Unlimited Nature: A Śaivist Model of Divine Greatness

Abstract. The notion of maximal greatness is arguably part of the very concept of God: something greater than God is not even possible. But how should we understand the idea of maximal greatness? The aim of this paper is to provide a Śaivist answer to this question by analyzing and discussing the form of theism advocated in the Pratyabhijñā tradition. First, I extract a model of divine greatness, the Hierarchical Model, from Nagasawa's work *Maximal God*. According to the Hierarchical Model, God is that of which nothing could be greater in virtue of being better suited than all other beings with respect to certain attributes known as great-making properties (§1). I then offer an analysis of the form of theism advocated in the Pratyabhijñā tradition by discussing passages from the work of Somānanda, the founder of the school, and of Utpaladeva, the most prominent of Somānanda's disciples, and argue that the Pratyabhijñā theist cannot account for divine greatness in terms of the Hierarchical Model. Briefly, my argument is that the Hierarchical Model requires a comparison between God and other beings that cannot be made with the Pratyabhijñā God (§2). Finally, I develop an alternative and original model, the Unlimited Nature Model, that accounts for God's maximal greatness in a way that suits Pratyabhijñā's theism. According to the Unlimited Nature Model, the nature of all ordinary beings is metaphysically limited as a result of realizing only a small portion of the potential of what could be, and God is maximally great because he only has a completely unlimited nature (§3).

Introduction

The intuition that God, if existing, must be an incredibly great being is deeply rooted in our thinking about the divine. In fact, many would say that it is part of the very idea of God that he is not simply great but *maximally* great: something greater than God is not even possible. We can find evidence of how rooted this intuition is by looking at its pervasiveness across philosophical traditions. Looking West, we see not only Christian philosophers like Anselm describing God as "something than which nothing greater can be thought" (Anselm 1979, 117) but even a pre-Christian philosopher of Plato's caliber characterizing gods in his *Republic* as "the most beautiful and best possible" (Plato 1992, 57). Turning East, we find other instances of the same idea. In the Pratyabhijñā tradition, the Indian Śaivist tradition that I am going to discuss in this paper, God is often referred to as the "*Supreme* Lord,"

while in the Chinese tradition, a very representative example is given by Wang Bi, who in his commentary to one of the foundational texts of Chinese philosophy, the *Daodejing*, describes the Dao as "the greatest possible thing" (Lynn 1999, 121). Finally, it has been recently argued that instances of the same idea can be found in Buddhism, which has often been considered an atheistic religion (Zappulli 2023).

Even the atheist can accept that maximal greatness is part of the concept of God; the atheist, very simply, contends that such a maximally great being doesn't exist. Saying that God is maximally great, however, leaves open *how* to understand the notion of maximal greatness. What are we saying when we say that God is that of which nothing could be greater? What does divine greatness amount to? In this paper, I intend to offer a Śaivist answer to this question. I will start by presenting what I call the Hierarchical Model of divine greatness extrapolating it from Yujin Nagasawa's *Maximal God* (2017). According to this model, God is that of which nothing could be greater in virtue of being better suited than all other beings with respect to certain attributes known as great-making properties (§1). Then, I will offer a presentation of the form of theism advocated in the Pratyabhijñā tradition, the form of Śaivism founded by Somānanda (900-950 CE), by discussing passages from the work of both Somānanda himself and Utpaladeva (925-975 CE), the most prolific of Somānanda's disciples, and I will argue that the Pratyabhijñā theist cannot account for divine greatness in terms of the Hierarchical Model (§2). This will lead to the formulation of an alternative model of divine greatness, the Unlimited Nature Model, according to which God is that of which nothing could be greater in virtue of having a nature that is metaphysically unlimited. I will then elaborate on some characteristics of the Unlimited Nature Model (§3).

The Hierarchical Model of Divine Greatness

In *Maximal God*, Nagasawa (2017) offers a defense of perfect being theism, a form of theism based on a specific research program in the philosophy of religion: perfect being theology. It is in Nagasawa's articulation of the method of perfect being theology that we are going to find the Hierarchical Model of divine greatness, so let's start by outlining the contours of this research program.

Perfect being theology is a research program in the philosophy of religion that aims to identify the attributes or properties of God. In other words, the perfect being theologian wants to find a set of properties that we can veridically attribute to God. Some examples of properties commonly ascribed to God are omnipotence (the property of being perfectly powerful), omniscience (the property of having perfect knowledge), and omnibenevolence (the property of being perfectly good).

The method of perfect being theology consists of two basic steps. First, the perfect being theologian gives a definition of God that captures the idea that God is maximally great or perfect. The definition

varies slightly from one philosopher to another, but they all try to render the idea of maximality. The formula of Anselm mentioned in the paper's introduction, "something than which nothing greater can be thought" (Anselm 1979, 117), is an instance of this definition, while other examples are "the greatest possible being" (Morris 1984, 177) and "the greatest metaphysically possible being" (Nagasawa 2017, 9).

The second step of the method consists in inferring the properties that God must have in virtue of satisfying the definition. The perfect being theologian engages thus in a procedure of reverse engineering: starting from the assumption that God is maximally great, they try to infer the attributes that God must have in virtue of being so. The properties thus identified are known as great-making properties. What properties the perfect being theologian infers from the definition of God as maximally great will depend on their understanding of maximal greatness, which means that it's in the logic of this second step that we can find a model of divine greatness.

The specific model that Nagasawa outlines in *Maximal God* is based on his definition of great-making properties:

> Great-making property: property *p* is a great-making property if, all else being equal, it contributes to the greatness of its possessor. (Nagasawa 2017, 53)

According to this definition, a property *p* is a great-making property if, for any being *x*, *x* is greater if it possesses *p* than if it doesn't. An important characteristic of this definition is that it doesn't apply only to God but to all beings, actual and also merely possible. (Notice that this is crucial because God is here defined as the greatest *possible*, and not merely *actual*, being.)

Now, assuming that the property of having knowledge is a great-making property, insofar as my friend Martin knows at least some truths, he instantiates the property. As you might be suspecting, though, my friend Martin is not God. Thus, according to this understanding of great-making properties, the fact that God is maximally great cannot simply be a matter of possessing such attributes. Something else is needed.

To fill this gap, Nagasawa proposes another parameter that we can use to account for God's superiority to all other possible beings: the *extent* to which a property is possessed. Accordingly, even if it is true that both God and my friend Martin instantiate knowledge, God can still be superior to my friend because he instantiates knowledge to a greater extent. In fact, most perfect being theologians would say that God instantiates knowledge to the maximum possible extent, namely, that he is *omniscient*. From this, Nagasawa derives the following understanding of God's maximal greatness, which is what I call the Hierarchical Model:

> ***Hierarchical Model:*** God is that of which nothing greater is possible because for every possible being *x* such that *x* is not God the following two conditions are satisfied: 1) *x* does not possess any great-making property that God does not possess AND none of the great-making properties common to God and *x* is instantiated by God to a lesser extent than by *x*; 2) God possesses some great-making property that *x* does not possess OR God possesses some of the great-making properties that he shares with *x* to a greater extent than *x*.[1]

Let me unpack this. According to the way of understanding great-making properties defined above, there are two ways in which God can be superior to any particular being *B* with respect to a property *p*: it could be that God possesses *p* while *B* doesn't or, in case both God and *B* possess *p*, God can still be superior by instantiating *p* to a greater extent. For example, concerning the property of knowledge, God will be superior to some beings, say my desk, because he instantiates this property while my desk doesn't, and he will be superior to other beings, say my friend Martin, because he instantiates the property to a greater extent.

If we extend this reasoning to all great-making properties, we see how the Hierarchical Model of greatness works. First, the model requires that it is never the case that God instantiates any great-making property to a lesser extent than any other possible being or that other possible beings possess great-making properties that God does not possess. The reason is the following. Suppose that God either possesses the great-making property *p* to a lesser extent than some other possible being *B* or that he lacks the property altogether. We could then conceive of a being *C*, different from God, that possesses all other properties that God possesses apart from *p*, plus *p* to the same extent as *B*. But then it would be *C* to be maximally great, and so *C* would be God.[2]

The first part of the principle, thus, guarantees that God is at least as great as any other being. However, our guiding idea is that God must be *greater* than any other being, which is what the second part of the Hierarchical Model of greatness is for. By requiring that, for any being other than God, God must possess some great-making property that that being lacks or possess some great-making property to a greater extent than that being (or both), the second condition guarantees that God is not merely not worse than any other possible being, but *superior* to all.

One could now ask: what makes this model of maximal greatness *hierarchical*? Simple. The model says that God is that of which nothing could be greater in virtue of being *better* than any other possible being with respect to certain properties (i.e., great-making properties): according to this view, God is

[1] Cf. Nagasawa 2017, 56-64.

[2] For reasons of simplicity, this account doesn't consider the possibility of mutually inconsistent properties. If some great-making properties were such that they were mutually incompatible, then the Hierarchical Model should be reformulated so as to characterize God's maximal greatness as a matter of instantiating the best *consistent* combination of great-making properties and extent of those.

a member of the same "league of greatness" of all other possible beings, a league where beings are all evaluated on the basis of the great-making properties they possess and the extent to which they possess them, and God is, quite straightforwardly, the winner of this league, while all other possible beings are ranked in lower positions. In fact, according to this view, it is precisely in virtue of being at the top of this hierarchy that ranks all beings on the basis of great-making properties that God is God.

With the foregoing, I offered an account of the Hierarchical Model of maximal greatness. It is now time to turn to present the form of theism advocated in the Pratyabhijñā school, which will lead to my formulation of the Unlimited Nature Model of divine greatness.

Śiva and His Creation

Somānanda's *Śivadṛṣṭi* and its Commentary

The Pratyabhijñā school is an Indian religious-philosophical tradition developed in Kashmir that identifies God as Śiva. In this section, I will consider passages from the foundational text of this tradition, Somānanda's *Śivadṛṣṭi* (*Vision of Śiva*)—also provided with the commentary of Somānanda's disciple Utpaladeva—with a twofold aim: first, giving an outline of the Pratyabhijñā's metaphysics of God and of God's relation to the universe and, second, showing that God's greatness within such a metaphysics cannot be accounted for in terms of the Hierarchical Model.

To start getting a grip on the Pratyabhijñā's metaphysics of the divine, a good starting point is constituted by the very opening verses of Utpaladeva's commentary on Somānanda's *Śivadṛṣṭi*.

> Homage to the Three-eyed [Śiva], the source of the generation of all marvelous things, the one who creates the portrait of the universe on his own body, which is made of the ether of consciousness. (Somānanda and Utpaladeva 2011, 99)

In this passage, we start to see some important aspects of the Pratyabhijñā doctrine. First, and perhaps unsurprisingly, Utpaladeva characterizes Śiva as the source of all things and so as a creator God. Less obvious is the metaphorical description of creation as a portrait on Śiva's body. This hints at one of the most central characteristics of Pratyabhijñā theism, namely the lack of ontological separation between God and his creation. Of course, it is not from this portrait metaphor alone that we infer this thesis: as it will emerge from the discussion below, the ontological non-distinctiveness between God and the cosmos is a consequence of the Pratyabhijñā understanding of creation as a process through

which God differentiates *himself*. In other words, according to Somānanda and Utpaladeva, the creative act is the very activity of God's *becoming* the cosmos itself.[3]

Another important point that we can extract from the passage is that according to the metaphysical view proposed here consciousness is ubiquitous in the cosmos. This follows from the claims that Śiva's body is made of consciousness and that the universe is ontologically non-distinct from Śiva.[4]

We now have a general sense of some core elements of the Pratyabhijñā doctrine. With this background, we can now dive into greater detail and discuss Somānanda and Utpaladeva's account of Śiva's creative activity. The following is a passage from the *Śivadṛṣṭi* accompanied by an extract from Utpaladeva's commentary.

> When he remains absorbed in the experience of nothing but the bliss of consciousness […] he is paramount in the delight of consciousness, nondistinct, (and) supreme. (Somānanda and Utpaladeva 2011, 107)

> […] *cittā*, i.e., pure consciousness, is eager […] to undertake, as is his nature, the creation of the multiple objects, which is perceived by making variegated (Śiva,) the one who has a fixed nature, this by means of *māyā*, the noncognition of non-duality […] (Somānanda and Utpaladeva 2011, 114)

The first passage describes the condition that metaphysically and logically antecedes creation,[5] namely the state of Śiva being completely absorbed in his own blissful experience. At this point, reality could be described as nothing but the undifferentiated plenitude of Śiva's consciousness: no entity stands out to obstruct this infinite land of divine light, which is absolutely simple.

However, as Utpaladeva comments, Śiva is not satisfied in this condition filled with nothing but his own bliss. Thus, he engages in the activity of creation, which Utpaladeva describes as a process of *making variegated* Śiva himself. This is a crucial aspect of Pratyabhijñā's metaphysics. As we just noted, the state logically prior to creation, that is, the state in which Śiva is wholly absorbed in himself, is a state of non-distinctness, of nondifferentiation. Moreover, as we know from the first quoted passage, the created cosmos is considered not ontologically distinct from Śiva but, on the contrary, within the consciousness of Śiva himself. This means that the process of creating the multiplicity of entities that, being distinct from one another, constitute the manifoldness of the universe can only be a process by which Śiva makes differentiated his very body of consciousness.

---

[3] In fact, Pratyabhijñā theism is generally understood to be a form of pantheism or panentheism. See Nemec (2014) for a discussion of pantheism and panentheism in Somānanda and Utpaladeva, and also Biernacki (2013) for an account of Pratyabhijñā panentheism in the later philosopher of the school Abhinavagupta.

[4] For the purposes of the present paper, we can leave it open whether this is to be better understood as a form of metaphysical idealism, panpsychism, or something else.

[5] But not temporally. See Prueitt (2020).

The creative force that makes this process possible is the power of *māyā*, which Utpaladeva defines as the "non-cognition of nonduality." The idea here is the following. Since the creation of the universe happens entirely within Śiva, all the entities or beings that make up the cosmos are fundamentally nothing but Śiva's consciousness itself. However, when we go around and look at the world surrounding us, what we see is not something like *mere Śiva's consciousness*. We perceive, instead, a variety of entities (trees, rocks, houses, etc.). But since it is the case that everything is ultimately nondual with Śiva's consciousness, our perception of a cosmos of multiple entities must depend on us non-cognizing this nonduality. In fact, given that *we* are also nothing but Śiva, it must depend on Śiva non-cognizing it. That is why the creative force behind creation is described as the non-cognition of nonduality.[6]

A final important point in this passage lies in Utpaladeva's characterization of Śiva as "the one who has a fixed nature." The reason why it is interesting is that, since the activity of creation is basically a process through which Śiva differentiates *himself*,[7] one could suppose that the process must have some effect on Śiva's nature: it must change it. However, Utpaladeva tells us that that's not the case. The rationale behind Utpaladeva's claim emerges when we look at a very influential metaphor that Somānanda uses to model the metaphysical relation between Śiva and his creation:

> […] it is like the ocean and the waves. There, the water that has become wavy is not called water, but the watery form is not destroyed there in the moment it becomes wavy; for, water is only water when it is wavy, or even when it is not wavy. If you argue that the waves modify it, then we reply: stillness (also) is a modifier. (Somānanda and Utpaladeva 2011, 238)

Somānanda explains that although when the water (i.e., the ocean) becomes wavy is not *called* water (i.e., we use the term '*waves*'), the water is still there: when we go to the beach and look at the expanse in front of us, what we see is not a bunch of things existing separately from the ocean which are the waves. Thinking that is absurd: waves are nothing but the ocean taking a certain form. According to Somānanda, the same applies to the relationship between Śiva and all beings: all existences are like the surface of the ocean of Śiva's cosmic mind, and, as such, they are ultimately nothing but divine consciousness. We thus see also why the activity of creation does not entail a change in the nature of

[6] It is worth mentioning that the claim that everything is nondual with Śiva's consciousness also applies to the relation between Śiva and his very creative power. In the Pratyabhijñā tradition, the creative power of Śiva is known as *śakti*, and in the *Śivadṛṣṭi* Somānanda affirms the nonduality of Śiva and *śakti* very clearly: "Śiva does not exist apart from *śakti*; *śakti* is not different (from Śiva)" (Somānanda and Utpaladeva 2011, 214). Somānanda also explains their nonduality metaphorically by saying that "[c]oldness is not separated from snow, and heat cannot be separated from fire" (*ibid*, 218), the idea being that just as coldness does not exist somewhere separated from the snow, *śakti* is not separated from Śiva.

[7] Of course, another consequence of the nondual view is that Śiva cannot be gendered. In this paper, I keep the use of masculine pronouns to refer to Śiva to maintain consistency with Nemec's translation and with the considerations on the issue that Utpaladeva makes in his commentary to the *Śivadṛṣṭi* (see Somānanda and Utpaladeva 2011, 213).

Śiva: no one would claim that the wavy ocean is more or less ocean than the still one because it is in the nature of the ocean to be wavy just as it is in the nature of the ocean to be still. (Conversely, it is also incorrect to think that the wavy ocean is more ocean than the still one.) If we think that creation changes Śiva's nature it's because we are mistakenly identifying Śiva with the *still* ocean while Śiva is just the ocean itself, which can be either wavy or still without losing or changing its nature. Thus, the nature of the Pratyabhijñā God doesn't change in the process of creation.[8]

Śiva is not Hierarchically Great

I propose that within Somānanda's and Utpaladeva's metaphysical view, God's greatness cannot be accounted for in terms of the Hierarchical Model. The reason is, in a nutshell, that the Pratyabhijñā theory of God doesn't allow us to compare Śiva to the beings he creates as the Hierarchical Model requires. In the remainder of this section, I will try to make a case for this claim.

In order to make sense of a comparison between two things, we must find a common plane that allows us to make the comparison or, to put it differently, a category with respect to which both things can be evaluated. For example, consider the following three questions: 1) which is better between Chianti and Bordeaux? 2) Who is better between Murata Sayaka and Han Kang? 3) Who is better between Donald Trump and Barack Obama? If I were to ask you any of these questions, you would probably be able to have a thought on each of them and give me your answer. However, *how* would you do that? It seems to me that when you consider, for example, which one is better between Chianti and Bordeaux, you will not compare them *simpliciter*, whatever that means, but find instead a common plane that you can use to make the comparison - i.e., which is better between Chianti and Bordeaux *as a red wine*? Who is better between Murata Sayaka and Han Kang *as a novelist*? Who is better between Donald Trump and Barack Obama *as a president*?

Of course, the ones I mentioned are by no means the only categories that you can use to make the comparison. Nothing prevents us from comparing Donald Trump and Barack Obama as fathers or golf players. However, it seems to me that in all these cases, subsuming both members of the comparison under a common category is not merely something that we do to simplify our task by narrowing down the amount of information we have to consider but a necessary condition to make sense of the comparison. This becomes even clearer when we see that, if we were asked to compare two things while subsuming the two of them under different categories, we really wouldn't understand the question. Asking who is better between Barack Obama *as a president* and Donald Trump *as a golf player* just doesn't make any sense.

[8] This view of creation connects to important issues in the Pratyabhijñā tradition concerning causation. Somānanda subscribes to a doctrine of causation known as *satkāryavāda* according to which effects are always already inherent in the causes. This doctrine is important in explaining why Śiva does not change his nature in the process of creation: since the effect (the created world) is always inherent in the cause (Śiva's consciousness) it is not the case that Śiva's nature gets affected by the creation process (see Somānanda and Utpaladeva 2011, 235-236).

If we look at the metaphysics of God advanced by Somānanda and Utpaladeva, it becomes clear that God cannot be compared to any particular being. Why is that? Well, we have just seen that in order for a comparison to make sense, we need to find a common plane for both members of the comparison, but if we look at the Pratyabhijñā metaphysics, it's clear that there can't be such a common plane between Śiva and any particular being. According to the Pratyabhijñā view, God is metaphysically orthogonal to all created beings because while all beings are *particular manifestations* resulting from the process of God's self-limitation through the non-cognition of nonduality, God is *manifestation itself*; in other words, he is not a being among beings, but what makes possible the manifestation of all beings in the first place. Since there is no common plane between God and particular beings, we cannot say that God is the greatest being in the sense required by the Hierarchical Model.

Bringing great-making properties into the story, the advocate of the Hierarchical Model wants to compare God and other beings with respect to certain properties that serve as parameters (such as knowledge and power), but without a common plane between God and other beings, we cannot select any of these parameters. For example, when I compare Chianti and Bordeaux, I can select which one is greater by considering properties such as aroma and taste *because I compare them as red wines*: the choice of the relevant properties for the comparison is dictated by the category under which both members of the comparison are subsumed. In fact, if I were to compare them as, say, reagents for a certain chemical reaction in a laboratory, I might well be interested in very different properties of the two liquids. Since, in the Pratyabhijñā view, no category can subsume both God and particular beings, there are no parameters that we can select to determine the relative greatness of God with respect to those particular beings and so we cannot form a hierarchy as required by the model.

It is important to clarify that the point of this argument is not that God has absolutely no properties or attributes. In fact, there is a sense in which the Pratyabhijñā theist must admit that Śiva does have properties, such as the one of being a creator. The point is rather that no properties can meaningfully be used to assess the relative greatness of God in comparison to created beings, and that is because there is no category under which both God and created beings can be subsumed. Take the property of having power as an example. Given that my friend Martin and a beaver can both be subsumed under the category of agents, it makes sense to compare their relative powers: for some capacities (e.g., building wooden dams) the beaver will be superior to my friend, but for most of them it will be my friend to win the comparison, and so it will make sense to say that my friend Martin has greater powers than a beaver. Given that according to Pratyabhijñā's metaphysics God is metaphysically orthogonal to created beings, there can be no category that subsumes both some created being and God, which makes it impossible to assess the relative greatness of the two.

One might object that there must be at least one category under which both Śiva and other beings can be compared, and that is the category of *existence*. Being a form of theism, in fact, one might say that the Pratyabhijñā doctrine should at least be committed to the claim that God, like other beings, exists.

This objection, however, fails to understand Pratyabhijñā metaphysics in all its depth. If we take the Pratyabhijñā doctrine seriously, we must say that, although there can surely be a sense in which we can say that Śiva, and so God, exists, that *can't be* the same sense in which we say that particular beings exist.[9] How to cash this out precisely with the tools of contemporary metaphysics is a complicated question that necessitates a paper on its own to be adequately answered. However, *that* the two senses must be different is a given of this metaphysics, and this is what matters to us for the sake of the present argument. In the picture that Somānanda and Utpaladeva offer, what it is for particular beings to exist is for them to be the result of the flowing creative activity of Śiva; it is for them to be a little wave in the ocean of Śiva's consciousness. On the other hand, Śiva is not a wave among the waves or, out of metaphor, a being among other beings: he is the very condition of the possibility of the existence of all beings. He is Being with the capital 'B.' Hence, even the category of existence is not broad enough to allow a comparison between Śiva and particular beings.

Thus, since the possibility of subsuming both God to other beings under a common category is a necessary requirement for the Hierarchical Model of divine greatness and since, according to the Pratyabhijñā doctrine, there is no such a category, it's clear that the Pratyabhijñā philosopher cannot account for divine greatness in terms of the Hierarchical Model.

A different but interconnected argument for the same conclusion can be advanced by introducing a distinction between an ultimate perspective and a conventional perspective that we can take within Pratyabhijñā metaphysics. (The exact terms 'ultimate perspective' and 'conventional perspective' are not used by Pratyabhijñā philosophers, but I think they can help us clarify the view.) The conventional perspective is the one we have in our everyday life; it is the angle from which we see a reality filled with myriad entities ontologically distinct from one another: tables, chairs, trees, and so on. From the ultimate perspective, on the contrary, reality is nothing but Śiva: the whole world surrounding us is all flowing divine consciousness, of which each of us is nothing but a tiny aspect. Crucially, the conventional and the ultimate are not to be seen as different *levels* of reality, for that would be a downplay of the doctrine of nonduality, which is crucial to Pratyabhijñā; they are, instead, different ways of seeing one and the same reality.

Does this mean that the difference between the ultimate and the conventional is completely epistemic, that is, that there is no real ontological difference corresponding to it? This is arguably one of the

[9] Cf. Utpaladeva (2002, 154), where he characterizes existence and non-existence as applying to particular manifestations that metaphysically depend on Śiva.

trickiest parts of the Pratyabhijñā doctrine, and going back to the Pratyabhijñā understanding of creation will be useful for get our minds around this issue.[10]

Let's use one more time the metaphor of the ocean and the waves. As a model for the creation process, the metaphor makes us think of it as a *metaphysical* process of differentiation or variegation from the "still" state to the "wavy" one.[11] Thus, the distinction between the state prior to creation and the created cosmos is here a metaphysical one in the sense that the process of creation is a process of genuine change or transformation. (But there is no metaphysical change in the sense of there being a categorical leap, for that would amount to denying the fixity of God's nature defended above.) Here's is where things get tricky: although creation comes with a genuine transformation of reality, it is a mistake to think that the nonduality of Śiva's consciousness is gone in phenomenal reality, and that is because however "wavy" the ocean might be, the ocean *qua* ocean is always the same; whatever multiplicity can be generated from Being, that doesn't change the unitarity of Being *qua* Being.

When I use the terms 'conventional perspective' and 'ultimate perspective' I am referring to the latter distinction, which is therefore epistemic. In other words, the conventional perspective and the ultimate perspective do not correspond to the state resulting from the creation process and the state anteceding it but correspond instead to two ways of seeing reality: as God *qua* God or as God *qua* creation, that is, *qua* noncognition of nonduality.[12]

Now let's go back to our discussion of the Hierarchical Model and why it cannot be used to account for divine greatness from a Pratyabhijñā perspective. As we discussed, the Hierarchical Model requires us to compare God to all possible beings. When we consider all these beings (Barack Obama, my favorite maple tree, a non-actual mountain), we must be speaking from a conventional perspective because that's the only perspective from which it makes sense to speak of all these distinct entities. In and of itself, there is no problem in taking a conventional perspective to speak about conventional

[10] I want to thank an anonymous reviewer for helping me clarifying this point.

[11] Cf. (Somānanda and Utpaladeva 2011, 119).

[12] Notice that one could take this to pose a puzzle for the Pratyabhijñā conception of *māyā* or the noncognition of non-duality. On the one hand, as in the passage quoted in the previous subsection (i.e., Somānanda and Utpaladeva 2011, 114), the noncognition of non-duality is understood as the power involved in the process of creation as the self-variegation of God, which we understood as having a metaphysical component; on the other, the noncognition of non-duality seem to be used to refer to the lack of one's capacity to see God's unity *qua* creation (as opposed to seeing even the variegated world as nothing but God's consciousness), which points instead to an epistemic distinction. This tension becomes particularly tricky when one connects it to the Pratyabhijñā understanding of liberation, for while noncognition in the first sense seem to *not* be faulty (in fact, it's the very power that generates the created world), in its second sense it refers to a cognitive state that we should get rid of in order to achieve liberation. This issue is explicitly addressed by Somānanda and Utpaladeva. Utpaladeva writes that "[e]ven when duality exists, the condition of Śiva exists in this way, i.e., in a dualistic form […]. Moreover, that, i.e., the duality, has Śiva as its nature, and in this way, the duality being of the nature of Śiva, there is no bondage; since that doesn't exist, there is no liberation, either the latter being dependent on the former" (Somānanda and Utpaladeva 2011, 256). Utpaladeva's answer to the problem is thus to embrace the noncognition of non-duality as the power behind creation and reject the ultimate value of the distinction between liberation and non-liberation or bondage. The world just is the result of Śiva self-variegation. Still, this duality is always subsumed under the non-duality of everything still being of Śiva's nature. Whether this is a satisfactory solution or not, I will leave to future research to discuss.

beings; after all, we need to do that in order to live our lives. The problem arises when we start comparing conventional entities to God.

God *qua* God can only be considered from the ultimate perspective. In fact, there is no way to talk about God from a conventional perspective because God just does not appear as God within the conventional world. For God to be God in the conventional world, there would have to be some entity that we can call 'God,' but that is precisely what Pratyabhijñā theism rejects: the fact that God is not a being among beings or a manifestation among manifestations implies that none of the actual or possible beings that can be identified *qua* noncognition of non-duality can be God. This means that from a Pratyabhijñā point of view when we compare God to limited beings we are switching perspective within the comparison.

That, again, renders the comparison meaningless. As an analogy, consider the fact that we can talk about more ordinary objects from different perspectives too. For example, we can talk about plants (or at least certain plants) from either a biological perspective or a culinary one (e.g., I can talk about oranges in the context of a biology class or when I am preparing a fruit salad for a dinner with friends). Of course, that's all good since we are interested in having both discourses, and once a certain perspective is selected, we can well make comparisons within it. It does not make sense, however, to compare, say, apples from a culinary perspective to oranges from a biological one. That just renders the comparison unintelligible. The same goes for the conventional and ultimate perspective in Pratyabhijñā: we can make comparisons between particular beings from the conventional perspective, but comparing a particular being to God involves a perspectival change that makes the comparison meaningless.

The distinction between the ultimate and the conventional perspective allows us to bring further clarity about my previous remark that the arguments I am proposing are not intended to imply that God has no properties or attributes at all, but only that God doesn't have properties that allow for a comparison with created beings in the way required by the Hierarchical Model. The distinction between the conventional and ultimate perspective allows to specify why: since God *qua* God can only be considered from an ultimate perspective and creatures only from a conventional one, none of the attributes that truly apply to creatures *qua* creatures can truly apply to God, and *vice versa* none of the attributes that truly apply to God *qua* God can truly apply to creatures.

Take again the property of having power as an example. In the case of my friend Martin and a beaver, it is meaningful to compare their powers because they can be said to have power in the same sense: their powers are their capacities to perform certain kind of actions in the world as agents. However, whatever is the sense in which we can say that the Pratyabhijñā God is powerful, that sense must be different: for one thing, the Pratyabhijñā theist would say that God is not in the world: God *is* the

world.[13] This of course opens the way to a very complex philosophical task, namely that of providing an independent metaphysical characterization of what we might call conventional properties and ultimate ones. While this task is beyond the scope of the present paper, what is important for us is that the distinction is there, and that is sufficient to get out intended conclusion: the greatness of the Pratyabhijñā God cannot be accounted for through the Hierarchical Model.

The Unlimited Nature Model of Divine Greatness

If the Hierarchical Model of greatness doesn't work for Pratyabhijñā theism, we should look for an alternative model compatible with the metaphysics of the divine outlined. In this section, I will develop such an account: the Unlimited Nature Model of divine greatness. According to this model, what makes God maximally great is the fact that only he possesses an unlimited nature.

I propose that the way in which ordinary objects instantiate their properties implies a limitation of their nature. For our purposes here, let's define the nature of a being as the set of properties that make that being the being it is. For example, it is arguably part of my nature to be a human and part of the nature of a wooden table to be made of wood. So, why does the way in which ordinary objects instantiate their properties make their nature limited? In a nutshell, the reason is that ordinary beings possess their properties, and so their nature, *to the exclusion* of others.

Let's take Socrates and his human nature as an example. If it is part of Socrates' nature to be a human, then he instantiates the property of being a human, however that property might be metaphysically cashed out. So far, so good. An interesting fact to notice, though, is that what it means for Socrates to have the property of being a human is also for him to *not* instantiate many other properties that are incompatible with humanness. That includes, for example, the properties of being a rock, a coconut tree, a liquid, or a book. This might strike someone as a trivial point, but I think it's a profound metaphysical truth that acquires much importance in the Pratyabhijñā school.

Ordinary beings are limited. They always possess their properties to the exclusion of a number of other properties. For example, a *red* rose must not be yellow or blue, and for something to be a wooden table, it must not be made of plastic or wrought iron. In fact, this limitedness is a necessary condition to be a *particular* being: to be particular is to realize only a tiny part of the endless possibilities of what could be. Without this very partial realization of the space of possibilities, beings couldn't have a qualitative identity that distinguishes them from other beings.

[13] To get a sense of how the attribute of being powerful applies to Śiva, see footnote 6 on the relation between Śiva and *śakti*.

If we now relate these considerations to Somānanda and Utpaladeva's account of creation, we see that while particular beings are limited in the way described, Śiva must instead be unlimited. Let's consider again one of the passages quoted earlier:

> […] *cittā*, i.e., pure consciousness, is eager […] to undertake, as is his nature, the creation of the multiple objects, which is perceived *by making variegated (Śiva,) the one who has a fixed nature*, this by means of *māyā*, the noncognition of non-duality […] (Somānanda and Utpaladeva 2011, 114; *my emphasis*)

As we have already discussed, Utpaladeva understands creation as a process through which Śiva differentiates himself, and the power that makes this differentiation possible is the noncognition of the world's unity as Śiva's pure consciousness. Since the outcome of this creative process is the world that we perceive, a world in which things are differentiated by virtue of instantiating different properties, it must be the case that it is this qualitative multiplicity that is the outcome of Śiva's creation. But reality displays this qualitative multiplicity only *qua* the differentiation operated through the noncognition of nonduality, and the metaphysical source from which such qualitative multiplicity flourishes through the process of differentiation is, instead, undifferentiated: as Somānanda says in one of the passages we quoted above, Śiva is "paramount in the delight of consciousness, *nondistinct*, (and) supreme" (Somānanda and Utpaladeva 2011, 107; *my emphasis*).

This means that Śiva is metaphysically quite remarkable, meaning that it's different from anything that we encounter in our ordinary experience of conventional reality, for his nature must be such that it doesn't contain any multiplicity *while fully containing the potential for all the multiplicity we experience*. He is not a particular, but he contains the potential for all particulars in himself. To understand this point more fully, it will help to use another metaphor that Utpaladeva largely employs in his *Īśvarapratyabhijñākārikā* (*Verses on the Recognition of the Lord*), which compares Śiva's consciousness to light. It is in the context of discussing Śiva's consciousness as light that Utpaladeva makes the following consideration about creation:

> [T]he Lord [...] renders externally manifest by his volition the multitude of objects that shine within him. [...] Creating is precisely rendering manifest in this way. (Utpaladeva 2002, 133-34)

Expanding the metaphor of light can help our understanding. This metaphor requires us to think about light in a very pre-theoretical way: the idea is that light contains the potential to differentiate itself in a number of colors without instantiating any of them as a property. White light is not blue, green, or purple, but it has the potential to differentiate itself into these colors. Within this metaphor, we are required to imagine white light as being metaphysically simple, and so as something that, while being in itself undifferentiated, has the capacity to differentiate (or variegate) itself in certain ways. It is in

this way that we should understand the nature of God according to Pratyabhijñā theism: Śiva's consciousness is like light in that it contains in itself the potential to manifest all the qualitative multiplicity that constitutes our cosmos while having a nature that is not describable in terms of the multiple properties that it manifests. While light contains in itself the potential to manifest all colors, Śiva's consciousness must contain in itself the potential to manifest all possible properties.

It is important to highlight that the process of differentiation of the original plenitude is always a process of *limitation.* Thus Utpaladeva writes in his *Īśvarapratyabhijñākārikā* that the noncognition of nonduality is "precisely the *rendering limited of that whose essence is all*" (Utpaladeva 2002, 211; *my emphasis*). The articulation of sunlight in all the colors of the rainbow is a process of differentiation of the original unity by limiting its plenitude in various particularities. Analogously, Śiva's creation through the noncognition of nonduality is a process of limitation of the plenitude of the divine nature into the multiplicity that we encounter in reality.

We can now give a rather precise characterization of divine greatness for Pratyabhijñā theism. Let L be a function of the degree of the metaphysical limitedness of a nature, where the degree of metaphysical limitedness of a nature is determined by how much it excludes other natures. For example, the degree of metaphysical limitedness of light, namely L(light), will be determined by how much something has to be *not* in order to be light (i.e., it has to be not a tree, not a raccoon, etc.). Let's say that L(light) = n. Consider now the function applied to *red* light, namely L(red light). Let's say that L(red light) = m. Now, m must be greater than n, and that's because in order for something to be red light, it has also to be not, say, blue or green light, which weren't excluded in the case of light *simpliciter* (which contains them). We can thus say that L(light) < L(red light); that is, light has a lower degree of metaphysical limitedness than red light.

This operator allows us to formulate the following model of divine greatness:

> **Unlimited Nature Model:** God is that of which nothing greater is possible because the following condition is satisfied: L(God) = 0.

According to Pratyabhijñā metaphysics, the degree of metaphysical limitedness of God must be zero. In other words, God's nature must be such that it doesn't exclude *any* possible property. As we have seen, the Pratyabhijñā theory of creation says that God creates the cosmos by way of *limiting* his own nature through the power of *māyā*. In order for that to be the case, the full potential for the manifestation of all these properties must already be contained in God, for if God's nature were such that it excludes a certain property p, then God wouldn't be able to create the manifestation of p by limiting his very nature, in the same way that if the potential for purple light wasn't already contained in white light then purple light couldn't originate from the differentiation of white light through a prism. Hence, since God must be capable of creating all possible properties, God's nature must be

such that it doesn't exclude any of them, which makes God's degree of metaphysical limitedness equal to zero. In the remainder of this section, I will elaborate on some characteristics of the Unlimited Nature Model.

What makes the Unlimited Nature Model a model of divine *greatness*? The Unlimited Nature Model takes *L* to be a measure of greatness—the lower *L* is, the greatest something is—and God is the greatest in virtue of having the *lowest possible* degree of *L*: zero.[14] In one sense, we could say that the Unlimited Nature Model is still hierarchical because it allows to classify the relative greatness of all beings and God on the basis of the value of *L*. At the same time, the Unlimited Nature Model is not hierarchical insofar as it doesn't consider God as a being among beings but greater than all others: there is a fundamental metaphysical difference between a positive *L* and an *L* equal to zero, and that is because the passage from zero to a positive value goes hand-in-hand with the metaphysical difference between *Being* and *beings*.

Moreover, the Hierarchical Model is perfectly compatible with all beings classified in the hierarchy, God included, being metaphysically separate from one another. However, to the extent that it draws a hierarchy, the Unlimited Nature Model determines a hierarchy of *encompassiveness*, so that God is maximally great in virtue of having a maximally encompassing nature. This means that, according to the Unlimited Nature Model, to be that which of which nothing could be greater, to be God, is to possess a nature that metaphysically encompasses the natures of all other possible beings.

The notion of encompassiveness used in the Unlimited Nature Model should be distinguished from the notion of encompassiveness used by a form of theism that has been advocated in recent years: modal panentheism (Nagasawa 2016). Modal panentheism can be seen as the combination of two claims: modal realism (the thesis that all possible worlds exist in the same way as the actual world) and the claim that God is identical to the totality of possible worlds. According to this view, God is maximally encompassing in the sense that God contains in himself all possibilities; however, what distinguishes divine greatness in modal panentheism from divine greatness according to the Unlimited Nature Model is that God's encompassiveness according to the modal panentheist can be seen as a mere *sum* of all possibilities, but that's not the case for the Unlimited Nature Model. According to the Unlimited Nature Model, in fact, we wouldn't characterize God's nature satisfactorily by merely listing all the possibilities that it contains any more than we could satisfactorily characterize white light by listing all the colors obtained by its refraction in a prism. The Pratyabhijñā view is that God's nature is such that it contains *the full potential* to manifest all possibilities, but God's nature *qua* God is absolutely simple and undifferentiated, and this starkly distinguishes Pratyabhijñā theism from modal panentheism.

[14] Arguably, it is a good feature of the Unlimited Nature Model that it identifies maximal greatness with the value zero, the reason being that, unlike any positive number, zero can constitute an objective limit of maximality. One could argue that an objective limit of maximality can also be constituted by the infinite. However, whether an actual infinite is possible is a debated issue (see, e.g., Craig and Smith 1993).

In conclusion of this paper, I would like to advance a couple of considerations that could point to directions of further research. First, it's worth noticing that the Unlimited Nature Model, unlike the Hierarchical Model, is tightly bound to a metaphysics of creation. Characterizing God as maximally great in virtue of instantiating certain great-making properties (such as omniscience and omnipotence) to a certain extent higher than other beings, as the Hierarchical Model does, doesn't seem, at least *prima facie*, to entail or even suggest any particular theory of creation. On the contrary, the Pratyabhijñā theory of creation and the Unlimited Nature Model go hand in hand. As we have seen, Śiva creates the cosmos by *differentiating* his own consciousness, and for that to be possible Śiva's nature must be both undifferentiated and capable of containing the potential for all the multiplicity that the differentiation can originate, which is what the Unlimited Nature Model says.

My second and final consideration is that subscribing to the Unlimited Nature Model of divine greatness will have implications for what the available arguments in favor of theism are. For example, versions of the ontological argument that attempt to infer God's existence from the definition of God as maximally great—say, Anselm's argument in the *Proslogion* (see Oppy 1995 for a discussion of it)—seem to be at odds with the Unlimited Nature Model, which reinterprets the notion of maximal greatness as being about the degree of limitedness of a nature. In fact, the Pratyabhijñā doctrine will take issue with *all* the arguments for theism that state as their conclusion the claim that God *exists*, for as we discussed above the Pratyabhijñā theists will want to say that, strictly speaking, existence applies to ordinary beings, while God is Being itself, the fundamental condition of manifestation of all beings: to exist is to be a wave in the ocean of divine consciousness, which is Being. At the same time, the Unlimited Nature Model might open venues of exploration of alternative arguments for theism, but whether this is the case, as well as how it ultimately affects one's preference for the Unlimited Nature Model over the Hierarchical Model or *vice versa*, is an issue that I have to leave to future philosophical inquiry.

References

Anselm. 1979. *St. Anselm's Proslogion: With A Reply on Behalf of the Fool by Gaunilo and The Author's Reply to Gaunilo*. Edited by M. J. Charlesworth. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

Biernacki, Loriliai. 2013. "Panentheism and Hindu Tantra: Abhinavagupta's Grammatical Cosmology." In *Panentheism across the World's Traditions*, edited by Loriliai Biernacki and Philip Clayton, 161–76. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Craig, William Lane, and Quentin Smith. 1993. *Theism, Atheism, and Big Bang Cosmology*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Lynn, Richard John. 1999. *The Classic of the Way and Virtue: A New Translation of the Tao-Te Ching of Laozi As Interpreted by Wang Bi*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Morris, Thomas V. 1984. “The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Anselm.” *Faith and Philosophy* 1 (2): 177–87.

Nagasawa, Yujin. 2016. “Modal Panenetheism.” In *Alternative Concepts of God*, edited by Andrei Buckareff and Yujin Nagasawa, 91–105. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Nagasawa, Yujin. 2017. *Maximal God: A New Defence of Perfect Being Theism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Nemec, John. 2014. “The Evidence for Somānanda’s Pantheism.” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 42 (1): 99–114.

Oppy, Graham. 1995. *Ontological Arguments and Belief in God*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Plato. 1992. *Republic*. Edited by C. D. C. Reeve. Translated by G. M. A. Grube. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.

Prueitt, Catherine. 2020. “Beyond Time, Not Before Time: The Pratyabhijñā Śaiva Critique of Dharmakīrti on the Reality of Beginningless Conceptual Differentiation.” *Philosophy East and West* 70 (3): 594–614.

Somānanda, and Utpaladeva. 2011. *The Ubiquitous Siva: Somananda’s Sivadrsti and His Tantric Interlocutors*. Edited and translated by John Nemec. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Utpaladeva. 2002. *The Īśvarapratyabhijñākārikā of Utpaladeva*. Edited and translated by Raffaele Torella. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

Zappulli, Davide Andrea. 2023. “Towards a Buddhist Theism.” *Religious Studies* 59 (4): 762-774.

Statements and Declarations

Competing interests:

The author has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.