

# A Posteriori Anselmianism

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**Abstract** I argue that Anselmians ought to abandon traditional Anselmianism in favor of Moderate Anselmianism. Moderate Anselmianism advances the view that a being  $x = \text{God}$  iff (i) for every essential property  $P$  of  $x$ , it is secondarily necessary that  $x$  has  $P$ , (ii) for most essential properties of  $x$ , it is not primarily necessary that  $x$  has  $P$  and (iii) the essential properties of  $x$  include omnipotence, omniscience, perfect goodness and necessary existence. Traditional Anselmians have no cogent response to most a priori atheological arguments. But a priori atheological arguments present no serious problem for moderate Anselmians. Unlike traditional Anselmianism, Moderate Anselmianism explains why a priori atheological arguments can be convincing and nonetheless illusory.

**Keywords** Anselm · Atheological arguments · Conceivability arguments · Traditional Anselmianism

## 1 Introduction

Incompossibility arguments are a priori atheological arguments according to which the conceivability of certain statements constitutes good evidence against the Anselmian

God.<sup>1</sup> The conceivability of a world so bad that an Anselmian God could not actualize it, for instance, has been persuasively advanced against traditional forms of Anselmianism, and so has the conceivability of a single sentient being leading a pointless and pain-racked existence. There are of course countless other troublesome examples for traditional Anselmians including the conceivability of Godless worlds and even the conceivability of there being nothing at all.<sup>2</sup>

In Sect. 2 I show that the traditional Anselmian project fails. Traditional Anselmianism as elaborated, for instance, in Anselm, Malcolm, Plantinga and Morris describes a God who possesses the divine attributes as a matter of a priori necessity.<sup>3</sup> Traditional Anselmianism does afford a straightforward and valid ontological argument. But traditional Anselmianism cannot accommodate the conceivability of states of affairs impossible with the traditional Anselmian God.<sup>4</sup> The traditional Anselmian project does not have the resources to explain the persistence of modal intuitions evincing the (at least) epistemic possibility that rabbits suffer pointlessly, people endure pointless abuse, fawns die painful and pointless deaths and so on.

<sup>1</sup> In order to side-step objections from various philosophical positions on propositions, I take the objects of epistemic (and metaphysical) possibility to be statements. But making propositions the object of epistemic and metaphysical possibility would not otherwise affect the argument. Simply for ease of exposition I use interchangeably the locutions ‘conceivability of’ and ‘conceivability that’ and similarly for ‘possibility of’ and ‘possibility that’.

<sup>2</sup> See Chalmers (1999) esp. sec. 3.3 and Yablo (2008), sec. 2.

<sup>3</sup> See Deane (1962), *Proslogium* III, Morris (1987), Malcolm (1960) and Plantinga (1974).

<sup>4</sup> A reviewer asks whether there can be any a priori argument against moderate Anselmianism. I expect there can be an a priori argument that aims to show that certain typical attributes of an Anselmian God cannot be coinstantiated. It may not show that God does not exist, but it might show that God is unexpectedly limited in attributes.

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In Sect. 3 I introduce *Moderate Anselmianism*. Moderate Anselmianism rejects the traditional position that, for most essential properties of God, it is a priori true that God has those properties. It is not a priori true, for instance, that God instantiates the essential properties of omnipotence, omniscience, perfect goodness or necessary existence.<sup>5</sup> Moderate Anselmianism can accommodate the conceivability of states of affairs impossible with the traditional Anselmian God. According to moderate Anselmianism it is epistemically possible that rabbits suffer pointlessly and that people endure pointless abuse. These epistemic possibilities constitute a specific sort of modal illusion that I call an *Anselmian Illusion*. Anselmian illusions are genuine, though misleading, metaphysical possibilities.

In Sect. 4 I show how the moderate Anselmian position can accommodate impossibility arguments. In Sect. 5 I defend moderate Anselmianism against several impossibility arguments. I conclude in Sect. 6 that moderate Anselmianism is the most promising Anselmian response to a priori atheological arguments.

## 2 The Failure of Traditional Anselmianism

Every impossibility proof assumes that there are conceivable statements that are inconsistent with the existence of an Anselmian God. Compare the statement in (1).

1. There exist rabbits enduring pointless pain.<sup>6</sup>

The statement in (1) seems primarily conceivable. Primary conceivability focuses on the way the world might, upon further investigation, turn out to be. If we could discover that there are actual rabbits leading the lives described in (1), then the statement in (1) is primarily possible. The semantics of primary possibility is sometimes elaborated directly as truth at a centered world or scenario and indirectly in terms of a priority.<sup>7</sup> But an analysis of primary

<sup>5</sup> Moderate Anselmianism is consistent with it being a priori true that God instantiates the trivial essential properties of being identical to God or not being a prime number. But there is some doubt about whether these trivial properties are essential properties of anything. See, for instance, Fine (1995, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> The example in (1) is due to Guleserian (1983). The argument that the statement in (1) is impossible with an Anselmian God assumes the standard view on evil. Among those who have defended the standard position on evil is William Rowe.

An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense evil it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.

See Rowe (1996), pp. 1–11.

<sup>7</sup> See Chalmers (2006), Kaplan (1989) and Stalnaker (1978).

possibility directly in terms of a priority is illuminating. Compare the concept of primary possibility in E1.

- E1.  $q$  is primarily possible at  $w$  if and only if  $q$  is consistent with all a priori truth at  $w$ .<sup>8</sup>

According to E1 those statements are primarily possible that are not inconsistent with any a priori truths. We will say that  $q$  is primarily necessary just in case  $\sim q$  is not primarily possible. Let's stipulate that the statement in (1) is primarily conceivable if and only if the statement is primarily possible in the sense of E1.<sup>9</sup> We'll say that  $q$  is primarily possible just in case  $q$  is epistemically possible.

Here's a useful example of primary possibility as I am using it. The epistemic or primary possibility that Hesperus is not Phosphorus is the possibility that something other than Hesperus is actually playing the Hesperus role. It is not the possibility that Hesperus might fail to be identical to itself. It is the possibility that something other than Hesperus has the observable properties and relations that we attribute to Hesperus and that object (of course) is not Phosphorus. It is consistent with something other than Hesperus actually playing the role of Hesperus that it's metaphysically necessary that Hesperus is Phosphorus. It is consistent with something other than Hesperus playing the Hesperus role in  $w$  that Hesperus—our Hesperus—also exists in  $w$  and is, of course, self-identical.<sup>10</sup>

Some impossibility arguments urge that (1) is also true as an assertion of secondary conceivability. Secondary conceivability focuses on a way the world might be counterfactually. Let's stipulate that a statement is

<sup>8</sup> The concept of primary possibility in (E1) is effectively the notion of deep epistemic possibility. A statement is primarily possible just in case its negation is not entailed by the set (or class) of all a priori truths. See Chalmers (2011). See also Jackson's (1998). I do not offer a further analysis of a priori truth, but an analysis would likely be in terms of the truths that could be known a priori.

<sup>9</sup> Throughout I use 'conceivable' for 'ideally conceivable' in cases of both primary conceivability and secondary conceivability. These are serious issues, of course, but too large to address in the scope of this paper.

<sup>10</sup> Strictly, if it is epistemically possible that  $G$  is not  $M$ , then it is not metaphysically necessary that  $G$  is  $M$ . Let  $W$  be a scenario in which  $G$  is not  $M$ . Recall that scenarios are centered worlds considered as actual. Suppose it is metaphysically necessary that  $G$  is  $M$ . It is true in every world in which  $G$  exists, whether the world is considered as actual or as counterfactual, that  $G$  is  $M$ . But of course  $G$  exists in  $W$ , so  $G$  is  $M$  in  $W$ , and that's impossible. The assertion that it is epistemically possible that  $G$  is not  $M$  is in fact the assertion that something *other than*  $G$  might actually play the role  $G$  is playing. David Chalmers makes, I think, the same point in another way. A possible world might *verify* the statement that  $H_2O$  is not water but no possible world *satisfies* the statement that  $H_2O$  is not water. But that's just to say that something other than the stuff we call 'water' might (*metaphysically* might) be playing the watery role. See Chalmers (2011)

secondarily conceivable if and only if it is secondarily possible. And let's understand secondary possibility as consistency with all necessary truth at a world.

E2.  $q$  is secondarily possible at  $w$  if and only if  $q$  is consistent with all necessary truth at  $w$ .

A statement  $q$  is secondarily possible if and only if it genuinely might have been the case that  $q$ . So  $q$  is secondarily possible if and only if  $q$  is metaphysically possible.<sup>11</sup>

According to traditional Anselmianism we can know a priori most (and certainly the most important) of the essential properties of God.<sup>12</sup> So it is primarily impossible, for instance, that God should not have the essential property of moral perfection or the essential property of necessary existence. It is impossible, that is, that we should discover that what plays the role of God fails to be essentially morally perfect and necessarily existing. It is indeed a conceptual impossibility on the traditional view that God should not have these essential properties. In *Proslogium* III Anselm expresses the position characteristic of traditional Anselmianism that it is a priori that God has, among other essential properties, the property of necessary existence.

And it so truly exists that it cannot be conceived not to exist. For it is possible to conceive of a being which *cannot be conceived* not to exist; and this is greater than one which can be conceived not to exist. Hence, if that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, can be conceived not to exist, it is not that than which nothing greater can be conceived. But this is a contradiction. So truly, therefore, is there something than which nothing greater can be conceived, that it cannot even be conceived not to exist; and this being thou art, O Lord, our God.<sup>13</sup>

Norman Malcolm too defends what I am calling the traditional Anselmian conception of God.

It may be helpful to express ourselves in the following way: to say, not that omnipotence is a property of God, but rather that necessary omnipotence is; and to say, not that omniscience is a property of God, but rather that necessary omniscience is... Necessary existence is a property of God in the same sense that

<sup>11</sup> In (E2) I have in mind consistency with all broadly logically necessary truth. I assume throughout that secondary possibility and secondary necessity are governed by a version of S5 that does not validate the Barcan Formula.

<sup>12</sup> If there are world-indexed properties that are essential to God, then of course most essential properties are not knowable a priori. But, most importantly, the traditional divine attributes are known in this way.

<sup>13</sup> See Deane (1962), *Proslogion* III, pp. 54–5. My emphasis.

necessary omnipotence and necessary omniscience are His properties... The a priori *proposition* "God necessarily exists" entails the proposition "God exists," if and only if the latter also is understood as an a priori proposition... In this sense Anselm's proof is a proof of God's existence.<sup>14</sup>

On the traditional Anselmian conception of God, then, anything identical to God satisfies the conditions in TA.

TA. A being  $x = \text{God}$  only if (i) for most essential properties  $P$  of  $x$ , it is primarily necessary that  $x$  has  $P$ , and (ii) the essential properties of  $x$  include omnipotence, omniscience, perfect goodness, and necessary existence.<sup>15</sup>

According to TA, it is primarily or a priori necessary that God is, at least, essentially perfectly good, essentially omnipotent, essentially omniscient and necessarily existent. We could not discover that God's nature was different with respect to these attributes. We could not discover that the being Anselmians have been worshiping all along was importantly different with respect to these, or any other, essential properties. Were we to discover that the best possible being is a necessarily existing, omniscient, less-than-omnipotent, less-than-morally perfect being, then we would discover that 'God' refers to nothing at all. God would not exist. Were the being that called Abraham and spoke to Moses to inform us directly that he is not omnipotent in the sense that traditional Anselmians understand omnipotence, then traditional Anselmians would have to conclude that the being that called Abraham is not God. It is a priori impossible that God should fail to be omnipotent in the sense that traditional Anselmians understand omnipotence.

But even the weaker position that it is metaphysically impossible that God should fail to be omnipotent (or fail to have any of the traditional attributes) is indefensible on traditional Anselmian assumptions. In defense, traditional Anselmians sometimes assert that we have good grounds for simply rejecting the metaphysical possibility of any state of affairs impossible with God's essential

<sup>14</sup> See Malcolm (1960), pp. 50–51. Malcolm adds,

... [W]hen the concept of God is correctly understood one sees that one cannot "reject the subject." "There is no God" is seen to be a necessarily false statement. Anselm's demonstration proves that the proposition "God exists" has the same a priori footing as the proposition "God is omnipotent".

Alvin Plantinga also defends a traditional Anselmian conception of God. See Plantinga (1974) esp. Chapter X, Section 7. For another defense, see also Morris (1987). My emphasis added.

<sup>15</sup> If we assume there are world-indexed properties, then clause (i) in TA would have to be changed to 'for most non-world-indexed essential properties  $P$  of  $x$ , it is primarily necessary that  $x$  has  $P$ '.

possession of such properties such as the possibility that rabbits suffer pointless pain. Thomas Morris and Alvin Plantinga, for instance, have argued that modal intuitions that normally evince metaphysical possibility are not in general reliable for traditional Anselmians. But neither Morris nor Plantinga advance any explanation for why just those intuitions supporting states of affairs impossible with the traditional Anselmian God are all unreliable for traditional Anselmians. There is no explanation why the particular recalcitrant intuition that rabbits might suffer pointless pain or, for that matter, that people might endure pointless abuse or fawns might die painful deaths, and so on, are all unreliable.<sup>16</sup> There is no credible explanation for why the Anselmian theist is justified in marking out intuitions about God's nature as reliable and intuitions about the possibility of pointless suffering as untrustworthy.

<sup>16</sup> Plantinga observes that there seem to be properties whose instantiation in any world is impossible with the instantiation of maximal greatness in any world. We don't know that the impossible property of there being no maximal being is not possibly instantiated. But Plantinga maintains that there's nonetheless no epistemological need to abandon the position that maximal greatness is possibly exemplified. We are offered no explanation from Plantinga as to why we have the intuition that such a property is possibly instantiated.

And (36) [the premise that maximal greatness is possibly exemplified] ... is not of this sort. A sane and rational man who thought it through and understood it might nonetheless reject it, remaining agnostic or even accepting instead the possibility of no-maximality... Well, then, why accept this premise? Is there not something improper, unreasonable, irrational about doing so? I cannot see why.

See Plantinga (1974) op.cit. p. 220. Thomas Morris, on the other hand, says that Anselmians might not share the intuitions of non-Anselmians. In defense of the reliability of Anselmian intuitions Morris offers the following.

Against this backdrop of general doubt about the status of many metaphysical intuitions... I believe the *Anselmian theist to be justified in marking out some few intuitions about metaphysical matters as trustworthy*... The Anselmian intuitions about God, or more broadly, all those intuitions which together yield the Anselmian conception of God, generate without intentional contrivance an overall belief-set in which it makes sense that there should be such intuitions and that they should be, at least a core of them, reliable. For if an Anselmian God exists, and creates rational beings whose end is to know him, it makes good sense that they should be able to know something of his existence and attributes without the need of highly technical arguments accessible to only a few.

See Morris (1987) op. cit. pp. 67–8 (emphasis added). Certainly if you justifiably believe that the traditional Anselmian God exists, then you should regard your Anselmian intuitions as reliable. But obviously the very point in question is whether traditional Anselmian conception of God is correct. It is that traditional conception that is being challenged, so it just begs the question to invoke that conception in defense of that conception.

Peter van Inwagen has marked out modal intuition generally—Anselmian and non-Anselmian—as largely unreliable. Modal intuitions do not evince metaphysical possibility in all of the more interesting disputes—in particular those in philosophical theology—in which we do rely upon them.

...[we] do not and cannot know (at least by the exercise of our own unaided powers) modal propositions like the crucial modal premises of our three possibility arguments. I have called this position “modal skepticism.” This name was perhaps ill-chosen... It should be remembered, however, that there has been another sort of skeptic: someone who contends that the world contains a great deal of institutionalized pretense to knowledge of remote matters concerning which knowledge is in fact not possible... It is in this sense of the word that I am a modal “skeptic.”<sup>17</sup>

The possibility arguments that van Inwagen has in mind include arguments that attribute properties to God.

1. It is possible for there to be a perfect being (that is, a being that has all perfections essentially).
2. Necessary existence is a perfection hence,
3. There is a perfect being.<sup>18</sup>

van Inwagen urges that it is possible to invert the premises of this possibility argument and reasonably (or, as reasonably) assert that it is possible for there not to be a perfect being. If so, then we cannot confidently arrive at our conclusion in (3). We cannot, according to van Inwagen, simply rely on our unaided powers of modal intuition to know that either (1) or (2) is true.

My own view is that we often do know modal propositions, ones that are of use to us in everyday life and in science and even in philosophy, but do not and cannot know (at least by the exercise of our own unaided powers) modal propositions like the crucial modal premises of our three possibility arguments.<sup>19</sup>

Van Inwagen's modal skepticism is of no use to the traditional Anselmian. The traditional Anselmian urges that we can know a priori that God exists necessarily and that God exemplifies all of the traditional attributes. But this is just what van Inwagen denies. Our knowledge of God's existence and attributes is something we cannot acquire through our unaided powers. But it is knowledge that we might acquire a posteriori.

<sup>17</sup> See van Inwagen (1998).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 67.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p. 68.

It is plausible to suppose that one can learn from the testimony of others what one could not learn by the exercise of one's own unaided powers. It would be therefore consistent with my thesis for me to affirm, say, that I knew that a perfect being was possible because God existed and had informed me that He was a perfect being...<sup>20</sup>

If there are exceptions to the general reliability of modal intuition, we should expect that they constitute a special class of intuitions: for instance, modal illusions of some sort. The conceivability of rabbits suffering pointless pain, for instance, might describe the genuine possibility of some state of affairs that we mistake for the genuine possibility of rabbits suffering pointless pain. But what explains the illusion for the traditional Anselmian? The illusion cannot result from mistakenly conflating the epistemic possibility of rabbits suffering pointlessly with the metaphysical possibility of them doing so since, on the traditional view, it is also epistemically impossible that rabbits suffer pointlessly. The illusion cannot result from conflating the epistemic possibility that God permits suffering that he ought to prevent with the metaphysical possibility that God does so since traditional Anselmianism entails that it is epistemically impossible that God permits any suffering he ought to prevent. The illusion cannot result from the absence of proof that it's a priori impossible that rabbits suffer pointlessly. We can give a proof that it's a priori impossible on the basis of principles traditional Anselmians cannot abandon.<sup>21</sup> But the modal intuitions that rabbits might suffer pointless pain, that fawns might die a pointless death, that people might endure pointless abuse, and so on, remain powerful and persistent.

Traditional Anselmians might sharply distinguish between the metaphysical status of what's conceivable and the metaphysical status of what's genuinely possible. But this approach too is unhelpful to the traditional Anselmian project. Traditional Anselmianism entails not merely that it's metaphysically impossible that something should suffer pointless pain, but that it's *inconceivable* that anything should do so. So we cannot explain the modal intuition that rabbits might suffer pointless pain by appealing to a broad set of non-genuine, epistemic possibilities. Traditional Anselmianism is committed to the position that a rabbit suffering pointless pain is not

included even among the expansive epistemic, non-metaphysical, possibilities.<sup>22</sup>

Traditional Anselmianism offers no good reason to believe that the intuition that rabbits might suffer pointless pain or that fawns might suffer painful and pointless deaths or that human beings might suffer pointless abuse constitute modal illusions. So they offer no reason to believe that these intuitions are in any way misleading or unreliable.<sup>23</sup>

### 3 Moderate Anselmianism

Moderate Anselmianism rejects the thesis that the essential properties of God are primarily necessary. If the essential properties of God are primarily necessary then no other being could have been the referent of 'God'. It is a priori necessary that God is just that being in each world that satisfies the attributes that traditional Anselmianism describes. But moderate Anselmians reject the initial clause in TA above. According to moderate Anselmianism anything identical to God satisfies the description in MA.

MA. A being  $x = \text{God}$  only if (i) for every essential property  $P$  of  $x$ , it is secondarily necessary that  $x$  has  $P$ , (ii) for most essential properties  $P$  of  $x$ , it is not primarily necessary that  $x$  has  $P$ , and (iii) the essential properties of  $x$  include omnipotence, omniscience, perfect goodness, and necessary existence.

Clause (i) in MA is unsurprising. It entails that, for every essential property  $P$  of God, it is metaphysically necessary

<sup>22</sup> A referee asks why the advocate for traditional Anselmianism needs to appeal to a more general illusion. Why isn't this sufficient for the rabbit case: we can conceive of rabbits suffering pointless pain because we can conceive of them suffering pain and we can imagine that there is no more to the story. The problem is that a traditional Anselmian cannot have such a conception. It is conceptually impossible that rabbits suffer and there is no more to the story. It is a conceptual necessity for traditional Anselmianism that rabbits suffer *only if there is a point to the suffering*. The referee adds that once one understands that one can conceive of the metaphysically impossible—rabbits suffering pointlessly—one won't have the inclination to continue to think that what is conceived is possible. The problem is that this is just what the traditional Anselmian cannot say. It is not merely metaphysically impossible that rabbits suffer pointless pain, it is for them a conceptual impossibility.

<sup>23</sup> A referee notes that one might think of the Anselmian conception as a kind of working hypothesis about what God's nature is like, but with the referent of "God" being fixed in a non-descriptivist way. One could think that, but this is not what the traditional Anselmians believe. They believe, as Anselm and Malcolm seemed to believe, that it is an a priori truth that God is maximally great. We can know a priori not only that God exists—that is, exists necessarily—but also that God has all of the maximal properties. Believing that God might fail to be omnipotent, for traditional Anselmians, is roughly like believing that triangles might be four sided. It's a conceptual error.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. Footnote 4.

<sup>21</sup> We might explain why a particular theorem looks a priori possible, even if it isn't, by appeal to the absence of a proof that it is a priori possible. That line of argument is not available to traditional Anselmianism.

that God has P. It is clause (ii) that is most distinctive about moderate Anselmianism. (ii) Entails that, for most essential properties P of God, it is not a priori that God has P. Moderate Anselmians allow that we do know a priori the trivial essential properties of God such as being identical to God, not being a prime number, and so on. But we do not know a priori any non-trivial essential properties of God.<sup>24</sup>

Supposing that M collects all of the essential properties of the Anselmian God, moderate Anselmianism endorses E3.  $\Box_1$  and  $\Box_2$  represent primary and secondary necessity respectively, G stands for God.

E3.  $\Box_2 M_G \ \& \ \sim \Box_1 M_G$

It is a major advantage of moderate Anselmianism that it easily resists the patently false conclusion that it's inconceivable that rabbits suffer pointless pain. Moderate Anselmians agree that it is epistemically possible that rabbits and fawns are suffering pain for which there is no God-given point or purpose. It is epistemically possible that people endure abuse for which there is no God-given point, and so on. There seems no question that these states of affairs are conceivable.

Moderate Anselmians deny, on the other hand, that it's metaphysically possible that rabbits suffer pointless pain. So they must provide an explanation for the persistence of the modal intuition that these states of affairs are genuinely possible. The moderate Anselmian explanation is that the intuition results from mistakenly conflating the epistemic possibility that rabbits suffer pointless pain with the metaphysical possibility that rabbits suffer pointless pain. This conflation constitutes a cogent explanation of the modal intuition only if the epistemic possibility has two properties: (i) it must describe a *genuinely possible* state of affairs that appears exactly as it would were rabbits actually suffering pointlessly. Clause (i) explains the modal error. And (ii) the epistemic possibility must be consistent with the existence of the moderate Anselmian God. According to moderate Anselmianism, God exists in every world, so any genuinely possible state of affairs has to be consistent with the Anselmian God. Call epistemic possibilities that satisfy (i) and (ii) *Anselmian illusions*.

Of course, there are strong modal intuitions evincing the metaphysical possibility of many other states of affairs that are impossible with the moderate Anselmian God.

Moderate Anselmianism must show that these modal intuitions also constitute Anselmian illusions. There is, for instance, the modal intuition that an omnipotent being might command a morally wrong action, that there are worlds in which God does not exist, that there are evils that God does not or cannot prevent, and so on. Moderate Anselmianism provides an explanation for all of these intuitions. In addition moderate Anselmianism offers an explanation for the persistent a priori disagreement on the nature of God.

#### 4 Defending Moderate Anselmianism

Moderate Anselmians advert to the class of Anselmian modal illusions. As noted above, an Anselmian modal illusion that p is an epistemic possibility that describes a genuine metaphysical possibility which is consistent with the existence of the moderate Anselmian God and qualitatively equivalent to p.

According to moderate Anselmians, 'God' is a name that is introduced and fixed to, for instance, *the being who called Abraham*. The reference fixing description sets some conceptual limits to the properties that we might discover God instantiates. But considerable room is left for a priori disputes about the properties instantiated by anything that might qualify as the referent of 'God'. The moderate Anselmian position is that we in fact discover a posteriori that the being that called Abraham has the property of maximal excellence. The property of maximal excellence entails, at least, the properties of essential omnipotence, essential omniscience, essential perfect goodness and necessary existence. The epistemic position is that the only evidence available that something has maximal excellence is a set of inductive arguments for God's existence and nature.<sup>25</sup> So, for most essential properties of God, it is a posteriori necessary that God instantiates those properties.

Unlike traditional Anselmianism, moderate Anselmianism makes it primarily possible that God fail to instantiate the property of maximal excellence. The primary possibility that God is not maximally excellent is the possibility that something other than the Anselmian God is playing the God role. Something other than the Anselmian God has

<sup>24</sup> By the trivial essential properties I have in mind the properties that God uncontroversially (and uninterestingly) exemplifies. These include being identical to God, not being a prime number, but also properties like being the sole member of the singleton {God}, and being diverse from the Eiffel Tower. Though God uncontroversially exemplifies these properties, I don't claim that these properties are uncontroversially essential. Kit Fine, for instance, would deny that they're essential properties of anything. See Fine (1994). But see also Cowling (2013).

<sup>25</sup> The only cogent arguments for the Anselmian God are a posteriori arguments. Of course, most theists would include, in addition to such arguments, the evidence of various forms of revelation. The a posteriori arguments include the cosmological argument, the argument from religious experience, the teleological arguments, fine-tuning arguments, etc. I'm not claiming here that there is no disagreement over the value of these arguments. I'm claiming that such arguments afford the Anselmian a route to the a posteriori necessity of the Anselmian God, and it importantly advances the position of Anselmians to take this route.

many of the contingent properties that the Anselmian God actually instantiates.

Moderate Anselmians take seriously the possibility—the primary possibility—that God is somewhat less good than we have been led to believe. They take seriously the primary possibility that we have gotten our theological views quite wrong. The being that called Abraham was capable of injustice and unfairness. These outcomes are impossible, according to the moderate Anselmian, but they are not inconceivable.

There is notable disagreement about what contingent properties the Anselmian God instantiates, but certainly there are worlds in which something other than the Anselmian God calls Abraham or Isaiah or Jeremiah, and so on. There are worlds in which the work of prophets, disciples and others are inspired by something other than the Anselmian God. It's conceivable that the Anselmian God did not create any contingent objects at all. It is also conceivable that the Anselmian God produces no miraculous events. In those worlds no miraculous event is attributable to the being playing the God role.

Let's consider whether moderate Anselmianism is consistent with the genuine possibility that rabbits suffer pointless pain. According to moderate Anselmianism there is a scenario at which 'God' does not refer to any existing being. Perhaps the reference of 'God' did not satisfy the initial reference fixing description or perhaps 'God' was fixed to a now non-existent being. Suppose, for instance, the reference fixing description is 'the being that called Abraham' and we are in a world where Abraham does not exist. No being satisfies that description and so 'God' does not refer to anything. It is true in that world that there is no God-given point or purpose for suffering rabbits or suffering fawns or, for that matter, suffering human beings. Moderate Anselmians will add that there is no God-given point or purpose for any suffering in that world, despite the fact that the Anselmian God exists in that world. 'God' does not refer to the Anselmian God in that world. The Anselmian God does not play the God role in every world in which it exists, just as water does play the role of water in every world in which it exists.<sup>26</sup> The state of affairs of

there being no God-given point for the suffering of rabbits and others is an epistemic possibility that is consistent with the existence of the Anselmian God.

It is not difficult to see how that mistake might have been made. What we find conceivable is indeed metaphysically possible. What we find conceivable is that the being playing the God role—the being to whom we are praying, the being we are honoring, worshipping, and petitioning—offers no God-given point to the rabbit's suffering. Suppose, for instance, the being playing the god-role for us is the Zoroastrian god, Ahura Mazda, or the Greek god, Zeus, and suppose those gods do not exist. Such gods cannot give a point to suffering, since they (by hypothesis) do not exist.

We thought we found conceivable that the Anselmian God offers no God-given point to the rabbit's suffering. The state of affairs that the being playing the God role offers no God-given point to the rabbit's suffering is genuinely possible. The state of affairs obtains in at least some worlds where the moderate Anselmian God exists. So, the epistemic possibility that there is no God-given point to the rabbit's suffering is an Anselmian illusion.<sup>27</sup>

Similarly we find it conceivable that water is not H<sub>2</sub>O. And what we are conceiving is something that is genuinely possible: namely, that the stuff playing the water role is not H<sub>2</sub>O. It is metaphysically impossible that water is not H<sub>2</sub>O. But it is not metaphysically impossible that the stuff playing the water role is not H<sub>2</sub>O. It is the analogous for the moderate Anselmian God. It is metaphysically impossible that God provides no point or purpose for the rabbit's suffering. But it is not metaphysically impossible that the being playing the God role does not provide such a purpose.

It is primarily possible that God should have lacked the divine attributes or should have failed to exist altogether. That is just to say that the being playing the God-role might have lacked the divine attributes or failed to exist. So, it is primarily possible that rabbits suffer pointless pain. But it's a mistake to conclude that it's metaphysically possible that the Anselmian God failed to provide a point to the rabbit's suffering.<sup>28</sup> More generally, for any primarily possible

<sup>26</sup> The point is more complicated than it looks. On the semantics of 'God' we are assuming, there are worlds in which God (the maximally great being in our world) exists, but where 'God' does not refer to such a being. In that world, when someone utters the sentence, God gives a purpose to everything; what they express is something we, in our world, misinterpret as being about God. But in fact the proposition they express is not about our God, since 'God' is empty in that world. They in fact say something false, and we should agree that it is false. In that world, the referent of 'God' does not play the role of God in our world, since of course there is no referent of 'God' there. But could 'God' have a referent that does not play the God role that our God plays? Moderate Anselmians want to affirm this, while agreeing that the Anselmian God necessarily exists. If a

Footnote 26 continued

less than perfect being is playing the God role—these are worlds in which our Anselmians would complain that an idol has replaced God—then the Anselmian God exists in that world, but everyone is worshipping, petitioning, and glorifying another being.

<sup>27</sup> Compare Soames (2007).

<sup>28</sup> A referee asks: if (i) it is primarily possible that rabbits suffer pointless pain and (ii) it's a mistake to conclude that it's metaphysically possible that the Anselmian God failed to provide a point to the rabbit's suffering, then it appears that there's no quantity/quality of pain and suffering can ever undermine the author's Moderate Anselmianism. This seems to make Moderate Anselmianism unfalsifiable. I think this is a good question. My claim is only that the

statement *q* inconsistent with the essential properties of the moderate Anselmian God, it is an Anselmian illusion that *q* is secondarily possible.

Moderate Anselmianism leaves room for a priori disputes about the nature of the properties of omnipotence, omniscience and perfect goodness. We discover a posteriori that God has the essential properties of omnipotence, omniscience and perfect goodness, but the exact nature of those properties is largely a matter of a priori investigation. And certainly Anselmians can disagree about the nature of those properties.

Finally, moderate Anselmianism is consistent with the widespread position among theists that the nature of God is largely known, if it is known at all, a posteriori. The familiar epistemology is that facts about God are primarily the subject of inductive inference and various forms of revelation. For moderate Anselmians, a priori investigation focuses mainly on finer disagreements about the exact nature of omnipotence, omniscience, perfect goodness and so on.

## 5 Advantages of Moderate Anselmianism

There are many a priori arguments against the existence of the Anselmian God. Moderate Anselmianism offers major advantages over traditional Anselmianism in managing these arguments. Nelson Pike, John Mackie and many others have argued that it is a priori impossible that the Anselmian God have the essential property of omnipotence. It is a priori true that omnipotent beings can perform any possible action and among the possible actions, of course, are morally wrong actions.<sup>29</sup> But it is a priori impossible that an Anselmian God might perform a morally wrong action. So it is a priori impossible that an Anselmian God is omnipotent.

Traditional Anselmians are forced to conclude either that it is a priori impossible that an Anselmian God is omnipotent or that we do not know a priori that omnipotent beings can perform morally wrong actions.<sup>30</sup> Moderate Anselmians, on the other hand, agree it's a priori true that omnipotent beings can perform any possible action. But they deny that it's a priori impossible that the moderate

Anselmian God perform a morally wrong action. Indeed there are many worlds in which the being playing the God-role performs morally wrong actions, and that establishes the primary possibility that the Anselmian God performs morally wrong actions. It is, in fact, genuinely possible that the being playing the God role performs morally wrong actions. Since it is primarily possible that the Anselmian God performs morally wrong actions, it is not a priori impossible that the Anselmian God is essentially omnipotent.

It has also been persuasively argued that it is a priori impossible that the Anselmian God actualize possible worlds with widespread gratuitous evil.<sup>31</sup> There are worlds so bad that it is a priori impossible that the Anselmian God actualizes it. According to traditional Anselmians, the modal intuition that there are worlds with widespread gratuitous evil must be mistaken. The space of metaphysical possibility cannot include such worlds. But traditional Anselmianism offers no explanation at all for the persistence and power of the modal intuition that there are such worlds.

Moderate Anselmians, on the other hand, deny that it's a priori impossible for the Anselmian God to actualize a world with widespread gratuitous evil. Indeed there are many worlds in which the being playing the God role provides no point or purpose for existing evil. It is, in fact, genuinely possible that the being playing the God role provides no point or purpose for widespread evil. In such worlds I speak truthfully when I utter 'God has provided no point or purpose to any existing evil'. And the existence of worlds in which the being playing the God-role provides no point or purpose for widespread evil establishes the primary possibility that the Anselmian God provides no purpose for widespread evil.

Some have objected that Anselmianism entails that it is a priori impossible that God fail to exist. It's central to the ontological argument, for instance, that it is a priori impossible that God fail to exist. But the modal intuition that God might not exist is, again, powerful and persistent. Moderate Anselmians agree that it is not a priori impossible that God fail to exist. There are worlds in which the reference of 'God' is not fixed to any existing being at all; some of these are worlds in which the reference-fixing description does not describe any existing thing and some of them are worlds in which the referent of 'God' has ceased to exist. In those worlds I speak truthfully when I utter the words 'God does not exist'. The primary possibility that the Anselmian God might have failed to exist is established by the existence of worlds in which 'God' does not refer to anything playing the God role.

Footnote 28 continued

existence of evil—however extensive—is not inconceivable, given moderate Anselmianism. So, we do not know a priori that the Anselmian God does not exist, given the possibility/observation of evil. But it does count as evidence against a particular view of the nature of the Anselmian God.

<sup>29</sup> See Pike (1998), pp. 283–293.

<sup>30</sup> Some Anselmians retreat to the position that God has the power to perform a morally wrong action, but that power is necessarily unexercised. See Senor (2006).

<sup>31</sup> See in particular Guleserian (1983).



There is widespread and persistent disagreement concerning whether God is an eternal being or a being in time. Moderate Anselmians observe that it is not a priori true that God is an eternal being and it is not a priori true that God is in time. There are worlds in which the being playing the God role is eternal and there are worlds in which the being playing the God role is in time. The disagreement persists because the question cannot be settled a priori.

In general a priori atheological arguments and disagreements present no serious problem for moderate Anselmians. Moderate Anselmians maintain that there are a posteriori facts about God that might have turned out differently. There are a posteriori facts about the possibility of suffering rabbits, God's existence, God's goodness, God's nature, widespread evil and so on that might have turned out differently. Disputes about the nature of God, and states of affairs compossible with God, persist because they simply cannot be settled a priori. These are metaphysical issues that can be settled only by a posteriori discovery.

## 6 Concluding Remarks

Anselmians have a persuasive argument that the Anselmian God is necessary a posteriori. Among the advantageous implications of an a posteriori necessary Anselmian God is that a priori atheological arguments in general lack cogency. Moderate Anselmians concede that, conceivably, rabbits lead pointless, pain-racked lives in the same way that, conceivably, Kripke's wooden table is made of ice. We could discover that each of these is true. But, as a matter of fact, it is genuinely impossible that rabbits lead pointless, pain-racked lives and genuinely impossible that Kripke's table is made of ice.

Among the disadvantages of an a posteriori necessary Anselmian God is an extensive modal defeasibility. The essential properties of God determine the shape of metaphysical possibility. But there seems almost no limits to what we might discover concerning the essential properties of the Anselmian God. So, there are almost no limits to what we might discover concerning the shape of metaphysical possibility. Among the surprising facts about the shape of metaphysical possibility is that it is not metaphysically possible that rabbits suffer pointlessly. Equally surprising is the discovery that it's genuinely impossible for some omnipotent beings to perform wrong actions and the discovery that there are no worlds bad enough that an Anselmian God could actualize it. None of these is metaphysically possible, though each of them is a priori possible, and we retain an illusion that they are metaphysically possible. The extensive modal defeasibility of Moderate

Anselmianism entails that the exact breadth of Anselmian illusion is an open question.

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