

# *The Idea of God*

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We will contrast various historical ideas of the divine with the idea of a maximally great being. The key great-making qualities of a maximally great being will be identified.

## 1.1 Historical Conceptions of the Divine

Historically, there have been various conceptions of the divine. Thales (ca. 625–ca. 545 BC), regarded by many as the first philosopher, is reputed to have said, “Everything is full of gods.” Taken at face value, this statement implies that there are many gods. Thales also said, “The magnet has a soul.” Still, Thales seems to have believed that only material things exist, since he is also reputed to have said, “Everything is from water.” Thus, Thales apparently sought to explain things in terms of *natural* forces alone. On the other hand, many primitive religions are *hecastotheistic*, that is, they imply that every sort of object possesses *supernatural* powers. As the foregoing discussion suggests, while it was commonplace in ancient times to believe in a plurality of gods, there was no clear consensus about whether the gods are material or spiritual in nature.

The belief in, or worship of, a plurality of gods is known as *polytheism*. Thus, polytheism ranges from a belief in two gods (*ditheism*) to a belief in a countless number of gods (*myriotheism*). For example, according to Manichaeism, there are only two gods: a good god of light, and an evil god of darkness. At the other extreme, in certain primitive animistic religions it is supposed that every object in the universe contains a distinct divine being, implying there are indefinitely many gods. In the polytheistic religion of the ancient Greeks, a multitude of imperfect gods is acknowledged, each one of which has limited, specialized, superhuman

powers: a god of thunder, a god of the oceans, a god of the sun, a god of the underworld, a god of love, a god of war, and so forth.

The polytheistic religion of the ancient Egyptians includes another element: the belief in, or worship of, animal gods (or beast gods), known as *zootheism* (or *theriotheism*). Three other forms of theism that have frequently been associated with polytheism are *anthropotheism*, the belief that the gods originated as men or are essentially human in nature; *herotheism*, the worship of deified men; and *autotheism*, the deification and worship of oneself. These three forms of theism are consistent with polytheism, as well as mutually consistent. Alexander the Great (356–323 BC) declared himself to be a god; his self-worship provides an illustration of herotheism, autotheism, and some elements of anthropotheism.

In contrast to the foregoing polytheistic pagan religious beliefs, *monotheism* is the belief that there is just one god. For instance, traditional forms of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are monotheistic, subscribing to the belief that there is just one god, a god who is morally perfect and has unlimited, superhuman qualities.

Xenophanes (ca. 570–ca. 478 BC) is an early philosophical critic of pagan Greek polytheism, who apparently exhibits strongly monotheistic tendencies. The following striking observations are attributed to Xenophanes.<sup>1</sup>

Homer and Hesiod ascribed to the gods whatever is infamy and reproach among men: theft and adultery and deceiving each other.

Mortals suppose that the gods are born and have clothes and voices and shapes like their own. But if oxen, horses, and lions had hands or could paint with their hands and fashion works as men do, horses would paint horse-like images of gods and oxen oxen-like ones, and each would fashion bodies like their own. The Ethiopians consider the gods flat-nosed and black; the Thracians blue-eyed and red-haired.

There is one god, among gods and men the greatest, not at all like mortals in body or mind. He sees as a whole, thinks as a whole, and hears as a whole. But without toil he moves everything by the thought of his mind. He always remains in the same place, not moving at all, nor is it fitting for him to change his position at different times.

As the foregoing quotations indicate, the usual sort of Greek paganism implies that the gods have bodies and minds like Greeks, and that the gods, like humans, are morally imperfect. Xenophanes provides two criticisms of anthropomorphic polytheism of this kind.

In the first quotation, Xenophanes ridicules the pagan belief that the gods are morally imperfect, on the ground that it is disgraceful to attribute

morally imperfect actions such as theft, adultery, and deception to the gods. This may suggest that a divine being must be morally perfect.

The second quotation from Xenophanes suggests the following criticism of the belief that the gods have bodies like those of the Greeks.

- (1) Different societies, e.g., Ethiopian society and Thracian society, accept incompatible propositions about the gods and their bodies.
- (2) These incompatible propositions are equally likely to be true, e.g., the proposition that the gods have bodies which resemble those of the Ethiopians, and the proposition that the gods have bodies which resemble those of the Greeks, are equally likely to be true.

But the Law of Non-Contradiction implies that, necessarily, if there are two incompatible propositions, then one or both of those propositions is false. Therefore, (1) and (2) together entail that

- (3) None of the incompatible propositions about the gods and their bodies referred to above is likely to be true.

In the third quotation, Xenophanes sets forth the alternative hypothesis that there is a unique greatest god, unlike mortals in body and mind: all-knowing, all-powerful, and unmoving.

While Xenophanes's alternative hypothesis strongly suggests monotheism, he does not deny that the greatest god is accompanied by a plurality of lesser gods. This is consistent with *henotheism*, the worship of a single god, without rejecting the existence of other gods. For instance, there is some reason to think that the ancient Hebrews were henotheists prior to the advent of Jewish monotheism.<sup>2</sup> Yet another possibility is *kathenotheism*, the worship of one god at a time as supreme, without rejecting the existence of other gods, and with the inclination to designate different gods as supreme in succession.

Monotheism may take a variety of forms, depending upon how God is conceived. First of all, God may be conceived of as either *personal* or *impersonal*. A personal god is a *person*, that is, a thing which can be aware of itself and of other things, and which can have a variety of mental **states**, including conscious beliefs, desires, and intentions. Traditional Judaism, Christianity, and Islam conceive of God as a personal being in this sense. On the other hand, certain traditional forms of Hinduism and Buddhism conceive of God as an impersonal, ultimate reality that transcends the

illusion of plurality and change. Second, God may either be conceived of as a physical thing, or as a spiritual thing, or as a thing that is neither physical nor spiritual. A physical thing is a thing that is located in space; while a spiritual thing, or *nonphysical substance*, is a thing which is capable of consciousness, but which is not located in space.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have traditionally maintained that God is a spiritual thing that exists outside the realm of divinely created physical things. Thus, these three religions are forms of *psychotheism*, the belief in a wholly spiritual God or gods. The Irish philosopher Berkeley (1685–1753) proposed an interesting version of psychotheism. He argued that God is a spiritual thing that created a realm of non-divine spiritual things, but that no material, or even physical, things exist. According to Berkeley, everything that exists is either a spiritual thing or an idea, namely, an inner perception had by a spiritual thing. This view, a form of *idealism*, stands in sharp opposition to *physicalism* (or *materialism*), the view that everything that exists is physical (or material). The Hellenistic philosophy of Stoicism is committed both to materialism and to the reality of the divine. Stoic philosophers thought of the divine as a fluid material substance that permeates the universe and gives other material things their unity and purpose. Thus, Stoicism is a kind of *physitheism*, the belief in a God or gods that is physical in nature. Epicureanism provides another example of physitheism. Notice that each of the three conceptions of the divine discussed in this paragraph implies that any divine being is *not identical* with the universe, i.e., that a divine being is **diverse** from the universe.

On the other hand, *pantheism* is the view that God and the universe are *the very same thing*, i.e., that God is identical with the universe. A pantheist may hold that the universe, that is, the divine thing, is a material being. Such a materialistic version of pantheism seems to have been held by the early Greek philosopher Parmenides (ca. 504–ca. 456 BC), who was apparently influenced by Xenophanes. According to Parmenides, it is demonstrable *a priori* that change and plurality are an illusion, and that there is but one material thing, necessarily existing, eternal, indivisible, and immutable. This is a kind of *hylotheism*, the doctrine that identifies God with matter. Alternatively, a pantheist may hold that the universe, namely, God, is a spiritual being. The Prussian philosopher Hegel (1772–1831) seems to have held such an idealist version of pantheism. Finally, a pantheist may argue that the universe, that is to say, God, is neither a physical thing nor a spiritual thing. The Dutch philosopher Spinoza (1632–77) developed a notable example of this sort of pantheism. According to

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Spinoza, the physical and spiritual realms are merely modes of God. Thus, God itself is neither physical nor spiritual in nature.<sup>3</sup>

## 1.2 God as a Maximally Great Being

According to the regulating notion of traditional Western theism, God is *the greatest being possible*. In other words, God is a possible being whose greatness cannot be surpassed, or even matched. During the Middle Ages, this notion of a maximally great being was developed in detail by theologians such as Anselm and Maimonides (1135–1204).

There are several reasons why this idea of God is worth exploring. First, it is of great historical importance and influence, and continues to play a vital role within the three great religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Second, it is the idea of a *personal being*. For this reason, it is consistent with God's having a number of features which seem to be highly desirable from a religious perspective, for example, God's hearing our prayers, God's being purposeful, and so on. Third, this idea of God is the notion of a morally perfect being, implying that traditional Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are forms of *ethical monotheism*. Arguably, there are a number of respects in which ethical monotheism marks an intellectual advance over earlier beliefs in a plurality of morally imperfect gods. For one thing, on the assumption that there are **objective** moral values, the worship of a morally perfect God represents *moral progress* over the worship of morally imperfect gods. Furthermore, according to **Ockham's Razor**, an important principle of epistemic rationality, we should not multiply entities beyond necessity. Given this methodological principle, it follows that all other things being equal, monotheism, or a belief in *one* God, is *intellectually preferable* to polytheism, or a belief in *many* gods. Moreover, it seems that gods were often posited by polytheistic religions, at least in part, to explain various natural phenomena, for example, thunder, earthquakes, floods, and so on. Polytheistic religions of this sort attempt to provide theoretical explanations of these phenomena by means of the activities of a *variety* of divine beings. On the other hand, ethical monotheism attempts to provide a *unified* theoretical explanation of *the entire physical world*, namely, that the entire physical world was created and designed by a unique, supremely perfect being. Thus, as attempts at *theoretical explanation*, ethical monotheism is *far more ambitious* than any form of polytheism. Finally, the idea that God is *maximally great* or *infinitely perfect* generates many philosophically interesting problems about the

great-making qualities or perfections of God. In what follows, we explore the logic of this important and fascinating idea.

Generally speaking, if a being has a certain degree of greatness, then that degree of greatness must be assessed relative to a particular *category* to which that being belongs. More specifically, the degree of greatness of a being,  $x$ , of a category,  $C$ , is determined by the extent to which  $x$  has the great-making qualities relevant for a being of category  $C$ . Great-making qualities typically vary from one category to another, and are a function of the nature of the category in question. For example, suppose  $C$  is the category, Car. Since a car is a humanly created artifact, the relevant great-making qualities pertain to the *purpose* or *function* of an artifact of this kind. Thus, relative to the category, Car, the relevant great-making qualities pertain to the worthiness and admirability of a car as a means of *automotive passenger transport*. In particular, these great-making qualities pertain to a car's design, materials, workmanship, performance, and so on. Given such criteria for grading a car, a Rolls Royce is a highly superior car. And, in particular, a Rolls Royce is a much greater, or better, car than a Yugo.

Presumably, in comparing two such cars, there are objective, **empirically** ascertainable facts about which one of them is more durable, reliable, efficient, and so forth. On the other hand, the contention that a particular set of qualities is relevant for assessing the greatness of a car is a value judgment, and is not obviously empirically ascertainable. The same is true of the contention that the qualities in such a set should be given certain weights.

Similarly, in conceiving of God as a maximally great being, traditional Western theism makes the value judgment that a certain set of qualities is relevant for assessing the greatness of such a being. This form of theism implies that God is a maximally great *substance*, rather than a maximally great *time*, *place*, *event*, *boundary*, *collection*, *number*, *property*, **relation**, or *proposition*. Yet, it seems that traditional Western theism is *also* committed to the idea that God is a maximally great *entity*, or being of any sort whatsoever, and hence to the idea that a maximally great *substance* is a greater *entity* than any possible insubstantial entity. This commitment reflects the influence of Aristotle (384–322 BC). Specifically, in his *Categories* Aristotle held that individual substances are the primary entities, and that entities of the other categories are dependent upon individual substances. Hence, if the aforementioned conception of God is intelligible, then a being's degree of greatness may be assessed relative to the category of Entity. It can be plausibly argued that Entity is a category on the ground that Entity is the *summum genus*, or most general kind, of all categories. Accordingly, the sub-

divisions of Entity include the categories of Concrete Entity and Abstract Entity; the subdivisions of Concrete Entity are categories such as Substance, Place, Time, Event, and Boundary; and the subdivisions of Abstract Entity are categories such as **Set**, Number, Property, Relation, and Proposition. Given such a taxonomy of categories, it seems that Entity qualifies as the limiting case of a category, since it is a category which applies *universally*.

Traditional Western theism implies that maximal greatness is determined by a particular set of great-making qualities or perfections, including maximal power (or *omnipotence*), maximal knowledge (or *omniscience*), maximal goodness and/or maximal virtue (or *omnibenevolence*), incorruptibility, and necessary existence. As we shall see, the possession of these *core* attributes entails or implies the possession of other attributes. According to traditional Western theism, God is the greatest being possible in virtue of possessing a *complete* set of great-making qualities or perfections.

Whether a particular quality should be included in such a set of great-making qualities depends upon the nature of the pertinent category. For instance, is *height* a great-making quality of the relevant kind? All other things being equal, if  $x$  is taller than  $y$ , then is  $x$  a greater being than  $y$  in the relevant sense? Anselm tried to answer this sort of question as follows.

But I do not mean physically great, as a material object is great, but that which, the greater it is, the better or more worthy – wisdom, for instance. And since there can be nothing supremely great except what is supremely good, there must be a being that is greatest and best, i.e., the highest of all existing beings.<sup>4</sup>

Anselm's remarks may be taken to suggest that physical greatness cannot make a material object better or more worthy. But such a suggestion is mistaken. For example, it would seem that since mountains may be *graded* by how difficult they are to climb, Mt. Everest may be the *greatest* mountain at least partly *because* it is the *tallest* mountain. Nevertheless, Anselm's claim that physical greatness is not a great-making quality of *the sort* relevant to a supreme being can be defended along the following lines.

Although physical greatness may be a great-making quality relative to some categories of inanimate natural formations, for example, Mountain, it is not a great-making quality relative to the category relevant to the assessment of God's greatness, namely, the category of Entity. Since Entity is not a category of humanly created artifact, the great-making qualities

relevant to this category do not pertain to the sort of function or purpose had by an artifact. Rather, the relevant great-making qualities pertain to an entity's *worthiness for worship and moral admiration*. Greatness of this kind is a function of a being's awesomeness and goodness (and/or virtue), and it is not difficult to see that God's core attributes are relevant to assessing his worthiness as an object of worship and moral admiration. In particular, perfect goodness and/or virtue are qualities that are morally admirable to a high degree. On the other hand, even though omnipotence, omniscience, and necessary existence are not morally admirable, they are awesome qualities that can make a morally admirable being worthy of worship. Yet, a being who is omnibenevolent and omniscient must be perfectly wise. Because of the epistemic and practical dimensions of perfect wisdom, perfect wisdom involves both omniscience and the morally admirable quality of being perfectly well-intentioned. Thus, perfect wisdom is *both* morally admirable and an awesome quality which can make an omnipotent being worthy of worship. Similar remarks also apply to divine incorruptibility. Indeed, it seems that a being can be *maximally* worthy of worship and moral admiration only if that being possesses all of the core attributes of God. Thus, it appears that physical greatness is a *relevant* great-making quality only if it ought to be included among these core attributes. However, these core attributes include omnipotence. And as we have said, we will argue later that being omnipotent entails being nonphysical. Since being nonphysical is incompatible with being physically great, such an argument implies that physical greatness is not a great-making quality of the relevant sort.

It seems that Anselm would accept the idea that the relevant great-making qualities pertain to a being's worthiness for worship and moral admiration. After all, he conceives of God as an object of worship and as an ideal moral agent. In any case, Anselm's assumption that wisdom and supreme goodness are great-making qualities of the relevant kind is quite consistent with the claim that if God exists, then God is a maximally great being with respect to his worthiness for worship and moral admiration.

But it has been alleged that maximal greatness is unintelligible. The charge is that maximal greatness can be shown to be self-contradictory, relying solely upon logical deductions from premises known *a priori*. If this charge is correct, then one or more of the divine attributes are either internally inconsistent or inconsistent with one another. This sort of *a priori* objection to the possibility of a maximally great being can take many different forms.

According to the first form of this *a priori* objection, it is impossible that there is a *greatest being*. In particular, it may be argued that there is no maximum degree of power, knowledge, or goodness; just as there is no largest number. In other words, for any degree of knowledge, power, or goodness, there is a greater degree; just as for any number, there is a larger number. Alternatively, it may be argued that, in general, greatness must be assessed relative to a restricted reference class, or to a category that does *not* apply *universally*. Yet, as we observed earlier, maximal greatness is to be assessed relative to Entity, a category that *does* apply universally. This second argument implies that it is a *category mistake* to speak of a maximally great *being*, as opposed to a maximally great thing of a less all-inclusive kind, for example, a greatest *car*, *diamond*, or *baseball player*. How weighty are these two arguments?

The first argument implies that there is no maximum degree of an attribute such as power, knowledge, or goodness; just as there is no largest number. But, on the other hand, there is a largest angle, namely, an angle of 360 degrees.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the question arises of whether power, knowledge, or goodness resembles *Number*, in *not* having a maximum degree, or resembles *Angle*, in *having* a maximum degree. The answer to this question is not evident. Thus, on first inspection, this attack upon the logical coherence of maximal greatness is inconclusive. It does not seem possible to resolve this matter definitively without an account of omnipotence, omniscience, or omnibenevolence. However, in later chapters, we attempt to provide accounts of these attributes. Based upon these accounts, we will generally seek to defend the notion that power, knowledge, and goodness *do* have a maximum degree.

The second argument maintains that greatness must be assessed relative to a nonuniversal category, a requirement which is not met by maximal greatness *per se*, for *it* is assessed relative to Entity, a universal category. We will answer this argument in the following fashion. First, although the category of Entity is universally applicable, the category of Substance is a nonuniversal category. Thus, if we can provide a coherent account of why a maximally great substance must also be a maximally great entity, then this attack upon the logical coherence of maximal greatness is unsuccessful. Below, we attempt to provide such an account.

To begin, every entity must be either a *necessary* being or a *contingent* being. Necessary beings do not depend upon contingent beings for their existence, but contingent beings do depend upon necessary beings for their existence. In other words, if  $x$  is a necessary being, and  $y$  is a contingent being, then  $x$ 's existence does not entail  $y$ 's existence, but  $y$ 's existence

entails  $x$ 's existence. Equivalently, if  $x$  is a necessary being, and  $y$  is a contingent being, then  $x$  exists in *all* possible worlds, but  $y$  does *not*. In this sense, necessary beings are more *fundamental* than contingent beings. This may be taken to imply that, all other things being equal, a necessary being is a greater entity than a contingent being. However, since maximal greatness relates to an entity's *worthiness for worship and moral admiration*, all other things being equal, an entity which *intentionally creates good* is greater than an entity which does not. Moreover, necessarily, everything is either a concrete entity or an abstract entity, and an abstract entity, for example, the empty set, cannot have the power to create. Thus, only a concrete entity can have the power to create. It follows that a necessarily existing concrete entity that intentionally creates good is greater than either a contingent being or a necessary being that does not. Such a necessarily existing creative concrete entity must be a person, since only a person can intentionally create good. Because a person must be a substance, a necessarily existing concrete entity that intentionally creates good must be a substance.

It might be objected that a person need not be a substance, but could be a temporally extended event or process. Our reply is as follows. Necessarily, an event or process *occurs*; and necessarily, a substance *exists* but does *not* occur. Although it is coherent to say that a person *exists*, for instance, that Socrates exists, it is absurd to say that a person *occurs*, for instance, that Socrates occurs. We conclude that it is a category mistake to identify a person with a temporally extended event or process.

The creative potential of a necessarily existing substance that intentionally creates good is maximally enlarged and enhanced if, in addition, it has attributes such as omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence. Clearly, all else being equal, a necessary substance that is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent is greater than any entity that is not. Furthermore, because a necessary substance exists in all possible worlds, and because it is hard to understand why what prevents a substance from *always existing* in a possible world would not prevent it from *ever existing* in some possible world, it would appear that a necessary substance is eternal at least in the sense of existing at all times. In any case, all else being equal, a maximally powerful, wise, and good being who is *temporally unlimited* and *exists at all times* is greater than such a being who is *temporally limited* or *fails to exist at some time*.<sup>6</sup> Finally, to say that a being is *incorruptible* is to say that it has its perfections *necessarily* or *essentially*. In other words, it has its perfections in every possible world in which it exists. Evidently, all other things being equal, such a being is greater than one which is *corruptible*,

i.e., that could fail to have one or more of its perfections or great-making qualities. For instance, despite his superhuman powers and other virtues, Superman has an Achilles' heel: he can lose his super powers when he is exposed to kryptonite. This implies that Superman has those powers *contingently* or **accidentally**, rather than essentially. Since Superman is corruptible, he is not a maximally great being.

In the light of this reasoned derivation of the core attributes of a maximally great being, it appears that there is a coherent account of why God must be a maximally great *entity*. We conclude that the first attack upon the logical coherence of maximal greatness is unsuccessful.

As our derivation of the divine attributes illustrates, one or more of the core attributes of God, for instance, omnipotence and necessary existence, may entail or imply additional divine attributes, for example, substantiality and eternity. In later chapters, we will argue that God's possession of the core attributes, and in particular, his possession of omnipotence, entails that he has the additional attributes of substantiality, independence, personhood, spirituality, simplicity (being without parts), freedom, and uniqueness. On the other hand, we will argue that omnipresence, the attribute of being located at every place, is inconsistent with being a spiritual or nonphysical substance. In addition, we will try to show that atemporality and immutability are each inconsistent with God's exercising omnipotence. Based upon these arguments, we will argue that God is not omnipresent, atemporal, or immutable.

According to the second form of the *a priori* objection to the possibility of a greatest being, *too many* greatest beings are possible. In particular, it might be argued that maximal greatness can be **exemplified** either by two individuals at the same time, or by two individuals at different times, or by different individuals in alternative possible situations. If this is the case, then even though the greatness of a maximally great being could not be *surpassed*, it could be *matched*.

The following line of reasoning might be advanced to support the conclusion that the maximum degree of greatness is possibly exemplified by different beings. Historically, a variety of criteria for maximal greatness have been accepted, for example, a criterion which includes being omnipotent, being omniscient, and being nonphysical, and a criterion which includes maximal size, maximal mass, and maximal temporal duration. Since a nonphysical being cannot have size or mass, a single being cannot satisfy both of these criteria at once. But we may assume that each criterion is internally consistent. It can be argued that since such competing criteria for maximal greatness are equally justified, maximal

greatness is **subjective** in the sense of being inherently relative to those who evaluate greatness. But if maximal greatness is subjective in this sense, then it is possibly exemplified by different beings relative to different evaluators. If this line of reasoning is correct, then maximal greatness is possibly exemplified by *many* beings, and the notion of *the* greatest being possible is incoherent.

In reply, we observe that even if there are many internally consistent, mutually incompatible, equally justified criteria for maximal greatness, it does not logically follow that maximal greatness is a subjective matter. The most that logically follows is the skeptical conclusion that none of these criteria for maximal greatness should be accepted.<sup>7</sup> Thus, this attack upon the logical coherence of maximal greatness is based upon a logically **invalid** inference. Moreover, the premise that the differing criteria for maximal greatness are equally acceptable *and* mutually incompatible is implausible. As we argued earlier, God's core attributes together entail that he is most worthy of worship and moral admiration. But it is rather implausible to suppose that if something has maximal size, mass, and duration, then it must also be most worthy of worship and moral admiration. Thus, it seems that if the differing criteria for maximal greatness are relative to the *same* category, then they are *not* equally acceptable. The alternative is that the differing criteria for maximal greatness are relative to *different* categories. But, then, the differing criteria for maximal greatness are *not* mutually incompatible. For the foregoing reasons, this attack upon the logical coherence of maximal greatness does not succeed. One may fairly conclude, however, that if the notion of the greatest being possible is intelligible, then a *nonsubjective* account of the relevant value judgments is required. Even though maximal greatness is inherently relative to a *category*, it has not been shown to be inherently relative to *individual evaluators* of greatness.

Still, the question remains, is maximal greatness possibly exemplified by different beings? A definitive answer requires determining whether the core set of divine attributes is possibly exemplified by different beings. A determination of this kind requires an extensive analysis of the divine attributes, in particular, of omnipotence. Such an analysis may be found in subsequent chapters. Based upon this analysis, we will argue that the core set of divine attributes is *not* possibly exemplified by different beings, i.e., maximal greatness is not possibly exemplified by different beings.

According to the third form of the *a priori* objection, since every assessment of greatness is indeterminate, we cannot intelligibly ask whether a

maximally great being is possible. But is it true that all assessments of greatness are indeterminate? Surely not. For example, even if it is indeterminate whether a Rolls Royce is superior to a Jaguar, it remains clear that a Rolls Royce is superior to a Yugo. Since this attack on the logical coherence of maximal greatness is based upon a false assumption, it does not succeed.

There are other more specific objections to the internal consistency of maximal greatness. They attack the intelligibility of one or more of the divine attributes, taken either individually or in combination. A number of such objections will be considered and addressed as we proceed in our systematic examination of the divine attributes.

## NOTES

- 1 Quoted in Baird and Kaufman, *Philosophical Classics, Volume 1: Ancient Philosophy*, 2nd edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1997), p. 16.
- 2 The ancient Hebrews were a group of tribes of the northern branch of the Semites that includes the Israelites, Ammonites, Moabites, and Edomites. A biblical passage that might be an echo of such early henotheistic attitudes can be found in Exodus, 15:11.

Who is like you, O LORD, among the celestials;  
Who is like You, majestic in holiness,  
Awesome in splendor, working wonders!

- In other translations, 'mighty' is used in place of 'celestials'. See *Tanakh, A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures according to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia and Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985), p. 108.
- 3 Spinoza's notion that God has infinitely many infinite modes that are ungraspable by us is of questionable coherence. Thus, this Spinozistic notion may violate the canons of rationality.
  - 4 *Monologium*, chap. II, in *Saint Anselm, Basic Writings*, trans. Sidney N. Deane (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court Publishing Co., 1962).
  - 5 See William L. Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction*, 2nd edition (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1993), p. 37.
  - 6 The other alternative is to hold that a maximally great being is *atemporal*, but as we stated in the introduction, we will argue against the view that God is atemporal in chapter 5.
  - 7 Compare Xenophanes's criticisms of anthropomorphic conceptions of the gods, discussed in section 1.1.

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