Responsiveness as a Greatmaking Property

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When we talk about "God," we intuitively think of a powerful, nonphysical entity that somehow created and runs the universe. To clarify this vague conception and set a more concrete groundwork for discussions about the nature of God, classical theologians have posited the Greatest Possible Being (GPB) thesis as the primary mode of understanding God.[i]After expounding upon the definition and implications of the GPB construct, this article will argue that a GPB identifiable as the God of religious tradition by said definition will contain responsiveness as one of its attributes rather than complete immutability as the Greeks and other classical theologians have posited.

The GPB concept requires both an intuitive and a more robust definition. Intuitively, the term "greatest possible being" accurately portrays God as "the being than which none greater can be conceived."[ii] If one can conceive of a being greater than the working conception of the GPB, then the conception is wrong. Augustine explains the experience of thinking about a GPB conception of God as one where "one's thought strains to reach something than which there is nothing higher or more sublime."[iii] Experientially, in the process of thinking about God, the human intellect reaches its limits; Adams asserts that "Divine nature is permanently partially beyond our cognitive grasp" when grappling with the GPB.[iv]

The concept still needs a robust definition to make it comprehensible. Morris provides a clear framework of how one would construct a maximally perfect being *a priori* by explaining that "God is thought of as exemplifying necessarily a maximally perfect set of compossible greatmaking properties."[v] Morris defines perfections as "Properties which are constituted by the logical maximum of an upwardly bounded, degreed great-making property," which are "Properties it is intrinsically better to have than to lack."[vi] These properties must also have a theoretical limit that can be maxed out for the GPB. For example, God can know everything, but God cannot be infinitely rich; therefore, knowledge is a greatmaking property and wealth is not. The maximally perfect set of these properties thus has room for flexibility; people can disagree about which properties are optimal for God to have while still agreeing on the general GPB framework.

There are two different approaches to a God that can both lead to the belief in a GPB. Morris outlines an *a priorist* tradition, which "begins with a purportedly self-evident conception of God as the greatest

possible being" and uses this "exalted yet simple conception of deity to entail all the divine attributes."[vii] An Anselmian theologian could construct a GPB without ever leaving the ivory tower. In contrast, an *a posteriorist* approach builds from empirical and experiential facts to a conception of God. Morris argues that rather than "contrast[ing] starkly the God of faith with the God of reason, the God of history with the God of the academy, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob with the God of the philosophers," we can argue that these are one and the same.[viii] Because the GPB is a "proper object of religious devotion" due to its maximal perfection, religious individuals can certainly worship such a being.[ix]

The hinge of this claim that the GPB is the God of religious traditions is that the GPB is worthy of our worship. If our notion of God was only pretty good, and the possibility of a GPB existed, then it would not be logical to worship the PDGB (Pretty Darn Good Being).[x] However, if "we know that if there is a highest one, it deserves our fealty, not arbitrarily, but because of its perfections."[xi] This move not only allows the GPB to be the God of religious traditions, but even more so argues that the GPB is the best candidate for the job.

With this in mind, I would like to shift to one specific greatmaking property, immutability, and analyze whether it belongs in the maximally perfect set of greatmaking properties, which belong to a GPB that is also the God of religious traditions. Morris asserts that "traditionally, the Anselmian description has been understood to entail that God is, among other things, omnipotent, immutable, eternal...".[xii] Immutability is certainly a greatmaking property by definition; the question is if a GPB would possess this property or its competitor, responsiveness, in its maximally perfect set. Despite the philosophical tradition in favor of divine immutability, rejecting immutability would not pose a problem to Anselmian GPB construction. "The specific properties an Anselmian God must have are under-determined by the Anselmian formula and by the basic intuitions by means of which it is applied."[xiii] So long as we can assert that responsiveness is preferable to immutability for religious observance or that immutability is not coherent, we can still uphold Morris's claim that the GPB is the God of religion.

We must first analyze arguments for immutability to better understand its definition and implications. Relying on God's assertion to Moses that God's name is "I will be that which I shall be,"[xiv] Augustine argues that "a God who gave His very name as "I am" and is perfect must be the perfect case of being. *But what can change is not a perfect case of being*: it does not have its being so securely that it cannot cease to be what it is."[xv] Since the perfect form of being is immutability, God, who engages in this process of being, must do so in a perfect way, and therefore is immutable. Boethius argues for divine timelessness along similar lines: "Temporal beings no longer live the past parts of their lives. They do not yet live the future parts of their lives."[xvi] Under the premise that these are both defects, God must have "no past or future. What has no past or future does not change."[xvii] Classical philosophers thus believe God cannot change for better or for worse because even improving is an imperfection in the state of being for these philosophers.

Such assertions are validated in the Jewish tradition as well. Malachi quotes a prophecy from God in which God asserts; "I am the LORD; I have not changed."[xviii] Maimonides hones in on this verse in his *Guide for the Perplexed*, where he asserts that "[God] is immutable in every respect, as He expressly declares, 'I, the Lord, do not change;' i.e., in Me there is not any change whatever."[xix] Similarly, Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra responds harshly when the Bible says that "God renounced the punishment God had planned to bring upon God's people" following the sin of the Golden Calf, which seems to imply that God changed God's mind about the punishment.[xx] Ibn Ezra emphatically declares "God forbid that Hashem should repent! No, the Torah is merely speaking in a language that human beings can understand!"[xxi] Clearly, the intuitive objection against divine mutability of any form influenced some of the greatest biblical commentators.

However, despite the tradition in favor of Divine immutability, there are several philosophical objections to divine immutability, including that of Norman Kretzmann:

1. If God is omniscient, God knows what time it is now.
2. What time it is now is constantly changing.
3. What God knows is constantly changing. (First, He knows that it is now *t* and not now *t*+1; later He knows that it is now *t*+1 and not now *t*.)
4. God is constantly changing.[xxii]

The primary objection to this is that God does not need to know directly what time it is now; rather, the timeless God knows what humans know the present time to be, at all times. The discussion on this objection extends far beyond the scope of the paper, but it introduces complexity into the concept of immutability from a purely philosophical standpoint without even invoking religious experience.

However, the most important objection to immutability and argument in favor of responsiveness is that a robust religious tradition which believes in a human's ability to have a dynamic relationship with God must allow for modifications to Divine immutability. This need not reject all forms of immutability. One can argue that God possesses time-indexed attributes, that it is always true that at time X God does Y. But this does necessarily reject the Augustinian and Maimonidean notion of perfect being as described above, which refuses to allow God to change at all. Thus, "responsiveness" could be comprised of preordained responses of an immutable God rather than pure reactions to events as open theism posits.[xxiii] Either way, responsiveness means that God's behaviors and actions can vary over time (even if God is not intrinsically changing). Being in a dynamic, loving relationship demands that God's actions change over time in accordance with a person's actions and state of mind. It could be preordained in that since God has foreknowledge of a person's actions and states of mind, God could eternally have time-indexed responses to each person.[xxiv] However, these specific actions are always tailored to respond to the person in his/her present state.[xxv]

Responsiveness also has a place in religious traditions. The Bible raises several cases where God regrets a decision or changes God's mind. For example, in Genesis, God "regrets that God created humankind."[xxvi] God's attitude toward humanity seems to change in response to humanity's free choice to sin. The Akeidat Yitzhak, a fifteenth-century Spanish rabbi, explains that Divine regret

is a re-consideration of one's plans and attitudes based on a changed set of circumstances … it is an admission that one had erred in one's assessment of the facts which one's promise had been based on. *A changed attitude then becomes an act of wisdom, a rejection of foolishness*.[xxvii]

Of course, this is not to imply that God erred in original judgment and plan. Rather, "when the Bible describes God as having reconsidered, it tells us that God continued to desire that He could carry out what He had originally planned, but what had now become impossible due to the conduct of the other half of the partnership between God and Man."[xxviii] The preservation of free will demands a God who can change God's attitudes and actions in response to human choices. Thus, the language of regret can still apply to God, who is "saddened" in having to resort to the alternative plan even though God knew it would happen all along. As such, we can still preserve a perfect but responsive God at all moments in time: when the circumstances change, the most perfect God responds perfectly to those changes to remain perfect for each specific moment.

Similarly, Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav uses this verse to argue that God feels emotion, so to speak, in response to human actions.[xxix] He writes that "We find, therefore, that if there is any misfortune or harsh decree affecting [the world], then certainly the joy of the Holy One is lessened, as in, 'He grieved in His heart.'[26] As the Sages taught: When a person sins, what does the *Shekhinah* [God] say? 'My head is heavy! My arms are heavy!"'[xxx] The notion of a responsive God provides a model for religious experience where God deeply cares about our actions, rejoicing in our successes and lamenting our failures.

This concept of a responsive, dynamic God allows for some of the most important elements of religion, including Divine action and a personal God. For God to act in history, this requires that God not act the same way in all times, implying that God acts in relation to the world in a time-dependent manner, either through actual mutability or time-indexed immutability. William Mann provides an example from the Ten Plagues in Exodus: At time t_1, God willed that there be locusts in Egypt; at time t_2, God willed that there be neither locusts nor darkness; and at time t_3, God willed that there be darkness.[xxxi] Such a proposition contradicts the Augustinian notion of divine immutability, which would claim that God is timeless and remains the same at all times. Yet, for religions that believe that God intervenes in a temporal world and speaks to temporal beings, they must concede this point. Even more powerful is the notion of a personal God. The Old Testament emphasizes how God has a close relationship with each person. Performing good deeds strengthens one's connection to God, sinning weakens it.[xxxii] The Bible asserts that God provides reward and punishment commensurate with one's actions;[xxxiii] that God listens to prayers and responds to them;[xxxiv] that God comforts us in our pain and cares for us when we are vulnerable and downtrodden.[xxxv] One of the most poignant elements of religious experience is repentance. A person can change his/her ways, and ask God for forgiveness; Jewish tradition asserts that God responds to true acts of repentance by turning past sins into merits.[xxxvi] A GPB of religious experience has personal relationships and therefore must be responsive; an immutable being in such a circumstance would not be as great as one who responded and could engage in dynamic relationships with people.

A potential solution that saves divine immutability while sustaining religious experience rests on a metaphor taught by Rabbi David Aaron, founder and teacher at Yeshivat Orayta, an Orthodox Jewish learning institution in Jerusalem for American gap-year students. Rabbi Aaron would tell his classes that there is music in the room and fall silent as the students looked at each other, not hearing anything. Rabbi Aaron would continue and explain that there are radio waves constantly moving through the room. If one would just have the right equipment and tune to the correct frequency, s/he would be able to experience the music that had been in the room all along. So too with God, if one views God's will as constantly flowing, we just "tune in" to different aspects of God through our various actions. God is always immutable; we just experience God differently at different times because we access God in different ways.[xxxvii] For a Christian example, one can argue for immutability even in the act of incarnation by asserting that "God was eternally ready to be incarnate, and eternally had those experiences of the earthly Christ which the Incarnation makes part of his life. Through changes in Mary and the infant she bore, what was eternally in God eventually took place on earth."[xxxviii] God's essential will and presence is constant and immutable while its earthly manifestation changes in accordance with human actions.

Yet, this approach fails to truly comprehend the nuances of a relationship of love between God and humans that forms the foundation for religious experience. Cobb and Griffin, in arguing for God as responsive love, assert that "responsiveness includes a sympathetic feeling with the worldly beings."[xxxix] For God to perfectly engage in loving relationships, God must possess "sympathetic compassion" for the other. An ideal relationship transcends "active goodwill"; it entails truly caring for the other and remaining sensitive and present through all circumstances.[xl] For something like repentance to truly have religious significance, it must entail a change in the individual and a response from God, a repair in this mutual relationship. The music metaphor does not adequately provide meaning to this process, because this relationship is one-sided: The penitent could change what aspect

of God s/he accesses, but no mutual transformation occurs. This would be a flaw in the relationship, and as such, Divine responsiveness is a property that should replace immutability in the maximally perfect set of properties that the GPB would have to validate Morris's claim that the GPB is the God of religion.

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Notes

[i] Andrew Chignell, "Religion and Reason," 9/16/19.
[ii] Anselm, *Proslogion* 2, quoted in "Religion and Reason" lecture notes, 9/16/19.
[iii] Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana* I,vi,6-vii, 7, quoted in "Religion and Reason" lecture notes, 9/16/19.

[iv] Adams and The Society of Christian Philosophers, “Fides Quaerens Intellectum.” 410.
[v] Morris, “The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Anselm.” 178.
[vi] Morris. 184.
[vii] Morris. 177.
[viii] Morris. 177.
[ix] Morris. 185.
[x] Chignell, 9/16/19.
[xi] Johnston, “Process Panentheism.” 195.
[xii] Morris, “The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Anselm.” 178.
[xiii] Morris. 186.
[xiv] Exodus 3:14.
[xv] Leftow, “Immutability.”
[xvi] Leftow.
[xvii] *Ibid*.
[xviii] Malachi 3:6.
[xix] Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed* Part 1, Chapter 11. www.sefaria.org.
[xx] Exodus 32:14.
[xxi] Ibn Ezra on Exodus 32:14. www.sefaria.org
[xxii] Kretzmann quoted in Leftow.
[xxiii] Daniel Rubio, 11/25/19.
[xxiv] *Ibid*.
[xxv] An allusion to Genesis 21:17: “God heard the cry of the boy [Ishmael], and an angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy in his present state.” The Talmud (*Rosh Hashana* 16b) learns from this verse the general principle that God judges a person according to his/her present state.
[xxvi] Genesis 6:6.
[xxvii] Akeidat Yitzhak 11:1.
[xxviii] *Ibid*.
[xxix] This may not be embodied emotions like humans possess, but God does change attitudes and actions based on our decisions.
[xxx] Talmud *Sanhedrin* 46a. *Likutei Moharan* 5. www.sefaria.org
[xxxi] Mann, *God, Modality, and Morality*.
[xxxii] Maimonides, *Laws of Repentance* Chapter 7.
[xxxiii] Deuteronomy 11.
[xxxiv] Exodus 3.
[xxxv] Isaiah 57:15.
[xxxvi] *Yoma* 86b.
[xxxvii] Rabbi David Aaron, *The Secret Life of God*; *Seeing God*; Lecture notes by Andrew Arking on classes from Nov. 2018.
[xxxviii] Leftow.
[xxxix] Cobb and Griffin, 378.
[xl] *Ibid.*, 379.