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Divinity and Maximal Greatness

By Daniel J. Hill

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[1] This book is a revised version of a doctoral dissertation defended at King's College London. It presents a detailed defence of so-called 'perfect-being theology' i.e. the view that in order to count as divine a being should be maximally perfect in the sense of exemplifying all great-making properties maximally. The first chapter defines what is meant by perfect-being theology and by great-making properties and explains how one is to decide which properties are 'great-making'. The rest of the book discusses the conceptual issues involved ascribing to God those great-making properties that Hill considers most important. Chapters 2-4 deal with divine omniscience. Chapter 2 tries to develop a coherent definition of divine omniscience. Chapters 3 and 4 discuss the most important problem raised by the concept of divine omniscience: can we ascribe omniscience about future contingents to God without this entailing a deterministic view in which future events can no longer be contingent? In chapter 4 Hill defends a molinistic solution in which God has middle knowledge about future contingents. Chapter 5 deals with the conceptual issues raised by the concept of divine omnipotence. Chapter 6 discusses the claim that in order to be maximally great God must be maximally morally good and maximally beautiful. Hill defends an objectivist view on values whereby goodness and beauty are objective realities maximally realised in God. In this way he sides with Plato against Euthyphro: God demands actions because they are right; they are not right because God demands them. In a final chapter Hill discusses the eternity and omnipresence of God. Most of the chapter deals with the question whether divine eternity should be viewed as timelessness or as temporal eternity. According to Hill there are no decisive philosophical arguments for choosing between these two views. Hill's reason for choosing for a temporalist view of divine eternity are therefore theological: 'It seems clear to me that Jesus of Nazareth was in time. ... Since he was both divine and in time, it follows that at least one divine being is in time, since one cannot enter or leave time. It would, however, be odd if only one of the divine persons was in time. ... So I believe that every actual divine being is in time.' In conclusion Hill deals briefly with divine omnipresence (that according to him is 'not a philosophically controversial attribute'), divine necessity, absolute sovereignty, and ontological independence. Hill summarises the conclusions of his book as follows: 'I have tried to show that the necessary and sufficient conditions for the possession of the property of divinity or *being divine* is the possession

of the property of maximal greatness or *being maximally great*. I have tried to show that possession of this single property implies possession of the traditional attributes of a divine being: omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, perfect goodness, eternity, maximal beauty, as well as possession of some properties that divine beings share with many other beings, properties such as *being a concrete particular, having life, consciousness, agency* etc.' Hill admits that there are many other divine attributes that he has not mentioned. However, 'here too the possession of maximal greatness is sufficient for the possession of all the divine attributes, even the ones beyond our comprehension.'

[2] This book raises some important issues and in general analyses them in a philosophically competent, although sometimes overly technical, way. There are, however, a number of rather controversial views that Hill seems to assume without question or argument. Thus he assumes Richard Swinburne's tritheist views on the Trinity, and the objectivist Platonic view on values according to which God's will is not itself the ultimate standard of goodness but is rather subjected to 'goodness' as an objective reality apart from God's will. Although Hill argues at length for the Molinist view on divine foreknowledge, I am still not convinced that this is more than a piece of logical slight of hand.

[3] For me the value of this book is that it explains and defends 'perfect-being theology' in a detailed fashion and thus demonstrates both its strengths and weaknesses. My main problem with this approach is twofold. On the one hand I have some difficulty with the apriori way in which perfect-being theologians like Hill decide on which properties are to be considered 'great-making' and have therefore to be maximally ascribed to God. Hill argues that we should appeal to our 'intuitions about which properties are great-making properties' (p.14). Thus for example he writes that 'I think that it is greater to be a concrete particular than an abstract object,' (p.15). And 'I think that *knowledge* is one great-making property: we mostly think that knowledge is a good thing – we want more of it and consider it the sort of thing we would like to be possessed by any children we have' (p.27). Also 'I think most people think powerlessness a worse thing than power, which is one reason why people are always trying to expand their power by modern technology ...' (p.125). Although I do not deny that God is omnipotent and omniscient, I do not think that this can be adequately established in such an apriori intuitive fashion. Our intuitions are not only fallible but also determined by our culture. Thus I think that the Platonic intuitions of the Church Fathers would probably have led them to reject Hill's view that concrete particulars are greater than abstract universals. Furthermore, the intuitions of believers can be very different from those of 'most people' to whom Hill appeals. Believers' intuitions are not only formed by their faith but also informed by the Biblical tradition. In his inaugural lecture at King's College, London, in 1994, Hill's supervisor, Paul Helm, argued this point persuasively with reference to St. Paul's statement in I Corinthians: 'The foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men.' In terms of the Biblical message divine omnipotence is very different from that desired by Hill's 'people [who] are always trying to expand their power by modern technology'. God's power is the power of love and it is

especially what John Wesley calls 'love divine, all loves excelling' that is God's most important 'great-making property'. Unfortunately Hill's intuitions failed to let him discuss the greatness of divine love.

[4] This brings me to my second problem with perfect-being theology. God's perfections are not merely the maximisation of human perfections. Such maximised human perfections produce superman rather than God. I do not deny that we usually understand the characteristics of divinity on the analogy of human characteristics. We employ terms we use with reference to human persons as metaphors for God. These metaphors have to be qualified because God is not like other people. However, such qualification does not consist in merely maximising the terms but by interpreting them in the light of the fact that unlike us God is not subject to the limitations of human finitude. Our knowledge, our abilities, our faithfulness, our love, our ability to consistently do what is good, our life, our spatial location etc. are all subject to the strictures of human finitude whereas God is free from these limitations. In this way God's perfections are *qualitatively* different and not merely the *quantitative* maximisation of ours. In order to sort out these differences one should examine the implications of human finitude for the way these characteristics apply to us and then see how these characteristics are qualitatively different when applied to God who is free from these limitations.

[5] Daniel Hill has produced a competent defence of perfect-being theology, and one with which it is worth debating. The above remarks are intended as an indication of some lines that such a debate might take.