The Philosophical Quarterly

The Scots Philosophical Association and the University of St Andrews

The Philosophical Quarterly Vol. 62, No. 249 October 2012
ISSN 0031-8094 doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9213.2012.00091.x

ANSELMIAN THEISM AND INDEFINITELY EXTENSIBLE PERFECTION

By Einar Duenger Bohn

The Anselmian Thesis is the thesis that God is that than which nothing greater can be thought. In this paper, I argue that such a notion of God is incoherent due to greatness being indefinitely extensible: roughly, for any great being that can be, there is another one that is greater, so there cannot be a being than which nothing greater can be.

Someone will say that it is impossible to produce the best, because there is no perfect creature, and that it is always possible to produce one which would be more perfect.'

G.W. Leibniz. Theodicy. Edited by A. Farrer (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1985. Pp. 249.)

Let's say x is *omniperfect* iff x is (i) omniscient, (ii) omnipotent, and (iii) omnibenevolent; and let's (at least for now) say that x is *omniscient* iff x is maximally knowledgeable; x is *omnipotent* iff x is maximally powerful; and x is *omnibenevolent* iff x is maximally good. Let the *OmniGod Thesis* (OT) be the thesis that God is omniperfect; and *the Anselmian Thesis* (AT) be the thesis that God is identical with that than which nothing greater can be thought.[1]

As Yujin Nagasawa points out[2], it has often been assumed that AT entails OT, but it does not, or at least it isn't obvious that it does, which means that an argument against OT is not automatically an argument against AT. So, a proponent of AT might stand unrefuted by the

[1] For the original Anselmian Thesis, see *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, edited by B. Davies and G.R. Evans (Oxford UP, 1998), p.87. For defenses of AT, see e.g. G.N. Schlesinger 'Divine Perfection' *Religious Studies*, 21 (1985), pp. 147–58; G.N. Schlesinger 'On the Compatibility of the Divine Attributes' *Religious Studies*, 23 (1987), pp. 539–42; and T.V. Morris 'Perfect being Theology' *Noûs*, 21 (1987), pp.19–30. See also B. Leftow 'Anselm's perfect-being theology' in B. Davies and B. Leftow (eds.) *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm*, (Cambridge UP, 2004).

[2] Y. Nagasawa 'A New Defense of Anselmian Theism', *Philosophical Quarterly*, 58 (2008), pp. 577–96.

Published by Blackwell Publishing, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK, and 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA

problem of evil because AT does not obviously entail that God is omnipotent and omnibenevolent. For all AT says, God might not be maximally powerful. Also, a proponent of AT might stand unrefuted by an argument to the effect that omnipotence is internally incoherent because AT does not obviously entail that God is maximally powerful. Finally, a proponent of AT might stand unrefuted by an argument to the effect that at least two of (i)–(iii) are mutually inconsistent.[3] For all AT says, God might have each one of (i)–(iii) to a restricted degree in such a way that the mutual inconsistency disappears.[4]

Nagasawa is right. AT is compatible with evil, with internal inconsistencies in one or more of (i)–(iii), as well as with mutual inconsistencies among two or more of (i)–(iii). Nagasawa's important insight thus gets AT off many notorious hooks. But there is one crucial hook left: *there has to be a maximal degree to which perfection can be instantiated on pain of there not possibly being that than which nothing greater can be thought.* That is, there has to be an *intrinsic maximum*, a top level or upper limit so to speak, to the degree to which perfection can be instantiated, even if at least one of (i)–(iii) is not maximal somehow. Without this assumption of intrinsic maximality to perfection, AT is a non-starter.[5]

In what follows, I argue against this Anselmian assumption of there being an intrinsic maximality to perfection. In particular, in section I, I explicate the assumption of intrinsic maximality. In section II, I explicate a notion of *indefinite extensibility*, according to which maximality fails. In section III, I argue that perfection is thus indefinitely extensible, and hence that it fails to satisfy intrinsic maximality. After concluding that the Anselmian Thesis is incoherent, I end in section IV by replying to some anticipated objections.

I. INTRINSIC MAXIMALITY

According to AT, God is that than which nothing greater can be *thought*. But thought by whom? Let's precisify by saying that according to AT,

[3] I am here thinking of traditional paradoxes such as that of the stone, the possibility of divine sin, and so on.

[4] This is also nicely pointed out in Schlesinger, *ibid* (1985), pp.155–8 and Schlesinger, *ibid* (1987).

[5] The assumption is simply taken for granted without argument in e.g. Schlesinger *ibid*, Morris *ibid*, and Nagasawa *ibid*. The fact that this assumption can be denied is most recently pointed out in G. Oppy 'Perfection, near-perfection, maximality, and Anselmian Theism', *International Journal of Philosophy of Religion*, 69 (2011), pp. 119–38, but as the opening quote shows, even Leibniz anticipated, or was aware of the problem with this assumption. But for some reason, no one has, as far as I know, argued against it.

God is that than which nothing greater can *metaphysically be*; and let for present purposes the greatness involved be a primitive notion of perfection that can be explicated, but not fully defined. This precisification seems plausible. It would be strange indeed for an Anselmian to hold that God is that than which nothing greater can be thought by some cognisers, but still there can be a much greater God.

Let's say a property X is *degreed* iff X's possible instances can be mapped on to a continuous scale such that for any two possible instances Xx and Xy, the instance of X in x is mapped on to a number that is either smaller than, equal to, or bigger than the number that the instance of X in y is mapped on to. But on this notion of a degreed property, any property is degreed, and hence it is a bit uninteresting. For example, consider the property of being square. All possible instances of this property are mapped on to the same number because the degree of squareness is an all or nothing matter, so to speak. So let's say a property X is *trivially degreed* iff X's possible instances are all mapped on to the same number on the scale; but that it is *substantially degreed* iff X's possible instances are all mapped on to the scale, but not all on to the same number on the scale. Let's by 'degreed property' henceforth mean a substantially degreed property.[6] Intuitively, more and less ordinary examples of such degreed properties are pleasure, pain, temperature, velocity, weight and mass.

Often the notion of omniperfection is explicated as I defined the notion at the outset, namely as the conjunction of (i) maximally knowledgeable, (ii) maximally powerful, and (iii) maximally good. A natural way to represent this is by saying that knowledge, power and goodness are degreed properties that can be mapped on to the *closed* continuous scale [0,1] such that the three instances of these properties in God, but in nothing else are each mapped on to the number 1.[7] But as we have seen, Nagasawa (*ibid.*) correctly points out that AT should be construed such that God does not have each one of the three properties to the maximal degree 1, but rather God has the *combination* of (i)–(iii) to some maximal degree. That is, God has perfection to some maximal degree to which (i)–(iii) can be jointly *co*-instantiated in one and the same thing, but God need not have each one of (i)–(iii) to the maximal degree 1. Nagasawa calls this the *MaximalGod Thesis*:

(MT): God is maximally perfect

[6] The reason I don't define a degreed property as a property whose instances are all mapped *one-to-one into* the scale is that we have the possibility of properties whose possible instances are such that some, but not all of them are mapped on to the same number.

[7] I am not sure how we are supposed to fix a unique reference for 'God', but let that be as it may.

where x is maximally perfect just in case x is maximally (i) knowledgeable and (ii) powerful and (iii) good.[8] A natural way to represent MT is to map all possible instances of perfection on to the closed continuous scale [0,1] without mapping each one of (i)–(iii) that is part of what constitutes such perfection on to 1. So, for example, it might be the case that the instance of perfection in God is mapped on to 1, but while God's goodness is perhaps also mapped on to 1, God's knowledge is mapped on to .8 and God's power is mapped on to .7. It might just be that it is metaphysically impossible to have a joint co-instantiation of each divine attribute to degree 1 in one and the same being. It might just be that maximal perfection (perfection to degree 1) is a maximal combination of (i)–(iii) without each one of (i)–(iii) being maximal.

Interestingly, these same points are made by C.D. Broad.[9] Broad distinguishes between a *comparative* notion of omniperfection and an *absolute* notion of omniperfection.[10] According to the comparative notion, an omniperfect being is a being such that nothing greater than it is metaphysically possible. According to the absolute notion, an omniperfect being is a being that has each divine attribute to the maximal degree 1. One point Broad makes is that the absolute notion makes sense only if it is metaphysically possible that each divine attribute is co-instantiated in one and the same thing to a maximal degree 1. Following Nagasawa (*ibid*), we have granted this, but argued that AT does not entail the absolute notion.

But another interesting point Broad makes is that the comparative notion makes sense only if there is an intrinsic maximum, a top level or an upper limit so to speak, to the degree of the possible joint co-instantiation of knowledge and power and goodness in one and the same thing. Nagasawa (*ibid*, pp.593–4) is of course aware of this point, but simply accepts such an intrinsic maximum as a necessary assumption without providing any justification for it. We have *not* granted that there is such an intrinsic maximum, and as far as I can see, we cannot grant it either.

But limits and limitlessness are complicated things.[11] The first and simplest complication for our purposes is that a degreed property X can be infinitely

[8] *Important*: while *omniperfection* is being maximally knowledgeable and maximally powerful and maximally good, *maximal perfection* is being maximally knowledgeable and powerful and good (i.e. maximally so collectively, not individually).

[9] C.D. Broad 'Arguments for the Existence of God', in C.D. Broad, *Religion, Philosophy and Psychical Research*, (London: Routledge, 1953). My interpretation of Broad's points is somewhat simplified, but hopefully not false. Nagasawa, *ibid*, does not refer to Broad, and hence seems unaware of Broad making very much the same points.

[10] In fact, Broad calls it a *positive* notion, but 'absolute' seems a better fit.

[11] Cf. J.A. Benardete, *Infinity*, (Oxford UP, 1964) and A. Kanamori, *The Higher Infinite*, second edition (Springer, 2009) on the metaphysics and mathematics of infinity, respectively.

degreed, but still have an intrinsic maximum. For example, all possible instances of it can be mapped on to the scale [0,1], which contains infinitely many numbers, but still no instance exceeding the upper limit 1. Hence, the mere fact that a property is infinitely degreed does nothing to disprove that there is an intrinsic maximum to the degree of the possible joint co-instantiation of knowledge and power and goodness in one and the same thing.

But we can naturally represent Broad's objection by simply removing the upper limit of our closed scale: instead of the closed continuous scale [0,1] we employ the *open* continuous scale ⟨0,1⟩, which includes all the numbers from the closed scale except the lower and upper limit 0 and 1.[12] With no upper limit to the scale, a property mapped on to it is such that for each possible instance of it, there is another possible instance of it mapped on to a higher number on the scale, without limit. The problem for AT is that if this is so with respect to perfection, there is no being than which nothing greater can metaphysically be because for any possible being x, there is a possible being that is greater than x.

For whatever it is worth, naïve introspection alone seems to reveal no firm intuition towards the effect that the best representation of the modal space for divine perfection isn't by virtue of the open continuous scale ⟨0,1⟩ rather than by virtue of the closed continuous scale [0,1].[13] Furthermore, no logical contradiction is lurking in a model of perfection in terms of the open scale, rather than in terms of the closed scale. So why think there must be an intrinsic maximum to perfection?

II. INDEFINITE EXTENSIBILITY

Consider trying to circle in some sheep, but every time you believe you have them all circled in, you find one outside of your circle. If your circle is a concept, and your sheep is its extension, then, intuitively, that concept is *indefinitely extensible*. A bit more accurately, a concept C is said to be indefinitely extensible just in case it is impossible to universally quantify over all Cs because for any way W of trying to capture the entire extension of C, there is something that is C, but not captured by W.

[12] In fact, we should perhaps have used the *half-open* scale ⟨0,1] all along because it is doubtful that any possible being of the relevant sort can lack knowledge, power and goodness altogether.

[13] This is also suggested in G. Oppy, *ibid.*

Indefinite extensibility is notoriously difficult to fully define,[14] but a more rigorous example is given by the concept of *ordinal numbers*. While cardinal numbers represent size, ordinal numbers represent the order of those sizes. So, let's for present purposes simply identify the cardinal number 0 with the first ordinal 1^{st}, the cardinal number 1 with the second ordinal 2^{nd}, the cardinal number 2 with the third ordinal 3^{rd}, the cardinal number 3 with the fourth ordinal 4^{th}, and so on. Then, arguably, you cannot sensibly talk about *all* ordinal numbers (in one big sweep) because whenever you think about a collection of ordinal numbers, call it *O*, the ordinal number of *O* itself is not among them. For example, when I consider all the ordinal numbers 1^{st}, 2^{nd}, 3^{rd}, …, that collection has the ordinal number $\ldots^{th}$ + one more.[15] The concept of ordinal numbers is thus intuitively truly limitless, and indefinitely extensible.

According to Shapiro and Wright, the ordinal numbers are in fact a paradigm of indefinite extensibility.[16] The concept of ordinal numbers can therefore be used as a test for indefinite extensibility: if there is an injection of the ordinal numbers into the extension of a concept C, then C is indefinitely extensible. Arguably, we can even strengthen this test into a bi-conditional: concept C is indefinitely extensible iff there is an injection of the ordinal numbers into the extension of C.[17]

[14] For example, didn't I universally quantify over all Cs in the very statement of indefinite extensibility according to which one cannot so universally quantify? This puzzle can be solved, but at the cost of some technical complications that we need not bother with here; see S. Shapiro and C. Wright 'All Things Indefinitely Extensible' in A. Rayo and G. Uzquiano (eds.), *Absolute Generality*, (Oxford UP, 2006), and K. Fine 'Relatively Unrestricted Quantification', in A. Rayo and G. Uzquiano, *ibid*. I will simply not here attempt to give a full definition of indefinite extensibility, but simply refer the reader to the relevant literature, and to the *First objection* in section IV below.

[15] Recall, $0 = 1^{st}$, $1 = 2^{nd}$, etc. So, … is the …-+-one-more-ordinal number. And the …-+-one-more-ordinal number has ordinal number …-+-one-more-+-one-more-ordinal number, and so on. Things get more complicated when we reach the transfinite (cf. Kanamori, *ibid*), but we can for present purposes keep things at a simple level. But note that if perfection is indefinitely extensible, then even $< 0,1 >$ might turn out to be insufficient for modeling it. That is, we might need strictly more numbers than what we get from the real numbers alone.

[16] Shapiro and Wright, *ibid*. That the ordinals provide the best paradigm of indefinite extensibility seems shared by most philosophers working on indefinite extensibility. In addition to Shapiro and Wright *ibid;* see also M. Dummett 'The Philosophical Significance of Gödel's Theorem' *Ratio*, 5 (1963), pp. 140–55; M. Dummett, *Frege: Philosophy of Mathematics*, (Harvard UP, 1991); and K. Fine, *ibid*.

[17] This strengthening is what Shapiro and Wright, *ibid,* calls *Russell's Conjecture*. Obviously, this bi-conditional cannot be a real definition, given that it treats the extension of C as a more or less definite collection. Shapiro and Wright's (*ibid,* section 5) full definition is complicated, but the rough idea is that C is indefinitely extensible just in case for some concept ***C*** of concepts of a certain type of things, any ***C*** sub-concept of C allows of limitless ***C***-preserving enlargement.

III. INDEFINITELY EXTENSIBLE PERFECTION

In order to show that AT's assumption of there being an upper limit to perfection is false, it isn't sufficient to merely show that at least one of (i)–(iii) is indefinitely extensible. If one or more of (i)–(iii) is indefinitely extensible with respect to its degree of instantiation, the *joint co-instantiation* of (i)–(iii) might still not be indefinitely extensible with respect to its degree of instantiation.

For example, it seems the concept of truth is indefinitely extensible because we can inject all ordinal numbers into its extension by virtue of there being a truth for every ordinal number. This arguably shows that knowing all true propositions is impossible because there would be no way of capturing all true propositions for some being such that he can know them all. Omniscience in the sense of knowing all true propositions is thus impossible because knowledge entails truth, but truth is indefinitely extensible. But this is not sufficient for showing that perfection has no intrinsic maximum, or upper limit. It might just be the case that perfection has an upper limit when knowledge is combined with power and goodness in one and the same being.

This is so even if each one of (i)–(iii) is indefinitely extensible. Consider goodness. It seems a community of pure souls each of which stands in a relationship of mutual love to each other as well as to their creator x is a good thing. But it seems the ordinal numbers can be injected into the extension of the concept of such a possible community of souls with mutual love for each other in virtue of possibly adding one 'lover' for each ordinal number. There thus seems to be no upper limit to the size and order of a possible community of mutual lovers, and therefore, if we grant that the more love there is the greater it is, the concept of goodness with respect to x seems indefinitely extensible. We can tell a similar story about the possible instances of power. There is a sense in which the more computational power a being x has, the more power x has. But it seems the ordinal numbers can be injected into the extension of the concept of computational power in virtue of there being one more unit of computational power per ordinal number x can calculate. There thus seems to be no upper limit to computational power in a possible being, and therefore the concept of power seems indefinitely extensible.

But even thus granting that each one of (i)–(iii) is indefinitely extensible, it just doesn't follow that perfection, which is the joint co-instantiation of all of them in one and the same individual, is indefinitely extensible. Compare with the case of some police officers surrounding a prisoner. Just because they surround the prisoner together, it doesn't follow that each one of the police officers surrounds the prisoner. Similarly, just because (i)–(iii) has an intrinsic maximum together, it doesn't follow that each one of (i)–(iii) has an intrinsic maximum. Conversely, just because while each one of (i)–(iii) individually has no upper limit, it doesn't follow that all of (i)–(iii) together has no upper limit; just like just because each one of the police officers individually does not surround the prisoner, it doesn't follow that all of the police officers together do not surround the prisoner.

So, in order to show perfection to be indefinitely extensible, and hence in lack of an intrinsic maximum with respect to its possible instantiation, we must consider perfection directly. That is, we must consider the conjunction of (i)–(iii) collectively, not each one of the conjuncts individually. So, is the concept of perfection such that there is an injection of the ordinal numbers into its possible extension? If so, there just cannot be that than which nothing greater can be.

There seems to be a short way to the conclusion that perfection is indeed thus indefinitely extensible. *All else being equal*, if x knows more mathematics than y, then x is more perfect than y. The 'all else being equal'-clause is here important. I don't consider a good mathematician an overall more perfect being than myself just because she knows more mathematics than I do. But if *all else is equal between us*, then I am indeed forced to conclude that she is more perfect than I am. But if the ordinal numbers are indefinitely extensible, then knowing mathematics is indefinitely extensible. And if it is impossible to know about all the ordinal numbers in virtue of them being indefinitely extensible, then it is impossible to know all mathematics in virtue of it being indefinitely extensible. But then it is clear that for each x that we suppose is perfect, there is a y such that all else is equal, but y knows more mathematics and hence is more perfect than x. So, perfection is indefinitely extensible.

Note that though perfection is thus made indefinitely extensible in virtue of knowledge about ordinal numbers, it is not a mere claim that knowledge is indefinitely extensible, which we saw above does not suffice for showing perfection is indefinitely extensible. Our example included the additional assumption that *all else being equal, knowing more mathematics amounts to greater degree of perfection*. That is, we first fix a degree of (i)–(iii) collectively, and hence fix a degree of perfection directly. Then, by raising the degree of mathematical knowledge alone, we raise the degree of (i)–(iii) collectively, and hence, by definition, raise the degree of perfection too. We might add the plausible conjecture that knowledge about ordinal numbers creates no tension in any possible co-instantiation of (i)–(iii).

There seem to be other examples too. *All else being equal*, if x creates more mutual love than y, then x is more perfect than y. The 'all else being equal'-clause is here important for the same reasons as in the preceding case. By creating a new possible relationship of mutual love for each ordinal number, we can in turn inject the ordinal numbers back into the extension of the concept of possible mutual love. But then for each x that can create some relationships of mutual love, there is a y that can create more such mutual love. But then for each x that we suppose is perfect, there is a y such that all else is equal, but y can create more mutual love than x, and hence is more perfect than x. So, perfection is indefinitely extensible.

Just like in the earlier case, though perfection is here made indefinitely extensible in virtue of the possibility of creating mutual love, it is not a mere claim that goodness is indefinitely extensible, which we saw above does not suffice for showing perfection is indefinitely extensible. Our example included the additional assumption that *all else being equal, creating more mutual love amounts to a greater degree of perfection*. That is, we first fix a case of a certain degree of mutual love. Then, by merely adding one 'lover' in this case of mutual love, *and leaving all else equal*, the creator would have done something better, and hence been more perfect.[18] We might add the plausible conjecture that the amount of mutual love creates no tension in any possible co-instantiation of (i)–(iii).

It now seems easy to come up with other similar cases by virtue of which we can come to see that perfection is indeed indefinitely extensible. So let's instead recap: AT is the thesis that God is identical with that than which nothing greater can be thought. AT entails MT, according to which God is maximally perfect, but AT does not entail OT, according to which God is omniperfect. I have argued against the coherence of MT, and hence argued against the coherence of AT, in virtue of considering perfection as being an indefinitely extensible property with respect to its possible degree of instantiation. But if perfection is thus indefinitely extensible, then there cannot be that than which nothing greater can be because any way of trying to capture the maximal possible instance of perfection necessarily leaves some higher degreed possible instance out. The Anselmian Thesis is therefore incoherent.

[18] There is no pretension here of defining goodness in terms of how *many* others we love because a possible world in which A and B mutually love each other to degree *d* might be better than a world in which A, B, and C mutually love each other to a lesser degree *d**. My point is only this: by first fixing a case of how many others we love, and to what degree we love them, by adding one more relationship of love to *that* case, we have a yet better case. Thanks to a referee for this journal for pressing this point.

IV. OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

If, as I have argued, there is no upper limit to perfection, then there cannot be that than which nothing greater can be, just like there cannot be that ordinal number than which no greater (ordinal number) can be. The Anselmian Thesis that God is that than which nothing greater can be thought is therefore an incoherent thesis, just like the thesis that God is that ordinal number than which no grater (ordinal number) can be thought. But at this point, I anticipate some objections.

First objection: it is the notion of indefinite extensibility that is incoherent, not Anselmian Theism. *Reply*: that might be so, but the claim requires an argument. As far as I know, the proponents of Anselmian Theism have not provided one. In section II above, I sketched (though admittedly never fully defined) what surely seems to *be* a coherent notion of indefinite extensibility. Others have sketched notions of indefinite extensibility that seems to be at least coherent notions too.[19] So Anselmian Theists have to pull up their sleeves and engage with this research, not simply take its incoherency for granted.

Second objection: granted the coherency of a notion of indefinite extensibility, divine perfection is still not thus indefinitely extensible. *Reply*: that might be so, but again the claim requires an argument. And, again, as far as I know, the proponents of Anselmian Theism have not provided one. For example, Schlesinger (*ibid*), Morris (*ibid*) and Nagasawa (*ibid*) simply take it for granted. In section III above, I provided an argument to the effect that divine perfection *is* indefinitely extensible. So Anselmian Theists have to pull up their sleeves and engage with my argument, not simply take its unsoundness for granted.

Third objection: granted the indefinite extensibility of divine perfection, God then has that divine perfection to an indefinitely extensible degree, and hence is still that than which nothing greater can be (and hence that than which nothing greater can be thought). Hence, Anselmian Theism is a coherent thesis after all. *Reply*: no, this objection rests on a misunderstanding of what indefinite extensibility really is. Nothing can have a property to an indefinitely extensible degree because there is no one such degree. For any indefinitely extensible property, there are infinitely many

[19] Historically, both Descartes and Leibniz were working with notions of indefinite extensibility. See e.g. R. Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes Vol I.*, edited and translated by J. Cottingham et al. (Cambridge UP, 1985), pp. 201–2; and G.W. Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*, P. Remnant and J. Bennett (eds.), (Cambridge UP, 1996), p.151. For contemporary philosophers, see e.g. Dummett, *ibid*, Fine, *ibid*, and Shapiro and Wright, *ibid*.

degrees to which it can be had, but there is no one indefinitely extensible degree to which it can be had. Consider ordinal numbers again. There are infinitely many ordinal numbers something can have, but there is no one indefinitely extensible ordinal number something can have. Or as Leibniz (*ibid* 1996, p. 151) put it with respect to wholes: 'there is never an infinite whole in the world, though there are always wholes greater than others *ad infinitum*'. Likewise, though there are indefinitely many degrees to which something could instantiate perfection, there is no one particular indefinite degree to which perfection could be instantiated. Indefinite extensibility is a genuine lack of limit, even at (the highest possible form of) infinity!

Fourth objection:[20] indefinite extensibility is best thought of in terms of potentiality (or powers or dispositions) such that a concept is indefinitely extensible just in case there is a procedure by which it is applicable, and this procedure *can* be indefinitely repeated. Having a maximal degree of perfection is simply having such a potentiality for indefinite repetition of a procedure, not having a completed manifestation of the potentiality. But then the above argument against Anselmian Theism fails because it only shows that the manifestation of this potentiality is indefinitely extensible, leaving the potentiality itself unaffected. *First reply*: granted the notion of potentiality in play here, my argument still goes through. Consider a being x with a great potentiality and *n* manifestations of it, for some cardinal number *n*. Another being y with the same great potentiality as x, but with *m* manifestations of it, for some cardinal number $m>n$, is more perfect than x, *all else being equal*.[21] In short: a being with a great power is better when she manifests it, all else being equal. *Second reply*: restricting the perfection of God to *only* be measured by the possession of potentialities amounts to giving up on Anselmian Theism, according to which God is that than which nothing greater can be thought. As said above, a being scoring high on the possession of potentialities *and* their manifestations is surely to be thought of as a more perfect being than a being that scores high on the possession of them, *but not* on their manifestations. But then, for any being who scores so-and-so on possession of potentialities, we can think of another being that is more perfect, namely one who scores equally on possession of potentialities, but higher on their indefinitely extensible manifestations.

Fifth objection: degrees of perfection can be measured along a qualitative axis as well as a quantitative axis. For example, assume there is a set of

[20] Thanks to two referees for this journal for pressing this and the next objection. The two objections might in the end be variants of each other.

[21] The 'all else being equal'-clause is here important for the same kind of reasons as was given in the main argument in section III above.

axioms from which anything else is a theorem. Then knowing this set of axioms can be said to be a maximal degree of qualitative knowledge, independent of how many of its theorems one quantitatively knows. Divine perfection must be measured along some such qualitative axis, not a quantitative axis, and hence the above argument fails because it only refutes a maximal degree of perfection by showing indefinite extensibility along a quantitative axis, not along a qualitative axis. *First reply*: granted some such distinction between a qualitative and a quantitative form of perfection, my argument still goes through. Consider a being x that qualitatively knows the set of axioms from which anything else quantitatively follows, in addition to quantitatively knowing *n* theorems, for some cardinal number *n*. Another being y that also knows the set of axioms from which anything else follows, but in addition quantitatively knows *m* theorems, for some cardinal number $m>n$, is more perfect than x, *all else being equal*.[22] *Second reply*: restricting the perfection of God to *only* be measured along a qualitative axis amounts to giving up on Anselmian Theism, according to which God is that than which nothing greater can be thought. A being scoring high on the qualitative *and* quantitative axis is surely to be thought of as a more perfect being than a being that *only* scores high on the qualitative axis alone. But then, for any being who scores so-and-so along the qualitative axis, we can think of another being that is more perfect, namely one who scores equally along the qualitative axis, but higher on the indefinitely extensible quantitative axis.

In closing, consider the following well-known question: if there is an infinite axiological hierarchy of possible worlds, what kind of world should God then create? The tempting answer is of course: some possible world or other above a certain axiological threshold. Now, it is interesting to note that no such threshold-solution will work for the Anselmian against the above problem of indefinitely extensible perfection: saying that God is one of the infinitely many possible beings above a certain threshold of perfection is simply giving up on Anselmian Theism![23]

So, as far as I can see then, the Anselmian Thesis that God is that than which nothing greater can be thought stands refuted: for any great being, there is always something greater than it that can be thought. That does of course nothing to show that theism as such is false, but only Anselmian Theism, or so-called Perfect Being Theism. But given the prevalence of some such notion of a perfect being in our conception of God – both among philosophers and non-philosophers – this is a very important result. Any ver-

[22] Again, the 'all else being equal'-clause is here important for the same reasons as in the main argument in section III.

[23] I owe this last point to Yujin Nagasawa.

sion of Anselm's ontological argument is of course a non-starter. But also, if the God we supposedly think and talk about could in fact have been indefinitely greater, how can we really be thinking and talking about a *God*?[24]

IFIKK University of Oslo

[24] Thanks to Yujin Nagasawa, Andreas Carlsson, and two referees for discussions, comments and references.