Review of *The Greatest Possible Being*

1. In Search of Perfection

People say God is wise, powerful, and good. Why say *those* things? Why not instead say God is cubical, divisible by two, or brown? These questions are about the root concept of God. Is there a concept that unifies or explains the attributes people classically ascribe to God?

Enter *Perfect Being Theology* (PBT). PBT is the ñstring theoryò of theology. PBT purports to shine light on deepest part of Godô s n. aAc cou rdi ng to PBT, the deepest, most fundamental attribute of God is *perfection*. By the light of perfection, we can see why God would have certain attributes and not others. God has knowledge, power, and goodness because these are the attributes of a perfect being.

How shall we understand perfection? T h i s q u e s t i o n t a k e s u s i n t
S p e a k s e x a m i n e s w h a t w e m a y c a l l ñ t h e m o d a l
greatest possible being. On this analysis, PBT is about teasing out the implications of being the greatest possible.

Speaks offers a penetrating investigation of the concept of the greatest possible being. He argues, contrary to his own anticipation, that the concept of the greatest possible being is an inadequate device for theorizing about the nature of God. The central thesis of *The Greatest Possible Being* is that there is no way to derive interesting claims about God from the principle that God is the greatest possible being.

Before we consider S p e a k s ô argument, let us consider what is at stake. Here are three potential benefits of PBT. First, PBT can (potentially) explain a wide range of things people have said about God. People say God is good, strong, and wise. If PBT works, one can see why these

attributes do not comprise an arbitrary list. Instead, one can see a unified root, which provides a criterion for determining the properties God would have. God has whatever perfection entails and lacks whatever perfection precludes. Thus, perfection illuminates the nature of God.

Second, PBT offers a tool for investigating the foundation of existence. A classic hypothesis about the world is that its foundation has a supreme (perfect) nature. With PBT in hand, we can test this hypothesis by deducing various implications. Some implications may be obvious (e.g., that the foundation of existence has supreme power, and all its aims are wholly good), while others take more work to see. The project of teasing out the implications of a supreme nature can help us investigate whetherð and to what extentð this classic hypothesis may fit, or fail to fit, with our observations. If meaningful deductions are possible, then PBT can be a handy tool for testing (a version of) theism.

Third, if PBT succeeds, it can bring diverse people together into a joint and systematic inquiry. While different people would have different concepts of God, these concepts could reflect a more basic root concept. PBT aims to use this root concept to provide a systematic and universal tool that can help people expand, clarify, and test their original concept of God. PBT could then help theology advance.

Can PBT deliver these results? Speaks is skeptical. By his analysis, PBT is like sand that falls through your fingers when you try to pick it up. Is he right?

Let us have a closer look at Speaksô analysis.

2. Challenge

To see how the modal analysis of perfection might serve PBT, Speaks searches for a *greatness condition*. This condition determines which attributes a maximally great being would have. In

order for a greatness condition to be useful for PBT, the condition must be accurate and informative. More precisely, Speaks suggests that a greatness condition should satisfy these two requirements (p. 12):

> *Entailment*: it should follow from the fact that a property F satisfies the condition, plus the relevant modal principle (which specifies the sense in which God is the greatestð either the greatest possible, conceivable, or actual being), that F is a property of God.
>
> *Informativeness*: it should be possible (without reliance on prior substantive claims about God) to see that some interesting candidates to bQ q 0. [(infor)4(mative.) Vd bd is the greatest