OMNIPOTENCE AND GOD'S EXISTENCE

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According to creeds and scriptures of many of the world's major religions, God is omnipotent. But what is it to be omnipotent? Does it mean God can do anything and everything, including the logically impossible? Or, are there limits to His power?[1] In this paper, I will defend a view of omnipotence according to which there are limits to God's power, I will use this idea of omnipotence to critique two arguments against God's existence. According to the first argument, there can't be an omnipotent God; and according to the second, if there is an omnipotent God, He can't be all-good. Each of these arguments arises from a question about omnipotence. The first argument arises from 'Can God create an immovable object?', and the second one from 'Can God sin?'   Both arguments are attempts to undermine belief in the traditional God of theism; both arguments aim to show that there is no being who is both omnipotent and omnibenevolent. But, as I shall argue, both arguments fail if omnipotence is properly understood.

Can an omnipotent God do anything and everything, including what is logically impossible? Many religious people think so; for them this is what omnipotence amounts to. They say, "With God all things are possible." (Mark 10:27) Rene Descartes is a supporter of this view of omnipotence; he says, "I do not think that we should ever say of anything that it cannot be brought about by God" (39). Descartes maintains that since God made the laws of logic, He could unmake them, and so yes, He could create logical impossibilities, such as square circles. To think otherwise, according to Descartes, would be to dishonor God's greatness

(39).

The Cartesian view of omnipotence, however, has a number of problems. First, for Christians, there is scriptural evidence against the view. Hebrews 6:13 & 18 tell us that God cannot lie or swear by a being higher than Himself (Vardy 112). Second, since this view of omnipotence implies that God can create a square circle, this view implies a self-contradiction. For this reason alone, many of us would reject the Cartesian view of omnipotence just as we would reject any view that implied an absurdity. For example, if our assumptions about our financial position lead us to conclude that we'll go broke by next Tuesday and also we won't go broke by next Tuesday, then obviously there's a problem with some of our assumptions.

Defenders of Cartesian omnipotence may rightly respond that such a criticism merely assumes the reliability of principles of reasoning that Descartes's argument has called into question (cf. Davies 175). But on the contrary, I believe there is reason to accept the reliability of reason and logic here as elsewhere. Understanding and clear communication seem to rest on the principle of non-contradiction, that no statement is both true and false at the same time (cf. Nash 40). To see what I'm getting at, suppose I tell you that at one and the same time someone's in this room and no one's here. Since I'd be talking nonsense, it'd be hard to know what I meant. The difficulty of understanding is compounded when we're told that God can become bad and simultaneously be completely good, that He can even cease to exist while at the same time continuing to exist. What could it mean if we're told that not only can God create logical impossibilities but also He can't create them? If we don't presuppose the principle of non-contradiction in our discussions, it's difficult to understand what we're saying and what we're meaning to say in our discussions, and for this reason I believe it is reasonable to presuppose the principle of non-contradiction in our discussions.

Further, it's hard to make sense of a God to whom the principle of non-contradiction does not apply. What is He like? As Peter Geach says, "as we cannot say how a non-logical world would look, we cannot say how a supra-logical God would act or how he could communicate anything to us by way of revelation" (68). We believe He says one thing, but He could <u>at the same time</u> be saying its opposite. Is He promising eternal life and at the same time not promising it? How would we know we had revelation in this case? In this way, exempting God from logic calls into question key doctrines of traditional religions. In fact, putting God beyond reason makes it difficult to tell the difference between sense and nonsense in religion.

Refusing to apply the principle of non-contradiction to God makes it harder for us to understand religion and each other. And beyond that, Descartes provides faulty reasons for God's exemption from logic.

Descartes claims that it dishonors God to think of Him as subject to the laws of logic in the way that Zeus was held to be subject to the Fates (37). But there need be no dishonor here at all if, with equal plausibility, we regard the laws as reflections of God's rational mind. Then God could, without dishonor, subject Himself to those laws, or simply choose to manifest Himself as rational.

Descartes also seems to think that God's freedom requires that He be able to overturn the laws of logic. He says, "God cannot have been determined to make it true that contradictories cannot be true together, and therefore ... he could have done otherwise" (39). But given the

kind of being God is, true He can't have been determined by something outside Him, but that

doesn't mean that He could have done the opposite. If God is self-determined and so free but

at the same time limited by His complete knowledge and goodness, it is not so clear that He

could have done the opposite — especially given the confusion and chaos that would result

from His doing the opposite.

Descartes's reasons for saying that God could break the laws of logic are not compelling.

Further, as we saw before, failing to presuppose the principle of non-contradiction leads to

serious difficulties of communication and understanding. Thus, there is reason not to accept

the Cartesian idea that God can do anything and everything, including the logically

impossible.

But if that's not what 'God is omnipotent' means, what does it mean? A more popular view is

that it means God can create anything logically possible. As St. Thomas Aquinas says,

> God is called omnipotent because he can do, all things that are
> possible absolutely ... everything that does not imply a contradiction
> in terms is numbered among those possibles in respect of which
> God is called omnipotent; whereas whatever implies contradiction
> does not come within the scope of divine omnipotence, because it
> cannot have the aspect of possibility (60).

What is logically possible does not involve logical contradiction; it contrasts with what is

empirically possible, which does not involve a conflict with the laws of nature. In claiming

that God is omnipotent, no one is claiming that He can only create the empirically possible,

for that would be to deny that miracles, i.e. violations of laws of nature caused by God, could

occur. But one is saying that God could not make an object that was square and at the same

time circular. On the view that God can create all and only those things logically possible, God's inability to create a square circle does not detract from His omnipotence because creating a square circle is logically impossible, and His omnipotence only covers what is possible.

But this Thomist view also has its critics. Peter Geach, for one, claims that "there must be some logically possible feats that are beyond God's power. One good example suffices: making a thing which its maker cannot afterwards destroy "(69-70). Anthony Kenny also has worries about this Thomist view. Using an example from Alvin Plantinga, he says, "making a table that God did not make is a logically possible action, but God cannot make a table which God did not make" (95). Thus these critics argue that a definition of omnipotence in terms of logically possible acts will not work because there are logically possible acts that God cannot do.

I believe, however, that this Thomist view of omnipotence can be defended. Its defense depends on a distinction between acts considered in the abstract and acts fully described. Acts fully described include their agents. Thus though 'creating a table that God did not create' is in the abstract possible, it is not a possibility when fully described as God's creating a table that God did not create. Similar remarks apply to Geach's example. In the abstract, 'making something its maker cannot destroy' is possible, but specifying its maker as God brings out a contradiction: making something which even the being who can destroy anything He makes cannot destroy. My point is that when fully described the acts mentioned by Geach and Kenny are not logically possible and so do not show that there are logically possible acts that God cannot do. Thus this Thomist idea of omnipotence as God's ability to do any act whose full description does not involve logical impossibility seems defensible.

Besides salvaging reason, this Thomist idea of omnipotence provides a way to answer two

arguments that are meant to show that the traditional Judaeo-Christian God does not exist.

Both arguments raise a question about the coherence of the traditional idea of God.

According to the first argument, God is not omnipotent' and, according to the second

argument, there is an incompatibility between omnipotence and complete goodness.

The first argument is meant to show that God can't be omnipotent. If the argument is good,

there is a serious problem with the traditional idea of God. The argument is called the

dilemma of omnipotence and begins from the question 'Can God create an immovable

objects?'

The argument proceeds as follows (cf Brody 332):

1)   Either God can create an immovable object or He can't.

2)   If He can create it, He won't be able to move it,[2] so He won't be omnipotent.

3)   And if He can't create it, that's something He can't do, and so he won't be

omnipotent.

4)   Therefore, in either case, God is not omnipotent.

However, this argument does not succeed in showing a serious problem with traditional

theism. The question 'Can God create an immovable object?' is similar to the question 'What

happens when an irresistible force meets an immovable object?' (Copi 312). The correct

answer to this latter question is 'Nothing', because there can't be a force that can move

anything and at the same time an object that can't be moved. That's impossible. Similarly,

God's creating an immovable object would amount to the simultaneous existence of a being

who could move anything and of an object that could not be moved — another

self-contradiction.

God can't create that situation because it's impossible, but that doesn't mean He's not

omnipotent. Given the Thomist idea that 'God is omnipotent' means 'He can do whatever is

logically possible', then His omnipotence is not affected by His not being able to do

something that's impossible. Thus though God can't create an immovable object, it does not

follow that He is not omnipotent. In this way, the Thomist idea of omnipotence helps

traditional theists blunt the dilemma of omnipotence.

Thus this argument does not succeed in its attack on traditional theism, does not show that

God is not omnipotent. If God were not omnipotent, He might be dependent on some other

being, which would make Him less than perfect. Yet His omnipotence does not require that

He can create an immovable object or any other logical impossibility.

Another attack on traditional theism arises from the question 'Can God sin?'. The argument

proceeds as follows (Brody 332):

1)   Either God can sin or He cannot sin.

2)   If He can sin, He is not the greatest conceivable being.

3)   If He cannot sin, then He is not omnipotent.

4)   Thus, whether He can sin or not, there is a problem with the traditional idea of God.

The Thomist idea of omnipotence also provides a way to answer this argument as follows.
God's inability to sin does not rule out His omnipotence because He can only do what is
possible, and His being able to sin is not possible. God cannot sin because He is essentially
good, meaning that His goodness is part of His nature. God is essentially good because as
William Wainwright says, a being who "sins in some of the logically possible worlds in
which it exists doesn't seem maximally perfect," (21) but God is maximally perfect. And
since goodness is part of His nature, then He does not have the power to be morally
imperfect. Thus saying that God can sin is tantamount to saying that a being with no power to
sin has the power to sin (cf. Wainwright 21 and Clarke 63). And so God cannot sin because
His doing so is impossible.[3] And since His omnipotence only covers what is possible, its
being impossible for Him to sin does not rule out His omnipotence. His inability to sin is
compatible with His omnipotence, and so this second argument against traditional theism also
fails.

A defender of the second argument against traditional theism might say that if God cannot

sin, then He is not free. He is not free because freedom requires being able to act otherwise,

but when it comes to moral behavior, God cannot do otherwise. For this reason, He is not

free; and if He is not free, He is not praiseworthy for His goodness (cf. Geach 71).

One way to short-circuit this objection is to say that though God cannot sin, He is still free

because He acts according to His will (cf. Rowe 758 and Clarke 62-63). Nothing outside of

Him determines Him to act as He does. And He does not act in the grip of overwhelming

passion. Instead He acts autonomously, directing Himself by His all-perfect nature. Just as it

makes sense to speak of a human who acts according to his own rational will as acting freely,

the same holds true for God. But while humans sometimes act unfreely due to compulsions or

external forces, the same cannot be said about an all-wise, all-good, all-knowing, all-powerful

being. God cannot be coerced, nor will His judgment be clouded by desire. And it is for this

steadfast, wise nature that many of us praise Him and show Him our gratitude.

But some are unhappy with such a view of God's freedom, saying "it fails to satisfy our basic

convictions that a free action requires the freedom to have done otherwise" (Rowe 760). But

this idea that God's freedom requires that He has the power to sin and the power not to sin

does not seem coherent. That is because, as we just saw, saying that God has the power to sin

is saying something self-contradictory. And so, if God's freedom requires that He has the

power to sin, then His freedom requires an impossibility. Thus the idea of freedom in terms of

acting according to one's rational will seems more appropriate for God. Since God's inability

to sin is compatible with His freedom, the second argument against traditional theism still

fails.

In this paper I have argued against the Cartesian idea of omnipotence. By not presupposing

the principle of non-contradiction, the Cartesian idea of omnipotence would cause serious

problems of communication and understanding. I have defended instead a Thomist idea of

omnipotence — one in terms of acts whose full description does not involve a logical

contradiction. I have used this idea to undercut two arguments against God's existence.

According to the first argument, God isn't omnipotent because He can't create an immovable

object. In response, I have argued that since His creating an immovable object is impossible,

it is not something covered by His omnipotence. Therefore His not being able to do it does

not rule out His omnipotence. According to the second argument, if God cannot sin, He is not

omnipotent. But again, given the Thomist idea of omnipotence, God's having the power to sin

is impossible and so outside the scope of His power. Since His omnipotence only covers what

is possible and His having the power to sin is impossible, His not being able to sin does not

rule out his omnipotence. Thus in this paper I have argued that a proper understanding of

omnipotence provides a way to turn back two arguments against the existence of the

traditional Judaeo-Christian God.

Notes

1. The use of 'He' in reference to God is not meant to imply a position on God's gender,

2. With regard to premise 2, an unnamed commentator suggest that perhaps God could self-
   create Himself as an immovable object and still have the power to move Himself. Initially,
   the suggestion appears paradoxical, since in that case God would appear to be a movable
   immovable being.

3.   If to sin is deliberately to go against God's will, then it seems God could not sin. To see this, suppose that He did sin. Then He would be deliberately going against His will. But if He did it deliberately, He would be acting in accord with His will. Thus, for an additional reason, it does not seem that God could sin (cf. Davies 179).

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