Perfect being theology and modal truth

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Perfect being theology is the attempt to use the principle that God is the greatest possible being to derive claims about the divine attributes. Roughly, the idea is that, for some property $F$, if God would be greater if $F$ than if not $F$, then, given that God is the greatest possible being, God must be $F$.

Leftow (2012) uses this method to argue for among other things, the following principle:

“NEC. (P)(□P is true → God is, contains, has, has attributes that have (etc.) or produces all its truth-explainers)”

The argument is that, as Leftow says, “It would be an awesome thing to be unconstrained even by modal truths and facts of modal status . . . A being whose power is not externally limited even by these would seem more powerful than one whose power was subject to such a constraint.” Suppose that this is correct. It seems to follow that were NEC true, God would be greater than if NEC were false; and this, together with the claim that God is the greatest possible being, seems to entail that NEC is true.

Following the numbering in Leftow (2015), the relevant argument can be presented as follows:

1. God = that than which no greater is possible.
6. If God can be $F$, and God would if $F$ be greater than if not $F$, then God is $F$. (from 1)
7. God can be $F$.
8. God would if $F$ be greater than if not $F$.
9. God is $F$. (from 6,7,8)

The relevant instance of the argument substitutes ‘explains the modal truths’ for ‘is $F$.’ While it will be useful to have a concrete example in what follows, our

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1 Leftow (2012), 115.
2 Leftow (2012), 134.
topic will be less this particular example than the form of argument exemplified by the above schema.

Speaks (2014) objects to this argument form by pointing out that it is plausible that God is not only the greatest possible being, but also necessarily the greatest possible being. That is, it is plausible that (1) is not just true, but necessary. (This seems especially hard for the perfect being theologian to deny, since it seems better to be the necessarily the greatest possible being than to be merely contingently so.) Given this, the claim that God is F — in our case, the claim that God explains the modal truths — will be necessary if possible.

For suppose that (7) is true, but that (9) is not necessary. Then there would be some world in which God is not F and, given our reasoning about F, this would imply that, in that world, God was less than the greatest possible being. And that contradicts our assumption that (1) is not just true, but necessary.

The problem, though, is that this means that (9) follows from (7) alone. And, if this is true, this seems to make the ‘greatest possible being’ bit of the argument an idle wheel.

Against this line of objection, Leftow (2015) offers two replies, which I consider in turn.

The first is that, even if the objection is correct, it does not show that perfect being reasoning can play no role deriving claims about the attributes of God:

‘…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 [the claims that God is the greatest possible being and that God would be greater if NEC were true than if it were false] 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).’

This is in a way fair enough: it is indeed the necessitation of (1), together with (8), which shows us that (7) is necessary if possible. But that correct point does not show that the claim that God is the greatest possible being gives us, for all that has been said, any reason to believe, or even increase our credence in, (9).

The necessitation of (1), after all, shows not just that (7) is necessary if possible; it also shows us that

7*. God is not F.

is necessary if possible. After all, if God would be less great if not F than if F, and it is possible that God is not F, this must be because the proposition that

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Speaks (2014), 207.

Leftow (2015), 426.
God is F is impossible. (Otherwise, it would be possible for God to be less than the greatest possible being, which would contradict the necessitation of (1).)

So suppose we are considering the claims that God is F and that God is not F. If it is true that God would be better if F than if not F, perfect being reasoning tells us that both the claim that God is F and the claim that God is not F are necessary if possible. But that fact alone hardly helps us to decide whether God is F or God is not F.

Imagine, for comparison, a mathematician wondering whether Goldbach’s conjecture or its negation is true. It will not help him to be told that both the conjecture and its negation are, if possible, necessary. Indeed, this new information is unlikely to cause him to adjust his credence in the two mathematical claims. Just so, I think, even if we accept the claim that God is necessarily the greatest possible being and accept some comparative claim of the form of (8), these give us no reason to raise our credence at all in the relevant claim about God. This sort of perfect being reasoning does not move the needle.

This is not, of course, to deny that arguments for the claim that a given proposition is necessary if possible are sometimes of philosophical significance. For example, Kripke’s defense of the Cartesian premise that if it is possible that mind and body be distinct, then they necessarily are, is of great philosophical significance. But that is because it comes packaged with a plausible conceivability argument for the relevant possibility claim. In the present case, we have no such thing.

Leftow’s second reply to Speaks’ objection is more speculative, and is offered more tentatively. This is that perfect being arguments might be used, not just to arbitrate between various hypotheses about God, but also to establish the possibility of certain such hypotheses. Given the problem just identified, this would, if successful, be of great importance.

Leftow’s idea is that the proposition that God is F is possible if the following two conditions are met:

(i) ‘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.’

(ii) God would be greater if F than if ¬F

Roughly, a proposition is secular if it does not say anything about God. The idea is then presumably that if we consider the property of explaining the modal truths, we will see that it satisfies (i) and (ii). It is supposed to satisfy (i) because the proposition that God explains the modal truths does not (in conjunction with logical, mathematical, or or secular necessary truths) entail the negation of any logical, mathematical, or or secular necessary truth. And it satisfies (ii) because the relevant instance of (8) is true: God would be greater if God

\footnote{\cite{Leftow2015}, 427.}
\footnote{For more details, see \cite{Leftow2012}, 248-251. See also \cite{Leftow2014}, 58. I discuss Leftow’s more detailed explication of this notion below.}

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explained the necessary truths than if not. So we are licensed to conclude that
the claim that God explains the necessary truths is possible — which is just
what we want.

Consider, by contrast, the claim that God does not explain the necessary
truths. This will presumably still satisfy (i); but it will not satisfy (ii), because
it is not case that God would be greater if God did not explain the necessary
truths than if God did. Hence we are not licensed to infer that the claim that
God does not explain the necessary truths is possible — which, again, is just
what we want. This seems to give us just the asymmetry between NEC and its
negation which was lacking in the original argument.

While this proposal is an interesting one, it seems to me not to be of much
help in validating the claim that NEC is possible — that it is possible, that is,
that God explain the modal truths. There appear to be only two alternatives
to the claim that God explains the necessary truths; the first is that they are
primitive truths which have no explanation, and the second is that they are
explained by something other than God — call this something, whatever it is,
X. These propositions might be stated as follows:

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\begin{align*}
\text{BRUTE} & \quad \text{The necessary truths are primitive.} \\
\text{NON-GOD} & \quad \text{The necessary truths are explained by X.}
\end{align*}
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These both appear to be secular propositions; neither seems to say anything
about God. We know by logic alone that there are exactly two possibilities:
either (1) NEC is true and both BRUTE and NON-GOD are false, or (2) NEC is
false and one of BRUTE and NON-GOD is true.

Suppose first that (2) is the case. Then it seems that NEC does not in fact
satisfy (i). For in this case one of BRUTE and NON-GOD is a secular necessary
truth and, as we have just seen, NEC implies the negation of both. So we know
that NEC satisfies condition (i) just in case condition (1) obtains — which means
that NEC satisfies condition (i) just in case NEC is true. But this is a disaster. We
wanted the fact that NEC satisfies conditions (i) and (ii) to give us an argument
for its possibility. But, to see that it satisfies these conditions, we have had to
employ the premise that it is true. And, of course, if we had that information,
we wouldn’t need any further argument! We have, it seems, landed right back
where we started.

The best move for a proponent of Leftow’s view, then, would seem to be
to deny that BRUTE and NON-GOD are secular propositions. One might, along
these lines, say that NON-GOD is not a secular proposition, on the grounds
that ‘X’ stands for ‘something other than God,’ which surely is about God in
some sense. But this would be a bad objection. ‘X’ is not to be replaced by the
description ‘something other than God.’ Rather, ‘X’ is to be replaced by a name
of the thing (if such there be) which in fact explains the necessary truths. So,
for example, it might be replaced by ‘linguistic conventions’ or ‘the real essences
of things.’ I use the placeholder ‘X’ only because, sadly, I’m not currently in
possession of the correct explanation of modal truths.
A better version of the objection would be to say that brute and non-God are not secular because they involve unrestricted quantification. One might then note that God is in the domain of quantification, and say that ‘any existential quantification quantifying inter alia over God provides information about God if true,’’ and is therefore not secular.

But this would be both mistaken and irrelevant. It would be mistaken, because brute and non-God employ only restricted quantification over the domain of necessary truths — a domain of which God is not a member. It is irrelevant because we can recast the problem in terms of the explanation of specific propositions. Consider, for example, the propositions

The proposition that Hesperus=Hesperus is primitive.

The proposition that Hesperus=Hesperus is explained by X.

These are monadic predications which assert claims about what explains a particular proposition. It is hard to see how either could fail to be secular. But, if nec is false, at least one of them will be true, and so at least one will be a secular necessary truth whose falsity is entailed by nec. And so again we get the result that nec satisfies (i) only if true. Hence (i) cannot be used as part of a test of nec’s possibility.

I think that this shows that Leftow’s attempt to use perfect being reasoning to show that nec is possible, and hence true, does not succeed. But I should note two limitations of my argument to this point.

The first is that none of this is an objection to the truth of Leftow’s claim that any proposition satisfying (i) and (ii) must be possible. For all I have said, this claim is true. The problem is rather that we cannot see whether nec satisfies (i) and (ii) without first knowing whether it is true — which of course makes it useless as a test of nec’s possibility.

The second is that while I have argued that Leftow’s conditions don’t help us to decide whether nec is possible, I have not shown that they won’t help us in the case of any proposition. Perhaps there are some propositions about God which can be seen to satisfy (i) and (ii) without first determining their truth.

So I turn now to a more general worry about the idea that a proposition is possible if it satisfies (i) and (ii). The worry is quite similar to one which, as Speaks argues, arises for many versions of the view that God is the greatest conceivable being. That worry is that, if conceivability (in the theorist’s favored sense) does not entail possibility, then there may be hypotheses which

\[\text{[Leftow] (2012), 250-1.}\]

'A possible move here would be to say that ‘is primitive’ is just shorthand for ‘has no explanation,’ and that the claim that a certain proposition has no explanation is the negation of an unrestricted universally quantified claim, and hence not secular. But it seems to me that there are two problems with this move. First, we could replace ‘is primitive’ with, e.g., ‘is fundamental,’ which seems less likely to be analyzable in terms of absence of explanation. Second, it is only halfway to a solution, since we are still left with the conclusion that the theist who is a proponent of a non-theistic explanation of modal truth will be unmoved by Leftow’s reasoning. See below for some further problems with the view that all claims which employ unrestricted quantification are non-secular in this context.'
would make God greater if true than if not, but which are in the end impossible. So, for example, suppose that it is in the relevant sense conceivable that Hesperus ≠ Phosphorus. Then it will also be in the relevant sense conceivable that

Venus God could have made it the case that Hesperus ≠ Phosphorus.

Does Venus make God greater than its negation? Surely it does; if Venus is true, then God has a certain power, and if it is false, God lacks that power. All else equal, then, it appears that God is greater if Venus is true than if ¬Venus is true. This is no worry for the proponent of thesis (1), which says that God is the greatest possible being; she can simply point out that Venus is impossible, and hence that it does not follow from the claim that God is the greatest possible being, plus the fact that God would be greater if Venus than if ¬Venus, that Venus is true.

But the case is not so easily handled by the proponent of the view that God is the greatest conceivable being, which does appear to entail the truth of Venus. And that amounts to a reductio of the thesis that God is the greatest conceivable (in the relevant sense) being.

The example of Venus is no problem for Leftow; it implies the falsity of the (presumably secular) necessary truth that, necessarily, Hesperus=Phosphorus, and hence does not satisfy (i). But trivial variants of Venus do make trouble. Consider, for example the claim that

God could have made it the case that something is red and uncolored.

We presumably want this not to come out as possible. But it looks like it will satisfy (i), since, while it does falsify the necessary truth that nothing is red and uncolored, this proposition involves unrestricted quantification and hence is not secular. I can’t think of any secular necessary truths which it does falsify, and it certainly falsifies no logical or mathematical truths. And the same considerations which make it plausible that Venus satisfies (ii) make it plausible that this proposition does.

It is not clear that this sort of argument is decisive; perhaps the definition of secular truth could be massaged in such a way as to avoid this sort of problem. I think that this is unlikely. Attempts to construct philosophical theories around a division between propositions of one type and propositions of another usually end in tears. (See: verificationism; the fact-value distinction.) I think that the attempt to define a class of secular truths which can do the relevant work in a theory of possibility is likely to meet the same fate. But that pessimistic conclusion is not entailed by anything I’ve said here. The idea that we can use perfect being reasoning as a test for possibility is an intriguing one, and worthy of further exploration.
REFERENCES


