

## On Perfection Per Se

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There is a serious question as to whether it makes sense to speak of a perfect being. It might be that asking for the Perfect Being without limit or setting is like asking for the perfect perfect. I suggest that the word 'perfect' is contextual and relative (i.e., relational). There is no perfect day per se, since a day is perfect only in relation to certain finite needs. Because human needs are so diverse on a given day, it is probably impossible to say that any one day is perfect regarding all human needs of that day.

Anselm says that there is the greatest conceivable being. To be the greatest or unsurpassed swimmer is to be able perhaps to swim faster and farther than all rivals. But what does one do in order to qualify as the all-time greatest *being*? What activities count as "being" activities? Obviously, Anselm's greatest being is not the greatest basketball player, safecracker, dentist, or catfish. If perfection of being means the inclusion of all reality, then it would include the worst catfish as well as the greatest. Perfection would include all relative imperfection.

Classical theism has its roots in at least three versions of what perfection is. Unfortunately, these versions often stand in contradiction to one another:

(1) For some of the ancient Greek philosophers, perfection is understood to be an *intelligible and limited form*. It is order and structure in contrast to limitless chaos and anarchy. If perfection were incomplete and limitless, it would presumably be neither intelligible nor comprehensible to the mind. For Plato and others like him, perfection is the very opposite of unstructured and limitless being. Perfection is not the whole of reality but is to be distinguished from the mass of chaotic motions.

(2) On the other hand, the Neo-Platonic tradition sees perfection as the *all-encompassing reality* that is somehow drawn together *into one total and simple unity*. Unlike Plato's perfection, however, the Neo-Platonic perfection is not comprehensible. It transcends the powers of human intelligence.

(3) There is still a third version of perfection. It stresses the *realm of limitless possibilities that can be actualized*. This realm may be seen as an infinity of possible worlds in the divine mind. According to this version of perfection, God contains an endless supply of resources and possibilities. He is adequate because he is an infinity.

Without going into great detail on points of conflict among these three versions of perfection, I wish merely to note that the first one stresses order, form, and limits, whereas the last one stresses limitlessness. Now clearly, a Being who has no limits as to what he will actualize cannot be regarded as supremely good, for he will make no value judgments. To have an infinity of possibilities is possibly to be a greatly evil being, depending on the particular possibilities to be actualized. But to actualize only *some* potentialities is to suppress certain others. Moral and aesthetic perfection must be discriminating and evaluative—hence placing *limits* on the infinite realm of possibilities.

As for the Neo-Platonic unity, there is no essential reason why unity must be superior to plurality. It all depends upon the needs, interests, and purposes to be served. For some purposes, unity in a certain area is to be preferred, whereas other needs and desires require plurality and diversity. Total unity per se has been designated as "perfection," but there is no convincing reason for accepting this designation.

If we take perfection to mean total, all-inclusive unity, then the God of classical theism must be judged as imperfect, since the universe is regarded as outside this God's own being and is not a part of his unity. Classical theism regards God to be a unity, but not an all-inclusive unity. If he creates a world outside himself, he is limited in the sense that he does not include it in his own being. On the other hand, if an all-inclusive Being cannot create a world outside himself, he is limited in *power*. Hence, God may be regarded as either perfect or imperfect, depending on the version of perfection we use as the standard of judgment.

It might be argued that God must reveal to us the version of perfection to be used as the general standard. The trouble with this argument is that we would need to know whether this alleged God is really God. Even assuming for the sake of argument that a very powerful Being could reveal to us some version of perfection, how could we know

that she is God? She might be simply the almighty Being, but she could not be God unless she were perfect—at least according to those who profess classical theism. It is possible that an all-powerful being might wish to offer *her own* version of perfection. But why should we accept it? If we accept it *because* she is all-powerful, then we have unwittingly subscribed to the version of perfection that simply defines 'perfection' as *unsurpassed might or absolute power!* This is indeed another version of perfection. But there is no convincing reason for accepting it, although there may be some threatening reasons. Those people who worship power per se would be impressed with this display of force, but the morally sensitive would abhor it. Ironically, Plantinga and Hartshorne are two of our most prolific proponents of the ontological argument for God's existence, but they differ radically as to what they mean by God. Plantinga's God is not Hartshorne's.

Hartshorne postulates that certain aspects of God's being will forever be changing. But this is not regarded as a threat to divine perfection, for no one surpasses God. If she surpasses herself, she is still the most perfect being. Here is another example of the many ways the words 'perfect' or 'perfection' may be used. For Hartshorne, a Perfect Being must be capable of growth and development. If God is in some sense personal, she must be responsive, sensitive, and therefore capable of gaining in new experiences. But there are many classical theists who cannot use the word 'perfect' to describe such a self-surpassing being. For these theists, perfection demands absolutely no change at all.

Unfortunately, there is no way to "prove" that one version or vision of perfection is the true one while the others are fakes or frauds. We can only point out the great difficulty that emerges whenever people try to say what Perfect Being "really" is.

Perhaps it could be argued that Perfect Being is able to satisfy either directly or indirectly the greatest gamut of finite needs and desires. Since some desires and/or needs conflict with each other, it would of course be impossible to satisfy them all. Perfect Being would, therefore, be directly and indirectly responsible for the satisfaction of the greatest *possible* gamut of desires and needs.

Unfortunately, this poses a problem for classical theism, in particular, since its Perfect Being is said to have the capacity for not only generating

the means of satisfaction, but creating from scratch, *ex nihilo*, the very needs and desires themselves. In its attempts to deal with theodicy, classical theism has always explicitly denied the existence of anything outside the Creator's mind that would condition or constrain his creative act. It has affirmed nevertheless the vague but powerful implication that there are conditions *inside* the Creator's mind that both set the stage and constrain the supreme act of creation. The constant controversy about the nature and character of these internal conditions makes the notion of the Creator's perfection relative and increasingly difficult to bring into steady focus. What one party of theists portrays as the internal quality or attribute of holiness and justice, for example, is portrayed by another party as not a divine attribute at all but a crude projection of human aggression.

In the Christian tradition, if I may speak broadly, believers often select Christ as their model of divine perfection. Whatever does not harmonize with this model is judged as lacking in divine perfection. Of course, there is a wide range of disagreement among believers as to what the Christ-ingredients are. The Christ of Falwell and Swaggart is not the Christ of Fosdick. The Christ that is pieced together as the model of perfect divinity often reflects the values and ideals of the believers at least as much as that of an objective model independent of the believers' subjective states. Indeed, I have in mind to write eventually an article entitled, "Christ Is a Rorschach Test." But, of course, it is only fair that I, too, be required to take the Rorschach test that I invite others to take.