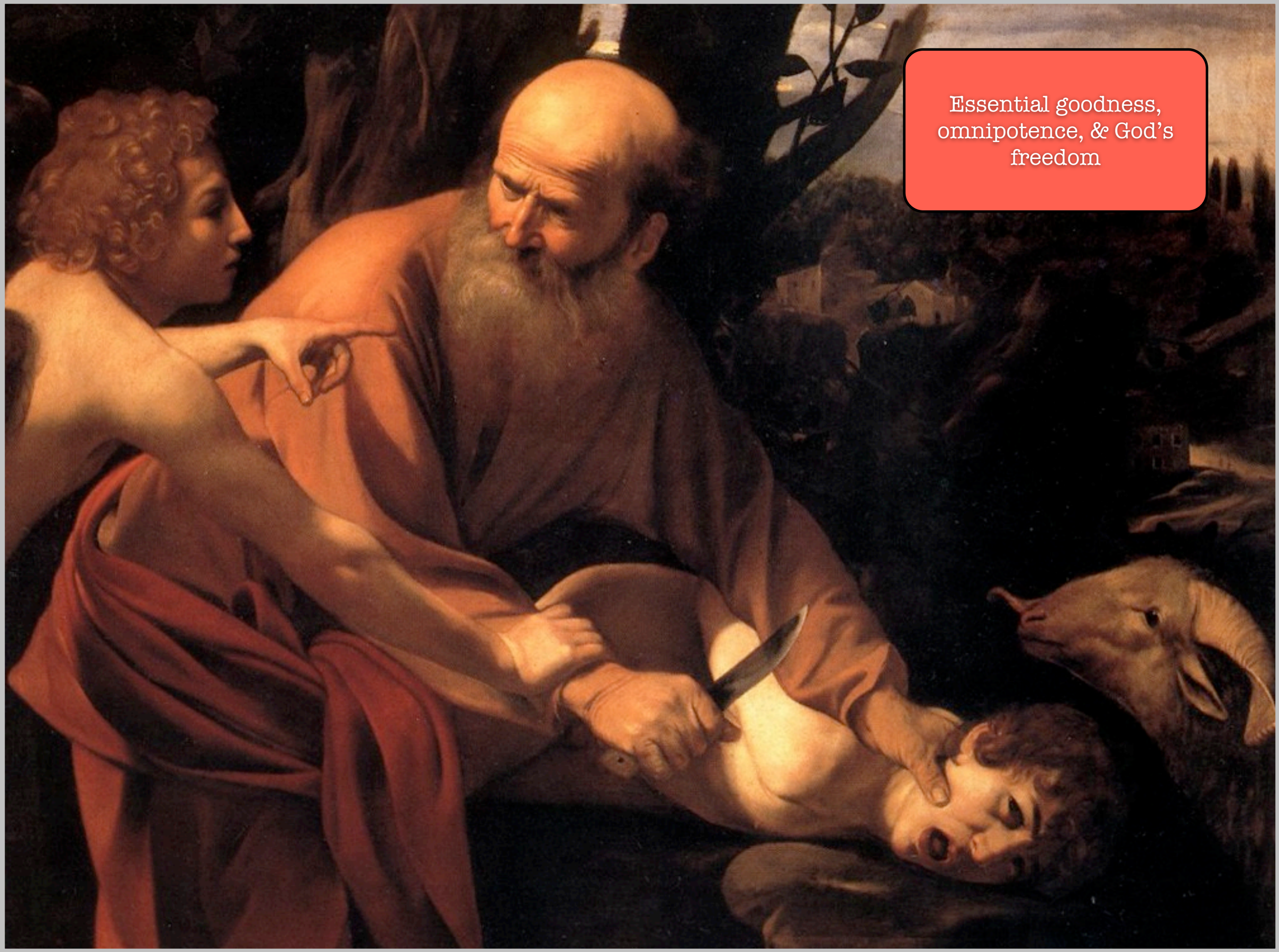

Essential goodness, omnipotence, & God's freedom

The best way into our topic today is by introducing a distinction between two different sorts of properties of a thing: it's **essential** properties, and it's **non-essential** (**accidental**) properties.

A thing's essential properties are the properties which it not only has, but also which it could not have failed to have. It's accidental properties, by contrast, are properties which it has, but could have lacked.

This is closely related to the distinction between necessary and contingent truths, where a necessary truth is a truth that could not have been otherwise, whereas a contingent truth describes a way that the world is, but could have failed to be.

For our purposes, we can define the essential/accidental distinction like this:

x is essentially F if and only if necessarily, x is F

x is accidentally F if and only if (i) x is F and (ii) possibly, x is not F.

We know from our discussion of the divine attributes that God is supposed to be perfectly good. But now let's ask the question: is this an essential, or merely accidental, property of God?

The standard view is that God is not just perfectly good, but essentially perfectly good: God could not have failed to be perfectly good.

This is the position that Aquinas defends in one of the readings for today:

> ... the will never aims at evil without some error existing in the reason, at least with respect to a particular object of choice. For, since the object of the will is the apprehended good, the will cannot aim at evil unless in some way it is proposed to it as a good; and this cannot take place without error. But in the divine knowledge there cannot be error, as was shown above. God's will cannot, therefore, tend towards evil.

x is essentially F if and only if necessarily, x is F

x is accidentally F if and only if (i) x is F and (ii) possibly, x is not F.

The standard view is that God is not just perfectly good, but essentially perfectly good: God could not have failed to be perfectly good.

This is the position that Aquinas defends in one of the readings for today:

> ... the will never aims at evil without some error existing in the reason, at least with respect to a particular object of choice. For, since the object of the will is the apprehended good, the will cannot aim at evil unless in some way it is proposed to it as a good; and this cannot take place without error. But in the divine knowledge there cannot be error, as was shown above. God's will cannot, therefore, tend towards evil.

Aquinas here seems to be arguing from two main assumptions.

The first is that God is not just free from error — i.e., false belief — but also necessarily free from error.

The second is that, necessarily, no one wills evil except on the basis of some sort of error — i.e., some sort of false belief.

Put these together, and what you get is that God is not just free from error, but also necessarily free from error — which is pretty close to the conclusion that God is essentially perfectly good.

x is essentially F if and only if necessarily, x is F

x is accidentally F if and only if (i) x is F and (ii) possibly, x is not F.

The first is that God is not just free from error — i.e., false belief — but also necessarily free from error.

The second is that, necessarily, no one wills evil except on the basis of some sort of error — i.e., some sort of false belief.

Put these together, and what you get is that God is not just free from error, but also necessarily free from error — which is pretty close to the conclusion that God is essentially perfectly good.

Is this argument convincing?

One might reasonably question either premise; but let's focus on the second.

Is it really true that all cases of someone willing the evil rest upon some sort of intellectual mistake?

There is a long tradition of thinking so, for roughly the following reasons: willing evil must be a case of intentional action; but in every intentional action, the agent takes what he is doing to be good; hence an agent can will evil only if he makes a mistake about what is good.

In response, some have thought that it is possible for agents to intentionally do things which they don't think are at all good. These are often called cases of 'weakness of the will.' Can you think of any examples of actions of this sort?

If actions of this sort are possible, that seems to be a problem for Aquinas' argument.

How else might we argue for the claim that, if God exists, then God must be essentially perfectly good?

x is essentially F if and only if necessarily, x is F

x is accidentally F if and only if (i) x is F and (ii) possibly, x is not F.

How else might we argue for the claim that, if God exists, then God must be essentially perfectly good?

Here's one way you might do it. Recall Anselm's conception of God:

> God is whatever it is better to be than not to be … What are you, then, Lord God, than whom nothing greater can be conceived?

Now consider the following statement of Anselm's idea:

X is God if and only if X is the greatest possible being.

Now let's ask: is this true necessarily, or only contingently?

It seems to be a necessary truth: necessarily, nothing would be God if there was something possibly better than it.

But now, keeping this in mind, suppose that God were not essentially perfectly good. Then, possibly, God would be less than perfectly good; which means that, possibly, God would be less than the greatest possible being. Which means that, possibly, God would not be God.

This is not obviously a contradiction. For example, "Possibly, the greatest basketball player is not the greatest basketball player" has a reading on which it is true. But "Possibly, God is not God" does seem implausible; it seems like, if God exists, then God is essentially God.

And if this is right, this plus the necessity of Anselm's claim that God is the greatest possible being gets us the conclusion that God is essentially perfectly good.

Who cares? We should care because the claim that God is essentially perfectly good seems to conflict with two other theses which we have found reason to defend in our discussions over the last few classes.

**Conflict 1: essential perfect goodness vs. omnipotence**

Suppose that God is essentially perfectly good. Then it seems that God is not able to do wrong. But surely this fact conflicts with God's omnipotence.

**Conflict 2: essential perfect goodness vs. the free will defense**

Suppose that God is essentially perfectly good. Then it seems that God is not able to do wrong. And if God is not able to do wrong, then the ability to do wrong must not be a very important property. But if the ability to do wrong is not a very important property, the free will defense fails, since it depends on the claim that our having the ability to do wrong is so great that it outweighs the vast evil we find in the world.

Let's discuss these in turn.

**Conflict 1: essential perfect goodness vs. omnipotence**

Suppose that God is essentially perfectly good. Then it seems that God is not able to do wrong. But surely this fact conflicts with God's omnipotence.

Let's try to make this argument more precise by making its premises explicit.

God is essentially perfectly good.

If God is essentially perfectly good, then it is not possible for God to do wrong.

If it is not possible for X to do something, then X is not able to do that thing.

If God is not able to do wrong, then God is not omnipotent.

It is not possible for God to do wrong.

God is not able to do wrong.

God is not omnipotent.

## Conflict 1: essential perfect goodness vs. omnipotence

God is essentially perfectly good.

If God is essentially perfectly good, then it is not possible for God to do wrong.

It is not possible for God to do wrong.

If it is not possible for X to do something, then X is not able to do that thing.

God is not able to do wrong.

If God is not able to do wrong, then God is not omnipotent.

---

God is not omnipotent.

**Conflict 1: essential perfect goodness vs. omnipotence**

1. God is essentially perfectly good.

2. If God is essentially perfectly good, then it is not possible for God to do wrong.

3. It is not possible for God to do wrong. (1,2)

4. If it is not possible for X to do something, then X is not able to do that thing.

5. God is not able to do wrong. (3,4)

6. If God is not able to do wrong, then God is not omnipotent.

---

C. God is not omnipotent. (5,6)

The argument is valid, and the traditional theist can hardly accept the conclusion. Hence she must find a premise to reject.

The only independent premises are 1, 2, 4, and 6. 2 looks hard to reject, and we're assuming 1 for the time being. So let's ask whether 4 or 6 could be rejected.

4 looks hard to reject. Suppose that it is literally **impossible** for me to do some action X — no matter what, the world could not have been such that I did X. In what sense could I be able to do X?

And there is another problem with rejecting premise 4, if we find the free will defense at all plausible. Remember that the core of the free will defense is the idea that God allows evil because it is of great importance that we have free will, and the ability to do evil, **and God couldn't have made it the case that we always freely choose the good**.

But if premise 4 of our argument is false, then it is a little hard to see why this last claim should be true. If 4 is false then we can't explain the fact that God did not cause us to freely choose the good in terms of the impossibility of his doing so — this, after all, would not imply that he couldn't have.

And this would leave our central question — "Why didn't God cause us to always freely choose the good?" — without an answer.

**Conflict 1: essential perfect goodness vs. omnipotence**

1. God is essentially perfectly good.

2. If God is essentially perfectly good, then it is not possible for God to do wrong.

3. It is not possible for God to do wrong. (1,2)

4. If it is not possible for X to do something, then X is not able to do that thing.

5. God is not able to do wrong. (3,4)

6. If God is not able to do wrong, then God is not omnipotent.

C. God is not omnipotent. (5,6)

This, at least, is the standard response to arguments like the one above. But is it convincing?

So let's focus instead on premise 6. Is this true?

It depends on one's definition of omnipotence. Definitions 2, 3, and 4 have the following in common: they all imply that even an omnipotent being might be unable to bring about a situation X, if X is impossible.

But now consider what would be involved in God doing wrong. This would presumably involve God bringing about some evil for which there was no corresponding good. Let's, as above, call such evils **gratuitous evils**.

Is it possible for there to be a gratuitous evil? Not, you might think, if premise 1 is true. For no perfectly good being would ever bring about a gratuitous evil, and if God is necessarily perfectly good, there is no possible world in which God would permit a gratuitous evil. Hence the defender of the view that God is essentially perfectly good should, it seems, say that it is impossible for there to be gratuitous evils.

But then God's inability to do wrong is just an inability to bring about an impossible situation — much like God's inability to make a stone so large that God cannot lift it. And we already know that 'inabilities' of this sort are no challenge to divine omnipotence. Hence premise 6 is false.

**Conflict 1: essential perfect goodness vs. omnipotence**

1. God is essentially perfectly good.

2. If God is essentially perfectly good, then it is not possible for God to do wrong.

3. It is not possible for God to do wrong. (1,2)

4. If it is not possible for X to do something, then X is not able to do that thing.

5. God is not able to do wrong. (3,4)

6. If God is not able to do wrong, then God is not omnipotent.

---

C. God is not omnipotent. (5,6)

W. R. Carter, in one of the optional readings for today, argues that it is not:

This may sound plausible. But when we look closely I think we find that something is amiss. Let us consider a group of sentient beings, perhaps Martians, who worship a "higher" being they call 'Dennis'. Dennis exists, as most Martians believe, if and only if something occupies a certain 'role' or 'office' (the Dennis-office). The conditions for filling this role are said to be (1) omnipotence, and (2) essential incapacity to solve even the most elementary problems concerning plain geometry. (For some reason Martians believe that anyone who can do plain geometry must have serious moral failings.) Martian atheists, so to speak, argue that it is impossible for anything to occupy the Dennis-role. Any being (they argue) who satisfies requirement (2) thereby fails to satisfy condition (1). So reasoning, atheists conclude that there is no possible world in which Dennis exists. Of course Martian "believers" have a reply to this. Since Dennis is essentially incapable of doing geometry, there is no possible world in which Dennis solves geometry problems. Being omnipotent is a matter of being able to do what is possible. Since it is not possible for Dennis to do geometry, nothing licenses the conclusion that Dennis is not omnipotent. One can, Martian believers remind us, conceive of things that aren't *really possible.* And omnipotence 'ranges over only what is possible'.

This, at least, is the standard response to arguments like the one above. But is it convincing?

This is not convincing as it stands, because it ignores the difference between definitions 3 and 2/4 of omnipotence: even if it is impossible that Dennis solve a geometry problem, it is not impossible that a geometry problem be solved.

But we could change the example so that Dennis' inability doesn't correspond to an ability that we actually have and hence know to be possible, so let's ignore this complication.

## Conflict 1: essential perfect goodness vs. omnipotence

1. God is essentially perfectly good.

2. If God is essentially perfectly good, then it is not possible for God to do wrong.

3. It is not possible for God to do wrong. (1,2)

4. If it is not possible for X to do something, then X is not able to do that thing.

5. God is not able to do wrong. (3,4)

6. If God is not able to do wrong, then God is not omnipotent.

---

C. God is not omnipotent. (5,6)

It's not totally obvious what the example of Dennis shows.

We should agree with Carter that Dennis is not omnipotent. But it doesn't follow from this that there's some logical flaw in the argument which says that Dennis' inability to solve geometry problems is not the inability to bring about some possible situation.

What the example does bring out, I think, is this: we have some independent grasp on the sort of power which anything deserving of the name 'God' must have which is not delivered by the Anselmian idea that God is the greatest possible being. Even if it turned out that Dennis was the greatest possible being, we can see that Dennis would lack the power that a being must have in order to be God.

This suggests that the Anselmian conception of God only captures part of our idea of God.

In the end, is the claim that God is unable to do wrong — like Dennis' inability to solve geometry problems — inconsistent with omnipotence? We seem to lack any general principle which would tell us how to answer that question.

Let's turn now to the second conflict mentioned above.

## Conflict 2: essential perfect goodness vs. the free will defense

## Conflict 2: essential perfect goodness vs. the free will defense

How might we make this intuitive conflict explicit, in the form of an argument?

The free will defense seems to assume something like this:

It is a great good that we have the ability to do evil.

But if God is essentially perfectly good, then we have

God does not have the ability to do evil.

Are these two premises really in conflict? They are if we assume some principle like the following:

If some property is a good property to have, and we have it, then God also has it.

Indeed, we could simply use the simpler premise

God has every good property.

## Conflict 2: essential perfect goodness vs. the free will defense

1. It is a great good that we have the ability to do evil.

2. God has every good property.

3. God has the ability to do evil. (1,2)

4. God does not have the ability to do evil.

---

C. God does and does not have the ability to do evil. (3,4)

The conclusion is a contradiction, and the argument appears to be valid, so there must be a false premise. But which one?

A natural thought is that to answer this question we must distinguish between two different ways in which a property might be good. It might be good for a **particular sort of being**, or good for **any sort of being**. Let's call these, respectively, **restricted** and **unrestricted** goods.

Here's an example. It looks like the property of having wings is a good property for an eagle to have; but it would not be a good property for a goldfish to have.

Once we have this distinction in hand, it looks like it gives us the resources to answer this argument. For we can now consider two interpretations of premises 1 and 2:

1a. It is a great restricted good that we have the ability to do evil.

1b. It is a great unrestricted good that we have the ability to do evil.

2a. God has every restricted good property.

2b. God has every unrestricted good property.

## Conflict 2: essential perfect goodness vs. the free will defense

1. It is a great good that we have the ability to do evil.

2. God has every good property.

3. God has the ability to do evil. (1,2)

4. God does not have the ability to do evil.

---

C. God does and does not have the ability to do evil. (3,4)

1a. It is a great restricted good that we have the ability to do evil.

1b. It is a great unrestricted good that we have the ability to do evil.

2a. God has every restricted good property.

2b. God has every unrestricted good property.

Of these, (2a) is pretty obviously false. The fact that it is good for eagles to have wings does not imply that God has wings.

That leaves us with (2b), which does seem plausible. Now consider (1a) and (1b). Would the argument be valid if we interpreted (1) as (1a)?

No: from the fact that we have some restricted good G, and that God has all unrestricted goods, it would not follow that God has G — for G might not be an unrestricted good.

So we must interpret (1) as (1b). But then is the thesis so clearly true?

This might seem like the answer to our problems; our ability to do evil is a good for us, but would not be a good for God; and this explains why God does not have this ability.

But a puzzle remains.

## Conflict 2: essential perfect goodness vs. the free will defense

1. It is a great good that we have the ability to do evil.

2. God has every good property.

3. God has the ability to do evil. (1,2)

4. God does not have the ability to do evil.

---

C. God does and does not have the ability to do evil. (3,4)

This might seem like the answer to our problems; our ability to do evil is a good for us, but would not be a good for God; and this explains why God does not have this ability.

But a puzzle remains.

Whenever something is a good for X but not a good for Y, this is explained in terms of some difference in the properties of X and Y.

So if the ability to do evil is a good for us but not for God, this must be explained in terms of some difference between us and God.

This will be a matter of God having some property F which we lack.

But now ask: why didn't God give us that property too?

God's having done so would have obvious advantages: if we would have had the property F, then the ability to do evil would not have been a good for us, and God could have made us more like God: with free will, but unable to do evil.

So it must be that it was impossible for God to give us F. But what could F be, such that it was impossible for God to give us F, and F explains why the ability to do evil is a good for us?