

Puzzles for Divine Omnipotence

1. Defining Omnipotence: A First Pass: God is said to be omnipotent. In other words, God is “all-powerful.” But, what does this mean? Is the following definition correct?

Omnipotence (a): The power to do absolutely anything.

Square Circles: Can God make something that is both a square and a circle? If God can do ANYTHING, then it seems like the answer should be “Yes.” Yet, square circles seem to be impossible. How could something be both a square and a circle? It seems like EVEN GOD could not make something have both of those features at one and the same time.

We might amend our definition of omnipotence as follows: “All-powerful” does not mean “The power to do anything” but rather the following:

Omnipotence (b): The power to do anything that does entail a contradiction.

Since a square circle is a self-contradictory concept (something cannot be both a circle, and NOT a circle at one and the same time, or have 4 sides and NOT have 4 sides, etc.), God can still be omnipotent in this sense without being able to make a square circle. The same would go for the following: God cannot make a married bachelor, or make the number 2 be the number 3, or make himself be both God and not God, etc.

The Paradox of the Stone: But, what of this question: Can God make a stone so heavy that he can't lift it? There does not seem to be a contradiction entailed by “a stone so heavy it cannot be lifted.” So, God should be able to make such a stone, right? But notice: Either way we answer (yes or no), it implies that God is not omnipotent.

(1) If yes: If God CAN create such a stone, then there will be something he cannot do; namely, lift the stone after he creates it. Thus God is not omnipotent.

(2) If no: If God CANNOT create such a stone, then there will be something that God cannot do; namely, create such a stone. Thus God is not omnipotent.

Is the idea of omnipotence simply incoherent, then?

Solution: Perhaps such a stone DOES involve a contradiction. For, what we are really asking is, “Can God create an object that is too heavy to lift for a being who has the power to lift anything?” Of course, the existence of an object that is too heavy to lift for the one who can lift anything is an incoherent concept. It is self-contradictory. So, perhaps, God cannot create such a stone—but, given the definition of omnipotence

above, this does not imply that God is not omnipotent. God can still do whatever is NOT self-contradictory.

Reply: But, doesn't it seem like there is a certain sort of stone that God is incapable of creating? God's power seems limited in some way still.

Rebuttal: What particular stone is it that God cannot create? It seems that God can create ANY stone imaginable. There is no sort of stone that God cannot create. Simply tacking on "Sure there is! The sort that he cannot lift!" does not defeat God's omnipotence. For, there is no conceivable stone that we could imagine that would fit this description. Such a stone is incoherent.

Another route (Frankfurt): We could also go another route. We could simply insist that God CAN do anything. Perhaps God CAN make square circles. Perhaps he CAN make a stone so heavy that he cannot lift it. But, if we are giving up contradiction or consistency as a criterion for God's omnipotence, then God can also LIFT the stone that is too heavy for him to lift. The objector cannot have it both ways. They cannot DENY consistency by insisting that God can create a stone too heavy to lift (a self-contradictory concept) and at the same time ACCEPT consistency by insisting that God could not then lift this unliftable rock. This seems to be Frankfurt's response to this issue.

2. Re-Defining Omnipotence: A Second Pass: The above definition of omnipotence seems to solve the paradox of the stone issue. But, it seems to do so only by smuggling in a new definition of omnipotence. Something like:

Omnipotence (c): The power to do anything that does not entail a contradiction, where the contradiction is implied by the action itself, or else the action is inconsistent with the nature of the actor.

This definition would solve a great number of other problems. For instance, it would also explain why God cannot do things like FORGET A FACT (an omniscient being not knowing something is a contradiction), or CEASE TO EXIST (a necessarily existent being not existing is a contradiction), or PERFORM AN EVIL DEED (a morally perfect being committing a morally wrong action is a contradiction). God can lack these abilities while retaining his omnipotence, given the definition above (where omnipotence is restricted to actions that are compatible with God's nature).

However, consider the following problematic case, first given by Alvin Plantinga:

- **Mr. McEar:** Mr. McEar is a man who has the essential property of only having the power to scratch his ear. He is incapable of doing anything else.

Mr. McEar does not seem to be omnipotent. But, he WOULD be omnipotent on the above definition. For instance, Mr. McEar is incapable of standing up; however, "A being who has the essential property of only scratching his ear doing something besides scratching his ear (standing up in this case)" entails a contradiction. Therefore, it is no detriment to Mr. McEar's omnipotence that he cannot stand up.

In fact, even though Mr. McEar cannot do ANYTHING besides scratch his ear, this does not detract from his omnipotence on this definition. Because NONE of those (non-ear-scratching) actions are compatible with his nature (i.e., essential properties).

[Note that it is the fact that McEar has this property—of only being able to scratch his ear—ESSENTIALLY that is doing the work. You and I would not be omnipotent on this definition. I cannot jump over a building, but presumably my lack of this ability is not a part of my NATURE; i.e., it is not ESSENTIAL to me. Things that are essential to me are probably more like being human, being male, being the product of such and such particular sperm and egg, and so on. So, I suppose one worry might be that McEar's essential properties are really strange—how can something even HAVE such a weird essential property?]

What are we to do? It seems that perhaps the best definition of "all-powerful"—at least, for God—is the following:

Omnipotence (d): Having the maximum amount of power that a perfect being (i.e., one possessing all of the great-making properties essentially) could have.

Note that this is different than "having the maximum amount of power that ANY being could have." There might be other sorts of beings that could do MORE things than God; for instance, forget things, or commit evils. But, such beings would lack omniscience, or moral perfection, etc. But, it seems like what we want GOD to have is the maximum amount of power that a PERFECT BEING could have. As such, since power is only ONE of God's many perfections, some of God's other perfections will limit God in some ways. For instance, his moral perfection limits the choices he could make (he could not rape someone, for instance). This MAY not be the true definition of "all-powerful," but it seems to be the one that we should be operating with when we say that God is maximally powerful.