SOME RUMINATIONS ON PERFECT BEING THEISM

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ABSTRACT

According to Perfect Being Theism, God is the absolutely perfect (i.e., greatest possible) being. The notion of absolute perfection can be analyzed in different ways. On one interpretation, to be absolutely perfect requires the exemplification of all absolute perfections. On another interpretation, to be perfect requires the exemplification of the best possible combination of perfections. It seems that the latter analysis is better than the former, because it does not fall prey to the problem of incompatible perfections, viz., that there (probably) are perfections that cannot be coexemplified. Here I argue that even if perfect being theists accept the latter analysis, the problem of incompatibility does not go away. I argue that perfections are (probably) incomparable: it is false that some perfection is better than, worse than, or equally good to another perfection. If so, then it is impossible or at least extremely difficult to say that among the combination of perfections there are, there is one that is best among them. I also argue that adopting the former analysis with some restrictions (as Mark Murphy does) leads to the same incompatibility and incomparability problems.

Keywords: Perfect Being Theism; Perfection; Incompatibility; Incomparability; Anselmianism.

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INTRODUCTION

There are theories about what it is for a being to be God. One famous theory is *perfect being theism* (sometimes called Anselmian theism or Anselmianism). According to this theory, to be God is to be the perfect being. Interestingly, there are many ways to explain what it is for a being to be perfect. In this paper, I present two ways in which the concept of perfection has been developed (which I call the strong and weak analyses), each of which gives rise to a specific version of perfect being theism. I will, then, present some arguments against each version. First, I argue that perfections are probably incomparable and that this is problematic for weak perfect being theism. Second, I argue that the same (and some extra problems) that apply to weak perfect being theism also apply to a revised strong perfect being theism. These arguments are not conclusive and need much more development. But the purpose of this paper, in the end, is to give a preliminary formulation of these arguments that have not been addressed before.

Our discussion will be as follows. In Section 1 I define what is perfect being theism and distinguish two versions of it. In Section 2 I discuss the problem of incompatibility, a well-known problem that gives us a reason to prefer weak perfect being theism over strong perfect being theism. In Section 3, I argue that the preferred version faces the challenge of incomparability. In Section 4, I critically assess the other version of perfect being theism arguing that it faces the same problems as weak perfect being theism. I conclude in Section 5.

1. WHAT IS PERFECT BEING THEISM?

Perfect Being Theism (PBT)[2] is the view that there is the best, greatest possible, or perfect being,[3] and that this being is God. More precisely, PBT is the proposition expressed by the following conjunction:

> (PBT) The perfect being exists & (the property) being perfect is identical to (the property) being God.

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[2] This view is also known as Anselmian theism or Anselmianism; see Nagasawa (2008, 2017), Murphy (2017). For historical and philosophical discussion on Anselm's view see Leftow (2004a). For the method of PBT (often called perfect being theology) see Morris (1987; 2002) and Leftow (2004b; 2011; 2012). For criticism of this method see Speaks (2014; 2016).

[3] I use perfect synonymously with 'best possible' and 'greatest possible'. The reader should note, then, that by 'perfect' I mean *absolute perfection*, i.e., perfection all-things-considered and not, for example, relativized to some possible world or value.

A note on the definition is in order. The use of the definite descriptor 'the' at the beginning of the definition expresses the uniqueness of the expression 'perfect being', that is, if there is *a* perfect being, there can *only* be *one*. For suppose there are two or more perfect beings. If they are duplicates—qualitatively but not numerically identical—then they have the same value *qua being*. If so, then they would be equally good. But to be (absolutely—see footnote 2) perfect is to be the best or greatest possible. This entails that no other being distinct from the perfect being is either equal or better than it. From this and the assumption that those beings are equally good we arrive at a contradiction. Therefore, by reductio, we conclude that if there is *a* perfect being, there is only one.

PBT by itself is not highly informative. For it to be informative, we need to know what the terms employed in the definition mean, and surely enough we know what the words 'exist', 'property', 'is identical to', and others mean. But the main concept used in PBT, namely, perfection, is not clear at all. Hence, for PBT to be philosophically informative and interesting, we need to flesh out what we mean by 'perfection' and 'being perfect'. In other words, we need to know what the property of being perfect is. For this purpose, we might offer an *analysis of* the predicate that refers to the corresponding property of perfection.

Being perfect has to do with *value* (being perfect is being the *best* possible), and (plausibly) the value an entity has supervenes on the properties exemplified by such entity. Thus, we say that a *perfection* is a *great-making* property, i.e., a property that increases the value of its possessor. This claim, however, needs to be qualified. The great-making properties with which we are concerned here must be *absolute*: their exemplification increases the *intrinsic* value of the exemplifier, i.e., the value independent of accompaniment and loneliness (Langton & Lewis 1998; Rubio forthcoming). With these distinctions we say that a being is perfect *only if* it exemplifies *some* perfections.[4]

We have made some progress, but we still need to be more informative in our definition. The above gave us a *necessary condition* of what it is for a being to be perfect: it is to exemplify certain perfections. Obviously, we can imagine a scenario where two entities exemplify some perfections but none of them are the best possible. What we need, then, is a sufficient condition for being perfect. As a first intuitive step, we can provide the following analysis:

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[4] Note that the predicate 'being perfect' refers to the *conjunctive property* p_1 & p_2 & … & p_n, where p_i is a perfection. Thus, the sentences 'x is perfect' and 'x has [a] perfection' express different propositions though sentences of the form 'x is F' and 'x has F' usually express the same proposition. The reason 'x is perfect' and 'x has [a] perfection' express different propositions is because the word 'perfect' and 'perfection' refer to different things. The former refers to the conjunctive property while the latter refers to a *single* great-making property.

(Strong Analysis) Being perfect is identical to (or consists of) exemplifying all perfections.

Yet another step to analyze the concept of perfection is to restrict the scope of Strong Analysis and weaken it. For instance, Nagasawa (2008, 2017) and others might be inclined to analyze perfection in the following manner:

(Weak Analysis) Being perfect is identical to (or consists of) exemplifying the *best* possible set of *compatible* and *compossible* perfections.

Whichever analysis one prefers, we have here two *versions* of PBT—a *strong* PBT and a *weak* PBT—each one according to one of the analyses above:

(SPBT) The perfect being exists & (the property) being perfect is identical to (the property) being God & being perfect is (consists of) exemplifying *all* perfections.

(WPBT) The perfect being exists & (the property) being perfect is identical to (the property) being God & being perfect is (consists of) exemplifying the *best* possible set of compatible and compossible perfections.

Note that SPBT does *not* entail WBPT. For SPBT to entail WPBT we need the extra assumption that a collection with more perfections in it is unqualifiedly better than one with less. If this assumption is made, then the best possible combination of perfections just *is* the one with all perfections in it. But without this assumption, SPBT does not entail WPBT. For it might be the case that the best possible combination of perfection is one which has less perfections.

2. THE PROBLEM OF INCOMPATIBILITY

I hinted above a reason to prefer one version of PBT over the other. I now turn to make this reason more precise. The question is, what reasons there are to prefer one version of PBT over the other? One answer is that there is at least one reason to prefer WPBT over SPBT which is what I call *the problem of incompatibility*. Let's turn to this issue next.

It is common to define incompatibility in the following way: *two* properties, F and G, are *incompatible* if and only if (iff for short) exemplifying F *entails* not exemplifying G. It would be better to have a definition that does not restrict incompatibility to two properties. So, I define incompatibility as follows: *n* properties are incompatible iff it is logically impossible to exemplify *all* (i.e., *n*) properties.[5] Another way to put this definition in terms of entailment is this: a set Γ of

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[5] By this I mean that it is logically impossible for an object to exemplify all those properties at the same time and place (whatever the case may be since God is not located in space—at least according to some).

properties is incompatible with property F iff exemplifying all properties in Γ entails not exemplifying F.[6] This definition applies to any number of properties. For instance, if there is just one property, F, F would be incompatible if it is logically impossible to exemplify F.[7] If there are two properties, then an object can exemplify at most one of them but not both.[8] If there are three properties, then an object can exemplify at most two of them. And so on and so forth.[9]

Perfections are properties, and it is crucial to PBT whether there are incompatible perfections. In fact, the mere epistemic possibility that there are incompatible perfections is seen as a sufficient reason to prefer WPBT over SPBT. This is the problem of incompatibility, and it can be formulated as follows:

1. If some perfections are incompatible, then PBT is false. [Premise]

2. Some perfections are incompatible. [Premise]

∴3. PBT is false. [1, 2 Modus Ponens]

One clarificatory point about this argument is in order. As stated above it seems that the argument trivially characterizes PBT. To see this, take the case of the perfection being-the-fastest-animal. This perfection seems to fit the sense in which I am using the predicate 'perfect'. Yet, one may argue that it is a platitude that if PBT is true, God will not exemplify the perfection being the fastest animal, for God is *not the sort of entity* of which we would predicate such perfection. To avoid this trivialization of PBT, one may do one of at least two things. On the one hand, we may narrow the predicate 'perfect' to mean those perfections that are *proper* to the object of attribution. On the other hand, one may say that perfections like being-the-fastest-animal are *not* really absolute perfections because they are relative to a specific value (e.g., survival or having predatory skills).

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[6] This is equivalent to say that $\Gamma \cup \{F\}$ is an inconsistent set.

[7] This is the case where a *single* property is incompatible with itself. Properties of the form being-F-and-not-being-F are an example. Another example might be being-a-squared-circle though it does not have the obvious form of a contradiction. The point is that there are properties that are "incompatible with themselves" (so to speak): those that are contradictory in broad sense.

[8] Suppose F and G are incompatible. Then, it is logically impossible to have both F and G. Not having both F and G is equivalent to have either not-F or not-G which in turn is equivalent to say that having F entails not having G. As we can see, it this is just the common definition. Under our definition, the common one is just one case of incompatibility, namely, when there are only two incompatible properties.

[9] Note that if n properties are incompatible then $n-1$ properties *entail* that the remaining property is not exemplified. This is so because if F entails not-G, then F and *any other* property entail not-G. This is analogous with the monotonicity of classical logic.

Either way, the argument should *not* be read as trivializing PBT. Rather, its premises should be read as claiming certain things of perfections that are *proper to the object in question* or *absolute* in the way clarified herein.[10]

With this clarification made, it is easy to show that 1 is true *provided* that SPBT is true (i.e., if Strong Analysis is the correct analysis of perfection). Here's one way of proving it.

4. Some perfections are incompatible. [Assumption]

∴5. It is logically impossible to have all perfections. [4 Definition of incompatibility]

∴6. SPBT is false. [5 Definition of SPBT]

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

∴8. PBT is false. [6, 7 Modus Tollens]

Note that what allows us to conclude that PBT is false is 7, the assumption that Strong Analysis is the correct analysis of perfection and, therefore, SPBT is true.

This leaves us with 2. There are pragmatic considerations to not deal with this premise. To deal with it, we would need to approach *each* argument for the conclusion that certain perfections are incompatible. But this case-by-case approach is unsuccessful as a defense of PBT. Nagasawa explains:

> The most obvious weakness of the case by case approach is that it is not very efficient as a defence of [PBT]. […] [I]f one's ultimate goal is to defend [PBT], the approach is not economical. Instead of settling the debate, the approach only invites further claims and ideas which are often contentious independently of whether [PBT] is itself cogent. (2008, 584-585)

I think these pragmatic and dialectical considerations are correct. But I also think that theists bear a burden of proof as well. Let me offer two reasons for this claim. First, as a matter of *intrinsic probability* (the probability a proposition has independent of extrinsic evidence) the claim that at least some perfection(s) is/are incompatible is much more intrinsically probable than the claim that no perfection is incompatible. The former claim is, we may assume, a long disjunction, and as such it is much more modest than the latter claim which is a conjunction. Conjunctions have many ways they can fail to be true while disjunctions have very few. So, even if there are arguments to support ~2, the intrinsic probability of 2 is so high that it might undercut the evidential force for its negation.

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[10] I owe this clarification to an anonymous reviewer.

Second, many philosophers have argued—to my light, persuasively—that some perfections are incompatible. I do not have the space to go through them in detail here but mentioning them is worth doing. Patrick Grimm (1984, 1986, 1990) argues that omniscience is incoherent (incompatible with itself),[11] and Felipe Leon (2024) argues that creation ex nihilo is problematic. Concerning pairs of perfections, 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.[12] 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.[13] In other words, there are many arguments for the conclusion that some perfections are incompatible. If we take the conclusion of each argument and put them in a disjunction, the likelihood that 2 is true increases.

These considerations are sufficiently strong to want to approach the problem of incompatibility, not by tackling 2, but some other way. Nagasawa's brilliant insight (2008, 585-591) was that we can tackle 1 by adopting Weak Analysis and, hence, WPBT. Note that by adopting WPBT, 1 turns out false. For assume that some perfections are incompatible. By stipulation, WPBT says that being perfect is (consists of) exemplifying the *best* combination of *compatible and compossible[14]* perfections there are. So, it is logically possible that the perfect being exists *while* also being the case that such a being does not exemplify *all* perfections. It must exemplify only the best possible combination of compatible ones. Thus, adopting WPBT allows us to approach the problem of incompatibility by rejecting 1.

This is one principal reason to prefer WPBT over SPBT: it gives us a novel way to deal with the problem of incompatibility. It has, nevertheless, other advantages as well (Nagasawa 2008, 583-585). One worth mentioning here is that it solves the pragmatic and dialectical limitations of dealing with 2. Provided that defending PBT by endorsing Weak Analysis and WPBT is successful, we

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[11] For an exchange and discussion of this argument see Plantinga & Grim (1993).

[12] See Mawson (2002) for an objection and Morriston (2003) for a reply to Mawson.

[13] This was pointed out to me by Paul Draper.

[14] Henceforth I drop 'and compossible' for ease of exposition but the reader should read the word 'compatible' broadly, meaning not only *logical incompatibility* but also *metaphysical and conceptual incompatibility*.

wouldn't need a case-by-case approach to defend PBT. Recall that to reject 2, one would have to consider most—if not all—incompatibility arguments there are (and there are plenty)[15] to give an informed assessment of 2. We need not do that if endorsing WPBT is successful as a defense of PBT since the perfect being only needs to exemplify the best set of *compatible* perfections.

Moving from SPBT to WPBT—Nagasawa's move we may call it—is a big, first step as a defense of PBT. I think that the reasons given above are sufficiently strong to justify (at least prima facie) theists to endorse Nagasawa's move. However, I also think that it comes with challenging and interesting problems for the theist. In what follows I turn to present this problem and argue that, conjoined with the problem of incompatibility, it is a good argument against PBT.

3. THE PROBLEM OF INCOMPARABILITY

3.1 The Argument

Looking closely at the definition of WPBT we note that its truth entails at least the following propositions: that some things are valuable, and that the value of a particular being, namely the perfect being, is *comparable to* the value of all other beings. The first claim follows from the way we are using the concept of perfection and being perfect. The second claim follows from the third conjunct of WPBT, that being perfect is (consists of) exemplifying the *best* possible combination of perfections. For x to be the best is for x to be *better than* every other thing value-wise. The problem of incomparability is the problem of whether perfections, or combinations thereof, *can* be compared at all.[16]

Suppose there are incompatible perfections—i.e., the set of all perfections P is inconsistent. Either there is no unique, biggest set of perfections P*, or there is. In the former case, we would not be able to point to a biggest set of perfections that God would exemplify; and since the incompatible perfections are also incomparable, then no combination would be greater than or worse than or equally good to another. In the latter case, even if P* exists, its being the largest set of perfections would not guarantee that it is the best combination (since it does not have *all* perfections in it). Furthermore, since the perfections under consideration are incomparable, it would follow that, irrespective of their size, those combinations would also be incomparable. Hence, WPBT is false. Let's turn now to consider this argument.[17]

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[15] See Martin & Monnier (2003) for a collection of such arguments.

[16] I have developed this argument in a different fashion in Resto Quiñones (2024).

[17] It would be incorrect to say that if there are incompatible perfections, then there is no largest, unique set of perfections. Suppose there is a set of perfections $S = \{P1, P2, P3, \ldots, Pn\}$ such that (i) P1 is incompatible with P2, (ii) P1 is incompatible with P3, but (iii) P1 is compatible

Certain things are better than, worse than, or equally good as other things. Feeling pain is worse than not feeling it; being happy is better than being sad; and killing an innocent bystander is as good (bad really!) as killing a different innocent bystander. These relations are the *canonical* comparative relations, and much philosophical discussion has been devoted to questions about them. One such question is the following: do these three relations exhaust the ways in which things can be compared? Those who favor the positive answer endorse a thesis similar to the following one:

> (Trichotomy) For every object x and y, either x is better than y, x is worse than y, or x is equally good as y, and *none* of these relations hold between x and y iff x and y are *incomparable*.

Those who answer negatively deny Trichotomy. Some deny that the canonical relations exhaust comparability between objects. Chang (2002, 2013) has famously argued that there is a fourth comparative relation, namely, *parity*. But note that one need not think that there is *another* comparative relation to deny Trichotomy. One may deny Trichotomy by saying that in some cases where no canonical relation holds between objects it is *indeterminate* whether they can be compared, i.e., whether one is better than the other or equally good as the other.[18] I will continue assuming that Trichotomy is true for ease of exposition. However, I will address concerns that arise from appeals to a fourth comparative relation and indeterminacy.

It is worth noting also that philosophers, mostly ethicists and action theorists, are interested in comparability as it relates to the rationality of action. Intuitively, it is rational to choose what is better than to choose what is worse. Things get complicated when two mutually excluding things are equally good. But the point I want to present here is that it is common to compare things that have to do with action, careers for example. Which one is better *to choose*: a career as a musician or as a lawyer? But here we are not concerned in comparing things that are related to action. We are comparing properties, specifically great-making properties, and these do not seem to be related to what we do. This is not an

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with all the rest of the perfections of P, and (iv) all the perfections belonging to S except for P1 are compatible with each other. In virtue of (i) and (ii), there are incompatible perfections. But, in virtue of (iii) and (iv), there seems to be a set of perfections with the greatest cardinality, namely, the set of all the perfections minus P1, which obviously has a greater cardinality than the set of all the perfections minus P2 and P3. In this case, however, the incomparability problem would still stand, because P1, P2, and P3 are incomparable. One may object that the larger set is the better one, but this is misplaced since it is not clear that adding more perfections makes the being that exemplifies them better intrinsically. For the sake of simplicity, I will focus on the first horn from now on, but everything said also applies to this case.

[18] One way to sidestep the route of indeterminacy is to appeal to a stronger version of Trichotomy: Trichotomy + exactly one canonical relation holds for every x and y. See Dorr, Nebel & Zuehl (2022) for a related discussion.

obstacle to our discussion (or at least I haven't found a reason to see it as an obstacle), but it is relevant to point out that it *makes sense* to compare things like great-making properties. It is *not* incoherent to ask whether being morally virtuous is better than being aesthetically virtuous, for example. Hence, I assume the coherence of comparing perfections even though many (perhaps most) philosophers working on comparability are not interested in comparing perfections.

Let's now formulate the problem of incomparability. Recall that we had reason to prefer WPBT over SPBT, the reason being that WPBT is a better solution to the problem of incompatibility. Those who endorse WPBT can say that *even if* there are incompatible perfections, PBT is still true. So, I will *assume* that there are incompatible perfections. The first step at formulating this problem is to also assume that those *incompatible* perfections are *also incomparable*. And from this fact we should derive the conclusion that PBT is false. Thus, a formulation of the problem of incomparability looks like this:

9. If those incompatible perfections are also incomparable, then PBT is false. [Premise]

10. Those incompatible perfections are also incomparable. [Premise]

∴11. PBT is false. [9-10, Modus Ponens]

By 'those incompatible perfections are also incomparable' I mean that no canonical comparative relation holds between them. Suppose omnipotence and omnibenevolence are incompatible. Then, those perfections are such that one is not better than the other, and they are not equally good. What if there are more than two incompatible perfections? Well, suppose there are three incompatible perfections F, G, and H. This means that it is impossible for a being to exemplify all three. They are also incomparable which means that no canonical comparative relation holds between them: F is incomparable with G, G with H, and F with H. And if the number is greater than three, we apply the same process so that no perfection is comparable with the other.

How can we support premises 9 and 10? Here's an argument for 9. If we are able to conclude that among the combinations of perfections no single one is the best among them, we will be entitled to conclude that PBT is false. First assume that there are incompatible perfections, i.e., that the set Φ the members of which are *all* (proper) perfections is inconsistent. From this it follows that a being cannot exemplify all perfections. Now, since Φ is inconsistent, the only combinations of perfections that God would exemplify must be some consistent proper subsets of Φ. Nevertheless, since we are assuming that those incompatible perfections are also incomparable, those proper subsets of Φ will also turn out incomparable in virtue of some of their members being incomparable. To see this,

take the following illustration. Suppose a pair of perfections (say, *a* and *b*) is incompatible, resulting in two consistent proper subsets of Φ, A = {*a*, 1, 2, …, n} and B = {*b*, 1, 2, …, n}. Since *a* and *b* are incomparable, so will be A and B.

At this point, one might object in one of two ways. First, even if *a* and *b* are incomparable, that does not mean that the combinations A and B are. If *a* confers more value in the presence of other perfections than *b* does, then A is more valuable than B. I do not think this holds true. The value *a* confers in the presence of 1, 2, …, n depends on the relation *a* has with 1, 2, …, n. The same applies to *b*. However, that A is better than B ultimately depends on the contribution *a* makes and the one *b* makes, since we are assuming all the other perfections are identical (1, 2, … n). But if so, it seems that the value of A and B will be permeated with the incomparability of *a* and *b* (so to speak), because there is no other relevant difference that would account for their comparability.

Second, one may object that in these cases, the cardinality of the combination of perfections need not be equal. But if not, the result would be that the combination with most perfections in them is the best one. To see this, suppose we have A = {*a*, 1, 2, …, n} and B = {*b*, *c*, 1, 2, …, n}, where A and B are consistent proper subsets of Φ, and *a* is incompatible with *b* and *c*. The PBT-ist may say that, for all we know, this is what holds and, therefore, God would exemplify B since it is the largest consistent proper subset of Φ. The problem with this argument is that having more perfections in the combination does *not* guarantee that such combination is better than one that has less. Put differently, this argument assumes that, since having *all* the perfections is better than having *some (but not all)*, then having *more* is better than having *less*. But though it is true that having *all* perfections is better than having some (but not all), it is false that having *more* is better than having less. Having all the logic books is better than having only some (but not all) since I get the maximal number of proofs that have been written in the books, etc. But now suppose that among all these books there are more crappy and badly written ones than well-crafted and well-written ones. If I have only the good ones, which are fewer than the crappy ones, and my friend has only the crappy ones, it seems I have a better collection of books even though he has more. Furthermore, in the example above, we are assuming that the logic books are comparable! But, as we are assuming, perfections that are incompatible are incomparable as well, it seems that change number of perfections does not guarantee that those combinations with more perfections are going to be better than ones that have less.

The upshot of what has been said above is that, if some incompatible perfections are also incomparable, then no combination of compatible and compossible perfections (i.e., no consistent proper subset of Φ) is better than any other. And PBT-ist cannot defuse this result by appealing to the overall value of a whole

combination of perfections, nor appeal to which combination has more perfections in it. Hence, premise 9 rests on good grounds.

The difficulty with this argument is to defend premise 10. I do not know of an argument for the conclusion that incompatibility entails (or implies or grounds) incomparability, and thus do not defend 10 on the basis that incompatibility gives rise to incomparability. A more suitable strategy is to give an argument for the conclusion that *all* or *most* perfections are incomparable, whether they are incompatible or not. For this purpose, we can use the Small Improvements Argument (SIA), a well-known argument to establish incomparability.[19] Here's a general version of the argument.

11. x is not better than y & y is not better than x. [Assumption]

12. $x+$ is better than x. [Truth]

13. If x and y are equally good & $x+$ is better than x, then $x+$ is better than y. [Indifference Principle]

14. $x+$ is not better than y. [Assumption]

∴15. x and y are *not* equally good OR $x+$ is better than x. [13, 14 Modus Tollens]

∴16. x and y are *not* equally good. [12, 15 Disjunctive Syllogism]

∴17. No canonical comparative relation holds between x and y. [11, 16 Conjunction Introduction]

This argument is valid. If we take 'x' and 'y' to refer to perfections, we need to defend assumptions 11 and 14 which is what we want, a general argument that gives us reason to believe that all or most perfections are incomparable. Before doing this, one note is in order. Applied to perfections, 12 says that more of one perfection is better than less, i.e., an improved perfection is better than it not improved. But some perfections are exemplified to their maximal degree (more of this on section 4). In cases like these, improvement is not possible. This is not problematic to the argument. We could just compare great-making properties that are not at their maximal level or, if they are, we can compare them (viz., perfections that are totally improved) and give reasons to affirm that they are incomparable. In any case, we would still need to defend the two assumptions of SIA to which we turn next.

One reason to believe that perfections are incomparable is the *appeal to radical difference*. Many perfections are extremely different from each other, having in common only that they are (believed to be) perfections. Since we are

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[19] For discussion of SIA see Chang (2002), Anderson (2015). For criticism that SIA does not establish incomparability see Espinoza (2008), Gustafsson (2013), and Gustafsson & Espinoza (2010).

assuming that these perfections are also incompatible, it is impossible for a being to exemplify them all. But each perfection gives its exemplifier value in diverse ways. Take perfect justice and perfect mercy. These seem to be incompatible since the former requires always giving someone what they deserve while the latter requires sometimes giving someone what they do not deserve.[20] Would it be better for God to be perfectly just or perfectly merciful? I can cite reasons for both, and though I may *prefer* one over the other, that does not show that the one I prefer is better than the other. Of course, this is far from being a full-fledged argument. But the fact that an answer to the question whether this or that perfection is better is an indication that they cannot be compared. And when asked why they cannot be compared, we may answer "because they are radically different", an equally good answer to the question of whether a career as a musician is better than a career as a lawyer. I cannot compare them because they are radically different careers.

A further reason to be skeptical of the comparability of perfections is that there seems to be no plausible way of establishing that one perfection is comparable to another. If we are comparing two perfections F and G, we may compare them with respect to some value or overall. If we do the former, and further compare F and G with respect to F (or G), the perfection with respect to which we are comparing the other two will be better. On the other hand, one may compare F and G with respect to some other perfection H. And although this may result in a reliable judgment about what perfection is better with respect to H, this does not help the PBT-ist, because God must the greatest possible being overall and not just with respect to some particular perfection.

What about *overall* comparative judgments? To say that F is better than G overall is, in a sense, an abstraction: we are affirming that exemplifying F is better than exemplifying G *all things considered* (i.e., irrespective of internal or external factors). One way to guarantee that our overall comparative judgment is correct is to take all proper perfections that contribute to the exemplifier's greatness. If a being exemplified all those properties, it would definitely be better than to lack some of them. But again, since we are assuming that there are incompatible perfections, we are not entitled to do this.

Overall value judgments about perfections are problematic for this other reason. When asked to explain why something is valuable (great), we refer to certain perfections proper to the thing under consideration. But when asked whether those things (i.e., perfections) are valuable (great), it would be improper

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[20] This is only one of many examples. Being morally perfect seems to preclude being aesthetically perfect since beautiful things can be morally objectionable and vice versa. Omniscience and immutability seem to be conflicting perfections since knowing everything includes knowing every indexical proposition about, say, that is happening *today* which requires change as time passes.

of the questioner to require that my answer not refer to perfections, since those are the very things that make something valuable. There is nothing beyond perfections that make *them* valuable, and so on and so forth ad infinitum. So it seems that when we are asked which consistent set of perfections (among the larger ones) is the best, it either requires us to appeal to something beyond perfections (which would not be correct) or, if we may appeal only to the perfections in the combination, then the value-judgment would not be an overall judgment. We would end up judging the combination by the perfections in it or by the ones that it does not have. In either case, the combination would be better with respect to some specific value.

3.2 Objections

This concludes my case that perfections are (probably) incomparable. If these attempts succeed, then we have established premise 10 and the problem of incomparability goes through. Therefore, we have prima facie reason to believe that WPBT and, hence, PBT are false. In what follows, I address two more objections against the argument presented here.

a) One obvious objection is the appeal to a fourth comparative relation like parity.[21] My argument depends on the claim that objects are incomparable just in case no canonical comparative relation holds between them. This claim, one may say, is false because there is a fourth comparative relation. So, it does not follow that, where no canonical comparative relation holds, things are incomparable. Since I formulated the argument assuming this claim, the argument turns out to be unsound.

Two things to say about this objection. First, it is contentious whether there is a fourth comparative relation. But even if there is, secondly, if combinations of perfections are *on a par* it would not do the PBT-ist any good since God must exemplify *the best* combination and not one among *on-a-par* combinations. Thus, my argument goes through even if we assume a fourth comparative relation like parity. In fact, one may present a similar objection by appealing to equality rather than parity. One may say that even if there are no combinations that are better than others, they can still be equally good. Now, I have offered two reasons to believe that they are not. But if those reasons are unconvincing or flawed, the argument still goes through if the combinations of perfections are equally good. Again, because WPBT requires that God exemplifies *the best* combination, and not one among equally good ones. Therefore, my argument can be stated fully as a trilemma: combinations of perfections are incomparable, on a par, or equally good. Under any of these cases, my argument that WBPT (and hence PBT) is

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[21] Other relations may be rough equality, rough comparability, or clumpiness. See Espinoza (2008, 129).

false goes through because there is no combination which is better than all the others.

b) An advocator of PBT might find an easy solution to this argument in the following way. SPBT was a problem because it was too broad; it required that all perfections be exemplified. WPBT *restricted* the scope only to those perfections that are compatible, but it must be the best combination of them. Why can't take this argument as motivation to *further restrict* WBPT? Here's an obvious restriction that would sidestep the argument:

> (WPBT*) The perfect being exists & (the property) being perfect is identical to (the property) being God & being perfect is (consists of) exemplifying the *best* possible set of compatible, compossible, *and comparable* perfections.

Since WPBT* is not susceptible to the argument presented here, the PBT-ist can safely adopt it as a solution to the problem of comparability just as they adopted WPBT to solve the problem of incompatibility.

One problem with this solution is that the combinations of comparable perfections have less perfections than the ones with comparable *and* incomparable ones. So one might claim that the largest consistent set of divine perfections is better than a subset of it because it has more perfections in it, even though it cannot be compared with *another* combination of the same size. Therefore, a combination of comparable and compatible perfections cannot be the best combination. Suppose I am wrong about this. Another problem is that they must show there is a *unique best* combination of comparable perfections. But comparability does not guarantee that one combination is *better than any other combination of comparable perfections* (i.e., best). They might be equally good. And since there might be incompatible perfections that are comparable, there are going to be many such combinations with the same number. If so, PBT does not guarantee us a monotheistic view of God; it might give us polytheism as well since there might be many beings each one with a different combination of comparable perfections. Although *I* am happy with this result, I guess PBT-ist won't be since the whole purpose of PBT is to give us a reason that *the* (unique) perfect being exists.

4. PROBLEMS FOR MURPHY'S REVISED SPBT

The above discussion shows that WPBT is not without problems. In fact, the problem of incomparability is not the only problem that WPBT faces.[22] Mark Murphy, in the first chapter of his book *God's Own Ethics* (2017), presents some

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[22] For direct criticism of PBT see Oppy (2011). For indirect criticism to PBT see Kraay (2008, 2010).

of these other problems which he uses as motivation to not endorse WPBT. Murphy, then, carefully argues how one can endorse SPBT without all the undesired consequences WPBT has. In this section I will present Murphy's view and argue that going back to SPBT is as problematic as endorsing WPBT.

Endorsing a view about a certain topic must satisfy certain desiderata. For instance, it must be consistent with well-established facts or intuitions. One desideratum that PBT must satisfy is that we must be able to affirm that if God exists, he must the greatest possible being. Now, "being the greatest possible" can mean "being the greatest *overall*", i.e., there is no possible *being* that surpasses God in value. Let's call this desideratum

(Collectivism) God must be the greatest possible being *overall*.

since it is a matter of the value a being has once we collect all its properties in a package and measure its value against other beings.

Following Nagasawa (2008), assume for simplicity's sake that there are only three perfections, omnipotence (OP), omniscience (OS), and omnibenevolence (OB). These are all *degreed* perfections. A property F is degreed iff some entity can be more or less F, and not being F to its maximal degree (it is impossible to be more F) does not entail not being F. Suppose having OP and OB at their maximal degree is impossible. That is not a problem for WPBT since God might still be the greatest possible being overall (see Figure 1).
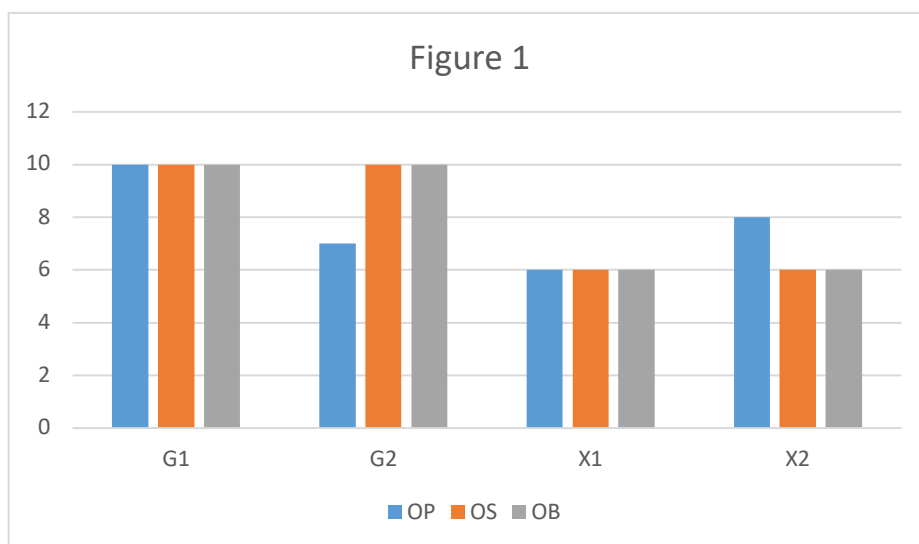
Figure 1

As we can see in Figure 1, if a being has G1 then he would be the greatest overall. Since we are assuming that OP and OB are incompatible with respect to their degree (they cannot be possessed at their maxima), then it is impossible for a being to exemplify G1. Note, however, that a being can exemplify G2 and be

the greatest overall against X1 and X2. In the case between G2 and X1 is uncontroversial that G2 has more value overall. But also, in the case between G2 and X2, *even if* the being exemplifying X2 is *more powerful than* the being exemplifying G2, *overall* G2 is better than X2. Therefore, even if some other being is better with respect to one perfection, that does not meant that God is not the best possible being overall.

Murphy finds this consequence problematic. He thinks that for a being to be *absolutely* perfect, it is not sufficient that such a being be the greatest *overall*. In other words, Murphy finds that collectivism is not the only desideratum that PBT must satisfy to be an adequate view of God. He thinks that the following desideratum must be satisfied also:

> (Distributivism) God must be the greatest with respect to *each* perfection he exemplifies, i.e., for *each* perfection, P, God exemplifies, there is no possible being that surpasses God in being P.

Clearly, WPBT does not satisfy distributivism. For it allows that there is a being that surpasses (is greater than) God with respect to, say, power as long as such being does not surpass God in value *overall*.

Murphy makes clear that we must not confuse distributivism with another, more controversial claim which he dubs *atomism* about the maximum degree of perfections. He explains:

> The distributive assumption is controversial, but it should not be confused with an even more controversial assumption, that of *atomism* about the *value* of each of these perfections. An atomist would hold that for each perfection, what *constitutes* the *intrinsic maximum* of the value of that perfection is *independent* of that perfection's *relation* to other divine perfections. (2017, 12, my emphasis)

Here I need to make some important clarifications. First, atomism is a thesis about the value-conferring power *of* perfections, unlike distributivism which says something about *how* God should be like. Second, the term 'intrinsic maximum' refers to the degree d of a perfection, P, such that having P to a greater degree d^* is not better than having P at d.

> [This is why] it is okay for P to be indefinitely increasable if, beyond some degree, having P does not make a being who has P to a greater degree better than a being who has P to a lesser degree. Even if P has a highest possible degree, it is okay for God to fail to realize P to that degree, if realizing it to some other degree is no worse than exhibiting it to the highest degree. What is crucial is that for any good-making property, there is a way of exhibiting that property that is unsurpassable in value. (2017, 20)

But note that the word 'intrinsic' does not mean (contrary to its use in metaphysics) independent of accompaniment with or loneliness from wholly distinct things.[23] Surely, Murphy does believe that the degree of a perfection a greater than which does not give any more value depends on its relation to other perfections since he rejects atomism.

So, Murphy thinks that PBT must satisfy Collectivism and Distributivism.[24] WPBT does not satisfy Distributivism. Thus, the natural move is to endorse SPBT. If we do this, the problem of incompatibility appears again. How can we sidestep this worry? Rejecting atomism: since the intrinsic maxima of perfections may *depend* on their *relations* with other perfections, we can allow God to have, say, power to a degree that is less that its logical maximum, that degree being its intrinsic maximum (in Murphy's sense of the term). If so, even if a being has more power than God, it would not matter because having power to a higher degree to which God has it does not add any more value. In this way, Murphy sidesteps the problem WPBT has and satisfies both Collectivism and Distributivism.

I think Murphy's way of solving things is problematic. First, it is not clear that this solves the problem of incompatibility. There is nothing that guarantees that the intrinsic maximum of a perfection is incompatible with the intrinsic maximum of another. Murphy himself explains this neatly as follows:

> But one might note that the perfect being theologian who is traditional in this way is always held hostage by the possibility that it could turn out that the only way to render the divine perfections compatible with one another would be to fix one of them at less than its intrinsic maximum. Watching traditional perfect being theologians juggle all of those divine perfections can give one the sense that even if one does not know which ball is going to get dropped, one of them definitely is; given a variety of genuinely distinct divine perfections, the odds that all of them can be realized at their maxima seem, to many, slim. (2017, 12)

Nevertheless, I think Murphy's rejection of atomism does raise (at least a little) the odds that the intrinsic maxima of perfections are compatible. But certainly, the odds are still slim.

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[23] See Langton and Lewis (1998). For a general discussion on intrinsicality see Marshall (2016).

[24] Murphy (2017, 16-19) says that it must satisfy also what he calls the "absolute greatness assumption" which is the claim that God must be sufficiently great. If it turns out that our theory about greatness and perfection has the result that Michael Jordan is the greatest possible being, we better not say that Jordan is God. One reason for this is that Jordan is not sufficiently great to be God.

Another problem with Murphy's revised SPBT is that it seems to be in tension with Collectivism. Suppose we have a scale of 0-10, 10 being the logical maximum a being can exemplify a degreed perfection. Suppose there are two perfections, P_1 and P_2, such that their intrinsic maximum is 8 but are incompatible at their logical maximum (a being cannot exemplify P_1 and P_2 at degree 10). Thus, we have the following scenario (Figure 2).

Figure 2
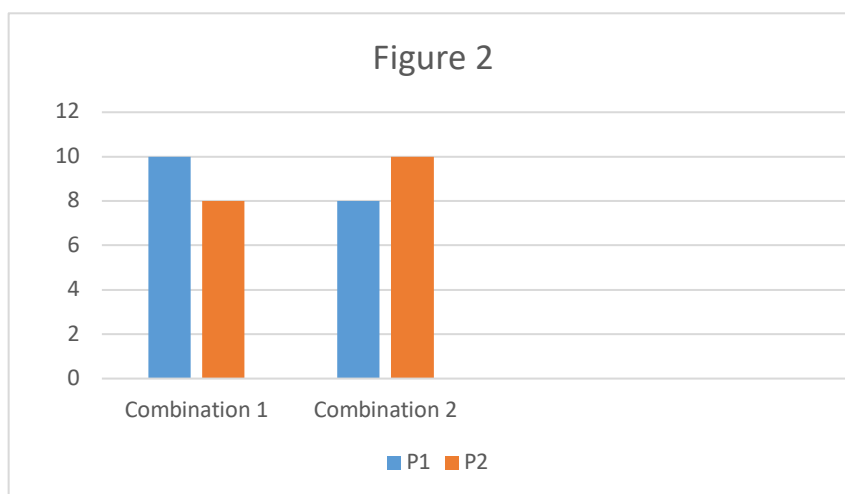
Which one is the better combination? Since the intrinsic maxima of P_1 and P_2 is 8, certainly no possible being surpasses in P_1- or P_2-value a being that exemplifies Combination 1 or Combination 2. So, Distributivism is satisfied. But which combination has more value *overall*? At best, it seems that both are equally good or (perhaps) incomparable or on a par. If so, we have yet another problem, namely, the problem of incomparability. Murphy's revised SPBT seems silent about this issue, and thus faces the problem discussed above.

Yet another argument against Murphy's view is the following. Why should we reject *atomism*? The atomist might (plausibly) argue that it is true that *more* of a perfection is better thant having *less* of it. If a perfection F is not degreed, it is better to be F than not; and if F is degreed, it is better to be more F than not.[25] In other words, the atomist finds the following proposition to be true:

(Q) For all properties, p, and degrees d and d', if p is a perfection, then it is *better* (with respect to p) to exemplify p at d' than at d, where $d < d'$.

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[25] Note that even the atomist's claim may be true independently of whether having more perfections is better than having less. Put differently, the atomist's claim does not imply that having more perfections is better than having less.

Suppose (as most theists do) that powerfulness is a perfection. From Q it follows that it is better to have more power than to have less. This is in tension with Murphy's claim that the intrinsic maximum of a perfection can be determined or constituted by its relationship with other perfections (rejection of atomism). Murphy says (as in the quote above) that there may be a degree of a perfection F after which being more F is not more valuable. But the atomist might stand their ground by arguing that any perfection F does not have a point after which being more F is not more valuable. A rumination of how such an argument would go is the following.

Perfections are properties that increase the intrinsic value of a being *qua being*. In other words, it would be worse for *x* to lack perfection F than to have F *full stop*. But if F's value-conferring power gets determined by another perfection, G, then F would increase the intrinsic value of *x qua being-G* and not qua being full stop. For example, if powerfulness gives value to *x* just as far as *x* is *benevolent*, then powerfulness would increase *x*'s value qua benevolent being or qua moral exemplar, etc. But PBT-ists are concerned with the *best* being *simpliciter*. We ought not identify a property as a perfection, P, and then relativize (or determine) the value of other perfections on P. Rather, the aim is to take properties that increase the value of their possessor and so without being determined by other perfections.[26]

One way to reject this sort of argument is the following. Note that this is compatible with the affirmation that the maximum degree of, say, powerfulness that a being *that is also all-good and ___ , and… and ___ is g*, and that *g* is the maximum degree that the *greatest possible being overall can* have. But that does *not* entail that no other possible being is not more valuable than God with respect to powerfulness (Distributivism does not hold). To block this consequence, one would need to affirm the following:

> (R) No being exemplifies powerfulness unless it exemplifies other perfections, specifically those that are incompatible with having powerfulness to a degree higher than the one at which God exemplifies powerfulness.

One problem is that this seems ad hoc. And even if it is not, the defender of Murphy's version of SPBT must defend this claim because it is not obvious, nor intuitive, and it is definitively not self-evident. Perhaps there are considerations

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[26] This seems to be reasonable because one way to "check" if a property is a perfection is to use our rational intuition to consider *solely* the property at hand. One does not check, say, power-to-do-bad-things or power-to-do-good-things; one checks if powerfulness is *by itself* a property that would make a being greater. To say that powerfulness is great-making just as far as one uses it for bringing about (morally) good things is to give power its value in virtue of the things that one can do with such power. But that is not what we want; we want properties that confer value all by themselves.

that give theists reason to believe R, for example, a defense of what Murphy calls the absolute greatness assumption (see footnote 20), but this is something that PBT actually struggles with as Jeffrey Speaks (2017, 593) has argued.

Moreover, it seems plausible that McEar—a being that, necessarily, can only scratch his right ear—is worse than me with respect to power because I can do other things that McEar's nature does not allow him to do.[27] The fact that McEar's nature allows McEar only to scratch his right ear would be a bad reason to explain why I am not better than McEar with respect to powerfulness. Similarly, that God's nature is such that he is morally perfect and moral perfection necessitates or determines what God can do is not a good reason to think that a being with more power is not better than God with respect to power. Again, just claiming that it is not—that the value powerfulness confers is fixed or constituted or determined by its relation with, say, moral perfection—lacks argumentative appeal. Thus, contrary to what Murphy says, I think atomism is actually more plausible than it looks.

Another problem this sort of objection faces is that some degreed perfections can be increased infinitely. This would entail that for every possible being, *x*, which is F at degree d, there is a another being, *y*, more F than *x*. Therefore, it is impossible for there to be a being that has the maximal value of F. If this is a problem for the argument presented above, it is also a problem for the PBT-ists because it would entail that those properties are not perfections (against our intuitions) or that God cannot exist (if it is necessary for God to exemplify such properties). In other words, it would entail that Distributivism cannot be satisfied for those properties. That is why it is important to accept that, after a certain threshold, no more value comes from being more F. But if so, we are back to the problem that F does not increase the intrinsic value of its possessor in an absolute way as the atomist would say.

5. CONCLUSION

The arguments presented above are not meant to be conclusive nor full detailed formulations. Rather, they are sketches of arguments that, I think, are worthy of pursuing further and, to my knowledge, have not been addressed in the literature. They constitute challenges to what it seems to me the strongest versions of PBT, namely, Nagasawa's and Muphy's. If these arguments are successful, I submit that philosophers of religion—specifically theists of some sort—ought to search for new conceptual tools to develop the view that God is the perfect being or a new theory of what it is to be God. My hope is that these arguments capture the

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[27] The one responsible for this example is La Croix (1977) and is one of the main problems in defining omnipotence.

attention of some philosophers and open some new paths of inquiry on concep-
tions of God and Ultimate Reality.

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