

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 “string theory” of theology. PBT purports to shine light on deepest part of God’s nature. According 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? This question takes us into Jeff Speaks’ project. Speaks examines what we may call “the modal analysis of perfection.” A perfect being is the *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 Speaks’ 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 whether—and to what extent—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 Speaks' 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 greatest—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 be divine attributes satisfy the conditions.

To illustrate, here is an example of a greatness condition:

$$G1. \forall x \forall y ((Fx_{\alpha} \ \& \ \neg Fy_{\alpha}) \rightarrow x_{\alpha} > y_{\alpha})$$

A property satisfies this condition just in case everything which actually has it is greater than everything which actually lacks it. (Speaks uses “ α ” to signifies that the item is in the actual world.)

As Speaks points out, however, this condition fails meet Entailment. The reason is that uninstantiated properties vacuously satisfy this condition. Surely, we don’t want to say that uninstantiated properties like *being a flying pig* or *being non-existent*, are thereby divine attributes. So, G1 is out.

Speaks considers a series of fixes and alternatives, but he encounters a pattern of problems. This pattern exposes a tension between Entailment and Informativeness. When Speaks finds a condition that seems to satisfy Entailment, he discovers it fails to satisfy Informativeness. Furthermore, when he finds a condition that seems to satisfy Informativeness, he discovers that the condition fails to satisfy Entailment. The challenge, then, is to find a condition that satisfies them both. Can we?

Let us have a closer look at the problem. Speaks explores candidate conditions along two paths. One path is *alethic*: a maximal great being is the greatest that is ontologically possible. The other path is *epistemic*. On this path, we analyze “maximal greatness” in terms of what one can *conceive*: a being is maximal if and only if one cannot conceive of any greater being.

Let us look first along the alethic path. Here is an example of a condition Speaks considers:

G2. (i) $\diamond \exists xFx$ & (ii) $\forall x\forall y ((Fx_w \& \neg Fy_{w^*}) \rightarrow x_w > y_w)$.

A property meets this condition just in case it meets both of the following conditions: (i) possibly, something has it; and (ii) anything in any world with the property is greater than anything in any world which lacks it. (Here Speaks uses “*w*” to signify that the item is in possible world *w*, and the domain of quantification includes all possible items.)

However, G2 faces what Speaks calls the problem of *trumping*. To illustrate the problem, consider *omniscience*. You might think the greatest possible being would at least be omniscient. But G2 fails to deliver this result. For an omniscient being is not automatically greater than any possible being that is not omniscient. Consider, for example, an omniscient, *weak* being. Such a being is not so great. It is less great than an all-powerful and *nearly* omniscient being. So an omniscient being is not automatically the greatest; other attributes can trump omniscience.

Speaks uses the problem of trumping as an instrument for investigating a series of greatness conditions along the alethic path. These conditions expose a more fundamental problem with every proposal on this path. The problem is with the modal landscape itself. The modal landscape is *too dark*. According to PBT, the concept of the greatest possible being should shed light on the nature of God. Yet, PBT fails to illuminate relevant crevices in the modal landscape. We cannot see, just by reflecting on our concept of the greatest possible being, which great properties such a being would have. We don’t know enough about what’s possible.

To illustrate the problem, suppose it happens to be the case that the greatest of all possible beings is severely limited. For example, suppose the greatest of the *possible* beings is incapable of entertaining certain mathematical truths. Moreover, this being fails to be omniscient, omnipotent, or morally perfect. In that case, the greatest possible being is not anything like what perfect being theorists say.

The problem here is that maximal greatness fails to be informative. If maximal greatness were informative, we could deduce information about God’s nature. We could see, for example, that God’s nature includes omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection. We could see those things by *a priori* reflection on the concept of the greatest possible being. But we can’t see those things. The mere concept of the greatest being doesn’t illuminate what is actually possible. So, if we take the alethic path, we must exit our concept of God. We must instead travel through murky modal lands, where we could theoretically discover that the greatest possible being is nothing like what anyone *means* by “God.”

I want to emphasize that Speaks is extremely creative in his attempts to find a path. He carves nine different strategies with technical precision. He combines strategies. He *disjoins* strategies. He comes up with sophisticated ideas, some bordering on bizarre, to see if he can make a way. Yet, every way runs into a ditch.

Speaks then considers an entirely different path—the *epistemic* path. On this path, we analyze “greatest possible” in terms of what is *conceivable*. For example, here is a greatness condition on this path:

$$G3. (i) \diamond \exists xFx \ \& \ (ii) \ \forall x\forall y ((Fx_c \ \& \ \neg Fy_{c*}) \rightarrow x_c > y_c).$$

This condition is like G2, except G3 exchanges “possibility” with “conceivability.” (I am following Speaks’ notations: ‘♦’ expresses conceivability, and ‘c’ signifies that the item is in conceivable world c.)

This condition avoids certain problems we found on the alethic path. In particular, by the light of G3, divine attributes do not hide in the dark crevices of the modal landscape. For example, you can see that omniscience would be a divine attribute without first figuring out whether omniscience is metaphysically possible. Rather than survey dark modal landscapes, we can inspect our concept of omniscience. If we can see that omniscience is conceivable (in some relevant sense) and deducible from maximal greatness, we can infer that omniscience is a divine attribute.

So far so good. However, Speaks exposes a different problem on this path. The problem now is that conceivability is too easy. You can conceive, for example, of a metaphysically *impossible* power, such as the power to make a square circle. Intuitively, it is better to have a power than to lack that power. If so, then the greatest *conceivable* being would seem to have every *conceivable* power, including impossible powers. Yet, it is impossible for any being to have impossible powers. Therefore, the greatest conceivable being is impossible (trivially).

A proponent of PBT might be tempted to reply by supposing that God would only have *possible* powers. So, for example, the power to make the radii of a circle unequal is not a possible power. Therefore, God wouldn’t have that power.

Yet, as Speaks astutely points out, if we limit God’s power to what is metaphysically possible, then we step back onto the alethic path. The alethic path is problematic, as we’ve seen. It does no good to escape the problems of one path by running back into the problems on the other path.

There is another problem (beyond the problem of impossible great properties): even *possible* great properties seem to be incompatible with other possible great properties. For example, suppose God has at least all possible powers. Then God has the power to do evil, since the power to do evil is metaphysically possible. Yet the power to do evil is in tension with a classic great property: *being essentially morally perfect*. Essential moral perfection appears to be a property that the greatest conceivable being would have; indeed, it is part of the classic concept of God. Yet, if the greatest conceivable being would *also* have the power to do evil, then we have a contradiction: the greatest conceivable being would both be able to do evil, yet be unable to do evil.

Speaks offers an idea that might help: perhaps God could have a power that God *cannot excise*. Then perhaps God could have the *power* to do evil, even if it is *not possible* that God do evil. In this way, we avoid the contradiction that God is both able and unable to do evil.

However, as Speaks notes, a deeper problem remains. Even if some possible powers cannot be exercised, still, the *possibility* of excising any possible power is itself a great property. So, the greatest conceivable being should have that property (it may seem). Yet, it is not possible for any being to have that property, for no being can possibly do what cannot be done. So the problem is back.

Let us recap the problems. The problems begin with a dilemma: either analyze “greatest possible” in terms of what is metaphysically *possible* or in terms of what is *conceivable*. In the first case, the concept of the greatest possible being fails to shine enough light to reveal anything informative about God’s nature. God’s nature then hides within dark modal landscapes. If, on the other hand, we analyze God’s nature in terms of conceivability, then we have an opposite problem. Instead of traveling in the dark, we have too much light. Too many properties count as great,

including properties that *cannot* be instantiated by anything (e.g., *being able to make the radii of a circle unequal*). In short, no greatness condition is both informative and accurate.

Could there be another way?

3. Another Try That Fails

Speaks' challenge is very sharp. I want to highlight its sharpness by considering one more attempt. Here is a proposal on the epistemic path (inspired by Speaks' own proposals):

$$G4. \forall x (\neg Fx_c \rightarrow \blacklozenge \exists y_{c^*} (y_{c^*} > x_c)).$$

A property P meets this condition just in case for any conceivable x that lacks P, there is a conceivable y that is greater than x. (As before, 'c' signifies that the item is in conceivable world c. 'V' ranges over conceivable things.)

This condition stands up well against several of Speaks' challenges. First, this condition helps with trumping. The problem with trumping, recall, is that some attributes can trump the greatness of others. This problem arises from the requirement that it is always better to have a divine attribute than to lack it. Fortunately, G4 doesn't require that. Instead, G4 requires that *some* conceivable being that has the attribute in question is greater than every conceivable being that lacks it. Thus, for example, omniscience still counts as a divine attribute so long as *some* conceivable omniscient being—e.g., a being that is omniscient, omnipotent, and morally perfect—is greater than any conceivable being that is not omniscient.

This proposal can also help remove incompatible properties. Take, for example, *essential moral perfection* and *being able to do evil*. These properties are incompatible. By the light of G3, we can tell a story to explain why God wouldn't have them both. Here is the story. While the power to do evil is a great power, being essential morally perfection is an *even greater* attribute.

By G3, God would have the properties that contribute to *overall* maximal greatness, and therefore, G3 does not entail that God have all great properties. Contradiction removed.

We are far from out of the woods, though. For there is still the problem of troublemakers. Speaks provides this example:

CIRCLE: the property of being able to make the radii of a circle unequal.

This property is a troublemaker if God must have this property, since nothing can have this property. Would God have CIRCLE? Here is a reason to think so:

1. CIRCLE is a conceivable ability.
2. Any being that *lacks* a conceivable ability is not the greatest conceivable.
3. Therefore, if a being is the greatest conceivable, that being has CIRCLE.

On behalf of (1), Speaks observes that CIRCLE is not formally contradictory. In that sense (at least), CIRCLE is conceivable. On behalf of (2), we observe that abilities are intuitively intrinsically great (greater for any being to have than to lack). If so, then by G4, we can infer that God would have CIRCLE.

The problem now is that nothing could have CIRCLE. Therefore, God cannot have CIRCLE. Therefore, by G4, we have a contradiction: God *would* and *wouldn't* have CIRCLE.

Here is a possible rejoinder, which Speaks considers. Perhaps CIRCLE is not great, after all. It is not great precisely because it is not possible. One might think that properties that entail impossibilities detract from greatness. After all, possible existence is greater than impossible existence. If that is correct, then perhaps CIRCLE detracts from greatness. More precisely, perhaps CIRCLE both adds some greatness (by entailing some great ability) *and* subtracts some greatness (being entailing incoherence). Then perhaps the total value of this property fails to be positive. Then CIRCLE is not a troublemaker.

Unfortunately, as Speaks points out, this response takes us back onto the alethic path. For by the present hypothesis, the very greatness of CIRCLE depends upon whether CIRCLE is metaphysically possible, which in turn depends on the structure of shadowy modal landscapes. The problem now is familiar: we can't see God's attributes by the light of God's nature if we must first trace inferences behind hidden crevices outside the concept of God. The alethic path takes back into a ditch.

When I first read Speaks' challenge, I was optimistic that a proposal on the epistemic path could work. However, upon further reflection, I have become less optimistic. The recurring problem is that the modal landscape is too dark. We can try to gain light on the epistemic path, but then we encounter troublemakers that force us back onto the dark alethic path. I do not see a clear way through. Speaks has succeeded in changing my view. I now doubt that the concept of the greatest possible being is an inadequate light (on its own) for perfect being theology. That is progress.

4. Beyond Maximal Greatness

Perhaps there is still another way. Speaks' project is about the *modal* analysis of perfection. Maybe the lesson of Speaks' work is that if PBT can bear fruit, its fruit must spring from a *non-modal* analysis of perfection.

Here is a proposal. Instead of analyzing perfection in terms of maximal greatness, we identify a more basic attribute. Here is an idea inspired by Graham Oppy's analysis of perfection (2004, pp. 64-68). Oppy suggests that we can understand perfections as *idealizations* of various basic excellences, such as knowledge, virtue, ability. Each excellence has an ideal form, which we

may call “a perfection.” *Absolute perfection*, then, includes all perfections. We might say absolute perfection is the idealization of excellence itself. It is the ideal way of being excellent.

On this proposal, PBT doesn’t begin with a modal concept of God. Instead, it begins deeper in. Perfection *illuminates* the modal landscape. We don’t first check to see what is possible. Instead, we see what *would* be possible were perfection possible.

To illustrate how PBT might work, take the property of *omniscience*. Suppose omniscience is a perfection with respect to knowledge—i.e., omniscience is the ideal with respect to having knowledge. Then an absolutely perfect being—i.e., a being that includes all perfections—would include omniscience. If one can indeed see that an ideal being would include omniscience, then one can deduce this classic divine attribute by the light of perfection.

The non-modal analysis of perfection may help us see something right with the modal analysis. Perhaps the reason perfect being theorists have tended to describe God as the greatest possible being is because absolute perfection non-trivially entails being the greatest possible. Perhaps the relationship between perfection and maximal greatness is like the relationship between *being an icosahedron* (a 20 faced-platonic solid) and *being a maximally complex platonic solid* (i.e., with the most vertices). Once you see which solid would be the maximally complex platonic solid, you can then see that being an icosahedron entails being a maximally complex platonic solid. In the same way, perhaps once one sees which property is the highest degree of greatness (i.e., absolute perfection), one can then see (at least in principle) that perfection entails maximal greatness. On this proposal, perfection is the root of maximal greatness.

On this analysis, PBT theology doesn’t properly start with the modal concept of maximal greatness. Rather, it starts deeper in, with pure positivity (absolute perfection). From pure positivity, maximal greatness follows.

A couple disclaimers are in order. First, this proposal would not settle every question one might raise about God's nature. There would still be substantive debates about which properties are ideal. One need not settle *all* questions for PBT to provide *some* light.

Another disclaimer: this proposal doesn't keep us entirely out of the modal landscape. That is because some candidate divine attributes still depend upon what's metaphysically possible. Take, for example, *being able to make the radii of a circle unequal*. If that attribute is impossible, then it (arguably) entails some disvalue (in virtue of its impossibility). As far as I can see, this disvalue may offset the positive value of having this additional power. If so, then perhaps one cannot see that a perfect being would have this property without *first* seeing whether this property is possible.

It is okay that some divine properties hide in the modal landscape. PBT doesn't require easy sight of *all* divine attributes. For example, perhaps we can see that *having supreme power* is a perfection with respect to power (leaving aside further questions about specific powers that supreme power may, or may not, entail). We don't need to first see that such power is possible to see it is a perfection. The inference may go the other way: if there *were* a perfect being, it would have supreme power—and so supreme power would be possible. So, while we may indeed need a modal lens to see *some* divine properties (e.g., being incapable of making the radii of a circle unequal), perhaps we can see others directly via the lens of pure positivity.

While questions remain, I'd like to draw attention to a potential fruit of this proposal. The proposal may help us separate the question of God's *existence* from the question of God's *nature*. PBT is about God's nature, not God's existence. Thus, when the perfect being theorist says that the maximally great being would be omnipotent, she is not trying to suggest that a maximal, omnipotent being is *possible*. There are famous arguments that move from the possibility of a

perfect being to its actual existence, yet PBT theology is orthogonal to those modal arguments. If a *non-modal* property is at the root of the divine nature, then we can consider the implications of that root without stepping into modal arguments for the existence of God.

5. Outcomes

I will wrap up this review by highlighting three helpful results of Speaks' project. First, Speaks exposes a serious challenge that serves to clarify what PBT requires. By the light of Speaks' challenge, we can see that the concept of the greatest possible being doesn't easily or obviously entail any classic divine attribute. This result invites perfect being theorists to clarify the root concept of God. There is more work to do, and Speaks' book lays valuable guiderails for that work.

Second, Speaks' critique invites us to look beyond the modal analysis of perfection. The modal analysis takes into dark modal landscapes. To bring light into the dark, we need a non-modal property (or properties). One of the lessons of the book is that we have been mistaken to think, in Speaks words, "that the concept of God just is the modal concept of God" (p. 167).

Third, Speaks reorients us to a root motivation for caring about the inquiry into a perfect being. Why care whether some abstract modal property happens to be instantiated? Speaks draws our attention to a more pragmatic concept: *a being in whom our hearts may find rest* (p. 167). Perhaps this concept gives perfect being theology a higher purpose.

References

Oppy, Graham. 2004. *Describing Gods*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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