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Fluctuating maximal God, the problem of inconsistent evil, and spacetime changes

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Abstract

The fluctuating maximal God thesis, developed by Jeffrey et al., offers a conception of God that removes the characteristic of divine immutability, allowing the degrees of God's great-making properties to change over time. This god-concept provides a substantial advantage over the 'static' maximal God thesis proposed by Yujin Nagasawa if it can adequately sidestep what I call 'the problem of inconsistent evil'. This problem questions how a static god can be compatible with the inconsistent dispersion of evil in the world. It is founded on the observation that evil is distributed neither equally nor fairly across time, space, and individuals. I distinguish between temporally inconsistent, spatially inconsistent, and interpersonally inconsistent evil and argue that the fluctuating maximal God thesis can account for all types of inconsistent evil if God fluctuates not only through time but also through space.

Keywords: immutability; maximal God; nature of God; the problem of evil; spacetime

Introduction

Anne Jeffrey, Matyáš Moravec, and I (Jeffrey et al. (2020)) recently built on Yujin Nagasawa's (2017) maximal God thesis to construct a concept of God that has potential advantages over alternative contenders. We postulated a 'fluctuating maximal God', unrestrained by the quality of immutability and, consequently, able to vary the degrees of its great-making properties. Fluctuating maximal God is not beholden to the intrinsic maximum of each great-making property – such as benevolence, power, and knowledge – like the omniGod thesis is. The degrees of fluctuating maximal God's great-making properties can potentially change at any time.

This article aims to defend and expand on the fluctuating maximal God thesis by expressing how this novel concept of the divine can evade one particular version of the problem of evil: the problem of inconsistent evil. This version of the problem of evil creates substantial issues for Nagasawa's original maximal God thesis. Yet if perfect being theists are willing to sacrifice the characteristics of immutability and timelessness, then the problem of inconsistent evil can be met.

The structure of this article is as follows. First, I outline some provisional concepts integral to the central argument: the problem of evil and Nagasawa's original 'static' maximal God (SMG) thesis. Next, I explore a version of the evidential problem of evil that the

SMG thesis cannot easily overcome: the problem of inconsistent evil. I consider two recent formulations of the problem of evil – the problem of geography and the problem of natural inequality – alongside the version of the problem of evil on which Jeffrey et al. (2020) concentrate to distinguish between different types of uneven evil distribution: temporally inconsistent evil, spatially inconsistent evil, and interpersonally inconsistent evil. Then I demonstrate how the fluctuating maximal God (FMG) thesis can effectively avoid the problem of temporally inconsistent evil, giving it leverage over the static maximal God thesis. Next, I explore the possibility that the FMG thesis cannot account for spatially inconsistent evil and interpersonally inconsistent evil. I propose that it can, so long as we accept certain implications about God, specifically that God prioritizes some entities over others or acts somewhat arbitrarily. I then explore a novel conception of God that can fluctuate through spacetime. Finally, I address a general concern for the FMG theist: that the god-concept it postulates is simply too inconsistent. I offer several suggestions to help overcome this potential problem. Overall, I maintain that the fluctuating maximal God thesis can sidestep the problem of inconsistent evil faced by the static maximal God thesis. Thus, it provides an attractive god-concept to theists with a willingness to explore God's nature using a particular metatheology that rejects worshipworthiness as its starting point coupled with an openness to rejecting divine immutability and timelessness.

The traditional problem of evil and the static maximal God thesis

The problem of evil, quite frankly, is the biggest challenge for Abrahamic religion apologists because it creates the greatest obstacle to belief in an all-good and all-powerful God. Put simply, the problem questions how an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent God (the 'omniGod' of perfect being theism) could or would allow evil to exist in the world.

There are various formulations of the problem of evil. The logical problem of evil claims that we cannot reconcile God with any amount of evil in the world. The evidential problem of evil claims that the sheer amount and intensity of evil in the world makes God's existence improbable. The evidential problem of evil, in particular, suggests that the evil apparent in the world undermines the existence of the omniGod (a god that possesses great-making properties to their intrinsic maxima). The problem of evil is an example of what Yujin Nagasawa (2017) refers to as a 'Type-C' argument against omniGod's existence (an argument that points to a certain contradiction between one or more of God's properties and a particular fact about the world). In this case, the contradiction occurs between God's omnibenevolence and omnipotence and the fact that evil exists in the world.

What Jeffrey et al. (2020) call the static maximal God thesis was proposed by Yujin Nagasawa (2017). Among other aims, the thesis attempts to establish compatibility between God's existence and evil by removing the necessity of God's omni-properties. In a nutshell, Nagasawa claims that perfect being theists ought not to be beholden to the omni-properties (great-making properties notched up to their intrinsic maxima). Instead of conceiving God as an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent being, the SMG thesis contends that although God is very powerful, very knowledgeable, and very benevolent, God may or may not possess these qualities to their intrinsic maxima.[1]

The SMG thesis effectively counters the logical problem of evil by removing the necessity of the omni-properties. In fact, there is no logical contradiction between evil's existence and a maximal God that doesn't *necessarily* possess the omni-properties. The SMG thesis can adequately explain why evil and suffering of various kinds exist. Perhaps God's power is an eight out of ten on the power scale, for instance, so God cannot prevent all natural disasters. Perhaps God's knowledge is a seven out of ten on the knowledge

scale, so God cannot have knowledge of all human intentions, inhibiting God from being able to thwart certain moral evils. Perhaps God's benevolence is six out of ten, entailing that God does not possess the required benevolence to care about the suffering of all non-human animals. There are infinite combinations that can answer Epicurus' original query under the SMG thesis.

Nagasawa also maintains that the SMG thesis could answer the evidential problem of evil. Without specifying the degrees of each great-making property God possesses, Nagasawa claims, there could plausibly be a combination of great-making properties consistent with the evidence of evil apparent in the world. Yet one form of the problem of evil creates a unique and worrisome challenge for the SMG thesis. I explore this problem in the next section.

The problem of inconsistent evil

Under the SMG thesis, it is not surprising that evil exists even in vast quantities and of great intensity. But we can question why the amount and intensity of evil are so *inconsistent* if the SMG thesis holds. As Jeffrey et al. note, it is difficult to reconcile the evidence with a single, fixed combination of the degrees of great-making properties:

> Suppose the defender of the SMG thesis says that God's power to prevent evils is limited while God's benevolence and knowledge are dialled up to the intrinsically highest degrees. Let us grant that any creature with more power than this would necessarily have less benevolence or knowledge. Now, add to this the observation that evils seem to differentially impact different persons, or even the same person through time. If God's power to limit those evils remains the same throughout time, why does God appear to intervene and prevent some evils and not others, when it looks like prevention would require roughly the same degree of power in those cases? (Jeffrey et al. (2020), 243)

From this question emerges a particular version of the evidential problem of evil for the SMG thesis. What I call 'the problem of inconsistent evil' asserts that the existence of a static maximal God is dissonant with the distribution of evil and suffering we observe in the universe. As Jeffrey et al. point out,

> If observed evils and prevented evils do not form a regular pattern, one easily explicable by the particular degree set of divine power, knowledge, or benevolence, this will detract from the power of the SMG thesis to allow a theist to respond to the problem of evil. (*ibid.*)

Many apparent inconsistencies emerge when we study the dispersion of evil over time. We can formalize the problem for the SMG thesis in light of these observations as follows:

1. God has fixed degrees of the great-making properties power, knowledge, and benevolence (the SMG thesis).
2. If God has fixed degrees of the great-making properties power, knowledge, and benevolence, then God acts consistently (the consistency principle).
3. If God acts consistently, observed evils and prevented evils would be likely to form a regular pattern.
4. Observed evils and prevented evils do not form a regular pattern.
5. Therefore, it is likely that God does not exist.

Let's call this the problem of inconsistent evil in its most basic form.

Concerning Premise 4, it seems clear that the manner in which God distributes or prevents evil is inconsistent at different times. Jeffrey et al. (2020) discuss this observation at length, helpfully providing several examples of apparent inconsistencies in God's (in) action. Let's look at one of these examples:

> God's degree of power, compossible with benevolence and knowledge, enables God to eliminate the Egyptian Pharaoh and his army during the Exodus; it is, then, unclear why those same degrees of benevolence and knowledge would not be compossible with a degree of power that would enable God to eliminate Hitler and the Nazi German army in World War II. (*ibid.*, 243)

In other words, it seems to be the case that there are significant inconsistencies in the way that God deals with evil over time. If one questions why God helped the Israelites escape during the Exodus but not the Jews during the Holocaust or why Daniel was saved from the lion's den but Steve Irwin was killed by a stingray, then perhaps one won't be convinced by the SMG thesis. Why did God send bears to murder forty-two youths for mocking a man's bald head in 2 Kings, but Chris Rock escapes (almost) unscathed? Why are some prayers answered and others neglected, despite the individuals requesting God's help possessing similar degrees of goodwill and faith?

The SMG theist could attempt to use the concept of karma (or some other method of dishing out good and evil based on the processes of rebirth or reincarnation) as a crutch. Still, I assume that perfect being theists see those metaphysical viewpoints as inconsistent with their religious worldview. They may also try to explain these inconsistencies using traditional theodicies, such as appealing to human free will. Perhaps, they may argue, God helps those who believe in God. Or maybe some people deserve suffering more than others. Possibly those who suffer more in life will be rewarded even more richly in the afterlife.[2] But there seem to be too many examples that simply don't add up under these explanations.

SMG theists may use other means to justify the inconsistencies. If they are sceptical theists, for example, they may deny Premise 3 by claiming that humans simply cannot have insight into the motivations and intentions of God. They might deny the truth of Premise 4, arguing that the seeming inconsistencies are exaggerated. But by postulating a fluctuating maximal God, we can avoid the problem of inconsistent evil entirely. Let's see how.

Fluctuating maximal God and the problem of inconsistent evil

The fluctuating maximal God thesis suggests that: 'the degrees of divine knowledge, power, benevolence (and perhaps others) fluctuate in the course of time, while their sum, nevertheless, remains maximal' (Jeffrey et al. (2020), 235). By allowing fluctuations in God's character, the FMG thesis allows that God is capable of change and provides a way out of some of the problems with which the SMG thesis is burdened.[3] Unshackled from the constraints of divine immutability, the FMG thesis entirely sidesteps the problem of inconsistent evil by denying Premise 1. Jeffrey et al. provide the following explanation for the seeming inconsistency between the Exodus and World War II under the FMG thesis:

> At the time of the Exodus, God's power is dialled up to a high enough degree that God may part and re-gather the Red Sea. Perhaps the degree of God's knowledge is limited at this time, but this does not affect God's successfully saving Israel. We can imagine that, due to there being few metaphysical possibilities of harm coming to Israel

immediately following the swallowing up of Pharaoh's army, God can base His plan to bring Israel to safety on a wager, using probabilistic beliefs instead of knowledge. Thus God cedes knowledge in order to gain power. We can tell another story for the case of Nazi Germany. Imagine the many battlefronts and enormous numbers of people involved make it important that God have more comprehensive knowledge to act wisely. Thus God sacrifices power to gain knowledge, and so fails to prevent some present evils to Jews and Allies. But perhaps if God had retained more power and abdicated knowledge, God would have exerted great force to do something where the probability of a worse disaster was fairly high. (*ibid.*, 243–244)

A god-concept that fluctuates through time can account for why we see many instances of God responding to evil differently in different circumstances. If one finds the concept of a mutable God who changes in time a compelling explanation for what is a pretty hefty problem, then this model of God should be worthy of consideration.[4]

Under the FMG thesis, the apparent contradictions between the vengeful, wrathful God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament, who seems less so, are no longer (logically) problematic. Just as an individual's degrees of particular properties change over time, God's character transforms, and this explains why God at one time seems quite different from God at another. The FMG thesis can also account for God's inconsistent actions (and inactions) over time. The multitudinous divine smitings described in the Old Testament, for example, no longer encounter an inconsistency problem because God's character is not consistent. When God smote the Ethiopians in 2 Chronicles or the men of Beth Shemesh for looking into the ark of God, as described in 1 Samuel, God's degree of benevolence was perhaps simply lower than those instances when God forgave individuals for comparable sins and exhibited mercy. Cases where pious, faithful, and virtuous people experience extensive and intense suffering for seemingly no reason – while others of a similar nature live blessed lives – cause no contradictions under this approach.

Yet can the FMG thesis account for all examples of inconsistent evil? In this section, I have focused on what I call 'temporally inconsistent' evils. In the next section, I distinguish this type of inconsistent evil from two other classes and explore two relatively recent formulations of the problem of evil – the problem of geography and the problem of natural inequality – to evaluate whether the FMG thesis can account for all types of inconsistent evil.

Different types of inconsistency and a potential problem for the FMG thesis

At face value, the FMG thesis holds more explanatory power than the SMG thesis when it comes to inconsistent evil because FMG theists deny Premise 1 of the problem of inconsistent evil. Digging deeper into the inconsistencies mentioned in Premise 4, we can further categorize the problem into (at least) three sub-problems. God's response (or lack of) to evil and suffering seems inconsistent over time, but other inconsistencies are apparent *at the same point in time*. Some creatures at one location suffer more at time t1 than others in another place. Some individuals suffer more than others, regardless of time or location.

It will be helpful for this project to classify these different types of inconsistency. First, the time-based inconsistencies on which Jeffrey et al. (2020) focus can be classified as follows:

Temporally inconsistent evil: evils and prevented evils dispersed inconsistently over time.

But we can also identify (at least) two more types of inconsistent evil.

Spatially inconsistent evil: evils and prevented evils dispersed inconsistently through space. Interpersonally inconsistent evil:[5] evils and prevented evils dispersed inconsistently between different individuals.

It's plain to see that the FMG thesis can adequately explain temporally inconsistent evil since God fluctuates through time under this account. But is the thesis as compelling when considering the other two types of inconsistent evil?[6] In the following subsection, I examine spatially inconsistent and interpersonally inconsistent evil[7] in more detail to check their compatibility with the FMG thesis.

The problem of spatially inconsistent evil and the problem of interpersonally inconsistent evil

The problem of geography was recently proposed by Daniel Linford and William R. Patterson (2016). This version of the problem of evil contends that the geographic distribution of evil and suffering, or lack of opportunities for flourishing and happiness, is better explained by no God than by God. It is one formulation of the spatially inconsistent problem of evil. They state,

Poverty and disease ravish [sic] much of Africa while those fortunate enough to be born in the industrialised West live in relative affluence and health. Drought, tsunamis, earthquakes and other natural disasters frequently recur in the same geographic areas, areas often populated by the world's poorest and most vulnerable people. Similarly, the opportunity to flourish and to stave off human suffering is offered abundantly in some societies but is beyond reach in many others. (Linford and Patterson (2016), 189)

It seems undeniable that suffering is unequally distributed by location. Although Linford and Patterson concentrate their article on suffering experienced by humans, we also observe similar trends in the non-human animal kingdom. Bulls that happen to be born in Spain, where the torture of these creatures for purposes of human entertainment is rife, seem to be denied the opportunity to flourish, while bulls that are born in India – where they enjoy sacred status with laws to protect them from torture – benefit from the culture into which they were born.

Inherent to Linford and Patterson's argument are the following principles of equality and divine equality. The principle of equality states that 'a just society would not treat A differently from B in any significant way, unless there is some morally relevant difference between A and B' (*ibid.*, 191). The principle of divine equality, correspondingly, states that 'a benevolent and perfectly good deity would ensure that A and B have the same opportunities to attain goods and avoid evils unless there are morally relevant difference [sic] between A and B, or there is some overriding factor that outweighs the moral demand of equality' (*ibid.*, 192). Linford and Patterson have raised a problem of spatially inconsistent evil: how is God compatible with the inconsistent dispersion of evil over space?

Instead of focusing on location, Moti Mizrahi's (2014) problem of natural inequality concentrates on the differences between *individuals* to pursue the potential incompatibility between God and the obvious inequalities brought about by nature. He writes, 'natural inequality is a new evidential problem of evil because it has to do, not with pain or suffering per se, but rather with an unequal distribution' (Mizrahi (2014), 130). The unequal distribution of particular characteristics may or may not lead to evil and suffering in the individuals to which the characteristics have been given, yet the inequality itself is what creates the problem. He explains,

Natural inequality is an evil, not because it leads to pain and suffering, although it might and often does, but because it is *unfair.* All things being equal, if there are four slices of pizza, and you get three and I get only one, then this unequal distribution is not fair, since you do not deserve to get more, and I do not deserve to get less (and vice versa). Such an unequal and unfair distribution, I take it, is a bad thing from a moral point of view, even if it does not lead to pain and suffering directly (although it might). Similarly, if some people are born with superior athletic talents, say, whereas others are born handicapped, then that is an unequal distribution of athletic talents. (Mizrahi (2014), 130)

The problem, then, is the unfairness brought about by the inequality of distribution of qualities rather than that it directly causes suffering. Mizrahi is also concerned with the lack of deservingness and seemingly arbitrary nature of the distribution.[8]

This unequal distribution is also unfair because the athletically gifted did not deserve to be so gifted just as the handicapped did not deserve to be handicapped. Again, an unequal and unfair distribution of anything, whether it is pizza, goods, or talents, is a bad thing from a moral point of view, not because it leads to pain and suffering, although it might and often does, but because it is unfair. (*ibid.*, 130)

The distribution of natural abilities, then, renders any God with static degrees of great-making properties unlikely (unless one of those characteristics is unfairness!).[9] Why was person A born with the natural inclinations to allow them to flourish in life while person B was not? Perhaps God provides an eschatological reward to those less privileged in life – a better experience in the afterlife, for instance – but that still doesn't explain why the inequality exists in the first place. The SMG theist might try appealing to some sort of reward system for those who get the short end of the stick by nature – other compensations in the course of life, for example. It seems obvious, though, that many who are born less privileged than others *don't* always experience a life of less suffering – quite the opposite, in fact. So why provide such hard-knock lives to some individuals and not to others? Mizrahi has highlighted a problem of interpersonally inconsistent evil: how is God compatible with the inconsistent dispersion of evil between different individuals?

Let's now consider whether the FMG thesis can reconcile God with the spatially inconsistent and interpersonally inconsistent evils these two modern versions of the problem of evil bring to light.

Can the FMG thesis overcome the problems of spatially inconsistent and interpersonally inconsistent evil?

In this sub-section, I will offer two responses to the problems of spatially inconsistent and interpersonally inconsistent evil. The first considers a fluctuating god that is arbitrary or partial. The second develops a new version of the FMG thesis that postulates a god that fluctuates through spacetime.

Despite first impressions to the contrary, I propose that a god that fluctuates through time *could be* compatible with the pattern of spatially inconsistent and interpersonally inconsistent evil we observe in the world. Let's consider an example to see how the FMG thesis can account for these two types of inconsistent evil. Imagine that at time t1, God creates two people. One is born into a wealthy and loving family located in a place with good natural resources, a low crime rate, and few natural disasters. They possess natural proclivities for music and medicine and inhabit an able, healthy body. As a

result of their natural privileges and safe habitat, this individual has a happy and satisfying life. The other person is born into a cruel and poverty-stricken family in a place with few natural resources, high crime rates, and frequent natural disasters. Additionally, they suffer from several congenital disabilities that cause almost unbearable physical and emotional suffering. As a result of their environment and disabilities, this person lives an unhappy and unsatisfying life. Can the fluctuating maximal God thesis account for this significant difference in privilege and flourishing between different individuals and locations? I think so.

Since it is clear that God does not provide equal benefits to these two individuals in different places, how can we reconcile this inconsistency? Consider that at the time of creation, the combination of power, knowledge, and benevolence God possesses is only sufficient to allow for one of these two individuals to live a privileged life. God's combination of great-making properties could not privilege both individuals at this point in time, so God prioritizes one individual, or one spatial location, over the other. Under this account, God is partial to some individuals over others, and this establishes a hierarchical order under which God operates, offering services to those at the top of the hierarchy over those at the bottom. God's benevolence is not fixed under the FMG thesis; therefore, God is not subject to the principle of divine equality. Although unpalatable, this option presents no logical inconsistencies (I will consider the undesirable implications of this account in the next section).

Another tack to take is to say that in these situations in which God cannot help both individuals equally, God must act arbitrarily to help at least one individual. One might immediately respond that God cannot act arbitrarily since rational agents do not act arbitrarily. In reply, we can employ Ryan Mullins's helpful distinction between different types of arbitrary action:

> God cannot perform an *utterly* arbitrary act or an act for no good reason whatsoever. God can, however, perform a *nested* arbitrary act. This is a seemingly arbitrary act that is nested within an overarching course of actions, and that overarching course of actions is motivated by good reasons. The good reasons that motivate the overarching course of actions can motivate the need to perform an arbitrary act in order to prevent the frustration of the overarching course of actions. What this means is that a nested arbitrary act is really an act that an agent has some reason to perform. (Mullins (unpublished))

Under this explanation, in a situation when God must prioritize one individual over another (to avoid both losing out), God performs a nested arbitrary act to retain overall goodness. We can regard this circumstance as a sort of divine Sophie's Choice in which God's refusal to act would result in a worse overall outcome. If we allow for divine nested arbitrary acts, the inconsistent distribution of evils over space can be accounted for. Yet, there is another option for FMG theists reluctant to accept a god who acts partially or arbitrarily and wanting to retain divine impartiality: a god who fluctuates in *spacetime*.

In the world of physics, spacetime refers to a single four-dimensional continuum composed of the three dimensions of space plus the single dimension of time. Under this model, space and time are not entirely distinct; rather, they are different aspects of the same thing. We call a particular point in spacetime an 'event'. Under the spacetime FMG thesis, God distorts the fabric of spacetime at different events. At one event, God's combination of great-making properties allows God to respond to evil in a particular way. At another point in spacetime, it doesn't. This explanation accounts for not only temporally inconsistent but also spatially inconsistent and interpersonally inconsistent evils. In fact, under this model, the distinctions between the three categories collapse

since we view the inconsistencies as occurring in spacetime rather than in space *or* time. Thus, when considering the inconsistency between God's response to the Exodus and the Holocaust, we should conceive of these events as spacetime events rather than merely temporal ones.

As well as meeting all three problems of inconsistent evil, the 'spacetime FMG thesis' can help tackle what James Arcadi (2017) calls the 'intensity problem', which questions why God seems to act in special ways on particular occasions but not on others. Arcadi explains, 'if God ubiquitously entends[10] all locations in the cosmos, then there is not a coherent way to explicate greater concentrations of God's presence, as the experience of the faithful indicates' (Arcadi (2017), 635). According to the spacetime FMG thesis, the erratic dispersion of miracles and prayer-answering result from God's spacetime fluctuations. Suppose one wonders why God performs life-saving miracles for some individuals but not others, despite the power of their prayers being comparable. The spacetime fluctuating maximal God thesis can be a response. Perhaps the energy expended performing one miracle causes God's power to be weakened significantly at one event in spacetime, preventing God from addressing other prayer requests. At event 1 God answers person A's petitionary prayer because there is a high concentration of great-making degrees at that particular event. At event 2 person B's prayer goes unanswered because the concentration is lower. In short, God's great-making degrees are more diluted at some events in spacetime than at others.[11]

The spacetime FMG thesis provides a way to answer all formulations of the problem of inconsistent evil, yet it isn't necessarily in the clear. In the next section, I consider one potential difficulty for the spacetime FMG theist: that this conception of God is too inconsistent.

Objections

In this section, I consider why the perfect being theist might reject outright a fluctuating god in favour of a static god, despite the FMG thesis enjoying more explanatory power in response to Type-C arguments than the SMG thesis. Since this article intends to defend and develop the FMG thesis and argues for its advantages over the SMG thesis, we must consider why one might reject the former in favour of the latter. The FMG thesis proposes a mutable god, somewhat inconsistent in character and action, whose great-making property levels potentially yo-yo through time or spacetime. Since consistency is traditionally considered a virtue, an inconsistent god might not be an attractive god-concept to a perfect being theist.

The problem with an inconsistent god is twofold. The first issue, which I call the problem of ductility, wonders whether God's fluctuations could cause God's greatness to diminish too much. The second issue, which I call the problem of erraticism, considers whether a fluctuating god is simply too erratic to be worthy of worship. Let's deal with each issue separately.

The problem of ductility

Ductility refers to the degree to which an object can change before it fails under the stress of the changes. The problem of ductility for the FMG thesis concerns the possibility that a fluctuating god might change so much it becomes too ignorant or weak. Critics may contend that this is a god whose great-making properties are, potentially, so diminished that God is no longer an entity with any significant power, knowledge, and goodness, lacking the required levels to become great once more.

Jeffrey et al. (2020) address this concern by postulating a threshold under which God's power cannot fall:

God's power never dwindles to so low a degree that God loses the power to change the degree of the divine attributes at the next moment in time. Suppose each unit of God's power corresponds to a power to perform a particular action. The defender of the FMG thesis must say, then, that God's power never falls below a certain minimal level and that the power represented by the baseline level is the power to change the degree of God's great-making properties. (Jeffrey et al. (2020), 245)

If there is a fixed threshold under which God's power cannot dip, then there is no danger of God being so weak that God cannot regain power. Under this line of reasoning, it is not possible for God's great-making levels to fall below the threshold by nature of God's character. We can expand on Jeffrey et al.'s supposition by applying similar reasoning to God's knowledge and benevolence. Perhaps Mother Teresa's benevolence can't fall below a six, or maybe Albert Einstein's knowledge can't dip below a seven, simply by nature of them being *them*. Similarly, God's knowledge or benevolence may be fixed in a way that means it is impossible for God to become too ignorant or malevolent.

Another possibility is that one or more of God's great-making properties *do not* fluctuate. Perhaps God's benevolence is always possessed to its intrinsic maxima, and it is only God's power and knowledge that change through spacetime. As mentioned in a previous footnote, perhaps not all great-making properties are maximally great to their intrinsic maxima, or perhaps some great-making properties are greater than others.[12] Although I do not have the scope to cover this territory more thoroughly here, more thought needs to be given to a potential hierarchy of great-making properties and to whether some possess more axiological weight than others.

The problem of erraticism

We can define inconsistency as possessing characteristics that are unreliably manifested. Another potential issue for FMG theist is that allowing inconsistencies in God's nature and actions creates the possibility of an erratic God. Inconsistency is not often thought of as a virtue. Particularly when it comes to a being that wields vast power and profound knowledge, one might justifiably prefer such a being to be consistent in thought and action. Does fluctuating maximal God have more in common with Boethius' fickle Lady Fortune than the God of classical monotheism?

Consider the case of a morally good individual whose life is filled with undeserved suffering, being born with a painful affliction in a region of the world in which the means to treat their condition are unavailable to them. They have suffered great injustices at the hands of nature, geography, and fellow humans. Furthermore, imagine this individual is a devout monotheist and has prayed extensively and earnestly to God in an appeal for help to no avail. After crying out in despair at the extent, duration, and intensity of their suffering, asking why God has seemingly forsaken them, would this individual be appeased with the reply that God simply isn't great *enough* at that particular point in spacetime to help them at that event in spacetime?

An erratic God inconsistent in power and knowledge is bad enough, but a god who is erratic in moral character is even more disturbing. A teacher who punishes one student for missing a deadline but lets another off scot-free is not a great teacher. Can a god who punishes one individual for committing a particular sin but not another for committing the same sin be called a god at all? Can a god who allows one person to suffer but who prevents the suffering of another for no good reason be a god worthy of admiration and reverence? Since the God of the FMG thesis may not conform to the principle of divine equality, this leaves open the problem of unfair vicissitudes for humankind. The notion that God is inconsistent when doling out or preventing evil is troubling.

The first response to this worry is simply to argue that this problem only exists for theists who adopt a particular metatheology, one that the FMG theist rejects. Jon Kvanvig (2020; 2021) recently proposed a helpful way to classify different approaches to exploring the concept of God. Metatheologies are 'approaches that propose a certain starting point for generating a proper account of the nature of God' (Kvanvig (2020), 318) and 'ask fundamental questions about the nature of the divinity and hence about how any approach to theological inquiry is to be grounded' (Kvanvig (2021), xi). According to Kvanvig, there are (at least) three major strategic positions to take when exploring the concept of God. Perfect being theology has, as its starting point, the concept that God is a perfect being and proceeds from there; it maintains that 'for anything to be God, that thing must be maximally perfect' (ibid., 6). Creator theology, on the other hand, takes as its starting point the view of God as 'first cause or designer' (ibid., 9). Worship-worthy theology, contrastingly, 'claims that what is fundamental concerning the nature of God is that God is worthy of worship' (ibid., 19). The FMG thesis adopts a form of perfect being theology, beginning from the starting point of God as a maximally great being. From this starting point, it constructs a god-concept that best fits with evidence in the world (such as dispersion of evil). Accordingly, it rejects, as a starting point, the notion that God must be worthy of worship.

Another possible way out of this difficulty is to contend that although the God of the FMG thesis does not act consistently, that does not entail that this God is wholly erratic by nature and acts only arbitrarily. God maintains a *certain level* of consistency of character due to not falling below a particular threshold of each particular great-making property, as detailed in the previous sub-section. Perhaps God's power will always be above a level 6, or God's knowledge must necessarily remain above a level 7. Besides, God never acts utterly arbitrarily, only committing *nested* arbitrary acts. Combining these suppositions with the potential for one of God's great-making properties to be fixed – benevolence for example – and a fluctuating god seems less disagreeable. Even with these caveats, though, the FMG thesis still entails that you can't always count on God to be *entirely* consistent. Despite being faithful and virtuous, one still may not be able to avoid undeserved evil. God still might not be able to prevent evil from happening to you at that event in spacetime.

Third, we can reaffirm that the concern is only an axiological one. It is coherent to say that we wouldn't *desire* a god like this to exist over an omni-God that is perfectly powerful, knowledgeable, and loving – or even a God that has fixed degrees of great-making properties. But the question of what God is like is not an axiological one. The god of the FMG thesis fits better with the evidence we observe in the world. The evidential mapping of this god-concept to the world is a separate matter from whether or not this conception of God is preferable to the God of the SMG thesis or the omni-God thesis.

FMG theists might even propose that the concept of an inconsistent God is not as axiologically unsatisfactory as it initially seems. It at least offers potential for believers that God exists, is somehow great, and, despite perhaps not being able to help in the past, might be able to assist in the future if the fluctuations work out in your favour. It may offer some heart to those whose prayers have not been answered: keep trying; perhaps God will be able to help next time you ask. This response probably won't be enough for some believers (more like playing the lottery and hoping for a good outcome than faith in and reverence for a constant, reliable God), but it might be the greatest possible god for which we can realistically hope.

A fluctuating god might be axiologically preferable to a static god with fixed degrees of great-making properties because it is more malleable and able to achieve greater levels than a static maximal god. One might prefer a fluctuating god who is overall greater than a static god who is less great over the course of God's entire career. Imagine that

a fluctuating god can prevent more evil overall than a static god can, but by nature of the fluctuations the evil will not be distributed entirely fairly across spacetime. Which god would be greater: a god who fluctuates and is at some events in spacetime less great than the static god but greater overall, or a god who is overall less great but whose great-making property levels remain fixed? To say that the latter is greater in nature of its consistency is to place an axiological weight on consistency over the other great-making properties. Again, this confirms the need for an exploration of the worth of great-making properties. Suffice to say it's not clear that a fluctuating maximal God is less great than a static one simply by nature of its fluctuations, especially if the fluctuations have limits.

Conclusion

Under traditional perfect being theism, the nature of God is not difficult to pin down: God is the superlative omniGod with all great-making properties possessed to their intrinsic maxima. Under the SMG thesis, we cannot know the precise levels of each property God possesses, but we know the being in question is consistent. Under the FMG thesis, things are murkier still. God potentially has different degrees of great-making properties at different times, in different places, and for different individuals.

Although the static maximal God thesis provides a way to overcome the logical problem of evil and some versions of the evidential problem of evil, it must still explain why evidence of evil in the world seems incompatible with an immutable God. The fluctuating maximal God thesis offers a concept of God compatible with inconsistent evil while suggesting that a temporally fluctuating God is partial or acts somewhat arbitrarily. The spacetime fluctuating maximal God can account for all types of inconsistent evil while explaining the strange patterns of miracles and petitionary prayer-answering to which evidence points.

I have suggested that despite the prima facie unpleasant implications of a fluctuating maximal God, it is not necessarily less great than a static god. I have also argued that it is not the job of the FMG theist to create the most desirable version of God, only one that is compatible with evidence and that remains the maximal being over the course of its career.

For some perfect being theists, relinquishing divine immutability might be too great a sacrifice to make, even to tackle the problem of inconsistent evil. Yet, for monotheists sceptical about the effectiveness of the available theodicy menu in response to the problem of inconsistent evil and willing to acquiesce to a mutable god who exists in time, the FMG thesis offers a god-concept worthy of consideration.

Notes

1. There is an emerging discussion in psychology literature about whether one can have *too much* of a particular virtue. Drawing on Aristotle's virtue ethics and the concept of the golden mean, modern psychologists question whether one can have 'too much of a good thing' when it comes to virtuous characteristics (Grant and Schwartz (2011)). This supposition might offer another reason to reject the omniGod thesis, employing the argument that having power, benevolence, and knowledge to their intrinsic maxima could actually *hinder* an entity from being perfect because great-making properties are not maximally valuable at their maximal levels.

2. The notion of a hierarchical afterlife might offer a way out of this quandary by speculating that individuals who suffered more in life are rewarded more in heaven (and those who suffered less in life are given less in heaven to even things out). Yet still, this seems unfair because these individuals didn't consent to this distribution of suffering and reward. It also involves viewing heaven in a non-traditional way, veering from the concept of heaven as the ultimate beatific vision of knowing God.

3. There are two types of divine immutability. The first contends that for God to be immutable is for God to have a constant character and to be faithful to divine promises; this is 'weak immutability'. The second type, 'strong immutability', contends that for God to be immutable is for God to be wholly unchanging (Pawl (2009)). The FMG

thesis rejects strong immutability outright, arguing that God's degrees of various great-making properties change over time. Jeffrey et al. (2020) are ambiguous when it comes to weak immutability. God's character could be seen as constant because it consists of having the quality of being able to fluctuate. Accepting a fluctuating god involves a rejection of other elements of God's essence besides immutability and timelessness. The God of the FMG thesis changes; thus, God is not pure actuality. This goes against the Thomist notion of 'Actus Purus', that God is pure actuality and no potentiality. Accordingly, a fluctuating maximal God defies the doctrine of divine simplicity.

4. The FMG thesis can also explain the large variety god-concepts between – and within – different religions.

5. Although I use the term 'inter*personal*', I include in this concept the suffering that non-personal, pain-feeling entities, such as non-human animals, experience.

6. Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for raising this question.

7. Although I deal with it as a distinct category here, interpersonally inconsistent evil could be considered a subset of spatially inconsistent evil (since no two people can occupy the exact same space) or temporally inconsistent evil (since no two people are born at precisely the same time).

8. The principle of divine equality is assumed in Mizrahi's view too.

9. As pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, some philosophers (see Stahl (2022) or Timpe (2020), for example) reject the evaluation of being disabled as a negative characteristic. Despite this, it would be difficult to explain away all the instances of some individuals being more disadvantaged at birth than others.

10. To 'entend' means to be present in multiple locations: 'Entension is such that the same object is wholly and entirely multiply located' (Arcadi (2017), 633).

11. The spacetime FMG thesis has interesting implications for the subject of God's omnipresence. For theists who are compelled by Brian Leftow's (1989) proposal that God is omnipresent by virtue of God's power, for example, a fluctuating maximal god cannot be present to the same degree through spacetime since God's power isn't ramped up to its intrinsic maximum at every event in spacetime.

12. Ng and Tay (2020) distinguish between virtue as a general tendency in an entity versus virtue as situation-specific optimality. They claim, contra Grant and Schwartz (2011), that virtues should be measured specific to the situation rather than independently from it. Suppose we view God's benevolence from a situation-specific perspective. In that case, it could explain why God would respond differently to different individuals even when possessing the same level of benevolence at that event. There might, for instance, be a situation in which God responds differently to one individual than another, not because God's benevolence degree has changed but because the situation calls for a different response due to God's limited power or knowledge. So, it could be the case that God's power and knowledge fluctuate, but God's benevolence does not (at least not to the same extent).

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