

# The greatest possible being

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<b>1</b>	<b>The idea of a greatest possible being</b>	<b>5</b>
1.1	From greatness to the divine attributes . . . . .	7
1.2	The modal conception of God . . . . .	9
1.3	Two steps to a perfect being theology . . . . .	11
1.4	Modal principles . . . . .	13
1.5	Greatness conditions . . . . .	17
<b>2</b>	<b>Alethic perfect being theology</b>	<b>19</b>
2.1	The greatest actual being . . . . .	19
2.2	The greatest possible being . . . . .	21
2.3	The restriction strategy . . . . .	23
2.4	The conjunctive strategy . . . . .	33
2.4.1	The conjunctive-disjunctive strategy . . . . .	38
2.4.2	The conjunctive-elimination strategy . . . . .	41
2.4.3	The conjunctive-conceivability strategy . . . . .	42
<b>3</b>	<b>Epistemic perfect being theology</b>	<b>44</b>
3.1	Epistemic greatness conditions . . . . .	45
3.2	Conceivability and logical truth . . . . .	47
3.3	Conceivability and a priori truth . . . . .	51
<b>4</b>	<b>Impure versions of perfect being theology</b>	<b>55</b>
4.1	Absolute greatness . . . . .	58
4.1.1	Properties that it is better to have than lack: the intuitive idea . . . . .	58
4.1.2	Intrinsic goods . . . . .	61
4.1.3	Categories of intrinsic goods . . . . .	66
4.2	Kind-relative goods . . . . .	68
4.3	Perfection theories . . . . .	75
<b>5</b>	<b>Conflict and the problem of hidden properties</b>	<b>76</b>

<b>6</b>	<b>Permissible tinkering with the concept of God</b>	<b>82</b>
6.1	The perfect being defense in action . . . . .	86
6.2	A reductio of the perfect being defense . . . . .	90
6.3	The perfect being defense: a diagnosis . . . . .	93
6.4	The epistemic perfect being defense . . . . .	97
<b>7</b>	<b>Perfect being semantics</b>	<b>101</b>
7.1	The standard picture of names . . . . .	101
7.2	Three levels of perfect being semantics . . . . .	102
7.3	What is special about ‘God’? . . . . .	108
7.3.1	The argument from requirements on reference . . . . .	108
7.3.2	The argument from informative identities . . . . .	109
7.4	The modal conception and semantic equivalence . . . . .	110
7.4.1	Theologically unsophisticated subjects . . . . .	111
7.4.2	Mildly heterodox subjects . . . . .	112
7.4.3	Impoverished modal space . . . . .	116
7.5	The modal conception and descriptive association . . . . .	117
7.6	The modal conception and descriptive introduction . . . . .	118
<b>8</b>	<b>Beyond perfect being theology</b>	<b>121</b>
8.1	Deriving the attributes . . . . .	121
8.2	Dispensable vs. mandatory attributes . . . . .	122
8.3	The meaning of ‘God’ . . . . .	123
8.3.1	‘God’ as an ordinary name . . . . .	124
8.3.2	The real problem with ‘God’ as an ordinary name . . . . .	129

# Introduction

In the spring of 2013, I taught a large lecture class at Notre Dame, designed for non-majors, on the topic of ‘Philosophical Theology.’ The organizing idea for the class was to work through the Nicene Creed, considering as we went the best arguments for the incoherence of the central doctrines of Christianity laid out in that document.

Many of the toughest questions that quickly arise — about evil, about the doctrine of original sin, about judgement and the afterlife — are best pressed against the background assumptions that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly morally good. So I wanted some way to get the students to see why claims of this sort about God were plausible (whether or not the students themselves believed in God, or not).

My idea was to follow what I thought of as a traditional line of thought: I would begin by introducing them to the idea of a greatest possible being, and then explain why, if there were a greatest possible being, it would be omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly morally good. But that lecture turned out to be harder to write than I thought. Despite what I thought was a consensus that there was a simple argument from the claim that God is the greatest possible being to the traditional attributes, I could not figure out how the derivation was supposed to work.

Three years later, I still can’t. The first five chapters of this book explain why. Once one tries to make the argument suitably precise, I argue, there is just no way to derive interesting claims about God from the principle that God is the greatest possible being.

This (still) seems to me to be very surprising. The form of argument one finds in Anselm and in much recent work in the philosophy of religion — that the greatest possible being must have every property which it is better to have than lack, and knowledge, power, and goodness are all better to have than lack, and so must all be attributes of God — is intuitively extremely compelling. I still have the uneasy feeling that I must be missing some way to make this intuitive argument work. But I’ve now been trying long

enough to make it work that it seems worthwhile to publish the negative case against it.

Even if the principle that God is the greatest possible being cannot be used to derive the divine attributes, it might still have important theoretical roles to play. Recent work in the philosophy of religion has suggested two. The first is the role of setting the boundaries of the core of our concept of God — as telling us what properties of God are, so to speak, non-negotiable when theorizing about the divine attributes. The second, related role is the role of giving the meaning, and fixing the reference, of ‘God.’ In Chapters 6 and 7, I argue that the claim that God is the greatest possible being is similarly unsuited to play these theoretical roles.

After seven chapters of negativity, in Chapter 8 I make some positive suggestions about how to answer the questions which the claim that God is the greatest possible being has been used, unsuccessfully, to answer.

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