

Omnipotence & prayer

Today, we'll be discussing two theological paradoxes: paradoxes arising from the idea of an omnipotent being, and paradoxes arising from the religious practice of prayer.

So far, in our discussion of theological paradoxes, we have been focusing on apparent contradictions between the existence of God, as traditionally conceived, and various apparent features of the world: the existence of evil, and of human free will. But attempts have also been made to show that there are contradictions inherent in the very idea of God. The first paradox we'll discuss today attempts to show that there is a contradiction in the very idea of an **omnipotent** being.

We begin with the logical problem posed by omnipotence, which we've already come across in Mackie's discussion of the problem of evil. Here is how Mackie (in our reading on the problem of evil) presents the problem:

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.

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A traditional formulation of this problem is the **paradox of the stone**, which focuses on the question: **Could God create a stone so large that God cannot lift it?**

As Mackie says, it seems that if God is genuinely omnipotent, we cannot answer either “Yes” or “No” to this question.

Could God create a stone so large that God cannot lift it?

Yes

No

Then there is something that God cannot do, namely lift the stone.

Then there could be something that God cannot do, namely create such a stone.

We can also present this in premise/conclusion form, as a derivation of a contradiction from the assumption that God is essentially omnipotent.

| | | |
|---|---|-----------------------------|
| 1 | God is essentially omnipotent. | assumed for <i>reductio</i> |
| 2 | Necessarily, God can bring about any state of affairs. | 1 |
| 3 | God can create a stone so large that God cannot lift it. | 2 |
| 4 | Possibly, there is a stone which is such that God cannot lift it. | 3 |
| 5 | Possibly, God can do anything and there is a stone which God cannot lift. | 2, 4 |

Though Aquinas does not explicitly respond to this paradox, his remarks on omnipotence do provide the resources for a solution.

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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.

Aquinas is suggesting that we understand omnipotence to be defined in terms of possibility. To be omnipotent is not to be able to do anything; even an omnipotent being could not make a round square, or make a man a donkey.

But if this is the right view of omnipotence, then it seems as though our attempted *reductio* fails, because a premise in that argument is false: premise 2.

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One might try to repair the argument by replacing premise 2 with the following:

2*. Necessarily, God can bring about any **possible** state of affairs.

Would the resulting argument be sound?

Could God create a stone so large that God cannot lift it?

Yes

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However, one might also object to Aquinas' "restricted" view of omnipotence. Descartes is an example of someone who thought that, for God to be genuinely omnipotent, God had to be able to do **absolutely** anything, as the following excerpts from his correspondence suggest:

"The truths of mathematics ...were established by God and entirely depend on Him, as much as do all the rest of His creatures. Actually, it would be to speak of God as a Jupiter or Saturn and to subject Him to the Styx and to the Fates, to say that these truths are independent of Him ...You will be told that if God established these truths He would be able to change them, as a king does his laws; to which it is necessary to reply that this is correct. ...In general we can be quite certain that God can do whatever we are able to understand, but not that He cannot do what we are unable to understand. For it would be presumptuous to think that our imagination extends as far as His power. ...

As for the difficulty in conceiving how it was a matter of freedom and indifference to God to make it true that the three angles of a triangle should equal two right angles, or generally that contradictions should not be able to be together, one can easily remove it by considering that the power of God can have no limits. ... God cannot have been determined to make it true that contradictions cannot be together, and consequently He could have done the contrary

If this sort of "unrestricted" view of omnipotence is correct, then it seems that premise 2 of our *reductio* argument is true; which means that we are left without a response to the paradox of the stone.

How should a defender of Descartes' view of omnipotence reply to the paradox?

If God can make a round square, can God make a stone too large for him to lift, and also lift it?

Could God create a stone so large that God cannot lift it?

Yes

Then there is something that God cannot do, namely lift the stone.

No

Then there could be something that God cannot do, namely create such a stone.

It thus seems that, whichever view of omnipotence we adopt, the paradox of the stone poses no serious problems.

If God's power extends only to possible states of affairs, then the right answer to the above question is: **No, God could not create such a stone; but, since it is impossible that there be such a stone, this is no objection to God's omnipotence.**

If God can bring about any state of affairs, whether possible or impossible, then the right answer to the question is: **Yes, God could create such a stone; but he could also lift it, so again we have no objection to God's omnipotence.**

But the fact that the paradox of the stone dissolves under closer inspection does not show that the idea of omnipotence is unproblematic; after all, we still don't know exactly what it means to say that God is omnipotent.

Descartes' text suggests the following definition: **omnipotence is the ability to bring about anything, whether possible or impossible.**

But this seems to lead to absurd conclusions. For if his view is correct, then God could have made a round square; but, in general, if God could have brought about some state of affairs, then that state of affairs could have obtained; and if a state of affairs could have obtained, it is possible; from which it follows that it is possible that there be a round square. More generally, Descartes' view seems to lead to the conclusion that there is no distinction between the impossible and the possible.

One graphic way of bringing out the worry is by considering the impossible state of affairs that God never existed. Could it really be the case that God can bring it about that it was never the case that God existed?

So we might turn to Aquinas, whose text suggests the following definition: **omnipotence is the ability to bring about any possible state of affairs.**

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But we've already encountered some problems with this in connection with the free will defense. As Mackie pointed out, it is possible that every free agent always choose the morally best action; but it does not seem (at least if the free will defense is any good) to follow from this that God can make it that the case that they do so freely choose. So it seems that if Aquinas is right about what omnipotence involves, then even God is not omnipotent.

One might then move to an even more restricted view of omnipotence, along the following lines: **a being X is omnipotent if and only if, for any state of affairs that it is possible for X to bring about, X can bring that state of affairs about.**

But one might reasonably worry that this is too weak. Consider, for example, McEar, a mysterious being who is essentially such that he is able to do only one thing: scratch his ear. Then, for any action other than scratching his ear, it is impossible for McEar to perform that action. Hence the only state of affairs which is such that it is possible that McEar brings it about is the state of affairs of McEar's being scratched. And McEar can bring this state of affairs about. Hence it follows from the above definition that McEar is omnipotent - which seems clearly false.

This is only a good counterexample if it is possible for there to be a creature such as McEar. Is this possible? What exactly would this involve?

Let's turn to our second paradox. This is one that arises from perhaps the most basic aspect of Christian religious practice: prayer.

Traditionally, Catholics distinguish four sorts of prayer: prayers of adoration, expiation, petition, and thanksgiving.

One basic sort of worry about all four kinds of prayer arises from God's omniscience. Prayer is ordinarily thought of as a kind of communication with God. But if God is omnipotent, then, whatever you tell God — presuming that it is true — God already knows. But then why bother? Doesn't saying something only make sense if it is something that your interlocutor doesn't already know to be true?

However, this sort of worry about prayer sounds worse than it is. Consider, for example, prayers of expiation. Of course, if you confess a sin to God, God already knows that you are guilty. But think, by analogy about the sorts of confessions we make to other people — a child to a parent, or an unfaithful spouse to his or her husband or wife. We can imagine cases in which the sin confessed is already known by the confessor — but that doesn't make the confession pointless.

Or consider prayers of thanksgiving. Someone might thank you for something you have done — and you might already know that you have done it, know that you should be thanked for it, and indeed also know that the person is thankful for it. All of that would not immediately make the act of giving thanks meaningless.

But there are more difficult paradoxes involving prayer, which are brought out most clearly by considering petitionary prayer. (Note that, for these purposes, we could think of prayers of expiation as special cases of petitionary prayers: they are, at least in part, petitionary prayers, where what is being requested of God is God's forgiveness.)

So let's consider a particular petitionary prayer. Suppose that, this morning, I prayed that God give me the strength to give an energetic and interesting lecture today. Let's call this particular prayer, PRAYER.

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PRAYER seems to give rise to the following paradox:

1. If it makes sense to say PRAYER, then it must be true that: (1) God would do X for me if I prayed for X, but (2) God would not have done X if for me if no one prayed for X.
 2. If it would be good for me for God to do X (and not bad for anyone else), then God knows this. (Omnipotence)
 3. If it would be good for me for God to do X (and not bad for anyone else), and God knows this, then God will do X if God can. (Omnibenevolence)
 4. If it would be good for me for God to do X (and not bad for anyone else), and God knows this, then, if it is possible for God to do X (and if this would do no harm to anyone else), God will. (Omnipotence)
 5. If it would be good for me for God to do X (and not bad for anyone else), and it is possible for God to do X, then God will do X. (2,3,4)
 6. If it would be good for me for God to do X (and not bad for anyone else), then this is true whether I pray for it or not.
 7. If it would be good for me for God to do X (and not bad for anyone else), then God will do X whether I pray for it or not. (5,6)
- C. It does not make sense to say PRAYER. (1,7)

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A different response is to focus on (1). Perhaps petitionary prayers do make sense, but not because they ever have an effect on what God will do. Maybe this is because, for example, praying, by itself, causes good effects in us.

However, one might worry that this would be a rather unsatisfying response to the paradox: it would make sense of petitionary prayer only at the cost of making petitionary prayer something other than what it seems to be. To put the same point another way, it would explain why petitionary prayer was good — but would do so in a way which had nothing in particular to do with the **petitionary** part of petitionary prayer.

It would also make petitionary prayer an oddly self-defeating practice. It seems that, on this view, coming to learn the truth about petitionary prayer will also make it psychologically impossible to offer petitionary prayers. Could you really ask God for something if you were certain that your asking for it would make no difference?

6. If it would be good for me for God to do X (and not bad for anyone else), then this is true whether I pray for it or not.

Let's turn our attention away from (1), to (6).

Perhaps this is the premise to reject. Couldn't, it be the case, after all, that certain things are good for me if I pray for them, but are **not** good for me if I don't pray for them? Let's call such things **prayer-dependent goods**. If there are prayer-dependent goods, then it seems that (6) is false, and we can at least make sense of petitionary prayers which request these goods.

This is basically the approach that Murray takes in the reading for today. He argues for the claim that many things are prayer-dependent goods, by using an analogy with parents and children:

The point of this section, however, is that making provision of certain goods truly dependent on petitioning is what allows many, and maybe all, to “recognize God as the source of all goods we enjoy” in the first place. My son, who likes to play with action figures, provides an helpful example. If I were simply to shower him with new figures regularly and indiscriminately, I can imagine him becoming spoiled and presumptuous. Thus, I often do not give him any new figures until he asks for them. And even then I might sometimes refuse for other reasons. Still, by making his having the figures dependent on his asking for them, and further by making the granting of the request something less than automatic, he not only has a genuine appreciation for the opportunity to play with them, he has a genuine appreciation for the fact that *I provided it for him*. While it could happen that he would have such an appreciation even if he were to receive the toy without asking, it is common for such appreciation to wear thin and become downright hollow unless the economy of provision is of the sort I have described.

However, this line of argument seems to be undermined by the disanalogies between God and parents, which surface in the last few sentences of the above passage. If it is possible for God to make us appreciate that God is the source of all goods we enjoy, as it presumably is, then God could bring this about without our prayer. And presumably the good in question, and the appreciation, would be good whether or not prayed for. So it is hard to see how this undermines (6).

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There's a general moral of this problem for Murray's argument. Given God's omnipotence, a prayer-dependent good would have to be something such that it is **impossible** for God to make it a good for us without our having prayed for it. This seems to restrict the range of things which could plausibly be examples of prayer-dependent goods.

However, perhaps we can improve on Murray's response to the paradox by thinking again about the idea that the good of free will might be at least part of the explanation of the existence of evil in the world.

Consider a bad exercise of free will — suppose, for example, that I lose patience with my daughter. It's worth noting that God did not need to allow me to make choices like this in order to give me free will; God could have made all of my choices between good alternatives. (Perhaps I could have only ever been given the choice between pairs of delicious foods — this would still be a situation in which I had free will.)

A natural response to this point is that there would be something deficient about such a life; sure, there would be no evil, but free will would in such a world lack any real significance. I would be able to make choices, but the choices would be of no real importance. For humans, at least, it seems that making significant choices involves the possibility of our going wrong.

One might raise doubts here — for example, one might point out (as mentioned previously) that if God is essentially good, then God is not capable of going wrong — and one might wonder why it's so important for us to have this ability, if God lacks it. But let's set these aside, and assume for now that God's allowing me the opportunity to lose patience with my daughter is explained by the good of our having not just free will, but significant free will.

Perhaps we could understand God's choice to make provision of certain goods dependent on petitionary prayer in much the same way as we can understand God's choice to allow significant free will more generally.

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To see how this might work, begin with the idea that significant free will requires not just the possibility of going wrong, but also the possibility of knowledge of regularities in the way that the world works. In order for me to have significant free will in my dealings with my daughter, I have to know that losing patience with her would hurt her feelings; I have to know that lighting her artwork from school on fire will cause the artwork to incinerate.

Maybe we can think of God's making certain goods dependent on prayer as working in the same way. Just as significant free will requires the possibility of going wrong and the knowledge of how to go wrong — by knowledge of regularities in the way the world works — God can't provide us every good prior to being asked for it (since doing so would preclude the possibility of us going wrong in any significant way), but can sometimes provide us goods in response to being asked, by giving us the knowledge that asking for such goods is one way to receive them — just as being patient with one's children is a way to encourage them.

Perhaps this provides us with an explanation of how (6) could be false. God might give me certain things in response to prayer but not otherwise because giving me (and everyone else) every good without my asking for it would stop me from having significant free will.