# The Argument from Imperfection: A New Proof of the Non-Existence of God

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**Abstract:** The paper argues that given the defining features of the God of "perfect being" theology, God would not create any contingently existing things. To do so would introduce a kind of gratuitous metaphysical imperfection in an otherwise metaphysically perfect universe. Given that in fact there are contingent things, it follows that the God of perfect being theism does not exist.

## 1. Introduction

Traditional atheistic arguments from the nature of the world to the non-existence of God have focused mainly on the existence of evil and/or suffering in the world—on the very wide spread of suffering/evil, or the unjust distribution of it, or on the degree of it in particular cases. But there is reason to think that the mere existence of a contingent world, irrespective of its contents, provides sufficient reason to deny the existence of at least the God of "perfect being" theology. In an earlier note, I attempted implicitly to argue for this bolder claim; this paper gives a much revised, more detailed and tighter statement and defence of such an argument.[1]

Terminology in the area in which the argument operates is variable, so I will start with some linguistic specification. Anselm famously defined God as "something than which none greater can be thought."[2] Descartes tells us that God is "a supremely perfect being,"[3] which he takes to entail that God "has all perfections."[4] Some modern writers speak of God as an "unsurpassable" being.[5] I will take these Anselmian and Cartesian definitions as equivalent, that is, that necessarily a being than which one greater cannot be thought is a supremely perfect being, and vice versa, and that a supremely perfect being is unsurpassable and vice versa. Further, I will

assume that the great-making properties are those which add value to reality, and that they are a subset of the perfections (this will become clearer in section 6). I will also assume something which indeed the language of perfection implies, that it is a good thing to have a perfection, that perfections are valuable characteristics to have. Although I will make assumptions about which properties are great-making or value-adding, I will not consider what value itself is; or what it is, in virtue of which the great-making properties are great-making. The concept of value which I will operate with is a purely formal one. I mean by this that it is to be located within a web of other concepts such as *good/better/best, bad/worse/worst, ought, ideal, perfect, unsurpassable*, etc. I shall also assume, as I believe that theists do, connections between these evaluative concepts and concepts of reason and action. Thus, a perfect being always has sufficient reason to the best thing (the reason being simply that it is the best); and correlatively a perfect being never has sufficient reason to make things worse; and that whatever a perfect being does, it will always have sufficient reason to do it. But I do not intend to give any of these terms a specifically moral interpretation. Perfect being theists regard divine perfection as a metaphysical property, which may have moral perfection as one of its manifestations. But the former is not to be identified with the latter.

Thus taking the central essential property of God (if he exists) to be his perfection, I will also assume that God is omnipotent, necessarily existent, and free. No doubt perfect being theists will want to add other essential properties to that list, but the ones I have listed are all that my argument requires.

While recognising that divine creation is not properly construed as a temporal notion, I will for ease of exposition put the argument in temporal terms. Creation can then be interpreted in terms of different kinds of dependence by different kinds of theist. Let us use the term "reality" to refer to the totality of existing things. It will thus cover the existence of what exists necessarily, such as abstract objects like numbers, propositions, etc; and also the existence of what exists contingently, such as atoms, stars, and galaxies. It will also cover God, if he exists at all. Since abstract objects will play no part in the following argument, I will subsequently ignore their existence.

## 2. The main argument stated

The main line of argument, which I will call Argument A, can now be stated, as follows:

(1) If God exists and contingent things exist, God created all contingent things (premise).

(2) God did not create any contingent things (premise).

So,

(3) It is not the case *both* that God exists, *and* that contingent things exist (from (1) and (2)).

(4) Contingent things do exist (premise).

So,

> (5) God does not exist (from (3) and (4)).

Since the argument is clearly valid, I will now try to show why we should accept the premises.

### 3. Defence of (1): If God exists and contingent things exist, God created all contingent things

This is probably the least controversial premise. It is universally accepted in all accounts of classical theism that God is the creator and sustainer of all that exists contingently. Controversy about this claim focuses not on its truth but on its interpretation, in particular how creation is to be understood in this context. Only the more naïve theists now take creation to be a temporal concept, the more usual alternative interpretation being that it is to be understood via the concept of dependence. To say that God created contingent things is to say that they somehow depend on him for their existence. Some writers are willing to say that God is the "cause" of contingent reality—but it is clear here that "cause" must not be understood in quasi-Humean terms, e.g. as involving temporal precedence, or law-like uniformities. It may be that dependence is best understood in terms of some non-temporal concept of explanation: the existence of God explains why there are any contingently existing things. It is in this sense that some theists are willing to say that God is self-caused, that is to say, the explanation of why God exists lies within God himself, not in any outside force. However this first premise is to be interpreted, then, it embodies a claim to which theism is committed, and to which (given its conditional nature), atheists should be equally willing to subscribe.

### 4. Defence of (4): Contingent things do exist

I will not try to provide any defence of (4), partly because I do not know how to offer any non-question-begging defence, and partly because it is a premise to which the great majority of theists are committed by other claims which they want to make e.g. about the existence of free will, of the possibility of sin, of appropriate punishment, of redemption, etc. Equally, the great majority of atheists would accept that the premise is true. It is of course possible that this consensus might be broken if my argument is successful, and this premise is seen to imply results unacceptable to theists. But at least initially, it seems a reasonable premise to accept.

### 5. Defence of (2): God did not create any contingent things

It is (2) that is the controversial, paradoxical-sounding assumption that stands in need of sustained defence. An initial statement of the defence runs as follows: Theism is committed to the idea that "in the beginning" (construing that phrase non-temporally) reality consisted simply of God, and all the abstract objects that exist necessarily. Let us label this state of affairs Reality 1. By an act of creation, God then brought about the existence of

contingently existing things. Reality then consisted of God and all contingently existing things. Let us call this state of affairs Reality 2. The problem for theism is that this account turns out to be incoherent in the light of theism's other commitments. For Reality 1 and 2 are not of equal perfection: Reality 2 is inferior. But necessarily, God is no perfection-diminisher, so he would never bring about a move from Reality 1 to Reality 2. He would never create any contingently existing things. To put this a little more formally, in what I will call Argument (B):

(7) Reality 1 was perfect (premise).
(8) Reality 2 is imperfect (premise).

So,

(9) Reality 2 is worse than Reality 1 (from (7) and (8)).
(10) God's actions never make reality worse (premise).

So,

(11) God's actions did not bring about a move from Reality 1 to Reality 2 (from (9) and (10)).

So,

(12) God did not create any contingent things (from (11)).

We now need to explore and defend the premises in this argument sketch.

### 6. Defence of (7): Reality 1 was perfect

To explain and justify (7), it is necessary to say something further about how the concept of perfection is to be understood. What follows is somewhat prescriptive, but it does, I think, capture the spirit of what followers of perfect being theology have in mind. The starting point must be the thought that God embodies all and only perfections. We can make sense of that claim in the following way. We can think first of properties as being ranged on a two-dimensional grid. Along one axis (say the vertical one), properties would be ranged in terms of value, that is to say, in terms of how much value, instantiations of that property would add to reality, all else being equal. At the most valuable end, it would be natural within theism to think of such properties as knowledge, power, benevolence, etc, properties which not only does God have, but ones which arguably he has essentially. Further down that axis would be properties whose instantiation might strike us as being neutral in value terms, such as being rectangular, being a telephone, etc. And below them would come properties instantiations of which would actually reduce the value in reality. We might here consider e.g. cruelty, meanness, vindictiveness, etc.

The other (horizontal) axis will be a measure of how closely the degree of instantiation of the property matches the ideal degree of instantiation, ideal being explained in terms of how much value, instantiation to that degree adds to reality. For example, given that knowledge is a value-adding

property, we can assume that greater value is added by the instantiation of a greater degree of knowledge than by the instantiation of a lesser. And given that vindictiveness is a value-reducing property, we can take it that other things being equal, more disvalue is added to reality, by the instantiation of greater degrees of vindictiveness than by the instantiation of lesser. For some valuable properties, it may be that the instantiation of the ideal degree for that property, and of the maximum degree, are the same. Thus in the case of knowledge, we may accept roughly that knowledge is good, that more knowledge is better, and that omniscience is best. For other valuable properties, the ideal and the maximum may not coincide. It may be, for example, that being merciful is a valuable property, but being limitlessly merciful is not the best way of being merciful. Perhaps there can be occasions when the demands of justice would conflict with those of limitless mercy. There will be yet other properties which are bipolar rather than scalar, for example, necessary existence. Nothing can more-or-less instantiate necessary existence: either it does instantiate it or it does not. On the assumption that necessary existence is a great-making property, and that it does not come in degrees, it will count as instantiated to an ideal degree if it is instantiated at all.

We can now define a perfection as an instantiation one of the swathe of properties which are both clustered at or near the top of the vertical axis, and which also have the ideal score on the horizontal axis, i.e. which are instantiated to an ideal degree. God, as Descartes' "supremely perfect being," will embody all the perfections. We can take it that the properties by which, within the tradition of classical theism, God's nature has always been explained, are the perfections. Thus omnipotence, omniscience, benevolence, independence, being the creator and sustainer of all contingent beings, being non-physical, being necessarily existent, being non-spatial and non-temporal are all perfections. Other possible candidates are impassivity and immutability.

From this account of perfection, we can draw out the following account of imperfection. Something is imperfect if either it is not an instantiation one of the swathe of top-ranking valuable properties, or it is one in that of favoured range, but not to an ideal degree. Thus, for example, knowledge is in the favoured range; and God has knowledge to an ideal i.e. limitless, degree, so knowledge contributes to God's overall perfection. By contrast, human beings have knowledge, but to a very limited degree, and their knowledge is therefore an imperfection. They also have e.g. selfishness, which is not a valuable property at all, no matter to what degree it is instantiated, and that too is therefore an imperfection.

It is compatible with this picture to recognise that within the range of imperfections will fall instantiations of properties, which do add value to reality, all else being equal. For example, being human will be an imperfect property; but given that it is instantiated, with all its limitations, it is valuable that certain other properties are also instantiated. Being human involves being liable to temptation, and that being so, the following condi-

tional is true: if being human is instantiated, it is valuable that the ability to resist temptation is also instantiated. More generally, we can recognise that whether a property is a valuable one for something to have depends on what sort of thing it is. Being amusing may be desirable in the performance of a comedian, but not in a funeral oration. Being very light is desirable in a high air balloon, but not in a ship's ballast. Being bouncy is desirable in a football but not in a billiard ball.

Even when we have relativised our talk of value and perfection to a kind of object, we cannot assume that all perfections which an item of that kind might have are mutually compatible. Being economical to run is a desirable quality in a car, but so is having good acceleration, but it may be that there has to be a trade-off between economy and acceleration: the more economical the car, the poorer the acceleration, and vice versa.

This sketch of course leaves open a number of questions. How are properties to be individuated? (Are malevolence and benevolence different properties, or only the instantiation to different degrees of a single property?) What *kind* of value is being invoked in this discussion of value, and what determines to which property-instantiations it attaches? However, I hope that I have said enough to provide a usable account of perfection for my purposes. Although it does involve some regimentation, it seems to be what is hinted at in such remarks as the following:

> Such qualities as life, consciousness, knowledge, wisdom, moral excellence, power, courage and the like are what we might call "great-making" properties; the more of these properties a being has, and the greater the degree to which it has them, the greater, all else being equal, it is.[6]

> A perfect being must have all the great-making properties and he must have them to an unlimited extent.[7]

> . . . to call something perfect is to say that it could not be improved upon considered as the kind of thing that it is. A perfect X is simply an X which lacks nothing that could improve it considered as an X.[8]

> God is good. Perfect being theology [claims] that God is perfectly good necessarily.[9]

Now let us come back to (7), the claim that Reality 1 is perfect. In what sense is theism committed to thinking that this is true? It is implied by what I have said above that reality has maximum value when it contains *only* something which instantiates all the perfections, and instantiates them to the ideal degree. But Reality 1 is precisely a situation in which highest number of mutually consistent properties of the most valuable kind are instantiated to an ideal degree, and in which there are no imperfections. There is thus no way in which Reality 1 could be bettered, and in this way it is unsurpassable and of supreme perfection.

## 7. Defence of (8): Reality 2 is imperfect

The imperfection of Reality 2 follows directly from what has been said about perfection in the previous section. The existence of created things neces-

sarily involves the existence of imperfections. Take, for example, the existence of the solar system, and think of it in terms of the list of perfections which God has. By contrast, the solar system is lacking in knowledge, power, benevolence, love, freedom, creativity, non-spatiality, necessary existence, and non-physicality. Reality 2, in which the solar system exists, necessarily contains very many instantiations of imperfections. Even when contingent beings do have divine properties, such as knowledge or benevolence, they do not have them to the ideal degree. Unlike the solar system, humans do know something, but they do not instantiate knowingness to the ideal represented by divine omniscience. Again, they can be moderately benevolent from time to time, but they fall hugely short of the continuous and unlimited benevolence of God. The argument that follows will focus on the divine perfection of necessary existence, which necessarily any created universe must lack.

There are thus two elements in the imperfection of Reality 2: the instantiation of valuable properties but not to an ideal degree, and the instantiation of non-valuable properties.

Let us now consider three possible objections to (8), and replies to those objections.

(i) The theist may wonder at this point if this defence of Premise 3 overlooks a distinction drawn earlier. What counts as a valuable property for X depends on what X is. So although being non-spatial or having necessary existence may be a valuable property in a divine being, they *could* not be valuable properties in created solar system. A created solar system is *bound* to be spatial, and *bound* to have only contingent existence, so it cannot be an imperfection in it if it does have these properties.

In reply, we can agree with the premise in this objection—but it is only another way of saying that a created solar system is bound to be imperfect. We have already seen how, given that something imperfect exists, it can be better that it has some properties than that it has others. (Given that human beings are liable to temptation, it is good that they have to some degree the power to resist temptation. The second property helps, as it were, to counteract the effect of the first.) But the counteracting is not so valuable that it is better that both should be instantiated than that neither should be.

(ii) A second objection would claim that there are some valuable properties which humans can have but God cannot. So by bringing about the move from Reality 1 to Reality 2, God makes possible and perhaps even ensures the creation of entirely new types of value. Consider e.g. such properties as being able to resist temptation, being willing to make sacrifices for other people (I here ignore any complications arising from the belief which most Christian theists will also hold that in some sense Jesus was God and he endured vicarious suffering), and being brave. Such properties do not have to be specifically moral properties. There is also a range of intellectual virtues which contribute to the value of humanity, for example, being intellectually adventurous, being scrupulous in collecting evidence, being careful and persistent in following through a chain of difficult reasoning, etc.

The theist may plausibly claim that having such properties instantiated makes reality better than it would otherwise be. On the assumption that these are valuable properties which God cannot have, the theist can then advance the following argument:

(12) There are some valuable properties which humans can have but which God cannot (premise).

So,

(13) Bringing about Reality 2 makes possible new modes of value which cannot exist in Reality 1 (from (12)).

So,

(14) God as a perfect being has reason to bring it about that Reality 2 exists rather than Reality 1 (from (13)).

Such an argument can be seen as challenging the assumption which I originally made, namely, that given that Reality 1 was perfect, no move away from it e.g. to Reality 2 could count as an improvement. What the above argument in effect says is that the move to Reality 2 can be an improvement in a certain respect, namely that it ensures the instantiation of valuable properties which could not be instantiated in Reality 1. So even if in some respects Reality 2 is worse than Reality 1 (it embodies imperfections), in other respects it is better.

To reply to this objection, we need to draw a distinction between properties which are what I will call underivatively valuable, and those that I will call counter-balancingly valuable. A counter-balancing value is one, the value of instantiations of which logically presupposes the instantiation of other non-valuable properties. The examples mentioned in the previous paragraph illustrate this. The capacity to resist temptation is a valuable property (let us assume), but the value which instantiations of it have logically presupposes the instantiation of some non-valuable properties, such as susceptibility to temptation. Bravery is a valuable property, but the existence of brave people logically requires the existence of something which is seriously very frightening, which is surely an imperfection. By contrast, an underivatively valuable property will be one whose instantiation does not carry such a presupposition. I take it that if God is to be supremely perfect, etc. then his existence cannot require the existence of some imperfections in reality. The implication of being supremely perfect is that he is not an amalgam of perfections and imperfections. It is not just that he has *all* perfections, but that in addition he has *only* perfections. If he had all perfections, but also some imperfections, then he could not be that being than which none greater can be thought. For we could think of a being who had all *and only* perfections, and that being would be greater. So, not only must God have all perfections, the perfections which he has must be underivative.

So if God is to have a reason to create the new kinds of value represented by the counterbalancing values, it has to be the case that those val-

ues do indeed more than counter-balance the imperfections which they entail. And now it seems that we are back with the familiar "greater good" defence (call this the GGD) in relation to the traditional problem of evil. The theist must agree that bringing about the existence of Reality 2 brings about the existence of imperfect beings, imperfect in at least two respects. First, they are bound to embody imperfections, in the sense of instantiating properties which are not valuable at all, most obviously the imperfection of having only contingent existence. Secondly, the valuable properties which they do embody, they cannot embody to an unimprovable extent. For example, although they have some power, they cannot be omnipotent; given that they have some knowledge, they cannot be omniscient, etc. Given that this is so, it is then desirable that they should have a range of other capacities which do something to ameliorate the imperfections from which they suffer. Given that there are many kinds of knowledge which they do not simply acquire non-consciously, it is good that they have intellectual curiosity, it good that they can be tenacious in thinking things through for themselves, etc. These are indeed valuable properties which God cannot have. But they are valuable only in beings who are themselves imperfect. They are ways of counteracting the more deep-seated imperfections which they presuppose.

Once we put the matter in this way, we can see that this first objection to (8) (the claim that Reality 2 is imperfect, is indeed a version of the GGD. It is open to a reply which faces all versions of such a defence. Given the choice between bringing about either pure evil or mitigated evil, the latter is indeed better than the former; but God's choice is between bringing about any evil, either pure or mitigated, and no evil at all, and in that case, former is worse than the latter. So, given that intellectual carefulness is a valuable property, it is not so valuable as to justify bringing about the existence of beings who are prone to intellectual sloppiness, simply to make possible the instantiation of intellectual carefulness. Given the choice between terrible unmitigated suffering, and terrible suffering accompanied compassion, the latter is better than the former. But given the choice between on the one hand terrible suffering whether or not it is accompanied by compassion, and on the other no suffering at all, the former is worse than the latter. Indeed, in our current context, a GGD argument looks especially weak. In the case of a traditional argument from evil, the theist can at least point to some properties which are plausible counterbalancing properties (such as compassion in the above example). But in the present context, the concept of good is metaphysical not specifically moral. Since there is no property which can counterbalance contingent existence as such, the whole of the created universe, both this one and any possible one which God could have created, is bound to have this non-counterbalanced imperfection.

The theist may respond to this by developing a form of the GGD defence which evades the above objection. It accepts that there is no good that counterbalances the imperfection of contingent existence by, as it were, making contingent things less contingent than they would otherwise be.

Rather, it appeals to goods which logically presuppose the existence of imperfect beings, and invokes properties which are counterbalancing in domains other than that of existence. Thus, the capacity to acquire knowledge that contingent beings have counterbalances the imperfection of their contingent existence, but not by lessening their contingency.

However, this further response by the theist also fails. For although she can summon up plausible examples of counterbalancing goods, such as compassion, etc. it remains true that none of these is instantiated to the ideal degree. God's compassion is ex hypothesi perfect, whereas all human compassion is bound to be imperfect. So although it remains true that it is better to have contingent beings who are compassionate rather than contingent beings who are not, the creation of either type brings gratuitous imperfection into reality.

(iii) A third objection focuses not on whether an instantiated property is great-making, nor on *the degree* to which it is instantiated (whether, for example, it is a perfection or whether it falls short of that degree of goodness), but rather on *the number of times* it is instantiated. For example, consider again the property of having knowledge. God has this valuable property to the ideal degree because he is omniscient. But he is (as we might say) only one knower, and if he were to create some contingent beings who instantiated this valuable property, even to a less-than-divine extent, he would have increased the value in reality just by increasing the number of instantiations of the property. To put it in simple terms, the theist may argue that reality contains greater value if there is one omniscient being and many knowing but non-omniscient beings, than if there is just the one omniscient being. Further, this increase in value is one that God cannot produce without producing contingent and therefore imperfect beings. For it is logically impossible to produce many instantiations of a property without producing many instantiators.

However, this line of theist argument also collapses into a version of the GGD, and hence is vulnerable to the above criticism. Suppose that increasing the number of knowers is a good thing. Then for God to create just one contingent being who is a knower rather than none at all would increase the value in reality; and that can be so only if the value of the continent being's great-making properties adds more value than is subtracted by the fact that these great-making properties are instantiated only to an imperfect degree by a being who suffers from the further imperfection of contingent existence. But this last claim is itself simple a version of the GGD, which I have argued is untenable.

## 8. Defence of (9): Reality 2 is worse than Reality 1

Given the formal concept of value and perfection which is here in play, it seems clear that (9) follows from (7) and (8). However let us confirm that claim by considering some possible objections.[10]

The theist may object first in the following terms:

The value involved in God's perfection is infinite, whereas the value (whether negative or positive) of contingent things must be finite. If this is the case, there can be no difference in value between Reality 1 and Reality 2, since a finite addition or subtraction to an infinite amount cannot change it.

A first problem with this initially attractive line of thought is that it commits the theist to some consequences which she will surely find unacceptable. For it implies that no matter how absolutely horrific a created universe might be (call the combined existence of God and such a universe Reality 3), its horrific nature would not make Reality 3 any worse than Reality 1. To put it in anthropomorphic terms, God could have no reason at all, in terms of increasing or decreasing the totality of value, to create one universe rather than another. He could have no reason (according to the objection which we are now considering) to create a truly wonderful universe rather than a truly terrible one, for the value of the resulting reality would be equally great (or indeed equally small). Suppose that God were such a being; he would then forfeit the title of "that than which nothing greater can be thought." For the thought of a being who as well as being perfect himself, did not avoid letting reality contain less value than it would have done had he acted differently, would be surpassed by the thought of a being who as well as being perfect himself, did avoid letting reality contain less value that it would have done had he acted differently.

The same point can be put in a different way in terms of the traditional problem of evil. If the objection were cogent, then when a sufferer raised the question "How could a good God allow this atrocity to happen?," we could always remove the puzzle by saying that God's perfection gave him no more reason to create a horror-free universe than it did to create one a wonderful one. For the infinity of his own perfection would ensure that whatever Reality resulted from his creative act would be just as perfect as he is himself.

A second weakness in the theist's criticism here is that it wrongly presupposes that my arguments (A) and (B) require the use of a mathematical concept of infinity of a kind which the objection presupposes. The criticism is right in saying that adding or subtracting a finite number from infinity results in infinity. But this numerical truth cannot simply be carried across to a discussion of God's perfection. Minimally, it is only to something which has denumerable units that the concept of infinity can be applied. We can sensibly ask whether space is infinite, because space can be divided into units, such as inches, light years, etc. and we can ask whether, proceeding in a Euclidean straight line, there is a 1:1 correspondence between the units and the natural numbers. Analogously for time; and analogously in both cases with the issue of infinite divisibility.[11] But when we speak of God's perfection, or of particularly kinds of perfection (necessary existence, creativity, goodness, etc), we do not presuppose that there are units of perfection by reference to which God's perfection can be judged infinite. The perfections do not come in separable units, and it therefore makes no sense to describe them as infinite (nor of course to deny that they are infinite) in the

mathematical sense. Although they no doubt fall under ordinal descriptions, such as less/more, least/most, greatest, etc, and although God is located at the greatest level in appropriate cases, it is a logical blunder to apply the concept of infinity in its mathematical sense. When the concept of infinity is applied to God, it is in the different sense of being unlimited, unconditioned, unbounded. It is clear these are quite different concepts from that of infinity. An infinite sequence can have a bound or a limit in the sense of a starting point, and hence could not be described without qualification as unlimited. By contrast, a country in which people are allowed to publish anything would be one in which they had unlimited freedom of the press, but their degree of freedom could not be called infinite. It is significant that in describing the perfections of God, none of the theists quoted in section 6 above used the concepts of infinity. In short, then, this first objection presupposes the use of a concept of infinity which my argument does not rely on.

An alternative objection to (9) (an objection that is in fact incompatible with the first "infinity" objection above) is to accept (9) and try to show that it is innocuous. The critic might say that Reality 2 *does* contain more value than Reality 1, given that both contain the unlimited goodness of God, but Reality 2 contains the net positive value of created things as well. So Reality 2 can be counted as worse than Reality 1 only if the contingent world contains a net negative value. But it is implausible to think that the contingent world does have a net negative value, so it follows that Reality 2 does contain more value than Reality 1.

The problem with this objection by the theist is that if Reality 2 contains more value than Reality 1, Reality 1 contains less value than Reality 2. This creates two problems for the theist. First, it entails that God's goodness is not unsurpassable—it would be surpassed by the goodness of Reality 2, in which God's goodness is supplemented by yet more goodness. And this contradicts the assumption of "perfect being" theology that God himself is unsurpassably great. Secondly, it implies that if God *is* unsurpassably great, his greatness would have to derive in part from something else, namely his creation of a contingent universe; and this is incompatible with the nature of God.

A third criticism would claim that the move from (7) and (8) to (9) involves equivocation about "imperfect." Sometimes (so the criticism would go), this means merely *being less valuable*, and sometimes *taking away value*. The theist will agree that any created universe is imperfect in the first sense, but deny it the second sense. So, the critic concludes, (9) does not follow from (7) and (8).

But there is no equivocation here. Given two options A and B, if one chooses option A, which creates less value than option B, then one has indeed lessened the total amount of value in existence—lessened it not necessarily in relation to whatever value was already in existence, but lessened it in relation to what it might have been. A perfect being presents a limiting case of this principle. Since ex hypothesi Reality 1 is perfect, avoiding the creation of any contingent beings maintains the existence of a maximal level

of value—from which it follows that there is no alternative action which can bring it about that there is more value than already exists.

## 9. Defence of (10): God's actions never make reality worse

By saying that God's actions never make reality worse, I mean that it is true of God that he never

> Either
>> (A) reduces the number of perfections by bringing it about
>>
>>> (a) that some at least of the existing perfections cease to be perfect because the properties involved are no longer instantiated to an ideal degree, OR
>>>
>>> (b) that some of the existing valuable properties cease to be instantiated at all
>
> Or
>> (B) increases
>>
>>> (a) the number of non-valuable properties, OR
>>>
>>> (b) the degree to which they are instantiated.

The thought behind this premise is that God as a being with all and only perfections could have no reason to make reality worse by moving from Reality 1 to Reality 2. But someone who knowingly and deliberately ensures the instantiation of more imperfection than there has to be, either by creating items which have imperfect properties, or creating items which have perfect properties but not to an ideal degree, is thereby making reality worse than it need be. Such a being cannot itself be totally perfect.

Does this fall foul of the claim that God is not a utility-maximiser? It has been argued by e.g. Adams[12] that there is no Biblical warrant for thinking that God is a consequentialist, and hence no justification for thinking that he is a consequentialist maximiser. The implication of Adams's claim is that there is no reason to think that any reality brought about by God, including e.g. Reality 2, will have to be the best possible, even less for thinking that it would have to be perfect.

Suppose we interpret utility in terms of value, which is in effect what Adams does. His conclusion then is

> (a) It is possible that God's actions do not maximise value

This is equivalent to

> (b) It is possible that God's actions make it the case that there is less value than there might have been had he done something else

And it is plausible that this entails

> (c) It is possible that God's actions make reality worse

We can note first that (c) does not contradict (10), because of the presence of the modal operator in (c) and its absence in (10). In general, "It is

possible that not-p" is compatible with "p." However, it might be thought that this way of dealing with Adams's point is too quick. For, it might be said, our only reason for accepting (10) derives from reflection on the implications of God's defining features within the "perfect being" tradition. That means that the reasons used to support (10) are all themselves necessary truths (if true at all), and that mean that they entail the modal claim:

> (d) It is necessary that God's actions do not make reality worse

It is only if we have reason to accept (d) (so the complaint would go), that we have reason to accept (10). So even if (10) is compatible with Adams's conclusion, the reason on which it rests is not. So any adequate defence of (10) needs to show that Adams is wrong.

So what of Adams's reason for asserting (a)? There is no reason to think that the Bible mentions all the truths about God, or about his nature. So the absence of Biblical reference to God as necessarily a non-creator of imperfection would not show that he did not have that feature. And for the reasons given above, it appears that at least with traditional "perfect being" conceptions of God, the claim is true. But anyway, the issue of Biblical warrant to which Adams refers for claiming that God is not a maximiser can in this context be set aside. For the point at issue concerns theism, not specifically Bible-based forms of theism. So there is no good reason to attach any special significance to the contents of the Bible.

An alternative defence of (a) would be to say that God has to create some contingent beings. He thus has to be an imperfection creator, from which (a) would follow. This claim might be defended by pointing out that one of God's defining characteristics is his creative power. God is by definition the creator of all contingently existing things. So, the defence of (a) would go, God *has to* create some contingent beings in order to embody one of his own perfections. There is room for him to exercise choice about *which* contingent things to create, but there is no choice to be made between creating and not creating contingent beings at all. Further, the theist might maintain, God's perfection encompasses boundless generosity, and therefore requires the existence of some conscious beings other than himself in relation to whom his nature can express itself.

However, this defence of (a) falls foul of another standard tenet of theism, namely that God's creation is entirely free. Given divine perfection, it cannot be the case that in order, as it were, to make himself perfect or to bring about his perfection, God *had to* create anything contingent and hence imperfect. Before the creation of anything contingent, he was already "something than which none greater can be conceived," a being who was "supremely perfect," who had "all perfections," who was "unsurpassable."[13] Another way of putting this point would be to say that Reality 1 is logically possible. The non-existence of contingent beings would not by itself show such Reality 1 to be imperfect. That being so, we are left with no reason to accept (a).[14]

In the light of this, the theist might try to defend a weaker position, that although God is free to create or not create contingent beings, his great-

making property of generosity gives him a powerful reason to do so. Given that he is non-arbitrary, and hence is responsive to reason, then he is almost bound to create contingent beings, and the only question for him to consider is "Which ones?"

However, this fall-back position also turns out to be indefensible. Let us grant that God as a being of reason will always do what he has the strongest reason for doing. However, as a being of reason he will presumably not act on powerful reasons for doing something if there are even more powerful reasons against doing it. In the case in hand, there are more powerful reasons against creating contingent beings than in favour of creating them. For he can know that any version of Reality 2 which he brings about will be imperfect.

There is anyway something incoherent about the claim that God's essential generosity could give him a reason to create contingent beings, even imperfect ones. For it is incoherent to suppose that it is an act of generosity to bring creatures into existence, even if once they exist, they lead flourishing lives and are themselves very glad they exist. For to whom is the generosity initially shown? Just as one does not wrong someone or harm someone by not bringing them into existence, so one does not benefit someone, or act generously towards them, by creating them. There is in such cases no creature on whom the benefit or harm could be bestowed. Of course, once creatures exist, generosity can be exercised towards them, by ensuring that they have at least a minimally decent existence (or harm exercised by ensuring the reverse). But that fact is not to the point if we are asking what an act of generosity to X could be before X exists.

This completes the defence of Argument (B), and hence the defence of (2) (the claim that God did not create any contingent things) in Argument (A). Since that was the only controversial premise in Argument (A), and Argument (A) is clearly valid, we are entitled to assert the conclusion of Argument A, namely, that God does not exist,

## 10. The argument from imperfection and the argument from evil

Superficially, it might seem that the argument from imperfection outlined above is variant of the traditional argument from evil, in that both argue from some defect in the created world to the non-existence of God. But that parallel is misleading. Traditional accounts of the problem of evil focus on the alleged incompatibility, or at least tension, between the existence of God, and the existence of evil. The tension is always between on the one hand, God's benevolence or lovingness, and on the other, the evils which we find in *this particular* universe, evils which are standardly conceived in terms of pain, suffering and distress, and never at all in terms of such metaphysical concepts as that of independence or necessary existence. The traditional argument has a kind of immediate appeal: it is immediately intelligible how there at least *seems* to be a conflict between permitting suffering and being benevolent, a conflict with which we all too familiar in the human case. Suffering (of a suitable kind) is obviously morally evil, and benevolence (in a suitable context) is obviously morally good. So there is an immediate

prima facie problem. Usually, the kind of evil and hence the kind of value on which the argument from evil trades, is specifically moral. Even those theists who think that evil does not present a serious philosophical problem for theism agree that it does present a pastoral problem.[15] Further, the implicit background assumption is that God could have created a very much better world—that is why there is a supposed to be a problem with the claim that he created this particular world, with all its evil.

It will be clear that the argument from imperfection is quite different, in that it does not invoke suffering per se, nor does it invoke evil if that term is meant to have a moral connotation. Instead, it operates with the metaphysical concept of perfection and imperfection, and of a value which is not essentially moral at all. This might initially seem a strange concept of value to employ in connection with God, one of whose defining characteristics is often said to be moral perfection. But it is clear that such a view cannot be quite right. According to perfect being theism, God has his goodness essentially, and therefore would have possessed it even if he had created nothing contingent. But it would be only if he had created something contingent that his goodness would have had a specifically moral form.[16] (Arguably, it would be only if he had created something *sentient* that his goodness would have had to be moral. But as some thinkers believe that it is possible to have moral obligations to the insentient environment, I put the point in the less committal way.) Further, the imperfections which the argument finds in the contingent world are metaphysical imperfections which contingent things have necessarily (that they have contingent existence only, etc.). So whereas the traditional problem of evil assumes that a created world need not have contained evil, and therefore need not have been evidence against God's existence, the argument from imperfection claims that *any* created world will contain imperfections incompatible with its having an origin in a being who has all perfections. In this respect, the argument from imperfection is closer to an atheistic version of some variants of the cosmological argument. The latter argues that since there are contingent beings, there must exist a necessary being (who is then assumed rather unclearly to have the other defining features of God). The argument from imperfection claims that since there are contingent beings, there *cannot* exist a necessary being who has all and only perfections. The argument can thus claim to be a new and distinctive line of reasoning in support of atheism.

Atheism, however, can be no more precise than the theism which it rejects. The criticism of theism presented here is directed specifically at so-called "perfect being" theism. A theism which dropped the requirement that is God perfect, or the stipulation that among his perfections are necessary existence and independence, would be able to evade the problems raised in this paper. Whether such theism would nevertheless succumb to other objections would depend on precisely how it was defined.

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## Notes

1. Nicholas Everitt, "Why Only Perfection Is Good Enough," *Philosophical Papers*.29 (2000): 155–158, and see also Everitt, *The Non-existence of God* (London: Routledge, 2004), 243–244.

2. Anselm, *Proslogion*, trans. M. J. Charlesworth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 117.

3. René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Volume 2*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1984), Fifth Meditation, 47.

4. Ibid., 48.

5. Daniel and Frances Howard-Snyder, "How an Unsurpassable Being Can Create a Surpassable Word," *Faith and Philosophy* 11 (1994): 260–268, at 260.

6. Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 201.

7. Katherin A. Rogers, *Perfect Being Theology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 13.

8. Brian Davies, *Thinking about God* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1985), 193.

9. Rogers, *Perfect Being Theology*, 120.

10. Objections in these terms have been made by some who have seen the paper.

11. I am not here concerned with questions about how we would verify or falsify any such claims about infinity, but only with a necessary precondition of asking a well-formed question about whether something is infinite.

12. Robert M. Adams, "Must God Create the Best?" *Philosophical Review* 81 (1972): 317–332; reprinted in *The Concept of God*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

13. See the references given in notes 1-5, above.

14. I here leave on one side the interesting and plausible line of argument developed by William Rowe in "Can God Be Free?" *Faith and Philosophy* 19 (2002): 405–424. Rowe argues that if there were a best possible world, then God's essential perfection would compel him to create it, and he therefore could not be free. I am assuming for the sake of argument that God (if he exists) is free with respect to creation, and hence could choose whether to create anything. My argument is that even with this assumption, the non-existence of the God can be derived.

15. Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdermans, 1974), 63–64.

16. It thus somewhat incautious of Petersen et al to say "It is a matter of consensus among theists that God is *perfectly morally good* " in Michael L. Petersen, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, and David Basinger, *Reason and Religion Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 68. For the reason given in the text, God's essential goodness cannot be moral. For one who accepts this point, see Davies, *Thinking about God*, 223.

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