# Modal Ontological Arguments

The modal ontological argument (MOA) proceeds from God's *possible* existence to God's *actual* existence. While different variations of the argument exist (e.g., Malcolm 1960, Hartshorne 1965, Plantinga 1974), they typically share four parts:

- The first part is a *characterisation* of the being to be argued for. Some MOAs focus on a *maximally great being*, where a being is maximally great if and only if it exists necessarily and is essentially omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect (Plantinga 1974). Other MOAs focus on a *perfect being*, where a being is perfect if and only if it essentially possesses every perfection and essentially lacks every imperfection (Bernstein 2014). Still other MOAs focus simply on *God* (McIntosh 2021). The precise characterisation at play will influence the justification of the second and third parts.
- The second part is the *possibility premise*, which asserts that the characterised being is metaphysically possible. (*Metaphysical possibility* is here understood minimally as the broadest kind of objective, non-epistemic possibility.)
- The third part is the *necessity premise*, which asserts that the characterised being would be a *metaphysically necessary being*—in any possible world in which the being exists, it is necessary that said being exists.
- The fourth part is a modal logic that (i) accurately captures metaphysical modality and (ii) is strong enough to validate an inference from the *possible* necessary existence of *x* to the *necessary* existence of *x* (or, minimally, to the *existence* of *x*). Typically used is S5, whose characteristic axiom is $\Diamond p \rightarrow \Box \Diamond p$, which in turn entails $\Diamond \Box p \rightarrow \Box p$. But a weaker system like B validates $\Diamond \Box p \rightarrow p$ and could therefore be used instead (Leftow 2005).

Thus, with God as our characterised being and S5 as our modal logic, a standard formulation of the MOA runs:

1. Possibly, God exists. (Possibility premise)
2. Necessarily, if God exists, then it is necessary that God exists. (Necessity premise)
3. (Hence) It is necessary that God exists. (From 1, 2)

According to (2), it's true in any possible world in which God exists that it is necessary that God exists. According to (1), there's some possible world in which God exists. From (1) and (2) it follows that there's some possible world in which it is necessary that God exists—i.e., it's possibly necessary that God exists. By S5, $\Diamond \Box p \rightarrow \Box p$. Hence, it's necessary that God exists. By axiom M, it follows that God exists.

Naturally, there are three ways to challenge the MOA so construed, each corresponding to the final three parts articulated earlier. First, one can challenge the inference from (1) and (2) to (3) by

challenging whether the modal logic underlying the argument accurately captures metaphysical modality. (For some such challenges, see Chandler 1976 and Salmon 1989. For defences of S5's metaphysical adequacy, see Pruss and Rasmussen 2018: 14–29, Williamson 2016, Hale 2013, and Leftow 1991: 6–14). Second, one can challenge the necessity premise. While some characterisations (e.g., *maximally great being* as defined above) render the premise definitionally true, others require substantive argumentation. For example, if the characterisation at play is *perfect being*, then the MOA proponent must argue that *necessary existence* is a perfection. Similarly, if the characterisation at play is *God*, then the MOA proponent must justify the claim that God would be a necessary being. (Against this claim, see Swinburne 2012. Against Swinburne and for God's necessity, see Rasmussen 2016.) Third, one can challenge the possibility premise by arguing either that the characterised being is metaphysically impossible or that its metaphysical possibility hasn't been adequately justified. Falling into this third category is perhaps the most important objection to the MOA: the symmetry problem.

To draw out this problem, consider the following *Reverse MOA (RMOA)*:

　1*. Possibly, God doesn't exist.
　2.　Necessarily, if God exists, then it is necessary that God exists.
　3*. (Hence) It is necessary that God doesn't exist. (1*, 2)

Like the MOA, the RMOA is valid in S5. To see this, notice that (1*) is the negation of (3) and that (3) follows from (1) and (2) in S5. Hence, (1*) and (2) together entail the negation of (1)—i.e., they entail that it is *impossible* that God exists. This impossibility, in turn, is logically equivalent to (3*).

But (3*) is incompatible with (3), and (2) is the same in both arguments. Thus, assuming (2) and S5, (1) and (1*) are incompatible. And yet (1) and (1*) seem epistemically on par—it seems intolerably arbitrary to privilege one over the other absent further considerations. What's needed is some principled reason favouring one over the other, i.e., a consideration that *breaks symmetry* between them. *Absent* such a symmetry breaker, however, the MOA is dialectically toothless—quite clearly, if you don't already accept the claim that God exists, you won't agree that (1) is more acceptable than (1*) absent some symmetry breaker. Thus, without a symmetry breaker, the MOA makes no headway in the dispute between theists and non-theists.

The natural solution to the symmetry problem, of course, is to offer a symmetry breaker favouring (1) over (1*). Categorization problems loom on the horizon here—for example, many such symmetry breakers appeal to premises that aren't *a priori*, and so they threaten MOA's status as a properly *ontological* argument. Furthermore, even if they only appeal to *a priori* premises, symmetry breakers may represent distinct ontological arguments *in their own right*—distinct, that is, from the MOA. Notwithstanding these concerns, the MOA debate has centred around symmetry

breaking, and hence symmetry breakers merit consideration here. Discussion can be found in the Supplement on Symmetry Breakers.

For further discussion of the most influential MOA—Plantinga's MOA—see (e.g.) Adams (1988), Chandler (1993), Oppy (1995: 70–78, 248–259), Tooley (1981), van Inwagen (1977), and Rasmussen (2018). For a recent re-casting of the modal ontological argument using only a standard extension of system K, see Hausmann (2022). And for a survey of many symmetry breakers, see Stacey (2023).

# Supplement on Symmetry Breakers

Symmetry breakers have two parts:

- First, it is argued that satisfying condition(s) C lends credence to (entails, probabilifies, provides a defeasible presumption of, or constitutes evidence for) metaphysical possibility.
- Second, it is argued that <God exists> (or something that entails as much) satisfies C whereas <God doesn't exist> (and anything that entails as much) does *not*. (*God*, here, is a placeholder for the MOA's characterised being—recall that MOAs differ here.)

Three general questions are therefore relevant for assessing symmetry breakers:

- First, does the satisfaction of C lend credence to (entail, probabilify, etc.) metaphysical possibility?
- Second, does <God exists> (or something that entails as much) satisfy C?
- Third, does <God doesn't exist> (or something that entails as much) satisfy C?

A symmetry breaker succeeds only if the first and second questions are answered *yes* while the third is answered *no*. Naturally, then, objections to symmetry breakers generally challenge one or more of these answers.

In the sections that follow, we tour extant symmetry breakers and objections thereto. We haven't the space to pursue *in depth* the symmetry breakers and all the objections thereto. The goal is simply to survey the central arguments and objections in this area. As always, the dialectic can and does extend further. The interested reader is urged to follow the references for more thorough treatments.

# Presumption of possibility

*The symmetry breaker.* "We have the right to presume the possibility of every being, and especially that of God, until some one proves the contrary" (Leibniz, *New Essay*, 504). Hence, we should accept (1) unless given reason to reject it.

*Objections.* First, one could argue that it is equally legitimate to presume the possible *non-existence* of any being unless given good reason to think it's necessary that such a being exists (Adams 1988). But then we are equally entitled to presume (1*), and symmetry is restored.

Second, it's not clear why we should take such a freewheeling approach to modality. Why not instead adopt *agnosticism* about modal claims—especially highly theoretical ones remote from our ordinary experience—unless given reason to think they're true?

Third, the presumption of possibility leads to inconsistent presumptions (Sobel 2004: 89). Consider a *KnowNo*, which is a being who knows that no perfect being (or no God) exists (van Inwagen 1994: 92). According to the presumption of possibility, we should presume such a being is possible. But the possibility of such a being entails the possible non-existence of a perfect being (or God), since one can only know $p$ if $p$ is true. Hence, we should likewise presume (1*). Not only does this restore symmetry, but it also entails inconsistent presumptions, which is absurd. We should therefore reject the presumption of possibility (in its general and unqualified form), at least in cases of symmetric but inconsistent possibilities. The same point can be made with other beings whose possibility entails (1*):

- A *MenPri* is a being enjoying *mental privacy*, such that *only that being* knows the contents of its mind. If a MenPri is possible, then a necessarily existent, essentially omniscient being (where *omniscience* is understood traditionally as knowing all truths) is impossible. Since God (traditionally conceived) is essentially omniscient in this manner, a MenPri is incompatible with God's existence (traditionally conceived).
- A *UniNon* is a uniquely necessary or uniquely independent non-God (or non-perfect) concrete thing, where a concrete thing is (i) *uniquely necessary* just in case it's the only concrete thing that exists necessarily, and (ii) *uniquely independent* just in case it's the only concrete thing that exists independently. (Examples of UniNons include Oppy's ultimate naturalistic singularity (Oppy 2013, Pearce and Oppy 2022), Schmid and Linford's (2023: ch. 8) naturalistic atemporal wavefunction, the *Brahman* of *advaita* Hinduism (understood impersonally) (McDonough 2016), the Neo-Platonic One (understood impersonally), the Tau, Schaffer's (2010) priority monist cosmos, a necessary foundational quantum field, various quasi-theistic and non-theistic religious ultimates, and so on *ad nauseam*.) Since God is necessary and essentially independent, a UniNon is incompatible with God's existence.

- A *SuffLife* is a being whose life is filled with (and exhausted by) such horrific suffering that no being is morally permitted to actualize a world in which a SuffLife exists. Suppose a SuffLife exists. Then, if God exists, God will have actualized a world in which a SuffLife exists, and hence God would have done something morally impermissible. But God, *qua* essentially morally perfect, cannot do something morally impermissible. Hence, a SuffLife is incompatible with God's existence. (Instead of SuffLifes, one could instead focus on unjustified, gratuitous, or unredeemed evils. However, it's controversial whether such evils are incompatible with God's existence.)

# Conceivability

*The symmetry breaker*. God's existence is conceivable, and conceivability is evidence for (or entails, or provides a defeasible presumption of, etc.) metaphysical possibility. Hence, conceivability supports (1).

*Objections*. First, there are many accounts of conceivability, ranging from imaginability to conceptual coherence and beyond (see the entry on [modal epistemology](#)). But depending on the account in question, either God's existence isn't conceivable after all, or it's only question-beggingly conceivable, or both God's existence and non-existence are conceivable (Spencer 2018). More generally, the non-theist can simply claim, with equal legitimacy, that God's *non-existence* is conceivable, and hence symmetry isn't broken (Nagasawa 2017: 187–189). And even if God's non-existence isn't (directly) conceivable, *other* things *incompatible* with God's existence seem conceivable—perhaps KnowNos, MenPris, UniNons, SuffLifes, or a world containing only an endless ocean of pink shrimp.

Second, it is controversial whether conceivability is good evidence for possibility. For a survey of some of the central arguments for a 'mitigated' or 'moderate' modal scepticism about the evidential value of conceivability, imaginability, and other such appeals when it comes to cases far removed from our ordinary experience, see Rasmussen and Leon (2019: 24–29) and the references therein.

Third, those in the apophatic tradition may reject that God is even conceivable—perhaps God is so transcendent or *wholly other* that he cannot be conceived.

# Deontic

*The symmetry breaker*. God is defined as a most perfect being. But a most perfect being ought to exist. So, God ought to exist. But what *ought* to be the case is *possibly* the case. Hence, God possibly exists (Kordig 1981). Thus, (1) is secured.

*Objections*. First, it's not clear that 'oughts' are applicable to non-agential contexts (Vallicella 2018: 207, Nagasawa 2017: 196–197). That is, in contexts where *x* isn't under any agent's control, it's not clear how it could be that *x* ought to be. Relevant here is a distinction between *deontic properties*—properties of obligation and permission (e.g., rightness, wrongness, oughtness, etc.)— and *evaluative properties*—properties of value and disvalue (e.g., goodness, badness, etc.). While evaluative properties are plausibly instantiable in non-agential contexts, it's contestable whether deontic properties are so instantiable. As Vallicella (2018: 207) puts the worry, "every state of affairs that ought to be or ought not to be necessarily involves an agent with power sufficient to either bring about or prevent the state of affairs in question." But if deontic properties are inapplicable to non-agential contexts, then it is *not true* that God ought to exist—there is no agent with the power to bring about or prevent God's existence, and so the context at hand is non-agential. A reply to this first worry might appeal to our ordinary and seemingly meaningful practices of attributing deontic properties in non-agential contexts (Vallicella 2018: 207–208). But such attributions are often (perhaps always) either implicitly or explicitly *evaluative* in nature, and those (if any) that *aren't* are perhaps best *interpreted* as such.

Second, supposing that deontic properties are applicable to non-agential contexts, it's not clear whether non-agential *oughts* imply corresponding *possibilities*. Consider non-agential oughts concerning the character of modal space. One might find it plausible that modal space *ought to be different* in various ways—perhaps there ought be no possible world in which holocausts occur, or in which conscious creatures suffer horrors, or what have you. But modal space is *not possibly different* (at least if S5 captures metaphysical modality). Thus, one might reasonably reject that non-agential oughts imply corresponding possibilities.

Third, supposing that non-agential oughts imply corresponding possibilities, those antecedently inclined to reject God's possibility will likewise reject that God ought to exist. But then affirming that God ought to exist seems dialectically untoward—if you don't already accept that God is possible, then you won't agree that God ought to exist, precisely because (as we're supposing) God ought to exist *only if* God is possible. See Grim (1982: 172) and Vallicella (2018: 210) for similar dialectical criticisms. (See also Grim (1982), Martin (1990: 91–93), Oppy (1995: 73–74), and Nagasawa (2017: 195–197) for critical appraisals of Kordig's subargument from deontic perfection for the claim that God ought to exist.)

Fourth, in saying that God ought to exist, the deontic symmetry breaker assumes *pro-theism*, according to which it's good for God to exist (Nagasawa 2017: 196). But pro-theism is controversial, and the symmetry breaker's success is hostage to settling the pro/anti-theism debate in its favour.

Fifth, the non-theist can claim, with seemingly equal legitimacy, that some *x incompatible* with God's existence ought to exist (or occur, or obtain). Since (per the symmetry breaker) oughtness

implies possibility, *x* is thereby possible. But since *x* is *incompatible* with God's existence—i.e., since any world in which *x* exists is a world in which God doesn't exist—it follows that God's non-existence is possible. Symmetry is restored. Examples of seemingly equally legitimate deontic claims include:

- Because privacy is a great good, a MenPri ought to exist. But a MenPri is incompatible with God's existence.
- Some UniNon ought to exist—e.g., impersonal versions of *Brahman*, the Neo-Platonic One, Plato's Form of the Good, etc. But UniNons are incompatible with God's existence.
- Plausibly, someone's central life projects, based on defending and furthering the truth in an intellectually and morally virtuous manner, ought not be frustrated. Call this the *Centrality Thesis*. But many people's central life projects constitutively involve non-theistic visions of ultimate reality, such that if these views are false, the projects are ultimately frustrated. And many such people—ranging from adherents of non-theistic religions to devotees of polytheism (where the pantheon does not include the MOA's characterised being) to staunch advocates of naturalistic atheism—virtuously defend and further their respective views. Now assume (for conditional proof) that some such non-theistic project P ought not be frustrated. Since we're granting that oughtness implies possibility, it follows that P is possibly *not* frustrated. But P constitutively involves some non-theistic view of ultimate reality, and hence P is frustrated in any world in which God exists. Since P is possibly *not* frustrated, it follows that God's non-existence is possible. Thus, by conditional proof, if P ought not be frustrated, then it's possible that God doesn't exist. We therefore have competing, incompatible 'ought' claims on our hands: (i) P ought not be frustrated, and (ii) God ought to exist. Plainly enough, if you don't already accept theism, you won't grant that (ii) is more acceptable than (i) (assuming you grant the Centrality Thesis). For instance, if you're an atheist, then—assuming you grant the Centrality Thesis—you'll clearly accept (i) over (ii). But then the symmetry breaker at hand makes no headway in the dispute between theists and atheists. Given the Centrality Thesis, the acceptability of (ii) over (i) *presupposes* the acceptability of theism over atheism and hence cannot be used to non-question-beggingly favour theism over atheism (or the possible truth of theism over the possible truth of atheism).

## Ontomystical

*The symmetry breaker*. Named after Indian philosopher Adi Śaṃkara (788–820 C.E.), *Śaṃkara's Principle* (*SP*) states that whatever is presented to a conscious subject in a phenomenal (or broadly perceptual) experience is metaphysically possible. Even if the experience is not veridical, its contents are at least *possible*—or so says SP. But many mystics have had phenomenal experiences *as of* a maximally great being. Hence, a maximally great being is possible (Pruss 2001). Assuming that the characterised being in (1) is a *maximally great being*, (1) follows.

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*Objections*. First, it's not clear how to differentiate phenomenal from non-phenomenal experiences. This, in turn, may hinder adequate assessment of SP (Byerly 2010: 97–98).

Second, there are (purported) counterexamples to SP, some of which serve dually to restore symmetry between (1) and (1*). In addition to the four counterexamples in Byerly (2010: 98–101), others may include:

- In dreams, many people phenomenally experience having the ability to fly at will. But, plausibly, humans essentially lack an ability to fly at will.
- In psychedelic experience, many people phenomenally experience severe time warping as well as other fantastical structural aberrations of time. But, plausibly, such structural aberrations are not possible.
- In psychedelic experience, many people phenomenally experience ego dissolution, the non-existence of the self, and/or identity with the universe, their surroundings, or even God. But, plausibly, people are essentially selves and necessarily distinct from the universe, their surroundings, and God.
- Many mystics have phenomenally experienced *identity* with God or Ultimate Reality (Spencer 2022, 2021, McGinn 2005, Stace 1961, Strong and McClintock 1890: 795–804). But, plausibly, mystics are necessarily distinct from God and Ultimate Reality. Moreover, many Hindu mystics seem to have phenomenally experienced identity with Brahman or the Universal Self, while many Buddhist mystics seem to have phenomenally experienced an ultimate reality that isn't a supreme being at all (Stace 1961: 34). (For more on all the aforementioned mystical experiences, see the entry on mysticism.) Not only do these experiences afford counterexamples to SP, but they also restore symmetry between (1) and (1*), since—together with SP—they imply that, possibly, ultimate reality is *not* a maximally great being. This, in turn, plausibly entails the possible non-existence of a maximally great being.
- Many mystics also have phenomenologically monistic experiences wherein the boundaries and individual identities of the world evaporate—"the experience of all as one and one as all" (Zaehner 1980: 28). But one may think this sort of monism isn't metaphysically possible.

Third, humans aren't terribly reliable at correctly identifying experiences of *modal* properties, which may undercut the symmetry breaker's reliance on the claim that mystics have experienced a *maximally great being* (where *maximal greatness* includes the modal property of *necessary existence*) (Byerly 2010: 101–103).

Fourth, it's dubious that mystics have had experiences as of a *maximally great being*. It is dubious, for instance, that mystics can *phenomenologically* differentiate between (i) experiencing an

essentially omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect being that exists in *all* possible worlds and (ii) experiencing an essentially omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect being that exists in *all but one* remote possible world (Nagasawa 2017: 191). Similarly, it is dubious that mystics can *phenomenologically* differentiate between (i) experiencing an *omnipotent* being and (ii) experiencing a being that's *nearly* omnipotent except for its inability to perform some trivial task (ibid.).

Fifth, many commentators argue that mystical experiences are more amorphous and less content-specific than Pruss's characterisation lets on. To characterise the object of such experiences as *God* or a *maximally great being* "is to invoke background theological beliefs and thereby to read something into the experience. One is thus giving an 'interpretation' of the experience which goes beyond what the phenomenological content of the experience itself warrants" (Forgie 1994: 231).

Sixth, there may be phenomenal experiences as of God's *absence* or *non-existence* or else something that plausibly *implies* God's non-existence—e.g., the ultimate absurdity of life and existence more generally, the intrinsic impermissibility of *anyone* allowing certain horrors to obtain, the indifference of reality to one's flourishing, and so on (Adams and Robson 2016, Draper 1989: 347–348). Given SP, the contents of such experiences are at least *possible*, and hence God's non-existence is possible. Symmetry may therefore be restored.

## Motivational centrality

*The symmetry breaker*. If belief that *p* is motivationally central to the flourishing and intellectually sophisticated lives of individuals and communities, then, probably, *p* is possible. But belief in a maximally great being has been motivationally central in precisely this way. So, probably, a maximally great being is possible (Pruss 2010). Assuming that the characterised being in (1) is a *maximally great being*, (1) follows.

*Objections*. First, there are serious challenges to the arguments proffered on behalf of the principle that *p*'s motivational centrality to flourishing and intellectually sophisticated lives probabilifies *p*'s possibility (Oppy 2012).

Second, in light of the plenitude of impossible beliefs that are motivationally central to flourishing lives, it's not clear that motivational centrality to flourishing lives probabilifies possibility. The world's religions seem to make countless claims about the essential character of things—ultimate reality, consciousness, the self, death, morality, and so on. Many such claims, in turn, form the motivational centres of flourishing lives. Since such claims characterise the *essential* character of things, they're either necessarily true or necessarily false. And yet in light of their incompatibility, the majority of such claims are necessarily false.

Third, many have lived flourishing lives motivationally centred around views *incompatible* with the existence of the monotheistic maximally great being—e.g., atheism, naturalism, polytheism, pantheism, and various non-theistic or quasi-theistic religious views about ultimate reality. This, in turn, restores symmetry between (1) and (1*). (See Pruss (2010: 239–246) for a response to this objection and Oppy (2012) for a response to Pruss' response.)

Fourth, it's not clear that belief in a *maximally great being* is at the motivational centre of flourishing lives. More plausibly, belief in (something like) an *omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent creator* is at their motivational centre, irrespective of whether such a being exists in all possible worlds. Ordinary religious believers rarely even *entertain* modal notions like necessary existence, much less centre their lives around them. (See Pruss (2010: 246–248) for a response to this objection and Nagasawa (2017: 193–194) for a response to Pruss' response.)

Fifth, one might argue that having *true* motivationally central beliefs is a precondition for human flourishing (or, more precisely, a precondition for those elements of human flourishing *centrally based* on said beliefs). But then settling whether theistic belief is motivationally central to flourishing lives depends on settling whether theistic belief is true (or, equivalently, possibly true), and hence one cannot non-question-beggingly wield the former in support of the latter (Oppy 2012).

# Gödelian

Gödelian symmetry breakers are based on the nature of perfection (or positivity) and the entailment relations (or lack thereof) between perfections and imperfections (or between positive and negative properties). For recent defences of Gödelian symmetry breakers, see (e.g.) Bernstein (2014, 2018). For recent criticisms, see (e.g.) Oppy (2017: 58–61), van Inwagen (2009), and Nagasawa (2017: 197–202). We won't cover Gödelian symmetry breakers here, since they amount to variations on Gödelian ontological arguments covered in Section 9.

# Maximal God

*The symmetry breaker*. On the *maximal God thesis*, God is understood as the being with the best possible combination of knowledge, power, and goodness. The maximal God approach to perfect being theism therefore construes God as the greatest metaphysically possible being. But then the possibility of God's existence is arguably secured *by definition* (Nagasawa 2017: 204–205). Thus, (1) is secured.

*Objections*. First, many objections have been levelled to the maximal God approach to perfect being theism. There are worries about what could explain God's precise, coordinated combination of degrees of great-making properties (Murphy 2017: 13–15), worries about whether there is a

*uniquely* best possible combination of great-making properties (Oppy 2011, Murphy 2017: 15–16, Kvanvig 2018, Bailey 2019), worries about whether there is even a *best* possible combination of great-making properties that don't reach their intrinsic maxima (Oppy 2011, Speaks 2017: 123–124, Goldschmidt 2020: 44), worries about implying polytheism (Goldschmidt 2020: 45–46), and so on.

Second, the maximal God thesis does not accord with a common understanding of God (as a perfect being). Consider: under some versions of naturalism, the greatest possible being will be a complex, highly intelligent, but severely limited embodied conscious organism. The maximal God thesis implies that such a being would be God (Oppy 2011, Speaks 2017: 117–124). This is not only implausible but also runs contrary to what proponents of perfect being theology typically say about God. Endless other counterexamples arise depending on how modal space is construed. The general problem is that there's no guarantee that the greatest possible combination of knowledge, power, and goodness will be anything deserving the appellation 'God'. This can only be inferred if we antecedently grant that something properly deemed *God* is possible. And yet that's precisely the issue in dispute between proponents and opponents of (1).

Third, there is no guarantee that the best possible combination of knowledge, power, and goodness can be instantiated *together with necessary existence* (Goldschmidt 2020: 44). Perhaps there cannot be necessarily existent concreta. Or perhaps all necessary concreta are axiologically surpassable in their combination of knowledge, power, and goodness. (E.g., perhaps the necessary concreta are one or more fundamental physical particles or fields. The combination of knowledge, power, and goodness enjoyed by such necessary concreta is clearly axiologically inferior to that of various contingent persons.) If any such proposal is correct, the best possible combination of knowledge, power, and goodness cannot belong to a *necessarily existent thing*. But then we cannot infer from the *possibility* of a being enjoying said combination to the *actuality* thereof—in which case, the necessity premise of the MOA is undercut. And, importantly, nothing in the symmetry breaker rules out any of the aforementioned proposals.

## Modal continuity

*The symmetry breaker*. Some degree of value is possibly instantiated. But if *some* degree of value is possibly instantiated, then *each* degree of value is possibly instantiated. This falls out of a broader *modal continuity* principle (refined and defended in Rasmussen 2014), which states that properties differing merely in degree tend to be modally uniform—either all are possible or all are impossible. So, each degree of value is possibly instantiated. But *maximal greatness* is a degree of value. So, maximal greatness is possibly instantiated (Rasmussen 2018). Assuming that the characterised being in (1) is a *maximally great being*, (1) follows.

*Objections*. First, the modal continuity principle is controversial, and those inclined to mitigated modal scepticism will reject it when applied to cases far removed from our everyday experience (e.g., infinite, unsurpassable degrees of value).

Second, a seemingly equally plausible parallel argument threatens to restore symmetry between (1) and (1*). Some degree of value is possibly *not* instantiated. But if *some* degree of value is possibly not instantiated, then *each* degree of value is possibly not instantiated. Since *maximal greatness* is a degree of value, maximal greatness is possibly not instantiated, and symmetry is restored. (See Rasmussen (2018: 185–186) for a response to this objection, and see Goldschmidt (2020: 41–42) for a response to Rasmussen's response.)

Third, another argument threatens to restore symmetry. Since some degree of value is possibly instantiated, each degree of value is possibly instantiated. But the instantiation of some degrees of value precludes the instantiation of maximal greatness. An example of a maximal-greatness-precluding degree of value is *near maximality*, where *x* is *nearly maximal* just in case *x* enjoys every perfection essentially *except* for being *nearly* omnipotent—*x* can do everything an omnipotent being can do *except* for performing some trivial task. If maximal greatness is a degree of value, surely near maximality is likewise a degree of value. (Plausibly, it's a degree of value *just below* maximal greatness.) But since *being the intentional source of every other concrete thing* is plausibly a perfection, and since a maximally great being would be independent, the possible instantiation of near maximality implies the possible *non*-instantiation of maximal greatness. And since the former is possibly instantiated, (1*) follows. If successful, this parallel argument also shows that the premise <if *some* degree of value is possibly instantiated, then *each* degree of value is possibly instantiated> is false. (See Rasmussen (2018: 186–187) for a response to this kind of objection, and see Erasmus (2022: 203–204) for a response to Rasmussen's response.)

Fourth, a still further argument threatens to restore symmetry. Since some degree of *disvalue* is possibly instantiated, each degree of disvalue is possibly instantiated. But then *infinite disvalue* is possibly instantiated—indeed, *infinitely many* increasingly worse orders of infinite disvalue are possibly instantiated. But, plausibly, God (or a maximally great being) would not allow something with infinite disvalue to exist. Hence, the possible instantiation of infinite disvalue implies the possible non-instantiation of maximal greatness. And since the former is possibly instantiated, (1*) follows. (Alternatively, we can run the parody in terms of other badness-entailing properties that differ merely in degree or quantity from possibly instantiated properties. Consider, e.g., the determinable properties *having conscious experience n% of which is horrendous suffering* or *being a world n% of whose conscious creatures experience pure, uninterrupted agony*.)

Fifth, the modal continuity principle is especially questionable in cases of infinite quantities. Huemer (2016) has argued from a suite of infinity paradoxes that all infinite intensive magnitudes are impossible. Pruss (2018) has argued from a suite of infinity paradoxes that all infinite causal

histories are impossible. Finitists of all stripes have argued similarly. The debates here are ferocious, and it's not clear that we can reliably apply the modal continuity principle to infinite quantities. Since maximal greatness is an infinite quantity of value, it's not clear that we can reliably use the modal continuity principle to infer its possible instantiation. (See Rasmussen (2018: 188) for some reflections on this objection.)

Sixth, perhaps maximal greatness is more plausibly understood as a *qualitatively complete and unlimited* kind of value rather than an *infinite quantity or magnitude* of value. For starters, a longstanding theistic tradition holds that God's greatness differs from ours, not in *quantity*, but in *quality* or *kind*. Moreover, if God's greatness were an infinite magnitude of value, God would seem to be arbitrarily limited: why *that* infinite magnitude of value as opposed to any of the infinitely many larger infinite magnitudes of value? If all this is right, then—*pace* the symmetry breaker—maximal greatness is *not* a degree of value.

Seventh, the symmetry breaker may suffer from absurd parodies. Consider that some degree of valuable island is possibly instantiated. But if *some* degree of valuable island is possibly instantiated, then *each* degree of valuable island—including a maximally great island—is possibly instantiated. But a maximally great island would *necessarily* exist if it exists at all—an island is surely *better* if it enjoys such a robust grip on reality and avoids the modal fragility associated with contingency. But then a maximally great island is possibly necessary and hence necessary (by S5). Similarly absurd parodies "prove" the necessary existence of maximally great unicorns, spaghetti monsters, and the like.

Rasmussen (2018: 191) offers two replies to this objection. First, echoing Plantinga, we have independent reason to think there cannot be a maximally great island, since the great-making features of islands do not admit of intrinsic maxima. Three replies might be made in turn. First, the great-making features for *beings* may not admit of intrinsic maxima either. For instance, a being may be *better* if it actualizes a *better world*, and the value of worlds may admit of no maximum. Or a being may be *better* if it *exists in more persons*, and the number of persons in which one exists may admit of no maximum. (E.g., a being existing in $n+1$ persons that is otherwise qualitatively identical to a being existing in $n$ persons may be more valuable by the addition of an intrinsically valuable person.) Or a being may be *better* if it knows more mathematics, and the amount of mathematics known may admit of no maximum (Bohn 2012). Second, even if the great-making properties of islands do not admit of intrinsic maxima, the impossibility of a maximally great island does not follow. For there may be some precise *tradeoff* among the various great-island-making features (e.g., open space, coconuts, palm trees, etc.) that is uniquely best (Oppy 2017: 55). Indeed, theists may need to make the same move for God, since the intrinsic maxima of great-making features for *beings* may not be individually or collectively possible—e.g., the intrinsic maximum of *justice* may require giving each exactly their due, whereas the intrinsic maximum of *mercy* may require giving each *less than* their due; the intrinsic maximum of

knowledge—knowing *everything*—may not be possible in light of self-reference paradoxes; etc. Third, parodies can be run with entities whose great-making features *do* admit of intrinsic maxima. Consider a *Solo-Know*. A Solo-Know is a necessary being who, by nature, has exactly one ability: to know the truth values of propositions. The greatness of a Solo-Know is solely a function of its modal status and the extent of its knowledge, both of which admit of intrinsic maxima (at least by the lights of those who mount Rasmussen's first reply). Minor modifications to Solo-Know create endless absurd parodies.

Rasmussen's second reply is that necessary existence does not contribute to the greatness of an island *qua island*; it only contributes to the greatness of something *qua being*. But then *being a maximally great island* doesn't entail necessary existence. Two replies might be made in turn. First, one might think that a necessary island intuitively *is* a better island (*qua island*) than a contingent one. (For instance, perhaps an island is better *qua island* the less susceptible it is to submersion. But a necessary island is not even *possibly* submerged, and hence it is *maximally unsusceptible* to submersion.) Second, even if a necessary island isn't better than a contingent island *qua island*, one might still think that the former is *better* than the latter. So long as a necessary island is *better* than a contingent one, a *maximally great* island—i.e., an island whose greatness is unsurpassable by any other island—would enjoy necessary existence. Otherwise, a maximally great island would be surpassable in greatness by a qualitatively identical island enjoying necessary existence, which is absurd. This second reply is relevant to restoring symmetry if being a maximally great island is itself a degree of value (in the relevant sense).

# Desire

*The symmetry breaker*. A *defective* desire is one that cannot be coupled with beliefs to guide action or make action intelligible, where a desire *guides action or makes action intelligible* just in case it disposes the desiring agent to action that fulfils the desire or constitutes a step toward its fulfilment. The object of a *non-defective* desire must therefore be possible—if the object were *impossible*, there could be no actions that fulfil the desire or even constitute steps toward its fulfilment, and hence the desire, together with beliefs, could not *dispose* agents toward any such action. In light of this, if a desire *seems* non-defective, then we're defeasibly justified in taking it to *be* non-defective (and so possibly fulfilled). But the desire for complete happiness—i.e., the desire for the full realisation of one's capacities for objective excellence stably across time and circumstance—seems non-defective. Hence, we're defeasibly justified in taking complete happiness to be possible. But complete happiness is possible only if God is possible—without God, happiness would be hostage to the vicissitudes of chance, laws of nature, or other finite agents, in which case it wouldn't be stable across possible circumstances. Hence, we're defeasibly justified in taking God to be possible and (1) to be true (Buras and Cantrell 2018).

*Objections*. First, the symmetry breaker rests on a controversial account of well-being or happiness. (For more on theories of well-being, see the entry on [well-being](#).)

Second, it's not clear that the desire for complete happiness *seems* or *appears* non-defective—perhaps instead it simply does *not* seem or appear defective. (Consider: plausibly, Goldbach's conjecture does *not* seem or appear true—its truth does not strike us as manifest. But it is *false* that Goldbach's conjecture seems or appears *not* true—its non-truth similarly does not strike us as manifest.)

Third, complete happiness—as defined in the symmetry breaker—is *not* possible. Buras and Cantrell (2018: 360–361) lay down several necessary conditions for complete happiness, one of which is stability across actual *and possible* circumstances. So long as there are even *possible* circumstances in which one fails to exhibit virtue (say), one has only *partial* well-being and hence "partial or qualified happiness" (ibid: 361). Since each of us fails to exhibit virtue in at least *some* possible circumstance(s), complete happiness is not possible for any of us, *pace* the symmetry breaker. Buras and Cantrell seem to recognize something like this point. Their response is to restrict the claim that humans desire happiness to a qualified, incomplete, person- and time-relative maximum of happiness: "we mean to attribute to [humans] only… the desire to come as close to the ideal of happiness as possible from any given point in their life" (ibid.). But then it is clearly *false* that only God can provide for this sort of qualified, incomplete happiness. Even under atheism, it is possible for humans to come as close to the ideal of complete happiness as possible for them.

Fourth, God's existence is *not* a necessary condition for complete or near-complete human happiness. For starters, any number of finite, limited, contingent supernatural agents with the stable means and desire of ensuring the external goods necessary for human happiness could do the trick—angels, a pantheon of gods, demiurges, aliens with extremely advanced technology, etc. Such beings need not be necessary—indeed, *they need not even exist*—since they need only exist in (a) worlds in which complete or near-complete human happiness is realised (call them *h-worlds*), and (b) all the worlds *nearby* h-worlds (so as to ensure that the happiness in h-worlds is stable across counterfactually relevant circumstances—i.e., so as to ensure that such happiness isn't objectionably modally fragile in h-worlds). But our world is very remote from h-words. (For the same reason, *even if* an omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent creator is needed for complete or near-complete human happiness, such a being need be neither necessary nor actual—it need only exist in h-worlds and worlds *nearby* h-worlds.) In fact, *agents* aren't even necessary for complete or near-complete human happiness. Any number of cosmic realities—the Form of the Good, the Neo-Platonic One, the Tau, etc.—might be able to create physical universes containing humans, and many such realities may be intrinsically directed toward the production of profound goods like the stable flourishing of their creatures. And again, such cosmic realities need be neither necessary nor actual.

Fifth, the symmetry problem simply re-arises, for there are many seemingly non-defective desires whose objects are possible only if God does *not* exist. First, many mystics in non-theistic religious traditions desire mystical union with their religious ultimate. Such desires seem to guide action—they seem, for instance, to guide various rituals and mystic practices. Second, their objects are also not obviously impossible. These two facts, in turn, legitimate concluding that such desires seem non-defective (ibid: 365). But the satisfaction of such desires requires ultimate reality to be non-theistic in nature. Second, consider the desire to do wrong without being held accountable for it. The object of this desire is not obviously impossible, and Buras and Cantrell grant that it seems action-guiding and that its object is inconsistent with God's existence (ibid: 367). This desire, then, also seems non-defective. In light of these sorts of desires, symmetry is restored. (Buras and Cantrell respond to the second case by denying that anyone has ever had such a desire (ibid.). But this may seem implausible. For starters, some have reported people expressing precisely this desire (Wurmbrand 1967: 34). Moreover, this desire plausibly explains, in part, why many wrongdoers go to great lengths to avoid being held accountable for their wrongdoing.)

## Open-mindedness

*The symmetry breaker*. Open-mindedness requires defaulting to "weaker modal claims (e.g., possibility) instead of stronger modal claims (e.g., necessity or impossibility), unless one has reason for accepting the stronger modal claims" (Arbour 2019: 85). We should therefore (defeasibly) presume the possibility of God's existence and hence the truth of (1). And we shouldn't presume the possibility of God's *non-existence*, since the latter is a possibility claim about a *negative existential*, and "the only grounds for possibility claims about a negative existential (a weak claim) that gives rise to epistemic justification… is antecedent knowledge of the impossibility" of the thing(s) reported in the negative existential, which is a *strong* modal claim (Arbour 2019: 85). So, since (i) epistemic entitlement to *possibility* claims about negative existentials depends on prior epistemic entitlement to the *impossibility* of the things reported in those negative existentials, (ii) such impossibility claims are strong modal claims, and (iii) open-minded persons should not presume strong modal claims, it follows that (iv) open-minded persons should not presume possibility claims about negative existentials. Given all the preceding, we have a symmetry-breaking defeasible presumption in favour of (1) over (1*).

*Objections*. First, it's not clear why an open-minded person should presume weak modal claims. Why shouldn't an open-minded person instead default to *agnosticism* about modal claims—especially highly theoretical ones remote from our ordinary experience—unless given sufficient reason to think they're true? Indeed, it's not clear why open-mindedness requires presuming *any* substantive philosophical thesis. Perhaps open-mindedness instead only requires certain attitudes and dispositions towards one's beliefs and intellectual inquiry (e.g., a willingness to revise, re-

consider, and doubt one's beliefs; a commitment to explore alternative views in requisite depth; etc.).

Second, when *p* would be necessarily true if true at all, asserting *p*'s possibility amounts to asserting *p*'s necessity (assuming S5). But then asserting *p*'s possibility *isn't* a weak or modest modal claim after all. And in that case, asserting God's possible existence is *not* a weak modal claim. Hence, per the symmetry breaker, open-minded persons should not presume its truth.

Third, it's not in general true that epistemic entitlement to possibility claims about negative existentials depends on prior epistemic entitlement to the *impossibility* of the thing(s) reported in said negative existentials. For starters, we know that some things (e.g., you and me) are contingent, and hence we're epistemically entitled to possibility claims about negative existentials concerning them. But, clearly, this entitlement doesn't require prior entitlement to the *impossibility* of such things. And even in cases of non-contingent things, entitlement to claims about their possible non-existence isn't tethered to antecedent entitlement to their impossibility. For instance, any reason to think a non-contingent thing T is not *actual* is *ipso facto* reason to think that T is *possibly* not actual, and many such reasons don't require antecedent entitlement to T's *impossibility*. Furthermore, there may (in principle) be modal epistemological tools (e.g., conceivability, modal seemings, etc.) supporting the claim that T possibly doesn't exist, and such support needn't require antecedent entitlement to T's impossibility.

Fourth, we should reject the principle that open-minded persons should default to the possibility of positive existentials, since the principle yields inconsistent presumptions. Consider, for instance, positive existentials reporting the existence of proofs and disproofs of claims that are either necessarily true or necessarily false (e.g., Goldbach's conjecture, mind-brain identity theory, etc.). If we presume that a proof *and* a disproof of such claims are possible, then we've thereby presumed that such claims are necessarily true while also presuming that such claims are necessarily false.

Fifth, defaulting to the possibility of positive existentials fails to break symmetry between (1) and (1*), since many positive existential claims are *incompatible* with the claim that God exists— return to KnowNos, MenPris, UniNons, SuffLifes, and the like.

# Explicability

*The symmetry breaker*. Several symmetry breakers appeal to possible explanations (causes or grounds). As an illustration, consider Rasmussen's (2019) argument from the explicability of limits. First, some definitions. A property P is *explicable* if and only if an explanation of P's instantiation that doesn't appeal to P itself is consistent with all logical truths. In simpler terms, P is *explicable* if and only a non-circular explanation of P is logically possible. P is a *limit* if and

only if necessarily, whatever instantiates P is limited in some positive respect (Rasmussen 2019: 182).

Second, the argument. Every limit is explicable—for any limit, there's nothing logically contradictory about a non-circular explanation thereof. But the property *having limits* is itself a limit—trivially, whatever instantiates *having limits* is limited in some positive respect. So, *having limits* is explicable. But if *having limits* is explicable, then it is possible that something lacks limits. And if it's possible that something lacks limits, then a perfect being is possible. For "[w]hatever is less than perfect has some limit in some positive respect," and hence whatever has *no* limits is perfect (Rasmussen 2019: 184). Hence, a perfect being is possible, and (1) is secured.

*Objections*. First, the terms in play ('limit,' 'explanation,' and 'perfection') are ambiguous in ways that invite questions about the validity of key inferences. To ensure validity, Rasmussen endorses several qualifications:

i.     The notion of 'limit' must be wide enough to include any imperfection-entailing properties.
ii.    The notion of 'explanation' must be external enough to entail that an explanation of limits is in terms of something without fundamental limits.
iii.   The notion of 'perfect' must be strong enough to entail perfection across all *a priori* possible worlds (or all worlds *simpliciter*).

Each qualification can be a liability for the argument. First, a wide notion 'limit' implies a correspondingly less modest (more ambitious) principle of explanation, and one may have independent reasons to doubt a principle so strong (and if the principle is treated as a defeasible principle, it is more easily liable to defeat). The notion of 'limit' in (i) also invites a dilemma: either lacking one or more positive properties entails being limited, or it doesn't. If lacking one or more positive properties *doesn't* entail being limited, then the inference from *being unlimited* to *being perfect* is threatened, since something might (in principle) lack limits by simply lacking positive properties altogether—in which case, something might (in principle) be unlimited but non-perfect. By contrast, if lacking one or more positive properties *does* entail being limited, then *God* may be limited in various ways if God lacks the intrinsic maxima of certain positive properties, for *having a positive property to its intrinsic maximum* is plausibly a positive property, as is simply having more of a quantitative positive property than one actually has. (For more on this point, see the modal continuity section.)

Second, tightening the conditions on 'explanation' further detracts from modesty. Consider that a wider notion of 'explanation' would seem to allow for a non-circular explanation of limits that does not appeal to something unlimited. For example, it is at least logically possible that *having limits* is explained by, e.g., the *metaphysical necessity* of its instantiation (or, equivalently, the metaphysical impossibility of its non-instantiation). This is similar to a popular explanation of why

there is something rather than nothing: there simply *must have been* something—there being nothing is *impossible*. Likewise, why is *having limits* instantiated? Because *there must have been* limits—the total absence of limits from reality is impossible. Other non-circular explanations (e.g., essentialist-style explanations) are likewise logically possible. If we add that in addition to these sorts of explanations, there would *also* possibly be an explanation of the sort required by (ii), then the principle is correspondingly less modest. Additionally, one might think that a more modest principle (employing a wider notion of 'explanation') accounts for the data concerning the explicability of limits just as well as the less modest principle. For these and other potential reasons, one might prefer accepting the more modest principle over accepting both together.

Third, including *a priori* necessity in the notion of 'perfection' invites difficult questions about the metaphysics and epistemology of modality (questions beyond the scope of our analysis here). For example, is it even possible (in principle) for an existent thing to be *a priori* necessary (cf. Swinburne 2012, Rasmussen 2016, and Leftow 2022)? Do the principles of S5 modality (relevant to the MOA) track *a priori* necessity? Does this strong notion of perfection preclude (or reduce) *a priori* support for the relevant modal steps in the symmetry breaker or the MOA?

So much, then, for clarifications and potential liabilities thereof. A second overarching worry concerns the premise that every limit is explicable (i.e., possibly non-circularly explained). In particular, a comparably plausible symmetric premise presents itself: some limit is possibly *not* explained. This symmetric premise seems incompatible with the existence of a perfect being. A perfect being has every perfection essentially. But, intuitively, being the intentional source of everything limited (if there are such) is a perfection. Moreover, providential control over the character of limited reality is plausibly a perfection, and one can only providentially control the character of limited reality if limited things depend on one's actions. Hence, a perfect being is essentially the source of everything limited, and so an unexplained limit is *not* possible if there's a perfect being (cf. Schmid 2023). Furthermore, at least for traditional theists, it isn't possible for something distinct from God to exist independently of God (Grant 2019: ch. 1). Since God is unlimited, every limit is distinct from God, and so it is necessary that every limit depends on God. The traditional theist therefore denies the possibility of an unexplained limit. Symmetry, then, has ultimately been relocated to the competing explanatory principles at play. (One might try to avoid this symmetry problem by appealing to differential *a posteriori* support for the original principle over the symmetric principle. But one might question whether such differential *a posteriori* support exists, and furthermore this move renders the MOA no longer a purely *ontological* argument.)

Third, another symmetry problem may arise from the prospect of parallel arguments with competing conclusions. For example, we can run a parallel modal argument with a *UniNon*. Pick some UniNon and call it U. Now focus on the property *being a non-U*. This property is explicable—there's nothing logically contradictory about a non-circular explanation of its

instantiation. But if *being a non-U* is explicable, then it's possible that something lacks the property *being a non-U*. And, trivially, if it's possible that something lacks the property *being a non-U*, then U is possible. But U's existence is incompatible with God's existence. Hence, God's non-existence is possible. (1*) is secured. An adequate response to this symmetry problem will involve displaying a relevant difference between the respective arguments (such as in terms of differential *a priori* support for the modal premises in play). In general, it is also tricky to assess modal principles independently of one's total theory and prior theoretical commitments. For example, those who have reasons to think ultimate reality is a UniNon may, by their lights, have reasons to prefer the parallel modal premise over the modal premise in the explicability argument.

## Modal appearances

*The symmetry breaker*. Let <God exists> be $g$. On the basis of conceiving of a situation in which $g$, it *appears* or *seems* that $\Diamond g$. This, in turn, *prima facie* justifies (*pf*-justifies) one's belief that $\Diamond g$ if it is reasonable for one to believe that <if it were not the case that one's belief that $\Diamond g$ is *ultima facie* justified (*uf*-justified), then the total range of conceived propositions relevant to $g$ would likely *not* make it appear that $\Diamond g$>. But it *is* reasonable to believe this. Hence, belief that $\Diamond g$ is *prima facie* justified—in which case, (1) is *prima facie* justified (McIntosh 2021).

*Objections*. First, one might challenge whether God's existence really phenomenologically appears or seems possible. For instance, one might argue that God's existence simply *doesn't appear impossible*. Or one might question whether we can *phenomenologically* differentiate between (a) the appearance of the possibility of an essentially omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect being existing in *all* possible worlds and (b) the appearance of the possibility of an essentially omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect being existing in *all but one* remote possible world (perhaps even a remote world of which we are unaware or have no concept).

Second, the symmetry breaker's epistemic principle—that the appearance of $\Diamond p$ (on the basis of conceiving a situation in which $p$) *pf*-justifies belief that $\Diamond p$ if it is reasonable for one to believe that <if it were not the case that one's belief that $\Diamond g$ is *uf*-justified, then the total range of conceived propositions relevant to $g$ would likely *not* make it appear that $\Diamond g$>—is controversial. Those inclined to mitigated modal scepticism, for instance, will reject the principle when applied to cases far removed from our humdrum, ordinary experience (e.g., the possibility of God's existence).

Third, it's plausible that if one's belief that $\Diamond g$ is not *uf*-justified, then one has overlooked defeaters for $\Diamond g$. But given the complexity of the issue of God's existence and its overlap with nearly every other interesting philosophical debate, if there *were* such defeaters, it is not unlikely that they would be *hidden*, i.e., not apparent upon reflection, conception, and the like. But then it's not clear that it's reasonable to believe that <if it were not the case that one's belief that $\Diamond g$ is *uf*-justified,

then the total range of conceived propositions relevant to $g$ would likely *not* make it appear that ◊*g*>.

Fourth, the symmetry problem re-arises. For the non-theist can argue, with seemingly equal legitimacy, as follows: Let <God does not exist> be ~*g*. On the basis of conceiving of a situation in which ~*g*, it *appears* or *seems* that ◊~*g*. This, in turn, *prima facie* justifies (*pf*-justifies) one's belief that ◊~*g* if it is reasonable for one to believe that <if it were not the case that one's belief that ◊~*g* is *ultima facie* justified (*uf*-justified), then the total range of conceived propositions relevant to ~*g* would likely *not* make it appear that ◊~*g*>. But it *is* reasonable to believe this. Hence, belief that ◊~*g* is *prima facie* justified—in which case, (1*) is *prima facie* justified.

One might respond that the case of ◊*g* involves a proper modal appearance while the case of ◊~*g* does *not*, since (i) ◊~*g* is logically equivalent to ~◊*g* (assuming S5 and the necessity premise), and (ii) proper modal appearances only take *possibilities*, not *impossibilities*, as their objects (McIntosh 2021: 250–251, 260). Here are four replies to this response.

First, because appearances are hyperintensional, one can enjoy the appearance of ◊~*g* (a *possibility*) on the basis of a fleshed-out, detailed, consistently conceived scenario *without* enjoying the appearance of ~◊*g* (an *impossibility*) *even if* ◊~*g* is logically equivalent to ~◊*g*. In other words, even if *p*'s possibility is logically equivalent to an impossibility, one can still enjoy proper modal appearances that only take *p*'s possibility (and not any impossibility) as objects.

Second, if (i) and (ii) suffice to show that the case of ◊~*g* does *not* involve a proper modal appearance, ◊*g* likewise doesn't involve a proper modal appearance, since ◊*g* is *also* logically equivalent to ~◊~*g* (assuming S5 and the necessity premise). Hence, ◊*g*—just like ◊~*g*—is logically equivalent to an impossibility.

Third, the reasons offered for accepting (ii) equally justify accepting (ii*): proper modal appearances only take *bare possibilities*, not *necessities*, as their objects. McIntosh (2021: 251) offers two such reasons. First, "claiming something appears impossible has a degree of boldness that invites further inquiry; presumably there is some obvious reason, such as a contradiction, category mistake, paralysing myopia suggesting *p* is not possible" (ibid.). But, equally, claiming something appears necessary has a degree of boldness that invites further inquiry; presumably there is some obvious reason suggesting *p* is necessary. Second, for McIntosh, "'it appears possible that *p*' is equivalent to 'there appears to be a possible world in which *p* is true.' Thus, the object of a proper modal appearance is technically not an individual proposition, but what appears to be a possible world in which the proposition is true. But 'it appears impossible that *p*' does not take a possible world as its object" (ibid.). But, equally, 'it appears necessary that *p*' does not take a possible world as its object; it takes the *entire ensemble* of possible worlds as its object. If one retorts that this still amounts to taking a possible world as its object in the sense of taking *at least*

*one* possible world as its object, one can equally retort that an appearance of *p*'s impossibility likewise takes all possible worlds (and so *at least one* possible world) as its object—in particular, such an appearance represents *all* possible worlds as verifying ~*p*. But if the reasons offered for accepting (ii) equally justify accepting (ii*), then the earlier response would equally apply to the case of ◊*g*, since (i) ◊*g* is logically equivalent to □*g*, and yet (ii*) proper modal appearances only take *bare possibilities*, not *necessities*, as their objects. By the response's own lights, it would follow that ◊*g* is not a proper modal appearance.

Fourth, we can altogether avoid appearances of impossibility in developing the symmetry problem—simply run the problem in terms of a KnowNo, MenPri, UniNon, or SuffLife that appears possible.

# Epistemic entitlement

*The symmetry breaker*. We aren't justified in thinking ◊*p* when (i) coherence fails to support ◊*p*, and (ii) *a posteriori* support for *p* (and ◊*p*) is unavailable. Now, (1*) entails *Not Essential Dependence* (NED), the claim that the actual physical things are not essentially dependent on a perfect being, whereas (1) entails neither NED nor ~NED. (Suppose the characterised being in (1) and (1*) is a *perfect being*.) But coherence fails to support ◊NED (since ◊~NED is also coherent but incompatible with ◊NED), and *a posteriori* considerations fail to support NED (and ◊NED). Hence, we aren't justified in thinking ◊NED. Since (1*) requires NED, and since we're unjustified in believing NED is even possible, we're likewise unjustified in believing (1*). But no such comparable undercutting defeater uniquely afflicts (1), and hence there's an epistemic asymmetry between (1) and (1*) (Collin 2022).

*Objections*. First, even if coherence fails to support ◊*p* while *a posteriori* considerations fail to support *p* (and ◊*p*), we could easily be justified in thinking ◊*p*. For there are *other modal tools* that can justify possibility claims, and such tools can, in principle, distinctively support ◊*p* as opposed to ◊~*p* (or vice versa) (Schmid 2023). Examples might include modal continuity, modal seemings, perceptual imaginings, and so on.

Second, it's not at all clear that *a posteriori* support for NED is unavailable. Any *a posteriori* argument for atheism (or for naturalism, or for the existence of some UniNon, etc.) is *ipso facto* an argument for NED. For the symmetry breaker to succeed, *all* of the dozens of arguments like this—from global theory comparison to arguments from evil and beyond—must fail.

Third, *pace* the symmetry breaker, (1) plausibly entails ~NED (Schmid 2023). A perfect being has every perfection essentially. But, plausibly, being the intentional source of all physical things (if there are such) is a perfection. Moreover, providential control over the character of physical reality (if such exists) is plausibly a perfection, and one can only providentially control the character of

physical reality if physical things are dependent on one's actions. Hence, a perfect being is essentially the source of everything physical, and so the actual physical things *are* essentially dependent on a perfect being if (1) is true. (For further justification that sourcehood of this kind is a perfection, see Leftow 2012: 20–22.)

Fourth, the symmetry breaker is incompatible with traditional theism. As W. Matthews Grant explains, "the traditional view maintains not just that everything distinct from God is, in fact, caused by God but that it is not possible that anything else exist without being caused by him" (2019: 3). Hence, for the traditional theist, (1) *does* require ~NED, *pace* the symmetry breaker (Schmid 2023).

Fifth, it is false that no comparable undercutting defeater uniquely afflicts (1). Simply run a parallel argument in terms of a *UniNon* rather than a perfect being: (1) entails *Symmetric Not Essential Dependence (SNED)*, the claim that the actual physical things are not essentially dependent on a UniNon, whereas (1*) entails neither SNED nor ~SNED. But coherence fails to support ◊SNED, and *a posteriori* considerations fail to support SNED (and ◊SNED). What results is a parallel undercutting defeater uniquely afflicting (1) (Schmid 2023).

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