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Wesley Morriston

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## Is Plantinga's God Omnipotent?

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A number of philosophers claim not only that the amount and variety of evil in the world provide strong evidence against the existence of God, but that the existence of any evil at all is logically incompatible with the existence of God'. More specifically, they argue that the following propositions are inconsistent with one another.

1. God exists — and is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good.
2. There is evil in the world.

In an impressive series of articles and books,<sup>1</sup> Alvin Plantinga has attempted not only to answer the arguments of these philosophers, but actually to provide a proof of the consistency of (1) and (2). The result is a highly original and challenging version of the free will defense, one that has provoked a good deal of controversy and critical commentary. At the center of the controversy is Plantinga's claim that it may not be within the power even of an omnipotent God to actualize a world in which there are free creatures who always choose good over evil. Plantinga does not deny that there are possible worlds in which there are such free and morally upright creatures. What he claims is only that God might not have been able to actualize any of the worlds in which this is the case.

But why couldn't an omnipotent God have actualized any world he pleased? Plantinga devotes a good deal of effort to answering this question. With great skill and ingenuity, he attempts to demonstrate that there are possible worlds God could not have actualized. In the present essay, I want to focus attention on just this portion of Plantinga's argument. I shall defend it against two mistaken lines of criticism. But in the process of showing how and why these criticisms are mistaken,

necessity, but in the sense that He is eternally complete and sufficient unto Himself.

### REFERENCES

1. The Latin text I have used for both the *Monologion* and the *Proslogion* is from Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson ed. and tr., *Anselm of Canterbury* (London: SCM Press, 1974), vol. 1. All translations are my own.
2. I trace these difficulties with the notion of *causa sui* also in my "God as Self-Explanatory", *Philosophical Quarterly*, 30 (1980), 210-211.
3. See, for example, Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. N. K. Smith (New York, St Martin's Press, 1965), pp. 500-507; G. E. Moore, "Is Existence a Predicate?", *Proceedings of the Aristotelean Society*, Supp. Vol. 15 (1936), 175-188; John Hick, "God as Necessary Being", *Journal of Philosophy*, 57 (1960), 725-734; and my *Analogy and Talking About God* (Washington: University Press of America, 1978), pp. 67-77.
4. Anselm's *De veritate* in Schmitt edition of *Opera omnia*, t. 1, pp. 188-90.
5. See *Monologion*, ch. 18.
6. *Monologion* ch. 16 and 17 *Proslogion*, ch. 18
7. *Monologion*, ch. 22; *Proslogion*, ch. 22.

I hope to show what is genuinely problematic in Plantinga's view. Specifically, I shall develop an argument for saying that Plantinga's God could not be truly omnipotent. To the extent that his argument succeeds, it does so only at the price of depriving God of his omnipotence.

#### I

In this section, I briefly summarize Plantinga's argument for saying that there are possible worlds God could not have actualized<sup>4</sup>.

Some possible worlds contain human beings who freely choose among alternative courses of action. But it is logically impossible for God to cause a man freely to choose one alternative over another. To the extent that God causes him to choose, his choice is not free. So if actualizing a world means causing that world to exist, even God cannot actualize a world in which there are men who make free choices. Such a feat is logically impossible, and even an omnipotent being cannot do a thing if it is logically impossible for him to do it.

But, as Plantinga is quick to point out, this does not settle the issue. For God is omniscient, as well as omnipotent. Consequently he knows what each possible person would do if created and placed in any possible set of circumstances. For example, God knew that if tempted in the garden, Adam would freely choose to eat the forbidden fruit. When God placed Adam and Eve and the snake in Eden, he knew just what free acts these three would perform there. But of course God didn't have to create these three persons; nor did he have to place them in just this set of circumstances. So it looks as if there were certain steps God took, knowing full well that if he took them Adam would eat the forbidden fruit. Furthermore, it may be that there were other steps God could have taken such that had he done so Adam would not have eaten the forbidden fruit. So even granted that he didn't cause Adam to succumb to temptation, it may be that there is a broader sense in which he brought about a world in which Adam sinned, and a broader sense in which he could have brought about a world in which Adam did not sin.

This point can be sharpened a bit if we introduce Plantinga's distinction between different senses in which God may be said to actualize a state of affairs. Let us say that God *strongly ac-*

tualizes a state of affairs, S, if he causes S to obtain. And let us say that God *weakly actualizes* a state of affairs, S, if although he does not strongly actualize S, there is an act, A, such that: (i) if God were to do A, S would obtain; and (ii) God does A. Finally, let us say that God *actualizes* a state of affairs if he either strongly or weakly actualizes it<sup>5</sup>.

Now we can put the challenge to Plantinga more clearly. Granted that there are worlds God can't strongly actualize, it doesn't follow that there are worlds he can't even weakly actualize. But if God could weakly actualize any possible world, then he could have weakly actualized a world in which Adam did not sin. More generally, he could have weakly actualized a world in which there are free creatures who do moral good and no moral evil.

Plantinga responds to this challenge by arguing that there are possible worlds God cannot even weakly actualize. Stick with the same example, the gist of his argument may be briefly summarized as follows. Let S be a state of affairs such that: (i) S includes Adam's being free with regard to temptation; (ii) S includes neither Adam's eating nor his refraining from eating the forbidden fruit; (iii) S includes every circumstance which, in the actual world, was relevant to Adam's decision; and (iv) in the actual world God actualized S. Since Adam did eat the fruit, the following proposition must have been true.

(3) If God were to actualize S, Adam would eat the forbidden fruit.

Now since S includes neither Adam's eating nor his refraining from eating the fruit, there is a possible world in which God also actualizes S but in which Adam refrains from eating it. Let's call this world W. Then God could not even weakly have actualized W, because in order to do so he would have had to actualize S, in which case, as (3) assures us, Adam would have eaten the fruit, so that W would not have been actual. It follows that there are possible worlds that God could not even weakly actualize.

It should be noted that, even if (3) were false, the same conclusion would follow. For on Plantinga's view, the falsity of (3) entails the truth of:

(4) If God were to actualize S, Adam would not eat the fruit. But if (4) had been true instead of (3), a parallel argument would show that there is a possible world God could not even weakly have actualized, this time a world in which Adam eats the fruit. So in either case, Plantinga's conclusion follows.<sup>7</sup>

## II

It is a fundamental presupposition of the above argument that subjunctive conditionals concerning the choices that would be freely made in various sets of circumstances have a definite truth value. This is controversial,<sup>8</sup> but let us assume for the sake of argument that Plantinga is right about this. Even granted this assumption, however, a number of critics profess to find serious flaws in the argument summarized above. Two of their objections are worth exploring briefly.

It has been suggested by one author that Plantinga has succeeded in showing only that "worlds" like W are not genuinely possible worlds at all.<sup>9</sup> This author claims that for Plantinga all three of the following suppositions must be true in W.

(3) If God were to actualize S, Adam would eat the forbidden fruit.

(5) God actualizes S.

(6) Adam does not eat the forbidden fruit.

But obviously these propositions form an inconsistent set. So W is not a possible world, and *a fortiori* W is not a possible world God could not actualize.

This is not a serious objection. It mistakenly assumes that for Plantinga (3) is true in W—something he explicitly denies.<sup>10</sup> What is true in W, according to Plantinga, is not (3), but rather (4). The objection does force us to raise an important question, however. In what world(s) is (3) true? Plantinga's answer is quite clear. (3) is true in the actual world—in the world in which God actualizes S and Adam sins.<sup>11</sup> But since (3) is only contingently true, its truth in the actual world is perfectly compatible with its falsity in W.

But this way of dealing with the first objection leads naturally to what at first sight appears to be a more serious one. For if (3) is only contingently true, it may seem that God could have brought it about that (4) was true instead. But if God could have brought it about that (4) was true instead of (3), Plantinga's argument for denying that God could have weakly actualized W collapses. To say that God couldn't actualize W because (3) is true is at bottom merely to say that he couldn't actualize W because he wouldn't make (4) true instead of (3). But that's saying that an expert swimmer couldn't save a drowning man because he wouldn't jump in the water!<sup>12</sup>

This criticism, too, rests on a misinterpretation of Plantinga's position. On Plantinga's view, it isn't in the least up to God which member of this pair of subjunctive conditionals is true. The truth or falsity of such propositions is a fact that God has to reckon with when deciding which possible free persons to create and which possible sets of circumstances to place them in. Indeed, on the grounds marked out by Plantinga, it seems clear that the very idea of God's determining the truth value of subjunctive conditionals concerning what some agent would freely do in a given set of circumstances is incoherent. Suppose, for example, that God has made (3) true. Then it would have been up to someone other than Adam what Adam would do if S were actualized. But then Adam would not have been free to eat or refrain from eating the forbidden fruit in the set of circumstances specified in our definition of S.

It seems clear, then, that this second line of criticism rests on a fundamental misinterpretation of Plantinga's view of the nature and scope of God's power. On Plantinga's view, God's power is limited by a very special sort of fact: by the way in which this or that possible creature would exercise its freedom if created in each possible set of circumstances. From God's point of view, the truth or falsity of such conditionals is discovered, not made. Here then is a set of contingent facts which limit God's power in such a way that he cannot even weakly actualize certain possible worlds.

But while the second line of criticism is mistaken in the way I have suggested, it does force out into the open what is problematic and, in my opinion, objectionable in Plantinga's view

of God's power. Granted that God's power is limited by the contingent truth of certain subjunctive conditionals, why doesn't this simply show that he is not omnipotent? Granted that Plantinga has succeeded in showing that there are possible worlds God can't even weakly actualize, hasn't he done so at the price of compromising God's omnipotence? Thus we arrive at what appears to be a devastating objection. For it is difficult to see how Plantinga could reconcile the claim that God is omnipotent with the suggestion that his power is limited by contingent facts over which he has no control. In the next section, I try to sharpen this criticism. First, I briefly explain what, following Plantinga, I take to be a necessary condition of God's omnipotence. Then I go on to show how and why Plantinga's God fails to satisfy this necessary condition. In the final section of the paper, I consider and-----with some hesitation-----reject what I take to be the best possible reply to my objection concerning omnipotence.

### III

What does it mean to say that God is omnipotent? Plantinga says disappointingly little about the concept of omnipotence; but in several places he suggests that the power of an omnipotent being has no nonlogical limits.<sup>14</sup> In *God and Other Minds*,<sup>15</sup> he explicates this claim in the following way:

... what we must say is that there are no nonlogical limits to what an omnipotent being can do. God is omnipotent only if God can perform any action that it is logically possible for him to perform. (p.118)<sup>16</sup>

A couple of points about this <sup>Formulation</sup>inference are worth noting. First, when Plantinga uses the term "God" in the above passage, I think he is using it as a rigid designator, and not as a title for whoever happens to possess whatever properties orthodox theists associate with the term. In other words, he is using the term, "God" in such a way that it picks out the same individual in every possible world in which God exists (which for Plantinga, of course, is every world). So when we say that for some action, A, it is logically possible for God to do A, we are saying that there is a possible world in which identically the same individual exists and does A. For example, there

are possible worlds in which God creates some unicorns. On the other hand, there are no possible worlds in which he squares the circle. And there are none in which he blows his nose. (Assuming that God is essentially incorporeal, there is no possible world in which he has a nose to blow.) So we should read Plantinga as saying that God is omnipotent only if he satisfies the following condition: for any action, A, if there is a possible world in which God does A, then God has the power to do A.

A second point about this formulation is also worth noting. It does not (and is not meant to) provide a complete analysis of the concept of omnipotence. For it does not specify a sufficient condition for omnipotence. Even a being quite lacking in power might satisfy this condition, just provided that all of its limitations were essential limitations. It seems possible, for instance, to conceive of a being-----call it X-----that is essentially limited in such a way that only two sorts of action are possible for it: moving up and moving down. In no possible world does X do anything else. So if X were able both to move up and to move down, X would be able to do everything: it is logically possible for X to do. But we would hardly want to say that X is omnipotent!

Nevertheless, I see no reason to deny that this formulation gives a necessary condition for omnipotence. Certainly a being who could not do something even though it is logically possible for it to do<sup>17</sup>would not be as powerful as theists have traditionally wanted God to be.<sup>18</sup> In the remainder of this section, I shall try to show that Plantinga's God fails to satisfy precisely this necessary condition for omnipotence. The reason is that, on his view, there are possible worlds God cannot actualize even though it is logically possible for him to do so. The argument runs as follows.

Let W be a world such that: (i) it is logically impossible for God to strongly actualize W because in W there are creatures who sometimes act freely; (ii) in W God does strongly actualize some states of affairs; and (iii) it is not within God's power even to weakly actualize W. For Plantinga there are plenty of possible worlds like W in these three respects. (If you doubt this, just consider a world like the actual world up to the time of Adam's sin, but in which Adam does not yield to temptation.)

We now proceed to show that it is logically possible for God to weakly actualize *W*. Let *T* be the largest state of affairs God strongly actualizes in *W*—i.e., let *T* be a state of affairs strongly actualized by God in *W* that is not properly included in any other state of affairs strongly actualized by God in *W*. Now, applying our definition of “weakly actualize” to the case in hand, we can say that God weakly actualizes *W* if: (i) God does not strongly actualize *W*; (ii) if God were to actualize *T*, *W* would be actual; and (iii) God actualizes *T*. By the way we have specified *W* and *T*, conditions (i) and (iii) are automatically satisfied in *W*. But what about condition (ii)?

That (ii) must be true in *W* can be shown as follows. Suppose (ii) is not true in *W*. Then on Plantinga’s view the following proposition would be true in *W*.

(7) If God were to actualize *T*, *W* would not be actual.

But 7 could not be true in *W* because in *W* it is true that God actualizes *T* and false that *W* is not actual. So (ii) must be true in *W*.

The upshot is that all three conditions are satisfied in *W*. It follows that in *W* God weakly actualizes *W*. But *W* is a logically possible world. Therefore, it is logically possible for God to weakly actualize *W*. So there is a world, viz. *W*, which God lacks the power to weakly actualize even though it is logically possible for him to do so. On Plantinga’s view, therefore, there is something God can’t do even though it is logically possible for him to do it. Thus, Plantinga’s God fails to meet our (and his) necessary condition for omnipotence.

#### IV

Plantinga does not consider this line of criticism, but I think he is not wholly without a reply. In the first place, the argument of the last section concerns only weak actualization. Even if God’s power were limited in the way I have indicated, it might still be the case that he could actualize any state of affairs it is logically possible for him to strongly actualize. Certainly nothing in Plantinga’s view of God’s power is inconsistent with this possibility. The states of affairs which, according to Plan-

tinga, God can’t strongly actualize are ones involving the exercise of freedom on the part of God’s creatures; and he explicitly maintains that it is logically impossible for God to strongly actualize any such state of affairs. (Recall that for Plantinga it is logically impossible for God to cause one of his creatures to exercise its freedom in this or that way.) So, to repeat, Plantinga might consistently hold that God can actualize any state of affairs it is logically possible for him to strongly actualize.

In the second place, Plantinga might reasonably claim that on his view it is logically impossible for God’s power not to be limited with regard to what he can weakly actualize. Recall that for Plantinga exactly one member of each pair of subjunctive conditionals like (3) and (4) must be true.<sup>17</sup> This is a matter of logical necessity, not a matter of contingent fact. Whichever member of each such pair is true, Plantinga claims to be able to deduce the conclusion that there is a possible state of affairs God cannot even weakly actualize. Since Plantinga’s argument relies on no contingent premises, it follows that, as a matter of logical necessity, there are possible worlds God can’t actualize. That this or that particular world is one God can’t actualize is a matter of contingent fact (since which member of the pair of subjunctive conditionals is true is a matter of contingent fact). What is not a matter of contingent fact is that there should be some possible worlds that God can’t actualize. It is logically impossible for God not to have been limited in this way.

Notice also that Plantinga’s argument for this claim does not rest on any special assumptions concerning God’s nature. So he might with some justice claim to have shown that it is logically impossible for the power of any agent not to be limited in the way God’s is limited. Thus even if God’s power is limited by certain (very special) contingent facts, and even if there are things he can’t do that are logically possible for him to do, it may still be the case that God has as much power as it is logically possible for any agent to have. Nothing in the argument of the last section tends to show that this is not the case.

Now it may be that this will be enough to satisfy a believer in “the greater than which none can be conceived”. After all, such a believer might argue, God needn’t have more power than

it is logically possible for any being to have! But the question of interest here is whether this is enough to ensure God's omnipotence. It might seem so. If a theist were convinced by Plantinga's account of the way in which God's power is limited, it might seem that he could simply revise his definition of omnipotence, dropping the requirement that there should be literally no nonlogical limits to what an omnipotent being can do, and replacing it with the requirement that an omnipotent being should have as much power as it is logically possible for any being to have. Omnipotence could then be defined as the maximum possible amount of power, however much that is.

There are serious objections to this way of dealing with the concept of omnipotence, however. I doubt that there is any satisfactory way of spelling out the intuitive notion of a maximum amount of power *simpliciter*. For one thing, it isn't clear what could be meant by an "amount" of power *simpliciter*. In the absence of any more particular parameters for a comparison, what could it mean to say that one being has more or less power than another? How much does the power to raise one's arm count in such a comparison? More or less than the power to wiggle one's toes? Than the power to count to ten? It's hard to see how such questions could be answered. But without answers to such questions, we can't make rational judgements about relative amounts of power.

But even if we could judge amounts of power, the concept of a greatest possible amount of power still might not make sense. For power *simpliciter* may not have what Plantinga calls an "intrinsic maximum". That is, for any given amount of power a greater amount might be possible. But if this were so, the idea of a maximum possible amount of power would be no more coherent than that of the largest natural number.

In a discussion of the Ontological Argument, Plantinga considers this problem and deals with it by appealing to the concept of omnipotence. Power, he says, has an intrinsic maximum because "... omnipotence is a degree of power that can't possibly be exceeded."<sup>18</sup> This is the obvious move to make at this point; but whether it will work depends on how we explain the concept of omnipotence. If, for example, we define omnipotence as the power to do anything it is logically possible

for anyone to do,<sup>19</sup> it follows immediately that power has an intrinsic maximum. For obviously it is logically impossible for anyone to do anything that an omnipotent being — thus defined — could not do; and in this sense nothing could be more powerful than an omnipotent being. If, on the other hand, we define omnipotence (in the way suggested earlier) as the maximum possible amount of power, we seem to be left without any defense of the claim that power has an intrinsic maximum. For we can scarcely defend the claim that there is a maximum possible amount of power by saying that omnipotence (thus defined) is the maximum possible amount of power!

But even if we could make sense out of the idea that Plantinga's God has as much power as it is logically possible for any being to have, I doubt that this would be sufficient to make him omnipotent. Exact philosophical concepts should, after all, bear some resemblance to the pre-philosophical ones they are meant to clarify; and the "picture" suggested by Plantinga's account of the way in which God's power is limited doesn't seem to square with the pre-philosophical notion of an all-powerful deity. The idea of God's having to work with a stock of possible persons which, as a matter of contingent fact, have various dispositional properties that limit his power sounds a bit too much like the idea of a finite, limited craftsman who does the best he can with the admittedly recalcitrant materials at his disposal. It sounds more like Plato's demiurge than like the Judaeo-Christian God. For this reason, I think that a theist who is convinced by Plantinga's account of God's power should, in all consistency, drop the traditional concept of omnipotence from his list of God's attributes and replace it with some other power-related concept.

If this is right, it follows that Plantinga has not succeeded in doing what he set out to do. He has not successfully demonstrated that the presence of evil in the world is consistent with the existence of a God who is omnipotent *as well as omniscient and perfectly good*. To the extent that his argument is successful, it provides us with a reason for doubting whether anything could satisfy the requirements of omnipotence.

## References

1. See, for example, J. L. Mackie's widely anthologized article, "Evil and Omnipotence", originally published in *Mind*, 64, (1955). Others who have defended this claim are H. J. McCloskey, H. D. Aiken and W. Kaufmann.
2. I shall be referring to just three of these. *God and Other Minds*, (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1967), ch. 6, hereafter referred to as GOM; *The Nature of Necessity* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1974), ch. IX, hereafter referred to as NN; and *God, Freedom, and Evil* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Mich., 1977), Part I (a), hereafter referred to as GFE.
3. For Plantinga, a world is a "maximal state of affairs", and states of affairs are abstract, external objects. As such, God does not create them, though he may actualize them.
4. This section is primarily based on the argument of GFE, pp. 34-44. A much more technical and thorough presentation of the argument may be found in NN, pp. 180-184. See NN, pp. 172-173. My formulation of the distinction is somewhat more careful than Plantinga's.
5. A state of affairs, S, includes a state of affairs, S', if and only if it is logically impossible for S to obtain without S' obtaining also.
6. Strictly speaking, this part of Plantinga's argument would go through even if it were not assumed that the falsity of (3) entails the truth of (4). The reason is that, by our definition of "weakly actualize", (3) must be true in order for God to weakly actualize W. So even if both (3) and (4) were false, there would still be a world God could not even weakly actualize. I think this is the real reason why Plantinga regards the assumption that exactly one member of each such pair of subjunctive conditionals is "dispensable". See NN, pp. 182-184.
7. Nevertheless, Plantinga is committed to the truth of this assumption. (See NN, pp. 174-180 and GFE, 40-41 and p. 43). And it's not hard to see why. For this assumption is required by another aspect of the free will defense; it's needed to make sense of the idea that God acted for the best when he decided to actualize this world. Just sup-

- pose that when God decided to actualize S neither (3) nor (4) was true. It follows that God couldn't have known either that (3) was true or that (4) was true. But then he couldn't have known what Adam would do if S were actualized, and he couldn't have known whether it would be a good idea to actualize S in preference to some other state of affairs. Surely a perfectly good and wise creator wouldn't "take a chance" on doing something which, for all he knows, might lead to the worst possible world!
8. For the most thorough airing of this controversy, see Robert Merrihew Adams's excellent article, "Middle Knowledge and the Problem of Evil", *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 14, 1977. Adams argues persuasively that propositions like (3) and (4) could not be true.
9. Hugh LaFollette, "Plantinga on the Free Will Defense", *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion*, 11, 1980. See especially pp. 126-127.
10. See GFE, pp. 47-48.
11. See note 9.
12. I believe this is the essence of Nelson Pike's main line of criticism in "Plantinga on Free Will and Evil", *Religious Studies*, 15, 1979. See especially pp. 464-467 and p. 469.
13. See GFE, pp. 17-18, NN, p. 167, and GOM, p. 118.
14. GOM, p. 118.
15. There is a long and distinguished tradition for saying that God can do whatever is logically possible. St Thomas Aquinas, for example, maintains that God can do whatever is "absolutely possible". See *Summa Theologiae*, Question XXV, Article 3.
16. A state of affairs, S, is properly included in a state of affairs, S', if and only if S' includes but is not included in S. See NN, pp. 174-180 and GFE, pp. 40-41 and p. 43.
17. See NN, pp. 174-180 and GFE, pp. 40-41 and p. 43.
18. GFE, p. 91.
19. Of course we have not defined omnipotence in this way. If we were to do so, it would quickly follow that God is not omnipotent. For there are many acts that are logically possible for human beings but not for God. For example, assuming that God is essentially incorporeal, it is logically impossible for him to scratch his ear.