

Omniscience, omnipotence, omnibenevolence, eternity

Jeff Speaks
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1. THE PARADOX OF THE STONE

But now consider the following question:

Could God create a stone so large that even God could not lift it?

If so, then there's something God cannot do: namely, lift the stone. If not, then there is something God cannot do: namely make the stone. Either way, there is something God cannot do, and God is not omnipotent.

Aquinas's solution: a limited view of omnipotence.

One way to state this view would be

Aquinas' view of omnipotence

A being is omnipotent if and only if that being can bring about anything which is possible.

A possible way to re-state the paradox of the stone: consider the following state of affairs:

There is a stone which is too large for its creator to lift it.

Is this a possible situation? Can God bring it about?

One might in response go for an even more restricted view of omnipotence:

A very restricted view of omnipotence

A being is omnipotent if and only if that being can bring about anything it is possible for that being to bring about.

Some independent reason to go this route: Mackie's objection to the free will defense.

The problem of McEar.

Suppose that we want a completely unrestricted view of omnipotence, on which God can do anything — even bring about the impossible. How should a defender of that sort of view reply to the paradox?

2. GOD AND NECESSITY

Many people feel some disinclination to limit God's omnipotence to the realm of the possible. Intuitively, the thought is that even logic, mathematics, and other necessary truths should be under God's control.

The 17th century philosopher Rene Descartes had this view:

You ask also what necessitated God to create these truths; and I reply that he was free to make it not true that all the radii of the circle are equal — just as free as he was not to create the world. And it is certain that these truths are no more necessarily attached to his essence than are other created things. You ask what God did in order to produce them. I reply that [†]from all eternity he willed and understood them to be, and by that very fact he created them[†].

A problem with Descartes' view seems to result if we assume the following principle:

Freedom/Possibility

If God was free to do X, then it is possible for God to do X.

What follows from this, together with the view expressed in the above quote?

Does this force us to give up the idea that, for example, God could have decided not to create the numbers?

3. ESSENTIAL PERFECT GOODNESS VS. OMNIPOTENCE

God is supposed to be perfectly good. But is God essentially perfectly good, or not? That is another way of asking: is it a necessary or contingent truth that God is perfectly good?

Aquinas gives an argument for this conclusion in the reading for today. How did that argument go?

An objection to Aquinas' argument: 'weakness of the will.'

A second argument for God's essential perfect goodness: the idea that God is essentially the greatest possible being.

Suppose that God is essentially perfectly good. How might that, plus the Freedom/Possibility principle, lead to an apparent conflict with God's omnipotence?

How might the defender of the very restricted view of omnipotence reply? Is this reply convincing?

A residual problem: does the fact that God lacks the freedom to do evil call into question the idea, which is central to the free will defense, that freedom to do evil is a great good? Could the ability to do evil be a good for human beings, but not a good for God? Why might this be?

4. OMNISCIENCE AND TIMELESSNESS

The following seems like a plausible definition of omniscience:

A being is omniscient if it knows every true proposition.

The central challenge to the idea that God is omniscient is one we have already discussed: the existence of freedom of the will. Today we will be discussing two other challenges to the idea that God is omniscient.

The first challenge: *de se* knowledge.

The second challenge: knowledge of propositions that change their truth-value over time.

This sort of knowledge becomes problematic if one adopts either of two traditional claims about God: (i) that God is immutable, or (ii) that God is outside of time.

This second challenge is expressed in the following passage from the 19th century philosopher Franz Brentano:

“If anything changes, then it is not the case that all truths are eternal. God knows all truths, hence also those which are such only for today. He could not apprehend these truths yesterday, since at that time they were not truths—but there were other truths instead of them. Thus he knows, for example, that I write down these thoughts, but yesterday he knew not that, but rather that I was going to write them down later. And similarly he will know tomorrow that I have written them down.”

Can one plausibly deny immutability? Would we then be committed to the idea that God is worse off and better off at different times?