



Activity 3 – God’s “perfections”

Pretty much since the dawn of Western philosophy, perfect being arguments have been made: in ancient Greece and Rome, they were sometimes made about ‘gods’ in the plural; the writers of the Old Testament ascribed properties to God which we think of as ‘perfections’; as monotheism rose and polytheism fell in the first half of the first millennium CE, ‘God’ singular, typically the God of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, became the subject of perfect being arguments. In this section we look at a collection of perfect being arguments for a group of claims about God which, taken together, philosophers call “Classical Theism”. Rather handily, versions of these arguments all come together in Anselm’s *Proslogion*, but that is by no means the first or last place, or the only arguments with which, these features of God have been defended by philosophers.

The sketches below aren’t based on any particular philosophers’ versions, which are more detailed and tend to appeal to whatever views about morality, minds and matter are prevalent when some philosopher makes the argument.

Agency and Impeccability

It seems like a good thing that we can think and act: that we are ‘agents’ with ‘minds’. Likewise, we tend to value things more the more agency, or mentality, they seem to have: so we think it’s worse to harm humans than to harm animals, and worse to harm animals than to harm vegetables. It seems, then, that rationality (the ability to think) and agency are both perfections. So God must be a rational agent.

Going one step further, agents which are more virtuous – which have good character traits like kindness or courage – are better than those which don’t: we aspire to be virtuous, and try to avoid being vicious. So if God is an agent, He must be the most virtuous there is – He will never do the wrong thing. God’s feature of never doing the wrong thing is called ‘impeccability’, from the Latin *peccato* for ‘sin’ or ‘wrongdoing’. (Newspapers sometimes refer to celebrities’ minor wrongdoings as ‘peccadilloes’.)

Omnipotence and Omniscience

There are two lines of reasoning which suggest that a perfect being would be all-powerful (able to do anything ‘logically possible’ – see the first section) and all-knowing (knowing everything that can be known – statements which are true, or things which really exist). The first is to reflect on the argument above that a perfect being would be a rational agent. Agency is the capability of action; since agents can be capable of more or fewer actions, it seems like agency comes in degrees, and more of it is better. So the perfect being would have the maximum amount of agency, and be capable of doing anything – a kind of capability called ‘omnipotence’. If something can be more or less rational, and rationality is good, then the more rational the better. We might think that rationality is not just about reflecting, remembering, desiring, and other mental activities, but also learning or knowing. Then a being who has the maximum kind of rationality will be a perfect learner or perfect knower, and know everything. That kind of knowledge is called ‘omniscience’.



Another line of reasoning would cut straight to the intuition that power is good (although this might be the same as the intuition that agency is good – power and agency might just be the same thing). So, having more power will be better. Then a perfect being will have the maximum possible power, and be ‘omnipotent’. We might also cut straight to the intuition that knowledge is, generally speaking, better than ignorance. The more we know the better. So a perfect being will have no gaps in His knowledge: He’ll be ‘omniscient’.

Timelessness and Changelessness

It seems good to us to be alive, rather than dead or merely existing without life, like a rock. So, a perfect being would be alive. But it seems like something can have more or less life: living longer seems to be the most obvious way. Many ancient and medieval philosophers, however, also thought that there was another way to have more life. If you live for a long time, then however much life you have, you only get to enjoy a tiny part of that life at a time. Your past moments lie behind you, accessible only by memory; your future moments don’t exist yet, and when you ‘get there’, you’ll have ‘lost’ the life you have now. It seems that, if it were possible, it would be better for you to enjoy all your life at once. So if God is perfect, then He’s alive in the most complete way: He does not exist in time, with parts of His life in the past and parts of His life not yet existing. It’s not easy to think about what this might mean: St Thomas Aquinas offered a metaphor of a man on a mountain looking down on a line of travelers along a road. He (representing God) never has to move from one place on the road to another, even though the whole road is present to Him; for the travelers, however, life consists in going from one place to another.¹

If we accept this picture of God’s eternal life, we might think that, as a result, God can’t change, since in order to change, you must first be one way and then another. The different ways you could be don’t exist yet – they are tied up with future moments in your life. But there’s only one moment in God’s life, and He’s already living it. Alternatively, a perfect being theologian might take a more direct line of reasoning. Change might be thought to be a symptom of imperfection: you only need to change if you aren’t already as good as you can be. If God is already as good as it’s possible to be, He’ll never need to change to become better. God’s changelessness is sometimes called His ‘immutability’, from the Latin *mutare*, which means ‘to change’. (‘Mutants’ are people who have been changed by magic or sci-fi radiation or whatever.)

Necessity

Finally, we might think it’s better to exist than not to exist. Would you rather have a conception about £100, or £100 in your hand? Actually existing is better than just being an idea, or a fictional character. Alternatively, actually existing is better than merely being capable of existing. It’s possible that you have £100 – there’s nothing logically contradictory about it – but wouldn’t it be even better to actually have £100? Existence seems to make things better than they would be if they didn’t exist: like agency or life, it’s a perfection.

¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1q14a13r3



If this is so, then it seems like a perfect being will exist. Anselm took this piece of perfect being theology to be one reason for thinking God existed: otherwise, He'd be lacking a perfection, and wouldn't be the perfect being. This perfect being argument eventually became known as an 'ontological argument'; it's thought of as the first of Anselm's two ontological arguments in the *Proslogion*, and follows immediately after his definition of God in *Proslogion* Chapter 2.

Alternatively, we might think that, even if mere existence isn't better than non-existence, and so a perfection, there is a kind of existence which *is* a perfection. Suppose you do have £100 in your hand. It could be the case that you don't: perhaps you were never given it. But suppose you could choose between the situation where you have the £100, but could have failed to have it, and another situation where you have the £100, and *there's no way things could have been so that you didn't*. You couldn't fail to have the £100. If something exists, and it couldn't fail to exist – it must exist – it has 'necessary existence' or 'exists necessarily'. It seems like 'necessary existence' is better than bog-standard, plain old existence. So if God is a perfect being, He must have that kind of existence, and exist necessarily. Of course, if anything exists necessarily, then it exists anyway. So if God is a perfect being, He must exist! This is known as Anselm's second ontological argument, and comes right after the first in *Proslogion* Chapter 3.

Questions

1. Do you think that agency is a pure perfection (see above)? Explain your judgment.
2. Can God be both impeccable and omnipotent? Try to give a definition for 'impeccability' and 'omnipotent' so that the answer is 'yes'. Do these strike you as good definitions? Explain your judgment.
3. Can you think of any problems which might arise for theists, if God never changes?
4. How significant is it for perfect being theology, as a method of theology, if the perfect being arguments in Activity 3 all fail?