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The Power Of God: Readings On Omnipotence And Evil

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Introduction

LINWOOD URBAN and DOUGLAS N. WALTON

An important component of most monotheistic religions is the belief that God is almighty or all-powerful. Certainly this conception is strongly fixed in Christianity. Occasionally Western religious philosophers or theologians have conceded that God may not be literally all-powerful, that he cannot do quite literally anything, yet even in this concession it is generally maintained that God is *very* powerful, or that the limits of his powers are beyond the human imagination and awesome in their scope.

The reasons for stress upon the extensive power of God are not difficult to discover. First, the Perfection, the Holiness, and the Majesty of God seem to demand that he transcend the world and everything which is in it. Hence he is said to be supremely wise and supremely powerful. Second, only such a being seems to be a fitting object of worship. If God has maximal power, then man's sense of awe and wonder is magnified. Stupendous power makes credible man's fear of the Lord.

Third, only a God who has supreme power is a fitting object of trust and can assure salvation. The best guarantee that God will be able to keep his promises and answer prayers is that no being is stronger than he. For while maximal power breeds fear of God, it also brings assurance that he can do what he wills to do.

So essential an attribute ought to have been thoroughly examined in philosophical theology, but this has not been the case. Traditionally, more attention has been paid to the divine attribute of omniscience in-

sofar as it has been distinguished from omnipotence. The literature in philosophical theology specifically on omniscience is more voluminous, the lines of controversy more clearly drawn. Perhaps the notion of infinite power has seemed too obscure, too shrouded in mystery and ineffability for us to analyze our feelings of awe and bring them into the domain of pure concepts. Yet recently, skeptics have challenged theologians with arguments that center on omnipotence, pressing theologians to clarify the meaning of this enigmatic property. One such argument is the argument from evil.

1. Evil

The argument from evil claims that classical Western theism, based on a deity infinitely wise, powerful, and just, is hopelessly involved in logical contradiction. How is it possible to reconcile the death by cancer of a small child with the existence of a just and benevolent deity sufficiently powerful to have circumvented this tragedy? In the face of this challenge, several options are open to the theist. He may deny that there is evil. However, the endless catalogue of suffering, deprivation, and distress of human beings and nature's appalling waste seem sufficient to demonstrate vast evil in the world. He may deny that God is almighty or deny that God is omniscient. He may likewise deny that God is morally excellent. No one of these alternatives is particularly attractive; but if the argument from evil is sound, one of the traditional attributes will have to be sacrificed.

However, in controversy the lines of assault are often not chosen by the defender, but by the aggressor. The militant atheist wants to show either that God does not exist or that he is irrelevant to human concern. Hence he has not usually attacked the notion of God's moral excellence. A morally depraved but omnipotent God would be a source of much human anxiety. However, a God who lacks omnipotence might safely be forgotten. A morally excellent God who struggles against evil and yet who is not able to bring about his good designs is caught in the same tragic situation as are men. Hence he is more to be pitied than to be worshipped.

The arguer from evil thus attempts a *reductio ad absurdum* of classical theism. He questions whether God is literally omnipotent or whether

there are some evils that, for whatever reason, he cannot prevent. The task faced by Christian theodicy is to explain or justify evil without eroding omnipotence to such a point that the deity thus described becomes irrelevant.

2. Flew's Challenge

The skeptic who argues from evil suggests that classical theism is meaningful, but false. Recently some challengers have attempted to demonstrate the stronger thesis that the basic tenets of classical theology are not merely false, but meaningless in the sense that they do not really assert anything about the world. The most notable protagonist of this view is Antony Flew. In the tradition of Logical Positivism, Flew laid it down that any cognitively meaningful statement, i.e., one that makes a genuine assertion about the world, must be such that some conceivable evidence could conclusively falsify it.¹ Many religious utterances were once meaningful in this sense, but are no longer so since they have been "killed by inches, the death by a thousand qualifications." Isaiah proclaimed that the righteous God ruled the world. He supported this claim by appealing to the fact that Assyria was about to overwhelm a sinful and unfaithful Israel. But today believers have so qualified the claim "God rules the world" that no conceivable evidence ever seems to hold good against it. Whoever wins in battle, God is still said to arrange everything. Since the claim is now consistent with every conceivable state of affairs, it cannot be falsified and thus cannot be taken to assert a fact about the world.

This challenge was particularly acute for the believer who refused to qualify the traditional conception of God: he insisted that God is all loving and all powerful and that no amount of evil in the world could falsify his claim. Attempts to buttress his position by saying "God works in mysterious ways" seemed an obvious evasion. Flew and others drew the conclusion that most religious utterances which seemed to make genuine assertions were actually without assertive force.

This skeptical attack of the verificationists seemed a temporary secular triumph. It actually had the effect of eliciting the concession of cogni-

tive emptiness of religious utterances from some theologians; an effect that, as Alvin Plantinga remarked, seemed rather like a civil rights worker welcoming the Ku Klux Klan.

Subsequent developments within the philosophy of science, however, soon had the effect of eroding and neutralizing Flew's challenge. Statements of the so-called Verification Principle were overwhelmed by counter-examples and difficulties. It became increasingly clear that a statement of the Verification Principle that would permit the claims of natural science to count as meaningful and rule out the claims of theology and metaphysics could not be produced. Flew assumed that any meaningful statement must be capable of conclusive falsification, i.e., we must be able to conceive of a state of affairs in which the statement could be shown to be false. Unfortunately even some very simple claims characteristically made by scientists fail to meet this test. In an infinite universe, the claim "For every metal there is an acid that will dissolve it" can neither be conclusively verified or falsified. The statement might be verified on the planet earth; but then on another planet, a metal that could not be dissolved by any known acid might be found. However, on another planet a new acid might be discovered, and so on *ad infinitum*. As a result, it turns out that it is theoretically impossible to verify or to falsify the universal claims that have an important place in the physical sciences. Although some philosophers of science have clung to the notion of empirical verifiability as an article of faith, others have become increasingly reluctant to accept what seemed a kind of simplistic empiricism associated with early statements of the Verification Principle. Most philosophers have rejected Flew's challenge and admit that a statement is factually meaningful as long as some empirical evidence counts for or against the claim. Since the good and evil found in the world count for and against the existence of God, theology is once again meaningful.

3. Power and Freedom

The skeptics' strongest line of attack is then to concentrate upon the supposed incoherence of the traditional conception of God. In order to bring his point home, he sometimes argues as follows. If God is om-

nipotent, then he can create any possible state of affairs. Why then did he not create a world in which people always freely do right? It is actually the case that people sometimes freely do right—it is therefore logically possible that people should *always* freely do right. It is possible that evil might not exist. Since an omnipotent God can actualize any possibility, it follows that he must have been able to prevent evil. Why then, did he not? Given the assumption that God is omnipotent and given the presence of actual moral evil in the world, it appears that God must have failed to create a world in which all men freely choose what is right through lack of moral excellence. How then can the attributes of benevolence, justice, and moral perfection be saved for a God who is able yet unwilling to prevent or even lessen the pain, misery, and injustice in the world?

The characteristic response of the theologian, perhaps the only rebuttal that has even partially succeeded in effectively meeting the thrust of this argument, is called the 'Free Will Defence.' This reply asserts first that God's decision to create men having the power to freely choose between good and evil is the best choice he could have made. Creatures who can freely choose between good and evil are better creatures than necessitated beings. Second, if men choose to do evil, that is up to them, not up to God. In other words, the Free Will defender concedes that it is possible that God could have created a world in which no evil exists if in fact it had turned out that, through their free choice, men had always done the right thing. That, however, the world has not turned out this way is not something that God could have remedied. Only the individual moral agents created by God could have rectified the existing sad state of affairs. For we presume that men are free to do good or evil as they alone choose. If God were to bring it about that a man does right, if he were to see to it that this man does not do the wrong thing, this individual would have lost his freedom to do either right or wrong. So it seems to the Free Will defender.

An important aspect of the Free Will Defence thus outlined is that it denies absolute omnipotence to God. Having created beings with the freedom to choose, God thereby lacks the power to exercise control over the decisions of these beings in any manner that would foreclose

on their freedom. If Lee Harvey Oswald pulled the trigger freely, then he had the option of either pulling the trigger or not, and provided this is so, God could not have prevented Oswald's pulling the trigger.

Thus the Free Will Defence imposes an inherent limitation on divine omnipotence. If there is to be more than one center of power in the universe, no one being can be exclusively and totally omnipotent in the sense of being literally able to bring about or prevent anything. A plurality of free moral agents necessarily entails a sharing of power within certain limits that are not very well defined. The limitations on omnipotence inherent in the Free Will Defence has been clearly recognized by Alvin Plantinga, who writes, "What is really characteristic and central to the Free Will Defence is the claim that God, though omnipotent, could not have created just any possible world he pleased. . . ." ²

4. Limits and Omnipotence

The initial problem faced by theologians is that it seems logically absurd to suggest that there can be any limits to omnipotence. For an omnipotent being can, by definition, have no limits to his power. Yet several considerations suggest the incoherence of the concept of omnipotence construed as the power to do quite literally anything. The literature concerning the definition of "omnipotence" is fairly extensive, and it is now time to set out the issues schematically.

(1) Although men from earliest times have called God omnipotent, it is not until the Middle Ages that one finds treatments of the possible limits to omnipotence. One of the earliest is found in the writings of St. Anselm, who was struck by the fact that men can do certain things that God cannot do. Men can change, but God who is immutable cannot. However, St. Anselm concluded that the ability to change is really a defect of power, an impotence, and not a power in a positive sense. Hence he concluded that God is omnipotent because he does nothing through impotence and nothing has power against him.

(2) But what does it mean to say that nothing has power against God? Does it mean that God is not bound by the law of non-contradiction?

Descartes argued that since God decreed or created this law, God could not be bound by it.

(3) However, views like Descartes' had seemed unreasonable to St. Thomas Aquinas, and in fact it has seemed unreasonable to the majority of theologians to require of an omnipotent being that he be able to bring about states of affairs that exemplify self-contradictions or other logical inconsistencies. A world in which God could bring it about that black is white, or in which Caesar on some historic occasion simultaneously crossed the Rubicon and did not cross that river, is a world that we would be hard pressed to imagine or understand. Of course if we regard the law of non-contradiction and similar binary principles of standard first-order logic as artificial contrivances, we might fail to see any good reason why God, in his infinite wisdom, should be bound to this two-valued conventional system. Yet the demand for logical consistency goes deep, and to jettison it without a clear alternative yields a total bereftness of orientation which seems tantamount to a Kierkegaardian irrationalism. Perhaps ultimately in the religious quest, consistency must be surrendered, but to do so will reduce our ability to attain even a dim and imperfect grasp of the divine nature, admittedly the best we can aspire to. To proceed further we must concede that an omnipotent being need not be required to be able to instantiate self-contradictions and the like. Nor do we normally require of finite beings that they ever have this power, so perhaps this limitation applies to all power generally and not uniquely or distinctively to an omnipotent agent.

(4) For parallel reasons, we need not require of an omnipotent agent, or any agent, that he be able to bring about states of affairs that are logically possible but nevertheless "unbringaboutable." For example, the following state of affairs is logically contingent: the door is open but I do not directly bring it about that the door is open. An instance would occur, say, where *you* open the door. Yet it is impossible that I myself should bring about this state of affairs. It is absurd that I should directly bring it about both that the door is open and that I do *not* directly bring it about that the door is open. Thus there are certain states of affairs that, while they do not admit of logical inconsistency in themselves, are *unbringaboutable* by a certain agent, for bringing them about is logically impossible for that agent to do.

(5) At this point a shift in terminology might seem appropriate. If an omnipotent being must be one who can bring about literally anything, even one of the peculiar states of affairs listed above, perhaps it is less misleading to say that God is *almighty* rather than absolutely omnipotent, meaning that he is all-powerful only within certain conceptual limits. Some have wanted to be even more restrictive. To many theologians, frightened by the possibility of logical entrapment, it has seemed expedient to say simply that "omnipotence" means only that God is the source of all power, or that he is "the power of Being in everything which exists" (Tillich). Whatever conceptual advantages this suggestion may have, it is too early in our discussion to adopt it. For one thing, it is not very helpful; for it does not tell us what creative powers God can be said to possess. Is an almighty Creator limited by the past? Can he lie, cheat, and steal? As to the first of these questions, St. Peter Damian, assuming Anselm's account of omnipotence, argued that since God does nothing through impotence and is not limited by anything outside himself, he must be able to change the past, because the past is something outside God. To the contrary, St. Thomas Aquinas argued the past is not in God's control, since changing the past is an incoherent notion. This is really an issue in the philosophy of time and is similar to the problem "Can God make time go backward?" If at t , God puts the universe in reverse, it does not appear that time goes backward, but that time continues to go forward. Only the causal sequence is reversed. Likewise at t God decreed that Rome should be founded, and at t' that it should be destroyed. But it does not seem possible for God to have decreed that at t' Rome should not have been; time has been continually moving ahead, and the past is lost to the control of any power. Although Peter Damian attempted to answer this challenge by an appeal to the atemporal character of God's will, it seems best to think of power as essentially future-directed, and we ought not require that an omnipotent agent have the power to change the past.

(6) Certain theological constraints are introduced by the assumption of the moral perfection of God. It would appear to be inconsistent with much of the western theological tradition to allow that God could be tired, oblivious, or angry, that God could be deceived, circumvented, or frustrated, that God could break a promise or commit any kind of

moral indiscretion. The reason for these restrictions is that omnipotence is only one of God's perfections. If God is that being than which no greater or more perfect can be conceived, he must be morally perfect and he must be omnipotent because of his moral perfection. A God who could not carry out his good designs would not be as perfect as one who can. Thus some of God's perfections limit others. In particular, a Christian cannot believe in absolute, uncircumscribed omnipotence.

(7) If God is that being than which no greater or more perfect can be conceived, then it appears that there can be only one of him. For if there were two Gods, neither could be more perfect. Likewise Duns Scotus argued that if "omnipotence" means "unlimited by anything outside the self," then there could be only one omnipotent being. If there were two, each would limit the other; and hence neither would be omnipotent. However, suppose "omnipotence" is defined as "the ability to do anything which does not involve a contradiction." Then, as William of Ockham pointed out, there could be more than one omnipotent being if they are necessitated by nature to co-operate with each other. This subtle shift in the definition of "omnipotence" has enormous consequences and puts considerable strain upon our natural conceptual scheme.

(8) But does God necessarily will what he wills? Spinoza argued that the perfection of God demands that he wills what he wills necessarily. Only if God's will is necessitated can he be free from any external influence. The majority of theologians have rejected this suggestion, arguing instead that the freedom to choose between alternatives is a perfection, and that, therefore, God must have it.

(9) It might seem absurd to require that an omnipotent agent must be able to bring about states of affairs that are *self-limiting*, that is, states of affairs that might result in a loss of power by the agent. However, Bishop Charles Gore thought that God must be able to divest himself of some of his power. According to him, the omnipotent God must be able to lay aside his omnipotence if he were to become truly incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. This *kenotic* theory of the incarnation seems to lead directly to the paradoxical assertion that an omnipotent agent is not omnipotent if he cannot divest himself of some of his power.

A similar problem can be put in the form of a dilemma: can God create a stone that is too heavy for him to lift? If not, he is not omnipotent. If so, he is not omnipotent either, since there is something he cannot lift. One way out of this dilemma, Bishop Gore to the contrary, is to relax the requirement that an omnipotent being can do just anything, ruling that such a being need not be required to bring about self-limiting states of affairs.

(10) However, to adopt the strategy just outlined may bring us into conflict with the Free Will Defence. We have already observed that a universe containing a plurality of free agents necessitates a different kind of limit on the sphere of the power of even an almighty agent. For if the actions of men are sometimes free, as seems required if they are to be held morally accountable, the control of a creator over these free actions will have to be sufficiently indirect and subtle not to negate that freedom. A totally omnipotent being, rigidly conceived, must, as such, usurp all power, leaving no room for human controllers or other free agencies such as Satan and his cohorts.

(11) But then could God create beings who always freely choose the good? Some have argued that only by necessitating the agents could God create a world in which men always choose the good. However, he has created a world in which men sometimes freely choose the good. Why, then, could he not create a world in which they always choose the good? The logic of this problem is not well understood; and because of this fact, it is fitting to refer the reader to the concluding selections.

(12) Finally, it might be argued that an omnipotent being should not be required to violate the lawlike regularities of nature. This observation raises the question whether miracles involve violations of physical laws, and is thus a wider and separate problem to some extent. As such it raises issues which are too extensive to be included in this volume. Suffice it to remark that it may be theologically preferable to countenance the notion of an almighty God whose agency is seen as operational only within certain limits of the causal nexus.

Notice that some of the limits listed above apply to finite agents as well as to an almighty agent, whereas some mark limits that are

unique to divine power. Finite agents often and typically bring about self-limiting states of affairs; many of the things we do result in inability to do other things. And (6) shows that, somewhat paradoxically, there are many things that you or I can do that God cannot—for example, execute twenty-five pushups or cheat at backgammon.

If we reflect on the several kinds of limitations, it may well be that if we are to have a concept of omnipotence or almightiness that is minimally logically consistent, and consistent with the mainstream of the western theological tradition, we must accept certain conceptual limits on the divine power. That none of these limits are as clear or well-behaved as we might like indicates at once the difficulty of constructing a consistent and adequate theodicy and the problems inherent in giving a clear account of the deep skeptical worries and doubts about the problem of evil. Only through further attempts to define and clarify the scope and nature of the several limits can a definitive understanding of these classical problems be expedited. The necessity for these limits may ultimately be due to intrinsic conceptual limitations of the human understanding. There may still remain some sense not very well understood, in which it is correct to say that pure potency has no limits. Conceptual limits are not to be confused with deficiencies.

At any rate, we hope to have shown the need for the analysis of the attribute of omnipotence, both as a required item of vocabulary in the adjudication and rational understanding of the dialogue between the theologian and the secular skeptic, and as an essential element in systematic theology. Logic is no more a good substitute for faith than for creativity, vision, inspiration or beauty. Yet when inconsistency runs deep, to the very roots of belief, to the essential foundations of our commitments, dissonance dulls and clouds belief; and logical considerations play a role in the eventual readjustment to consistency. An awareness of the importance of the place of logic in theology is conveyed in the work of the great scholastics, in their judicious balance of faith and reason. Logic is neither the beginning nor the end of religious belief, but an illogical theology is unworthy of and cannot support a mature faith.

Notes

1. A. Flew and A. MacIntyre, *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*. London, S. C. M. Press, 1955, pp. 96ff.
2. Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1974, p. 168.