Omnipotence: A Primer

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Theists maintain that God is not only the creator of the universe and all it contains, but that He is also omnipotent. This short essay will explore the attribute of omnipotence by attempting to clarify it and draw out the consequences of some attempts at clarification.

To say that God is omnipotent is to say something about God's relationship to power, i.e., that God is all-powerful. So let's consider this a first pass definition of omnipotence:

D1: X is omnipotent iff X is all-powerful.

A first point to note here is that what we are after is a general account of omnipotence; we want to know what the concept entails. This should be conceptually separate from the general concept of God, so we are not here looking for an account of *God's* omnipotence as if there were different than just plain old omnipotence. That is why we have the "X" in the definition. Still, since it is God that we are interested in here, in what follows I'll often talk about God's omnipotence, but that should be read as just omnipotence as applied to God.

Although D1 has the virtue of being clear and intuitive, it suffers from one potential problem: the definition seems no clearer than the term being defined. What does it mean to say that something is all-powerful? Well, we can say at least this much: to be all-powerful doesn't mean that one has *all the power*, that everything else is impotent. As noted above, it does seem to require that the omnipotent being have some important relationship to power itself. But it is consistent with the concept of omnipotence that God be omnipotent and yet that you and I and the angels and the devil all have a certain amount of power. On the other hand, God not only has all the powers a being can have, all powers there are derive from God. That is, besides the fact that God has so much *more* power than any of the rest of us do, God also bears a fundamentally different relationship to power: he is the source of it. Any power that the rest of us have we have only because God (in some sense or other) *wills* it. Our power is derivative.

Here's a second pass at a definition:

D2: X is omnipotent iff X can do anything.

This definition has the advantage of helping to focus our thoughts and even make them somewhat concrete. For D2 tells us that omnipotence is cashed out not in terms of being omni-powerful but in terms of being *able to perform any action*. It tells us that there are simply no limits to what an omnipotent being can do. Create a universe and keep it in

existence? God can do that. Raise the dead back to life? He can do that too. What is not possible for humans and other created beings is possible for God.

D2 is thus informative. However, it is also widely objected to. And it is objected to not so much by atheists but by theists. No less a theist than Thomas Aquinas (the official philosopher of the Roman Catholic Church) thought that a definition like D2 had to be given up because it leads to absurdities. In particular, it leads to the view that God is able to do even that which is logically impossible. But what is logically impossible quite literally *cannot* be done. For example, it would seem to follow from D2 that God could create a square circle and a married bachelor. But, Aquinas thought, those actions are incoherent. In the past century C.S. Lewis claimed, against D2, that nonsense didn't become sense just because one puts "God can" in front of it. The fundamental idea, then, is that laws of logic are importantly unlike laws of nature; the latter are created by God and under God's control. God can violate a natural law anytime God chooses. But a logical principle like, for example, the law of non-contradiction, which says that nothing can be both true and false (in the same sense at the same time), is not something that even God can violate. And since creating a round square or a married bachelor would involve violating that very principle, God simply cannot do it. But this "limitation" on God's power is no limitation at all. For the only actions this objection to D2 rules out are actions the descriptions of which are simply incoherent.

So amending D2 accordingly we get:

D3: X is omnipotent iff X is able to do anything that is logically possible.

But, an objector to D3 might claim, aren't we forgetting that we are talking about *God*, an infinite being who is acknowledged by all theists to be well beyond what the human mind can grasp? Aren't we just "putting God in a box" because of our limited imaginations?

There is a great deal of intuitive plausibility to this complaint. Certainly, the premise is hard to argue with: if the theist's God exists, he is very much greater than we are and hence we shouldn't be thought to be able to understand all of God's ways much less all of his very nature. But does it follow from this that we should think of God as outside the scope of logic? To think more about this, we need to understand what we are saying when we claim that God isn't limited by the logically possible. As intimated above, the clearest, and I think best, way to understand what this means to think of logic along the lines of the way theists generally think about laws of nature. Laws of nature are the regularities that govern the physical world. In a real sense, these laws act as constraints on what physical entities can and cannot do. Human beings might be powerful in all kinds of ways, but their power does not include the ability to violate or break a natural law. Where do laws of nature come from? Theists almost unanimously see them as the creations of God. In deciding what kind of universe to create, God had to decide what kind of stuff to make the universe out of and how that that stuff would behave. Had God wanted to create a universe without gravity or in which the speed of light was more than 185,000 miles per second, he could have done so (or so goes the standard view, anyway). The laws of nature are thus creations of God. And as creations, God is not bound by

them. Indeed, in order to achieve his purposes, God does sometimes intervene in affairs of the universe in ways that suspend or violate the natural laws. Theists call these events "miracles."

I suggest that if you are inclined to think that God is able to do even the *logically* impossible, then you should think of laws of logic as akin to laws of nature. Just as humans cannot break the laws of nature, neither can they violate the laws of logic. Indeed, one might think that in some way the laws of logic are deeper or more fundamental than the laws of nature, and yet for all that think they are still the voluntary creations of God. So the view of the objector to D3 is that logic is the free creation of God and that God could have created a world where either there is no logic or where the laws of logic are different than the laws of logic we find in the actual world.

So what's the problem? Why shouldn't we eschew D3 in favor of D2? First, D2 has consequences that are counterintuitive in the extreme. For example, just as the law of gravity happens to hold but would not have if God had chosen to create different laws of nature, so, on the view we are considering, the law of noncontradiction holds but would not have if God had chosen to create different laws of logic. The first means that there are possible creations in which bowling balls float on a planet with the mass of earth; the second means there are possible creations in which there are four-angled triangles (i.e., closed geometric shapes that have exactly three interior angles that have exactly four interior angles). The floating bowling balls are things we don't experience on earth but we have little difficulty imagining. However, the situation is very different regarding a four-angled triangle. The trouble *isn't* that we don't know what it would be like; the trouble is that we have a very clear concept of what such a thing would be (even if we find we can't picture it in our imaginations) and we can see that there just couldn't be such a thing. This is an important point, the defender of D3 will insist. It is only to be expected that there would be aspects of the divine that will pass our ability to understand and even imagine. But the problem with the claim that there could be four-angled triangles is *not* that it is beyond our understanding. We understand the description perfectly well and we can see that there could be nothing like that. If God created the laws of logic and might have made different laws than those we find, then there is nothing, no matter how contradictory that is not possible: married bachelors, four-angled triangles, beings that have always existed and yet never existed at all, and anything else that is simple unimaginable.

This leads to a serious theological consequence of this position as well. To see this, though, we have to think a bit about the nature of language. When we assert something, when we claim that something is true, we can be understood not only by what we say but by what our statement rules out. If I tell you that "Merlot is a red wine" I'm intending to convey that this wine is red and not white or a blush. You understand what I say because you know what it would take for my sentence to be true, and part of what it takes for my sentence to be true is that merlot is not white and not light pink. Suppose I told you that merlot was red and then quickly added, "but of course its being red doesn't rule out its being white or light pink, or purple or anything at all; in short, its being red doesn't mean that it's not not-red and even not-colored." You'd find this mighty puzzling. What exactly

did I think I *was* asserting, then, when I told you that it was red? The truth is there would be no answer. I hadn't managed to assert anything at all. And inasmuch as you might think I had, it's just that you are thinking of merlot's being red as ruling out its being other colors.

Now theists assert things about God. For example, theists say "God is omnipotent." They understand this to be a significant claim about what God is like. But now suppose that we think of the laws of logic as having no application to God in the same way that we think that the laws of nature do not bind God. Then we should think of, in particular, the law of noncontradiction as having no application to God. So when the theist claims "God is omnipotent," she can't be understood as ruling out its contradiction, namely, that God is not omnipotent. For if it were so understood, then we'd be supposing that God couldn't be both omnipotent and not-omnipotent, and if we supposed God couldn't be both of those things then we'd be thinking that the law of noncontradiction does apply to God. So if we are going to say that the laws of noncontradiction do not have application to God, then we will have to admit that our claim that God is omnipotent could be true while it is also true that God is not omnipotent and even true that God has no power at all. Indeed, it could also be true that God not so much as exist! Claiming that God is omnipotent does not rule out anything at all; that is, if the laws of logic don't apply to God then even if it is *true* that God is omnipotent, God could still be limited in power and even completely powerless or nonexistent. But just as my claim that "merlot is red" is devoid of meaning if I claim that what I say can be true even if merlot has no color or a different color, in just the same way the claim that God is omnipotent would be devoid of meaning if it could be true and yet God still be completely powerless.

The bottom line, then, is that if we are to assert anything meaningful about God we have to assert something that, if true, rules out other possibilities. But if the laws of logic don't apply to God then nothing we say about God, even if true, will rule out anything. So we won't have succeeded in making a meaningful claim about what God is like. Therefore, it seems that we must at least commit ourselves to the claim that the laws of logic have application to God if we want to make any contentful assertions about God at all.

One final point. One motivation for thinking that God has control over even the laws of logic is that God if God doesn't control them, then it seems there is something independent of God. But God is supposed to be the ground of all that is. But if God doesn't create the rules of logic, then doesn't that mean there is something significant over which God has no control, and that is therefore not dependent on God? One reply open to the theist is to separate the claims "God has no control over X" and "X is independent of God." Consider, for example, God's very nature. By definition, one has no control over one's nature (where "nature" is understood as philosophers understand it: as the set of all an individual's essential properties). So God's nature as an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent being is something that God has no control over at all. But just as obviously, that doesn't mean that God's nature is somehow *independent* of God. God's nature is the essence of Who God is. Now some theologians have wanted to say the same kind of thing about the principles of logic. They have claimed that the principles of logic are essential the thought processes in the nature of God. The reason, in other words, that

the law of noncontradiction is so fundamental to reality is that it is fundamental to the divine psychology. The rules of logic are, in other words, figuratively hardwired into the mind of God.

Even if all this amounts to a successful defense of D3 against the above objection, that doesn't mean that D3 is unobjectionable. Here are three objections to the coherence of the very concept of omnipotence.

1. *First Person Actions:* There are logically possible actions that can only be done by a particular person. For instance, I can perform the action of "drinking Tom Senor's first cup of coffee of the day" but you can't. And neither can God. The act itself includes an implicit reference to the actor. But because it is something I can do then it is a logically possible action. But that means, then, that either no being is omnipotent (because even though I can have *my* first cup of coffee of the day, I can't have yours, so that means there are things I can't do too) or that omnipotence isn't well defined by D3.
2. *The Paradox of the Stone*: This is problem associated with the initially smart-alecky seeming question, "Can an omnipotent being create a stone that it can't lift?" The difficulty is supposed to be this: if you answer "yes," then although the being's creative powers seem to know no limit, its lifting powers do. For it is apparently possible that the being create an object to heavy for it to lift. But if you answer "no" then you've straight away hit on an action that the omnipotent being can't do—namely create a stone that it can't lift. Now you've recognized a limitation to its creative abilities.

   While this objection might at first seem like only a superficial riddle, there really is a serious underlying point and it is this: can an omnipotent being create a being that it could not subsequently control? The most straightforward answer is 'no,' that it is not possible that there be a being that an omnipotent being couldn't then control. But, as with the stone paradox, that means that there are limits to the omnipotent being's created power. To answer 'yes,' however, seems wrong too. Richard Swinburne has argued that the theist should answer "yes" and then claim that this doesn't amount to a limitation on the omnipotent being unless that being creates the being that it can't control. And if it does that, it ceases to be omnipotent (because surely no being could count as omnipotent if there are beings that it can't control).
3. *The Necessity of the Past*: there are some actions that are logically possible but that would, at a given time, be impossible for even an omnipotent agent to perform. Consider, for example, the action of bringing it about that Hitler die before his first birthday. This is a logically possible action; that is, there are possible worlds where it is performed. However, it would seem that it is not now possible. Given that Hitler didn't in fact die before his first birthday, it is not now within anyone's power to bring it about that he actually die by then.