

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 10 | Issue 2

Article 4

4-1-1993

The Epistemology of Evil Possibilities

Paul Tidman

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Tidman, Paul (1993) "The Epistemology of Evil Possibilities," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 2 , Article 4.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil199310233

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol10/iss2/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF EVIL POSSIBILITIES

Paul Tidman

In this paper I defend the Anselmian conception of God as a necessary being who is necessarily omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good against arguments that attempt to show that we have good reason to think there are evil possible worlds in which either God does not exist or in which He lacks at least one of these attributes. I argue that the critics of Anselmianism have failed to provide any compelling reason to think such worlds are possible. The best the critic of Anselmianism can achieve is a stand-off of competing modal intuitions. I conclude by suggesting some ways of resolving such a stand-off in favor of the Anselmian view.

At the very heart of classical theism is the claim that God is perfect. Anselm gave expression to this central theistic tenet when he described God as “a being than which nothing greater can be conceived.”¹ Many theists today hold both that God exists necessarily and that He is necessarily omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect. For the sake of convenience, I will call such theists “Anselmians.” The Anselmian, then, maintains that it is not possible either that God should fail to exist or that He should fail to possess omnipotence, omniscience, or moral perfection. In terms of possible worlds, the Anselmian view amounts to the claim that the individual who is God both exists and possesses each of these attributes in every possible world.

There is an objection to the Anselmian conception of God based upon the ease with which we can conceive of very evil possible worlds. Theodore Guleserian labels this problem “The Modal Problem of Evil.”² Stated in its simplest terms, the modal problem of evil is the charge that there are some possible worlds where the problem of evil works. Perhaps the contemporary theodist can plausibly argue that this world does not contain evil of a sort sufficient to preclude the existence of God. But surely among all the possible worlds, there are some that are sufficiently nasty. Nelson Pike, for example, argues that we have good reason to think that there are worlds in which God, for no excusable reason, brings it about that an innocent child suffers a slow and torturous death by starvation.³ If there are such wretched worlds, the Anselmian view of God is incorrect. Some worlds do not contain an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good God.

It seems to me, however, that this line of criticism rests largely upon a faulty modal epistemology. In this paper I will argue that the evil states of affairs that would preclude Anselmianism are not in the least bit shown to be



real possibilities by their apparent conceivability or consistency. I hope to show, that is, that the Modal Problem of Evil is no problem at all, because the epistemological assumptions it rests upon are mistaken.

1. *Wretched Worlds*

At the heart of the modal problem of evil is the claim that there are possible worlds which contain evil of the sort sufficient to preclude the existence of the God of theism. Let us call any such world a wretched world. Guleserian describes one of these wretched worlds:

Think of a world, we will call it β , in which the only sentient beings whose existence is contingent are nonrational animals of various sorts—or are sentient beings a good deal like the higher nonrational animals in our world—all of which suffer long spontaneous bouts of excruciating pain, and spend the few hours between bouts barely doing what is necessary to survive. We can draw the picture as detailed as we like.... Such a wretched world clearly seems to be logically possible, yet one that no divine being would permit to be actual.⁴

It seems to me that if a world such as β as indeed possible then either God does not exist in that world or else in that world He lacks omnipotence, omniscience, or perfect goodness. The creatures who inhabit β are so characterized as to be incapable of making morally significant choices. Because of this, the usual theistic responses to evil, such as the free will defense, or the soul making, virtuous response, and punishment theodicies, would not be available in this context. All of these, in one way or the other, require there to be creatures capable of making morally significant choices. Since there are no such creatures in β it seems to me that the Anselmian is committed to denying that such a world is possible.

Indeed, one need not posit particularly evil worlds of the sort imagined by Pike and Guleserian. Consider, for instance, what might be called “the empty world”; a world in which nothing whatsoever exists, except perhaps abstract objects. This world is not particularly evil, there is nothing in this world to be evil. Nevertheless if such a world is possible the Anselmian view is false.

But why should anyone think wretched worlds are really possible? The most obvious reason that might be suggested is that we seem to be able to clearly conceive of such worlds. Philosophers commonly defend claims about what is possible in this manner. Hume is the classic proponent of this sort of methodology. For example, Hume argues that our ability to conceive of the laws of nature failing is sufficient to show that the laws of nature are not necessary truths:

We can at least conceive a change in the course of nature; which sufficiently proves, that such a change is not absolutely impossible. To form a clear idea of anything, is an undeniable argument for its possibility, and is alone a refutation of any pretended demonstration against it.⁵

For a more recent example, consider Kripke's argument against the identity theory. Kripke argues that the materialist who holds that being in pain is identical to being in a particular brain state must show that we cannot imagine the one without the other.

He has to hold that we are under some illusion in thinking that we can imagine that there could have been pains without brain states.... So the materialist is up against a very stiff challenge. *He has to show that these things we think we can see to be possible are in fact not possible. He has to show that these things which we can imagine are not in fact things we can imagine.*⁶

Of course, Kripke does not think the materialist can pull this off. Showing we cannot imagine what we obviously can imagine would require, "a deeper and subtler argument than I can fathom and subtler than has ever appeared in any materialist literature that I have read."⁷ But why should the materialist even attempt this Herculean task? Why might the materialist not simply retort that in this case we are merely imagining something which is impossible? After all, conceivability seems to be a psychological notion having to do with our mental abilities, whereas possibility and necessity are metaphysical notions having to do with how things could be. So it is hard to see why we should suppose there should be any sort of tight correspondence between our powers of imagination and the modal facts of the matter. Why should we not be able to conceive of impossibilities? Just because we can picture or imagine something, why should *that* give us reason to think things could really be that way?

It is somewhat ironic that Kripke should argue in this way since he is very careful at the outset of *Naming and Necessity* to distinguish the epistemic question of what is *a priori* from the metaphysical question of what is necessary.⁸ As a result of Kripke's work philosophers today are much more careful to avoid blurring epistemological and metaphysical issues. But it seems not to have occurred to Kripke that the very same sorts of questions he raises with respect to the relationships between the *a priori* and the necessary can be raised regarding the connection between the conceivable and the possible as well. The question of what is conceivable is a question about us, about our mental capabilities. The question of what is possible, on the other hand, seems entirely independent of such considerations. It is a question about how things can be, whatever the powers of our imagination might be.

In this light, consider the conceivability of the sort of world described by Guleserian, a wretched world in which the only creatures that exist are gratuitously suffering rabbits. Surely we can conceive of such worlds. Not only are such states of affairs not unintelligible to us, there seems nothing at all contradictory in the idea that they might obtain. But this, I suggest, fails to give us sufficient reason to think that such worlds are possible. One way to emphasize this point is to note that the Anselmian can say the same things about the claim that God exists necessarily and is necessarily omnipotent,

omniscient, and perfectly good. So, if bare conceivability were to be the test by which we determine what is possible, the situation appears to be at best a stand-off. We can conceive of wretched worlds, but we can also conceive of the impossibility of such worlds.

Consider another example. In his book, *Religious Belief*, C. B. Martin charges that the divinity of Christ suffers from an irresolvable contradiction.

The contradiction is: Christ can be *conceived* to have been other (that is, not good) than he was, yet as God it should be not just false but *inconceivable* that he should have been not good.⁹

Martin's claim that we can conceive of Christ being not good seems incontestable. Picture, for instance, Christ hurling himself from the roof of the Temple at Satan's bidding. Assuming the divinity of Christ, is this a problem for the Christian Anselmian? I think not. Why should we suppose that its being a necessary truth that Christ not sin should render us unable to imagine his sinning? I think it remains perfectly reasonable to affirm that it was not possible for Christ to do this in spite of such imaginings.

The Anti-Anselmian needs a conception of conceivability according to which it is uncontroversial that wretched worlds are conceivable, and which is such that conceiving of worlds in this fashion gives one good reason to think them possible. I suggest that there is no conception of conceivability which fulfills both of these desiderata.

2. Consistency

A tempting strategy at this point would be to abandon appeals to conceivability and appeal instead to straight-forward logical consistency. Pike, for instance, argues that the reason the Anselmian view ought to be rejected is that God's torturing of infants is "consistently describable." Consistency seems to avoid the vagueness and unwelcome psychologistic implications that accompany appeals to what is conceivable. What is conceivable tends to depend far too much upon human conceptual capabilities, whereas what is consistent is a logical feature of the claim itself.

Can we consistently describe wretched worlds? One problem here is that of determining what counts as a description. "The state of affairs I am thinking of" seems to be a perfectly consistent description, even if I happen to be thinking of an impossible state of affairs, and "an impossible state of affairs" seems to consistently describe any impossibility you like.

It seems to me that the most promising course is to drop talk of descriptions altogether and concern ourselves with whether the modal claim itself is consistent. For instance, is the following consistent?

- (R1) All rabbits that ever exist suffer wretchedly for their entire existence and these rabbits are the only contingent sentient things that ever exist.

This and other propositions which detail evil a good omnipotent being would not allow seem consistent. Is the apparent consistency of such propositions a problem for the Anselmian? I will argue that it is not.

There are in fact three distinct notions of consistency which it will be helpful to distinguish at this point. One notion is what I will call "formal consistency." Let us say that a proposition is formally consistent if and only if no contradiction can be deduced from it by the resources of logic alone. What exactly is included in the resources of logic is a matter of some dispute, but that need not concern us here. For clearly there are propositions which are impossible but whose impossibility is not in any way a result of their logical form. The most obvious example is the familiar "There exists an object which is red and green all over at the same time." There is nothing wrong with the logical *form* of this sentence.

Is there a notion of consistency on which the thesis that anything which is consistent is possible is not subject to obvious counter-examples of this sort? Certainly. Sometimes accounts of possible worlds are offered whereby it is said that there is a possible world corresponding to every maximally "consistent" set of propositions.¹⁰ The notion of consistency here appealed to must be stronger than that of mere formal consistency since, as should now be apparent, a set of propositions could be formally consistent and yet include necessary falsehoods. In order to distinguish between the two notions of consistency let us label this stronger notion as "modal consistency."

Since there is a possible world corresponding to every maximal set of modally consistent propositions, a proposition p is modally consistent with a proposition q if and only if p does not entail the denial of q (where p entails the denial of q if and only if it is not possible for p to be true and the denial of q false). In other words, two propositions are modally consistent if and only if their conjunction is not a necessary falsehood.

The notion of modal consistency renders the claim that anything which is consistent is possible immune to counter-examples, but only at the cost of also rendering it epistemologically useless as a means of determining what is possible. For to ask whether a proposition is modally consistent just is to ask whether it is possible. The claim that wretched worlds are consistent in this sense is no more uncontroversial than the claim that such worlds are possible.

What is needed is some sort of intermediate notion of consistency—one not so weak as to give rise to obvious counter-examples yet not so strong as to beg the question. In order to characterize how such an account of consistency might go, it is helpful to note a similarity in the above two accounts. In each case a privileged class of propositions was specified which was such that a proposition was said to be consistent with another if and only if this class did not contain the denial of their conjunction. In the case of formal consistency the class in question is the class of logical theorems whereas in the case of

modal consistency it is the larger class of the necessary truths. For the Anti-Anselmian's purposes the first appeals to a class too small; the second to a class which is large enough but epistemologically useless. What is needed is a notion of consistency tied to some class of propositions which lies between these two extremes—one which avoids obvious counter-examples and whose members can be identified without first having to ask whether they are necessary truths.

Only one candidate comes to mind that seems capable of fulfilling this desideratum. The kind of account I am thinking of would be one according to which two propositions are consistent if and only if the denial of their conjunction is not a "conceptual truth" or something of that sort. The problem here, of course, is to specify in any precise manner the privileged class of propositions here appealed to. Perhaps there are a number of similar but slightly different classes in this general neighborhood. By "conceptual truths" I had in mind those propositions which are such that we can make no sense of the idea that they might be false; whose falsehoods are inconceivable. For our purposes this rough idea will be sufficient. For no such notion of consistency can do the work the Anti-Anselmian requires.

Once again, to facilitate discussion, let us give this third sort of notion of consistency a label. When two propositions are consistent in this manner let us say they are "conceptually consistent." On this interpretation the claim that anything which is consistent is possible would seem to be immune at least to the obvious sort of counter-examples raised above in connection with formal consistency. On the other hand this notion of consistency is meant not to be so strong as to beg the question. If so, one must be able to tell whether a proposition is conceptually consistent without relying upon an insight into whether the proposition is possible. The most obvious way of working this out would be by appeal to something like analyticity. We know what is analytic, it might be suggested, not by insight into what is possible, but by our grasp of the conventions which govern language.¹¹

The problem here is that there are propositions whose denials are not, in this sense, conceptual truths which are nevertheless not possibly true. To take some well-known examples, it might be suggested that among such propositions are some or all of the following:

- (1) Gold does not have an atomic number of 79.
- (2) All cats are actually cleverly disguised automata.
- (3) Hesperus is not identical to Phosphorus.
- (4) This table is made of ice.

The Anselmian, it seems to me, should say the same about the denial of the claim that an omnipotent, perfectly good God exists in every possible

world. This is yet another example of a claim which is impossible, though not analytically false. Perhaps some may be inclined to argue that some of the propositions listed above are not only impossible but analytically false as well. But regardless of the position one takes upon such questions, the crucial point is that on any sufficiently weak conception of conceptual consistency there will be some propositions which, although impossible, are not denials of conceptual truths.

To see why this is so, consider how one might attempt to rule out such cases. The only way to rule out all such cases, as far as I can see, would be to strengthen the notion of analyticity involved so that *it follows* from the fact that a proposition is a necessary truth that it is analytic. But if one makes this move, once again it becomes just as hard to tell whether a proposition is analytic as it is to tell whether it is possible. On the other hand, if a weaker conception of analyticity is employed, like the traditional equation of analytic propositions with those which we can see to be true by grasping the linguistic meaning of the sentences which express them, surely the claims which have a bearing upon the Anselmian conception of God would be prime candidates of non-analytic modal claims. The result is that either the denial that there are wretched God-precluding possibilities is obviously not analytically false, or else the claim that they are is just as controversial as the original claim that they are possible. So the appeal to conceptual consistency has not offered any way of advancing beyond the original impasse.

I conclude that in general consistency provides us with no means of resolving the dispute over whether wretched worlds are possible. We seem left with just the bald claim that wretched worlds are possible—a claim for which, thus far, no compelling support has emerged.

3. *Modal Intuitions*

It might be thought that what is needed is an appeal to our modal intuitions rather than an appeal to the conceivability of the states of affairs involved. Although many harbor significant misgivings about any sort of intuition talk, I am sympathetic to such an approach. It seems to me that we can think of modal intuition as a belief-forming mechanism on a par with vision. Just as we are so constructed that when appeared to in various ways we are strongly disposed to form beliefs about the external world, so also when we reflect on various states of affairs we find ourselves strongly disposed to believe in their possibility or impossibility. For example, when I reflect upon round squares I am strongly inclined to believe in their impossibility, whereas when I reflect upon green-cheese moons I am inclined to think them possible.¹² Although space does not permit pursuing these matters here, I am prepared to argue that we are rationally entitled to trust such intuitions and that ultimately it is only through reliance upon such intuitions that knowledge of non-actual

possibilities can be gained. At any rate, one who, like me, is inclined to take appeals to intuitions seriously might suggest that our intuitions cut against Anselmianism. But, appeals to intuitions are notoriously tricky. What one person finds intuitive another may find positively unintuitive. For me at least, my intuitions are silent with regards to the sort of states of affairs described by the Anti-Anselmian. I have no clear insight into whether these wretched states of affairs are possible or not. Indeed, in my own case I find there to be an epistemologically significant difference between these two states of affairs:

(R1) All rabbits that ever exist suffer wretchedly for their entire existence and these rabbits are the only contingent sentient creatures that ever exist,

(R2) All rabbits that ever exist suffer wretchedly for their entire existence,

in that my intuitions affirm the possibility of R2 much more strongly than the possibility of R1. I suspect that I am not alone in this. To say that one has a modal intuition, I take it, is stronger than merely saying that one sees no contradiction implied by the state of affairs. It is to bear witness to some sort of phenomenologically felt pull or tug affirming the state of affair's possibility. Sometimes people describe having such an intuition in terms of "just seeing" that a state of affairs is possible. I think, perhaps, I would affirm this with respect to the possibility of R2, but not R1. My intuitions at best provide only the weakest sort of support for R1, support which is easily counterbalanced by the intuitive support for the possibility of the Anselmian state of affairs,

(A) God is a necessary being who is essentially Omnipotent, Omniscient, and Perfectly Good.

So I find in my own case that modal intuitions do not directly provide adequate support for the Anti-Anselmian's position. I suspect that when others attend carefully to the matter they too will find their intuitions to be counterbalanced, or at least nearly so. At any rate, for those who do, like me, find the data of intuition inconclusive with respect to wretched worlds, the case for the modal problem of evil has yet to be made.

4. *Guleserian's Combined Approach*

Guleserian attempts a more indirect appeal to modal intuitions—via the following rather complicated argument:

I have seen an animal that was so starved and disease-ridden that it could just barely function well enough to seek food, trembling as it went. I can imagine a single rabbit—or an amoral animal that is very much like a rabbit—that is similarly starved and diseased.... I intuit that (c1) it is possible that there be such an animal who is amoral and whose life is miserable. But now I ask whether there is any inconsistency in assuming that in addition to

this one animal, living in one valley, (c2) there is another animal living in the same or another valley. It seems that (c3) there is no inconsistency. So I conclude that (c4) it is possible that there are two such animals who are amoral and whose lives are miserable.... I intuit that (c5) no inconsistency would arise from adding any number of miserable rabbits.... I arrive inductively at the conclusion that (c6) it is possible that (c6') there are a great many animals on the imagined planet all of whom are amoral and whose lives are miserable.... I further intuit that (c7) it is possible that (c7') the aforementioned animals on the imagined planet are the only contingently existing beings capable of being conscious, and also that (c7') is consistent with (c6'). I conclude

- (c) It is possible that there are a great many contingently existing beings capable of being conscious and all such beings are amoral and have miserable lives.¹³

According to Guleserian each step of this argument is supported either directly by an intuition or is drawn from earlier steps which are so supported. In this regard he suggests that there are two different sorts of modal intuitions. "In some cases an intuition of a modal proposition affirms that a given state of affairs is possible. In others, the intuition affirms that two states of affairs are consistent with one another."¹⁴ Guleserian claims that steps (c1), (c2), and (c7) are supported by intuitions of the former sort whereas (c3), (c5), and the claim that (c7') is consistent with (c6') are supported by the latter kinds of intuitions.

The remaining steps of the argument, (c4), (c6), and the conclusion, (c), are each said to follow from preceding steps. According to Guleserian these steps can validly be so informed since, "On any notion of consistency, if state of affairs T is consistent with state of affairs T' and T is possible and T' is possible, then the state of affairs that both T and T' obtain is possible."¹⁵

Guleserian thus proposes a more modest role for consistency. He apparently recognizes the distinction between being consistent and being possible. Mere consistency alone does not establish possibility. Two propositions may be consistent with each other and yet their conjunction not be possible. Yet Guleserian's suggestion is that consistency can still be used to augment our modal knowledge concerning states of affairs about which our modal intuitions are silent. Consistency, on Guleserian's view provides a *supplement* to modal intuitions rather than a replacement for them. If, in addition to knowing that two propositions are consistent, we know they are each possible, we can safely infer that their conjunction is possible.

The length and complexity of Guleserian's argument renders the task of discussing it a rather cumbersome chore. Fortunately a much simpler argument can be formulated which remains true to the central features of Guleserian's argument while dispensing with some non-essential details. For the sake of simplicity let us suppose that rabbits are incapable of making morally significant choices. The argument moves from two states of affairs,

S1 All rabbits have wretched lives,

S2 Rabbits are the only contingent sentient things that ever exist,

to a third state of affairs,

S3 All rabbits have wretched lives and rabbits are the only contingent sentient things that ever exist,

which consists of S1 and S2 both obtaining.

Intuition would seem to tell us at least three things concerning S1 and S2:

- (1) S1 is possible
- (2) S2 is possible
- (3) S1 is consistent with S2.

Recall that according to Guleserian, on any notion of consistency the following is true:

(C*) For any states of affairs T and T', if T is possible and T' is possible and T is consistent with T' then the state of affairs that both T and T' obtain is possible.

If C* is true, then (1)-(3) are together sufficient to entail the Anti-Anselmian conclusion:

- (4) S3 is possible.

It seems to me that this argument embodies the essential features of Guleserian's argument, (c1)-(c), quoted above. I will argue that this argument fails for reasons that will apply *mutatis mutandis* to his. Roughly (1)-(4) corresponds to the last half of Guleserian's argument.

How can the Anselmian respond to this argument? If (4) is true then worlds like β are possible. I allowed above that the Anselmian should agree that an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good God would not allow such a world to obtain. Given C* and his commitment to the denial of (4) it looks as though the Anselmian must deny one of the three premises, all of which seem intuitive.

Are these premises in fact intuitive? It seems to me that while the Anselmian should reject the conclusion of this argument, the first two of its premises should be accepted. Surely there are possible worlds where there are fallen moral creatures who delight in tormenting rabbits and are so effective in doing so that every rabbit has a wretched existence. If so (1) is true. Similarly, (2) is true if, as seems plausible, there are possible worlds in which rabbits are the only creatures and in which their entire lives are full of bliss.

Of course, in itself, neither of these claims is in any way problematic for the Anselmian, who can allow that S1 and S2 are each possible. The Anselmian's problem lies in the move from the claim that they are each possible to the claim that they are compossible; from "there are possible

worlds which include *each*," to "there are possible worlds which include *both*." According to Guleserian all that is needed to legitimize such a move is that the two states of affairs be consistent, the claim embodied by (3) and said to be given by intuition.

It is at this point however that Guleserian's argument suffers a crucial flaw. Guleserian offers no account of what exactly we are intuiting when we intuit that one state of affairs is consistent with another. Apparently he thought this unnecessary since C*, he claims, is true on any notion of consistency. Unfortunately this is not the case. There are quite straightforward notions of consistency according to which two possible states of affairs could be consistent yet not be compossible. Guleserian's attack on the Anselmian fails because, contrary to his claim, his appeal to intuitions of consistency is either useless or question-begging. Intuitions of consistency cannot be used to supplement our knowledge of modal matters in the way suggested by Guleserian.

There is, in fact, an obvious counter-example to Guleserian's claim that C* is true given *any* notion of consistency. If we interpret "consistent" in C* as "formally consistent," the proposition *the ball is red all over at t* (where 't' designates a time) is consistent with *the ball is blue all over at t*. Yet though both of the states of affairs corresponding to these propositions are possible, the state of affairs *the ball's being red all over at t and the ball's being blue all over at t* is, of course, not.¹⁶ So, contrary to Guleserian's claim, C* is not true given any notion of consistency.

Is there a notion of consistency on which C* is true? Certainly, the notion of "modal consistency," identified above, would render C* immune to counter-examples. Two propositions are modally consistent if and only if their conjunction is not a necessary falsehood. But the notion of modal consistency also will not serve the purposes of Guleserian's argument. It fails to be adequate for a different reason however. Whereas formal consistency is too weak, modal consistency is too strong. Recall that Guleserian differentiates between two different sorts of modal intuitions—intuitions that a state of affairs is possible and intuitions that two states of affairs are consistent. On the notion of consistency at hand, this distinction seems to collapse. Having an intuition that two states of affairs are modally consistent with one another amounts to the same thing as having an intuition that the larger state of affairs that includes both is possible.

The problem here is that if appeal is made to such a strong notion of consistency the argument merely begs the question. It begs the question because to claim that wretched states of affairs are consistent in this sense just is to claim that they are possible. The argument's conclusion, in disguised form, is offered as one of its premises. Consider Guleserian's claim that all rabbits having wretched lives is consistent with rabbits being the only contingent sentient things that ever exist. Obviously anyone who has doubts

about the conclusion is going to have doubts about this premise, if consistency is taken in this strong sense of modal consistency. The two claims would be logically equivalent and the other premises would be rendered superfluous. Surely if we have an intuition that the third premise, so interpreted, is true, we also have an intuition that the conclusion is true. Putting things in the form of this argument does not help; it only confuses the issue.

This leaves only conceptual consistency. But, like formal consistency, this notion seems too weak as well. This is because there are conceptually consistent but impossible propositions, like "The atomic number of Gold is not 79." But if there are conceptually consistent impossibilities, then we are not entitled to infer from the conceptual consistency of two propositions each of which is possible, that the conjunction of the two propositions is possible. Consider, for example, these two propositions:

- (5) I have only one wedding ring and it is made entirely of pure gold,
- (6) I have only one wedding ring and it is made entirely of a metal which does not have an atomic number of 79.

Each of these propositions is possibly true. Yet their conjunction seems to be both consistent and not possibly true.

If, on the other hand, one tried to shore things up so that there are no conceptually consistent but impossible propositions, it becomes just as controversial to claim that a proposition is conceptually consistent as it is to claim that the proposition is possible. One might try to claim that if one "fully" grasped what it is to be gold, one would know that gold could not fail to have an atomic number of 79. In just the same way the Anselmian might claim that if one fully grasped what it is for rabbits to suffer in the gratuitous manner described by Guleserian, one would know that such suffering is impossible.

I conclude that Guleserian's attempt to use consistency to extend modal knowledge fails. Indeed it would certainly be odd if an issue of this sort could be resolved by the kind of argument he proposes. Similar arguments could be offered with regard to a number of perennial philosophical disputes. Consider the materialist view that it is not possible that we should exist without physical bodies. A Guleserian-like argument can easily be constructed against such a position:

- (7) *My existing* is possible.
- (8) *There existing no physical objects* is possible.
- (9) *My existing* is consistent with *there existing no physical objects*.

Therefore,

- (10) *My existing and there existing no physical objects* is possible.

Does such an argument allow us to dispose of materialism? Of course not. Appeal to the putative consistency of *my existing* with *there existing no physical objects* is of no help. If the notion of consistency is taken to be sufficiently strong, whether these two states of affairs are consistent becomes a very hard question—no less difficult than the question of whether (10) itself is true.

Guleserian's attempt to marshal our modal intuitions against the Anselmian position via his argument (c1)-(c) is a failure. If the notion of consistency employed in this argument is taken in a sense sufficiently strong to render the argument valid, the premises become just as controversial as the conclusion, and can be plausibly denied by the Anselmian.

5. *Resolving the Stand-Off*

I conclude that the Modal Problem of Evil fails. Our ability to conceive of wretched worlds like Guleserian's world of suffering rabbits does not give us reason to think them possible, especially since we can equally well conceive of the possibility that God necessarily prevents such worlds from obtaining. The same is true, I suggest, for any putative evil possibility that would raise problems for the Anselmian conception of God. We can, like Pike, consistently describe such purported possibilities—we can talk about them, imagine them, and so on—but only in ways that do not give us good reason to think them really possible. It seems plausible to claim that one's modal intuitions are silent or at the most provide only very weak support for the claim that wretched worlds are possible. Moreover, any degree of support the Anti-Anselmian might muster by appeal to intuition can easily be counterbalanced by the support the Anselmian can muster for the claim that it is possible that a maximally perfect God exists in every possible world. I conclude that the case for rejecting the Anselmian view of God is yet to be made.

Of course, none of this shows that the Anselmian view is, in fact, credible. Diffusing the modal problem of evil no more shows Anselmianism to be reasonable than the free-will defense constitutes an argument for the existence of God. Indeed, upon reflection it might seem that agnosticism concerning the Anselmian view is the only reasonable course. For although one's intuitions may not be sufficient to establish the possibility of wretched worlds, many, I suspect, will also find their intuitions to be insufficient to establish Anselmianism. As far as intuitions go, we seem left with a stand-off. I have argued, that is, that neither the conceivability, consistency, or intuitiveness of propositions like

- (R1) All rabbits that ever exist suffer wretchedly for their entire existence and these rabbits are the only contingent sentient creatures that ever exist

show them to be possible. But the same might be said about the Anselmian

conception of God. Neither conceivability nor consistency can be used to show it to be possible that

- (A1) God is a necessary being who is essentially Omnipotent, Omniscient, and Perfectly Good.

And for many, myself included, it may seem that whatever degree of intuitive support A1 may have is easily counterbalanced by the intuitive support there is for propositions like R1. It would seem that intuition does not come down firmly in favor of either camp.

I agree that intuitions alone provide no clear-cut answer as to whether Anselmianism is true. But such indeterminacy should incline us toward agnosticism only if intuition is the sole arbiter by which we can lawfully decide modal questions. I am inclined to question this assumption. Although space does not permit exploring these matters in detail, I would like to close this paper by briefly indicating two avenues by which the Anselmian view of God might be defended even if it is granted that intuition alone cannot provide the view with adequate support.

The first of these would be to employ an “innocent until proven guilty” approach with respect to one’s beliefs about what is possible. Some have argued that we are, in general, rationally entitled to continue to hold a belief in the absence of adequate reason to think it false. For example, Nicholas Wolterstorff defends such a view:

A person is rationally justified in believing a certain proposition which he does believe unless he has adequate reason to cease from believing it. Our beliefs are rational unless we have reason for refraining; they are not nonrational unless we have reason *for* believing. They are innocent until proved guilty, not guilty until proved innocent. If a person does not have adequate reason to refrain from some belief of his, what could possibly oblige him to give it up? Conversely, if he surrenders some belief of his as soon as he has adequate reason to do so, what more can rightly be demanded of him? Is he not then using the capacities he has for governing his beliefs, with the goal of getting more amply in touch with reality, as well as can rightly be demanded of him?¹⁷

If Wolterstorff is correct, it would seem that the apparent stand-off concerning Anselmianism can be avoided. On this view each side would be free to continue to hold to their respective beliefs on the matter in the absence of good reason to give up those beliefs. So an Anselmian employing this strategy might argue, “Although I lack any positive reason to believe Anselmianism to be true, I find that I do so believe, and so in the absence of adequate reason to think this belief false I may reasonably continue in this belief.”

The second approach is to avoid the stand-off by appeal to the theoretical strengths of Anselmianism. Philip Quinn has defended the analogous suggestion that we can appeal to such considerations as utility, simplicity, and

fertility to justify our choice of competing modal logics when the data provided by intuition is indeterminate. We can, says Quinn, “be principled realists about the structure of the world and practicing instrumentalists about the structure of our concepts.”¹⁸ Along these lines, it seems to me that it might plausibly be suggested that there is a kind of pleasing simplicity to the Anselmian view.¹⁹ A single predicate, maximally perfect, describes how God is in every possible world. Given the Anselmian conception of God, one can say how God is with respect to existence, power, knowledge, and goodness, in a particular possible world no matter how that world is specified. Consider, for example, an arbitrarily selected world in which fleas do not exist. How is God with respect to goodness or power in such a world? The Anselmian is always in a position to answer such questions, no matter how the world in question is picked out. In contrast, those who hold that God only possesses omnipotence, omniscience, and perfect goodness in some possible worlds will find themselves often with no answers to such questions.

Moreover, those who hold that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good in some worlds but not others would seem to be unable to explain why it is that a particular sort of world with respect to God should obtain. Suppose for example a world obtains in which God is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good. Why is it that such a world obtains rather than one in which God does not exist, or in which he lacks one of these attributes? On the Anselmian conception it is not merely a bit of good fortune that the actual world is one in which an omnipotent, perfectly good God exists—it is a necessary truth. Those who would say that such a being exists in only some possible worlds are left with a contingent brute fact that, as far as I can see, they cannot explain, that an omnipotent, perfectly good God in fact exists (or doesn’t exist).

An important qualification to the suggestions made in the previous two paragraphs is that these theoretical virtues I have described at best give one reason to prefer Anselmianism to non-Anselmian positions on which an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good God exists in some possible worlds but not others. There are, of course, non-Anselmian views on which an omnipotent perfectly good being exists in *no* possible world. Such views would seem to fare equally well with respect to the virtues just described. Those who hold such a view can say how God is with respect to, say, omnipotence in any possible world. He doesn’t have it. Moreover, defenders of such a view, like the Anselmian, can explain why it is that God is as he is with respect to existence, power, knowledge, and goodness in any possible world. Again, it is a necessary truth. However, against these particular non-Anselmian views the Anselmian has two important recourses. One the one hand, I suspect many will find that their modal intuitions may incline them to believe that an omnipotent, perfectly good being is at least possible. That is, while one’s

intuitions may not provide adequate grounds for dismissing all the non-Anselmian alternatives, they may nevertheless provide one with reason to reject the view which says that the existence of God is impossible. Moreover, the Anselmian has recourse to the whole array of traditional theistic arguments in support of the claim that an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good God exists in the actual world. Of course, anyone who has good reason to think such a God does not exist, also has good reason to reject Anselmianism. But one who antecedently has reason to think Theism to be true can narrow the debate to Anselmian vs. non-Anselmian varieties of Theism, and use the machinery suggested here to avoid a stand-off.

The suggestions of the last four paragraphs admittedly call for further development. Whether in fact the positive case for Anselmianism can be made along these lines is a subject I hope to explore in greater detail in the future. I hope these suggestions are sufficient to indicate that agnosticism concerning Anselmianism is not rationally mandatory even given the indeterminacy of intuition on the matter. Defenders of the modal problem of evil argue that intuition alone (or conceivability or consistency) when applied to evil possibilities provides decisive grounds for the rejection of Anselmianism. The primary concern of this paper has been to argue that this line of objection is without merit. The modal problem of evil does not provide good reason to reject the Anselmian conception of God.²⁰

University of Delaware

NOTES

1. *Proslogion*, Chapter 2.

2. Theodore Guleserian, "God and Possible Worlds: The Modal Problem of Evil," *Nous* 17 (1983), pp. 221-38. For a criticism of Guleserian along different lines than those pursued in this paper see Laura Garcia's "A Response to the Modal Problem of Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 1 (1985), pp. 378-88.

3. Nelson Pike, "Omnipotence and God's Ability to Sin," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 6 (1969), pp. 203-16.

4. Guleserian, p. 226.

5. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. by L. A. Selby-Bigge (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 89.

6. Saul Kripke, "Identity and Necessity," in *Identity and Individuation*, ed. by Milton K. Munitz (New York: New York University Press, 1971), p. 164 [emphasis mine].

7. Kripke, "Identity and Necessity," p. 164.

8. Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 36.

9. C. B. Martin, *Religious Belief* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1960), p. 62.

10. See, for instance, Robert Merrihew Adams, "Theories of Actuality," *Nous* 8 (1974), pp. 311-31.

11. Of course, sometimes accounts of analyticity are offered that equate analyticity with necessity. For example, sometimes an analytic proposition is characterized as one which is "true no matter how the world is." If such a notion is used to explain conceptual consistency, this notion will be faced with the same problems that beset modal consistency. To ask whether a proposition is conceptually consistent would be the same as to ask whether it is possible.

12. For some skeptical questions about the belief that green-cheese moons are possible see Peter van Inwagen's review of Swinburne's *The Coherence of Theism* in *Philosophical Review* 86 (1979), pp. 668-72.

13. Guleserian, pp. 229-30.

14. Guleserian, p. 228.

15. Guleserian, p. 228.

16. It seems to me to be rather awkward to speak, as does Guleserian, of states of affairs being consistent with one another. It seems to me that consistency is a relationship that is more properly said to obtain between propositions. Perhaps, with Chisholm, Guleserian thinks states of affairs just are propositions. At any rate for every state of affairs, such as *The ball's being red*, there is a closely related proposition, *The ball is red*. I take it to be unproblematic to assume, as I do, that whenever two propositions are consistent the corresponding pair of states of affairs are "consistent," and *vice versa*.

17. Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Can Belief in God Be Rational If It Has No Foundations?," in *Faith and Rationality*, ed. by Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), p. 163. For a similar view see John Pollock's defense of a "negative coherence" theory in "A Plethora of Epistemological Theories," in *Justification and Knowledge*, ed. by George Pappas (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1979), p. 101.

18. Philip Quinn, "Metaphysical Necessity and Modal Logics," *The Monist* 65 (1982), p. 454.

19. For an opposing view see J. L. Mackie's criticism of Anselmianism in *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 61. Mackie argues that the Anselmian conception should be rejected on grounds of parsimony. The Anselmian view, with a God in every possible world, is by Mackie's lights, theoretically extravagant, multiplying entities beyond what is necessary. Mackie's criticism is answered, decisively in my view, by Alvin Plantinga in "Is Theism Really a Miracle?," *Faith and Philosophy* 3 (1986), p. 119.

20. I am grateful to Alvin Plantinga, Thomas Morris, Philip Quinn, David Hunt, David Anderson, Jeffrey Jordan and two referees for *Faith and Philosophy* for helpful critical comments on earlier versions of this paper.