



Activity 4 – Is there a perfect being?

Perfect being theology is a way of thinking about God which follows from the assumption that God is a perfect being – the best being possible. Perfect being theology not only bears on what we think God might be like, but also whether we think He exists. In this section we look briefly at how perfect being theology, and the definition of God as a perfect being (or the assumption that God, defined some other way, is perfect), makes a difference to the evidence for and against God's existence. Each of the following topics constitutes a whole topic on many A-level syllabuses: so here are just a few suggestions as to how perfect being theology interacts with these.

The Ontological Argument

At the end of the last section we saw how perfect being theologians might appeal to the intuitions that existing is better than not existing, and that necessarily existing is better than just plain old existing, to argue that God has to exist. Refer back to the last section to look at these arguments.

Suppose that there is a successful ontological argument. Does it provide good support for religious belief of the rich kind found in society? Not obviously: it would prove that there actually is a perfect being, that the best possible being really exists, 'out there', not just as a hi-tech piece of equipment in the philosophical gym. If we wanted to know whether the perfect being became Incarnate in Jesus Christ, or revealed the Quran to Mohammed (pbuh), though, a lot more work would be needed.

The Cosmological and Design Arguments

The God of the Abrahamic religions is typically conceived of as perfect – but also as the Creator of everything else. Using this second conception, philosophers have often wondered whether the world contains evidence that suggests it was created, rather than just existing 'by accident', or necessarily. (See the previous sections to think about what it would mean for the universe to exist necessarily.) Arguments that it does are typically called 'cosmological' and 'design' arguments, depending on which features of the world the philosopher looks at when seeing if there is evidence of a Creator.

If all the word "God" is taken to mean is "the Creator of everything else", cosmological and design arguments only have to show the existence of some rational agent powerful enough to make the world. If "God" is taken to mean both "the Creator of everything else" and "the best possible being", these arguments are affected in interesting ways. It might increase the difficulty of their success, since they now have to prove the existence of a maximally rational, maximally powerful, impeccable eternal agent (among whatever else we think a perfect being would be like). On the other hand, it might make the job easier. The idea of a perfect being is much more precise than a creator who is somewhat powerful and somewhat rational. We might think there are strange features of the world, such as moral truths or the regularities we uncover in physics, which only a perfect being could explain. A less-than-perfect being might be a worse explanation for such features than none at all.



The Problems of Evil and Hiddenness

If you knew that, in a foreign country, there was an extremely powerful dictator who wanted the Labour party to win elections in Britain (and no equivalent friend of the Conservatives), you would expect Labour to win most of the elections. If they didn't, all the explanations for Labour's losses would involve the limits of the dictator's powers.

Supposing that there is an infinitely powerful, impeccable Being in existence has rather similar consequences. We might expect an impeccable Being to want the world to be a better place, and so expect an omnipotent impeccable Being to make the world a better place: so all the suffering and evil would be very surprising. Likewise, given the goodness of our knowing about this Being's existence, we might expect a lot more certainty about whether He exists, so doubt about His existence would be very surprising.

The 'problem of evil' – why does God allow suffering and cruelty? – and its analogue, the 'problem of divine hiddenness' – why does God allow so much doubt about His existence? – are both direct consequences of the assumption that God is a perfect being. Without something like Anselm's definition, we could appeal to God's weakness, ignorance, or carelessness to explain why He allows these things. On the other hand, perfect being provides a framework for theists to respond to the problems of evil and hiddenness. We might discern reasons why a truly perfect being, rather than a perfect pet-owner or perfect economist, might permit the sort of world we see.