Whatever it is better to be than not to be

Martin Lembke

Abstract The Anselmian claim that God is that than which a greater cannot be thought in virtue of being ‘whatever it is better to be than not to be’ may be accused of incoherence or even unintelligibility. By proposing a non-relative but apparently meaningful analysis thereof, I attempt to defend it against such criticism. In particular, I argue that ‘whatever it is better to be than not to be’ can be plausibly interpreted so as to imply very many attributes traditionally predicated of that than which a greater cannot be thought. Central to this line of reasoning is the assumption that whatever is an actual moral being is greater, simpliciter, than whatever is not an actual moral being.

Keywords Anselm · God · That than which a greater cannot be thought · Greatness · Universal value-commensurability · Great chain of being · Possibilism · Actualism · Morality · Actuality

According to Anselm, God is that than which a greater cannot be thought in virtue of being ‘whatever it is better to be than not to be’. Arguably, this idea constitutes ‘[t]he pinnacle of traditional theism’, if not ‘the regulating notion’ thereof. As Brian Lef-tow has shown, it goes back ‘at least to Plato, who takes as premisses in the Republic that “a God and what belongs to him are in every way in the best condition … they are

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1 Anselm (1998, p. 89).
2 Morris (1987a, p. 31).

M. Lembke
Centre for Theology and Religious Studies, Lund University, Box 201, 221 00 Lund, Sweden
e-mail: Martin.Lembke@teol.lu.se; Martin.Lembke@gmx.com
the most beautiful and best possible”’. Perhaps it even follows inevitably from that which is ‘essential to our idea of God’ in the first place, namely, the idea that ‘God is eminently worthy of worship’. Notably, Findlay argues that ‘[t]o feel religiously is to presume surpassing greatness in some object’, and this presupposition implies that ‘our religious object should have an unsurpassable supremacy along all avenues’, indeed, ‘that it should tower infinitely above all other objects’. In a similar vein, Mascall warns that ‘[t]o adore any being less than one who comprises in himself all possible perfection would be … a kind of conceptual idolatry’. Everitt suspects that the fact that theism crucially presupposes its God to be ‘worthy of worship … has been a powerful factor in pulling the articulation of theism, and of the divine attributes in particular, towards extreme formulations’. Paradoxically, it may even be suggested that the paradigmatically apophatic method of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, a method consisting in ‘the denial of all beings’, is aimed at coming to know ‘the highest God’. Aquinas, for one, relying on the selfsame Dionysius, points out that, since ‘[a]ll created perfections are found in God … He is spoken of as universally perfect, because He lacks not … any excellence which may be found in any genus.’

Its antiquity and theistic significance notwithstanding, the idea that God is that than which a greater cannot be thought in virtue of being whatever it is better to be than not to be is not easy to understand. On the face of it, it may even seem incoherent. It is better to be eight-legged than not to be eight-legged if one is a spider, all right, but what if one is an insect? Then it is better not to be eight-legged. And in what sense is it ‘better’ to be than not to be, say, omnipotent if one is a being than which a greater cannot be thought? Is it not rather necessary to be omnipotent in order to qualify as such? In what follows, I will try to disentangle problems such as these. In particular, focusing my argument on the assumption that whatever is an actual moral being is greater, simpliciter, than whatever is not an actual moral being, I will hazard a non-relative and yet, for all I can see, intelligible analysis of ‘whatever it is better to be than not to be’, an analysis, moreover, which would seem to entail exactly ‘that than which a greater cannot be thought’.

Towards greatness, simpliciter

As a preliminary, the idea that God is that than which a greater cannot be thought should be clarified accordingly: God is that than which a greater cannot possibly be thought. So, if an entity \( x \) is a being than which a greater cannot be thought then there is no metaphysically possible thinker who is able to conceive of an entity greater than \( x \). The unsurpassable greatness, in turn, must not be interpreted subjectively. Although

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4 Leftow (2011, p. 104).
5 Gale (1991, p. 8).
6 Findlay (1948, p. 179).
7 Mascall (1943, p. 197).
9 Jones (1996, p. 363), my emphasis.
10 Aquinas (2007, p. 21).