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Infinity and Beyond

James Derflinger

The idea of God being infinite has been around since the very foundations of theology. Andrew Lavin, in his article *The Theological Use of Infinity* makes the claim that the idea of an infinite God is self-defeating on many fronts and that a finite God would be more conceivable. I attempt to show how his assertions regarding an infinite God are incorrect, that Lavin's concept of infinity is misconstrued to begin with, and that the idea of an infinite God is in fact very possible, if not necessary.

Lavin begins by attempting to define infinitude, and this is where the primary issue within his argument lies:

The first manner of understanding "infinite" – infinitude – is that an in-finite substance is without bounds, not having a finite nature. This could be taken two ways, however: A. that the substance encompasses everything because it has no bounds and therefore "spreads out in all directions without ceasing" (to speak figuratively, as if this substance were growing in a temporal sense); or B. that the bounds of this substance are uncertain and that it may or may not encompass this or that concept, being, or object.¹

The author confuses the concept of infinite with indefinite. Something that is indefinite merely has no bounds that we know of (is potentially infinite), while something that is infinite does not have bounds that can be known whatsoever (is actually infinite). Both concepts do have something in common, namely, that both are described as being without limits; however, while indefinite can be used in tangent with quantity (e.g. divisibility, magnitude, extension), actual infinity cannot be spelled out in terms of quantity, magnitude, etc.² Something that is potentially infinite is left open-ended (incomplete) as we can always add more in contrast to something that is actually infinite, which is complete (perfect) in every sense; nothing can be added to it since it is complete, but that does not mean that we cannot discover more about it. Consequently,

¹ Lavin, Andrew. "Theological Use of Infinity." *Dialogue* 53 (April 2013). 83

² Puškarič, Ksenija. "Cartesian idea of god as the infinite." *Filozofia* 67 (2012). 285

quantity is not something that can be applied to actual infinity, as quantity implies potential, so both of Lavin's definitions of infinity are incorrect.³

Lavin asserts that a God that is infinite in essence requires an infinite number of essential attributes, that a supposedly infinite being could not be quantitatively infinite (in essence) unless it consists of an infinite number of attributes.⁴ The sheer notion of something being "quantitatively" infinite by "consisting" (implying parts) of an infinite "number" of anything makes no sense, as these terms cannot be logically applied to infinity to begin with. If Lavin means infinite in that God would necessarily consist of every possible attribute known, it would stand to reason that God would necessarily contain the attributes of being both "physical" and "non-physical" at the same time in the same sense, as since they are attributes, they would have to be included with all other attributes. This is obviously a contradiction. In response, the author could possibly state that because this is the case, it further proves his point by showing that the idea of an infinite God is in fact illogical; shown in this simplified version of a potential argument based off of this line of reasoning:

- A. If God is infinite, then God must have an infinite number of attributes
- B. If God has an infinite number of attributes, then God would necessarily contain the attributes of being both "physical" and "non-physical."
- C. Something cannot be both "physical" and "non-physical" at the same time in the same sense.
- D. Therefore, God cannot be infinite

However, this argument can be flipped around to mean the exact opposite:

³ Puškarič, Ksenija. "Cartesian idea of god as the infinite." *Filozofia* 67 (2012). 286

⁴ Lavin, Andrew. "Theological Use of Infinity." *Dialogue* 53 (April 2013). 85

- A. Something cannot be both “physical” and “non-physical” at the same time in the same sense.
- B. If God has an infinite number of attributes, then God would necessarily contain the attributes of being both “physical” and “non-physical.”
- C. Therefore, God cannot have an infinite number of attributes.

Therefore, it goes to show that Lavin’s assertion regarding the attributes of God are incorrect in both his own reasoning as well as his understanding of the nature of actual infinity to begin with.

Lavin goes further to claim that if there is only a single substance that is infinite, then there can really be no other substances:

The individuality of what seem like individual substances to us is destroyed with the expansion of the substance of God, who, according to this thought process, contains everything that seems to be a distinct substance. Every individual is nothing more than an extension or a mode of God.⁵

Lavin once again makes the mistake of applying quantity to infinity, as if infinity were something growing in size until it pushed everything else out of the way or encompassed it within itself. Something cannot be infinite and yet have parts that are finite. More specifically, infinity cannot be made up of a successive series of finite parts. If one was to add or multiply finite numbers *ad infinitum*, all we would have would be a very, very large number; no matter how much more is added, the resulting number will always be finite, or be within the grasp of our finite minds. Plus, this would imply that one could somehow subtract a finite number from infinity in order to make infinity into a finite number, but that is absurd, infinity minus one or one million is still infinity. Therefore, an infinite entity also cannot consist of finite parts (e.g. the physical universe, God). Creation cannot be a part of God (existing within God) for this very

⁵ Lavin, Andrew. “Theological Use of Infinity.” Dialogue 53 (April 2013). 86

reason. God has to remain separate from the physical universe in the sense that God does not contain it, nor does the physical universe contain God.

Moreover, God cannot create an infinite. In order for God to create an infinite, He would have to create something that has completely infinite attributes. If something is infinite with infinite attributes, then that thing would effectively take up the exact same “space” as does God, so to speak, meaning that there would be two things that would be existing within that exact same space as the other at the exact same time in the exact same sense. This would ultimately imply that they are the exact same thing; but one of these is God, and the other is not God, this is contradictory. Thus, God cannot create an infinite. Some have claimed that God is merely infinite on another plane of reality, while the infinite universe He created is below Him, as if on a tier list with God being at the top, but this cannot be true. If something is to be truly infinite, then it has to exist amongst all planes of reality and possible worlds, otherwise it would be restricted or contained, and thus not actually infinite. Therefore, God has to be completely separate from creation in infinity, as infinity in itself is objectively separate from the physical (finite) universe.

Lavin claims that the problem with an immaterial God is that the definition of “God” becomes “that which is not physical reality” and “Creation” becomes “that which is not God;” that God is effectively reduced to a sort of field that exists everywhere, and that He would then be bound by physical reality, since he is purely immaterial.⁶ But this is absurd; Lavin continues to make the same mistake due to his ignorance of the nature of infinity. The ideas of space, quantity, and position cannot even be applied to infinity, what he is referring to is an indefinite God. Based on this line of reasoning, Lavin goes further to say that if God were completely immaterial, then nothing immaterial could be distinct from God, as God would encompass all

⁶ Lavin, Andrew. “Theological Use of Infinity.” *Dialogue* 53 (April 2013). 86-87

that is immaterial. The idea that an immaterial God would require that no immaterial thing be distinct from Him makes the same fallacy as was made previously. It is reasonable to assume that an infinite God would have an infinite mind, and that this infinite mind would be capable of producing infinite thoughts. Moreover, a finite being with a finite mind could produce only finite thoughts. Finite thoughts can by no means be part of an immaterial infinite God due to the same reasons that finite material things cannot be a part of an infinite God. They are on two completely different planes of existence and it is a category error to think of them being of one and the same essence. Furthermore, something being immaterial by no means inhibits its ability to interact with what is material. If something is conceptual by nature, it exists in juxtaposition with physical reality, without necessarily being a part of it. A primary example of this would be this sentence. That sentence existed purely as a thought within my physical brain before I transformed it by typing it out onto a physical sheet of paper. The idea behind the sentence is no more or less immaterial than it was before I put it down, nor was the idea ever physically part of my brain before, during, or after I conceived it; the idea is completely separate and immaterial, and yet it exists in juxtaposition with physical reality. Based on these assertions, it would seem logical to conclude that God is by no way actually limited in any respect to His infinite nature. God would be fully capable of interacting with creation and would be unrestricted by anything in the physical world, as infinity is a completely different category of existence.

Lavin further asserts that should God be thought of to have an infinite number of attributes, then He would necessarily contain the attributes of evil or badness as well as goodness; for if God were to be only good, He would thus be finite.⁷ Aside from his obvious ignorance of the concept of infinity, the author also does not seem to understand the concept of

⁷ Lavin, Andrew. "Theological Use of Infinity." *Dialogue* 53 (April 2013). 87

morality in regards to God's infinite nature. Morality is not something that is applied to God, but something that is derived from God. If God has omnibenevolence as an essential attribute, and God is infinite in essence, then "goodness" would be the standard by which things are measured against. Evil, therefore, does not exist as its own distinct attribute, but merely as the opposite of goodness. Lavin addresses this and states, "It seems that this would lead to the claim that all attributes would be positive only and there would be no negative attributes, because all negative attributes would be nothing but negations of their corresponding positives, [not in value, but in negation]."⁸ There's a problem with this. It is erroneous to assume that because certain attributes are known purely by their negations that all attributes are known purely by their negations. When one sees something that is small, that person does not think of that thing as being "not large," nor does that person think of large things as being "not small." Attributes that are known through their negations are known that way based on what they are derived from. Cold is not something in itself, but merely the absence of heat, darkness is not a thing in itself so much as it is the absence of light, etc. Obviously, it would also be contradictory for God to contain the negations of the attributes that he has in an infinite degree.

Lavin moves on to discuss how a supposedly infinite God (or by his definition, indefinite) would be impotent given how certain attributes coexist within God, specifically the attributes of being just and merciful. It is true that these particular attributes are seemingly contradictory. But that does not mean that one has to be rejected in favor of the other. An analogy would be suitable for this: Let it be the case that you own a vase that is valued at quite a bit of money. If you have a guest over to watch a sports game, and in the heat of the moment your guest knocks over and breaks this valuable vase, what is to be done? The merciful thing to

⁸ Lavin, Andrew. "Theological Use of Infinity." *Dialogue* 53 (April 2013). 87

do would be to forgive your guest and the just thing to do would be to have your guest pay for its replacement. If one were to be both just and merciful in this situation, how would that be accomplished? If you have the guest pay for part of the cost to replace the vase, then you have not truly forgiven them, if you decide to not to replace the vase and to let them go free, then you have not been just. So who pays for the vase? The owner does. This way, the price that needed to be paid was paid in full, and the one responsible was completely forgiven. Both the criteria for justice and mercy were met. While one may not be able to say that every God of every religion has met this criterion, the God of Christianity has. The price for sinning against God is eternal death, but God decided to forgive all of humanity. However, God is still a perfectly just God, and the price for sinning still had to be paid, so He paid the price Himself, using Jesus as a qualitatively infinite sacrifice, allowing Him to be able to properly forgive all of humanity for eternity. Of course, this forgiveness is given out in grace, it is a gift; if one does not accept forgiveness, then they will not be forgiven, and the appropriate consequences will ensue. This settles the Christian God's being both infinitely merciful and infinitely just at the same time. Furthermore, God is fully capable of being either merciful or just in any situation; merely having both attributes to an infinite degree does not mean that He must forsake one attribute in order use another. To say that God is just is not to say that God has the attribute of justice, but due to the nature of infinity, is to say that God is justice *simpliciter* (it goes without saying that this also applies to all other attributes of God). By no means is one attribute pushed out of the way, so to speak, to make room for another; that would not imply an infinite entity, but an indefinite (or finite) entity.

The Author uses the "perfect kitten" analogy to explain how something that is theoretically perfect in nature can change what he calls accidental states, such as emotion,

without changing intrinsically. However, soon after he claims that while God cannot sin, as it would be counter to His nature, God could conceivably sin, but since He cannot, He is restricted in will.⁹ That makes no sense; sin is defined as “that which is against the very nature of God Himself.” It is a category error to state that God could conceivably sin. Much like the “perfect kitten” analogy that the author himself used, a kitten that is perfect in every possible way cannot fly, because that would require the kitten to have the nature of a flying thing, and not of a kitten; this does not mean the kitten is not perfect, it is perfect within its own nature. This is the same of God, by no means is it a restriction of will, but is instead what is defined by His will. It is equivalent in practice as one trying to conceive of the taste of the color purple. The color purple does not have taste as an attribute, and thus cannot be applied. Lavin goes on to say:

God could not change intrinsically, which would be required for an infinite being to act or to will in many, though not all, circumstances. God’s will would be rendered inert if God were, in fact, infinite, since God could not will that one part of God’s nature be more powerful or more apparent than another, as that would involve the effective negation of an aspect of God’s essential nature.¹⁰

There is a fundamental difference between having the quality of infinitude and expressing said infinitude. If all aspects of God are infinite, including will, then that would make the author’s statement meaningless. The ability to choose not to act is still a choice made by an infinite entity. This is not a restriction of God, nor could it even be considered self-restriction in that God is exercising His free will, not limiting His will. Merely having infinite attributes does not necessitate the use of those attributes, especially if one of those attributes is the ability to will (choose) freely.

Lavin’s final attempt to show that the idea of an infinite God is inconsistent is through the use of language. Specifically, by attempting to define God, we are restricting him through our

⁹ Lavin, Andrew. “Theological Use of Infinity.” *Dialogue* 53 (April 2013). 88

¹⁰ Lavin, Andrew. “Theological Use of Infinity.” *Dialogue* 53 (April 2013). 89

definition of Him. According to Lavin, “to define is to confine, to set up limits and boundaries inside of which a thing must stay... If God is infinite, then ‘God’ is by definition not definable. So a definable ‘God’ is finite.”¹¹ The only parts of God that are defined are the finite things that we observe within the physical universe and attribute to God as He has revealed Himself. I fail to see how the defining of certain attributes of God, that He Himself has revealed, confine or restrict Him in any sense. Things are defined according to what is observed; things are not limited by how they are defined. The laws of physics, for example, have undergone many changes and additions as the years have gone by (the law of gravity has undergone scrutiny recently due to theoretical suggestions about how black holes function, for example), it would be ridiculous to think that the universe functions purely due to the way we have defined it. Definitions are merely a label and can be changed; they do not have intrinsic value. Not just that, but certain words can have several different definitions, for example, the word “cast” can either mean the set of people working on a play or production of sorts, or it could mean to throw something aside. The definition used pertains to the subject or circumstances at hand, not the other way around.

Lavin concludes by stating that a finite God would be more conceivable. According to Lavin, a finite God would be a God who is definable and knowable, a God who acts, can change, who can evolve along with Creation, who cares, who loves, and is free to act on things outside of God’s self.¹² What Lavin essentially wants is a god that is similar to the Greek gods of old. These gods could act however they wish, were easily definable, and were fully capable of love and benevolence. However, because these Gods were finite, they were not always what you would want from a god. They very often raped any women they found beautiful, most of the time in

¹¹ Lavin, Andrew. “Theological Use of Infinity.” Dialogue 53 (April 2013). 89

¹² Lavin, Andrew. “Theological Use of Infinity.” Dialogue 53 (April 2013). 89

animal form (which means forced bestiality), they caused natural disasters without any justifiable reason, killed people for no other reason than because they wanted to, as well as performing many other abominable acts against each other or humanity. The god that Lavin desires would be no better than these gods, and from what we know about the Christian God (of which I am assuming he is directing this discussion towards) through history, there is absolutely nothing that would suggest anything like this would be true. The idea that God would need to change or evolve with its creation implies that creation has something that God does not, that God is less than or equal to his creation, or that God is incomplete and imperfect. A God that fits into any of these criteria is not worthy of even being called “God” as it is nothing more than an extension of humanity, it is merely a construct, if you will.

All in all, infinitude is a necessary attribute of God. To draw from the basic message of the Cosmological Argument, if God is finite, then something must have caused God. That statement itself is marked with absurdity. Lavin unknowingly does not argue against an infinite God, but an indefinite God, and the very idea of a purely “finite” God defies the very basic understanding of the concept of God in itself. Therefore, it stands to reason that God must in fact be infinite, as of the only three options available, finitude, indefinitude, and infinitude, infinitude is the only option that stands to reason.

References

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