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ON THE COMPATIBILITY OF THE DIVINE ATTRIBUTES

According to Anselm, all Divine qualities are tightly interrelated: they are implied by the unique central property of being absolutely perfect. In the second chapter of the *Proslogium*, Anselm claims that it is the essence of our concept of God that He is a being greater than which nothing can be conceived. From this, he argues, it is possible to infer that He is eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, and so on. In other words, given an absolutely perfect being we can derive all the attributes commonly ascribed to Him.

The remarkable predicate 'absolutely perfect' has the unique feature that it contains, and thus by itself implies, all the other predicates traditionally ascribed to God. In proclaiming the existence of an absolutely perfect, or the greatest possible being, the theist offers a complete description of the deity thus postulated. The theist's brief statement, that his object of worship exemplifies a maximally consistent set of great-making properties, enables us in principle to determine for any property P, whether his Deity does or does not possess P: if through having P one's excellence is enhanced, then P is a member of the set of attributes characteristic of an absolutely perfect being, otherwise it is not.

Now suppose there is a P such that it is advantageous to have it up to, but not beyond, a certain degree. Obviously then, a perfect being will have P but not to higher than the desired degree. It would surely be a mistake to regard a being as inadequately exemplifying P and thus treat it as inferior, simply because it possessed P less than to its full measure. For, on the contrary, it is a mark of perfection to have P just to the degree it is excellence-enhancing and no more. To give a simple example illustrating the point, suppose it has been stated that a certain person enjoys an absolutely perfect health. Surely that statement is not to be taken to imply that he has, for example, an infinitely fast heartbeat, nor again that he has an infinitely slow heartbeat, since neither a too fast nor a too slow heartbeat promotes the kind of blood circulation that ensure the best functioning of the body. The heart of an individual who is perfectly healthy will beat precisely at a rate that is not slower nor faster than is required for the optimum functioning of his various

organs. It would clearly be absurd to maintain that since the heart of a person, who was in fact absolutely sound of mind and body, did not beat faster than it was good for him, he was after all handicapped by an inadequate pulse. It is thus very hard to follow Professor Pearl when he says:

Schlesinger's attempt to protect God's perfection from challenges by lowering the standards for someone's deserving the title 'God' leaves the door open for idolatry.¹

How can there be a lowering of standards in maintaining that God exemplifies every attribute to a degree that is neither more nor less than the exact degree it is desirable? And clearly an idolater is one who pays Divine honours to a deficient deity, one that is inferior and thus different from the super-excellent being of theism. By definition then, a person who worships a being greater than which nothing can be conceived, cannot be practicing idolatry.

II

Once we grasp this elementary point it will not be hard to see how any attempt to demonstrate an incompatibility among the Divine attributes cannot succeed. Consider, for example, one such attempt which consists in posing the supposedly damaging question: could God create a person S who knows a secret no one else knows? Each answer we might wish to offer could seem to lead to the defeat of theism. If the answer we give is yes, then we concede that He is not omniscient since we have admitted the possibility of something He would be ignorant of, namely, the secret known to S only. If the correct answer is no, He is not omnipotent as He is incapable of creating S.

There exist a number of wrong approaches to this problem which should be avoided. For example, one might be tempted to say that it is logically impossible that there be a secret now known to an omniscient being. Hence one might wish to argue, it is logically impossible to create a person like S. Thus God is unable to create S, since as is well known he cannot do, and is not required to do (and His inability to do does not diminish His power) that which is logically impossible.

This suggestion does not help to solve the problem since it offers no reason why we should not instead claim that on the contrary God is able to create S who would indeed have a secret not known to anyone, not even to Him. We might claim that God is simply not required to know S's secret and His inability to discover it does not diminish His omniscience, as it was logically impossible for Him to do so. The reason why it would be logical impossible for God to know S's secret is that it is logically impossible to know that which had been ensured by an omnipotent being to remain a secret.

¹ Leon Pearl 'The Misuse of Anselm's Formula For God's Perfection', *Religious Studies* xxii (1987), 385.

Another unhelpful line, a line adopted by Pearl, is to say that it is irrational for God to create S. Such a suggestion will not work since it leaves open the question, given that an act is irrational and therefore God is certain not to perform it, still, would He have the power to perform it, that is to say, could He do so if He wanted to? Furthermore, this approach provides no clue as to what would happen if rationality did require the creation of S. This last question need not be interpreted as a counterfactual; the universe being so exceedingly complex and its management by far surpassing human understanding, Pearl could not insist on knowing for certain that some long-range Divine plan did not involve the need for having just the kind of person S is.

But the correct view, in my opinion is, that the question relevant in the present context is: which is more desirable, the property of having the power to create S, and thus lacking the knowledge of S's secret, or instead lacking the power to create S but being fully informed about everything? As I have stated in my original paper, we may never know the answer to this question, but can be rest assured that a perfect being will have whichever is the more desirable of these two properties. At this juncture, however, Pearl expresses his belief to have uncovered a difficulty serious enough to prevent a theist from knowing what deity to worship He says:

This approach (if interpreted as not requiring us to make principled choices) is not acceptable. For without either intuitive conviction in this matter or a rational procedure for choosing, we are in no position to identify God. A can lift every stone but not create every one; B, on the other hand, can create every stone but not lift every one. If we insist on remaining monotheists who ought we to worship, A or B. (p. 358)

It seems to me, that if Pearl's was a damaging objection then even without anything I have said, theism would be in a hopeless state. Most scientists, for example, agree that at the moment there is no sufficient evidence that intelligent life exists or does not exist outside our planet, and also that we have nothing to go by to determine whether or not our galaxy contains a planet having a mass exactly seven times as large as the earth. Also I take that not many would claim to have a clear view as to which of the two otherwise equal, impeccable beings X and Y is superior: X, who is disposed to create a universe where intelligent creatures are confined to a single planet, or Y who will allow more than one planet to be inhabited by sentient beings? Similarly, there seems to be no way of deciding whether of U and V, who are no different from one another except that U places in our galaxy a planet sevenfold as massive as our own, whereas V does not do so, which one is to be preferred? Thus according to Pearl the theist finds himself in the unwieldy predicament, is he to adopt as his object of worship a deity like X, like Y, like U or like V?

In fact, however, the theist faces no such dilemma. He is not confronted with the problem which one of several different candidates he ought to deify. He unequivocally believes in the existence of an absolutely perfect being, except that he may not know down to the last detail all the properties absolute perfection implies. It does not seem reasonable to insist that a theist, claiming the belief in a being greater than which is not conceivable, does not really have a coherent belief as long as he did not know everything that belief implies, including even whether such a being would or would not create intelligent life on more than a single planet. But Pearl's point does not seem more reasonable either. The believer does not find himself in a predicament of having to choose between two incompatible lines of action, namely, whether to place his faith in A or instead in B. He claims to have an unambiguous belief in the existence of a unique being whom he regards absolutely perfect, while admitting to be lacking a full knowledge of every peripheral detail concerning the Divine attributes. Among other things, the theist may be uncertain as to whether it is in the nature of God to have the ability of creating a person like S. Thus there are no grounds for maintaining that the theist faces the problem which being to worship, when his problem amounts to no more than not knowing about some attributes whether or not to ascribe them to the perfect being he worships.