

# The paradox of the stone

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Toward the end of Mackie's discussion of the problem of evil, he gives a further argument against the existence of a God with the traditional attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence:

This leads us to what I call the Paradox of Omnipotence: can an omnipotent being make things which he cannot subsequently control? Or, what is practically equivalent to this, can an omnipotent being make rules which then bind himself? (These are practically equivalent because any such rules could be regarded as setting certain things beyond his control, and *vice versa*.) The second of these formulations is relevant to the suggestions that we have already met, that an omnipotent God creates the rules of logic or causal laws, and is then bound by them.

It is clear that this is a paradox: the questions cannot be answered satisfactorily either in the affirmative or in the negative. If we answer "Yes", it follows that if God actually makes things which he cannot control, or makes rules which bind himself, he is not omnipotent once he has made them: there are *then* things which he cannot do. But if we answer "No", we are immediately asserting that there are things which he cannot do, that is to say that he is already not omnipotent.

It cannot be replied that the question which sets this paradox is not a proper question. It would make perfectly good sense to say that a human mechanic has made a machine which he cannot control: if there is any difficulty about the question it lies in the notion of omnipotence itself.

We can state the paradox he has in mind using the traditional example of a stone so large that God cannot lift it. First, what is omnipotence? A first thought is that omnipotence is the ability to do anything: it is the ability to bring about any state of affairs.

Then consider the following two states of affairs:

- (1) There is a stone with a size — call it  $X$  — that God cannot move it.
- (2) A stone of size  $X$  moves.

Can God bring about state of affairs (1)? If not, then there is a state of affairs that God cannot bring about.

So let's assume that God can bring about state of affairs (1). Then there is still a state of affairs God cannot bring about, namely (2), and God is still not omnipotent.

How should the defender of divine omnipotence respond? Here is what Aquinas says about the problem:

It remains therefore, that God is called omnipotent because he can do all things that are possible absolutely; which is the second way of saying a thing is possible. For a thing is said to be possible or impossible absolutely, according to the relation in which the very terms stand to one another, possible if the predicate is not incompatible with the subject, as that Socrates sits; and absolutely impossible when the predicate is altogether incompatible with the subject, as, for instance, that a man is a donkey.

What is Aquinas saying here about the relationship between possibility and the power of God? Does it make sense to say that God is bound by the laws of logic, or of possibility? Does this imply a limitation on the omnipotence of God?

If we say that God is *not* limited by the laws of possibility, this undercuts Aquinas' solution to the problem. In that case, what can we say about the paradox? Does it strengthen or weaken the argument against God's omnipotence?

Are there possible states of affairs which God cannot bring about? How about the following examples:

- That the Reds won the World Series last year.
- That I freely choose to let you out of class early.
- That God performs some morally evil acts.