

Is God Perfect?: Brian Leftow

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Transcript - Long

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Brian we talk about God people, use the term perfect, God is perfect. And I can say sure if I believe in God that makes sense. But if I think about it, the nature and the concept of perfection is a difficult one. How do we understand the idea that God is perfect?

Brian Leftow:

Well, there are certain traits we think of as making something good or valuable. It's a good thing to have knowledge, it's a good thing to have power, it's a good thing to be morally good. Those things come in different degrees. I might know more than some of the students who show up in my class at the first time, many people in the world are morally better than I am. If you extend the degree higher and higher and higher, some of those things have kind of an intrinsic maximum. There's a maximum for knowledge. If you knew everything, you couldn't have more knowledge than that; that would be the most perfect state of knowledge you could have. There's a maximum for moral goodness too. If you were the sort of being who never did anything wrong and who could never even be tempted to do evil and who was constantly looking to do things as well as possible, you couldn't be any better than that. So to say that God is perfect is to say that he has qualities like this in their absolute maximum degree.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Look I think that makes sense. But is it important, are some of these concepts, do they even have a maximum? Can you have a maximum amount of knowledge that you know? Can you have a maximum amount of power? Why is it necessary to impose on these concepts the idea of a maximum?

Brian Leftow:

Some good qualities may not have intrinsic maxima. In other words, maybe for every beautiful thing there could be something even more beautiful than that, who knows? But with some others you can see where a maximum is just a natural consequence of what's involved. For instance, knowledge; knowledge has to be of the truth, of the way things really are. There is just one way things really are, just one body of truth. And it's got limits, you know, that this is true and what's the contradictory of it isn't true, so there's a maximum amount of truth, namely all of them. And so there's a maximum amount of knowledge, namely knowledgeable of all of that.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Let's start with truth. Now I can imagine all sorts of different relationships between objects or enormous numbers of things that can be infinite numbers of infinities in terms of the different possibilities that are possibilities. Now does God have to know all of that to be perfect? Why impose understanding every bad piece of music that possibly could be written for God? Does God have to know all those bad pieces of music to be perfect?

Brian Leftow:

The music may be bad, but the knowledge of it could still be a good thing, just for a human analogy, I mean, we would think it might be useful to look at bad music to know how to do better. It might be a good thing for God to know about the bad music just so he knows all the possibilities for music, and so he can appreciate the better pieces by contrast with the worst.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

But to know all the worst possibilities would be an infinite, it would flood his mind with all sorts of rubbish.

Brian Leftow:

That's right. But it also floods his mind with all the good stuff. And the question is whether it's better even to know the rubbish. We have a sense, at least many people do, that it's better to know the way things really are; you know

one way to go through life would be to be just kind of seeing everything with rose colored glasses, thinking everything was better than it really is. A wise person doesn't look at reality that way. A wise person sees the way things really are and accepts them. And that includes all the bad bits; truly wise would know all the bad without flinching and be wiser because of it. If God is perfectly wise, then surely he's got to know everything about what's good and everything about the contrast with what's good, and that's the rubbish, that's the bad stuff.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

So the concept of perfection deals with a host of different qualities that if they have a maximum, God has them, and if they don't have a maximum, God has as much as is possible?

Brian Leftow:

Well, if they don't have a maximum there isn't such a thing as having as much as possible. If they don't have a maximum then the concept of a perfect being isn't committed to God's having the maximum of it, it's just committed to his being very good in those respects.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Why is it important for God to be perfect on this human description?

Brian Leftow:

We worship God. That means that we want to say that he's better than we do. When you worship, you praise God, you say that he's great, and you don't sort of have a mental reservation, as to the effect, yeah, you're great, but I can think of better. (LAUGHTER) The attitude of worship is really praise without reservations. What would an object have to be to really deserve that? It would have to be good without qualification.

Brian Leftow:

Well, I mean, I can extend, we all respect and deeply love our parents. And I can amplify that very substantially without having to impose upon God some artificial human philosophical standard of perfection when maybe that even concept limits God's ability to move. If you force God to be so perfect in all of these areas, it would seem if God is an active consciousness to almost limit God.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

I can't see that. How could it be limiting to have more knowledge rather than less? Surely ignorance is what limits your possibilities, because then you don't know how to do things, you don't know what you might face. Again, how could having more power be a limitation? Surely having less power is what limits you, because then you can't accomplish some of the things you might want to accomplish.

Brian Leftow:

Moral goodness, well...certainly somebody who is morally indifferent has a wider range of action in one sense. I mean, because if I'm morally indifferent I can do some very evil things, I can do some very good things, whereas if I am morally good, the evil things are going to be much less attractive; I'm not going to do as many of those. But we generally think that nonetheless it's better to be morally good.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

And therefore that would be perfection. I can see that more easily. That brings up the problem of evil. Now that's a vast topic. But it would seem that no matter how you try to solve the problem of evil in the world that for a God to be so absolutely perfect is difficult. Whereas if you had God be extraordinarily good and knowledgeable and powerful, but not this concept of perfection, it would seem like the problem of evil would become more soluble in a theological sense.

Brian Leftow:

The problem of evil is generated by the idea that God knows everything, has all power so that he can stop all evil and he's perfectly good so he wants to stop all evil. If all those things were true, why is there evil? Certainly if you knock out one of those perfections the problem becomes easier to deal with. Well, if you say that God's knowledge

is limited, why is there evil? He didn't know enough to get around that one. (LAUGHTER)

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Right, right.

Brian Leftow:

There's no explanatory difficulty, but by the same token God is less worthy of our worship. I mean, he's very good, you know we think he's pretty great, but, you know, gosh, we're stuck with this bad world because he couldn't do any better. I mean, you get a grudge perhaps. If God is perfect then every evil that's allowed is allowed not because he is so ignorant that he couldn't find a way around it or because he's so weak he couldn't stop it, it's allowed because there is some great good involved, which is good enough to justify the allowing of even that evil. It's a far more hopeful thing to believe that God is perfect because it means that any evil there is can ultimately, and if God works his will out, will ultimately serve a good end, which justifies even the occurrence of that thing. If God is limited, some evil may be utterly unredeemed, you know, it may just be there's stuff that's there because God couldn't do anything about it and we're just stuck with it too.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Look I agree with what you're saying, but that doesn't make it right. It's a hopeful thing, it's something that we should hope for, but it is not something that because the hope is a good hope makes it true in reality,

Brian Leftow:

Right. I mean, the problem is actually, the problem is actually soluble only if there is such a thing as a good reason God could have for allowing every single evil that he allows. That's a big topic. I believe that there are good reasons; that was why I skipped immediately to the hope bit. You know, what the reasons are, well, that's a very long story.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Yeah, but the end of that story has to be that the ultimate good significantly outweighs the bad, because otherwise it would be impossible to use the term perfect to describe this world.

Brian Leftow:

We don't say that the world is perfect; we say that God who made it is.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

But God created the world. And if God is omniscient, knowing everything, then God knew how the world was going to be.

Brian Leftow:

Well, he at least ... there's an interesting question there. Before God decided on a world to create, there was no future to know. All he knew, all he could know, were the possibilities and what was likely to happen, given certain other things. He could know, for example, that it was possible to make a world with plate tectonics and very likely that if he made a world with plate tectonics and certain land masses, earthquakes would occur in a certain place at a certain time.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Oh, I think that's not right. I think ... very likely? I think God would know for certainty that would happen.

Brian Leftow:

Well, that depends on whether the natural laws governing plate tectonics are deterministic; whether given the prior state of the world at a certain time it is definitely the case that there will be an earthquake at a certain time.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

You cannot necessarily say at any given instance statistically of when that will be, but you can say with absolute

certainty that over time this will happen, or the likelihood of it not happening is so remote that it's virtually zero.

Brian Leftow:

That I think is true. The point I was making, however, was at a slightly different level; it was the question could God in deciding what to create have worked out in advance every exact detail of how history would turn out? All I was saying is he couldn't have done that.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

But doesn't that limit his perfect knowledge?

Brian Leftow:

It's not a limitation if there's nothing there to know. If there are no facts about what will be the case, prior to God's decision to create a particular world setup rather than some other, then he's not ignorant of any truth.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Okay, but let's continue the thought that this world has lots of evils; so-called moral evil that human beings do to each other or natural evil, the plate tectonics, and a whole bunch of other things that God had, you say likely, I say statistical certain that these things would happen. So God created this world with all of its horror, with certainty that this would happen, and yet that is part of God's perfection.

Brian Leftow:

It is part of God's perfection given that he had a good reason for allowing every evil which was likely to occur or even possible to occur, and given that he had in advance worked out what he would do to bring good out of each of those evils.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

I agree with the latter point, but I'm still hung up on this likely to happen, because are you defending God's perfection on the difference between likely and certain?

Brian Leftow:

No.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

If you felt that it was certain that God knew for sure that all of the evil would occur in one time or another, that God still went ahead and did it being certain that those things were going to happen, 100 percent sure, maybe not exactly how, but that they will happen, does that affect his perfection?

Brian Leftow:

It depends on how he would know it and why it was certain. One theory, the one that's associated with Augustine and Calvin, would say God could know it and it was certain because he had foreordained all of it; he had decided we would do every evil we do, he had decided that the earthquakes would occur just when and how they would occur and would kill everybody they killed. If that's how it was, then I couldn't believe that God was morally perfect. No, I mean, I would cease to believe in God if I came to believe that was the only way to understand what was going on here.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Well, unless God had a bigger purpose in that. I wouldn't give up God so quickly.

Brian Leftow:

Well, (pause) my approach to moral evil says that God allows us to do the evil we do for the sake of producing moral growth and the possibility of the great good we can do if left free to do both good and evil. If God isn't leaving us free in that strong sense, if instead he's ordering every single thing we do, then why couldn't he just order to get a

whole lot more moral growth with a whole lot less evil? That to me becomes a very hard question.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Okay, fair enough. Now let's go onto the other possibility.

Brian Leftow:

Okay, the other possibility is that God, as he's deciding what to create, sets up the initial conditions. He sets up what the natural laws are going to be, what the initial states of universe are going to be. He maneuvers things in such a way that human beings will come on the scene. And then once free creatures are there, able to make moral decisions, he doesn't interfere, he lets them make the choices they make. As long as he's given them a reasonably good chance to choose the good over the evil, the evil that they then choose becomes their responsibility, not God's.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

I think that's fair, however, I think God had 100% certainty of what would happen, or else his knowledge is limited.

Brian Leftow:

Before—Okay, we have to distinguish what he might know before he'd made the decision to create and what he might know after he'd made the decision to create. Before he made the decision to create, there couldn't be such a thing—there wasn't such a thing as a definite future for him to know. The future would only begin once he started time and chose one particular world to start evolving through time. Again, if what he is deciding is to produce a world in which there are free creatures who have governance of their own actions, then I would argue that it's not really possible for him to predict what we would do. He would know that certain things were more likely than other, and he might help to make them more likely than others, but still at the end of the day we have the choice, and we can choose the darndest things, and God himself has to observe and see what we do and have a response ready for it.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

So, as you pull this all together, how important is the doctrine of God's perfection in your understanding of the nature of God?

Brian Leftow:

To me, it's absolutely fundamental. It's something that the bible is fairly explicit on, it's something that the vast majority of philosophical tradition agrees to, and it's something that's presupposed in the attitude of worship, which is the most basic religious thing we do.