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Incompatible and Incomparable Perfections: A New Argument Against Perfect Being Theism

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Abstract. Perfect being theism is the view that the perfect being exists and the property being-perfect is the property being-God. According to the strong analysis of perfection, a being is perfect just in case it exemplifies all perfections. On the other hand, the weak analysis of perfection says that a being is perfect just in case it exemplifies the best possible combination of compatible perfections. Strong perfect being theism accepts the former analysis while weak perfect being theism accepts the latter. In this paper, I argue that there are good reasons to reject both versions of perfect being theism. On the one hand, strong perfect being theism is false if there are incompatible perfections; I argue that there are. On the other hand, if either no comparison can be made between sets of perfections, or they are equally good, then there is no best possible set of perfections. I argue for the antecedent of this conditional statement, concluding that weak perfect being theism is false. In the absence of other analyses of perfection, I conclude that we have reason to reject perfect being theism.

Introduction

Many theistic philosophers in the Abrahamic tradition are perfect being theists. Perfect being theism is the view that a unique perfect being exists and that being (uniquely) perfect is a necessary and sufficient condition of being God. It follows logically that God exists. In an attempt to describe what a perfect being would be like, if one existed, perfect being theists argue that a being is perfect only if such a being instantiates certain properties (often called perfections or great-making properties) that increase their possessor's intrinsic value. However, what perfect being theists want to achieve is giving necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for perfection. Thus, a complete analysis of perfection would inform us what conditions are needed for a being to be perfect.[1]

There are two standard analyses of perfection that perfect being theists employ. On one analysis, being perfect requires instantiating *all* perfections there are. Call this the *strong* analysis. If correct, then perfect being theists would be committed to accept the proposition that being perfect entails having all perfections. Recent developments in philosophical theology (see Morris 1987; Nagasawa 2017; Muphy 2017; Leftow 2011) have cast doubt upon such an analysis. The heart of the worry is that there might, for all we know, be incompatible perfections

[1] For the main accounts of PBT see references in the Introduction. See also Leftow (2004) and Wierenga (2011) for historical perspectives. For objections to PBT see Oppy (2011), Speaks (2014, 2016).

or, worse, there is evidence that there are such perfections. If so and the strong analysis is correct, then it is impossible that there is a perfect being.

Considering this, another analysis of perfection has been developed. According to this analysis, being perfect just requires instantiating the best possible combination of compatible perfections (Nagasawa 2017; Morris 1987). Call this the *weak* analysis of perfection. Not only does it have interesting consequences for the ontological argument, but also deals with the previous worry generated by the strong analysis of perfection. That there are incompatible perfections does not entail that there cannot be a perfect being because what is required is just that a being instantiates perfections that are compatible and that those are the best among other combinations. This way, perfect being theists dismantle the problem of incompatibility.

I do not, however, think that the weak version of perfect being theism is free of problems. In fact, I show in this paper that it does not even completely avoid the problem of incompatibility. More generally, I argue that we have good reason to believe that either no comparison relation holds between sets of compatible perfections, or (if some holds) that they are equally good. On both alternatives, it is false that there is a *best* combination of perfections. Since the weak version of perfect being theism entails that there is such a combination, then by modus tollens, that version is false.

The Problem of Incompatibility

A perfection is a kind of great-making property. A great-making property is a property the exemplification of which increases the value of its exemplifier—i.e., increases the intrinsic value of any thing that exemplifies it. In other words, a great-making property makes a positive contribution to the intrinsic value of anything that exemplifies it. What kind of great-making properties are perfections? They are *absolute* great-making properties, which means that they increase the *intrinsic* value of its exemplifier (not its extrinsic value). Perfections are *perfectly exemplified* absolute great-making properties, which means that they are exemplified to their *optimal* degree. The optimal degree need not be its *maximum* degree but often is. An example of optimality without maximality is perfect freedom. A being may be free to do irrational things but this does not mean that such freedom makes this being better (Draper 2019). Plausibly, it is maximal freedom *consistent with* rationality that is best. An example of optimality as maximality is omniscience.

With this concept of perfection, let's review the definition of PBT for ease of exposition. PBT is the proposition that the perfect being exists and that (the property) being perfect is (the property) being God. All strands of PBT claim this. We can identify two strands of PBT which enrich our current definition by analyzing what being perfect is. There are two main analyses of perfection that are the focus of this paper, namely, the *strong* and *weak* analyses of perfection.

On the one hand, the strong analysis of perfection says that a being, *b*, is perfect *b* iff *b* exemplifies all perfections there are. On the other hand, there is the weak analysis of perfection according to which *b* is perfect iff *b* exemplifies the *best possible* combination of *compatible* perfections. Taking each analysis of perfection, we can define two strands of PBT accordingly:

(SPBT): the perfect being exists, being perfect is being God, and $\forall b$, *b* is perfect iff *b* exemplifies *all* perfections.

(WPBT): the perfect being exists, being perfect is being God, and $\forall b$, *b* is perfect iff *b* exemplifies the *best* possible combination of compatible perfections.

Note that SPBT and WPBT do not entail each other. One might think that SPBT entails WPBT because, if all perfections are compatible, then the *best* combinations of perfections is the one that contains *all* perfections. But this relies on the assumption that adding more perfections to a collection makes them better—an assumption that we will get to later in the paper. But without such an assumption, then entailment from SPBT to WPBT is blocked.

Is there any reason to prefer one strand of PBT over the other? Some philosophers think there is.[2] One reason to prefer WPBT over SPBT is what I call here *the problem of incompatibility*. To explain the problem, however, I need to define incompatibility. Let us take that task next.

We say that some property(ies) is(are) incompatible iff they make an *inconsistent set*. A set, S, of properties is *inconsistent* iff it is (broadly) logically impossible to exemplify all the properties in S. Let 'Φ' be the set of all perfections. The problem of incompatibility starts with the question, is Φ an inconsistent set? If it is, then no being can have all perfections. This seems to contradict SPBT.

For brevity, let '$I(\Phi)$' be the sentence 'Φ is an inconsistent set'. Assume for the sake of the argument that SPBT is the correct strand of PBT, i.e., if PBT is true, then SPBT is true. (I will use this assumption in 4-9 below.) Then,

1. If $I(\Phi)$, then PBT is false. [premise]

2. $I(\Phi)$. [premise]

∴ 3. PBT is false. [MP 1,2]

We can establish premise 1 easily by formulating a conditional proof (CP).

4. $I(\Phi)$. [Assumption for CP]

∴5. $\forall b$, it is logically impossible that *b* exemplifies *all* perfections in Φ. [Definition of Incompatibility]

∴6. SPBT is false. [5 definition]

7. If PBT is true, then SPBT is true. [Assumption of Strong Analysis]

∴8. PBT is false. [6, 7 MT]

∴9. If $I(\Phi)$ then PBT is false. [4-8 CP]

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[2] Cf. Nagasawa (2011, 2017); Murphy (2017).

The crucial question, however, is whether premise 2 is true.

I do not have the space to argue for 2, but two points are worth noting. First, I can direct the reader to many arguments that try with varying degrees of success to establish 2 by arguing that a *pair* of perfections is incompatible. For one, even though Nelson Pike (1969) showed that moral perfection and omnipotence are compatible, Morriston (2001) argues persuasively that *necessary* moral perfection is incompatible with (necessary) omnipotence.[3] Kretzmann (1966) argues that omniscience and immutability are incompatible. Another argument challenges the compatibility between moral perfection and perfect freedom on the grounds that moral perfection entails moral praiseworthiness, which in turn entails being free (in the libertarian sense) to do wrong. Yet another argument claims that perfect mercy and perfect justice are incompatible because the former sometimes requires not giving others what one deserves while the former requires always giving others what they are due. Still another argument claims that existing necessarily is incompatible with being a concrete entity.[4] In other words, there are many arguments for the conclusion that a pair of perfections is incompatible. If we take the conclusion of each argument and put them in a disjunction, the likelihood that $I(\Phi)$ increases.

The other point comes from a discussion with Paul Draper on incompatibility arguments. Note that the main strategy of incompatibility arguments is to identify a pair of divine attributes and see if they are compatible or not. Thus, incompatibility arguments against PBT can exploit the tension between God's so-called *metaphysical* attributes (immutability, impassibility, timelessness, simplicity, necessary existence, etc.) and God's perfect agency. But if one defines 'God' as the perfect *agent* instead of the perfect *being*, arguments that exploit this tension don't work. In other words, it is easier to hit PBT than to hit perfect *agent* theism. Now, the fact that it is easier to hit PBT with one of these arguments makes PBT more at risk of being false and, therefore, less probable than perfect agent theism. Therefore, from an evidential point of view, I am inclined to think that 2 is more probable than not. Hence, be it through demonstrative or evidential support, it seems 2 wins against its contradictory.

If what I've said is true, theists are justified in worrying about holding SPBT. But assume that I am wrong. There is another problem for PBT-ists. One might think that 2 is *possibly true* in the *epistemic* sense of 'possibly'. Assuming that it is, we can formulate a modal-epistemic version of the incompatibility problem as follows.

1*. Necessarily, if $I(\Phi)$, then PBT is false. [premise]

2*. Possibly, $I(\Phi)$. [premise]

∴ 3*. Possibly, PBT is false. [MP 1,2]

Though this is *not* at odds with the proposition that God exists necessarily (as many theists believe), it is an evidential challenge for those who endorse SPBT. I find 2* plausible. For all we know, there may be perfections too complex for us to understand, let alone grasping the entailment relations between them (see objection V below for a related concern). At this point,

[3] See Mawson (2002) for an objection and Morriston (2003) for a reply to Mawson.
[4] This was pointed out to me by Paul Draper.

then, it seems that the burden of proof is on the theist who endorses PBT. Since it is the case that *if* one has reasons to believe 2* is true, then there is tension between those reasons and the common theistic belief that PBT is true, I submit that the problem of incompatibility is a problem those who endorse SPBT should take seriously.

Either way, I think theists find this sufficiently troublesome to reject SPBT. In fact, it is the assumption that being perfect entails having all perfections (7 above) that generates the case for 1. And since 2 is sufficiently plausible, 3 goes through. This is just one[5] reason many theists reject SPBT and accept WPBT, because endorsing WPBT opens the door to reject 1 through rejecting that the strong analysis of perfection is the correct one.[6] Also note that endorsing WPBT deals with the modal version of the incompatibility problem since the mere possibility of there being incompatible perfections does not entail that, possibly, there is no perfect being. These are strong reasons to prefer WPBT over SPBT.

The Problem of Incomparability

Theists have good reasons to think that 2 is probably true, thus giving them reasons to prefer WPBT over SPBT. In this section, I argue that there is a pressing argument against WPBT, namely, the *problem of incomparability*. As with the problem of incompatibility, we need to understand what incomparability is before getting into the problem. Let's take this task next.

There are three "canonical", dyadic value comparison relations: *better-than*, *worse-than*, and *equally-good-to*. According to some, the *Trichotomy Thesis (TT)* holds:

> (TT) $\forall x \forall y$ if *x* is comparable with *y*, then either *x* is better than *y*; *y* is better than *x*; or *x* and *y* are equally good.[7]

The consequent in TT is read "*exactly one* of the relations better-than, worse-than, or equally-good-to holds between any two items" because the three relations are obviously mutually exclusive.

Now, as a definition of *incomparability*, we can say that:

> (IP) $\forall x \forall y$ *x* is incomparable with *y* iff neither *x* is better than *y*; *y* is better than *x*; nor *x* and *y* are equally good.

Note that TT and IP can both be true. Furthermore, many philosophers (Chang 2002, 2014; Griffin 1986; Hsieh 2005; Parfit 1984) suggest that there are cases where no canonical

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[5] Though not the only nor (perhaps) the main one. Theists (and non-theists) might reject the strong analysis, not because it leads to the conclusion that God does not exist (that would be bad reasoning), but because they just don't think it is true by definition that a perfect being is perfect in every way. Instead, what it means to be perfect is to be as intrinsically valuable as it is possible to be.

[6] In fact, this was Nagasawa's (2017) brilliant insight. One can reject 1 on the grounds that being perfect just requires exemplifying the best possible combination of compatible perfections. This way, Nagasawa, by rejecting 1, provides an argument against the problem of incompatibility *without having to tackle each incompatibility argument for 2*.

[7] I am using Chang's (2002) version of TT. But TT can be distinct from the *Comparability thesis*. See Espinoza (2008). See Steele & Stefánsson (2020) for a different terminology. For a novel defense of TT see Dorr & Nebel & Zuehl (2022).

comparison relations hold between certain things *while* arguing that such things are still comparable because the relations in TT do not *exhaust* the comparison relations. For example, Chang would say that (for some people[8]) no canonical comparison relation holds between being a musician and being a lawyer, but that does not entail that they are incomparable since there is a fourth relation, *parity*, which holds between them. Thus, many philosophers think that IP is not an adequate definition of incomparability precisely because TT is false.

For our purposes, however, I take two items to be incomparable just in case no canonical relation between them holds. (I will consider deviations from the traditional view in the "Objections" section.) Hence, certain things are incomparable when and only when none of these three relations hold between the things under consideration. For instance, a career as a musician and a career as a lawyer are incomparable since neither is better than the other nor are they equally good.

A few other clarifications are required about the concept of (in)comparability. Chang (2014, 3-5) says that the comparability relations (better-than, worse-than, and equally-good-to) are three-place functions: x is (in)comparable to y *with respect to value V*. In other words, comparisons always require a *covering value*. Hence, if we compare two things, it must be done relative to a certain value. I assume this is true. I'm also inclined to believe that it is true only if relativizing comparison to values does not remove the possibility of comparing two things relative to all values, i.e., all things considered. Chang (2014, 3) says that covering values can be *specific* like the value of being-pleasing-to-my-grandmother. So, it seems that the same goes for generality; covering values can be *generic* like being-intrinsically-valuable. Furthermore, I also assume that one can make generic value comparisons *all things considered*. This would mean comparing some things with respect to all values. I think Chang's account is consistent with these points and, therefore, it is safe to assume them for the sake of the argument.

Finally, note that we are comparing *perfections* (properties of some kind), not careers or objects like tables and chairs. This leads me to note the following. Either perfections are values, or they are not. If not, then we compare them relative to some value. If they are, however, can we compare values to other values? Can one value be better than another with respect to some other value? Is being loving better than being rational? I think these questions are coherent. Being loving is better than being rational with respect to pleasing-my-grandmother-who-suffers-from-Alzheimer's disease. It seems, then, values too are comparable. Therefore, I will allow myself to extend the conceptual framework of comparability, not just to things like tables or careers, but also properties that could be considered values themselves (e.g., power, agency, etc.).[9]

Enter incomparability. In addition to assuming that Φ being an inconsistent set, I am also assuming that Φ has the following property: the members of Φ that are incompatible are *incomparable* as well, i.e., no canonical comparative relation holds between them. Suppose Φ=

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[8] Chang would also say that for other people being a lawyer is better than being a musician, for instance, those who dislike or do not have a talent for music, and vice versa!

[9] I think a logical consequence of B(x, y, V) is that it is always true that B(x, y, x) for any y. Anything is better than any other thing with respect to the first thing. The Eifel Tower is better than New York relative to being-the-Eifel-Tower. Similarly, pleasure is better than compassion relative to being-pleasurable.

$\{a, b, c\}$. Then, not only Φ is inconsistent, but also *a* is incomparable with *b*, *b* with *c*, and *a* with *c*, and no member is incomparable with itself. This is extremely relevant to the argument so let's subscript Φ_i to state that Φ has this incomparability property.

The problem of incomparability can be stated as follows. Assume for the sake of the argument that WPBT is the correct strand of PBT, i.e., if PBT is true, then WPBT is true. Then,

10. If I(Φ_i) then PBT is false. [premise]

11. I(Φ_i).[10] [premise]

12. Therefore, PBT is false. [MP 10, 11]

10 is true. To see this, let us take some concrete examples. Assume, for the sake of illustration, that $\Phi = \{p_1, p_2, 1, 2, \ldots, n\}$. Here p_1 and p_2, along with 1, 2…, *n* are perfections since Φ is the set of all perfections. Assume Φ is an inconsistent set because p_1 *and* p_2 are incompatible. Then $n - 1$ members of Φ entails the negation of the remainder. Therefore, p_1 (along with 1, 2, …, *n*)[11] entails ~p_2, and p_2 (along with1, 2, …, *n*) entails ~p_1. This implies that a being cannot exemplify all the perfections. But note that there are other perfections that are compatible (thus co-exemplifiable) with only one of the elements of $\{p_1, p_2\}$, namely, {1, 2, …, *n*}. Let's continue to denote all perfections that are not in $\{p_1, p_2\}$ with natural numbers. In this case, there would be two (maximal) sets of perfections that a being could exemplify:

Set 1	Set 2
p_2	p_1
1	1
2	2
3	3
.	.
.	.
.	.
n	*n*

Since p_1 and p_2 are incomparable, then no comparison relation between the sets containing them (i.e., Set 1 and Set 2) holds. And since Set 1 and Set 2 have more perfections than $\{1,2,3, \ldots, n\}$,

[10] Recall, I(Φ) abbreviates the sentence 'the set Φ of all perfections is inconsistent'. By adding the subscript, I intend '$I(\Phi)_i$' to be read as 'the set Φ of all perfections is inconsistent and those members of Φ that are incompatible with each other are incomparable'.

[11] Note that this is true because of the monotonicity of classical logic (which is the one I employ here). What this means is that a valid argument cannot be made invalid by adding new premises. If *p* entails *q*, then *p* and *r* and *s* entail q also. In our case, if a perfection p_n entails ~p_m, then p_n and q_1 and q_2 and… entail ~p_m also, where q_i is a perfection.

they are better than $\{1,2,3,\dots,n\}$,[12] so one cannot take p_1 and p_2 out (so to speak) because then a being exemplifying $\{1,2,3,\dots,n\}$ would not exemplify the best set of perfections.

Suppose now that $\Phi = \{p_1, p_2, p_3, 1, 2, \dots, n\}$. Let's go through the motions again. All members of Φ are perfections since Φ is the set of all perfections. Since Φ is an inconsistent set, $n - 1$ members of Φ entail the opposite of the reminder. Suppose (as before) that $p_{1\text{-}3}$ are incompatible with each other. Therefore, p_1 and p_2 (along with 1 through *n*) entail $\sim p_3$; p_2 and p_3 (along with 1 through *n*) entail $\sim p_1$; and p_1 and p_3 (along with 1 through *n*) entail $\sim p_2$. This implies that the perfect being cannot exemplify all three. Again, note that there are other perfections that are compatible (thus co-exemplifiable) with at most two of the elements of $\{p_1, p_2, p_3\}$ that are incompatible with each other. Denoting these other perfections with natural numbers, these are the sets (maximal) of perfections that the perfect being could exemplify:

Set 1	Set 2	Set 3
p_2	p_1	p_1
p_3	p_3	p_2
1	1	1
2	2	2
3	3	3
.	.	.
.	.	.
.	.	.
n	*n*	*n*

Now, p_1, p_2, and p_3 are incomparable, which means that p_1 is incomparable with p_2 and p_3, and p_2 is incomparable with p_3. Since this is so, then no comparison relation holds between them. It follows that Sets 1-3 are incomparable as well. Moreover, since Sets 1-3 have more perfections than $\{1,2,3,\dots,n\}$ they are better than $\{1,2,3,\dots,n\}$. Thus, the perfect being cannot exemplify $\{1,2,3,\dots,n\}$ since it is not the best combination possible nor it could exemplify Sets 1-3 since none is the best set of perfections to exemplify because they are incomparable.

We could go on and on, but these examples suffice to prove two important things, namely, that (i) whenever $|\Phi| = n$ (i.e., the cardinality or size of Φ is *n*) there are *n* subsets of Φ that have the *greatest* possible number of compatible perfections, and (ii) that the greatest possible number of compatible perfections is *all-minus-one*. Let's explain each in turn.

(ii) is obvious. Since Φ is an inconsistent set, then no being can exemplify all perfections in Φ. But a being exemplifying *less* than all-minus-one perfections would not exemplify the greatest possible number of perfections that can be co-exemplified. Since an intuitive aggregation principle[13] says that a set of intrinsically good things is better than another set if the

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[12] An anonymous referee points out correctly that this claim is dubious. I address this worry in the Objections section below (see objection II).

[13] See Rubio (forthcoming, 8).

former has more things than the latter; and since a being is perfect (according to WPBT) iff that being exemplifies the *best* possible combination of compatible perfections, it follows that a perfect being cannot exemplify *less* than all-minus-one perfections.[14] Since it is impossible to exemplify *all* perfections, and it is impossible for a perfect being to exemplify *less* than *all-minus-one* perfections, it follows that a perfect being exemplifies *all-minus-one* perfections.

In the examples above, this is captured by the *ps*. Since the *p*s are incompatible, then there is always one of them that we must "take out" so to speak. Note then that whenever $|\Phi| = n$, the new compatible set we form by taking out one of the *p*s will have all the *p*s *possible* plus all the others (those denoted by natural numbers). But this entails that this the greatest possible number of perfections in this new set is *all-minus-one*. Therefore, (ii) is true.

(i) follows from Φ being an inconsistent set. Recall that if Φ is inconsistent, then $n-1$ elements of Φ entail the negation of the remainder, so no being can exemplify all perfections in Φ. A being can exemplify *at most* $n-1$ perfections in Φ. The question is, how many *consistent* subsets of Φ with the *greatest possible number* of elements can we form? The answer is we can form *n* compatible subsets of Φ. The way to prove this is using the equation $C\binom{n}{k} = \frac{n!}{k!(n-k)!}$.[15] What this equation allows us to do is to count how many sets with *k* elements we can form by taking elements from another set with *n* elements. Since a *consistent* combination of perfections with the greatest possible number of elements must have $n-1$ members (as shown in the previous two paragraphs), we substitute *k* for $n-1$ and get the following result.

$$C\binom{n}{n-1} = \frac{n!}{(n-1)!(n-(n-1))!} = \frac{n!}{(n-1)!\times 1} = n.$$

This shows that whenever $|\Phi| = n$, there are *n* subsets of Φ with the greatest possible number of compatible perfections. Adding all remaining perfections (represented by natural numbers), we get that there are *n* compatible proper subsets of Φ with the greatest possible number of elements. In the examples above, this is captured by the number of columns. A generalized illustration looks like this. Let $|\Phi| = n$.

[14] See footnote 12.
[15] *n!* is the product of all the integers $i \leq n$. In other words, $n! = n \times (n-1) \times (n-2) \ldots \times 2 \times 1$.

Set_1	Set_2	Set_3	Set_i	Set_{n-2}	Set_{n-1}	Set_n
$omit\ p_1$	$omit\ p_2$	$omit\ p_3$	$omit\ p_i$	$omit\ p_{m-2}$	$omit\ p_{m-1}$	$omit\ p_m$
$p_{m-(m-2)}$	$p_{m-(m-1)}$	$p_{m-(n-1)}$	…	$p_{m-(m-2)}$	$p_{m-(m-1)}$	$p_{m-(m-1)}$
$p_{m-(m-3)}$	$p_{m-(m-3)}$	$p_{m-(n-2)}$	…	$p_{m-(m-3)}$	$p_{m-(m-2)}$	$p_{m-(m-2)}$
.	.	.	.	.	.	.
.	.	.	.	.	.	.
.	.	.	.	.	.	.
p_m	p_m	p_m	p_m	p_m	p_m	p_{m-1}
1	1	1	1	1	1	1
2	2	2	2	2	2	2
3	3	3	3	3	3	3
.	.	.	.	.	.	.
.	.	.	.	.	.	.
.	.	.	.	.	.	.
n	n	n	n	n	n	n

The number of columns is *n* corresponding to the *n* consistent subsets of Φ while the number of rows (obviously excluding the first row) is $n-1$ corresponds to the cardinality of each subset of Φ which is the greatest possible number of compatible perfections.

Since all the consistent proper subsets of Φ are incomparable, then there is no best possible set of compatible perfections. If so, then WBT is false. But since we are assuming that if PBT is true then WPBT is true, it follows that PBT is false. Because we arrive at our conclusion from the assumption that $I(\Phi_i)$, we conclude that if $I(\Phi_i)$ then PBT is false.

The challenge is to prove 11. The strategy here is to take those perfections that are thought to be incompatible and argue that they are also incomparable. Since I already motivated the case for 2—specifically, that Φ is an inconsistent set—I need not repeat myself here. Hence, what I need to show is that those properties are incomparable. To this end, I offer two reasons to support 14, namely, that the pairs of perfections thought to be incompatible are also incomparable.

The most cited argument to establish incomparability is the so-called small improvements argument (SIA).[16] The argument goes like this. Suppose that two value-bearers, *a* and *b*, are such that neither is better than the other. If *a* and *b* were equally good, then a small improvement in either one would make the improved one better than the other (thus making one prefer the improved over the non-improved). Thus, suppose we improve *a*, having as a result *a*+. If *a* and *b* were equally good, then *a*+ would be better than *b*. However, it is possible—indeed, plausible—that even when *a*+ is clearly better than *a*, it is false that *a*+ is better than *b*. This shows that *a*

[16] See Broome (1997), Espinoza (2008), Gustafsson & Espinoza (2009), Gustafsson (2013), and Anderson (2015) for arguments claiming that SIA fails to establish incomparability. See Carlson (2011) for criticism of Gustafsson & Espinoza.

and *b* are not equally good. Combined with the starting assumption—that neither is better than the other—then we have a case of incomparability: *a* and *b* are such that neither is better than the other nor they are equally good.

We can clearly see the validity of this argument by stating it formally. I take Espinoza's (2008) formulation with some notation changes.

13. $\sim Bxy \wedge \sim Byx$ [Assumption]

14. $Bx^{+}x$ [Truth]

15. $(Exy \wedge Bx^{+}x) \supset Bx^{+}y$ [Indifference Principle]

16. $\sim Bx^{+}y$ [Assumption]

17. $\sim(Exy \wedge Bx^{+}x)$ [from 15, 16]

18. $\sim Exy$ [from 14, 17]

19. $\sim Bxy \wedge \sim Byx \wedge \sim Exy$ [from 13, 18]

13 and 16 are assumptions made in cases under consideration. For instance, if we take *a* and *b* above to be a career as a professional musician and a career as a lawyer, respectively, it is clear that 16 and 19 come out true. I take 14 to be an analytic truth. If the career as a musician has *n* amount of value, an improvement to the career (say, better pay) makes the improved career better than the unimproved one. It is from the *meaning* of the word 'improve' that this follows. The *indifference principle* states that if there are two things that are *equal* in value, adding value or improving one "will tip the scale in favor of the improved option" (Spinoza 2008, 130). I take this to be extremely plausible, if not (necessarily) true. Therefore, the question is whether the assumptions—16 and 19—are true when applied to perfections.

The Appeal to Radical Difference. One way to show that 16 and 19 are true with respect to the pairs of perfections considered above (necessary moral perfection/necessary omnipotence, perfect mercy/perfect justice, perfect freedom/moral perfection, omniscience/immutability, etc.) is to argue that they are radically different value-bearers. True, they are all perfections. But when confronted with the question "is it better for God to be knowledgeable or unchanging?" one might justifiably answer that those two perfections are too different to say that one is better than the other. Think about the case of careers in music and law. One the one hand, a career in music gives one artistic liberty and promotes creativity. On the other hand, a career in law gives one economic stability and promotes critical thinking skills. One is better *with respect to* some things, and the other is better *with respect to* others. But *all things considered*, it is extremely plausible that neither is better than the other precisely because what they offer is radically different. The same applies to perfections. Immutability, perhaps, implies metaphysical stability and uniformity while knowledge provides rationality and other virtues. But it seems to me that these perfections (and what they provide) are sufficiently different to say that one is not better than another and to say that it is also false that an improvement won't make one better than the other.

The Appeal to Optimality. Another way to motivate 16 and 19 with respect to perfections is by noting that since we are dealing with perfections God would exemplify if he existed, we are dealing with perfections exemplified *perfectly* (see "The Problem of Incompatibility"). Put differently, the great-making properties God would exemplify would not admit further improvements. Thus, one cannot provide reasons against 16 and 19 on the grounds that one perfection is exemplified to its optimal degree while the other is not. For example, one cannot say that exemplifying power is better than exemplifying freedom because power is exemplified to the optimal degree while freedom is not. Moreover, since all perfections we are considering are absolute perfections—properties the possession of which makes its bearer intrinsically more valuable—it is extremely difficult to affirm that possession of one perfection is better than another since not possessing either one would result in a decrease of intrinsic value. But that they all make their possessor more intrinsically valuable does not imply that they are equally good. For all we know, they might make its possessor more intrinsically valuable in diverse ways. (In fact, they all make their possessor more valuable with respect to themselves.) Therefore, it is plausible that 16 and 19 are true with respect to perfections.

These two factors give evidence in favor of 13 and 16 as applied to perfections. But even if they fail, one might defend the argument by affirming that the comparable perfections are *equally good* to each other. In other words, even if they are comparable, one might plausibly think that the most plausible relation that holds between them is that they are equally good. But since the WPBT-ist is committed to say that it is *the best* combination of perfections (which is equivalent to say that such combination is better than any other), their being equally good suffices to show that WPBT is false. I do not claim to have proven that WPBT is false, but I think that the WPBT-ists must show that there is a best combination of compatible perfections. And what this requires is explaining how one perfection can be better than another, something that has not been offered yet.

Objections

This is a long and somewhat complicated argument, which is open to an enormous number of objections. In this section, I address what I take are the main objections to my argument, namely, (I) further weakening WPBT, (II) the appeal to organic unities, (III) the appeal to a fourth comparison relation, (IV) the appeal to indetermination, and (V) skeptical theism.

(I) We saw that theists have reason to move from SPBT to WPBT. But now consider a weaker formulation of PBT than WPBT.

(EWPBT) God has the best compatible set of comparable perfections.[17]

If theists are prepared to countenance a from SPBT to WPBT, it is not clear why theists should not also be prepared to countenance a move from WPBT to EWPBT. And even if we have reasons to believe that there is no uniquely best set of compatible and comparable perfections, this is a problem that was already present in WPBT. Staying with the problem but solving

[17] That is: if we consider all of the compatible sets of comparable perfections, God has the best of those. More precisely, suppose that there is a "largest" set of comparable perfections. Consider all of the compatible subsets of that set. Whichever of those is best is what God has.

another (i.e., the problem of incomparability) is still a move toward a solution. Furthermore, if there were something that instantiated the best set of compatible and comparable perfections, it is not obvious that it would *not* be a good candidate for God. Specifically, it does not seem that this being would *not* be worthy of worship.[18] Thus, moving from WPBT to EWPBT suffices to undermine my argument.

This is a multifaceted objection; let's respond to the claims in reverse order. (I.1) The problem with the claim that plausibly a being having the best set of compatible and comparable perfections is worthy of worship is that for PBT-ists worthiness of worship is neither necessary not sufficient for being God (see Murphy 2017 for one example). (I.2) The claim that if there were something that instantiated the best set of compatible and comparable perfections it would be God seems incorrect for two reasons. First, it assumes that there is such a set. But this is far from obvious. The PBT-ists would need a way to show that perfections are comparable, but until they do, the burden of proof is on their shoulders and prospects of finding such a way to determine comparability among perfections seem dim. Second, even if there is a best set of compatible and comparable perfections, a being exemplifying the perfections in such set would not be God. For surely a being that has the best set of compatible and comparable perfections wouldn't count as God according to PBT if some other being were better because it had all those perfections plus some incomparable ones.

A last word on there being—for all we know—no uniquely best set of compatible and comparable perfections. If PBT by itself of with the aid of argument (e.g., the ontological argument (Nagasawa 2017)) we might end up concluding that *multiple* entities that are as valuable as it is possible exist. In other words, once we entertain that there are distinct equally valuable sets of perfections, polytheism becomes a possibility. Of course, this may not be a problem for some. But since the audience toward which this argument is directed are perfect being *monotheists*, this surely is a problem for them. Thus, even if appeal to this claim solves some problems, it might create other equally difficult problems.

(II) One problem with my argument is that I assume that sets of perfections are just that, mere sets or collections of perfections. By assuming this, I am implicitly claiming that there is no more to these collections other than their trivial and logical relations. But this is false. Since these are the sets of perfections God would exemplify if he existed, we need to consider them *organic unities*, that is, sets of properties that exhibit non-trivial, non-logical relations that affect the value of such collections. If we consider them as such, then it is not true that a set with more intrinsically good things than another is better. In fact, it may worsen it. But since this is a crucial step in my argument against WPBT, by rejecting the aggregation principle one is entitled to reject the conclusion of such argument.

One attempt to answer this objection is to claim that organic unities have value in virtue of the extrinsic properties they have. For instance, one can claim that a property that makes something an organic unity is that thing's teleology. A group of people that ought to carry a heavy rock is an organic unity. The non-trivial, non-logical relations matter in this case. For

[18] My gratitude to an anonymous reviewer for raising this objection.

example, adding one more person to the group might not make the group better since the rock may have certain dimensions such that it would be a hassle for six people to carry. Five people would be better since it would be easier for them to carry. But what makes this so is the purpose or end the group has, namely, carrying the rock, which is an extrinsic factor to the group. And even if what makes an organic unity is not solely the thing's teleology, it is plausible that what makes it so are *other extrinsic* factors that contribute to the value of the thing. In the case of WPBT, however, we are not considering any extrinsic factors, let alone any teleology, relative to God. We are considering properties the possession of which makes their possessor *intrinsically* more valuable, i.e., independent of any extrinsic factors.

This reply is inadequate. For it assumes that an organic unity's value rests upon its extrinsic properties *only*. But this is clearly false. Take the set Φ of all perfections and let Δ and Γ be small proper subsets of Φ. (By 'small' I mean proper subsets of Φ with less than the biggest number of compatible perfections a subset of Φ can have. Recall that we are assuming that Φ is an inconsistent set.) Suppose that Δ and Γ have no members in common (i.e., their intersection is the null set)[19] and that there is a perfection, *p*, in Φ such that $\Gamma \cup \{p\}$ and $\Delta \cup \{p\}$ are consistent sets. It might be the case that *p* makes a different contribution to the intrinsic value of an object that exemplifies the perfections in $\Gamma \cup \{p\}$ from the contribution *p* makes to an object that exemplifies the perfections in $\Delta \cup \{p\}$. In other words, *p*'s co-instantiation with distinct (collections of) perfections could (and plausibly does) make different contributions to the intrinsic value of the being that exemplifies them simply because what *p* contributes to intrinsic value in the presence of the perfections in Γ is different from what *p* contributes to intrinsic value in the presence of the perfections in Δ. Note, moreover, that we may safely assume that all properties are *intrinsic*, and that the value of an object exemplifying the collections herein are not dependent upon extrinsic factors. This shows that the value of some organic unities does not depend on extrinsic factors. Therefore, the response above does not work.[20]

Here is an adequate response to the problem. That organic unities can be made only of intrinsic properties (as shown above) does not affect this argument. In fact, it makes the problem of incomparability worse. Why? Because if a perfection can make different contributions to different packages of perfections (and thus to the objects that exemplify them), it seems we have strong reason to believe that no comparative relation holds between the packages of perfections. In other words, we can appeal to the *radical difference* between, not only the perfections, but between the different combinations of perfections to claim that they are incomparable. In the case above, *p* could make *different* contributions to the intrinsic value of an object depending on what other perfections are co-instantiated with *p* by that object. Not only the contribution that *p* makes to these combinations of perfections is different (perhaps *radically* different), but also the

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[19] I take this case for ease of exposition, but the same applies with other cases (e.g., Δ is a subset of Γ or vice versa; Δ and Γ have some (but not all) members in common but neither is a subset of the other).

[20] I am very thankful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out to me. The reviewer also rightly points out that "it might be said that this objection overlooks that appeal to optimality: a perfection is the optimal degree of a great-making property (see p.2). But whether there is such a thing as "the optimal degree of a great-making property" depends upon whether what a given perfection contributes to intrinsic value depends upon what other perfections it is coinstantiated with.

relations between perfections themselves and between combinations of perfections are (metaphysically) very complex so that it would not be surprising at all if these combinations were incomparable or that their value were indeterminate or on a par. Thus, if we allow that some perfections, $p_1 \ldots p_n$, make different contributions on the intrinsic value of an object depending on which perfections $p_1 \ldots p_n$ are co-instantiated with, then the problem of incomparability becomes a more difficult problem of the PBT-ist.

In fact, the assumption that collections of perfections are not organic unities works better for the PBT-ist. The perfect being theologian has a (more or less) clearer way to say which combination of perfections God exemplifies—namely, the more the better. But if they reject the "the more the better" claim, we not only have a reason to believe that those combinations are incomparable (as argued above), but we are also left in the dark to how that combination looks like in terms of the value it confers to the object that exemplifies it. Therefore, not only this is a problem for PBT, but it is also a problem for perfect being theology as a *method* to know how God is like. If the contributions perfections make in the intrinsic value of an object depend upon their co-instantiation with other perfections, we seem to undercut perfect being theology as a (more or less) clear method to know how God is like, a method PBT-ist would like to hold on to.

(III) It is well-known that SIA is used, not to prove that there are things that are incomparable, but as an intermediate step to argue for a fourth comparison relation like *parity* (Chang 2002, 2014).[21] I focus on Chang's parity relation. An objection to my argument is that one can appeal to parity and say that incompatible perfections are not incomparable but are on a par or roughly equal. If this is the case, then one can affirm that perfections are neither incomparable nor equally good but are on a par, thus rejecting 14 and making my argument unsound.

I do not think this strategy works since I can formulate 14 in terms of parity in the following way:

11*. $I(\Phi_{par})$.

If the incompatible perfections of Φ are on a par, then there is no *best* possible set of compatible perfections. The resulting subsets of Φ would be on a par. In debates about deliberation, if *n* options are on a par with each other, it is rationally permissible to choose one over another *even though* it is not the case that one is better than another. (Chang (2002, 2014) has a story to tell about how this is the case.) We are not talking about rational deliberation, however. We are talking about perfections. If the incompatible perfections of Φ are on a par with each other, then one (imperfectly) analogous claim to that of being permissive to choose among options that are on a par would be that, if God existed, he could exemplify any on a par subset of Φ.

The problem with this claim is that it would be a brute fact. We cannot explain that God exemplifies this set of perfections because that is the best possible set since there is no such set. This would undercut the whole purpose of perfect being theology, namely, figuring out how God

[21] Rough equality (Griffin 1986), rough comparability (Parfit 1984), or clumpiness (Hsieh 2005) could be seen as a fourth relation.

would be if he existed. If it is a brute fact that God exemplifies a particular subset of Φ then there is no further explanation as to why God exemplifies such perfections. But then, perfect being theology would be bankrupt as a method *to discover and explain* how God would be if he existed. In fact, PBT would be uninformative since, if we didn't know what set of perfections God exemplified, we would not know what being perfect consisted of in the first place. Therefore, I submit, appealing to parity does not work to undermine the argument against WPBT (and PBT generally).

(IV) A claim put forward against IP is that the fact that no canonical comparative relation holds between two things does not entail that they are incomparable since it can be *indeterminate*. It is indeterminate that p iff it is neither true nor false that p. Let 'D' stand for a determination operator and 'I' for the indetermination operator. This way, Dp iff $\sim(D\sim p \vee Ip)$ and $\sim Dp$ iff $(D\sim p \vee Ip)$.[22] Espinoza (2008, 134-135) shows that if we assume *vagueness anti-symmetry* (if $I(Bxy)$, then $[I(Byx) \vee D\sim(Byx)]$), the following sets are consistent.

s.1 $\{I(Bxy), I(Byx), I(Exy)\}$

s.2 $\{I(Bxy), D\sim(Byx), I(Exy)\}$

s.3 $\{D\sim(Bxy), I(Byx), I(Exy)\}$

s.4 $\{I(Bxy), I(Byx), D\sim(Exy)\}$

s.5 $\{I(Bxy), D\sim(Byx), D\sim(Exy)\}$

s.6 $\{D\sim(Bxy), I(Byx), D\sim(Exy)\}$

s.7 $\{D\sim(Bxy), D\sim(Byx), I(Exy)\}$

Therefore, one could object that even if no canonical relation holds between a pair of things, that does not entail that those things are incomparable. What it entails is that *either* they are incomparable, *or* it is indeterminate that they are equally good. One could, then, argue that s.7 holds, granting that no perfection is better than the other while claiming that it is indeterminate that they are equally good. Since I have not shown that $\sim I(Exy)$, then I cannot conclude that they are incomparable. Therefore, my argument fails.

Again, I note that I have stated my argument in such a way that it works if the perfections are equally good. I have defended the claim that they are incomparable since it seems to me more plausible than the claim that perfections are equally good. Still, if this objection goes through, it will supply a reason to be skeptical of my argument. I do not think, however, that this objection affects my argument negatively. For if s.7 holds, i.e., it being neither true nor false that the perfections are equally good does more damage to the WPBT-ist than to my argument. If it is determinately true that no perfection is better than the other; and if it is indeterminate whether they are equally good, the WPBT-ists are in trouble since now there is *no* fact about whether the subsets of Φ are equally good, which makes an appeal to bruteness (as with parity above) much harder to swallow. If p is a brute fact, then Dp. So, under indetermination, there is no best

[22] See Fine (1975) for an elaborate trivalent logic.

possible combination of perfections, and there is no brute fact about whether the subsets of Φ are equally good.[23] Therefore, even if this affects the validity of SIA, it takes WPBT with it down the abyss.

(V) The last objection I want to consider is skeptical theism. Skeptical theists affirm that we have no good reason to believe that our knowledge of actual goods/evils and their entailment relations is not representative of all the possible goods/evils and their entailment relations (Bergmann 2008). This is closely related to judgments of value. Thus, I imagine a skeptical theist affirming that we are in the dark about what relations other than entailment hold between perfections. Nevertheless, if we are in the dark with respect to what comparison relations hold between perfections, we cannot even affirm that they are equally good, incomparable, or even indeterminate. We should withhold judgment about such things. If so, then there is an undercutting defeater for my claims and my argument does not go through.

I do not think WPBT-ists want to go this route since it is a double-edge sword. If we are really in the dark about such matters, then we are also (at least partially) in the dark about what God is like. God could exemplify any subset of Φ, but we would not be able to discern which one. In fact, this kind of skepticism may even make us unable to know whether a certain property *is* a perfection. If so, we would not just be in the dark about which subsets of Φ God would exemplify, we would also be in the dark about what properties would count to be elements of Φ. This is the reason I think skeptical theism does more damage than not. Therefore, if one endorses skeptical theism, one provides an undercutting defeater to my argument at the cost of disabling our capacity to know what God is like. A remarkably high price to pay.

Conclusion

Two versions of PBT have been analyzed. According to SPBT, the perfect being must exemplify all perfections. If there are incompatible perfections, it is impossible for the perfect being to exist. There are plausible arguments for the claim that there are incompatible perfections, and even the possibility of there being such perfections puts the cherished belief that God exists necessarily at jeopardy. This is sufficient for the PBT-ist to reject SPBT and adopt another version of PBT.

According to the other, now most accepted version of PBT, i.e., WPBT, what is required for a being to be perfect is that it exemplifies the best possible combination of compatible and compossible perfections there is. We saw that if WPBT is true, then there must be a comparison relation that holds between the combinations of perfections. After all, that there is a *best* combination of perfections is to say that one combination is *better than* all the others. However, I argued that if there are incompatible and incomparable perfections, then WPBT is false precisely because, by virtue of incompatibility and incomparability, either no comparison relation holds between combinations, or if one comparison holds, it is that they are equally good. Either way, we can conclude that there is no *best* combination of perfections.

[23] Note that this is true even if any s.1-7 holds.

An important consequence of my argument is that PBT raises a host of issues about value, comparability, consistency, and adequacy conditions for a definition of 'God' seldom addressed in discussions on PBT. The argument presented here is one attempt to get those issues out to the light and advance philosophical inquiry on these topics among philosophers and theologians.

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