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MODELS OF ANSELMIAN THEISM

Yujin Nagasawa

The so-called Anselmian thesis says that God is that than which no greater can be thought. This thesis has been widely accepted among traditional theists and it has for several hundred years been a central notion whenever philosophers debate the existence and nature of God. Proponents of the thesis are often silent, however, about exactly what it means to say that God is that than which no greater can be thought. The aim of this paper is to offer an answer to this question by providing rigorous, systematic models of the Anselmian thesis. The most straightforward model, which I call the “Linear Model,” says that God is that than which no greater can be thought by virtue of occupying the top link in the “great chain of being,” a universal linear ranking of all possible beings. Most contemporary philosophers believe, however, that the Linear Model does not succeed because the notion of the great chain of being is untenable. I therefore explore alternatives to the Linear Model. I argue that what I call the “Extended Radial Model” characterizes the Anselmian thesis correctly, even though the model faces a powerful objection. I argue further that the Linear Model should be taken seriously as a backup option for Anselmian theists because (i) it is not vulnerable to the objection that the Extended Radial Model faces and (ii) what is widely regarded as a knock-down objection to the Linear Model is not as compelling as some have claimed.

1. Introduction

In the eleventh century Anselm introduced in his *Proslogion* the “Anselmian thesis”: God is that than which no greater can be thought.¹ This thesis has been widely accepted among traditional theists and it has for several hundred years been a central notion whenever philosophers debate the existence and nature of God. Ironically, however, philosophers have rarely analyzed the concepts expressed in the Anselmian thesis itself. Exactly what does it mean to say that God is that than which no greater can be thought? Anselm himself is silent about this question in the *Proslogion*. While he does touch on the question in the *Monologion*, his answer is not very helpful:

I do not mean great in terms of size, like some sort of body; but something which, the greater it is, the better or more valuable it is, like wisdom. And

¹Anselm, *Proslogion*, in *St. Anselm's Proslogion*, ed. M. J. Charlesworth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965, originally 1077–1078), 102–155.

since only that which is supremely good can be supremely great, it is necessary that there is something that is best and greatest—i.e. of everything that exists, the supreme.²

In this passage Anselm offers a paradigm example of greatness that is relevant, namely wisdom, and a paradigm example of greatness that is not relevant, namely size. However, he does not say exactly what sorts of conditions God must satisfy in order for Him to be that than which no greater can be thought. Anselm hints, however, that God's and other beings' greatnesses can be understood in terms of a hierarchy. Again, in the *Monologion*, rather than in the *Proslogion*, he writes:

[I]f one considers the nature of things, one cannot help realizing that they are not all of equal value, but differ by degrees. For the nature of a horse is better than that of a tree, and that of a human more excellent than that of a horse, and to doubt it is simply not human. It is undeniable that some natures can be better than others. None the less reason argues that there is some nature that so overtops the others that it is inferior to none.³

Anselm does not, however, say exactly what sort of structure must be present in the hierarchy in order to render the Anselmian thesis coherent.

Given that the Anselmian thesis has for several hundred years been a central notion whenever philosophers debate the existence and the nature of God, it is surprising that very few, if any, have attempted to analyze the Anselmian thesis in detail. The aim of this paper is thus to specify exactly what the Anselmian thesis means by providing rigorous, systematic models of its structure and content.

The most intuitive way of characterizing the Anselmian thesis is to say that God is that than which no greater can be thought by virtue of occupying the top link in the "great chain of being," a universal linear ranking of all possible beings. I call the model of the Anselmian thesis that is based on this view the "Linear Model." It is widely agreed among contemporary philosophers, however, that the Linear Model does not succeed because, according to them, the notion of the great chain of being is untenable. They think that it does not make sense to say that there can be a single objective scale of value that ranks *all* possible beings. In the central part of this paper, therefore, I explore alternatives to the Linear Model by systematically analyzing God's properties. I argue that what I call the "Extended Radial Model" is the most plausible alternative, even though the model faces a powerful objection. I argue, however, that the Linear Model should also be taken seriously as a backup option for Anselmian theists because (i) it is not vulnerable to the objection that the Extended Radial Model faces and (ii) what is widely regarded as a knock-down objection to the Linear Model is not as compelling as some have claimed.

²Anselm, *Monologion*, in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 5–81, at 13.

³*Ibid.*, 14–15.

This paper has the following structure: In Section 2, I introduce the Linear Model. From Sections 3 to 6, I discuss alternatives to the Linear Model and conclude that the Extended Radial Model is tenable. In Sections 7 and 8, I defend the Linear Model as a backup option for Anselmian theists. Section 9 concludes.

2. The Linear Model

Let us begin by reviewing several assumptions and preliminaries. First, I assume in the following, in common with other philosophers of religion, that “that than which no greater can be thought” is equivalent to “the being than which no greater can be thought.” Anselm uses the phrase “that than which no greater can be thought” in his work, but the term “the being than which no greater can be thought” is more convenient because it clearly excludes polytheism, which Anselmian theists reject. Second, I assume that the claim that God is the being than which no greater can be thought entails that He is the being than which no greater is possible or that He is the greatest possible being. This assumption relies on the proposition that thinkability (or conceivability) entails possibility, a proposition that is disputed among philosophers but which, for the sake of simplicity, I accept in this paper.⁴ Third, I assume that by “possible beings” Anselmian theists mean actual or merely possible *concrete objects*, whether they are physical or nonphysical. I assume, therefore, that mere properties or mathematical objects cannot be included in a ranking of possible beings. Fourth, I use the terms in the following pairs interchangeably: (i) property/attribute; (ii) greater/superior; (iii) worse/inferior. This is not very elegant, but it is unavoidable because the literature mixes up the terms in each pair. Fifth, I allow that what I defend in this paper might not be entirely consistent with Anselm’s theological system taken in whole. Following tradition, I use the term “Anselmian thesis” and call any version of theism that holds to the thesis “Anselmian theism” but, because my interest is philosophical rather than exegetical, I am not ultimately concerned with whether my discussion is faithful to Anselm’s relevant texts. Sixth, and finally, since the aim of this paper is to *model*, rather than to defend, the Anselmian thesis, I set aside attempts to eliminate the thesis itself. Some critics try to eliminate the thesis by saying, for example, that since for any possible being there is always another possible being that is greater, there is no such thing as the being than which no greater can be thought.⁵ Although I believe that Anselmian theists can respond to such a criticism, I do not discuss it in this paper.

⁴See, for example, Tamar Szabó Gendler and John Hawthorne eds., *Conceivability and Possibility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). Some might hold that the assumption in question is unnecessary because the Anselmian concept just is that God is the being than which no greater is possible or He is the greatest possible being. Thanks to a referee for this point.

⁵See Graham Oppy, “Perfection, Near-Perfection, Maximality, and Anselmian Theism,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 69 (2010), 119–138.

The most straightforward model, the Linear Model, says, again, that God is the being than which no greater can be thought by virtue of occupying the top link in the great chain of being while all other possible beings occupy other links lower in the chain. The great chain of being is a linear ranking of all beings, both actual and merely possible, which is established in accordance with a single objective scale of value and presented as a potentially infinitely long chain. The ranking tells us, for any pair of possible beings x and y , whether x is as great as y , greater than y , or less great than y . It should also be noted that there are cases in which the same being has different degrees of greatness in different possible worlds. (Such a being has the relevant properties at their respective intensity only contingently). This means that the same being can occupy multiple links in the great chain of being if we take into account possible worlds. In this paper, I treat a being in one possible world and the same being in another possible world as if they are two distinct beings, provided that the degree of greatness differs in these possible worlds. The degree of God's greatness, however, does not change in this way throughout all possible worlds because God is meant to have the relevant properties necessarily at correspondingly necessary intensity. Related issues will be addressed in Section 5. The Linear Model is committed to, using Thomas V. Morris's terminology, "universal value commensurability"⁶:

Universal Value Commensurability: Every possible being is value commensurable.

According to universal value commensurability, we can compare the greatness of any two beings and locate them on the great chain of being. If we have access to the great chain of being, we can easily prove that God is the being than which no greater can be thought. We need only to look at the chain and confirm that God, and only God, occupies the top link. The Linear Model can be formulated as follows:

The Linear Model: God is the being than which no greater can be thought by virtue of occupying the top link in the great chain of being (Figure 1).⁷

Despite its intuitive appeal, the Linear Model is not taken seriously today because most philosophers reject universal value commensurability and, hence, deny the legitimacy of the great chain of being. C. D. Broad, for example, says that universal value commensurability is false because a correct analysis of relevant properties does "not allow us even in theory,

⁶Thomas V. Morris, "The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Anselm," *Faith and Philosophy* 1 (1984), 177–187, reprinted in his *Anselmian Explorations* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), 10–25, at 15–16 (page numbers refer to reprinting).

⁷The distances between the links in the chain do not necessarily correspond to the degrees of difference between the greatnesses of the corresponding beings. It might be the case that there is an infinite gap between the greatness of God and the greatness of the second best possible being. The same point applies to other relevant figures throughout this paper. Thanks to an anonymous referee for this point.

Figure 1: The Linear Model

to arrange everything in a single scale of perfection.”⁸ Morris, to take another example, claims that universal value commensurability is “a position which is clearly false.”⁹ He rejects the possibility of the great chain by saying, “It just makes no sense to ask which is of greater intrinsic value, an aardvark or an escalator.”¹⁰ What Morris expresses is widely regarded as a knock-down objection to universal value commensurability, the thesis on which the Linear Model is based.

In Sections 7 and 8, I argue that the Linear Model is more plausible than it is often thought to be. However, before doing so, I will consider whether there can be an alternative model of the Anselmian thesis, a model that does not rely on universal value commensurability and the great chain of being.

3. The Radial Model

Suppose, for the sake of simplicity, that there are only three possible beings: an aardvark, an escalator and God. How can God be the greatest possible being among them with the assumption that an aardvark and an escalator are not value commensurable? Under this circumstance God can be the greatest possible being only if He is value commensurable with an aardvark and an escalator individually and independently. This example suggests that once universal value commensurability is given up, the following has to be true in order for God to be the being than which no greater can be thought:

Universal Divine Value Commensurability: Every possible being is value commensurable with God.

⁸C. D. Broad, “Arguments for the Existence of God,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 40 (1939), 16–30, 156–167, reprinted in his *Religion, Philosophy and Psychological Research: Selected Essays* (London: Routledge, 1953), 175–201, at 177 (page numbers refer to reprinting).

⁹Morris, “The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Anselm,” 19. See also Stephen Maitzen, “Anselmian Atheism,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 70 (2005), 225–239 and Katherin A. Rogers, “The Medieval Approach to Aardvarks, Escalators, and God,” *Journal of Value Inquiry* 27 (1993), 63–68.

¹⁰Morris, “The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Anselm,” 17.

In fact this is what Morris seems to endorse, even though he does not explicate it in detail.¹¹ The idea is that while such beings as an aardvark and an escalator might not be value commensurable with one another, God is value commensurable with, and greater than, each of them. We can thus maintain that God is the being than which no greater can be thought. Universal divine value commensurability is more modest than universal value commensurability because it is entailed by universal value commensurability but not *vice versa*.

Universal divine value commensurability is open to further options concerning the relationships among possible beings other than God. The most straightforward option is the following:

Universal Non-divine Value Incommensurability: No non-divine possible being is value commensurable with any other non-divine possible being.

By “non-divine possible beings” I mean all possible beings except God. If universal non-divine value incommensurability is correct, then, for example, an aardvark is value incommensurable with all other non-divine possible beings, such as escalators, alligators and human beings, even though, given universal divine value commensurability, it is value commensurable with God and itself. This means that for each possible being there is one “local chain of being” consisting entirely of that being and God. For example, there is a chain that contains only God and an aardvark and there is another chain that contains only God and an escalator. However, there is no chain that contains more than one non-divine possible being. Let us call this model entailed by the conjunction of universal divine value commensurability and universal non-divine value incommensurability the “Radial Model.”

The Radial Model: God is the being than which no greater can be thought by virtue of occupying the top link in all local chains of being, each of which contains only one non-divine being (Figure 2).

Figure 2: The Radial Model

According to the Radial Model, God is the being than which no greater can be thought because He is greater than each member of the set of all non-divine possible beings, although no non-divine possible being is value commensurable with any other non-divine possible being.

¹¹Ibid., 16.

The Radial Model is, however, implausible because universal non-divine value incommensurability is implausible. In order to see this, and in order to advance the discussion, we need to introduce and discuss in detail several important terms.

Great-making Property: Property *p* is a great-making property if it contributes to the greatness of its possessor.

For example, being knowledgeable is, according to many philosophers, a great-making property because the property of being knowledgeable makes a being that possesses it greater than otherwise. As intuitively clear as that example is, it does not explain exactly what makes great-making properties great. Consider the following four different senses of greatness:

- A. *Great for oneself:* For example, the property of being smart is great for a criminal to have because it benefits the criminal.
- B. *Great for the world and others:* For example, the property of being smart is not great for a criminal to have because it is not beneficial to the world and others.
- C. *Great in one's character/capacity:* For example, the property of being sharp is great for a knife to have *qua* knife.
- D. *Great intrinsically:* For example, the properties of being knowledgeable, powerful, benevolent, beautiful, and so on, are great in themselves, regardless of their greatness in the above three senses.¹²

It seems reasonable here to adopt sense D; when we talk about the greatness of God or of some other being in this context, we talk about intrinsic greatness. This is indeed the sense that most theists adopt when they defend Anselmian theism. Thus in what follows I assume that great-making properties are *intrinsically* great properties that contribute to the greatness of their possessors. I shall focus on the three individual great-making properties that are most commonly attributed to God: knowledge, power and benevolence. I set aside other candidates for God's great-making properties, such as simplicity, timelessness, incorporeality, and immutability. In this way, I can eliminate unnecessary complexity in my discussion and avoid further disputes over God's individual great-making properties.

Let me introduce several additional terms.

Extensive Equality: *x* is extensively equal to *y* if and only if both of the following are true: (i) *x* has all the great-making properties that *y* has; (ii) neither *x* nor *y* has any other great-making property.

When we talk about the extensity of the great-making properties of possible beings, we are not concerned with their intensity. We are concerned only with whether these beings share the same great-making properties,

¹²I owe this classification to Philip Goff.

regardless of their intensity. For example: Suppose that being *A* has only two great-making properties *G1* and *G2* and that another being *B* also has only the same great-making properties *G1* and *G2*. Regardless of the intensity of each of the great-making properties that these beings have, *A* and *B* are extensively equal (Figure 3).¹³

Figure 3: Extensive Equality

Extensive superiority: *x* is extensively superior to *y* if and only if both of the following are true: (i) *x* has all the great-making properties that *y* has; (ii) *x* has some great-making properties that *y* does not have.¹⁴

For example: Suppose that *A* has two great-making properties *G1* and *G2* while *B* has only one great-making property *G1*. Regardless of the intensity of each of the great-making properties these beings have, *A* is extensively superior to *B* (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Extensive Superiority

¹³One might claim that in order to determine extensive equality we need to check 'worse-making properties' as well, that is, properties that undermine the greatness of their possessors. For example, a being that has two great-making properties *G1* and *G2* but no worse-making properties might be judged as being extensively superior to another being that has two great-making properties *G1* and *G2* as well as a worse-making property *W1*, where *W1* cancels out, say, *G1* in its entirety. I set this point aside for the sake of simplicity. We can assume that when I talk about great-making properties in this paper this kind of calculation has already been made.

¹⁴I borrow the terms "extensive superiority" and "intensive superiority" from Broad, "Arguments for the Existence of God," 177.

The following should be obvious:

Extensive Inferiority: x is extensively inferior to y if and only if y is extensively superior to x .

The extensity of great-making properties is not the only measure of the greatness of a being. In order to measure it we need to examine the intensity of great-making properties as well:

Intensive Equality: x is intensively equal to y if and only if both of the following are true: (i) x is extensively equal to y ; (ii) great-making properties are present in x at the same degree of intensity as in y .

For example: Suppose that A has only two great-making properties $G1$ and $G2$ and B has also only two great-making properties $G1$ and $G2$ and that A and B have these two great-making properties at the exact same degree of intensity. In this case A and B are intensively (and also extensively) equal (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Intensive Equality

Intensive Superiority: x is intensively superior to y if and only if all of the following are true: (i) x is either extensively equal or extensively superior to y ; (ii) one or more of the great-making properties that is common to both is present in x at a higher degree of intensity than in y ; and (iii) none of the great-making properties that is common to both is present in y at a higher degree of intensity than in x .

For example: Suppose that A has only two great-making properties $G1$ and $G2$ and B also has only two great-making properties $G1$ and $G2$. However, while $G1$ is present in both A and B at the exact same degree of intensity, $G2$ is present in A at a higher degree of intensity than in B . In this case A is intensively superior to B (even though they are extensively equal; Figure 6).¹⁵

¹⁵One might think that this definition of intensive superiority is too strong. Suppose that A and B share 100 great-making properties. A has 99 of them significantly more intensely than B does, and B has the remaining great-making property only slightly more intensely than A does. In this case it seems reasonable to say that A is intensively superior to B without satisfying condition (iii) in the definition. As I explain in Sections 7 and 8, this kind of counterexample motivates the Linear Model. Thanks to a referee for raising this point.

Figure 6: Intensive Superiority

The following should be obvious:

Intensive Inferiority: x is intensively inferior to y if and only if y is intensively superior to x .

With these terms in mind, consider the following thirteen combinations of relationships between x and y .

- (1) x is extensively equal and intensively equal to y .
- (2) x is extensively equal and intensively superior to y .
- (3) x is extensively equal and intensively inferior to y .
- (4) x is extensively superior and intensively equal to y .
- (5) x is extensively superior and intensively superior to y .
- (6) x is extensively superior and intensively inferior to y .
- (7) x is extensively inferior and intensively equal to y .
- (8) x is extensively inferior and intensively superior to y .
- (9) x is extensively inferior and intensively inferior to y .
- (10) x is neither extensively superior, equal nor inferior to y .
- (11) x is extensively superior to y and the great-making properties that x and y share are present in x at the same degree of intensity as in y (in this case x is neither intensively superior, equal, nor inferior to y).
- (12) x is extensively inferior to y and the great-making properties that x and y share are present in y at the same degree of intensity as in x (in this case x is neither intensively superior, equal, nor inferior to y).
- (13) Other cases than (11) and (12) in which x is either extensively superior, equal or inferior to y but x is neither intensively superior, equal, nor inferior to y .

In case (1), x and y are *genuinely equal*, which means that the greatnesses of x and y are overall equal. In case (2), x is *genuinely superior* to y , which

means that x is overall superior to y . In case (3), x is *genuinely inferior* to y , which means that x is overall inferior to y . Case (4) is impossible to obtain because if x is intensively equal, then x has to be extensively equal as well. In case (5), x is *genuinely superior* to y . Case (6) is impossible to obtain because if x is intensively inferior to y , then x has to be either extensively equal or extensively inferior to y . Case (7) is also impossible to obtain because if x is intensively equal to y , then x has to be extensively equal as well. Case (8) is, again, impossible to obtain because if x is intensively superior to y , then x has to be either extensively equal or extensively superior to y . In case (9), x is *genuinely inferior* to y . In case (10), x and y are value incommensurable. In case (11), x is *genuinely superior* to y because x has all the great-making properties that y has at the same degree of intensity and, moreover, x has some extra great-making properties that y does not have. In case (12), x is *genuinely inferior* to y because y has all the great-making properties that x has at the same degree of intensity, moreover, y has some extra great-making properties that x does not have. In cases that fall under (13), x and y are value incommensurable.

Let us return to the Radial Model, according to which God is the being than which no greater can be thought by virtue of occupying the top link in all local chains of being, each of which contains only one non-divine being. The Radial Model is based on universal non-divine value incommensurability, according to which no non-divine possible being is value commensurable with any other non-divine possible being. The above discussion seems to suggest why universal non-divine value incommensurability fails, thus undermining the Radial Model as well. As we have seen, there seem to be possible cases, such as instances of (1), (2), (3), (5), (9), (11) and (12), in which two non-divine possible beings are value commensurable.

4. The Extended Radial Model

The Linear Model seems to be untenable because universal value commensurability—the thesis that every possible being is value commensurable—seems too strong. On the other hand, the Radial Model seems to be untenable because while universal divine value commensurability—the thesis that every possible being is value commensurable with God—is plausible, universal non-divine value incommensurability—the thesis that no non-divine possible being is value commensurable with any other non-divine possible being—seems too strong. We therefore need to construct a new model which is (i) free from universal value commensurability, (ii) free from universal non-divine value incommensurability, and (iii) consistent with universal divine value commensurability. In addition to universal divine value commensurability, such a model can rely on the following thesis:

Partial Non-divine Value Commensurability: Some non-divine possible beings are value commensurable with one another.

Partial non-divine value commensurability entails that even if universal value commensurability is false, some non-divine possible beings remain value commensurable among themselves. One might plausibly say, for example, that while an aardvark and an escalator are not value commensurable, an aardvark and a hedgehog are value commensurable.

An interesting question concerning partial non-divine value commensurability is whether there is a non-divine possible being such that it is not value commensurable with any other non-divine possible being. The answer seems to be negative because it is reasonable to think that for any being there is another being such that they jointly satisfy either (1), (2), (3), (5), (9), (11) or (12). (To see this, consider the following: For any non-divine possible being we can always conceive of another possible being that is genuinely slightly inferior or greater.) This means that, contrary to what the Radial Model implies, there is no local chain of being that contains God and only one non-divine possible being. Thus any local chain of being will always include God and multiple non-divine possible beings. This observation suggests that the following thesis is true:

Universal Partial Non-divine Value Commensurability: Every non-divine possible being is value commensurable with one or more other non-divine possible beings.

Partial non-divine value commensurability remains true, but universal partial non-divine commensurability, which is more specific, is also true. Given universal partial non-divine commensurability, we can conclude that there are many local chains of being such that (i) every possible being occupies a link in at least one of the chains, (ii) each of the chains contains multiple non-divine possible beings, and (iii) God occupies the top link in all of the chains. The Radial Model can therefore be revised as follows:

The Extended Radial Model: God is the being than which no greater can be thought by virtue of occupying the top link in all local chains of being, each of which contains multiple non-divine beings (Figure 7).

Figure 7: The Extended Radial Model

It is interesting to note that while we have attempted to avoid the Linear Model, which is based on the infamous theses of universal value commensurability and the great chain of being, we have settled on something that is not too dissimilar to that model. Instead of having a potentially infinitely long great chain of being with God at the top, the Extended Radial Model allows for many local chains of being, some or all of which might be infinitely long, with God at the top of each. In fact, the Linear Model is a special version of the Extended Radial Model, a version in which universal partial non-divine value commensurability coincides with universal value commensurability and there is only one "local" chain, namely, the great chain of being.

One might wonder at this point why we need to talk about these models in the first place. The differences between the models arise from how they treat the commensurability between non-divine possible beings, rather than the commensurability between God and non-divine possible beings. All God needs to satisfy, one might point out, is that He is greater than all possible non-divine beings.¹⁶ However, it is indeed necessary to discuss these models in order to fully understand the Anselmian thesis. Consider a parallel example: In order for University *A* to be the best university, it needs only to satisfy the condition that it is better than all other universities. However, it is not helpful merely to assert, "However other universities are compared and ranked, University *A* is the best university because it is better than all other universities." In order to understand fully what it means to say that University *A* is the best university we need to know by what criteria all universities are compared and on what basis University *A* is ranked as the best university.

5. The Comprehensive Greatness View

We have seen so far that once we give up the Linear Model, which relies on universal value commensurability and the great chain of being, the Extended Radial Model allows for the Anselmian concept of God as the being than which no greater can be thought. The Extended Radial Model is, however, still incomplete because it does not tell us exactly how God manages to occupy the top link in all local chains. In particular, it does not tell us what sort of relationship God has with other possible beings. I address this issue here and in the following sections.

In Section 3 we saw that, in order for *x* to be genuinely superior to *y*, *x* needs to satisfy one of the following conditions:

- (2) *x* is extensively equal and intensively superior to *y*.
- (5) *x* is extensively superior and intensively superior to *y*.
- (11) *x* is extensively superior to *y* and the great-making properties that *x* and *y* share are present in *x* at the same degree of intensity as in *y* (in this case *x* is neither intensively superior, equal, nor inferior to *y*).

¹⁶Thanks to a referee on this point.

This means that in order for God to be genuinely superior to any other possible being, He needs to satisfy one of the above three conditions jointly with each one of every possible being except Himself. This observation suggests the following view:

The Comprehensive Greatness View: God occupies the top link in all local chains of being because, for every non-divine possible being y , God is either: (i) intensively superior to y or (ii) extensively superior to y and the great-making properties that God and y share are present in God at the same degree of intensity as in y .

The view is named as such because in order to satisfy either (i) or (ii) God must, first of all, be either extensively equal or extensively superior to all possible beings. This means that God has to have all great-making properties that at least one possible being has, that is, all possible great-making properties *simpliciter*. With this view in hand, the Extended Radial Model can be advanced as follows: God has all the great-making properties that other possible beings have and, moreover, He is genuinely superior to each one of every possible being. That is why He occupies the top link in all local chains of being, which is equivalent to saying that He is the being than which no greater can be thought.

6. Objections to the Comprehensive Greatness View

The Comprehensive Greatness View is plausible at first sight and it seems compatible with Anselmian theism. For example, it seems compatible with what Leibniz, a proponent of Anselmian theism, says in his *Discourse on Metaphysics*: “God is an absolutely perfect being . . . there are many different kinds of perfection, all of which God possesses, and each one of them pertains to him in the highest degree.”¹⁷ However, the Comprehensive Greatness View faces two major objections, which I call the “extensity objection” and the “intensity objection.” In this section I address these objections. I argue that while we can successfully refute the extensity objection, the refutability of the intensity objection remains controversial.

(i) The Extensity Objection

Again, the Comprehensive Greatness View requires that God possess all possible great-making properties. However, the extensity objection says that there are many great-making properties that God cannot have. As I mentioned earlier, property p is a great-making property if it contributes to the greatness of its possessor. So, for example, one might say that having a healthy heart is a great-making property because it contributes to the greatness of a person who possesses it. A person would be greater with a healthy heart than otherwise. To take another example, one might

¹⁷G. W. Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics* and *The Monadology*, trans. George R. Montgomery (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2005, originally seventeenth–eighteenth centuries), 1.

say that being a fast typist is a great-making property because, again, it contributes to the greatness of a person who possesses it. A person would be greater as a fast typist than otherwise. However, God surely does not have these great-making properties. The Comprehensive Greatness View is, therefore, wrong in saying that God has all possible great-making properties. This is the extensity objection.

It is questionable whether such properties as having a healthy heart and being a fast typist are relevant to Anselmian theism because they do not seem to be intrinsically great. However, I assume, in favor of the extensity objection, that they *are* intrinsically great.

Fortunately, proponents of the Comprehensive Greatness View have an effective response to the extensity objection. This response relies on the distinction between what I call “relative great-making properties” and “absolute great-making properties”:

Relative Great-making Property: Property *p* is a relative great-making property if its acquisition would improve the greatness of some beings but would worsen the greatness of some other being.

Absolute Great-making Property: Property *p* is an absolute great-making property if its acquisition would improve the greatness of some beings and would not worsen the greatness of any other being.

This distinction allows us to identify non-arbitrarily great-making properties that God should have. Consider, again, the property of having a healthy heart. This is only a relative great-making property because while its possession would improve the greatness of many people it would worsen the greatness of God by undermining some of His other great-making properties. For example, it would be likely to undermine God’s omnipotence and incorporeality.¹⁸ Consider, on the other hand, the property of being, say, omnibenevolent. Assuming that omnibenevolence is a coherent notion, this is an absolute great-making property because its possession would improve the greatness of many beings, such as people and other non-divine beings, and would not worsen the greatness of any other being, including God Himself.

By appealing to the distinction between relative great-making properties and absolute great-making properties, we can claim as follows: The extensity objection fails because the mere fact that God cannot have all possible great-making properties does not undermine the Comprehensive Greatness View. The extensity objection needs to show, but fails to show, that God cannot have all *absolute* great-making properties.

¹⁸One might claim that it is impossible for God to have a healthy heart because, necessarily, He lacks any such organ as a heart. That is, the counterfactual, “if God were to have a healthy heart, then . . .” is always counterpossible. In order to avoid this complication, we can refer to another being that is only contingently omnipotent and contingently incorporeal when we determine whether the property of having a healthy heart is a relative great-making property.

(ii) *The Intensity Objection*

The second objection to the Comprehensive Greatness View is the intensity objection, which is potentially more troublesome than the extensity objection. The intensity objection says that the Comprehensive Greatness View cannot be sustained because there are powerful arguments that purport to show that God cannot have even such *absolute* great-making properties as omniscience, omnipotence and omnibenevolence, that is, knowledge, power and benevolence at the highest degree of intensity, respectively. There are largely three types of such arguments.¹⁹

Type-A arguments purport to show that God cannot have the absolute great-making properties because they are internally incoherent. Type-A arguments include: (i) The paradox of the stone, which purports to show the internal incoherence of omnipotence by considering the possibility or impossibility of an omnipotent being's creating a stone that that being itself cannot lift;²⁰ (ii) The argument from knowledge *de se*, which purports to show the internal incoherence of omniscience by showing the impossibility of any being's acquiring knowledge *de se* of another being.²¹

The intensity objection, however, cannot rely on Type-A arguments. Suppose, for example, that the paradox of the stone is indeed successful and the concept of omnipotence is internally incoherent. In this case God cannot have the property of being omnipotent. However, this is not necessarily bad news for the Comprehensive Greatness View, because what the paradox shows is merely that being omnipotent is not an absolute great-making property and that instead something slightly weaker, or less intense, than omnipotence is an absolute great-making property. Anselmian theists can maintain that since omnipotence is an incoherent notion, God needs only to be slightly weaker than omnipotent. In order to undermine the Comprehensive Greatness View here, one has to show that God cannot possess even the property of being slightly weaker than omnipotent. However, one cannot derive such a conclusion from the paradox of the stone itself. The same point applies to all other Type-A arguments. In sum, Type-A arguments do not underpin the intensity objection. There are, however, two more types of arguments against the omni-properties that seem to support the intensity objection more forcefully.

Type-B arguments purport to show that God cannot have the absolute great-making properties because they are mutually inconsistent. Type-B arguments include: (i) The argument from God's inability to sin, which purports to show the inconsistency between omnipotence and

¹⁹For detailed discussion of these arguments see Yujin Nagasawa, "A New Defence of Anselmian Theism," *Philosophical Quarterly* 58 (2008), 577–596.

²⁰George I. Mavrodes, "Some Puzzles Concerning Omnipotence," *Philosophical Review* 72 (1963), 221–223.

²¹Patrick Grim, "Against Omniscience: the Case from Essential Indexicals," *Noûs* 19 (1985), 151–180.

omnibenevolence by claiming that an omnibenevolent being cannot be omnipotent because it cannot perform a morally wrong action;²² (ii) The argument from concept possession, which purports to show the inconsistency between omniscience and omnipotence by claiming that an omnipotent being cannot be omniscient because such a being fails to know fully what fear and frustration are.²³

Type-C arguments purport to show that God cannot have the absolute great-making properties because the set they comprise is mutually inconsistent with a certain contingent fact. Type-C arguments include: (i) The problem of evil, which purports to show the inconsistency between the existence of a being with the set of such absolute great-making properties as omniscience, omnipotence and omnibenevolence and the fact that there is evil in the actual world;²⁴ (ii) The problem of divine hiddenness, which purports to show the inconsistency between the existence of a being with the same set of absolute great-making properties and the fact that the existence of such a being is not manifest to everyone in the actual world.²⁵

Unlike Type-A arguments, Type B and Type C arguments do seem to support the intensity objection to the Comprehensive Greatness View. Suppose, for example, that the argument from God's inability to sin is correct in saying that omnipotence and omnibenevolence are indeed mutually inconsistent. In this case, Anselmian theists have to compromise the intensity of either God's power or God's benevolence in order to maintain the existence of God as the being than which no greater can be thought. Let us assume that God's power should be compromised.²⁶ Here, while God is omnibenevolent, He is not really omnipotent; the intensity of His power extends only as far as it is consistent with omnibenevolence. If so, however, the Comprehensive Greatness View might be wrong, because being as powerful as possible consistently with omnibenevolence might not be an absolute great-making property. If there could be a non-omnibenevolent being that is fully omnipotent or very nearly fully omnipotent, then the property of being as powerful as possible consistently with omnibenevolence diminishes, rather than maintains or enhances, the greatness of the being in question. Yet, by definition, no absolute great-making property

²²Nelson Pike, "Omnipotence and God's Ability to Sin," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 6 (1969), 208–216.

²³David Blumenfeld, "On the Compossibility of the Divine Attributes," *Philosophical Studies* 34 (1978), 91–103.

²⁴J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments for and Against the Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982).

²⁵J. L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

²⁶John Bishop suggests this move in response to the problem of evil and Wes Morriston does the same in response to the argument from God's inability to sin. See John Bishop, "Evil and the Concept of God," *Philosophical Papers* 22 (1993), 1–15; Wes Morriston, "Omnipotence and Necessary Moral Perfection: Are they Compatible?," *Religious Studies* 37 (2001), 143–160.

diminishes the greatness of any being. The Comprehensive Greatness View, therefore, appears to fail. It seems impossible for God to have all absolute great-making properties.

The intensity objection is certainly more forceful than the extensity objection but defending it is not so easy. First, in order for the intensity objection to succeed at least one of the Type B and Type C arguments has to be sound. However, many powerful objections have been proposed to refute these arguments. If one wants to defend the intensity objection, therefore, one has to refute conclusively all existing objections to at least one of the arguments, which is a difficult task. Second, once proponents of the Comprehensive Greatness View compromise one of the omni-properties, the onus of proof is on opponents of the thesis to show that the property with the compromised intensity is not an absolute great-making property. For example, once proponents of the Comprehensive Greatness View admit that God is not omnipotent and that He is only as powerful as possible consistently with omnibenevolence, opponents have to show, in order to advance the intensity objection, that the property of being as powerful as possible consistently with omnibenevolence is not an absolute great-making property. This is not an easy task either, especially, but not only, if a Type-A argument succeeds in showing that the concept of omnipotence is internally incoherent and thus that it is impossible for any being to be omnipotent in the first place. In sum: While the intensity objection is a potential threat to the Comprehensive Greatness View, whether or not it ultimately succeeds remains contentious.

Our conclusion at this point is thus the following: (i) The Extended Radial Model seems tenable. God is the being than which no greater can be thought by virtue of occupying the top link in all local chains of being, each of which contains multiple non-divine beings. (ii) The Comprehensive Greatness View seems plausible. God occupies the top link in all local chains of being because for every non-divine possible being y , with respect to all absolute great-making properties, God is either extensively equal/superior and intensively superior to y or extensively superior to y and the absolute great-making properties that God and y share are present in God at the same degree of intensity as in y . I believe that the Extended Radial Model with the supplement of the Comprehensive Greatness View allows us to characterize correctly the Anselmian thesis, according to which God is the being than which no greater can be thought. However, as I have claimed in this section, the intensity objection against the Comprehensive Greatness View remains controversial. In what follows, therefore, I reconsider the Linear Model, which relies on the great chain of being, as a backup option for Anselmian theists. I argue that despite its infamous reputation, the Linear Model should be taken seriously because it undercuts the extensity and intensity objections and, also, what is widely regarded as a knock-down objection to the model is not as compelling as philosophers tend to think.

7. *Reconsidering the Linear Model*

We have seen in the previous section that the Comprehensive Greatness View faces two objections: (i) the extensity objection, which purports to show that there are great-making properties that God cannot have; and (ii) the intensity objection, which purports to show that God cannot have all absolute great-making properties at maximum intensity. I argue in this section that Anselmian theists should keep the Linear Model as a backup option because it avoids both of these objections. Moreover, I argue in the next section that the model might be able to block what is widely regarded as a knock-down objection.

As I explained in Section 2, the Linear Model says that God is the being than which no greater can be thought by virtue of occupying the top link in the great chain of being. This model assumes universal value commensurability, according to which all possible beings are value commensurable with one another.

In Section 3 we saw that the Comprehensive Greatness View—which complements the Extended Radial Model, an alternative to the Linear Model—allows that x is genuinely superior to y only in the following cases:

- (2) x is extensively equal and intensively superior to y .
- (5) x is extensively superior and intensively superior to y .
- (11) x is extensively superior to y and the great-making properties that x and y share are present in x at the same degree of intensity as in y (in this case x is neither intensively superior, equal, nor inferior to y).

We also saw that, according to the Comprehensive Greatness View, x and y are not value commensurable in the following cases:

- (10) x is neither extensively superior, equal nor inferior to y .
- (13) Other cases than (11) and (12) in which x is either extensively superior, equal or inferior to y but x is neither intensively superior, equal, nor inferior to y .

The Linear Model agrees with the Comprehensive Greatness View that in cases (2), (5) and (11) x and y are value commensurable and x is genuinely superior to y . However, it disagrees with the Comprehensive Greatness View that x and y are not value commensurable in cases (10) and (13) by advancing the following view:

The Overall Greatness View: The intensity and extensity of one's great-making properties can be converted into its overall greatness.

According to the Overall Greatness View, all possible beings are ultimately extensively equal because we can convert the intensity and extensity of individual great-making properties into the extensity of one great-making property: the overall greatness. Once we determine the overall greatnesses of all possible beings, we can show that God is the being than which no greater can be thought. He occupies the top link in the great

chain of being by achieving the combination of the great-making properties that produces the maximum intensity of overall greatness.

The Linear Model, supplemented by the Overall Greatness View, is not vulnerable to the extensity and intensity objections. The model undercuts the extensity objection because whether or not there are some individual great-making properties that God cannot have does not affect the Overall Greatness View, as long as He exhibits the maximum intensity of overall greatness. It also undercuts the intensity objection because whether or not God can simultaneously have all individual great-making properties at maximum intensity does not affect the model, again, as long as He exhibits the maximum intensity of overall greatness. In sum, the Linear Model and the Overall Greatness View are not vulnerable to the extensity and intensity objections because they purport to show that God is overall greater than any other possible being without directly comparing the extensity and intensity of individual great-making properties. If one takes seriously the Anselmian thesis, according to which God is the being than which no greater can be thought, then, as the Linear Model and the Overall Greatness View say, what matters is only whether or not God is *overall* greater than any other possible being. Whether or not He is greater than any other possible being with respect to every great-making property is a separate issue.

8. *A Knock-Down Objection to the Linear Model?*

As we have seen, the Linear Model, along with the Overall Greatness View, can undercut the extensity and intensity objections. However, as we have also seen, it faces an objection of its own. According to this objection, the Linear Model is untenable because it is absurd to assume that the great chain of being, on which the model is based, can be constructed. As I noted at the beginning of this paper, this objection is widely regarded as a knock-down objection to the Linear Model. In this section, however, I argue that it is not so obvious that the objection succeeds.

Morris puts forward the objection by stating, "It just makes no sense to ask which is of greater intrinsic value, an aardvark or an escalator."²⁷ If the Linear Model and the Overall Greatness View are correct, we must be able to locate both an aardvark and an escalator on the same chain and compare their greatnesses. Morris thinks that that is clearly impossible.

As Katherin A. Rogers says, if we focus only on this specific example, we might be able to reject Morris's claim by saying as follows: An aardvark and an escalator *are* value commensurable.²⁸ An aardvark is clearly greater than an escalator because, unlike an escalator, it lives a sentient life, which is intrinsically great. However, the point that Morris tries to make is not limited to this specific example. C. D. Broad makes the same point by introducing different examples: (i) the comparison of the greatnesses of a cat and a dog, where the cat can climb trees but the dog cannot, and the dog can track by

²⁷Morris, "The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Anselm," 17.

²⁸Rogers, "The Medieval Approach to Aardvarks, Escalators, and God," 64.

scent but the cat cannot; (ii) the comparison of the greatnesses of a mathematical genius of very slight musical capacity and a musical genius of very slight mathematical capacity.²⁹ Broad says that it is impossible to construct the great chain of being because the beings in these pairs are not value commensurable. (Neither the ability to track by scent nor the ability to climb trees seems relevant to the Anselmian thesis because neither seems to be intrinsically great. However, I assume otherwise in favor of Broad.)

Consider case (i). Assume, for the sake of simplicity, that the cat and the dog are genuinely equal, except that the cat has the property of being able to climb trees and that the dog has the property of being able to track by scent. In this case, according to Broad, the cat and the dog are not value commensurable. If we set aside all other properties that the cat and the dog have this case can be illustrated as follows:

Figure 8: Broad's First Case

Consider case (ii). Assume, for the sake of simplicity, that the mathematical genius and the musical genius are genuinely equal, except for their mathematical and musical capacities. In this case, according to Broad, the mathematical genius and the musical genius are not value commensurable. If we set aside other great-making properties that the two geniuses have this case can be illustrated as follows:

Figure 9: Broad's Second Case

The example of the cat and the dog is an instance of (10) above, where a being is neither extensively superior, equal, nor inferior to another being. The

²⁹Broad, "Arguments for the Existence of God," 177–178.

example of the mathematical genius and the musical genius is an instance of (13) above where two beings are extensively equal but neither of them is intensively superior, equal, nor inferior to the other. The Linear Model and the Overall Greatness View reject Broad's objection by saying that two beings are value commensurable even in instances of (10) and (13) because we can convert the intensity and extensity of their great-making properties into the intensity of the overall greatnesses of these beings. So, for example, perhaps the cat is greater than the dog because the calculation of their great-making properties shows that, despite the inability to track by scent, the overall greatness of the cat exceeds the overall greatness of the dog. But how can we motivate such a claim without begging the question against Broad and Morris? One possible route here is to provide an instance of (10) or (13) in which two beings are clearly value commensurable.

Consider, for example, the comparison between the greatnesses of Mother Teresa and Adolf Hitler. Broad (and possibly Morris as well) would say that such a comparison is impossible because this is an instance of (10). That is, there are great-making properties that Mother Teresa has but Hitler does not and *vice versa* (i.e., they are not extensively equal). Even if we assume that Mother Teresa and Hitler do share the exact same great-making properties (i.e., they are extensively equal), it is still impossible to compare their greatnesses because while there are great-making properties that are present in Mother Teresa at a higher degree of intensity than in Hitler (e.g., benevolence), there are also great-making properties that are present in Hitler at a higher degree of intensity than in Mother Teresa (e.g., power). That is, if this is not an instance of (10), it is still an instance of (13). Nevertheless, it does not seem unreasonable to say that Mother Teresa is overall greater than Hitler because she is significantly more benevolent than Hitler. This example suggests that there are instances of (10) and (13) in which two beings are value commensurable.

Broad might respond to this point as follows: The above example shows only that there are *some* instances of (10) and (13) in which two beings are value commensurable. However, in order to construct the great chain of being, we need to show that in *all* instances of (10) and (13) two beings are value commensurable. Morris tries to show that there are indeed instances of (10) and (13) in which two beings are not value commensurable, again, when he asserts, "It just makes no sense to ask which is of greater intrinsic value, an aardvark or an escalator."

The most obvious interpretation of Morris's assertion is that since an aardvark and an escalator are so fundamentally different, they are not value commensurable with each other. However, there seem to be at least two possible interpretations that *are* consistent with the Linear Model. The first interpretation says that it does not seem to make sense to compare the greatnesses of an aardvark and an escalator (or, taking Broad's example, the greatnesses of the cat and the dog, or the greatnesses of the mathematical genius and the musical genius) because of our intellectual limitations. That is, we cannot confidently compare the greatnesses of

these beings because it is extremely difficult for us to list all the great-making properties (and all the worse-making properties) that they have and perform a highly complex calculation of their overall greatnesses. But this means only that an aardvark and an escalator are not value commensurable *to us*, which is just an epistemic, not a metaphysical, problem. The second interpretation of Morris's assertion says that it does not make sense to ask which is greater, an aardvark or an escalator, because neither of them is greater than the other. That is, their overall greatnesses are equal. Contrary to what Morris's assertion implies, the great chain of being does not demand that for any pair of beings one has to be greater than the other. It only demands that for any pair of beings one has to be greater than *or equal* to the other. Given that it seems impossible for us to tell which one is greater between an aardvark and an escalator, it might be reasonable to conclude that their overall greatnesses are equal.

9. Conclusion

Over the course of this paper I have discussed several models of the Anselmian thesis. First, I defended the Extended Radial Model, according to which God is the being than which no greater can be thought by virtue of occupying the top link in all local chains of being, each of which contains multiple non-divine beings. This model is based on universal divine value commensurability, partial non-divine value commensurability and universal partial non-divine value commensurability, and supplemented with the Comprehensive Greatness View. Second, I considered, as a back-up option for Anselmian theists, the infamous Linear Model, according to which God is the being than which no greater can be thought by virtue of occupying the top link in the great chain of being. This model is based on universal value commensurability and supplemented with the Overall Greatness View. I argued that this model is more attractive than many philosophers have characterized it to be because it undercuts both the extensity and intensity objections. Moreover, I argued that it might be able to respond to what is widely regarded as a knock-down objection.

The Anselmian thesis is a foundation of many debates concerning traditional theism. I hope our discussion here helps us achieve a better understanding of the thesis.³⁰

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