Preface

I would like to start by thanking all who have helped me with this Element. But I can only draw out for explicit mention some of them. John Cottingham, Stewart Goetz, Brian Leftow, Martin Pickup, Richard Swinburne and Bill Wood have been kind enough to read the first draft in its entirety or read sections of it and offer comments which have enabled me to improve on it. The anonymous reviewer for CUP was also tremendously helpful; he or she really did go above and beyond the call of duty.

Second, I should offer the reader some apologies in advance.

There are many properties[1] of God that I do not as much as mention in this Element. I have had to narrow my focus to considering only essential attributes of God and of course I have not been able to consider even all of those. I do not even try to discuss God's accidental attributes. Insofar as they come up, they do so as I attempt to use them to illuminate the essential attributes of God. There are accidental attributes of God which, despite that status, almost all theists agree that God has. The most significant of these are creator of the natural world; source of value for us; revealer of Himself and His will; and offerer of eternal life. Some of these accidental attributes may be thought to be more important to the relevance of God to our lives than at least some of the essential attributes that I do discuss. And thus they may be thought more worthy of discussion than at least some of these attributes. In addition, what I say about the essential attributes that I consider is, in some cases, so brief as to be embarrassing to me. I have had to strip out many notes citing works which, were they to be consulted by my readers, would go to make up some of that shortfall. And I have had to strip out everything from the Bibliography other than details of the works which I have actually cited.[2] The explanation for such omissions is of course the need to make hard choices in the light of the word limit imposed by the publisher, but I offer my apologies nonetheless. Additionally, I apologise for the lack of an index; this has been omitted to conform with the required style for Elements.

And then there is the incompleteness of the case that I make in favour of atemporalism and against temporalism as ways of conceptualising the theistic God. As I develop this case in this Element, I point to various ways in which it is less than conclusive and, in that I think the correct analysis of the best arguments available in this area is that any such case really is inconclusive, I'm not apologising for that. But there is one significant way in which the

[1] In this volume, I use the words 'property' and 'attribute' synonymously.

[2] In this context then, may I draw interested readers' attention to two works, which, as I do cite them, do manage to appear in the Bibliography as it is – that of Hoffman and Rosenkrantz and that of Oppy. Each is more comprehensive than this slender book could ever hope to be.

analysis of the situation given in this Element is incomplete. According to my analysis, the temporal God, while falling short of the atemporal when it comes to what it's logically possible the greatest person might be, does not fall so far short that we should say he's only a god, not God.[3] If in fact, of metaphysical necessity, the best person possible is the temporal God and such a being exists, it's still God that exists. It's just that God is less great than it's logically possible He could have been. He's still as great as it's metaphysically possible anyone might be.[4] And if that's right, it means that the temporalist may fairly push back at the atemporalist on grounds which fall outside the purview of this Element and thus which I do not survey as the Element progresses. But allow me to look over the border at these grounds before I move on to make what progress I am able on the ground, and in the time, allotted to me.

Apart from issues to do with the consistency of the concept of God, the main reason people cite against the existence of God is the problem of evil. It's not at all implausible to think that the temporalist can turn what seems to me to be a weakness when thinking about the concept of God (the temporal God is less great than the atemporal) into a strength when arguing for His existence in the face of evil (God is less great than atemporalists have supposed Him to be). I shall suggest that a temporal God would know little, if anything, about the future; would not be truly all-powerful, as a result; would be well intentioned, but prone to bodging; and would thus be dependent on the vagaries of luck for how beneficent and virtuous (if not benevolent) He managed to end up being. Such a God is one that it is plausible to think it will be harder to gain evidence against the existence of from a world such as ours. Indeed, one might say that *this* – indicating the world by pointing at some of the worst bits of it – is just the sort of world that such a God would stick us with! If that's right, then if a perfect being's essential attributes could not – of metaphysical necessity – be as good as I shall argue they could be as a matter of logical possibility, the rationality of believing in God may be rather greater than many suppose it to be.

[3] In this work, I use the capital 'G' to indicate that the being in question is the God of theism, whom I understand to be the most perfect being possible and I use a small 'g' to indicate otherwise. So, were there a being like Zeus, he would be a god (possibly even the only god), but not God. Similarly, I use 'He' – capitalised – rather than 'he' (or 'She' etc.) to refer to the God of theism. These are all issues of taxonomic and stylistic preference; nothing of substance turns on them.

[4] In this Element, I use an understanding of metaphysical necessity as something stronger than physical necessity, but less strong than logical necessity; in terms of possible worlds, there are logically possible worlds which are not metaphysically possible, but no metaphysically possible worlds which are not logically possible. In such a case as is envisaged in the Element, the atemporal God would exist in some logically possible worlds, but not in any metaphysically possible ones; the temporal God would exist in all metaphysically possible worlds. This understanding is defended in section 3.

Introduction: Perfect Being Theology

Throughout history (and, no doubt, pre-history) different people have attributed different properties to God. And this diversity of opinion persists in popular culture even to the present day. However, within the discipline of philosophy, things are better regulated, as one would have hoped.

Two-and-a-half thousand years of philosophical speculation as to the nature of the God worshipped by the main monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – has honed a concept of God. The resultant concept – the theistic concept, as it has become known – is now more or less uniformly the concept of God that is in the minds of those who are philosophically informed when they declare either that that they believe in God (are theists) or that they do not (are atheists or agnostics). In order to make progress in the relatively short space that is available to me in this Element, I shall thus narrow my focus to the most central of the essential divine attributes as they are understood in the theistic tradition. Even then I shall have to be somewhat stipulative in how I take that tradition.

Typical of the theistic tradition are the two most significant philosophers of religion of the twentieth century (and, so far, the twenty-first), Alvin Plantinga and Richard Swinburne. They write thus:

> God is a *person*; that is, a being with intellect and will. A person has (or can have) knowledge and belief, but also affections, loves, and hates; a person, furthermore, also has or can have intentions, and can act so as to fulfil them. God has all these qualities and has some (knowledge, power, and love, for example) to the maximal degree. God is thus all-knowing and all-powerful; He is also perfectly good and wholly loving. Still further, he has created the universe and constantly upholds and providentially guides it. This is the *theistic* component of Christian belief.[5]
>
> By 'theism' I understand the doctrine that there is a God in the sense of a being with most of the following properties: being a person without a body (that is, a spirit), present everywhere (that is, omnipresent), the creator of the universe, perfectly free, able to do anything (that is, omnipotent), knowing all things (that is, omniscient), perfectly good, a source of moral obligation, eternal, a necessary being, holy, and worthy of worship.[6]

Within the theistic tradition, there is variation in how the concept of God is understood, the most significant division, I shall argue, being between those who see God's eternality as His being outside time and those who see it as His being inside time but everlasting in both the backwards and forwards direction, which difference of opinion has knock-on effects for how other divine attributes are to be understood. If I am not to leave the reader languishing at the

[5] A. Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), vii.
[6] R. Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1.

level of telling him or her merely how it is that various philosophers have understood the divine attributes, but rather to raise him or her to the level of telling him or her about what are the divine attributes (if God exists), I shall need some sort of 'regulative idea', as it were, to guide me (and him or her). That is to say, I shall need a principle by which to evaluate differing streams of thought within this tradition as more or less commendable, as more or less likely to be true reflections of the attributes God has, or would have were He to exist. In this Element, I'm going to take Perfect Being Theology as that regulative idea. What is Perfect Being Theology? Or, more precisely, how am I going to be taking it?

According to Perfect Being Theology, we should be guided in our thinking about the divine attributes by the thought that God, were He to exist, would have to be the most perfect being possible. God, were He to exist, would have to be a being greater than which none other could be and, given that the sorts of reasons that might prevent a greater being existing could not properly be a part of the natural order, we may perhaps even say that God would have to be a being greater than which none other could even be *conceived*. That is certainly how Anselm famously characterised God – '*aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit*' – though he was by no means the first to do so (Seneca and St Augustine used similar formulas). Indeed, Perfect Being Theology has a lineage which goes back to the founding of our discipline. We find examples of it in Plato. In *The Republic*, for example, Plato rates certain stories about God behaving badly as 'objectionable', objectionable not only because of the likely deleterious consequences on young men hearing them (though those consequences are uppermost in Plato's mind), but also because such stories do not adequately reflect the likely nature of God, should He exist. In response to being asked what sort of Theology should then be practised, Plato answers that 'God is always to be represented as he truly is . . . And is he not truly good?'. He then goes on to deploy some perfect-being argumentation to reach the conclusion that God must thus be said to be 'not the author of evil, but of good only'.[7] Similar arguments occurring down the generations and up to the present day have cumulatively resulted in the theistic concept of God as sketched by Plantinga and Swinburne in the quotations from their works which I gave a moment ago.[8]

[7] Plato, *Republic* Book II, lines 379ff. I use the Jowett translation (B. Jowett, *The Dialogues of Plato* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1875), vol. II, 251–3) Of course, in my exegesis, I have assumed which of the views expressed in it are Plato's own and on this (as on much else) there may be dispute.

[8] Oppy says at one stage that 'if one is able to acknowledge that there can be reasonable and informed disagreement about whether God is the greatest possible being, then one can hardly think that it is a conceptual truth – part of the very concept of God – that God is the greatest possible being' (G. Oppy, *Describing Gods* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014),

Perfect Being Theology sets up then what we might follow Michael Murray and Michael Rea in calling a 'recipe for developing a more specific conception of God'.[9] The recipe has stages and goes like this. Consider any given attribute, *A*: think about whether or not having *A* makes a given thing better or worse than not having it. If better, then 'in it goes'. God should be conceived as having *A*, at least at the first stage of perfect-being reasoning – of later stages, more later. If it is 'degreed' – that is if it is the sort of attribute that admits of degrees – and if these degrees are such that the more, the better, then He should be conceived of as having *A* to the greatest extent possible, 'maximally', as it is sometimes put, again at least at the first stage of perfect-being reasoning. 'In it goes', to the maximum extent possible. If having *A* makes a thing worse, then the opposite. God should be conceived of as lacking *A*, at the first stage. So, that ingredient stays out. If neither better, nor worse, then we must suspend judgement (or decide on other grounds) on whether or not to include it. And thus we may continue following the recipe for developing our idea of God. Consider power. Is it better to have power or lack it? Obviously, it is better to have power and obviously the more power, the better. So, prima facie, God should be considered the most powerful being possible; He should be thought of as omnipotent. Is it better to know something or be ignorant of it? Obviously, it is better to know something and obviously the more one knows, the better. So, prima facie,

16–17). On my account, if someone says that he or she wonders whether or not God (rather than perhaps merely a god) might fail to be the greatest possible being in any sense of 'possible' at all, he or she really is revealing, not perhaps that he or she is unreasonable or ill-informed, but that he or she is using the term 'God' in a way that differs from the usage which would place him or her interior to the theistic tradition in which this work locates itself. But of course I admit – as I started the Introduction by suggesting – *this is stipulative*; outside the confines of this tradition (as so stipulated), the word 'God' is used in different ways. And even interior to the tradition, two different senses of possibility are in play – logical and metaphysical – which complicates matters. If the greatest being that's logically possible is also metaphysically possible, then not much turns on this ambiguity; and the position that the greatest being that's logically possible is also metaphysically possible is in fact the one that most in the tradition have 'occupied' (even if the quotation marks may be justified as arguably they've occupied it by default, not having distinguished between logical and metaphysical possibility). But it's arguably epistemically possible that the greatest being that's logically possible is not metaphysically possible, and thus – interior to the tradition as demarcated – there is room for saying that God is not the greatest possible (meaning logically possible) being even though He is the greatest possible (meaning metaphysically possible) being. That's in fact what I would say is the case if the temporal God exists, rather than the atemporal. Another complication is that it's arguably epistemically possible that the greatest being that's logically or metaphysically possible is not perfect, meaning – the way I divide things up – that one might in consistency say that the greatest being (logically or metaphysically) possible is not God. That is because, as I conceive of the tradition, theism commits itself to *Perfect* Being Theology (not just Greatest Being Theology), though there is some of what I shall call 'well, I suppose I meant "as perfect as possible" wriggle room' here; but I would agree that this too is at least somewhat stipulative.

[9] M. Murray and M. Rea, *Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 8.

God should be considered maximally knowledgeable; He should be thought of as omniscient. And goodness? Well, good intentions are obviously better than bad; good outcomes are better than bad; and good character traits better than bad. And that which is relatively good is better than that which is relatively bad even if the latter is in itself good. So, prima facie, we should think of God as perfectly good – omnibenevolent, omnibeneficent and supremely virtuous. And so on.

The reason for the 'prima facie's' in some of these claims and for the mention of a 'first stage' of perfect-being reasoning is that there may be some attributes that are great-making but that it's not even logically possible to have alongside other great-making attributes. And, if that 'may be' is in fact our starting epistemic position on what we ultimately come to see is of conceptual necessity a 'must be', then, in order to see Perfect Being Theology through to the end, we'll have to do our best to consider sets of logically co-possible attributes and judge which set it is the having of which would make the being in question the best possible, the results of that consideration meaning that *ultima facie* a certain great-making attribute is not one we can attribute to God. Leftow calls this comparison between sets the 'last stage of perfect-being reasoning' and he puts the point in the following way:

> Given that there is the live possibility of conflict for any *prima facie* 'great-making' property, it is a live option that the last stage of perfect-being reasoning (taking us from *prima* to *ultima facie* ascription of a property) rule against it. So . . . something could lack a particular . . . great-making property . . . *because* [emphasis supplied] it is the greatest possible being. For the greatest possible being has the greatest compossible set of great-making attributes, and perhaps that particular great-making property is not compossible with one it is even greater to have.[10]

As well as the sort of case Leftow has in mind, there are a couple of other possibilities, ones which it is as well to flag up at this stage.

First, there is the possibility (at least an epistemic possibility) that two sets of great-making attributes might be different from one another in their members but not evaluable such that one comes out as better than the other, either because both come out as equally good or because they are incommensurable with one another in such a way that they cannot be ranked (other than relative to other sets (as above them)). Let me give a 'toy' example to illustrate.

For simplicity of model, allow me to suppose that there are only two great-making attributes, *A* and *B*; that they logically exclude one another; and

[10] B. Leftow, 'Why Perfect Being Theology?', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* (2001), 69(2), 103–18, 117.

that each is as exactly as great-making as the other. Allow me also to suppose, again just to keep things simple, that they're not degreed attributes. On these suppositions, the *A*-attribute-having God and the *B*-attribute-having God would – *ex hypothesi* – be equally great and it not be possible for anything to be greater, so Perfect Being Theology alone could not tell us whether God had attribute *A* or *B* (even assuming it were granted that God exists, which result itself is not something Perfect Being Theology could deliver).[11] We could of course say that, in such a circumstance, God would have the disjunctive attribute of 'having either *A* or *B*', but to proceed further to specify quite how He manifested that disjunctive attribute – the *A*-way or the *B*-way – we would need to turn to special revelation or to some natural phenomenon as providing evidence. Leibniz, who was one of the first to vex himself (and others) over these sorts of things, would disagree. Leibniz would maintain, via his Principle of Sufficient Reason, that, if there were a God, then there'd have to be some explanation for His having of whichever of *A* or *B* it is that He did have. It couldn't just ultimately be an inexplicable contingency. But, as the way that my model has been set up, it *would* have to be an ultimately inexplicable contingency whichever of them He had, then there could not be such a case as I am seeking to model. There is indeed a tradition that precedes Leibniz and runs broader and arguably deeper than the stream of philosophical reflection which he represents, one which anathematises thinking of *any* of God's attributes as contingent. But Leibniz and this broader tradition err.

Contingency should be admitted into God's (non-essential) attributes; He's no less perfect for that. A quick way to see this may be the following.[12] God is perfectly free (in the libertarian sense) and specifically He could have done otherwise than He did in creating this universe – He might have remained the sole existent or created another universe instead of this one. That being so, theists are committed to thinking that the attribute that God has of being creator of this universe is one that He holds contingently. Similarly, if the model that I've been using were to reflect reality in its salient points and there were to be a God, then one might even say that the full specification of the set of attributes the having of which made God the greatest (i.e. one that specified how the disjunctive attribute *A-or-B* was instantiated) would be contingent.[13]

[11] *Pace* Anselm. [12] If one doesn't accept the assumptions, it won't be.

[13] Would this be to admit contingency into the essence of God? No, if one is permitted to say that the relevant essential attribute of God in such a case would be *A-or-B* and that the particular 'specification', as I am putting it, of that property – that He's an *A*-God, say, rather than a *B*-God – is what is contingent and non-essential. It's non-essential, as the most perfect being possible would still have been that even had He had this essential property made specific in the *B*-way. This is a bit like something's having as an essential property *being coloured*, but there being no particular colour that the thing has to have.

If I am right that a perfect being would have some attributes contingently, that entails that Perfect Being Theology faces another limitation and this one, unlike the first situation discussed, is not plausibly merely an epistemic possibility; it's an actuality. The first situation required us to hypothesise that there might be two or more distinct sets of great-making features such that they tie for top place – the having of one set is no better than the having of any of the others. This could be argued to be a mere epistemic possibility; great-making features can't really work this way; the 'possibility' that they might work this way is just an epistemic one – an artefact of our not seeing them clearly enough. As I have said, Leibniz would have diagnosed the situation this way, but others would too. And nothing I have said should be taken to indicate that I am not sympathetic to that thought. I'm just not sympathetic to it as a result of thinking that, were such to obtain, it would require positing contingency in a perfect being and contingency in a perfect being is to be eschewed. Be that as it may, the second sort of situation, to which I'm about to turn, is one which, I shall argue, is not plausibly merely an epistemic possibility; it's something we can know to be actual.

There are some attributes the having of which isn't evaluable at all for a perfect being, so such attributes are not evaluable as great-making (or as bad-making). Perfect Being Theology can't tell us whether or not God has such attributes. An example might be the attribute of having a favourite colour (rather than being indifferent between colours). Some people have a favourite colour; some don't. Those who do aren't *eo ipso* either better or worse than those who do not. And then, among those who do have a favourite colour, there is no colour the having of which as one's favourite makes one better than one would have been had one had any other colour as one's favourite. If we add to this the claim that there are an infinity of colours (there are, after all, an infinity of shades of any one colour), then there are an infinite number of sets of attributes that a perfect being might have and Perfect Being Theology alone won't allow us to adjudicate between them.

Some perfect-being reasoners argue that if a being having a given property would neither add to nor detract from its greatness, we should conclude that God does not have that property, not that Perfect Being Theology can't tell us whether or not He has it. Mander, for example, says, 'A perfect being could have no particular interests or likes. He could not, for instance, have a favourite colour.'[14] But this just seems wrong to me. All that follows from a being's being perfect and its being non-great-making whether or not one has a favourite colour is that we cannot infer that a perfect being does have a favourite colour

[14] W. Mander, 'God and Personality', *Heythrop Journal* (1997), 38, 401–12, 403.

from the fact that He's perfect; not that we can infer that He does not. Here is a suggestion for an argument. Of logical necessity, a perfect being must either (a) have a favourite colour or (b) not have a favourite colour. Call the first the attribute of colour-favouritism; call the second the attribute of colour-indifferentism. If one insists that, as neither of these would be more great-making than the other, then a perfect being would have to have the attribute of colour-indifferentism, can one not fairly be accused of actually grading the attribute of colour-indifferentism as more great-making than the attribute of colour-favouritism, which – *ex hypothesi* – cannot be the case? Mander himself addresses the sort of view that I hold open as a possibility and says in effect that for God to have a favourite colour would be too 'arbitrary': 'In short, we may wonder, especially if we take God to be a necessary being, whether there can be anything arbitrary about him.'[15] But it is a logical necessity that there be something arbitrary about a perfect being if it is indeed a matter of value-indifference whether a being has the property of colour-favouritism or that of colour-indifferentism; if He has the property of colour-indifferentism, that is as arbitrary as if He has the property of colour-favouritism. If some of the properties that a perfect being may have are value-indifferent, then it's a logical necessity that there be arbitrariness of this sort in the most perfect being possible.[16]

The considerations sketched in the previous few paragraphs are to the effect that Perfect Being Theology alone will not enable us to decide between two or more sets of attributes the having of any one of which would make one such that none could be greater (and which have different great-making attributes among them) and between two or more sets of attributes the having of any one of which would make one such that none could be greater (and which have different non-great-making attributes among them). These considerations show the limits of Perfect Being Theology. These considerations do not, I suggest, show *weaknesses* in Perfect Being Theology. Perfect Being Theology alone will not allow us to know of all attributes whether or not

[15] 'God and Personality', 409.

[16] It's been suggested to me (by Martin Pickup) that perhaps colour indifferentism is less arbitrary, in that colour favouritism entails another arbitrary property, having a particular favourite colour, which colour indifferentism doesn't. If so and if having as little arbitrariness as possible is a great-making feature, colour indifferentism would then be ascribable, via Perfect Being Theology, to the greatest possible being. It may be then that this difference between Mander and me comes down to a difference in value judgement – I don't judge as great-making lack of arbitrariness (between options which don't differ in value); perhaps Mander does. This may be because I see this sort of arbitrariness as essential for being free when choosing between options which don't differ in value; see being free as great-making; and see it as necessary that there be options for an omnipotent being which don't differ in value. Perhaps Mander differs from me in one or more of these respects.

God has them, presuming He exists at all. But to say that one mode of argument can't tell you everything you might like to know about the nature of God is of course not to say that it can't tell you a lot.

To have characterised Perfect Being Theology with these few comments is to have sown dragon's teeth – a host of objections spring up, fully armed. Considerations of space mean that I can deal only with those which seem to me most pressing. There are three such.

First, we might consider the fact that the great-making status of many attributes is relative to the kind of thing in question. It's good for a bathroom mirror to be reflective (absent gerrymandered conditions), but it's neither good nor bad for a bathroom tile to be reflective (again, absent gerrymandered conditions). Are all great-making attributes like this – kind-relative? And, if so, do we not first need to decide what kind of thing God would be prior to being able to use Perfect Being Theology to consider candidate attributes as either great-making or not? The way through this issue is to deploy Perfect Being Theology on the attributes of being beings of certain kinds, the attribute of being a bathroom mirror, being a bathroom tile and so on. That is to say that we should ask of differing kinds of being if they're greater or less great than other kinds of being. Sometimes, assuredly, this question will not yield an answer for a given pair of kinds – are internal combustion engines greater or less great than sonatas? But sometimes this question will yield an answer. The case cogent to our concerns is, I suggest, this. Are *persons* greater than internal combustion engines; sonatas; bathroom mirrors; or indeed anything else? And it seems to me that this question yields the answer 'Yes', thus establishing that the greatest being possible will be a person. (Some theologians proceed further – 'beyond being' – or claim that God is not a being, but 'Being Itself', but such moves do not make sense.) Perfect Being Theology then is reflection on what the best person possible would be like.

Second, we might consider the fact that Perfect Being Theology rests on value judgements among other things. We're asking ourselves questions such as 'Are persons per se greater than sonatas per se?'; 'Is attribute *A* a great-making one for persons?'; 'Even if it is, would it be greater overall not to have it but instead to have attribute *B*, which is incompatible with *A*?'; and so on. And our value judgements are fallible. Leftow reports that as he gives perfect-being arguments, he has a 'nagging fear' that he is 'just making stuff up' as a result of the fact that 'our ideas of what it is to be perfect are inconsistent and flawed, and there is no guarantee that they match up with what God's perfection really is'.[17] I have the same nagging fear.

[17] B. Leftow, *God and Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 12. He makes a similar point in 'Why Perfect Being Theology?', 111.