



Activity 2 – Reasons for and against perfect being theology

Here we consider two long-standing objections to using perfect being theology. For each one, we consider the response an advocate of perfect being theology might give. Before considering the objections, however, it's worth considering some of the motivations behind perfect being theology. If there are no reasons for using perfect being theology in the first place, then we've nothing to lose by rejecting it, so it wouldn't be worth defending!

Why Perfect Being Theology?

There are two basic reasons for theologians to use perfect being theology for thinking about God. The first is that insofar as they are a theist and belong to one of the Abrahamic traditions, they should use it because it's traditional: the God which is the object of worship in their religion is regarded as the perfect being. For the sake of concision, let's assume the theologian in question is Christian, and so wants to know more about the God Christians believe in and worship. Christian philosopher Brian Leftow argues that there are many places in the Bible where God is described as having features – being everlasting, or almighty – which only a perfect being could have. (An argument for Muslims can be made on the basis of the 'ninety-nine names' of Allah, which are all great-making properties.) Moreover, there are a few places where God seems to imply that we should think of Him as the best possible being, such as in Isaiah 40:25 – “To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal? Says the Holy One.” According to Leftow, “the questions are plainly rhetorical, the expected answer “no-one”.”¹ Insofar as Jewish theologians are bound by passages like these in the Old Testament, perfect being theology will also be appropriate for Judaism.

The second reason is more general: we might think that religion is fundamentally about worshipping God. Then, for religious behaviour to be rational, or right, God will need to be worth worshipping! (Imagine if worshipping God were a waste of time: then if religion is about worshipping God, religion would be a waste of time.) But how can we know whether something is worthy of our worship? The perfect being theologian can respond by saying that we should worship things because they're better (worship is a kind of admiration or awe or love). If God is the best possible being, then if He exists, He must be worthy of our worship. Christian philosopher Edward Wierenga has offered the most explicit recent formulation of this kind of argument, but it crops up again and again in Abrahamic theologians' reflections on God's perfection and the nature of worship.²

The 'Reformed' Objection

Skepticism about the appropriateness of perfect being theology has existed among Abrahamic theologians at least since the early days of the Christian Church, however. The worry theologians with commitments to Judaism, Christianity or Islam might have is this: God has revealed a lot of information about Himself (to the people of Israel, through Christ, or

¹ Leftow B, “Why perfect being theology” in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* (2011) 69:103-118.

² Wierenga, E, “Augustinian perfect being theology and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* (2011) 69:139-151



through the Quran). Perfect being theology, however, doesn't need to appeal to this information. So either God has told us everything we need to, or can, know about Him, and perfect being arguments are all either unnecessary or mistaken; or, God has not revealed everything. The famous early twentieth-century Protestant Christian theologian Karl Barth offered a version of this argument which made perfect being theology (and indeed philosophizing about God) quite unpopular among many modern Protestant theologians.³ If God reveals Himself totally through becoming human in Christ, there's no 'room' for perfect being theology left in Christian theology, which should be entirely about unpacking what Christ did and said.

Here is one way the perfect being theologian can respond, owed to Michael Sudduth⁴: even if God tells us everything we need to know through revelation, this doesn't guarantee that we will all believe Him. There are many reasons for doubting that some event really counts as God telling us something. If we have a perfect being argument for a belief about God, however, we have additional reasons for the belief, so we can supplement the evidence God has provided through revelation. Meanwhile, if we are convinced that some revelation is truly from God, and it contradicts the conclusion of a perfect being argument, we can assume that the perfect being argument has gone wrong somewhere. Revelation can act as a 'guide rail'.

The 'Projection' Objection

Another long-standing objection to carrying out perfect being theology is not just that it might be inappropriate because God has revealed everything we can know about Him, but that it's likely to make mistakes. The most famous argument for this view originates from the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach in his *The Essence of Christianity* written in 1841.⁵ Feuerbach argues that the concept of God we come up with using perfect being theology is just a 'projection' or a 'chimera'. A chimera is a mythical beast made up of bits of different animals: likewise, God is made up of different human needs or values bundled together into one concept. People believe such a God exists because of wishful thinking: they want a perfect being to exist, who can make the universe meaningful and redeem us from our weaknesses. In Feuerbach's view, perfect being arguments don't tell us about what an external being, God, is like: they just tell us about what properties we think are better.

The perfect being theologian can respond by pointing out that Feuerbach's view of perfect being theology requires one of two controversial theses. The first is atheism. If atheism is true, then in a sense conclusions of beliefs like "God is almighty" or "God is loving" can't be true because God doesn't exist so God can't be any ways at all. But the assumption of atheism doesn't make perfect being theology generate mistakes: it makes all theology generate mistakes! The perfect being theologian can supply reasons for thinking atheism is false.

³ For an exposition of Barth along these lines see Plantinga, A, and Wolterstorff, N (eds), *Faith and Rationality* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press), p71.

⁴ Sudduth, M, *The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).



Alternatively, the 'projection' objection to perfect being theology might use a different thesis, instead of assuming atheism is true. It might assume that we do not have moral knowledge: that our beliefs about which properties are good and which bad are unreliable, likely to be mistaken. Then, even if Anselm were correct about how we should define God – “something greater than which nothing is possible” we wouldn't be able to do perfect being theology because we would make mistakes about which things were better or worse, and thereby make mistakes about what God is like. The thesis that our beliefs about good and bad are unreliable is very “expensive”, however. It would mean that our moral reasoning would be unreliable in non-theological contexts, such as when deciding who to vote for or how to treat our friends and enemies. So the advocate of perfect being theology has good reason to reject the second assumption which Feuerbach's objection might use.

Questions

1. Must a being be the best possible, in order to be worthy of our worship? If not, why not? If so, why?
2. Is it enough for a being to be the best possible being, for it to be worthy of our worship? Or is more required? What reasons might people have for disagreeing about this?
3. Many people disagree about right and wrong. Many people disagree about whether and what God has revealed to us. Which are more reliable, our moral beliefs, or our beliefs based on revelation? Explain your judgment.
4. Can you think of any purposes for perfect being theology, if we knew God didn't exist?