

The Slippery Slope of Perfect Being Theology

Stripping Down God to the “Mini-maximal” Being

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Abstract: Perfect Being Theism has been reformulated by Nagasawa to avoid putative conflicts between omni-properties inside God by downgrading either of any two conflicting properties. This move has recently been pressed further by others vindicating a “fluctuating maximal God”, a God that needn’t be the highest possible being at any moment of time (nor at any place in space), as long as he will eventually be the highest possible being by the end of time. With this new conception of God, they claim to answer the most intractable conundrums of the problem of evil.

I criticize this conception of “God” because it does not meet many of the standard requirements for being God, neither philosophical (logical, metaphysical) nor religious (theological, devotional, pastoral). In sum, it is not a God who inspires awe, devotion and ultimate hope, and so cannot be the proper object of religious attitudes of any monotheist within the Abrahamic traditions.

Keywords: Perfect Being Theism, Fluctuating maximal God, God’s concept, Immutability, Worship worthiness

Introduction¹

A crucial question for theology concerns the development of a proper concept of God. This concept of God must fulfil two desiderata: it should be in consonance with religious practice, and it should be philosophically adequate, since it is a *concept*. Religious people in general don’t need an elaborate “concept” of God: some rather vague notion is usually enough.

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These two sources of our idea of God (religion and philosophy) start from quite different viewpoints and interests, and at different times. If there were no religion whatsoever, there would not exist any theology, either philosophical or dogmatic. The two sources end up approaching each other in the long run (and this phenomenon occurs both in the Near-East tradition and in the Far-East one), but their beginnings and their goals are different.

From the internal viewpoint of religions, at all different stages of their development, God (or the gods) are devised as the adequate referent(s) of our religious attitudes and practices. A common feature of most historical religious practices and attitudes—and essential to any religious monotheism—is petitionary prayer, and an adequate referent for God must be such as to make sense of that practice.

On the other hand, since the *Upanishads* in the West and Xenophanes in our Western tradition, philosophers have been trying to arrive at the most adequate conception of God as the highest ontological reality. In this vein, Perfect Being Theology has been offered as the best method to arrive at that concept of God as The Perfect Being.

The Appropriateness of Perfect Being Theology

“Perfect being theology” is becoming a popular label for a method for inquiring into the divine attributes that eventually renders quite different conceptions of God as a perfect being. That God is (or rather that ‘God’ means) *the perfect being* can be interpreted differently, as has been remarked Jeff Speaks (2018). Of course, in any event God must be *the highest being*, but this could be taken as the highest *actual* being, the highest *possible* being or even the highest *conceivable* being. Nevertheless, the first option is not recommended. As Brian Leftow, among others, has remarked (2021, 264), the highest actual being could be far away from our standard requirements to count as God. Let’s suppose (which seems quite reasonable) the highest being has to be knowledgeable (so conscious, intelligent, informed) and powerful (so at least a true agent, with free will) and benevolent (a moral subject). And imagine we are in the second century AD. Then, it could be the case that Marcus Aurelius would fit the description: the highest actual being. But he does not exemplify what is understood in theology (nor in monotheistic religions) by the term ‘God’: he is not at all omnipotent, nor omniscient, nor morally perfect. And more importantly, he enjoys a contingent and temporal existence, not necessary existence and the subsequent eternity proper of God.²

² Speaks presents this argument against God being the highest *possible* being (supposing a narrow conception of metaphysical possibility). Leftow replays that, in that case, theists would not claim that Aurelius is God, but that God does not exist, since maximal possible greatness is a

So, adhering to this *actual* conception of highest being, now in 2025 we should say either that God no longer exists (which is absurd for the theist, given God's necessary existence) or that God is now another individual, say Donald Trump. But then 'God' would function as a descriptive term whose referent would be changing as time passes by. The idea that God as a supreme being is a role that was formerly occupied by someone (say Cronus), but latter is occupied by someone else (say Zeus), is akin to polytheism, as in the *Theogony*, the *RgVeda*, the *Enuma Elish* and so on, but it is untenable for monotheism, and so for any Abrahamic theology. It is also undesirable on purely philosophical grounds, since the individual that is God now must be eternally and necessarily so, at least according to either classical or neoclassical theism.

Finally, given the existence of anything, and conceding the axiological ordering of all entities (the great chain of being, that is, that all entities have a definite global value, and that there are no two entities equal in global value),³ this first version of perfect being theism (from now on PBT) trivially entails that God exists: whoever (or whatever) is the highest being at a given time is God at that time. Certainly, if God were the highest conceivable being (the omni-God) and he exists, he is *a fortiori* also the highest actual being. I understand Anselm to take this route, and it is the key to the ontological argument.⁴ But if we find unsound any version of the ontological argument (modal ones included) and keep open the logical possibility of God's nonexistence (as most philosophers agree we should), a conception of God that trivially entails its/his existence as a contingent, finite and temporally limited being is unacceptable.

And, last but not least, the status of that being would not guarantee its being worship-worthy in the proper theological sense of the term, and consequently such a being would not be the adequate referent of (monotheistic) religious attitudes. Now, concerning worship-worthiness, as Kvanvig notes (2021, 119-120) different philosophers have underlined various aspects of what worship consist in: praise (Leftow), admiration (Adams), awe (Bayne and Nagasawa), submission and surrender (Kvanvig himself), and I would add *ultimate hope*. Although all these aspects are relevant (and commonly jointly present), if you single out admiration or even awe (in the sense of wonder), Aristotle's god could be worthy of worship, but this god cannot be the foundation of any positive religion (there are no other religious attitudes toward him, and crucially not

necessary condition for being God, but it is not a sufficient condition. An additional condition is to be "great enough" or "worship-worthy": "But there is a God, we think, only if something has both God's essence and God's proper accidents" (Leftow 2021, 265).

³ I am assuming here a Leibnizian approach, according to which any being possess an ontological value, and no position in the scale can be neither unoccupied nor shared by two different individuals. This is also controversial, but let's suppose it for the sake of argument, as a tenet assumed by Anselmians. Oppy 2011 displays a full battery of issues against this hypothesis.

⁴ This point is thoroughly developed in Oppy (2011, 131).

prayer). Thus, worship would be sufficient as the religious component of God's concept only if we include all the aspects just mentioned. Since the concept of worship is rather vague, I would add "adequate referent of religious attitudes" as a complementary requisite for any divinity to fulfil its essential religious role. The problem is that many different religious beliefs and practices throughout history come with their own different divinities that fit this label: for instance, for the indigenous people who feared, adored and surrendered to the god of the Popocatepetl volcano by offering him meals and fruit to placate his temper, this divinity was the adequate object of their religious attitudes and practices. But I think these sorts of religion are hardly a live option for us in the XXI Century. We are after the religious attitudes proper of monotheism, so I would say the religious essential aspect of an acceptable conception of God should be termed "adequate referent of monotheistic-religious attitudes". For these reasons, we should focus our inquiry not on the highest actual being, but on the highest possible or conceivable being. And this is a relevant divide.

Now I turn to another part of the story. What are the properties constitutive of greatness for God? Basically, there are two views about this: the loose (or neo-classical) versus the strict (or classical theism). Both versions include among divine properties power, knowledge and goodness at their maximal level, that is, at an actual infinite degree.⁵ This is in accordance with monotheistic religions from East and West. But the strict or classical version, following the tradition of Augustine, Anselm and Aquinas, includes ontological properties that usually are not conceived as a matter of degree, but instead as all-or-nothing properties: simplicity, immutability and atemporality.⁶ As a meta-theological method, PBT matches naturally with a conception of God as the highest possible being (the absolutely perfect being) that has been heavily disputed in the last decades for allegedly being in conflict with the Bible and with the possibility of God being personal.⁷ We could term the version compromised only with divine omniproperties the basic version of perfect being theism (BPBT), and the one adding the all-or-nothing properties the extended version (EPBT)⁸. It seems quite dubious that an immutable and atemporal being, absolutely "well rounded" as

⁵ This raises further problems concerning whether the maximal degree possible for such predicates is finite or infinite, and whether in case of no highest limit, it would loom the paradox of *for any level of power (or knowledge) there is a higher one*, in which case there could not be a *maximal* degree of power (or knowledge). For these questions see Oppy, 2011. I will not pursue these issues here. Suffice it to say concerning omniscience that an omniscient being must know the truth value of all propositions (be they infinite or finite in number).

⁶ A contemporary version of this PBT is Rogers, 2000.

⁷ In particular, relevant philosophers like Plantinga, Swinburne, Wolterstorff, Ward, Hasker and more recently Mullins (2016) endorse these criticisms.

⁸ BPBT and EPBT are different resulting conceptions or models of God, nevertheless they can be a product of the same Perfect Being Theology as a meta-theological method.

it may be (like Parmenides' Being), could play the essential role of the God of religion: to be worship-worthy in the full sense and *the adequate referent of monotheistic-religious attitudes*, to be some who *listens to* and *responds to* prayers, someone we can love and who can love us, someone we can even get angry with (as Job did). So, even if the God of EPBT could be the "one which no higher can be conceived (not even by an omniscient being)" from a philosophical point of view, EPBT could be questioned from a religious point of view.⁹

Conversely, the basic version of PBT is entirely adequate for religious ends (crucially including petitionary prayer), and philosophically is (arguably) at least as good as EPBT. I am aware of some relevant putative advantages of EPBT. For instance, if according to the simplicity doctrine all divine properties were eventually equivalent, then there couldn't arise any conflict between divine properties to which BPBT is so prone. Nevertheless, I will reply: 1) the conflict between omnipotence, omniscience and moral perfection is likely just apparent, not real. 2) Even if there were a real conflict, we could "adapt" one of the properties, which could (arguably) mean to abandon even neoclassical theism, but not monotheism. We would get some alternative respectable concept of God, like that of open theism, for instance. 3) If we concluded in the end that this revised concept was no longer an adequate concept "of God", then we should say farewell to any form of classical or neoclassical theism, opting for alternative and downgraded forms of theism (panentheism, process theism... or directly for agnosticism). At any rate, EPBT involves controversial attributes such as simplicity or immutability, that are unnecessary—and dubiously convenient—for a monotheistic religiously tenable position.

Now, as BPBT¹⁰ is less controversial and has been recently much defended I will focus on it. (Basic) perfect being theology is, then, fully pertinent for a philosophically comprehensive concept of God. However, once we agree in a minimal set of predicates that are great-making, we face three kinds of problems (Nagasawa 2016, 87): intrinsic coherence of each predicate, extrinsic consistency among predicates, and consistency with facts about the world. This last point, although eventually essential, has at this moment no direct bearing on our concept of God as such, but with the possibility or probability of God's existence, once we have forged a philosophically acceptable concept of God, so I will postpone its analysis to the final part.

As for the first point, I will take for granted that none of the great-making predicates has been conclusively proven to be incoherent in itself, not even

⁹ I also agree that the Bible in general does not cohere with EPBT at all. But the Bible is an enormous collection of books, that are vague and ambiguous on many points, so that different conceptions of God can be vindicated depending on where you focus on.

¹⁰ Nevertheless, I understand BPBT rather as leaving open the question of divine simplicity, and to a lesser extent immutability or atemporality, not as directly rejecting them.

omnipotence, despite various alleged putative paradoxes. The more serious challenge arises when two (or more) predicates are supposed to clash. If two properties constitutive of greatness do enter into conflict when both are assumed to reach the maximal (unlimited) degree, then the standard strategy to face this problem is either to say that one predicate has priority over the other (and so, only this one at its highest is properly applicable to God), or that we face two alternative concepts of God as the maximally perfect being. For instance, if omnipotence and moral perfection would effectively clash, we could opt either for rephrasing omnipotence and say, instead, that God is almighty¹¹: He can do all that a morally perfect being can logically do (He cannot lie or fail to fulfil a promise). Or, alternatively, we can say that God is unrestrainedly omnipotent, so He can lie or whatever (for instance, destroy the universe if and when He wishes just for fun)¹². That is, He would be beyond the moral law, as seems to happen for instance with Shiva in some versions of late Hinduist Shaivism.¹³

Quite naturally, *moral* theisms (as Judaism, Christianity and Islam are supposed to be) will and do opt for the first alternative, not the second. This is usually introduced as a *refinement* of our concept of God (Leftow 2011). But it can also be regarded as a disguised retreat from perfect being theology foundational aims, for if the essential predicates constitutive of greatness are not all compatible when taken at their logically possible maxima, then there cannot exist a perfect being that has *infinite* power, knowledge and goodness. Again, this could be taken simply as a proof of the nonexistence of (that) God, or, less dramatically, as a sign of the failure of strict perfect being theology. In that case, we should be content with a God that is one, infinite, necessary; omniscient, morally perfect and extremely powerful, albeit not strictly omnipotent.¹⁴

¹¹ As Peter Geach (1973, 15–18) did, claiming that (the Christian) God cannot do anything logically possible for any agent to be done, since his moral perfection precludes him from unfulfilling his promises or from performing wicked actions.

¹² Nevertheless, such unrestrainedly omnipotent God could not ground any ultimate hope for us, and so would not be worthy of worship.

¹³ Nonetheless, in the Puranas, when Shiva is depicted as breaking Dharma (and so, above it) this is not just for free, but for the sake of the greater good. The idea of Shiva existing beyond good and evil is probably more philosophical than religious.

¹⁴ Anyway, as we have followed Speaks distinction between PBT as a method and PBT as an apologetical standard that measures permissible tinkering with the concept of God, the Maximal God strategy could support the second sense of PBT, but damages the first one, because now we cannot affirm any particular degree of any attribute unless we are sure it is compatible with all the other ones.

From Perfect Being Theology to Maximal God Theology

Nagasawa follows this path, by saying (2016, 67 & 99) that God could have the property/predicate of being “slightly less than omnipotent”. It could seem that with this move we lose almost nothing. Unfortunately, to be “slightly less than omnipotent” does not single out any property (unless we are ready to accept vague properties).¹⁵ We can (with difficulty) understand what being omnipotent consists in, but nobody knows what exactly being “slightly less than omnipotent” consists in.¹⁶

A second, but no minor, issue is that, once we are ready to make exceptions within the range of omni-properties, many “divine” beings could exemplify differently these restricted omni-properties: one being could just be unable to lie, but could “harden the heart of Pharaoh”; other could be capable of lying, but incapable to harden the heart of anybody, etc. Or even one divinity could be incapable of lying only on odd days, but other only on even days, and so on. Once we diminish a maximal property, like omnipotence, we immediately lose uniqueness.

So, even setting apart the problematic question of vagueness, if we *construct* precise properties concerning very high power, knowledge or goodness, the problem of multiplicity reappears. Nagasawa refers repeatedly to his concept of maximal God as one that *could* not be omnipotent, or omniscient or omnibenevolent, but that nevertheless *God is the maximal consistent set of power, knowledge and goodness*.¹⁷ Now, it could plausibly be the case that there exists no such unique maximal set once we abandon omni-properties. For the sake of simplicity, let’s limit our analysis to the three single properties accepted by almost all theists: power, knowledge and goodness. Let’s also suppose that it is

¹⁵ This is something inconvenient by itself, but even more so when the subject is God, for how could we understand that God is vaguely immutable or vaguely omniscient? And how could we come to terms with such divine agent? If we followed an epistemic approach of vagueness, vague divine properties could fit well with our limited understanding of God, but if vagueness is ontological, vague divine properties sound bizarre, since the very foundation of being would be vague!

¹⁶ Oppy (2011, 126), claims that if total knowledge (knowledge of 100% of true propositions) were an unrealisable ideal, we could replace it with near-perfect knowledge, that is, “a case in which there is just one true proposition that one does not know”. Then adds: “it is worth noting that, if perfect knowledge is unrealisable, then it may well be the case that near-perfect knowledge is also unrealisable: if there cannot be something that knows 100% of true propositions, then it may also be the case that there cannot be something that fails to know 100% of true propositions because there is just one true proposition—or a tiny handful of true propositions—that it fails to know.” So, even if we make precise what quasi-perfect knowledge means, the difficulties of full perfect knowledge are inherited. And something similar runs for absolute power and absolute goodness.

¹⁷ Nagasawa, 2016, 90–119. He repeats this statement many times.

metaphysically impossible to exemplify jointly the three properties at their maximal degree. Let's also suppose that these properties are scaled from 0 to 100. Now, imagine that to keep any one of them at 100, either the other two must be reduced to 85, or alternatively one must be reduced to 90 and the other to 80.¹⁸ Either way the global result would be equivalent: 270. But it could also be the case that if we don't insist on maintaining at least one of the properties at 100, the three could be compatible when all score 90. The global result would again be 270. These possibilities would render ten different combinations that would entail the same greatness degree of 270, and all would constitute a "maximal set" if no other combination of degrees of properties that exceeded 270 were possible.¹⁹ At the end of the day, it is very plausible that there were many different ways of constituting some or other "maximal set".²⁰ In that case we would have a series of different and competing concepts of God. How should we then proceed? Suppose we reach ten alternative concepts of God all equally great (scoring 270, say). We could argue on different grounds to deem only one of them "God", so enforcing monotheism. Let's call this being Yahveh. Then, Yahveh would fulfil the clause: a being such that no other greater than Him is possible, for none is over Him in global greatness. But this would also be true of the remaining nine divinities. So, if we insisted on qualifying only Yahveh as God, it could not be because of His greatness, but because we (arbitrarily or upon certain grounds) prioritize some properties over others. But we are not entitled to follow this route *once we have measured the global greatness of all candidates, found out that their respective marks are equivalent, and defined God just as the greatest possible being*. In such a case we would have different and alternative concepts of God, and none of them could be "*the perfect being*", not even "*the maximal being*".²¹

This shows another significant issue. These ten competing concepts of God all equal in greatness would fulfil the recurrent clause "a being such that no other higher is possible". But a philosophically adequate concept of God is more

¹⁸ So, we can expand the equivalent maxima by exchanging values: omnipotence 100, the other two 85; omniscience 100, the other two 85; omnibenevolence 100, the other two 85; omnipotence 100, omniscience 90, omnibenevolence 80; omniscience 100, omnipotence 90, omnibenevolence 80; omnibenevolence 100, omnipotence 90, omniscience 80, and so and so on.

¹⁹ We could address the question that the three properties could not be axiologically equal, so that, for instance, one of them would have 120 as maximum possible, other one 100 and the last one 80. This move would only complicate the analysis, and, by allowing more and more possible combinations, would increase the plausibility of different combinations of grades and properties which rendered globally equivalent "maximal greatness."

²⁰ This point is also made in Jeffrey et. al (2020, 232).

²¹ Things could be much worse if the maximal degree of greatness metaphysically possible for any set of great-making properties were much lower than 270. If it turned out to be 187, for instance, we would be entitled to say this set constitutes the "maximal god", but this one would be too far away from the absolutely perfect being to be considered an adequate referent of the religious attitudes we mentioned above.

demanding. God must be the *supreme* being. Not only *not second to none*, but *over* anyone else in global greatness. And in the case envisioned, none of the ten candidates to God is *the* supreme being. This is the typical instance of polytheism, where many gods are very excellent, but they are also different in their ways of exemplifying their capabilities.²² What is then apparent, is that with Nagasawa's approach we face not only a conceptual problem concerning our concept of God. Worse than that, there is no reason why many of these divinities could not simultaneously exist. You could maybe think of some good reason: a second independent actually-existent divinity undermines the greatness of God in a way a possible but not actually existing divinity does not. Therefore, to state that there are many possible maximally great beings apparently is more plausible than to state that many of them can exist simultaneously. But this need not be so. If there exists a god of 90 omnipotence, 90 omniscience and 90 omnibenevolence, and then appears another with 90, 100 and 80 respectively, the second's existence does not affect the maximal level of greatness of the first one. The reason why a second and different "maximally" perfect actual being *apparently* diminishes the status of the first one is just this addition of another being equal in greatness (but no intrinsic property changes in the first being when a second is added). Nothing prevents the existence of both, or more of these gods. In that case we should entertain polytheism as a live option. Recalling our previous case, all ten divinities would be properly deemed "God" (or rather "god").

Nagasawa addresses this sort of question, and his answer is unconvincing. He states that it *could* turn out to be the case that in the end only one single combination of properties and degrees would reach the maximal level of greatness, and all the rest rendered sets inferior in greatness, and that it is up to the critic to discard this possibility by providing concrete examples to back his critique. But the problem is that, once you are ready to abandon absolute maximality, that is, the omni-properties, there are so many possible combinations of quasi-omnipotence, quasi-omniscience and quasi-omnibenevolence, that it seems extremely plausible that there are many different combinations of degrees/properties that will reach equal global highness²³. Conversely, the perfect-being theist who includes the omni-properties in the concept of God, has all this work done.

And this is particularly the case concerning omnipotence (the property that most supposedly perfect-being theists are too quickly ready to downgrade, if necessary). This is crucial, since omnipotence is the highway to uniqueness, that is, to monotheism. Kvanvig contends that omnipotence does not entail

²² I take that, even if the attitudes and practices of polytheism are religiously "adequate", polytheistic conceptions of the gods are philosophically inferior to the monotheistic conceptions.

²³ Or that could be intrinsically indeterminate whether a single combination was higher than anyone else, especially if we allow vague properties.

monotheism, since there could be two maximal beings (omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent) who, because of being morally impeccable would –as a matter of fact– never clash. But a first issue is that he is not confronting here just one (putative) omnipotent agent against another, but two perfect-being candidates who are *also* morally perfect. If we consider omnipotence alone, these agents could clash, and only one could prevail.

Now, you could insist that we must address omnipotence as an essential property of a *perfect being*, after all, omnipotence without omniscience, for instance, would barely be possible. Is Kvanvig right, then? I would claim that omnipotence should be defined counterfactually: *if* two perfect beings were to conflict, who would prevail? If none were, none would be really omnipotent. If one would, this one –and not the other– is the really omnipotent one. In no case could both be omnipotent.

Brian Leftow has replied that, since the antecedent of the conditional (“they are in conflict”) is necessarily false, for (given their identically perfect moral character) it is impossible for them to disagree, then, whatever the consequent, the conditional is always true. That is: *if Perfect Being A and Perfect Being B enter into conflict, A wins; if PB A and PB B enter into conflict, B wins; and if PB A and PB B enter into conflict, neither win*, are all true statements. So, as the first statement is true, A is omnipotent, since he wins; but, as the second statement is also true, B is also omnipotent, since he *also* wins. But, is it not a plain contradiction that A *overcomes B* and B *overcomes A*? Where lies, then, the problem? To me, what is fooling us here is the (controversial) interpretation of this conditional that assumes that conditionals with impossible antecedents are all equally true²⁴, for we see clearly this: since omnipotence *entails maximal power*, then two beings who have maximal power are *equal* in power, and so none could overcome the other. Thus, the third statement must be the only one true. But in this case, neither of them is omnipotent, since omnipotence surely implies the capacity to overcome or defeat anyone else in opposition. If so, then, contrary to what Kvanvig and

²⁴ This position has been termed “vacuism” and many logicians are now rejecting it for its highly implausible renderings, and alternative semantics are under development to offer non-vacuous truth conditions for these conditionals, some appealing to impossible worlds and other exploring new approaches. The intuitive implausibility of vacuism is very strong, as Nolan’s (1997) example put it: (1) If Hobbes had (secretly) squared the circle, sick children in the mountains of South America at the time would have cared. (2) If Hobbes had (secretly) squared the circle, sick children in the mountains of South America at the time would not have cared. “The intuition is that Hobbes’s squaring the circle would have made no difference with respect to the life of those sick children. The second Hobbes-sentence should, then, be true for this reason, and for the same reason, the first Hobbes-sentence should be false.” (Berto et al. 2019, 268). Cf. also Weiss (2017) and Sendlak (2024) for different novel semantic approaches to reject vacuism.

Leftow assert, omnipotence is sufficient if we want to implement unity in our conception of God from “natural” great-making properties.²⁵

In the end, omnipotence can achieve what neither omniscience nor omnibenevolence could, for there is no incoherence in supposing there to be two or more omniscient or omnibenevolent beings. But absolute, supreme, maximal power cannot be shared. Without full-fledged omnipotence, we can only assure monotheism by fiat, listing a priori unity as one of the transcendental predicates of God, like Kant did. But “unity” is not a property of any concept²⁶, it is (or is not) a fact of the matter: the fact that the concept necessarily has a single instantiation, if any at all. In sum, Nagasawa’s “maximal God” is maximal only in quite a low sense²⁷, and certainly his version of PBT ends up very far from the absolute conception of God that motivated this method, and that is a symptom of the difficulties this approach confronts. God must be the *supreme being*. Since some entity can be maximal, just by being “second to none”²⁸ (one that no greater can be conceived) God as the supreme being demands to be *over and above* anyone else. So, being *maximally* perfect is not enough for being God.

Finally, if we insist in downgrading omnipotence to preserve omnibenevolence, saying that God can perform all that is logically possible except anything that is contrary to the moral law (lie, torture, unfulfilling promises, commit genocide...), that concept could be entirely adequate for religion and for philosophy (that is, for moral theism), but, is it yet the concept of God proper of Perfect Being Theology initial ambitions? In a sense, it is not, because an essential property has been limited. But it has been limited for the sake of greatness. And it establishes a clear-cut limit to omnipotence which is well grounded.

Nevertheless, my main aim here is not to reject perfect being theology as a method, but to question whether some recent putative perfect being theologians are really such. My own view is that God must be and is both fully omnipotent and morally perfect, and that the fact that God *could* act against the moral law does not diminish his omnibenevolence. If God can for instance lie, but He never did it, nor will ever do it, there are (logically) possible worlds where God does lie. But the fact that God prevents any of these worlds from obtaining is something great-making for him. So, God is necessarily omnipotent, but contingently (though eternally) omnibenevolent. And so, we worship him: because albeit being metaphysically capable of wrongdoing, He neither did, nor

²⁵ Another question is: if both candidates are maximal in power, knowledge and goodness, then what would be the basis for numerical distinction (accepting they are spirits)? Should we resort to *thisness* to individuate these two perfect beings?

²⁶ With the exception of the wholly perfect being, in case that is a coherent concept.

²⁷ Or at least in an indefinitely low sense.

²⁸ This, of course, is a necessary condition, but not a sufficient one.

does, nor will ever do wrong doings, as a sane mother is metaphysically (and physically) capable of throwing her baby through the window, but morally and psychologically incapable of doing it. And we praise her for that: even when the baby does not stop crying all the night preventing her from sleeping at all, she won't throw it, not for being handicapped or anything of the sort, but for consciously not willing to.

Someone could rejoin that God must not only possess the omni-properties but have them in a necessary manner. This need not be so. Maybe God could do things to limit his omniscience (as creating a world intrinsically indeterminate with an open future and an evolutive structure unpredictable in its most concrete details), whether or not He will ever do these things. And the same could go for his omnibenevolence. As for his omnipotence, it is an open question whether God is necessarily or contingently omnipotent. Presumably, a God who could curtail his "original" unlimited omnipotence would have additional power over one who couldn't do that. That is, a God whose omnipotence was contingent *upon him* would presumably be greater than a God whose omnipotence was unremovable.²⁹ Nevertheless, all these are philosophical issues that are not only far from the mind and interests of common religious people, but that are highly controversial among philosophers, even when they regard themselves as perfect being theologians.

Maximal God Minimalised

When we define the God of perfect being theology as the being who has "all great-making properties, at maximal degree, that are mutually compatible", we are allowing that some great-making properties may be missing or some great-making properties may be present but not be intrinsically maximal. In the end, once we concede that God is only quasi-omnipotent (or quasi-whatever), it seems equivalent to say either that the property of omnipotence is missing or that it is present but downgraded. Either way, God is not omnipotent (or onmi-whatever), and so he is neither an infinitely nor absolutely perfect being, though he may still be a maximal being. So, it seems tricky to define maximality in that way, but to insist that this is still the concept of a perfect being. For suppose that there were *n* properties constitutive of greatness, and that any of these properties were in conflict with at least other two. We should be very careful in order to pick out the adequate properties to expel from the list. Then, unless it is the case that it is

²⁹ However, there could be ways to treat these cases without having to introduce contingency. For example, one could suppose that there are different 'relative' modalities, so that God is both necessarily omnipotent and necessarily omnibenevolent, but under different accessibility relations. The set of worlds accessible to God's active power would then not be the same set of worlds accessible to God's moral perfection.

possible to have simultaneously all great-making properties at a maximal level, any metaphysically coherent concept of God would lack several great-making properties, but nonetheless it would continue being the concept of a maximally perfect being, in accordance with our definition of “maximally perfect being”. But this runs counter to the idea of the perfect being as exemplifying all great making properties, and each in its maximal degree. Why then insist that this is nevertheless an outcome in accordance with perfect being theology’s methodological initial aims?

But this shrinking of the maximal being goes a step further with Jeffrey, Lancaster-Thomas and Moravec (2020). According to Nagasawa, at a determinate time, God is a maximal being if it is *de facto* the highest actual being at that time. At the end of the universe, God is the maximal being if He has been the maximal being at any time. But Jeffrey et al. go beyond that, claiming that God can be the maximal being even if He were not the greatest being at each and every time. It is enough that He will be the highest actual being at the end of time,³⁰ what they call “fluctuating maximal God” (FMG). Now, is this really yet another viable outcome of perfect being theology?

Jeffrey et al. propose that perfect being theists can respond to the objections the maximal God thesis is supposed to defuse “by denying that the degrees of the great-making properties composing the maximal set are necessarily the same at each point in time.” They “postulate a “fluctuating maximal God” whose degrees of power, knowledge, and benevolence may change over time as long as *the set* of these is maximal in its axiological value.” (2020, 232).

They claim Nagasawa’s conception of maximal God is flawed for being designed in terms of an atemporal and immutable God, as was usual within classical PBT, and they want to adapt his thesis to a temporal God. So, they address what I call EPBT. But if, conversely, God is in time, they ask when He is supposed to exemplify the maximal consistent set of omni-properties: from all eternity? At each and every moment in time? At the end of time? Although Nagasawa is not explicit on this point, his spirit is a static conception of God, according to which God is that maximal set at any time. They propose, instead, that “the degrees of divine knowledge, power, benevolence (and perhaps others) fluctuate in the course of time, while their sum, nevertheless, remains maximal.” (2020, 235). Such a hypothesis leaves open what the specific degrees of individual properties are at particular times or whether one great-making property has more axiological weight than others. So, at one time God could be very high in knowledge and not so much in power, but latter could be higher in power, and lesser in benevolence, and so on, as long as God always remains the maximal consistent set of great-making properties at that time, that is, His overall value

³⁰ I take that this position fits with a growing-block conception of time.

does not change. Now, what are the reasons behind these fluctuations? Facts about the world. For instance, as the world evolves and new contingent states of affairs are actualized, God's knowledge increases in parallel.

Concerning Nagasawa's type A and B arguments against PBT³¹, the fluctuating God hypothesis is not so relevant: it permits different combinations of degrees of great-making properties in God at different times, but it does not demand it. Nonetheless, the fluctuating hypothesis becomes more relevant with type C arguments: inconsistencies between God's properties and facts about the world. For it is precisely those facts the cause of the fluctuation in God's properties (237). Example: God's possibility to sin appears once conscious beings (or rational beings) arise, then diminishing His power, since his goodness has primacy over his power. In parallel, God's love for his creatures increases once they appear. In the end "contingent facts about the world can actually fix how God's great-making properties combine" (238). This allows its defenders to better face the problem of evil. Nagasawa is rather insensitive to the problem of evil, saying that, while this problem puts in a difficult position the thesis of the omni-God, his thesis of the maximal God that allows for reductions of any of his properties is less affected. But Jeffrey et al. disagree, and they want to directly address this problem. They claim "the FMG thesis can offer a strong response to Type-C arguments like the problem of evil because it allows that contingent facts independent of the nature of God can affect God's attributes at one time, but they act as temporary metaphysical constraints on any being. So, at any time, God refers to the axiologically best being in that world."

Now, they remark that the fluctuating hypothesis can be interpreted in two ways:

Claim 1: The degrees of divine knowledge, power, benevolence (and perhaps other great-making properties) fluctuate in the course of time, while their total sum for the totality of all times, remains maximal.

Claim 2: The degrees of divine knowledge, power, benevolence (and perhaps other great-making properties), fluctuate in the course of time, while their total sum for every single time remains maximal. (239)

According to the first claim, God needn't be greatest at every single point of time, but, once His values for all times are added up, He "ends up" being the greatest. The trouble with this first and modest claim is that it is in principle compatible with there being a time at which God is not the greatest possible being (or not even the greatest actual being at that time). "Whereas for the standard maximal God thesis, the problem is that the maximal set may be exhibited by

³¹ To remind: (A) intrinsic incoherence of some property and (B) incompatibility between properties.

more than one being, for our proposal, this problem is multiplied, since there is a single maximal set like this for every point in time. At every point in time t , there exists a (different) possible world in which there is a being with a maximal set relative to t , but this maximal set consists of a different combination of degrees of the great-making properties. How can we guarantee that this is always the same being?" (240).

Their response is: "the term "God" (or in our case, "fluctuating maximal God") is a rigid designator which refers to God, i.e., the being that has the maximal sum of great-making properties for all times conjointly. "God" can designate God, even if God changes, and even if a definition applying to the totality of times does not apply to Him at individual times. More importantly, it does not matter whether there is an actual being at time t with a higher degree of greatness than God since God is the greatest for all times."

Why not prefer the more specific clause 2? "First, on this reading, it seems very difficult to ensure that God be the greatest possible being at every time t other than by fiat." (241) They survey Nagasawa's reply that it is up to the critic the task of showing that there are indeed different greatest actual beings at different times, and they acknowledge that this, while coherent, is a quite weak answer. Conversely, clause 1 avoids this unwelcome polytheistic consequence. In sum, polytheism is kept out because, even if there are different possible combinations of great-making properties that render equally great (although different) beings, even if more than one of these beings are actual at a given time, and finally, even if different maximal beings are actual also at different times, at the end of the day there is only one God, since "God" refers to the only one that has gathered the maximal sum of greatness across all times.

Secondly, they proceed, one might also run into difficulties trying to define what the "time" to which FMG is now supposed to attach, actually is. This is an ontological problem of deciding whether the indexation to "times" refers to durationless moments, instants, concrete periods or what. "By contrast, sticking to Claim 1 gives the FMG theorist the possibility to either adopt an eternalist ontology of time (God is greatest with regards to the entirety of the spacetime block) or, if she wishes, the freedom to come up with ways to make Claim 2 coherent." So, by sticking to the more modest clause they claim to skip a whole battery of problems.

Now, they recognize that "Surely, allowing the possibility of there existing a being greater than God at certain points of time —implied by Claim 1—is a *slightly weird* consequence" (my italics). Adding that "it may be part of the divine providential plan to allow there to be a being greater than He is at those points in time" (242). And finally, they dare say: "the consequence of allowing there to be "short-term greater" beings than God in no ways affects the type of greatness for which God is worshipped". So, they opt for adopting clause 1: God is the

greatest possible being taking into account all moments of time. He will be triumphant by the end of time.

Now I want to comment on some deep misgivings. Their main reason to prefer clause 1 over 2 is that clause 2 is unable to be constructed coherently if we want to preserve monotheism. Let's suppose it to be so. But the fact that clause 1 could bypass problems of clause 2, does not make clause 1 an acceptable hypothesis in its own right.

Firstly, if God is the highest, the best possible being only taking into account the sum of all moments of time, it could well be the case that He only achieved that magnificent status as the unique highest by the end of time. But the very notion of "end of time" is problematic. One thing is the end of the universe or even the multiverse, and quite another thing is the end of time, *once we have accepted* God as a (omni)temporal being, as they vindicate. In that case there will not be any end of time. And consequently, if God could only reach his status as the highest being at a moment of time (the end) which is not effectively going to happen, then God could never arise.

Secondly, if we admit a full ending of metaphysical time, how do we know that by that time "God" (used as a rigid designator across times and worlds) will be the highest being? This can be presupposed only if time is wholly determined and there is no open future (or at least if none of the open possibilities allows that the current God candidate could stop being God). But most philosophers who defend a temporal conception of God, think that the future is really open, even (in a sense) for God. Jeffrey et al. could reply that, in that case, God would be whoever, at the end of the time, turned out to be the highest being. But in that case, we don't know who God is today. We could be addressing our prayers to the highest actual being of today, but it could turn out to be that this is not really God, if he will be sooner or later definitely surpassed by a greater being. In such a weird scenario, when we are praying to God we would be saying something like: "Hey, whoever of you above in heavens, that by the end of time will be the greatest..."³²

Thirdly, would that fluctuating maximal God be worship-worthy in the strictest theological sense? It could be rather so for ancient forms of polytheistic religions, but surely not so for Abrahamic religions nor for Visnuism or Shivaism. So, Jeffrey's et al. fluctuating maximal God is totally inadequate both from philosophical, theological, and very likely even religious viewpoints.

Fourthly, how are we so confident that, by the end of time, there will be only one being who has acquired the maximal score? Why couldn't there be a tie? Maybe, if there is a tie, an extra time should be added for a tie-break. Or maybe two extra times... And *who* is going to add this extra time? Or we could end up

³² Apart from the fact that "God" could no longer be treated as a proper name, but as a definite description for a role.

with Dual Perfect Being Theology. But, why just dual? At any rate, we cannot stipulate uniqueness in greatness by the end of time except by an arbitrary fiat.³³

Fifthly, and crucially, the idea that God at different moments or periods of time can be axiologically below some other beings at those periods is totally contrary to the letter and spirit of any theistic monotheism. God must be, must have been and always will continue to be metaphysically the highest possible being, either existing outside time or existing at any time. Were it not so, you may continue calling "God" that being, but this is a totally different version of theism. Definitely, it is no longer any version of traditional PBT, but something more akin to process theism and the like.

This fluctuating maximal God conception seems to be made up by focusing on some sports like cycling, for instance, where the final result is what essentially matters. You can argue that Miguel Induráin was the best cyclist ever for having been the only one to win five times in a row the Tour de France (let's forget wretched Armstrong's case), although he very seldom won any stage (individual time trials apart). He could perhaps be termed the king of cyclists, but not the god of them, since the highest possible cyclist would arguably have won *all stages*, or at least most of them. In fact, his critics at the time argued that he, contrary to Eddy Merckx, won very few stages. But his advocates argued that, contrary to Merckx, who was a predator, Induráin was so generous that he allowed other cyclists to achieve local victories to share moments of glory. Could God in that spirit be so generous to share moments of glory over time, so that at some different times other beings could be temporarily the highest? For instance, is that procedure been allowed for the devil to play that role for a while?

These speculations sound ludicrous, but they simply are the result of those postulated fluctuations in God's greatness. The cyclist God cannot possibly take part in all competitions, due to physical limitations, but must win any race he takes part in. God does not have this sort of limitations (only logical ones), so he must be at a minimum the best at any moment in time.

Lancaster-Thomas has recently downgraded this concept of God even further. She is worried by the fact that the actions of God and the distribution of evil do not follow any regular pattern. Some prayers are answered, some not. At some times and places God acts to punish wrongdoers or to alleviate suffering (as when delivering the Israelites from the Pharaoh), but at others he doesn't (as in the Holocaust). From this she infers that God's properties must fluctuate not only along time, but across space. In fact, since space-time is a single entity, his

³³ Some Christians could tell a story of redemption where God had to stop being the greatest possible being for a limited span of time but then had a definitive and irreversible triumph. I find this strong kenoticism problematic: once God degrades himself and loses omnipotence and other omni-properties, how could He regain them later? What would prevent a previously lesser god from taking advantage of the situation and prevail forever?

fluctuations must affect places in space as well as moments in time: “Perhaps the energy expended performing one miracle causes God’s power to be weakened significantly at one event in spacetime, preventing God from addressing other prayer requests... In short, God’s great-making degrees are more diluted at some events in spacetime than at others.” (2023, 104). The same *inconsistency* in God’s behaviour (her words) sometimes appears in God’s attitude to the same human, who is treated differently at different times for no discernible reason. The unstable divine level of power and/or knowledge (and perhaps benevolence also) must account for this.

Conclusion

What is, then, the deep reason behind such a peculiar hypothesis? No other than the same motivation that has pushed many philosophers to go from EPBT, to BPBT, to quasi BPBT, to FMG, or even to open theism (or process theism, or deism, or pantheism, or in the last run to agnosticism): the theological problem of evil. If there are periods of time in which God is not the highest actual being, or places of space where his abilities are ineffective, then not only the existence of evil, but the huge amount of evil, and its diversity and intensity, is compatible with this shrinking of God.

How do Jeffrey, Moravec and Lancaster-Thomas address the problem of evil, which is supposedly smoothed over by their approach? “If God’s power to limit those evils remains the same throughout time, why does God appear to intervene and prevent some evils and not others?” (243). Static Maximal God (SMG) thesis supposes that the combination of power, knowledge and benevolence in God is invariable, so it cannot answer this question. “If observed evils and prevented evils do not form a regular pattern, one easily explicable by the particular degree set of divine power, knowledge, or benevolence, this will detract from the power of the SMG thesis to allow a theist to respond to the problem of evil.” (ibid). So, when God saved Israel from the Egyptians by dividing the waters of the Red Sea, He could have had more power and less knowledge, but when allowing the Holocaust, He could have less power and more knowledge. The battle fronts were so complicated that God would have needed to gain much more knowledge (to be able to decide where, when and how to act), and the only way to achieve this increase in knowledge was letting some decrease in his power, according to them.

But I ask: what such a “God” –who is unable to prevent the Holocaust given his strong limitations in knowledge– has to do with the God of monotheism,

much less with the initial (Anselmian) infinite God of PBT?³⁴ Concerning the complaint that their fluctuating maximal God is not great enough to be qualified as God they have very little to offer as a rejoinder. They just say: “when we disagree (about which mix of great-making properties and their corresponding degrees are better), the disagreement is not about what God is, but what is more valuable—what perfection in benevolence, or knowledge, or power consists in.” (246) But their proposal is not just another additional and alternative concept of God. The idea that God is a different and oscillating mix of properties exemplified by Him at different times (and for Lancaster-Thomas also space) along his career *to adapt himself to the requirements of an ever-changing world* is simply bizarre. Revisionist philosophers of EPBF began trying to keep their concept of God apart from doctrines of divine simplicity and immutability. Nevertheless, nowadays some are ending up in the antipodes, with a sort of fickle God. They certainly have reduced dramatically the impact of the problem of evil, although at the cost of stripping God down to a mini-maximal being. So mini, that He no longer deserves the name of God on any accounts, neither philosophical nor theological, (and even less from an Abrahamic religious perspective).

That the deep motivation behind this extravagant conception of God is the amount and intensity of evil, is explicitly acknowledged by Lancaster-Thomas (2023, 106) at the end of her paper:

The question of what God is like is not an axiological one. The god of the Fluctuating Maximal God thesis *fits better with* the evidence we observe in the world. The evidential mapping of this god-concept to the world is a separate matter from whether or not this conception of God is preferable to the God of the Static Maximal God thesis or the omni-God thesis. FMG theists might even propose that the concept of an inconsistent God is not as axiologically unsatisfactory as it initially seems. It at least *offers potential for believers that God exists*, is somehow great, and, despite perhaps not being able to help in the past, might be able to assist in the future if the fluctuations work out in your favour. It may offer some heart to those whose prayers have not been answered: keep trying; perhaps God *will be able to* help next time you ask. This response probably won't be enough for some believers... but it might be *the greatest possible god for which we can realistically hope*. (my italics).

But the cost is nothing to scoff at. Our new “God” is either quite powerless, or rather ignorant, or not so clearly good, or likely a mix of all of these, or is just enjoying an all too long siesta. In a word, this hypothesis seems to be neither a

³⁴ They exploit the benefits of their theory to explain the Incarnation and certain passages of the Bible. This could well be so, but I want to stick to theism, without entering into the intricacies of specific Christian dogmatic theology.

respectable version of the God of the philosophers, nor the God of the great religious monotheistic traditions. It is a god we simply cannot trust any more, and arguably cannot pray to either, for it is not the one sovereign highest being, most holy and creator of all, who is the only one worthy of worship in the full theological sense. He is a divinity worthy of compassion, not of awe, praise, glorification or hope. The resulting conception of God is so far from classical and neo-classical views, and so troublesome on philosophical and religious grounds, that this might indicate that PBT is not the best method to yield a concept of God, unless you could set a principled ending point to stop restructuring endlessly God's properties.

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