

Permissible tinkering with the concept of God

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1 PERMISSIBLE TINKERING

Typically, arguments against the existence of some entity take the form of arguments that nothing has some property F – where it is common ground that, if the entity in question did exist, it would be F . Arguments against the existence of God are no exception. Typically, they aim to demonstrate that some property F is not, or could not be, instantiated, where F is typically counted among the divine attributes.

In response to arguments of this form – as well as in response to perceived conflicts between divine attributes – theists often face pressure to give up some pre-theoretically attractive thesis about the divine attributes. In response, theists have two options: they can try to find some flaw in the argument in question, or they can accept its conclusion and simply revise their view of God.

Some examples of the second strategy are well known. One might, for instance, weaken one’s view of God’s power in response to perceived conflicts with the necessitation of the law of non-contradiction, or with God’s essential goodness; and one might weaken one’s view of God’s knowledge in response to perceived conflicts with the existence of freedom of the will, or with the existence of essentially first-personal propositions.¹ Other examples are not hard to come by.

This is a risky strategy, for one always runs the risk of unacceptably watering down the concept of God. This is a response that undergraduates often have in

¹See, respectively, (among many other places) Mavrodes (1963) and Flint and Freddoso (1983); Morris (1983); van Inwagen (2008); and Wierenga (2001).

response to the claim that God cannot bring about contradictions; they often often inclined to hold, for example, that no being which could not make $2+2=5$ could qualify as God. But this sort of response can't always be dismissed as 'an undergraduate response.' When, for example, the open theist tells us that God does not know what I will do tomorrow, the worry that we have moved too far from the traditional conception of God deserves to at least be taken seriously.

It would be good to have some principled way of thinking about this topic – some principled way of deciding whether a given way of revising our views of the divine attributes is, as Peter van Inwagen nicely puts it, 'permissible tinkering' with the concept of God, and when it is not.² Let's say that some pre-theoretically attractive candidate to be among the divine attributes is *dispensable* if a theist can deny that God has that attribute without unacceptably watering down our concept of God, and *mandatory* if not. Then what we seek is a principled way of distinguishing dispensable from mandatory candidates for the divine attributes.

Here it is very natural to – as van Inwagen and others have done – appeal to the Anselmian claim that God is the greatest possible being. This claim is often said to, in some sense, express our concept of God; and, if this is true, it seems as though examination of the notion of a greatest possible being ought to help us figure out when some claim about God conflicts with the core of our conception of God. The aim of this paper to point out some difficulties which attend this initially promising strategy.

2 THE CLAIM THAT GOD IS THE GREATEST POSSIBLE BEING

The claim that God is the greatest possible being has played more than one central role in recent philosophy of religion. One of its roles is a constructive one. According to proponents of perfect being theology, the claim that God is the greatest possible being 'provide[s] us with a rule or recipe for developing a more specific conception of God.'³ For proponents of this program in constructive theology, it is natural to formulate the claim that God is the greatest possible being as predicating a certain property of God: the property of being such that, for any being in any world other than God, God is greater than that being. If we help ourselves to quantification over possibilities and worlds,⁴ and use ' α ' as a name for the actual world, this claim might be expressed as

$$[\forall x : x \neq \text{God}] \forall w (\text{God in } \alpha \text{ is greater than } x \text{ in } w)$$

We then argue that God has a certain property F by arguing that, if God were greater than any other being in any world, God would be F .

²van Inwagen (2006), 81.

³Murray and Rea (2008), 8.

⁴Obviously, there are good reasons to find quantification over possibilities problematic. We might seek to avoid it in the present context by quantifying over degrees of greatness, or in a number of other ways. I stick with the formulation in the text because it makes things simpler, and because the formulation and defense of the sort of view criticized below is made easier, rather than harder, if possibilist quantification is problem-free.

Our aims here are slightly different than the aims of the perfect being theologian. Rather than providing a recipe for deriving claims about the divine attributes, we are interested in formulating the principle that God is the greatest possible being in such a way that it is common ground between the theist and non-theist, and as such suitable to play a neutral role in arbitrating disputes about the existence of God of the sort sketched above.

There is a familiar way to formulate principles of this sort. To illustrate, consider question of whether witches exist. Let's say that 'Wiccanism' is the belief that there are witches. If we want a debate between Wiccans and their opponents to be productive, we should want to find some neutral way of formulating the condition which would have to be satisfied for witches to exist. Let us suppose that Wiccans and non-Wiccans agree on the claim that for something to be a witch is for that thing to be a woman with evil magical powers — while of course disagreeing⁵ over the question of whether anything is a woman with evil magical powers. Then we might formulate the claim on which they agree as the biconditional

[Witch] There are witches iff there are women with evil magical powers

The debate can then proceed by arguments for and against the right-and side of the biconditional.

Such a debate can then be significantly structured by the content of the right-hand side of the biconditional. For suppose that the anti-Wiccans provide an argument for the claim that nothing is F . The Wiccan may then reply either by finding a flaw in the argument, or by giving up the claim that witches are F . But with a principle like [Witch] in hand, the scope of this second sort of maneuver is constrained in a principled way, for the Wiccan cannot simply concede that nothing is F if so doing would entail that there are no women with evil magical powers.

Given our interest in finding a parallel constructive way to constrain debates between theists and non-theists, we can formulate a similar biconditional which aims to state the conditions under which God would exist:

[GPB] God exists iff $\exists x [\forall y : y \neq x] \forall w (x \text{ in } \alpha \text{ is greater than } y \text{ in } w)$

This says that God exists just in case there is something which is greater than any other thing in any possible world — just in case, that is, the greatest possible being actually exists.⁶ It is reasonable to think that, just as [Witch] provides a Wiccan-neutral account of the conditions under which Wiccanism would be true, so — if the claim that God is the greatest possible being captures the core

⁵Surprisingly, the OED defines 'witch' as 'a woman thought to have evil magic powers' which would make witch trials paradigms of reliability.

⁶Many proponents of the idea that God is the greatest possible being might also accept this principle if the right-hand side were strengthened to require, not just that x be greater than any other thing in any world, but also to require that x could not be greater than x actually is. Since nothing in what follows hangs on the difference between these two formulations, I stick with the simpler [GPB] in what follows.

of our concept of God — [GPB] provides an account of the conditions under which God exists which should be acceptable to theist and non-theist alike.

Of course, to say that this is reasonable is not to say that it is uncontroversial. Not all theists are attracted to the claim that God is the greatest possible being; some take this claim to be inconsistent with, or at least in tension with, the content of revelation. Our question, though, is whether, for those theists that do find the claim that God is the greatest possible being plausible, a principle like [GPB] might serve as common ground between theist and non-theist in debates about the existence of God.

If it can, then — as with [Witch] — it appears that we can use [GPB] to provide the wanted principled distinction between dispensable and mandatory attributes. For suppose that we are considering whether God is F . We can ask: would denying that God is F — and hence presumably also denying, for attributes of interest, that anything is F — entail that there could be a being greater than the greatest actual being? If we answer ‘Yes,’ then it would seem that F is a mandatory attribute. For then denying that God is F would entail the falsity of the right-hand side of [GPB], which we are (at present) assuming to state the conditions under which God would exist. If we answer ‘No,’ on the other hand, then F would seem to be dispensable. For then denying that God is F would be consistent with maintaining that the greatest possible being actually exists, and hence (given [GPB]) consistent with the existence of God.

We might state the resulting principle as follows:

[Dispensable] If the proposition that God is not F does not entail the falsity of the right-hand side of [GPB], then F is dispensable.⁷

[Dispensable] gives us a sufficient condition for a property’s being dispensable, which the theist might then deploy in responding to various arguments against the existence of God. I will call the attempt to use [Dispensable] in this way the *perfect being defense*. Let’s now look at a few instances in which theists have put this sort of strategy to work.

3 THE PERFECT BEING DEFENSE IN ACTION

The perfect being defense is more often deployed than explicitly articulated. But one person who makes the sort of strategy just sketched more than usually explicit is Peter van Inwagen. To see the form it takes in his work, let’s consider van Inwagen’s discussion of omniscience and freedom of the will in Chapter 5 of *The Problem of Evil*. There van Inwagen is imagining an atheist challenging the free will defense on the grounds that free will is incompatible with omniscience

⁷Some delicacy is required in understanding what ‘entails’ should mean in a thesis of this sort. It cannot simply mean ‘necessitates,’ since this would, given that most false predications of God will be necessarily false, threaten to trivialize the thesis. The intended interpretation is rather something like ‘has as a clear a priori consequence.’ I ignore this in what follows, since the objections that I raise against the perfect being defense have nothing to do with the threat of triviality.

– and that, necessarily, if God exists, then God is omniscient. Here is what van Inwagen says in reply to the atheist:

“Now consider these two propositions:

- (i) X will freely do A at the future moment t
- (ii) Y, a being whose beliefs cannot be mistaken, now believes that X will do A at t.

These two propositions are consistent with each other or they are not. If they are consistent, there is no problem of omniscience and freedom. Suppose they are inconsistent. Then it is impossible for a being whose beliefs cannot be mistaken now to believe that someone will at some future moment freely perform some particular action. Hence, if free will exists, it is impossible for any being to be omniscient. . . .” (81)

Let us say that a being is *classically omniscient* iff, for every proposition, that being knows whether that proposition is true. Given that it rules out divine classical omniscience, one might reasonably think that the view that (i) and (ii) are inconsistent is itself inconsistent with theism. van Inwagen suggests another option:

‘why should we not qualify the “standard” definition of omniscience . . .? Why not say that even an omniscient being is unable to know certain things – those such that its knowing them would be an intrinsically impossible state of affairs. . . . This qualification of the ‘standard’ definition of omniscience is in the spirit of what I contended . . . were permissible revisions of the properties in our list of divine attributes . . . he will possess knowledge in the highest degree that is metaphysically possible, and will therefore not be debarred from the office ‘greatest possible being.’” (82)

Here van Inwagen seems to be reasoning as follows: if there is a genuine incompatibility between free will and classical omniscience, then having classical omniscience (in a world with free agents) is an impossible property. Hence it is not a property which is such that, were we to deny it to God, we would conflict with the proposition that God is the greatest possible being. And if denying a property to God does not conflict with the right-hand side of [GPB], then [Dispensable] tells us that this property must be (in our terms) an dispensable one. Hence the theist can reasonably deny — if (i) and (ii) really are inconsistent — that God (or anything else) is classically omniscient.

One step in this reasoning deserves slight closer examination. This is the inference from the claim that

The property of having classical omniscience is impossible⁸

⁸Strictly, the relevant claim is that the conjunction of classical omniscience and coexistence with free agents is impossible; I ignore this complication for simplicity, since it does not affect the general point at issue.

to

Denying that God is classically omniscient is consistent with the claim that God is the greatest possible being

One natural way to unpack this reasoning would be as follows. If the property of being classically omniscient is impossible, there is no being in any world which is classically omniscient. But then denying that God is classically omniscient cannot imply that God is not the greatest possible being. For it could do that only if there could be a being which was classically omniscient and, in virtue of possession of this property, greater than God. Since there could be no such being, this possibility is foreclosed.

This is a reasonable line of thought; it does seem that denying God some property could ‘debar God from the office ‘greatest possible being’ only if denying God this property could make some other possible being greater than God. And it does seem that it could have this effect only if there could be some other possible being with the property in question. Since this form of reasoning seems to be general, it appears to be a corollary of [Dispensable] that the following principle is true:

[Impossible] If F is impossible, then F is dispensable.

This is, as van Inwagen’s argumentative strategy makes clear, a useful principle for the theist to have in hand. (One may suspect that it is a bit *too* useful — that it makes things a bit too easy for the theist. More on this sort of worry in the next section.)

Other instances of the perfect being defense in action — though typically not as explicit as the example from van Inwagen — are not hard to find. An example — which also focuses on omniscience — can be found by looking at the debate between Alvin Plantinga and Patrick Grim over the question of whether classical omniscience is possible. Grim defends the position that it is not, on the grounds that Cantorian arguments show that there can be no set of, or quantification over, all true propositions, and that this result is inconsistent with the possibility of a being who knows all true propositions. One of Plantinga’s central lines of reply to this argument is to say that

‘the problem ... is not really a problem about omniscience. Omniscience should be thought of as *maximal degree of knowledge* ... Historically, this perfection has often been understood in such a way that a being x is omniscient only if for every proposition p , x knows whether p is true. ... This of course involves quantification over all propositions. Now you suggest there is a problem here: we *can’t* quantify over all propositions, because Cantorian arguments show that there aren’t any ... propositions about all propositions ... But suppose you’re right: what we have, then, is not a difficult for *omniscience* as such, but for one way of explicating omniscience,

one way of saying what this maximal perfection with respect to knowledge is.⁹

Unlike van Inwagen, Plantinga is not explicitly relying on the claim that God is the greatest possible being. But that claim seems to be just behind the scenes. For Plantinga's claim is that we can safely deny that God is classically omniscient if this denial is consistent with the claim that God has the maximal — i.e., the greatest possible — degree of knowledge. And this is presumably 'permissible tinkering' with the concept of God because it does not contravene the principle that God is the greatest possible being. After all, if classical omniscience is impossible, there is no fear that some other possible being might, by possessing classical omniscience, be greater than God.

Standard responses to paradoxes of omnipotence proceed in a similar vein. Abstracting from details, a standard line of reply to paradoxes of this sort hold that they illicitly suppose that God's omnipotence requires God to have an impossible property — like the property of creating a stone that God could not lift. But, so the standard reply goes, this is an impossible property, and hence one which we can deny to God without contradicting the principle that God is the greatest possible being. It is, therefore, dispensable.¹⁰

This is enough, I hope, to show that the perfect being defense is very widely deployed. Recently, this defense has been significantly generalized in the work of Yujin Nagasawa. In his 'A New Defence of Anselmian Theism,' Nagasawa distinguishes between the Anselmian Thesis — roughly, the claim that God is the greatest possible being¹¹ — and the OmniGod Thesis — the claim that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent. Nagasawa then points out that arguments against the existence of God typically target the claim that God has one or more of the omni-properties rather than the Anselmian Thesis itself. The theist who endorses [GPB] thus has room to resist these arguments by denying the conditional claim that if the Anselmian Thesis is true, then the OmniGod Thesis is true. This point he, says, 'undercuts existing arguments against Anselmian theism *all at once*.'¹²

The reason why it undercuts these arguments 'all at once' is that such ar-

⁹Plantinga and Grim (1993), 291.

¹⁰Parallel points could be made about replies to arguments for the incompatibility of omnipotence with essential goodness of the sort given in Pike (1969). Standard replies rely on the claim that these arguments assume that God is omnipotent in a sense which is inconsistent with essential perfect goodness, and hence that the conjunctive property — being omnipotent in the sense presupposed by these arguments and being essentially perfectly good — is impossible, and hence dispensable. Often, of course, this line of defense is buttressed with an alternative account of omnipotence.

¹¹I say 'roughly' because Nagasawa formulates it as the claim that God is the being than which no greater can be thought, rather than in explicitly modal terms. But since his argument (as far as I can see) does not rely on a distinction between what can be thought and what is possible, I stick with the modal formulation for simplicity. Nagasawa's preferred way of making the Anselmian Thesis more explicit — the MaximalGod Thesis — is given in explicitly modal terms. See Nagasawa (2008), 586. More on the distinction between conceivability and possibility in §6 below.

¹²Nagasawa (2008), 578. Emphasis in original.

guments all try to show either that one of the divine attributes is individually impossible, or that two or more are jointly impossible. But such arguments inevitably rely on assumptions about just what the attributes of God are supposed to be. Such assumptions are licensed by the OmniGod Thesis — but they are not licensed by the claim that God is the greatest possible being since, as Nagasawa points out, it seems to be epistemically possible that God is the greatest possible being but not the bearer of all of the omni-properties.

Nagasawa’s defense of Anselmian Theism is an instance of what I have been calling the perfect being defense. To see this, note that his preferred replacement for the OmniGod Thesis is

‘*The MaximalGod Thesis*. God is the being that has the maximal consistent set of knowledge, power and benevolence.’¹³

which is equivalent to the conjunction of the claim that God is the greatest possible being with the auxiliary assumption that a being’s greatness supervenes on its knowledge, power, and benevolence. But if the MaximalGod Thesis captures our concept of God, we can see immediately that if, for example, classical omniscience is impossible, then this property is not one which our concept of God requires God to have. That concept, after all, requires only that God have the maximal *consistent* combination of knowledge, power, and benevolence. Hence classical omniscience is, if impossible, dispensable.

Indeed, the claim that any such impossible property is, in virtue of being impossible, dispensable, is required for Nagasawa’s defense to have the generality he claims for it. His defense is, he says, ‘a radically new and more economical response to Anselmian theism, one that aims to eliminate the force of the arguments against it *all at once*.’¹⁴ But since he does not engage with the details of any argument against Anselmian Theism — indeed, the point of his more economical new defense is to obviate the need for that — Nagasawa’s defense eliminates the force of an argument against Anselmian Theism just in case it enables us to treat the property targeted by any anti-Anselmian argument as dispensable. Viewed in this light, Nagasawa’s ‘New Defence’ is simply the consistent and universal employment of the principles — [Dispensable] and its corollary [Impossible] — characteristic of the perfect being defense.

4 A REDUCTIO OF THE PERFECT BEING DEFENSE

Something should strike us as odd about the dialectical situation here. On the one hand, non-theists attempt to provide arguments against the existence of God by showing that one or more candidates for divine attributes are individually or jointly impossible. On the other hand, proponents of the perfect being defense are licensed, for any property demonstrated to be impossible, to dismiss that property as dispensable. The non-theist would thus appear to be in a rather

¹³Nagasawa (2008), 586.

¹⁴Nagasawa (2008), 585. Emphasis in original.

unenviable position; the very success of her arguments is simply grist for the mill of the perfect being defense.

One might regard this as a great victory for the theist. Alternatively, one might think that this shows that there is something fishy about the perfect being defense. I now want to argue that the latter view is the correct one. (I'll turn in the next section to the question of *why* the perfect being defense goes wrong.)

Suppose that the non-theist presents an argument for the inconsistency of the following three theses:

- (a) God is omnipotent.
- (b) God is perfectly good.
- (c) God created a universe which contains some evil.

Arguments of this general form are of course very familiar, as are many standard responses. Often arguments of this sort rely on eminently questionable assumptions, like the assumption that a perfectly good being will always eliminate as much evil as it can, or the assumption that an omnipotent being can create any possible world; and theists typically respond to arguments of this form by identifying, and rejecting, the relevant assumptions.

But the perfect being defense would seem to license a much simpler and more general response to this form of argument. She can simply pose the following dilemma to the non-theist: either the conjunctive property

omnipotent & perfectly good & creator of a universe with evil in it

is possible, or it is not. If it is possible, then the non-theist's attempt to demonstrate the inconsistency of (a)-(c) fails. If it is impossible, then it is not a property of the greatest possible being, and hence is dispensable. Either way, the non-theist's argument fails. Q.E.D.

The non-theist, undaunted, might try again. She might come up with a yet more clever argument for the inconsistency of the following theses:

- (d) God is very powerful.
- (e) God is very good.
- (f) God created a universe with amount E of evil.

where it is plausible that the universe in fact contains amount E of evil. But, no matter how clever the argument, the perfect being defender is ready with a response. Either the properties attributed to God by (d)-(f) are jointly possible, or they are not. If they are, then the argument for the inconsistency of (d)-(f) fails. If they are not, then the conjunctive property corresponding to (d)-(f) is impossible, and hence dispensable. So again the argument fails.

Nor is there anything special here about arguments from evil. Suppose that our non-theist delivers an argument for the conclusion that the universe satisfies the following description:

Singularity. The universe, of necessity, begins with expansion from a high density singularity. Necessarily, everything that exists is causally ‘downstream’ from this singularity. In different worlds, the universe unfolds differently — partly due to variation in the laws of nature, and partly due to chance. But the laws can only vary in a tight band, and it is impossible for the laws to be such as to permit the evolution of organisms significantly more intelligent or powerful than human beings.

Let us say that, if Singularity is true, that the greatest possible amount of power, goodness, and knowledge is X . Surely, given the above description, we can see that nothing with property X would be God; after all, a being with property X would not have more power, knowledge, or goodness than a human being. Given this, if the above description of the universe is correct, then God does not exist. So surely, one thinks, a non-theist in possession of a convincing argument for Singularity has in her possession a good argument against the existence of God.

But, predictably, the perfect being defender has an answer. For if the above hypothesis is correct, then nothing could be greater than something with property X . So every other property which would be greater to have than X is not possibly instantiated and hence, by [Impossible], a dispensable property.

To put the same point another way, there is nothing in the above story which implies the falsity of the MaximalGod Thesis. (After all, the non-theist has no argument for the claim that nothing with property X actually exists.) So if the MaximalGod thesis does indeed capture the commitments of the Anselmian theist, the latter should find an argument for the above view of the universe profoundly untroubling.

It is clear at this point, I take it, that something has gone badly wrong. Things simply can’t be this easy for the theist. But, if you agree with this verdict, you must also agree that there is something wrong with the perfect being defense. For if the perfect being defense were legitimate, there would be nothing wrong with the theist’s imagined responses to different versions of the argument from evil, or to Singularity. After all, if the perfect being defense is true, then it really is true that any impossible property, just in virtue of being shown to be impossible, is dispensable.¹⁵

The parallels to the the instances of the perfect being defense discussed in the previous section are fairly clear. The dilemma which we just imagined the theist posing to the proponent of various versions of the argument from evil is exactly parallel to the dilemma which van Inwagen poses for the atheist

¹⁵While this argument opposes Nagasawa’s ‘New Defence’ (as it opposes any instance of the perfect being defense) it is worth highlighting the fact that I am agreeing with Nagasawa on one central point: it is epistemically possible (in at least one good sense of that term) that the Anselmian Thesis be true and the OmniGod Thesis false. What Nagasawa misses, I think, is that when one thinks of the range of cases which would falsify the second thesis but not the first, this turns out not to provide a general defense of Anselmian theism, but rather to falsify the characteristic Anselmian claim that our concept of God is the concept of a greatest possible being.

attempting to demonstrate the incompatibility of free will and omniscience. And all of the instances of perfect being defense we discussed rely on the validity of the inference from impossibility to dispensability — which is the only premise required for the envisaged response to the argument from evil, or Singularity, to stick.

Let me emphasize that I am not saying that van Inwagen’s response to the incompatibility of free will and foreknowledge, or any of the other instances of the perfect being defense mentioned above, is as implausible as the envisaged response to the problem of evil. On the contrary, classical omniscience does strike me as a much more plausible candidate for a dispensable attribute than the conjunctive properties attributed by (a)-(c) or (d)-(f) above, or the property of being greater than something with property X . What I am saying is that the perfect being defense itself provides no help in making this distinction; it validates the bad response to the problem of evil just as readily as the others.

5 THE PERFECT BEING DEFENSE: A DIAGNOSIS

The argument of the preceding section shows that the use of [Dispensable] and its apparent corollary [Impossible] by the perfect being defender to distinguish mandatory from dispensable attributes should be rejected. But it does not tell us why this promising strategy goes wrong.

The perfect being defender can be thought of as pursuing the following chain of reasoning:

- (i) The claim that God is the greatest possible being captures the core of our conception of God;
- (ii) So, if denying that God is F does not contradict the claim that God is the greatest possible being, then denying that God is F does not contradict the core of our conception of God;
- (iii) So, if denying that God is F does not contradict the claim that God is the greatest possible being, F is dispensable;
- (iv) If a property F is impossible, then denying that God is F won’t contradict the claim that God is the greatest possible being, since in that case there will be no possible F which could exceed God’s greatness;
- (v) So, from (iii) and (iv), it follows that any impossible property is dispensable.

This reasoning fails in two places. The most important of these is the first.

What the *reductio* argument of the preceding section demonstratives is that the claim that God is the greatest possible being does not capture the core of our conception of God. At best, it can capture the core of our conception of God only if it is combined with certain theses about modal space.

The problem is that certain theories about the nature of the universe will, so to speak, ‘shrink’ modal space. Singularity is one example; but there are

plenty of others. Many such hypotheses will entail that it is impossible that there be anything great enough for us to be remotely inclined to regard that being as God. But, despite this, many will be consistent with the existence of a greatest possible being. Singularity, for instance, while clearly inconsistent with the existence of God, is not clearly inconsistent with the existence of a greatest possible being, or a being which has the greatest maximal combination of power, knowledge, and goodness.

The theist, it may be worth adding, is in no position to object that there is something illegitimate about this sort of shrinking of modal space, for the ‘possibility’ that modal space may be in certain respects smaller than we think is a tool frequently deployed by theists. To take one well-known example: it has been argued (in a number of related ways) that God’s omnipotence is inconsistent with God’s being essentially perfectly good. For if God is omnipotent, then God can bring about any possible state of affairs; so, it is possible that God bring about some morally prohibited state of affairs; so, God is possibly less than perfectly good, and therefore not essentially perfectly good.¹⁶

The standard theistic reply to this sort of argument is nicely articulated by Thomas Morris. Given God’s necessary goodness, Morris says,

‘No state of affairs whose actualization . . . would be such that God would be blameworthy in intentionally bringing it about or allowing it . . . represents a genuine possibility. Thus, on any careful definition of omnipotence, God’s inability to actualize such a state of affairs no more detracts from his omnipotence than does his inability to create spherical cubes . . . [here] we find an important corollary of the Anselmian conception of God brought to light. Such a God is a delimitter of possibilities. If there is a being who exists necessarily, and is necessarily omnipotent, omniscient, and good, then many states of affairs which would otherwise represent genuine possibilities, and which by all non-theistic tests of logic and semantics do represent possibilities, are strictly impossible in the strongest sense.’¹⁷

The present point is that it is not only the hypothesis that God is a necessarily omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good being which is a delimitter of possibilities; various anti-theistic hypotheses similarly delimit modal space. And the claim that God is the greatest possible being can only hope to capture the core of our conception of God when it is conjoined with the highly substantive claim that none of these anti-theist modal-space-delimiting hypotheses are true.

Here is a more informal way to see what is wrong with step (i) of the perfect being defender’s reasoning. Suppose that one were to hold that the claim that God is the greatest actual being captures the core of our conception of God. One way to show that this is a mistake is to imagine that, at the end of the universe, it turns out that Michael Jordan was the most impressive being to ever have existed. Then atheism is true, because, as it turns out, this universe

¹⁶See, among other places, Pike (1969); Resnick (1973); Guleserian (1983).

¹⁷Morris (1985), 47-8.

did not turn out to include any being great enough to be God. Being the best would not make Jordan God; so the claim that God is the greatest actual being does not capture the core of our conception of God.

But just as whether the best thing in the universe is God depends on what the universe contains, so the question of whether the best thing in the pluriverse — the space of all possible worlds — is God depends on what the pluriverse contains. It depends on what is and is not possible.

One somewhat fanciful way to press the point is to imagine a philosopher coming up with a surprising argument, based on some strong actualist premises, for the conclusion that it is impossible that anything be greater than the greatest actual thing. This argument, plus the claim that something in the actual world is such that nothing is actually better than it, should not convince anyone that God exists. It should just convince them (if they don't think that God actually exists) that the pluriverse is depressingly bereft of truly excellent things.

This has all been by way of criticizing step (i) of the perfect being defender's line of reasoning above. But there is another (much less important) problem, which emerges at step (iv). This step lays out the reasoning which led us from [Dispensable] to [Impossible]. The basic idea is that if some property F is impossible, then denying that God is F cannot imply that God is less than the greatest possible being, since one is then simply denying God a property which no possible being has.

What this plausible-sounding argument misses is that it may be the case that some properties are such that their impossibility implies that it is impossible that there be a greatest possible being. That is, it may be that the impossibility of some property F implies that for any object x in any world w , there is some object y and world w^* such that y is, in w^* , greater than x is in w . Suppose, just to pick one example, that we identify the maximum conceivable levels of power, knowledge, and goodness; call these perfections P , K , and G . Now suppose that we find that none of P , K , and G are possibly instantiated. If none of these are possibly instantiated, it might follow that for every possible being, there is another possible being more powerful than it, some other possible being more knowledgeable than it, and some other possible being better than it. And in that case it will plausibly follow from the fact that none of P , K , and G are possibly instantiated that it is impossible that there be a greatest possible being.

This will then falsify the right-hand side of [GPB] and hence — by the lights of the theist who holds that his principle states the conditions under which God exists — entail the non-existence of God. It is, therefore, not dispensable. What this shows is that even if [Dispensable] were acceptable — and the argument of the first half of this section shows that it is not — [Impossibility] would still not follow. This is because denying that some impossible properties holds of God implies that there is no greatest possible being, not by making room for some other possible being with the relevant attribute, but rather by making the property of being the greatest possible being itself impossible.

6 THE GREATEST CONCEIVABLE BEING

Let's now consider a modification of the perfect being defense — one which is naturally suggested by the problems which arose from 'possibility-shrinking' non-theistic hypotheses in the preceding section.

While the modal claim that God is the greatest possible being has played quite a prominent role in recent philosophy of religion, historically a much more influential claim has been the claim that God is the greatest *conceivable* being, or that being than which no greater can be thought. This is the sort of formulation which one finds in Anselm, earlier in Boethius, and through the early modern period.¹⁸ If, as is now widely held, certain claims can be in some sense conceivable without being genuinely possible, the claim that God is the greatest conceivable being and the claim that God is the greatest possible being can come apart.

It would be anachronistic to read into Anselm and earlier thinkers a preference for the conceivability claim over the modal claim, since (arguably) there is little or no explicit discussion of the distinction between conceivability and possibility until Descartes. But *we* are in a position to distinguish conceivability and possibility; and this distinction is one which might seem to be of use to the proponent of the perfect being defense.

For one of the central worries of the previous two sections was that it might turn out that certain properties are, even though not possibly instantiated, nonetheless mandatory rather than dispensable. In the case of Singularity, one prominent such property was the property of having more power, knowledge, and goodness than a being with property X — where such a being would not have significantly more power, knowledge, or goodness than a normal human being. But even if Singularity implies that having this property is not possible, it does not imply that having this property is not conceivable. Quite the contrary; no matter what the contours of modal space turn out to be, we can surely imagine, or conceive of, a being with much greater power, knowledge, and goodness than any human being. The shift from possibility to conceivability thus promises to solve the problem illustrated by the too-easy responses to the argument from evil and examples like Singularity discussed above.

It is natural, then, to think that we might formulate our criterion for dispensable attributes in terms of conceivability rather than possibility. And, by adapting the framework developed above, there is a natural way to do this. One who claims that the core of our concept of God is given by the claim that God is the greatest conceivable being will state the conditions under which God exists not with [GPB], but with a principle like the following:

[GCB] God exists iff $\exists x$ (we cannot conceive of a being greater than x is in α)¹⁹

¹⁸See Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, §X; Anselm *Proslogion* §II.

¹⁹We could state this in a way more closely parallel to [GPB] by quantifying over conceivable beings and conceivable worlds; the formulation above will be enough for present purposes.

This says that God exists just in case there is something which is such that we can imagine nothing greater — which is such that, there is, nothing greater can be thought.

As above, we can use this principle to state a sufficient condition for a property to be dispensable:

[Dispensable*] If the proposition that God is not F does not entail the falsity of the right-hand side of [GCB], then F is dispensable.

And, if [GCB] does capture the core of our conception of God, this principle is a very reasonable one. For suppose that denying that God (or anything else) is F does not imply that there is no being than which none greater can be thought. Then this denial is consistent with the claim that there exists a being which satisfies the core of our conception of God — and hence the property we are denying God to have must be a dispensable one.

It is notorious that there are many different senses of ‘conceivable.’ The key question for the proponent of the strategy under consideration is: which of these gives the intended interpretation of the term in [GCB] and [Dispensable*]?

I want now to pose a dilemma for the attempt to answer this question in a satisfactory way. On the one hand, the perfect being defender might choose an interpretation of ‘conceivable’ on which the claim that a proposition is conceivable is a very weak claim. To have an example to discuss, let us say that

p is weakly conceivable iff $\neg p$ is not a formal logical truth²⁰

On the other hand, she might pick an interpretation on which the claim that a proposition is conceivable is much more substantial. Again to have an example to discuss, let’s say that

p is strongly conceivable iff $\neg p$ is not an a priori truth

As the names suggest, everything which is strongly conceivable will be weakly conceivable (at least if all formal logical truths are knowable a priori). But many propositions will be weakly conceivable but not strongly conceivable. The proposition that my pen is bright red and green all over is certainly weakly conceivable (since its negation is not a formal logical truth), but is plausibly not strongly conceivable (since it seems to be knowable a priori that nothing is bright red and green all over).

Suppose first that we go for weak conceivability. The central problem here is that it is so easy for a proposition to be weakly conceivable that virtually no properties will satisfy, on this interpretation, the antecedent of [Dispensable*]. To see this, return to van Inwagen’s argument that if free will and omniscience really are incompatible, then classical omniscience (in a world with free agents)

²⁰Here I am being a bit loose with the distinction between sentences and propositions, since propositions are the things which are conceivable or not, whereas sentences are logical truths or not. Not much hangs on this at present; the definition could be revised to ‘the negation of a sentence expressing p is not a formal logical truth.’

is impossible, and hence not a property the denial of which would entail that God is not the greatest possible being.

That argument relied on [GPB] and [Dispensable]. How might it work with [GCB] and [Dispensable*]? One would have to argue that the property of being classically omniscient is not just impossible, but also not even weakly conceivably instantiated. That, after all, is what would be required for us to be able to infer that the denial of the claim that God is classically omniscient does not entail the falsity of the claim that God is the greatest (weakly) conceivable being. The obvious problem, though, is that if it turns out that classical omniscience is impossible, it is still obviously weakly conceivable that an agent be classically omniscient. The claim that God is classically omniscient is, after all, not the negation of a formal logical truth. Weak conceivability thus renders our sufficient condition for dispensable properties entirely toothless.

So suppose that instead we go for strong conceivability. Here we, at least initially, seem to be on stronger ground. For suppose that classical omniscience is impossible. It is at least plausible that this will be knowable a priori, and hence that the claim that a being is classically omniscient will not be strongly conceivable. And this will be enough (given an interpretation of ‘conceivable’ as ‘strongly conceivable’ in [GCB] and [Dispensable*]) to give us the result that classical omniscience is not a property of the greatest (strongly) conceivable being, and hence dispensable. This is what we want.

The problem, though, is that the attempt to construct the perfect being defense around the notion of strong conceivability runs into exactly the same problems as the does the attempt to construct such a defense around possibility. For recall the reductio of the latter strategy in §4. The problem there was that, for any candidate divine attribute demonstrated to be impossible, the perfect being defense licenses the theist to dismiss the property as a dispensable attribute of God. But, for many such properties, this conclusion will be quite implausible.

But arguments for the impossibility of certain candidate divine attributes are inevitably a priori arguments. So, in every case in which we have a demonstration of the impossibility of certain attributes, we will also have a demonstration of the fact that the relevant attributes are not strongly conceivable. And, given this, [GCB] and [Dispensable*] will license just the same implausible responses to the argument from evil and the example of Singularity as our original modal formulations.

Furthermore, the diagnosis of this failure given in §5 will carry over to the present version of the perfect being defense. Just as certain hypotheses about the universe have the effect of shrinking modal space in a way which is problematic from the perspective of the perfect being defense, so certain arguments will shrink the space of strongly conceivable hypotheses about God, leading to just the same problems.²¹

²¹One might object here: ‘How about arguments from evil? These do not seem to be purely a priori arguments, since they contain at least an a posteriori premise about the existence (or amount, or distribution) of evil in the world.’ This point is correct but I think ultimately irrelevant. The arguments which attempt to establish the incompatibility of evil with the

What we want, it seems, is some happy middle ground between weak and strong conceivability. We need, that is, some sense of ‘conceivable’ weak enough to avoid the problems with the modal version of the perfect being defense but strong enough to occasionally show us that certain properties are dispensable. We should also want this middle ground to be a natural enough choice that it does not seem cherry-picked to give us the result we want in a given case. While I have nothing like an impossibility proof, I’m skeptical that we can find a sense of ‘conceivable’ which will satisfy these desiderata.

7 CONCLUSION

A criterion for distinguishing dispensable from mandatory candidate divine attributes – those which may, and those which may not, reasonably be denied by a theist to hold of God – is something very much worth wanting. It is also *prima facie* quite plausible that we should be able to derive such a criterion from our conception of God as the greatest possible, or the greatest conceivable, being. But, in the end, the attempt to find such a criterion seems to be a failure.

It would be depressing if this made the sort of dialectic between theist and atheist described at the outset wholly unprincipled. But the failure of the perfect being defense need not quite have this dire consequence. It does, however, suggest that the debate between the theist and the non-theist should be, in a certain way, reconceived.

It seems to me unlikely that there is any principle which can — as [GPB] tries to — neatly state, in a way which avoids substantial theological assumptions, the conditions under which God would exist. This is in a way wholly unremarkable. For consider other philosophical debates about existence — for example, debates about whether anything really has free will, whether things are really colored, and whether abstract objects exist. In none of these cases is it easy to come up with a simple, non-trivial biconditional of the form

x has free will iff . . .

which is acceptable to all parties.

Despite this, debates about free will are not completely unprincipled. This is in part because there is some agreement about particular cases — a fact which would not seem to have an analogue in the debate between theist and non-theist. But it is also in part because participants in debates about the existence of free will have tried to structure them by connecting these debates to the sorts of questions that made us care about free will in the first place — like questions about moral responsibility and praiseworthiness.

A similar move can be used to structure the debate between theist and non-theist. When we are asking whether some property is dispensable, we can ask

existence of a being with certain attributes are all a priori arguments. And that means that, if such arguments succeed, conjunctive properties like those given by (a)-(c) and (d)-(f) will not be strongly conceivably instantiated — which will license, again quite implausibly, treating these conjunctive properties as dispensable.

questions like: Could a being without this property be a suitable object of the absolute trust characteristic of religious faith? Or: could a being without this property be deserving of worship?

This is of course not a new idea. Van Inwagen, for example, raises precisely this sort of question when discussing the consequences of his denial that God can know which future free actions agents will perform. He asks,

‘If one believes that human beings have free will and that God does not know how human beings will act when they act freely, does this not imply that God was not in a position to make the promises that (Christians believe) God has in fact made?’²²

If we take questions like this to be more central in giving the core of our concept of God than the formula that God is the greatest possible being, this might have the consequence that the ground rules for debates about the existence of God – that is, our criterion for distinguishing mandatory from dispensable attributes – may well vary depending upon the particular theological views of the theist in question.

If his were true, then that would give at least some debates in the philosophy of religion less generality than we might ideally like them to have. But that, I think, is preferable to relying on the principle that God is the greatest possible being to play a role which, if the above argument is correct, it is most unsuited to play.²³

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²²van Inwagen (2008), 228.

²³Thanks for helpful discussion to Sam Newlands, Mark Murphy, Mike Rea, Blake Roeber, Meghan Sullivan, the participants in the Philosophy of Religion Workshop at Notre Dame, and an audience at the BGND philosophy of religion conference in 2013.

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