

Handout 2: Omnipotence

“All confess that God is omnipotent, but it seems difficult to explain in what His omnipotence precisely consists.”

- St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (1266-1273)

I. Aquinas on Omnipotence

The Absolute Account of Omnipotence

x is *omnipotent* =df. *x* can bring about any state of affairs.

An Argument Against the Absolute Account of Omnipotence: Impossible States of Affairs

1. If the Absolute Account of Omnipotence is true, then if some being is omnipotent, an impossible state of affairs can be brought about.
2. If an impossible state of affairs can be brought about, then there is some state of affairs that is both possible and not possible.
3. But no state of affairs is both possible and not possible. [LNC]
4. Therefore, if the Absolute Account of Omnipotence is true, then no being is omnipotent. [1, 2, 3]

The Possibility Account of Omnipotence

x is *omnipotent* =df. *x* can bring about any state of affairs that is possible.

Two kinds of possibility: relative possibility vs. absolute (“metaphysical”) possibility (Aquinas, p. 60 in *PR*):

A state of affairs, *p*, is *possible relative to* a being *x* =df. *x* can bring about *p*.

A state of affairs, *p*, is *metaphysically possible only if* *p* does not entail a contradiction.

Some metaphysically possible
states of affairs

The earth is flat.

Pigs fly.

Tiger Woods lives forever.

Some metaphysically impossible
states of affairs

The earth is both flat and not flat.

There are four-sided triangles.

Tiger Woods is a married bachelor.

The Relative Possibility Account of Omnipotence

x is *omnipotent* =df. *x* can bring about any state of affairs that is possible relative to *x*.

An Argument Against the Relative Possibility Account of Omnipotence:
Trivial Omnipotence

1. If the Relative Possibility Account of Omnipotence is true, then everything is omnipotent.
2. Not everything is omnipotent.
3. Therefore, the Relative Possibility Account of Omnipotence is not true.

The Thomistic (or Metaphysical Possibility) Account of Omnipotence
x is *omnipotent* =df. x can bring about any state of affairs that is metaphysically possible.

II. The Thomistic Account at Work (exercises)

A. Divine Suicide

Can God annihilate Himself? Since He is essentially eternal, it would appear that He cannot. But does this threaten his omnipotence? What should Aquinas say?

B. The Paradox of the Stone

The Paradox of the Stone (as an argument against the Thomistic Account)

1. Either God can create a stone too heavy for God to lift or God cannot create a stone too heavy for God to lift.
2. If God can create a stone too heavy for God to lift, then there is a metaphysically possible state of affairs that God cannot bring about.
3. If God cannot create a stone too heavy for God to lift, then there is a metaphysically possible state of affairs that God cannot bring about.
4. Therefore, there is a metaphysically possible state of affairs that God cannot bring about. [1,2,3]
5. If there is a metaphysically possible state of affairs God cannot bring about, then if the Thomistic Account of Omnipotence is true, then God is not omnipotent.
6. Therefore, if the Thomistic Account of Omnipotence is true, then God is not omnipotent. [4,5]

Does Aquinas have an adequate reply to this argument? If you think the answer is Yes, identify which premise Aquinas should reject, and explain exactly why he should reject it. If you think the answer is No, then, for each premise, be prepared to explain why you think it is true.

III. A Problem for the Thomistic Account

An Argument Against The Thomistic Account of Omnipotence: Divine Wrongdoing

1. Some metaphysically possible states of affairs are such that it would be morally wrong for God to bring them about.
2. God is essentially morally perfect.
3. If (1) and (2), then some metaphysically possible states of affairs are such that God cannot bring them about.
4. Therefore, some metaphysically possible states of affairs are such that God cannot bring them about. [1,2,3]
5. If some metaphysically possible states of affairs are such that God cannot bring them about, then if the Thomistic Account of Omnipotence is true, then God is not omnipotent.
6. Therefore, if the Thomistic Account of Omnipotence is true, then God is not omnipotent. [4,5]

Aquinas on Divine Wrongdoing (p. 61 in *PR*).

III. Clarke's Account

"... infinite power cannot extend ... to moral contradictions which imply a destruction of some other attributes as necessarily belonging to the divine nature as power."

- Samuel Clarke, *Discourse Concerning the Being and Attributes of God* (1704-1705)

Clarke's Account of Omnipotence (p. 63 in *PR*)

x is *omnipotent* =df. x can bring about any state of affairs that is metaphysically possible and that is compatible with x 's essential attributes.

Clarke's Account and Divine Wrongdoing

An Argument Against Clarke's Account of Omnipotence: The Case of Mr. McEar (due to Alvin Plantinga)

1. If Clarke's Account of Omnipotence is true, then Mr. McEar is omnipotent.
2. But Mr. McEar is not omnipotent.
3. Therefore, Clarke's Account of Omnipotence is not true. [1,2]

IV. Wielenberg's Account

A. The Account

The Case of Hercules

Two false principles (p. 38):

(B) If x cannot lift y, then x lacks the strength to lift y.

(C) If x cannot bring about p, then x lacks the power to bring about y.

Wielenberg's Account of Omnipotence (p. 39)

x is *omnipotent* =df. it is not the case that there is some state of affairs, p, such that x is unable to bring about p because of a lack of power in x.

B. Wielenberg's Account at Work

1. Impossible States of Affairs (pp. 39-40)
2. Divine Wrongdoing (p. 40)
3. The Case of Mr. McEar (pp. 40-42)

C. Past States of Affairs: A Problem?