



What is the greatest being? Comparing western and eastern concepts of ultimate reality

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Abstract

The idea of the greatest (possible) being or perfect being features prominently in the ontological argument for God's existence and perfect being theology. The greatest being is commonly conceived as a being with various omni-properties (e.g., omniscience, omnibenevolence, omnipotence and omnipresence). Non-Western traditions include very different accounts of ultimate reality, like the *Dào* or *Brahman*. In some traditions, these are regarded as the greatest or perfect being. The paper investigates whether non-Western accounts hold better cards to be regarded as the greatest or perfect being.

Keywords Greatest being · Perfect being · Ontological argument · Perfect being theology · Hinduism · Daoism · Brahman · Dao · Omni-properties

1 Introduction

The perfect, greatest possible, or maximally great being has been the topic of extensive philosophical discussion. It features prominently in defenses of the ontological argument and in broader perfect being theology. The greatest being is commonly attributed various perfections like omniscience, omnibenevolence, omnipotence, and omnipresence. A maximally great being should possess all properties because these constitute great-making properties to the maximal extent.

Though common in Western philosophy of religion, the idea that the greatest being has various omni-properties is not universally shared. Some propose that a being that realizes and encompasses all possibilities and all of reality could be regarded as the greatest being. Others argue that a non-personal ultimate reality beyond limiting categories (for example the *Dào* or *Brahman*) deserves the title of greatest being.

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This paper examines what account of the greatest being is the most convincing. It does so by briefly analyzing the central ideas of the ontological argument (Sect. 2); by examining how defenders of the classical account, where the greatest being has various *omni*-properties, arrive at their accounts (Sect. 3); by noting rivals to the classical account (Sect. 4); and finally by comparing various accounts of the greatest being (Sect. 5).

2 The ontological argument and the greatest being

The perfect being features prominently in some versions of the ontological argument. In one of its plainest forms, the ontological argument is as follows:

- (i) I conceive of a being than which no greater can be conceived. (Premise)
- (ii) If a being than which no greater can be conceived does not exist, then I can conceive of a being greater than a being than which no greater can be conceived—namely, a being than which no greater can be conceived that exists. (Premise)
- (iii) I cannot conceive of a being greater than a being than which no greater can be conceived. (Premise)
- (iv) Hence, a being than which no greater can be conceived exists. (From i, ii, and iii) (Oppy, 1996a)

The first premise states that we can conceive of or imagine the greatest being. The second premise notes that the concept must include existence because an existing being is greater than a non-existing being. The properties or attributes of a perfect being therefore must include existence. The argument concludes therefore that the conceived greatest being must also exist in reality.

The term “perfection” is not found in the earliest version of the ontological argument. The earliest known version was written down by St. Anselm.¹ Anselm argues that we can conceive of a being to which no greater being can be conceived. When we conceive so, we should conclude that the greatest being exists, or else it would not be the greatest conceivable being (Anselm of Canterbury, 1995). Much has been written on the historical context and aims of Anselm’s original argument (see Sweeney (2013)). Some note that Anselm’s argument is couched in a meditation or prayer addressing God. The idea of the greatest conceivable being may have its roots in Anselm’s meditations on the nature of God or in an idea that came to him during prayer. In any case, Anselm argues that the greatest conceivable being cannot solely exist in the mind but must also exist in the objective world (Malcolm, 1960).

Anselm does not only discuss existence but also derives other attributes from “being the greatest conceivable being.” According to Anselm, the greatest conceivable being should have properties like being alive, wise, all-powerful, true, just,

¹ Before Anselm, Augustine and Boethius already argued that God is the most excellent or greatest conceivable being (see Leftow (2015)). Both did not argue that such a being must necessarily exist.

happy, and eternal (Anselm of Canterbury, 1995: 29). Anselm's focus is however, not in exploring what attributes are implied by God's perfection but establishing that God must exist.

Later versions traded the concept of "the being to which nothing greater can be conceived" for "the perfect being." René Descartes' ontological argument concludes to a supremely perfect being. Descartes attributes properties such as existence, eternality, immutability, infinity, omniscience, omnipotence, and simplicity to this perfect being. Like Anselm, Descartes argues that such a being must exist in order to count as perfect (Descartes, 2008).

Most versions of the ontological argument from the second half of the twentieth century argue for the existence of a *maximally great being* rather than a perfect being. The best-known example is Alvin Plantinga's modal ontological argument, which can be summarized as follows:

- C1. There is a possible world W in which there exists a being with maximal greatness.
 - C2. A being has maximal greatness in a possible world only if it has maximal greatness in every possible world, including the actual world.
 - C3. Therefore, there is a being with maximal greatness in the actual world.
- (Plantinga, 1978) as summarized in (Rasmussen, 2018: 3)

Being maximally great is commonly defined as possessing all great-making properties to the fullest degree. Examples of great-making properties are being good or having knowledge. While humans can possess such great-making properties to a limited degree, God possesses all great-making properties to the highest degree (Plantinga, 1978). Plantinga argues that maximal greatness includes existence in all possible worlds and therefore a maximally great being exists in the world we inhabit. Maximal greatness also includes other great-making properties besides (necessary) existence.

The purpose of this paper is not to reevaluate the ontological argument. Many other defenses and criticisms were put forward.² Instead, the paper zooms in on the conclusion. The goal of the ontological argument is to demonstrate that a perfect or maximally great being exists. What kind of being is this perfect being? Are there many possible ways to fill in perfection? And, can any of them make a claim to being more perfect than the other? These are the questions the remainder of this paper hopes to answer.

² Most criticisms either reject that a maximally great being is conceivable, see Speaks (2018) for a discussion, or that existence is a predicate, see Oppy (1996b): Chapter 10, for a discussion. See Oppy (2018) for an overview of defenses of various ontological arguments.

3 The greatest being

Most versions of the ontological argument conclude that a perfect or maximally great being must exist. As with other theistic arguments, the focus is on existence rather than nature of God. The argument does imply a number of attributes.³ A perfect being must have a number of *perfections*. Common examples are omniscience, omnibenevolence, omnipotence, and omnipresence. Moving beyond the strict focus of the ontological argument, much more has been written about what kind of being a perfect being is and what attributes such a being must have.⁴

Most authors who define God as a perfect being are adherents of Abrahamic religions or closely affiliated with them. Equating God to the perfect being is much less straightforward in other traditions. The ancient Egyptian gods are bound by cosmic forces and some display imperfect character traits. Many gods of Indian and African diaspora religions have similar imperfections. Doubts have also been expressed within Abrahamic traditions. For example, some Christian authors argue that the Biblical concept of God does not fit the concept of a perfect being (e.g., Hazony, 2018).

Most discussions on the nature of the perfect or maximally great being⁵ distinguish various great-making properties. A great-making property is any property of which it such that its possession makes a being greater than its non-possession. The central example in defenses of the ontological argument is necessary existence. A being that possesses necessary existence is greater than a being that possesses contingent existence or no existence at all. Some great-making properties are scalar. Having knowledge is greater than not having knowledge. Knowing 1000 propositions is greater than knowing 999, and knowing all propositions is greater still. A maximally great being should possess scalar great-making properties to the maximal degree (see Hill (2004)). Other great-making properties have qualitative differences. Humans have qualitatively greater rationality than all other animals. Humans can use rationality in different ways and achieve different things by means of it. God has still superior rationality. The maximally great being has great-making properties of this kind to the greatest qualitative degree.

How to discover great-making properties is not always clear. Daniel Hill⁶ proposes to rely on intuitions. Certain properties can intuitively be recognized as

³ Jeff Speaks argues that no other properties can be derived from the claim that God is perfect (Speaks 2018, 2014). His position is a minority position (see Dunaway (2022) for a critique).

⁴ Discussions on the nature of a perfect being are commonly called “perfect being theology.” Not all who discuss the nature of the perfect being are defenders of an ontological argument. For example, Thomas Aquinas discusses various properties of God as the highest, most perfect being at length yet did not think that the ontological argument was convincing.

⁵ The difference between “perfect” and “maximally great” is often unspecified. According to Daniel Hill, the term “perfection” captures the idea of a conjunction of all great-making properties so as to give an overall level of greatness higher than any other level, whether or not that combination is possible or not (Hill 2004: 3). The term “maximally great” captures the concept of being a (metaphysically) *possible* being than which there is no possibly greater one. Both terms are used interchangeably throughout this paper.

⁶ Hill’s account draws on Nelson Pike (Pike 1970) and Tom Morris (Morris 1991).

making a being greater or are intuitively connected to having a higher exalted nature. Our intuitions guide us to see what properties lend more value (Hill, 2004). Other authors rely on intuitions as well.⁷ Anselm suggests that great-making properties are derived by reason. He writes:

For the supreme essence must not at all be said to be any of those things to which something that is not what they are is superior; and, as *reason teaches*, he absolutely must be said to be any of those things to which whatever is not what they are is inferior. He must therefore be living, wise, powerful and all powerful, true, just, happy, eternal, and whatever similarly it is absolutely better to be than not to be. (Anselm of Canterbury, 1995: 29) emphasis added.

Apart from “being,” the most widely discussed great-making properties are knowledge, goodness, presence, and power. The greatest being has knowledge to the greatest degree. Knowledge is most often taken to mean “propositional knowledge.”⁸ The greatest being knows all true propositions.⁹ Being good is also commonly considered great-making. What being maximally good means is subject of considerable discussion.¹⁰ Omnibenevolence is rarely regarded as doing all good acts, but rather having only morally good traits of character and desires and only doing morally good actions (see Murphy (2013)). Such accounts allow that a perfect being allows evil to achieve a greater good.¹¹ Omnipresence is more straightforward. The property of being present is deemed better than not being present. Being maximally present is commonly taken to mean being present everywhere (e.g., Wierenga 2005). A maximally great being also has maximal power or omnipotence. Omnipotence, however, is hardly ever taken to mean being able to do everything. Even the greatest being cannot do contradictory or impossible acts. An omnipotent being is also unable to do embodied or evil acts. Such acts would limit other great-making properties, in this case being unconstrained by matter and being omnibenevolent.

A full discussion of every perfection lies beyond the scope of this paper. The short discussion does reveal that being maximally great does not mean having *all* great-making properties. Properties that may be great-making in their own right may not apply to the maximally great being because they imply limitations or contradict other great-making properties. For example, Morriston argues that necessarily moral perfection is incompatible with omnipotence (Morriston, 2001), and Kretzmann argued that omniscience is incompatible with immutability (Kretzmann, 1966).¹²

⁷ For example, William Craig argues that it seems obviously true that an omnibenevolent being is more perfect than a non-omnibenevolent being (Craig 2016).

⁸ Exceptions are Rob Lovering who includes experiential knowledge (Lovering 2013), Linda Zagzebski who includes knowledge from all first-person perspective (Zagzebski 2023), and Dan O’Brien who includes experiential knowledge of other minds (O’Brien 2013).

⁹ Some include that the greatest being also knows which propositions are false. See Wierenga (2010) for other accounts of maximal propositional knowledge.

¹⁰ See Garcia (2009) for some accounts.

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¹² See Resto Quiñones (2024) for more conflicts between perfections.

Conflicts between perfections prompted Yujin Nagasawa to revise maximal greatness to mean the greatest metaphysically possible being. Because particular perfections may stand in conflict, the maximally great being does not possess all great-making properties to the maximal extent, but only the greatest metaphysically possible *combination* of properties (Nagasawa, 2017). The greatest possible combination may not have omnipotence defined as being able to do everything because this would conflict with omnibenevolence.

Traditionally, perfection or maximal greatness is taken not to include all properties that imply a limitation. On some accounts of divine simplicity (i.e., the thesis that God is perfectly unified and does not have subparts), all attributes of God are regarded as identical to perfection.¹³ The unity is that profound that maximal simplicity implies that a being cannot have individual properties or attributes (Rogers, 2000). On such an account, properties that may be great-making in their own right cannot be attributed to the perfect being because they clearly imply limits with respect to other perfections. For example, having a perfect body inherently implies being bound to matter and not being present everywhere. For that reason, a maximally great being cannot have a perfect body. Being maximally great therefore does not mean having the largest number of great-making properties and certainly not having *all* great-making properties to the maximal degree.

The idea that properties that imply a limitation cannot be attributed to the greatest being is widely shared. Duns Scotus distinguishes pure perfections (perfections simpliciter). Pure perfections are any predicates that do not imply a limitation (see Williams (2001)). Pure perfections can be attributed to God whereas impure perfections cannot.¹⁴ Gottfried Leibniz also argues that perfections attributed to God should be positive qualities that involve no limitations at all (see Adams (1999)).

Most authors who discuss the greatest or perfect being share the idea that the perfect being has properties like omniscience, omnibenevolence, and omnipotence. They differ on the exact details of these omni-properties. Very few have defended the idea that the perfect being might be very different. The next section examines some exceptions.

4 Alternative accounts of the greatest being

By far, most academic discussion on the perfect or maximally great being includes a discussion of omni-properties like omnibenevolence, omnipotence, and omnipresence. A small minority defends the possibility of a maximally great being that is markedly different. I discuss three accounts: Zappulli's account of a limitless being, Schellenberg's account of a yet unknown even more maximally great being, and

¹³ Some accounts of divine simplicity hold that a perfect being is itself identical to perfection. The maximally great being is then identical to perfections like maximal goodness, maximal knowledge, and other perfections (see Hill (2004) and Rogers (2000)).

¹⁴ Scotus adds that pure perfections can be attributed to God *univocally*. The discussion on univocal and analogical predication of God lies beyond the scope of this paper.

Ziporyn's purposeless ultimate reality. The goal is not to show that all accounts are identical or highly similar, but to point to alternative accounts of what the greatest being is.

Zappulli notes that most accounts of perfection rely on comparative concepts. As noted above, most accounts see perfection as having great-making properties (like goodness, knowledge and power) to the maximal degree. Focusing on Nagasawa's account (see also above), Zappulli notes how defenders usually regard God as being in the same "league of greatness" as other beings, like humans, animals, or plants. In the league, all beings are compared on the basis of the great-making properties they possess and the extent to which they possess them. God, or the maximally great being, is that being that ends up on top of the league with great-making properties to the greatest possible extent. All other beings are ranked lower. The properties that are compared (knowing, power, goodness) are similar. This model inherently relies on a comparison between the greatest being and all other beings. Such a comparison is impossible for other conceptions of God. For example, in the *pratyabhijnā* tradition, Shiva is the supreme being. All else emerges from Shiva and is not different or distinct from Shiva. Even the very act of emergence or creation is part of Shiva's being.¹⁵ Shiva cannot be meaningfully compared to anything in creation because all exists within Shiva. For this reason, Shiva cannot even be said to exist in the same way as other beings. Shiva *qua* Shiva should be understood as being wholly different from anything else (Zappulli, 2024).

Even though comparison of Shiva to other beings is not possible, Zappulli argues that Shiva can be regarded as the greatest being, nonetheless. Unlike all other beings, Shiva has an *unlimited* nature. Shiva realizes all potentialities whereas other beings do not. In other words, Shiva is metaphysically unlimited whereas all other beings are limited. One key reason why other beings are limited is that they possess their properties to the exclusion of others. For example, personal beings are not impersonal; human beings are not non-human; and Socrates is not not-Socrates. Shiva does not suffer from any such exclusions because Shiva is all of reality all at once. Shiva encompasses all reality and is therefore not limited by any categorical exclusions within reality (Zappulli, 2024).

For Zappulli, some comparison between the greatest being and other beings is possible, but it is far more limited than the comparison at work in traditional ontological arguments or perfect being theology. The only meaningful comparison is between being limited and being unlimited. Because of his nature, Shiva is not limited by properties like personhood or being human. All other beings at least have some limitations. Focusing on limitations thus allows for some comparison that allows for the conclusion that one being comes out on top. The comparison does not rely on any property that is shared.

Schellenberg's alternative ontological argument also takes issue with common conceptions of the greatest being. His main problem is that it is not at all clear that our current understanding of God is the greatest possible or perfect being.

¹⁵ Zappulli notes that most are unaware of the unity of all with the supreme reality (Shiva). Even this very act of ignorance about the true nature of reality is a part of the supreme reality.

Schellenberg notes that the perfect being is often seen as a perfect *person*.¹⁶ Other non-personal accounts, like Spinoza's account, may prove to be even greater. Schellenberg argues that at our current stage of knowledge and of human evolution, we cannot be sure what being is the greatest. Human intelligence, in both its reflective and spiritually sensitive forms, will likely continue to evolve and improve. New religious experiences and newly developed religious ideas are likely to give us a better idea of what the greatest being is. Hanging on to our current idea of a perfect being as a perfect person is therefore not warranted and potentially overconfident or arrogant (Schellenberg, 2016).

If human rational faculties indeed evolve or enhance through some other means, our value-intuitions may change. Less advanced beings, like non-human animals, may judge other things as more valuable than we do. More advanced beings may have other value-judgments as well.

Schellenberg's alternative for the perfect or maximally great being is very different from Zappulli's. Zappulli's limitless being is worshipped by contemporary religious groups. His account is also a lot more detailed about this being's nature and how it is exalted above all other beings. Schellenberg primarily raises skepticism about common understandings of the current being as personal. He does not defend an alternative but notes that our understanding will likely develop, leading to a better one.

Brook Ziporyn not only argues that alternative conceptions of the greatest being are on offer. He also argues that alternatives are superior to common conceptions of a perfect, personal being. Like Schellenberg, Ziporyn draws inspiration from Spinoza. On Ziporyn's reading of him, Spinoza's God is an intricate system that realizes all possibilities by necessity. Spinoza's God is not personal and attributes like omniscience or omnibenevolence are not properly attributed to it. What makes this reality the greatest is its capacity to realize all possibilities and actually doing so. Only by producing all that can be produced can a God be qualified as absolutely infinite. Alternative conceptions impose limitations on God. On classical theistic accounts, God is intrinsically purposeful. Therefore, God cannot realize realities that are inherently devoid of any purpose (Ziporyn, 2024). To this, we can add that on classical accounts, God is also intrinsically good and therefore cannot realize gratuitous evil.

Ziporyn's account is much more intricate than can be summarized here. Key to regarding a being as the greatest is its ability to realize or bring about everything that can possibly exist. For Ziporyn (and possibly for Spinoza), this takes precedence over all other great-making properties discussed above. Similar to Zappulli's account, such a being is limitless. The greatest being is unlimited in another sense on Ziporyn's account. Its limitlessness lies not in not being bound by categories, but in not being limited in what it can realize.

¹⁶ A clear example is the account of Peter van Inwagen (Van Inwagen 2006:158). He writes: "The concept of God should be understood in this way: the concept of God is the concept of a *person* who is the greatest possible being" (emphasis in the original).

5 What being is the greatest?

The discussion above leaves us with at least three conceptions of the greatest being. One is the traditional account, where the maximally great being has perfections like omniscience, omnibenevolence, omnipresence, and omnipotence. The second and third are accounts of a being that is more radically limitless. On the second, the greatest being is not limited by any category, including categories like knowing, goodness, and power. The greatest being is also not limited in what it can possibly realize. On the third, the greatest being is not limited in what it actually produces as it produces all possibilities. The second and third account can be combined. A limitless being can be both unlimited by categories and unlimited in what it realizes. This limitless, greatest being is unlimited in two ways. It is unlimited by any category and unlimited in what it realizes (i.e., all that is possible). The first type of being unlimited pertains to lack of limitations on the nature of the greatest being. The greatest being is such that it cannot be confined to any category. The second kind of being unlimited pertains to what the greatest being can achieve or bring forth. A potential fourth conception would be a future conception that we have yet to discover after our intellectual functions have evolved.

A possible conclusion is that there is no way to decide which of the alternatives is greater. This could in turn imply that we cannot conceive which being is the greatest among these and ought to reject the first premise of the ontological argument.¹⁷ This section investigates ways how the alternatives of Sect. 4 can be compared. The section focuses on comparing the first (classical theism) and a combination of the second and third alternative (a being not limited by categories and not limited in what it produces).

One problem for comparing candidates for the perfect being is that judging perfection might be strictly subjective. Hill and Anselm suggest ways how this need not be the case. Hill argues that great-making properties can be recognized intuitively. Value intuitions help us make clear what properties are greater and therefore should be attributed to the greatest being. To avoid subjectivity, the intuitions relied on should be shared, generally human intuitions. Western intuitions might favor other accounts than Eastern intuitions. However, many seem to think that humans have a set of shared value intuitions that are up for the task. The assumption is that shared value intuitions are truth-conducive. Schellenberg raises doubt that our *current* value intuitions are truth-conducive or sufficiently truth-conducive to be relied on. This section leaves that point aside and (like most authors in the discussion) assumes that our current shared value intuitions are truth-conducive.

Anselm suggests that perfections can be derived through exercising reason. Indeed, arguments can be put forward that it is better to have more power than to

¹⁷ A similar argument was defended by Resto Quinones. Noting that the perfect being need not be attributed all great-making properties but only the greatest possible combination (see above), Quinones concludes that various sets of combinations of great-making properties can be put forward without a way of deciding which option is greater (Resto Quinones 2024). Resto Quinones does not take other alternatives, like ultimate reality in Indian or Daoist traditions, into account.

have less power. A being with more power can achieve more and will be less easily suppressed. However, the argument seems to rely on intuitions in the end, like that achieving more is greater and that being suppressed is less great. Arguments like these can show what value intuitions imply, how great-making properties are connected or rule out other properties.

A first observation to make is that at least some value-intuitions are shared by defenders of both alternatives. Defenders of classical accounts (that include omni-properties) agree that the greatest being should be free from limitations as much as possible. Some properties that are great-making in their own right are not attributed because they imply limitations (see above). Implied limitations can pertain both to the nature of God as to God's possibilities. Various great-making properties are attributed because they show how the perfect being is *not limited*, for example with regard to knowledge (omniscience), goodness (omnibenevolence), power (omnipotence), or presence (omnipresence). Some add that the greatest being is constrained by some limits. For example, Swinburne argues that a perfect being is constrained by what is logically possible and by what is good (Swinburne, 2016). Even a maximally great being therefore cannot do acts that are not logically possible or are not morally good. Swinburne adds that such limitations are unavoidable. Going against the laws of logic is inherently impossible and doing morally bad acts would limit perfect goodness. Defenders of open theism argue that the greatest being cannot know the future and is therefore limited in knowledge (Basinger, 2012). Some open theists add that the limit is unavoidable as well. Because the future has not come to be, future events are inherently unknowable. These and other unavoidable limitations are accepted because no being can exist without such limitations. A being with unavoidable limitations can therefore still be considered the least limited being possible or as maximally unlimited.

Classical theists thus appear to be agreement with the alternative account that the greatest being should be as limitless as possible. This seems to favor the pratyabhijnā account, where the greatest being is not limited by any categories. According to classical theism, the greatest being has a number of attributes necessarily, like knowing. Such a being is therefore essentially non not-knowing. The God of the pratyabhijnā tradition is both knowing and not-knowing at the same time. It encompasses knowing things, like humans, and non-knowing things, like rocks. The God of classical theism is also commonly regarded as personal and therefore necessarily as not non-personal. The God of the pratyabhijnā tradition is both personal and not personal at the same time because he encompasses all of reality in both its personal and non-personal forms.¹⁸

However, other considerations cast doubt on the limitlessness of the God of the pratyabhijnā tradition. The God of the pratyabhijnā tradition encompasses all of reality in all its details (see above). This implies that God also bears all *imperfections*. Very imperfect beings, like blind worms or organisms that are born incapable

¹⁸ Shiva, the supreme being in the pratyabhijnā tradition, is, however, regarded as personal. Its non-personality is therefore derivative of its personhood or a manifestation of Shiva where Shiva *lacks* personhood.

of surviving, are manifestations of God as well. Even material, imperfect objects, like lemon cars or jammed printers, are included. This concept of God thus incorporates all great-making properties *and* all small-making properties. It even incorporates all small-making properties to a maximal degree. It is not at all obvious that being unlimited by categories outweighs God's lack of perfection and limitations in its many manifestations.

Accounts of both alternatives thus have different limitations. It is not intuitively clear what outweighs the other, being unlimited by categorical properties or not suffering from countless imperfections. Therefore, it is not clear if both can be meaningfully compared. The God of classical theism (with omni-properties) and the God of the pratyabhijnā tradition do not exhaust all alternatives. Although the God of the pratyabhijnā tradition encompasses non-personal beings, Shiva is in its primordial form a personal being with personal characteristics like love and relationality. Schellenberg and Ziporyn note that the greatest being could also be non-personal. Ziporyn also defends a view where the ultimate being is not limited by any category but does not encompass all of reality. We turn to this account next.

Ziporyn defends an account where ultimate reality is not personal, purposeful, or intentional.¹⁹ This reality realizes all possibilities by necessity. The reality is infinite and not bound by any categories. Ziporyn's account draws heavily on Spinoza and Daoism. According to Ziporyn, both agree on many aspects of ultimate reality. Spinoza calls it "God" and Daoists "the Dao."²⁰ Unlike the pratyabhijnā tradition, all of reality is not part of the ultimate reality itself according to Daoists.²¹ While Daoists do affirm that the Dào is not separated from the rest of reality, and is immanently present in it, the primordial Dào existed before the rest of reality. Daoists sometimes distinguish the *nameless* Dào, which is the primordial reality in its formless, undifferentiated, ineffable form, from the more concrete Daos or ways that it brings forth. The primordial Dào is seen as limitless. Some Daoist scholars use terms like wuji (limitless or boundless) and wúqióng (infinite or inexhaustible) to designate the Dào.²² The Dào is also described as ever-present and inexhaustible.²³

We find similar accounts in Indian traditions. Many Indian traditions affirm that all of reality comes forth from the primordial Brahman. Sometimes the Brahman

¹⁹ Especially these last two properties make Ziporyn call his account "atheistic" because he defines God as an ultimate being that is inherently purposeful. Such a God does not exist according to Ziporyn. While Ziporyn's account is very different from classical theism, his account is not necessarily naturalistic or physicalistic. Ziporyn includes Mahayana Buddhists as defending a similar account of ultimate reality while they also worship supernatural beings like Bodhisattvas. His account is compatible with the existence of an ultimate reality that is not inherently purposeful.

²⁰ According to Daoists, there are many more specific Daos or ways, and the Dào refers to the primordial reality from which everything came forth.

²¹ This is not strictly the case for Spinoza's account where all of finite reality is a mode of existence of God.

²² See for example, Zhuāngzi Chapter 2 "The Way [Dào] has never known boundaries" (Watson 2013).

²³ See for example the Dàodéjīng Chapter 25: "There was something undefined and complete, coming into existence before Heaven and Earth. How still it was and formless, standing alone, and undergoing no change, reaching everywhere and in no danger (of being exhausted)! It may be regarded as the Mother of all things." (Legge 1891: Chapter 25).

is given different names. Sometimes all of reality is included as a manifestation or aspect of the Brahman, not unlike in the pratyabhijnā tradition. Some traditions, like Advaita Vedānta, do distinguish the primordial Brahman, which is formless, beyond categories, and ineffable from the rest of reality.²⁴ The rest of reality is mere appearance or even illusory.

Brahman is also regarded as unlimited. The root of the word “Brahman” is “brh” or “brahm,” which means “to grow,” “to be great,” or “to expand” (Kalita, 2020). Vedantist scholar Adi Śaṅkara²⁵ describes Brahman as “anantam,” meaning²⁶ “without spatial, temporal, or object-based limitation.” He adds that Brahman is boundless and cannot be confined or limited by any of its manifestations or effects (Sastri, 1923: 116).

Vedantists and Daoists also regard being unlimited as being unlimited by categories (like personhood, knowing or others) but in a different way than on the pratyabhijnā account. On the latter, Shiva is not limited by such categories because Shiva encompasses all of reality. Shiva is therefore both human and non-human or Socrates and not-Socrates at the same time. This holds true for all categories that can be applied to beings. Brahman and the Dào in their primordial forms do not encompass all of reality in this sense. Nonetheless, they are not limited by any category because they are *beyond* categorization. What this “being beyond” means is subject to some discussion. Adi Śaṅkara argues that Brahman is perfect because it is *the source of everything*, including all categorizations. On some accounts, beings in all categories are manifestations of Brahman in one of its endlessly many ways (Chaudhuri, 1954). Because Brahman is the source of everything, including all categorizations, and Brahman transcends all categorization. Brahman cannot be properly attributed properties like knowing, power, or goodness, because Brahman is the very reason why these categories exist.

The Dào is also described as beyond categorization. The Dào is described as being beyond color, sound, or form because it is the source of all. Furthermore, the Dao is described as free from any distinctions or borders (see Kohn (2019)). The Dào is the source of all of reality, including all categorization.

There is another meaning of “being beyond something” different than being the source of something. For example, Śaṅkara writes about the Brahman as beyond knowing because it is not an object to be known, nor a subject that knows. It is rather the knower and known itself (Swami Gambhirananda, 1965). The same holds for categories of speech or mind. The Brahman cannot be captured in speech or thought because it is both the speaker and the spoken, as well as the thinkers and

²⁴ Often adherents distinguish the higher or Nirguṇa Brahman from the lower or Saguṇa Brahman. Others distinguish the unqualified Brahman (without attributes) from the qualified Brahman (with attributes) (see below). The latter is the Brahman when manifesting distinctions and qualities. The former is Brahman in its primordial form without any qualifications. Rambachan suggest that the distinction is made by adherents of Advaita Vedānta to keep Brahman free from limitations and imperfections of the world (Rambachan 2001).

²⁵ Adi Śaṅkara is sometimes referred to as “Śaṅkarācārya.” The suffix “Ācārya” means “teacher” or “instructor.” All references to Śaṅkara’s works are referenced with the English translator as author.

²⁶ Śaṅkara writes: “Brahman is existence, Knowledge and Infinity.” (Sastri 1923: 108).

the thought. Because speech and mind are inherently intentional, a non-dual reality like Brahman cannot properly be attributed any. For the Brahman, there is no other reality to be known, spoken of, thought of, or observed. All such dichotomies only arise in other realities that come from the Brahman, like the sensible world we live in.²⁷ Brahman is thus beyond knowing and observing in the sense that the necessary distinctions for knowing and observing do not exist in its reality. The Brahman does know, but more like a human being knows its conscious mental states through immediate introspection. Such knowledge is non-conceptual, but more like a direct experience.

Adherents of both traditions commonly affirm that no properties whatsoever can be attributed to ultimate reality because any property would imply a limitation (see also below). As Zappulli notes, a solid case can be made that many categorical properties imply a limitation. A being that is human is inherently not a not-human and therefore limited. However, there are some properties that are not limiting, i.e. properties that are shared by all beings. Noting that the greatest being *is* does not imply anything that the greatest being is not. It²⁸ is not clear whether there are other universally shared properties.²⁹ The number of universally shared properties is probably very limited, and most are not very informative. Realities like Brahman and the *Dào* can thus probably be attributed universally shared properties like “being.” Such properties do not imply a limitation like categorical properties do.

An additional argument why attributing omni-properties is not suitable to the greatest being is that they imply a dependence. For example, a being that has maximal propositional knowledge has a knowledge relation to propositions (*s* knows that *p*). The relation implies that the being is distinct from *p*. As a result, the being is in some sense dependent on *p*. Knowledge of *p* necessarily requires the existence of *p* and conforms to the nature of *p*. A being that is beyond propositional knowledge does not have this inherent dependence. The same holds for power. Having power is a two-place relation as well (*x* has power over *y*). The implication is that *x* is distinct from *y* and in some sense dependent on *y*. Presence is a two-place relation as well (*x* is present in *y*). All suggests that a being beyond two-place relations is superior to being part of such relations. A being that is beyond does not have the intrinsic dependencies involved in such two-place relations. For other omni-properties, such as omnibenevolence, direct limitations are implied. A being that is perfectly good cannot do evil actions and hence is limited in what it can do.

²⁷ Adherents of Advaita Vedānta, like Śaṅkara, will add that the world we know, and its dichotomies are unreal or illusory.

²⁸ Some Daoist suggest that the *Dào* is beyond being as well and that the *Dào* gives rise to being and non-being (*wú*) alike. However, non-being is commonly read as referring to indeterminacy rather than nothingness (Strickmann, Michel 2025). While a full account of non-being in Daoism lies beyond the scope of this paper, it appears as if indeterminacy can be included in a Fregean concept of being where “being” does not include additional qualities like determinacy.

²⁹ If idealism is true, the property “being mental” would be universally shared. If materialism is true, the property of “being material” would be. Both positions are, however, very different from the alternative taken into consideration in this section.

A reality that is beyond limiting categories and also does not include all imperfections in reality avoids the limitations that pertain to classical theistic accounts and the pratyabhijñā tradition. Both ideas are affirmed by key Vedantist thinkers. They distinguish the qualified Brahman (with attributes) from the unqualified Brahman (without attributes). Of both, only the unqualified Brahman is ultimately real (Sivananda, 1949).³⁰ All imperfections we note in the empirical world are illusory (like the empirical world in its entirety) and not properly attributed to the unqualified Brahman (Sastri, 1928: 104–105). Like many Vedantists, Śaṅkara also affirms that Brahman is beyond designation. Śaṅkara writes: “Brahman which is birthless, causeless, changeless and attributeless (...)” (Nikhilananda, 1949: 149).³¹ Brahman cannot be attributed positive properties but can be described by noting what it is not. Vedantist Swami Nikhilananda writes: “Now, therefore, the description of Brahman: ‘Not this, not this’ (Neti, Neti), for there is no other and more appropriate description than this ‘Not this’” (Nikhilananda, 1953: 128).

Similarly, classical Daoist sources affirm that the primordial *Dào* is beyond limiting categories and does not include all earthly imperfections. Classical texts also attest that the primordial *Dào* is to be distinguished from the *Daos* that arise from it. The *Dàodéjīng* states:

The *Dao* that can be trodden is not the enduring and unchanging *Dao*. The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name. (Conceived of as) having no name, it is the Originator of heaven and earth; (conceived of as) having a name, it is the Mother of all things. (Legge, 1891: Chapter 1)

Specific *Daos* or courses that emerge from the primordial *Dào* can be named and bear properties. The primordial *Dào* from which these originate cannot. The quote also distinguishes the unchanging *Dào* from other *Daos* that can be named or trodden.

The *Dàodéjīng* also reads:

Its upper part is not bright, and its lower part is not obscure.
Ceaseless in its action, it yet cannot be named, and then it again
returns and becomes nothing. This is called the Form of the Formless,
and the Semblance of the Invisible; this is called the Fleeting and
Indeterminable. (Legge, 1891: Chapter 14)

³⁰ See also Śaṅkara: “[W]e (...) must definitively conclude that Brahman is devoid of form. Those other passages [of sacred texts], on the other hand, which refer to a Brahman qualified by form do not aim at setting forth the nature of Brahman, but rather at enjoining the worship of Brahman. As long as those latter texts do not contradict those of the former class, they are to be accepted as they stand; where, however, contradictions occur, the passages whose main subject is Brahman must be viewed as having greater force than those of the other kind.—This is the reason for our deciding that although there are two different classes of scriptural texts, Brahman must be held to be altogether without form, not at the same time of an opposite nature.” (Thibaut 1890) (3.2.14).

³¹ The idea of “not this, not this” is derived from the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, which reads “Now, therefore, the description of Brahman: ‘Not this, not this’ (Neti, Neti); for there is no other and more appropriate description than this ‘Not this.’” (2.3.6) <https://vedantastudents.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/10.-Brihadaranyaka-Upanishad.pdf>

Zhuāngzi Chapter 2 states: “The greatest Course [Dào] is thus always unproclaimed” (Ziporyn, 2009: 17). The impossibility to name the primordial Dào supports the idea that properties cannot be properly attributed to the Dào.

A being that does not encompass all of reality, including all its imperfections, and is beyond categorization combines the features of the alternative accounts discussed above. It shares the limitless of Shiva in the pratyabhijñā tradition since it realizes all possibilities and it is not limited by categories. Like God in classical theism, it does not suffer from the imperfections and small-making properties that many beings have. There are important differences in how Brahman and the Dào are described by adherents. Brahman is commonly described by Advaita Vedantists as the ultimate reality that is identical to our innermost self (Ātman). Brahman is also described by Advaita Vedantists as the only real reality whereas the rest is merely illusory or Māyā. The Dào is described as giving rise to various Daos or ways that govern various aspects of reality. Although a full description of Brahman and the Dào lies beyond the scope of this paper, the differences mainly pertain to how the ultimate reality relates to the rest of reality and what the status of the rest of reality is (illusory or real, identical to ultimate reality or different). Vedantists and Daoists are in agreement that ultimate reality is beyond limiting categorization.

6 Objections and replies

Are there reasons to doubt that a being like Brahman or the Dào in its primordial form should be regarded as the greatest or as maximally great? One problem may be its lack of libertarian freedom.³² Ziporyn notes that an ultimate reality that generates all possibilities does so by necessity. Spinoza also argued that all is brought forth by God in a deterministic fashion. It is not immediately clear that the same holds for Brahman or the Dào. The question could again be a category mistake because neither the property of “being free” nor “being determined” can be attributed to Brahman or the Dào. Śāṅkara suggests that Brahman is actionless.³³ If Brahman is actionless, Brahman is also without free actions. Similarly, the Zhuāngzi states: “For that Course [Dao] has its realness and reliability, but without any deliberate deeds (...)” (Ziporyn, 2009: Chapter 6: p.56).

Abstracting from deeper questions on whether “being free” or “being determined” can be properly attributed to Brahman or the Dao, not having libertarian free will need not be problematic. If the greatest being realizes all possibilities, no room is left for libertarian freedom. Libertarian free will is commonly defined as the ability to do otherwise. A being that realizes all possibilities cannot choose to act in a certain way or refrain from acting in a certain way. It must act in such a way as to realize all possibilities. It, therefore, cannot do otherwise because there

³² A thorough discussion of the concept of libertarian freedom lies beyond the scope of this paper. Libertarian freedom is commonly taken to mean “the ability to do otherwise.”

³³ Śāṅkara writes that realization the identity of the self (atman) with Brahman implies a “realization of the nonexistence of actions” (Gambhirananda 1984: 5.9 p.228).

is no other thing to do. As a result, it necessarily lacks libertarian free will. Not having libertarian free will because all possibilities are realized, however, does not imply a limitation. Finite beings that lack free will are sometimes considered limited because they are not the source of their own actions or cannot claim ownership over their actions. For beings that are determined by an outside force, this is indeed the case. However, ultimate reality as construed above is not determined by outside forces. The reason why they realize all possibilities is because of their own nature. Because Brahman and the *Dào* are *unlimited*, they realize all possibilities. The reason is not because of an outside force.

Another objection is denying that perfection implies being as limitless as possible. We noted above that many defenders of classical theism agree that the greatest being should not be attributed properties that imply a limitation. Other defenders disagree or defend accounts of perfection that do not refer to being limitless. Many argue that the perfect being should be attributed all properties that endow a higher value to a maximal extent. For example, Martin Lembke argues that the greatest being ought to be attributed moral being because having a moral nature is of higher value than not having a moral nature (Lembke, 2013). Another alternative of perfection includes all properties that make a being worthy of worship in a maximal way. Properties like moral goodness show that a being is more worthy of worship than being that lacks it (McCoy, 2019).

A thorough discussion of alternative accounts of perfection and what they imply lies beyond the scope of this paper. We can note, however, that a being that is beyond properties like having knowledge and being good does not *lack* these properties in a strict sense. Instead, it is beyond such properties and the source of their very existence (see above). This implies that a being like Brahman and the *Dào* does not lack such properties in the sense that it is devoid of them. Brahman and the *Dào*, however, do not have these properties in a way that having the properties endows a higher degree of value or excellence. According to defenders of classical theism, however, God does not enjoy the value and excellence of properties for which God is the ground of existence as well (like having visual aesthetic appeal or being very detailed). Focusing on properties that make a being more worthy of worship appears to rely on subjective value judgments.

Another objection is that a being like Brahman or the *Dào* cannot properly be called “the greatest” or “being unlimited.” Problems would also arise to regard ultimate reality that is beyond all predication as realizing all possibilities. As noted above, adherents of Advaita Vedānta and Daoism claim that both are *beyond predication*. Predicating “being the greatest,” “being unlimited,” or “realizing all possibilities” of either therefore commits a category mistake.

As a reply, a distinction must be made between negative and affirmative statements. No problems arise for attributing “being unlimited” and “not encompassing all of reality.” As noted, being beyond predication does allow for negative statements. It remains possible to claim that Brahman and the *Dào* are not-human or not-divided. Claiming that Brahman and the *Dào* do not encompass reality in their primordial forms makes a claim about what both are not. Claiming that Brahman and the *Dào* are unlimited is synonymous to claiming that both are not-limited and are therefore negative statements as well. Claiming that both

are unlimited are claims about what Brahman and the *Dào* are not (i.e., bound by limitations) and are therefore not affirmative statements.

Matters are more difficult for attributing “being the greatest,” which *is* an affirmative statement. Here, defenders can point to the use of “pointer concepts” for Brahman. Some adherents of Advaita Vedānta note that positive predication of Brahman is not unheard of. Brahman is called “all-pervasive”³⁴ and eternal.”³⁵ Brahman is also called “existence” (*sat*), consciousness (*cit*), and bliss (*ānanda*).³⁶ These properties when attributed to Brahman function as “pointer concepts.” Pointer concepts do not indicate Brahman in a direct, literal way, but *point towards* a reality that is beyond categorizations. They hint or suggest the reality of a higher reality that is not fully captured by the concept.³⁷ Using negative terms can have the same pointing role. The term “being the greatest” can also be used in the same way. Adherents of classical theism do something similar when they call God the greatest being. The term “being the greatest” is taken to refer to having a host of great-making properties to a maximal degree (see above). The term “greatest” thus also points to other properties that God allegedly has. Returning to Brahman, the term “greatest” points to properties like “being beyond categorization,” or “being unlimited.”

Claiming that the ultimate reality realizes all possibilities poses perhaps the most difficulties. The statement is clearly affirmative and suggests a clear attribution. However, the claim can be read as a pointer concept as well. Swami Vireswarananda makes a similar move when he claims that Brahman is the origin of the world (Swami Vireswarananda, 1936: 24–25). His statement is commonly interpreted as a pointer-concept as well. Claiming that Brahman is the origin or cause of the world notes characteristics of *the world* rather than of Brahman. The world is such that it owes its existence or appearance to Brahman. Its dependence does not attribute a property to Brahman, yet indicates or points to Brahman (Swami Vireswarananda, 1936). Realizing all possibilities also primarily designates that which ultimate reality causes or brings forth. It indicates nothing about the nature of Brahman.

Although Daoism does not have a tradition of pointer concepts, the same line of reasoning can be applied to the *Dào*. Classical Daoist writers commonly affirm that the *Dào* is beyond form and attribution (see above). They nonetheless use various terms to describe the *Dào*. According to Brook Ziporyn, terms are frequently used with a sense of *irony*; Daoist authors affirm that language is inadequate to designate the *Dào* but nonetheless use language as an imperfect guide (Ziporyn, 2013).

³⁴ e.g., Śaṅkara: “That which cannot be seen nor seized, which is without origin and qualities, without eyes and ears, without hands and feet, the eternal, *all-pervading*, omnipresent, infinitesimal, that which is imperishable” 135 (Max Muller and George Thibaut 2004: 135).

³⁵ e.g., Mundaka Upanishad 1.1.6 <https://www.wisdomlib.org/hinduism/book/mundaka-upanishad-shankara-bhashya/d/doc145080.html>

³⁶ e.g., Swami Krishnananda: “The existence (*Sat*), consciousness (*Chit*) and bliss (*Ananda*) of Brahman are all one indivisible essence, and not three qualities or properties of Brahman” (Krishnananda 2003: Chapter 8).

³⁷ The technical term in Sanskrit is *taṭastha lakṣaṇa* (indication in a limited sense). For a discussion, see Biswas (2021).

Concepts used to describe the *Dào* can therefore also indicate or point to the ultimate reality but do not describe its internal nature.

7 Conclusion

The paper argued that an unlimited being that realizes all possibilities and is beyond limiting categories and dichotomies, but that does not encompass all of reality, is greater or more perfect than other accounts of what the perfect being is. Accounts of such a being can be found in the Advaitin Vedantic account of Brahman and the Daoist account of the *Dào*. Such a being is greater than a being with omni-properties, like omniscience, omnibenevolence, omnipotence, and omnipresence because the latter does not transcend all categories and dichotomies. It is also greater than a being that realizes all possibilities and encompasses all of reality. Such a being has all perfections or great-making properties, but also all imperfections to a maximal degree.

The conclusion has several ramifications. If the ontological argument is sound, the greatest, most perfect being must exist. If the greatest being is indeed the Brahman, *Dào*, or something very similar to it, the argument thus concludes to the necessary existence of this being instead of the God of classical theism. The conclusion also strongly suggests that perfect being theology should be radically rethought.

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