Omnipotence

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God, Faith and Infinity » Lecture 6

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Divine Attributes

What is God Like?

› We've been operating with an **informal** understanding of the various aspects of God's **perfection** so far.
  » For example: while we've certainly made use of the claim that God is all good and all powerful, both for the argument from evil but also for the argument from morality, we haven't really delved into what those claims mean in any systematic way.

› In this lecture and next time we will turn to questions about some of the perfections themselves, rather than how they might be used to argue for or against the existence of God.
  » Is it even **coherent**, for example, to suppose that any being could know everything, or do everything?
  » This of course might tie into an argument about God's existence – if we are sure he has to have a certain feature that turns out to be incoherent, then he cannot be believed to exist.

The Traditional List

There is a broad … consensus that the main divine attributes are:

› Omnipotence
› Creatorship
› Omniscience
› Eternity and omnipresence
› Personhood
› Goodness/[moral] perfection
› Non-physicality
› Necessary existence
› Simplicity
› Immutability
› Impassibility [not susceptible to transient suffering and pleasure].

… perfect being theism, or the 'maximal greatness' tradition, regards God as the uniquely perfect being or the maximally great being, and the attributes then specify what characteristics count as perfections, or which aspects of God are maximally great. (Everitt 2010: 78)

Classifying the list (Oppy and Scott 2010: 236–37)

Base qualities Those that both God and people too can have: *good, wise, powerful, free,* …

› The way God has these properties differs from the way people do: *perfectly good, infinitely wise, maximally powerful, unrestrictedly free*…. And indeed God is often said to have *perfection* as a quality.

O-qualities The modified base qualities may be treated as a class of qualities themselves: *omnipotence, omniscience*, etc. (These will largely be our focus.)

Metaphysical qualities Those that God can have but his creation cannot: *simplicity, immutability, eternity, impassibility, necessity*.

Originative qualities Those characterising God's relation to his creation: *creatorship*, but God is a *source* of goodness or morality or truth.

Essence or Accident?

› It is standardly assumed that these features are **essential** properties of any PBT God (Oppy and Scott 2010: 236).

> Essential If F is essential to a, then it is necessary that if a exists, then a is F (Robertson Ishii and Atkins 2020: §1).

› Maybe the fact that God's properties are part of his essence also **follows** from his perfection. (Recall here Plantinga's (1974) modal ontological argument.)

» For being essentially good – thus having goodness **inextricably linked** to one's existence – seems to be a more perfect way of being good than merely accidentally happening to be good.

› It may also be thought to follow from the divine attributes that God has no accidental properties, since no accidental feature could be explained by something intrinsic to God's own nature.

» But did God **need** to create a physical world in order for God to exist? His **independence** suggests not; in which case maybe the fact that God is a creator is accidental (though explained by God's exercise of his own essential freedom).

Defining Omnipotence

Omnipotence and Maximal Power

› We earlier said that omnipotence is what results from extreme adverbial modification of **potency** – it is having power in a 'maximal' way.

› To have the power to do something is **to be able to do it** (more or less). So when we attribute omnipotence to God, we are saying that his abilities to do things are maximal – unrestricted in some sense.

› But what is this sense? Is it having the power to do **anything**? The power to do **anything that it is possible to do**? The power to do **anything one might want to do**?

› These different answers to the question will give different verdicts about what God's omnipotence renders him able to do.

Framing a definition of omnipotence

› The simplest proposal:

(O-) Necessarily, X is omnipotent iff X do anything – i.e., can perform any action.

› But note that this depends pretty crucially on what an **action** is.

» Is it a bodily movement? If so, it would be possible to achieve omnipotence even if lots of non-actions remain outside of my control.

› So we might prefer to define omnipotence in terms of the agent's **options**. An option is a proposition such that an agent can 'act at will so as to make it hold' (Lewis 1981a: 7).

(Ox) Necessarily, X is omnipotent iff for any proposition ϕ meeting condition C, X is able to do something which ensures that ϕ is true.

› (Ox) is a schema; different definitions will impose different **conditions** C.

The Liberal View

› The most liberal view is that there is literally **no restriction** at all on what can is able to do:

> (O1) Necessarily, X is omnipotent iff for any proposition ϕ **whatsoever**, X is able to do something which ensures that ϕ is true.

› If this is what omnipotence means, then an omnipotent being is able to ensure the truth of **contradictions** and **impossibilities**, among other propositions.

» It can make $2 + 2 = 5$, change the past, ensure that it never existed, ensure that I freely choose to do something that it coerces me to do, etc.

A Restriction

› This liberal view cannot be right. Suppose X is an omnipotent being according to (O1):

(AP0) If X has an ability, it is possible that X successfully exercises their ability.
(AP1) If X is able to make ϕ true, then it is possible that ϕ is made true. (AP0)
(AP2) But contradictions and other impossibilities cannot be made true.
(AP3) So X is not able to make contradictions true. (AP1, AP2, *modus tollens*)

› So we might say: let's impose the condition that ϕ **must be possible**:

(O2) Necessarily, X is omnipotent iff for any **possibly true** proposition ϕ, X is able to do something which ensures that ϕ is true.

Restrictions on Ability: Action Revisited

› We now see another reason for our form of definition, rather than that in terms of actions.

› For here are some **possible actions**, things I am able to do: *walking down North Terrace, being gratuitously cruel, forgetting to turn the oven off.*

› If an omnipotent being can perform these actions, then they are able to be physically embodied and located, to be less than perfectly good, and to be less than perfectly knowledgeable.

› But God is essentially non-spatiotemporal, good, and wise. So God would be **unable** to perform these possible actions, and hence God would fail to be omnipotent.

› Use our style of definition, however, and there is no problem. The proposition *the greatest conceivable being is gratuitously cruel* is necessarily false (supposedly), and so there is no requirement that God be able to act so as to make it true by (O2).

A Challenge From Free Will?

› **Free will theodicies** – you'll recall – say that God permits evil because God cannot prevent the evil acts of free agents.
  » So while it is possible that a free agent chooses a good outcome, God can't ensure that they do. If God is omnipotent, is this a problem for (O2)?

› **Distinguish** (Lewis 1981b: 115):
  1. A person who is actually the free author of their own actions could have chosen a good outcome due to God's intervention;
  2. A person could have chosen a good outcome due to God's intervention while **remaining** the free author of their own actions.

› The first proposition is **possible**, and an omnipotent being can make it true – God is able to do something such that, if he did it, a free agent would have been controlled by him.

› The second proposition is **impossible** (given libertarian freedom), so there is no requirement that an omnipotent agent be able to make it true – no requirement that God is able to control an agent who remains free throughout.

The Paradox of the Stone

The Paradox Formalised (After Savage (1967: 76))

(S1) Let x be arbitrary. Either x can make it true that there is a stone which x that cannot lift, or not.

(S2) If x can make it true that there is a stone which x cannot lift, then there is a possible proposition which x cannot make true (namely, that x lift the stone in question).

(S3) If x cannot make it true that there is a stone which x cannot lift, then there is a possible proposition which x cannot make true (namely, that x create a stone meeting that description).

(S4) Hence, there is a possible proposition which x cannot make true. (S1, S2, S3, constructive dilemma)

(S5) If x is an omnipotent being, then x can make true any possibly true proposition. (Definition O2)

(S6) x is not omnipotent. (S4, S5, *modus tollens*)

(SC) But x was arbitrary; so no being is omnipotent. (S1–S6, universal introduction)

Responding to the Paradox

› Following our definition of omnipotence, the argument talks of **possibly true propositions**. But are the propositions in question really possible?

> when Jane is an essentially omnipotent agent … the state of affairs of Jane's being non-omnipotent is impossible. Therefore, Jane cannot bring it about that she is not omnipotent. Since, necessarily, an omnipotent agent can move any stone, no matter how massive, [the proposition that there is a stone which Jane cannot move] is impossible. But, as we have seen, an omnipotent agent is not required to be able to bring about an impossible state of affairs. (Hoffman and Rosenkrantz 2017: §2)

› If this is right, (S3) is false: the proposition that an essentially omnipotent being x makes it true that there is a stone that x cannot lift is **impossible**. Making that true would ensure the being loses their omnipotence – which it cannot, because it is essential.

Reformulating (S3)

› If an omnipotent agent x can't make it true that there is a stone x cannot lift, then it is not possibly true that (there is a stone and x can't lift it).

› Substituting, using the logical equivalence of $\exists y(Sy \land \neg Lxy)$ and $\neg\forall x(Sy \to Lxy)$, yields:

  (1) It is not possibly true that it is not the case that: x can lift every stone.

› Since 'not possibly not' is equivalent to 'necessarily', we can substitute:

  (2) It is necessarily the case that x can lift every stone.

› That allows us to reformulate (S3) in a way that reveals its falsity quite clearly.

  (S3*) If necessarily x can lift every stone, then there is at least one *possible* proposition which x cannot make true: that there is a stone s such that x is not able to lift s while x is necessarily able to lift every stone including s.

That proposition is clearly not possible!

Restrictions on Omnipotence and Affecting the Past

Outside of Time

› On many conceptions, God is **outside of time**.

› So long as we allow that God's **creation of the world** is among God's action, then God can decide to actualise any possible world and hence render true any possible proposition – this is compatible with (O2) being the correct account of omnipotence.

 » This is the only way for God to actualise **atemporal** propositions (such as those about what the universe is **always** like), which he cannot actualise at any point in time.

 » But since every proposition has an atemporal equivalent, there is no restriction if we suppose that what God does is simply actualise a whole world-description.

› **However**, some have thought that God's merely actualising a world is not **interventionist** enough – and these authors have sought an account of divine power which is compatible with temporally localised actions.

› They seek an account of omnipotence compatible with a God who is **temporally embedded**, and whose actions bring about states of affairs by effective procedures.

 » This is also connected to debates over divine foreknowledge which we will encounter in the next lecture.

Restrictions on Possibility: Affecting the Past?

› (O2) is not such an account.

> it is not possible for an efficient cause to occur later than its effect. However, an agent's bringing about a state of affairs is a kind of efficient causation. Therefore, it is not possible for an agent to bring about anything that is in the past. In other words, it is impossible for any agent to have power over what is past. Hence, no agent, not even an omnipotent one, can bring it about that ['a raindrop fell'] obtains. (Hoffman and Rosenkrantz 2017: §2)

› But the proposition that *a raindrop (already) fell* is clearly possibly true.

› So if this is right, we need to further restrict our definition (O2) – because we would have a need to ensure that omnipotent beings are not required to be able to affect the past, and so some possible propositions must be outside the scope of God's control.

Some other definitions

› A number of **alternative** definitions of omnipotence have been proposed (Hoffman and Rosenkrantz 2017: §§3–4).

› All are aimed at maintaining the view that an omnipotent being could **intervene causally** at specific moments, while avoiding the possibility that omnipotent beings exercise power over the past.

› These definitions are diverse, but unified in being highly **complex** and **unnatural**.
  » It has been compellingly argued too that they fail to even avoid the consequences they are supposedly constructed to avoid (Oppy 2007).

› It might be easier, then, to try and **resist** the idea that agents can't bring about the past – a resistance I will now try to motivate.

Time Travel

› In cases of **backwards time travel**, it seems like an efficient cause can occur later than its effect – as long as it is earlier in the 'personal time' of the time traveller (Lewis 1976).
› An omnipotent being in a world where backwards time travel was possible could construct a pertinent time travel scenario and thus **influence** the past.
› It is true that no one can **change** the past – if that means make it some way other than the way it actually is.
  » But of course, no one can change the future in that sense either!

'Bringing About'

› What about the idea that to bring something about is to **efficiently cause** it?
› It is not obvious to me that an omnipotent being has to be restricted by the **causal laws** of the world it inhabits; that would appear to prevent an omnipotent being from having control over those contingent laws.
› So I'd rather say: X is **able to bring it about** that ϕ iff there exists an action A such that X can perform A, and if A had been performed, ϕ would have been true.
  » So here the action is one that would be sufficient, in nearby possibilities in which it occurs, for the truth of the proposition – but we are agnostic about mechanism.
  » Maybe that the agent exploits **backtracking**.

Backtracking

› A **foretracking** counterfactual claim *if it had been that A, it would have been that C* is one where we hold fixed the past of *A* to the greatest extent we can, making the latest changes consistent with *A*'s being true, and then evaluate whether *C* in the scenario we have now described.

  » Normal interpretation of *if I were to drop this mug, it would smash on the floor*.

› A **backtracking** counterfactual *if it has been that A, it **would have to have been** that C* is one in which we figure out what kinds of (large or small) changes to pre-*A* history would have most plausibly led to *A*'s being true, and then evaluate whether *C* in the scenario we have now described (Bennett 1974: 391–93; Lewis 1979: 456–58).

  » 'I wouldn't drop a mug that was going to smash – I'm not a vandal. So if I were to drop this mug, there would be a soft cushion under it, and it would not smash'.

› My idea is that omnipotent agents link their actions to propositions using backtracking counterfactuals.

Backtracking and Omnipotence

› If this is right, we get this third definition: a definition which tries to emulate the scope of (O2), but for a God who is embedded in time rather than outside it.

> (O3) Necessarily, X is omnipotent iff for any possibly true proposition ϕ, there is an action A such that (i) X can perform A and (ii) had X performed A, ϕ would have to have been true.

› This is not subject to constraints imposed by time or causation, constraints which (intuitively) should not be constraints on an omnipotent agent, though they might well be constraints on **us**.

» This is hostage to constraints on **counterfactual evaluation** (Lewis 1981b). Must we always hold the past fixed? If so, a problem for an omnipotent agent's ability to make propositions about the past true (though the question of when God acts may be answered differently from how we answer that question for other agents).

› The question remains: why opt for (O3) rather than (O2)? Reasons for thinking God is within time are not, to my mind, compelling; so I'll deal with the simpler (O2) from now on.

The Number of Omnipotent Agents

How Many Omnipotent Agents?

> If a plurality of coexistent omnipotent agents were even possible, then possibly, at a time, t, some omnipotent agent, x, while retaining its omnipotence, endeavors to move a feather, and at t, another omnipotent agent, y, while retaining its omnipotence, endeavors to keep that feather motionless. Intuitively, in this case, neither x nor y would affect the feather as to its motion or rest. Thus, in this case, at t, x would be powerless to move the feather, and at t, y would be powerless to keep the feather motionless! But it is absurd to suppose that an omnipotent agent could lack the power to move a feather or the power to keep it motionless. Therefore, neither x nor y is omnipotent. This line of reasoning appears to reduce the notion of a plurality of coexistent omnipotent agents to absurdity. If such a *reductio ad absurdum* is sound, then a plurality of coexistent omnipotent agents is impossible. (Hoffman and Rosenkrantz 2017: §1)

A Flow?

› Given analysis (O3), it seems like x has the power to move the feather, and y has the power to keep it still.
› But is it obvious that they are able to do what is envisaged in the vignette, namely, exercise their powers **simultaneously**?
› Hold fixed x's performance of an action such that it was true that *were that action to be performed, the feather would have to have moved*.
› If (O3) is correct, then y's omnipotence entails that y has an action at their disposal such that were it performed, it would have to have been true that *the feather moves due to x's action and the feather remains at rest*.
› But this proposition is **impossible**, so not the kind of thing an omnipotent agent should have to be able to do.

Constraints on mutual freedom

› We can conclude: if y is omnipotent, they have an action such that, were it performed, the feather remains still (and hence that x is not moving it).

› **If y had tried to perform this action, it would have to have been that x wasn't simultaneously trying to perform its action.**

› There needn't be any explanation of this – compare solutions to the **grandfather paradox** (Lewis 1976).

  » It is not possible for Tim to kill his own grandfather, since then Tim would make it true that (Tim never existed and Tim kills his grandfather).

  » But what happens to exclude it? Nothing **particular**: he slips, the gun misfires, etc.

The Dominance Dilemma

Dominating Beings

› Let us say that one being X is **dominated by** another Y just in case 'that other being [Y] will be able to do all that the described being [X] can do, and more besides' (Oppy 2007: 81)

› With this notion, we may find this **domination principle** plausible:

> (D) 'being dominated is sufficient to rule out being omnipotent'. (Oppy 2007: 81)

› God, on the standard conception, dominates us – that is enough to exclude us from the ranks of omnipotent beings, without having to tally up what we in fact can and cannot do.

The Argument From Dominance (Oppy 2007: §IV)

(D1) If our God is essentially good, then he is dominated by a possible deity who is 'otherwise identical to ours at all times except for the fact that the being in question is not essentially perfectly good (but is rather essentially morally indifferent)' (Oppy 2007: 81).

(D2) If our God is omnipotent, he is only contingently good. (logic D, D1)

(D3) If God is only contingently good, then

> we have adopted a religiously unappealing conception of the creator of the world. … In view of the horrendous evils of this world, why should we suppose that the creator is perfectly good if we have already acknowledged that, at best, the creator is merely contingently perfectly good? (Oppy 2007: 82)

(D4) If God is omnipotent, he is not the God of scripture. (D2, D3)

(D5) The God of scripture is almighty.

(DC) So either there is no God of scripture, or 'almighty' isn't omnipotence. (D4, D5)

Restrictions on the Divine Will?

› One response to this argument from dominance revisits our definition on omnipotence in terms of options.

› An omnipotent agent can bring about any possible state of affairs **at will**. But then what an omnipotent agent would will seems to be relevant to their options. This gives us a further narrowing of (O2):

> (O4) Necessarily, X is omnipotent iff for any possibly true proposition ϕ **that X would will**, X is able to do something which ensures that ϕ is true.

› Noting God's essential goodness, we might think **God would never will evil**. So an evil state of affairs that God cannot bring about turns out not to be an obstacle to God's omnipotence, so long as God would not will that state of affairs into being.

› Adopting (O4) leads us to reject the domination principle (D): God is dominated by the morally indifferent agent, but remains omnipotent by (O4), because God is able to enact at will anything he would will.

>> So we block the step from (D1) to (D2) in the argument, which relies on (D).

Weakness of Will

› However (O4) seems to face a difficulty.
› Consider Ms McEar. It is in **her nature to will** only one thing: to scratch her ear.
  » She is a cousin of McEar, a man essentially capable of only one thing: scratching his ear (La Croix 1977: 183).
› Since Ms McEar by nature wills only to scratch her ear, then *that her ear be scratched* is the only state of affairs she would will.
› Thus, (O4) predicts – wrongly! – that if Ms McEar can scratch her ear, then she is omnipotent.
› So much the worse for (O4); but in that case, the Argument from Dominance remains a threat to the Perfect Being Theist.

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