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PERFECTION AND POSSIBILITY

Brian Leftow

Perfect being theologians try to fill out the concept of God by working out what it would take to be perfect—in various respects, or *tout court*. Jeff Speaks's "The Method of Perfect Being Theology" raises two problems for perfect-being thinking. I reply to these.

Perfect being theologians try to fill out the concept of God by working out what it would take to be perfect—in various respects, or *tout court*. Jeff Speaks's "The Method of Perfect Being Theology" raises two problems for perfect-being thinking.¹ To deal with one, we must distinguish two sorts of perfect-being project. The other is a difficulty for any perfect-being project.

Kinds of Goodness

In *God and Necessity*, I outlined a form of perfect-being reasoning this way: suppose that God has a valuable property G. Then

Nothing could be a better G . . . than God in fact is. God can be F. God would be a better G were he F than were he not F . . . Suppose now for *reductio* that God is not F. Then God is not as good a G as He could be. So if God is not F, it is false that nothing could be a better G than God in fact is. But this is true. So, *prima facie*, God is F.²

Speaks asks what kind of goodness I had in mind:

Some properties are good for me relative to a kind of which I am a member; for instance, I'm a member of the kind *basketball player*, and, relative to that kind, it is better for me to shoot baskets every day than not to—that is, I would be a better basketball player were I to shoot baskets every day, than were I not to. But this . . . property is (not) one it is better for me to have than lack, full stop. . . . Hence we might ask whether [perfect being theology] employs the kind-relative or the non-kind-relative sense of "good" . . . If we choose the kind-relative notion, then some choices of a kind seem to give the wrong results, whereas others (e.g., the kind *deity*) . . . presuppose a knowledge of the divine nature that we might have wanted perfect being theology

¹Jeff Speaks, "The Method of Perfect Being Theology," *Faith and Philosophy* 31 (2014), 256–266. Hereafter "Speaks."

²Brian Leftow, *God and Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 9–10, quoted at Speaks, 258.



to provide rather than presuppose. If we choose the non-kind-relative notion, then we face the problem that different properties are good for me than for, say, a parrot—which makes it seem as though we have to specify an object, or class of objects, in order to get results about which properties are better to have than lack even in the non-kind-relative sense. But again . . . some classes of objects will yield the wrong results, whereas others (e.g. . . . the singleton set containing God) will assume the sort of knowledge of God's properties which we want our method to deliver.³

For the sort of argument I gave, the short answer to Speaks's question is: the argument deals in G-relative goodness, whatever G is. It takes as given that God is G. It tries only to fill out *how* He is G. So our knowledge of the good-making features for Gs guides us. This sort of argument is part of what I call Scriptural perfect being theology, or SPBT. SPBT starts from the conception of God given in Scripture, and uses perfect-being thinking merely to flesh it out. SPBT starts with a skeleton concept of God, and that provides concrete values for G: a person, a knower, etc. We have decent intuitions about what makes for a better person, knower, etc., and SPBT calls only on these. Now perhaps problems occur within SPBT: perhaps what is good for a knower as such isn't good for a person as such, and if so, perhaps what would make God a better knower isn't a property better to have than to lack, full stop.⁴ But this isn't a recurrence of Speaks's problem. Speaks offers a dilemma: either some good-making properties are relative to the wrong kind, or we avoid this only by assuming illicit knowledge of the divine nature. In SPBT, it is not illicit to assume knowledge of the divine nature. Rather, we accept that from Scripture. The only question is whether God belongs to two kinds, *knower* and *person*, whose highest-degree good-making properties are not compatible. If what is good for a knower as such isn't good for a person as such, then perhaps being a perfect knower isn't compatible with being a perfect person, and one just has to figure out what's most important. This is just the second stage of SPBT, as I understand it. The first stage is finding a field of candidate divine perfections, properties that would make God a better G. The second is assessing whether they are compatible, and taking measures if they are not.

The other sort of perfect being theology (hereafter PBT) is a pure *a priori* project. This does not start with an agreed list of divine attributes. It tries to come up with a concept of God entirely by perfect-being means. In this project, as Speaks suggests, we must start by settling the perfect being's kind. How well we get on depends on this. If we can make a case that the kind is <person>, the rest then unfolds as in SPBT. It's a good question whether the *a priori* project can succeed, but I was not attempting that project, and so it is a question I will not address here.

³Speaks, 257–258.

⁴My thanks to a referee for this.

The Characteristic Argument of Perfect Being Theology

Speaks's second problem is also aimed at something of mine, but the problem applies to all PBT, not just my arguments, and so I prefer to frame my discussion in terms of Anselm. In *Proslogion* 5, Anselm writes,

What then are you, Lord God, than whom nothing greater can be thought? . . . the greatest of all things, alone existing through itself, that made all other things from nothing. For whatever is not this is less than can be thought. But this cannot be thought of you. . . . And so you are . . . whatever it is better to be than not to be.⁵

I take it that Anselm here speaks of a sort of "thinking" in which only what is possible "can be thought," and so his axiom has the force of

1. God = that than which no greater is possible.

For if we do not restrict the "thinkable" to the possible, it will be easy to "think" impossible things greater than God—e.g., the being greater than the greatest possible or impossible God.⁶ The *Proslogion's* *proem* tells us that the *Proslogion* will display "*unum argumentum*" yielding all that Christians believe about God, including that He exists. Anselm never says just what he understands the "*unum argumentum*" to be. It might be just Anselm's axiom, (1). But Anselm might instead mean a general form of argument involving the axiom. If he does, and this one form of argument *inter alia* yields God's existence, then *Proslogion* 2's "ontological" argument is the fullest display of the argument-form, and we should read Anselm's perfect being reasoning as proceeding in parallel: only so do we have one *form* of argument that yields all that Christians believe about God.

If Anselm's axiom is (1) and the *reductio* of *Proslogion* 2 displays his form of argument, we might see *Proslogion* 5 as proceeding as follows:

2. No possible being could be in an intrinsic state greater than God's actual intrinsic state.

Suppose for *reductio*:

3. God can be F; God would if F be greater than if not F; and God is not F.

Then

4. It is possible that something (God) be in an intrinsic state greater than God's actual intrinsic state.
5. (3) is false, by *reductio* from 2 and 4. So

⁵F. S. Schmitt, ed., *S. Anselmi Opera Omnia*, v. 1 (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd. 1946), 104; my translation.

⁶I show elsewhere that Anselm does not mean PBT to derive extrinsic properties; see *Anselm's God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming). So at the price of jarring readers, I could substitute for (1) the claim that God = that than which no intrinsically greater is possible. In any case, we should understand (1) with this restriction.

6. If God can be F, and God would if F be greater than if not F, then God is F.
7. God can be F.
8. God would if F be greater than if not F. So
9. God is F.

If something could be in an intrinsic state greater overall than God's actual state, (1) would not be true. Thus (2) explicates (1). As to (3) and (7), again, *Proslogion* 5 does not say that possibly God is F, but we should read Anselm as restricting what is thinkable to what is possible.

Possibility Problems

Speaks's second problem concerns (7).⁷ Without it, the argument is invalid. But with it, he contends, perfect-being reasoning becomes otiose. PBT will insist that (1) is necessary. If the natures of being F and not being F are necessary, plausibly they necessarily affect God's greatness just as they actually do, and so plausibly (8) is necessary. If S5 is the right logic for metaphysical modality, (7) is necessary if possible. On these assumptions, it follows that (9) is necessary if possible. If God is F in one world, that is because (1), (7) and (8) are true in that world, and on the assumptions noted, (1), (7) and (8) are all true in all worlds if true in any. So on present assumptions, (7) and (9) are strictly equivalent. If they are, the argument seems otiose: any reason we have to accept (7) is itself reason to accept (9), without appeal to perfect being considerations.

We can also add a problem Speaks does not raise. Speaks unpacks "God would if F be greater than if not F" this way:

10. God is F $\square \rightarrow$ God has greatness of level X,
11. $\neg(\text{God is F}) \square \rightarrow$ God has greatness of level Y, and
12. $X > Y$.⁸

If $\langle \text{God is F} \rangle$ is necessary, (11) is a counterpossible. Then (11) is true, but on the standard approach to counterpossibles so equally is

- $\neg(\text{God is F}) \square \rightarrow$ God has greatness of level $X + 1$.

If *that's* true, Anselm's form of argument kicks in to tell us that after all, $\neg(\text{God is F})$. That turns $\langle \text{God is F} \rangle$ impossible. If it is impossible, then while (10) is true, so also $\langle \text{God is F} \square \rightarrow$ God has greatness of level $X + 2 \rangle$, and that flips us back to saying that God is F. It seems that if its results are necessary if possible, on the standard approach to counterpossibles, Anselm's procedure becomes unstable, unable to yield even one definite result.

⁷Speaks, 259ff.

⁸Speaks, 259.

I have two replies to Speaks's dilemma. One is this: suppose that Speaks is right, and we've now learned that any reason we have to believe (7) is reason to believe (9). It is perfect being reasoning that has shown us this. So perfect being theology is not otiose in our coming to believe (9). It is precisely what tells us that our (7)-reasons are (9)-reasons. Any valid argument tells us that reasons for its premises are reasons to embrace its conclusion. In the dilemma, Speaks in effect holds our reasons to endorse (1) and (8) steady, and focuses on our reasons for (7) as making the decisive difference vis-à-vis (9). That's fine. But that one can do that hardly shows that the rest of the argument makes no contribution to our accepting (9).

My other reply is a bit more radical. It is that we can treat (1)–(8) as an enthymeme, and if we do, (7) is a lemma, not a premise. The hidden bit would be this:

13. That God is F passes all tests for possibility that are not part of PBT, and

14. (8) and (13) imply (7).

This circumvents Speaks's dilemma. We get (7) and so render the argument valid, but perfect-being reasoning justifies (7), and so retains its point. Let us now look at (13) and (14).

(13) and (14) go beyond anything Anselm explicitly says. Saying that they belong in the argument is a friendly amendment to Anselm, a reasonable suggestion that gets Anselm past an objection. We should also let friendship guide how we fill out (13). I suggest that (13) is true just if

13*. the conjunction of <God is F> with any logical, mathematical or "secular" necessary truths does not imply the negation of any logical, mathematical or "secular" necessary truth save as a paradox of strict implication.⁹

Three things here require comment.

- The full development of what makes a truth secular and which truths are secular is tricky,¹⁰ but the root idea is that such truths are not about God and carry no information about God.

⁹This is not the same claim as that <God is F> is compatible with everything that *appears* a secular necessary truth. It might appear such a truth that possibly there are states of affairs with n amount of suffering, where n is a degree too great for a perfectly good, omnipotent, omniscient being to allow, and so to co-exist with. PBT may well tell us that such a perfect being would necessarily be perfectly good, omnipotent and omniscient. So if we follow PBT to the end, we will say that it is not in fact possible that there be n suffering—i.e., that that is not in fact a secular necessary truth. It is secular—it carries no information about God—but it is not in fact true, and what rules it out is ultimately the character of God. I would have to complicate (13) and (13*) to deal with this. For present purposes I need not work this out. The final successors to (13) and (13*) would function in my overall argument just as (13) does: the difference between them does not matter *here*.

¹⁰See my *God and Necessity*, 248–252, and for a correction, my "Omnipotence, Evil and What's in God," *European Journal of Philosophy of Religion* 6:3 (2014), 58.

- Some writers see the claim that a proposition does not imply a contradiction as entailing that it is possible, or at least as important evidence that it is possible. The “does not imply etc.” part of (13*) generalizes from “does not imply a contradiction.” The law of non-contradiction is not all a proposition must respect if it is to pass all non-theistic tests for possibility.
- I say “save as a paradox” etc. for the following reason. If being *F* is a legitimate candidate for perfect-being ascription to God, $\langle \text{God is } F \rangle$ is either necessary or impossible. If it is necessary, of course, $\langle \text{God is } F \rangle$ in conjunction with any set of necessary truths does not imply any impossibility. If $\langle \text{God is } F \rangle$ is impossible, then to pass all non-theistic tests for possibility, it must respect all non-theistic necessary truths. It is impossible that God knows that $2 + 2 = 5$, but this fails the test in (13*): the impossibility here does not respect all non-theistic necessary truth. In contrast, while it might be impossible that God is not omnipotent, this impossibility is entirely theistic. In the sense of implication at issue in (13*), it carries no implications for anything other than God. So it passes the test in (13*). True, if God is necessarily omnipotent, $\langle \text{God is not omnipotent} \rangle$ implies everything whatsoever. But it implies all this as a paradox of implication. This is the *only* reason it implies all this, and that is why $\langle \text{God is not omnipotent} \rangle$ passes—why *in the sense of implication that matters* for (13*), it carries no implications for things other than God. For if we just thought out intuitively what is involved in God’s not being omnipotent, we would not infer from this that $2 + 2 = 5$ or that eagles are mammals. If we abstracted from its impossibility, we would not say that it implies these things. Consider the conditional $\langle \text{there are no minds} \rightarrow \text{there are no thoughts} \rangle$. If God exists necessarily, this has an impossible antecedent. So the semantics tells us that it is equally true that $\langle \text{there are no minds} \rightarrow \text{there are hippopotami} \rangle$. But the claim about hippopotami follows *only* as a paradox of implication. So when we think about there being no minds, we legitimately ignore the hippopotamus conditional. On the other hand, when we think about there being no minds, we do not legitimately ignore there being no thoughts. That just seems part of there being no minds. There is a substantive connection between the antecedent about minds and the consequent about thoughts, and this substantive connection and the semantics overdetermine that conditional’s truth. Some impossibilities imply other propositions for more than one reason. (13*) tells us in effect that iff $\langle \text{God is } F \rangle$ passes the non-theistic tests for possibility, there is no substantive connection between $\langle \text{God is } F \rangle$ and the negation of any logical, mathematical or “secular” necessary truth.

The basic thought I want (13*) to explicate is that in evaluating theological hypotheses by perfect being thinking, we hold everything in the

modal realm *but* theology constant, and the live options are just those that “fit” into the modal realm as it actually is.¹¹ The thought is that (13) is true just if $\langle \text{God is } F \rangle$ fits in with all “non-theistic” necessary truth. “Save as a paradox” rules out any *substantive* connection between an impossible theistic hypothesis and a non-theological impossibility. It does so to keep theological hypotheses in an appropriate way disconnected from the modal realm I want to hold constant in evaluating them.

We justify (13) or (13*), presumably, as we do candidate possibility-claims. I intend (13*) not to entail that possibly God is F, for intuitively, some theistic impossibilities “fit” in the sense given with non-theistic necessary truth: both $\langle \text{God is omnipotent} \rangle$ and its negation “fit” with $\langle 2 + 2 = 4 \rangle$. If we are to take both $\langle \text{God is } F \rangle$ and its negation as hypotheses to investigate, live candidates PBT must decide between, both must appear possible before PBT gets to work, even if one is in fact impossible. (13*) sets up the particular sense in which they do—both are “conceivable” and appear to be possible given all relevant information from outside PBT, as both appear to satisfy (13*). But that I let theistic impossibilities be conceivable or appear possible raises two issues.

One is simple consistency. I said above that Anselm must restrict the thinkable to the possible. Now I’m saying that (13) requires a sense of “thinkable” which is not restricted to the possible. One wants to say that Anselm can’t have it both ways. Well, Anselm thinks he can. *Proslogion* 4 distinguishes two ways one can “think” that God does not exist. One captures the nature of what one thinks about; let us call it thinking_n. The other does not, but remains merely on a superficial verbal level or even misunderstands the words being used; let us call it thinking_s. In parallel, there are two ways to “think” other theistic impossibilities. Being thinkable_n entails being possible. Being thinkable_s does not. This second, less demanding sense is in play in (13) and (13*).

The second matter is this. If we let theistic impossibilities appear possible, we risk concluding that God has impossible attributes. A dilemma seems to loom: either risk this, or let being conceivable or apparently possible in (13)’s way entail possibility. The latter might seem problematic because then $\langle P \rangle$ is conceivable only if possible, and then if $\langle P \rangle$ is possible only if necessary, $\langle P \rangle$ is conceivable only if necessary: which Speaks will say gets us $\langle P \rangle$ without PBT, just from $\langle P \rangle$ ’s conceivability. I think the dilemma is not serious. Neither horn is sharp.

On the one side, the impossibilities we judge conceivable or apparently possible will be *theistic*—claims about divine attributes. These have to be live, conceivable, apparently possible hypotheses, else there’s nothing for PBT to do comparative work with. And many such theological impossibilities obviously *are* in some senses conceivable. If we let these be

¹¹Again, this is too simple, in that the modal realm as it actually is may have been shaped partly by theological constraints—perhaps it doesn’t contain the possibility of *n* amount of suffering. But again, for present purposes we can ignore this.

conceivable, the risk that we conclude to impossibilities is just the risk that our intuitions about perfection lead us to the wrong theological conclusions. We had that risk anyway. So this is no additional problem for PBT, and is in that sense cost-free. It is also a risk PBT has no matter how “conceivable” be understood, I think.

On the other side, maybe the entailment isn’t so bad. For one thing, I’ve already argued that even if things are as Speaks says, perfect being reasoning is not otiose. There is also a second reason it would not be otiose. If conceivability in the relevant sense entailed possibility entailed necessity entailed actuality, it would no longer be a straightforward matter to judge whether something is conceivable. If PBT yields $\langle \text{God is } F \rangle$, necessarily God is F. So that God is not F turns out impossible, and so if conceivability implies possibility, it follows that this was inconceivable all along. If P, it turns out inconceivable that $\neg P$, even if $\langle \neg P \rangle$ ’s *prima facie* claim to be conceivable is just as good as $\langle P \rangle$ ’s. So we turn out to need a perfect being argument to judge between rival claims to conceivability for $\langle P \rangle$ and $\langle \neg P \rangle$, just as we do to judge between rival claims to possibility. And so PBT still has a role.

Now to (14). The thought here is that PBT is a vehicle *inter alia* for determining what is possible. For the non-theistic part of logical space, we settle our beliefs about what is there (for the most part¹²) by non-theological means. For the theistic part, we use the same non-theological tests we apply elsewhere, but that does not suffice to whittle our hypotheses down to one. Further, strictly theological tests are needed. PBT provides them. Anselm’s axiom is that God is the greatest possible being, and in his eyes, “greatest” in some contexts dominates “possible.” Anselm proceeds as if there is no chance that independent modal facts could trim God down from what PBT says He ought to be, save insofar as he seeks to make sure that individual divine attributes are understood in coherent ways and to iron out apparent incompatibilities between them. That suggests that Anselm sees himself as using PBT to discover what a certain portion of the modal realm contains, guided in part by logical truths he takes to govern the entire modal realm.¹³ In so doing, he guides part of his modal thinking by the axiom that God is the greatest *thinkable*_s being, which might be why

¹²Again, intolerable levels of evil provide an exception.

¹³I saw this independently, but this idea also occurs in unpublished work by Mark Murphy. Graham Oppy suggests that facts about what is possible are independent of any facts about perfect, near-perfect etc. beings, and so it might well be that the most powerful possible being is a long way from any intuitively acceptable conception of omnipotence, the most knowledgeable possible being a very long way from any intuitively acceptable notion of omniscience, etc. (Graham Oppy, “Perfection, near-perfection, maximality, and Anselmian Theism,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 69 [2011], 130). Well, if one is not committed to PBT, this might be exactly the view to take, and even those committed to PBT should (I think) treat the non-theological bit of the space of possibility this way in practice, with the exception of apparent possibilities too bad for a perfect being to permit to be actual.

Another point here: If Anselm is proceeding as indicated, this might also suggest that while Anselm does not explicitly assert (13) and (14), he tacitly assumes them—so that they are not mere friendly amendments, but instead bring out implicit assumptions.

Proslogion 2 puts his axiom in terms of being thinkable rather than being possible. I have suggested in effect that a proposition <God is F> is thinkable_s just if it does not violate logic, mathematics or “secular” necessary truths. If we treat Anselm’s reasoning as in effect covertly involving (14), we can also see a reason for what is otherwise puzzling—that no claim that *possibly* God has the attribute in question figures in the reasoning *Proslogion* 5 sketches. This may be because PBT as a vehicle of modal discovery is guided by what is thinkable_s. Anselm has to restrict what is thinkable_n to what is possible, but in PBT it is thinkable_s levels of divine greatness that tell us what the possible levels of greatness are. However, the claim that God is the greatest *possible* being still has a role to play. It might well be thinkable_s that something surpass God: if we take the non-theological part of modal space as fixed, it seems an open option to fill the theological bit with something that passes the (13)-test but surpasses God. Anselm’s axiom rules that move out. It tells us that whatever we think_s, the thinkable_s perfections of *God* are the summit of possible perfection, and anything over that summit, if thinkable_s, does not come out possible or thinkable_n.

Finally, let us consider the counterpossible problem. Here I want to distinguish conditionals true only as an artefact of the semantics and conditionals that also have substantive grounds for truth. As an artefact of the semantics, that God is not F entails that God has every conceivable level of perfection. But our intuitions tell us that God’s not being F also has a substantive connection with some level(s). For instance, where F is omnipotence, not being F is having any lesser degree of power, and so intuition tells us that the “level” of greatness associated with not being F is actually an interval of levels open toward omnipotence’s level and closed on the low end by zero. We are reasonable in focusing on what intuition directs us to in doing philosophical theology, and ignoring the alternatives. This amounts to reasoning with what is plausible rather than what is implausible, and with what seems to us to reflect the relevant facts in the area in question, as the connection between no minds and no thoughts does. We ought to respect the relevant facts, and we do so by reasoning only with conditionals that respect them.

I suggest, then, that PBT weathers the storm Speaks raises for it.

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