

Omnipotence and necessary moral perfection: are they compatible?

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Abstract: This paper elaborates and defends an argument for saying that if God is necessarily good (morally perfect in all possible worlds), then He does not have the maximum conceivable amount of power and so is not all-powerful. It considers and rejects several of the best-known attempts to show that necessary moral perfection is consistent with the requirements of omnipotence, and concludes by suggesting that a less than all-powerful person might still be the greatest possible being.

Great is your power, and your wisdom is immeasurable.

Psalm 147.5¹

Many contemporary philosophers of religion follow St Anselm in holding that God is the greatest of all possible beings. They believe this commits them to the view that God not only exists necessarily, but that He possesses his various perfections (omnipotence, omniscience, and moral goodness) in every possible world. Critics of this conception of God have sometimes argued that necessary moral perfection is incompatible with omnipotence. If God is omnipotent, He must be able to do evil (even if He never actually does any), whereas if God is necessarily morally perfect, it follows not only that He does not, but that He cannot, do evil. Or so the argument goes.

Some philosophers who have written about this issue conclude that the concept of necessary moral perfection is a mistake.² Others have suggested that the philosophical concept of omnipotence should simply be discarded.³ But contemporary ‘Anselmians’, as I shall call them, hold that such drastic measures are not called for. The purpose of the present paper is to take a critical look at several of the most prominent Anselmian strategies for showing that omnipotence is compatible with necessary moral perfection. I shall argue that none of these strategies is successful and that more drastic measures are required.

A more precise statement of the problem will help focus our discussion. Let *E* be some possible state of affairs that God’s moral perfection prevents Him from

actualizing. Then each of the following propositions has a great deal of prima facie plausibility.

- P1 If God is necessarily morally perfect, then there is no possible world in which He actualizes *E*.
- P2 If God is omnipotent, He has the power to actualize *E*.
- P3 If God has the power to actualize *E*, then there is a possible world in which God actualizes *E*.

It shouldn't be too hard to find a filling for *E* that makes P1 true – some state of affairs that is so bad that it is hard to believe that there is any possible situation in which God (or anyone) would be morally justified in actualizing it. Perhaps 'an innocent child's being maliciously tortured' is a sufficiently uncontroversial example.⁴

The case for P2 is based on what might be called the 'maximal power test' for omnipotence. Whatever else omnipotence may be, an omnipotent being must have the maximum possible amount of power.⁵ The problem is that, however much power God may have in other respects, we seem to be able consistently to conceive of a being with that much power, *plus* the power to actualize *E*. So if God lacks the power to actualize *E*, He does not have the maximum possible amount of power and is not omnipotent. By contraposition, it follows that if God is omnipotent, then He has the power to actualize *E*.

P3 will strike most libertarians, at any rate, as obviously true. Libertarians usually think of freedom as a two-way power either to do, or to refrain from doing, an act. If a person *P* possesses this two-way power with regard to an act *A* at a time *t*, then *as things are* at *t*, it must be possible for *P* to exercise this power by doing, or by refraining from doing, *A* at *t*. If this is right, then it follows that one necessary condition of *P*'s having the power to do *A* at *t* is that it is possible that *P* does *A* at *t*. In the language of possible worlds, there must be at least one possible world in which *P* does *A* at *t*. Applying this conclusion to God's power to actualize *E*, it follows that P3 is true.

I believe that P1–P3 constitute a formidable challenge to the Anselmian. If each of these propositions is true, it follows that God cannot be both omnipotent and necessarily morally perfect. So if the Anselmian is unwilling to accept this conclusion, she needs to come up with a convincing rationale for rejecting one or more of P1–P3.

In this paper, I take a close look at various attempts by Anselmian philosophers to provide such a rationale. In the first section I consider an objection to P1, in the second and third I criticize some popular strategies for rejecting P2. In the fourth and fifth sections I develop (but ultimately reject) a rationale for denying P3. In the final section of the paper, I briefly consider the implications of accepting P1–P3 for the Anselmian conception of God.

Some doubts about P1

In their well-known article, 'Maximal power',⁶ Thomas Flint and Alfred Freddoso develop an account of omnipotence that relies heavily on Plantinga's well-known distinction between 'weak' and 'strong' actualization. Very roughly, the distinction comes to this. A person *P* strongly actualizes a state of affairs *S* if, without relying on help from any indeterministic processes, *P* causes *S* to obtain. *P* weakly actualizes *S* if *P* strongly actualizes some other state of affairs *S**, such that if *P* were to actualize *S**, some indeterministic process would bring about the actualization of *S*. An example of strong actualization is that of a potter making a pot. An example of weak actualization is that of putting a free but weak-willed person into a situation of temptation, knowing that she would in that case freely do the wrong thing.

This distinction opens up a bit a logical space that might be occupied by someone who wishes to deny P1. Suppose once again that *E* is some such state of affairs as 'an innocent child's being maliciously tortured'. Evidently, the actual world is one in which some free creatures do actualize *E*. Assuming that God knew what these persons would do when He created them, it follows that He weakly actualizes *E*. So there is at least one possible world in which God weakly actualizes *E*, and this is so whether or not there is a possible world in which God strongly actualizes *E*.

Now suppose we take 'actualize' to mean 'either strongly or weakly actualize'. Then Flint and Freddoso think there is no bar to saying that there are possible worlds in which God actualizes *E* or that He has the power to do so. And since they employ this broad sense of 'actualize' in their account of omnipotence, Flint and Freddoso think that they do not have to worry about the fact that God cannot strongly actualize the likes of *E*.

The analysis of omnipotence which we have proposed does not require an omnipotent being to have the power *strongly* to actualize states of affairs like (13) [a young child's being maliciously tortured]; the ability *weakly* to actualize them is sufficient to satisfy the conditions laid down by (D) (our analysis).⁷

But how are we to reconcile even weak actualization of *E* with God's necessary moral perfection? The answer suggested by Flint and Freddoso is based on Plantinga's well-known free-will defence. A world in which God creates free persons and places them in situations in which He knows that they will strongly actualize states of affairs like *E* may be better overall than a world in which God makes sure that such things never happen. So it is perfectly possible that *E* could be part of 'some world *W* which is itself such that God's actualizing it might be morally justifiable'.⁸

Let us suppose that Flint and Freddoso (and Plantinga) are right about this much. A morally perfect God might – in certain circumstances – weakly actualize states of affairs like *E*. So if 'actualize' means 'weakly or strongly actualize', then

P1 may be false. But even if all of this is granted, I don't think it helps much with our original problem. The reason is that the ability to 'actualize' states of affairs in this watered-down sense is not the kind of ability required for omnipotence. An example will make this clear.

Suppose I can make a cake from scratch without relying on anybody else's help, but you can't. However, if you were to ask me to make a cake, I would do so. Now let *S* be the state of affairs consisting in a cake's getting made. Surely it would be absurd to say that your power with respect to states of affairs involving cakes is up to the level of mine, on the ground that you can actualize *S* by asking me to do it for you. The fact remains that I can strongly actualize *S*, whereas you can't. Surely, then, I am more powerful with respect to states of affairs involving cakes?

Analogously, if God lacks a power that lots of His creatures have (the power strongly to actualize *E*), then He lacks a power that they have and is, *in that respect*, less powerful than they. He may still possess the maximum possible amount of power, when *all* relevant respects are considered, but it will not be an adequate defence of God's claim to omnipotence merely to insist that He has the power weakly to actualize *E*. He must have the maximum possible amount of power strongly to actualize states of affairs. Thus it seems that we can simply replace 'actualize' throughout P1–P3 with the expression, 'strongly actualize', and the original problem returns with full force.⁹

So far, I have been operating on the assumption that even if God is justified in allowing some of His creatures to actualize states of affairs like *E*, His moral perfection prevents Him from strongly actualizing them. Some philosophers may wish to deny this. They may argue that God could strongly actualize *E* – *if* there were a sufficiently great good that even He could not achieve without doing so, and *if* He were prepared to compensate the innocent torture victim at a later time. If this were so, then there might be possible worlds in which God strongly actualizes *E*, and P1 would be false.

I do not think this objection cuts very deeply. For we can simply change the example, letting *E* stand for something like 'all innocent creatures being maliciously tortured forever'. It's hard to believe that any greater good could justify God's causing – or even allowing – that. Necessarily, then, if God is morally perfect, He does not actualize this value of *E*. And if God is necessarily morally perfect, there is no possible world in which He actualizes it. Assuming that this is right, Anselmians will need to find a rationale for denying either P2 or P3.

Wierenga's objection to P2

Perhaps the simplest strategy for rejecting P2 is to craft an analysis of omnipotence that does not include the ability to do anything logically incompatible with the omnipotent being's own nature or essence. This approach is adopted

by Wierenga, who lays down the following desideratum for any adequate analysis of omnipotence.

(EP) [A]n omnipotent being need not be able to do anything incompatible with its having the essential properties it has.¹⁰

Wierenga's own analysis, which I will not reproduce in all its subtle detail, amounts (roughly) to this. A being x is omnipotent at a time t if she can strongly actualize any state of affairs S such that x 's actualizing S at t is logically consistent with the history of the world prior to t . (In order to avoid having to say that rocks and such are omnipotent, Wierenga wisely adds the qualification that an omnipotent must be able to actualize some state of affairs.) Evidently, if x 's nature or essence includes moral perfection, then it is not possible at any time that x actualizes any evil state of affairs unless it has a morally sufficient reason for doing so. At no time, then, is it possible that such a being actualizes E . So where $x = \text{God}$, the fact that x cannot actualize E does not count against the claim that x is omnipotent. If this is right, then the way is open for the Anselmian to deny P2, and our problem is solved.

One obvious difficulty with this proposal is that it seems to open up the possibility of all sorts of 'omnipotent' beings who are obviously quite weak. Wierenga himself discusses one such case – the case of an imaginary gentleman named 'McEar'. McEar's nature or essence allows him to perform just one action – scratching his left ear. But McEar can scratch that ear. Therefore, on Wierenga's analysis, we must say that McEar is omnipotent. Evidently, this is absurd. So mustn't there be something wrong with Wierenga's analysis?

Wierenga replies to this objection by arguing that the case of McEar is not genuinely possible. I will not reproduce Wierenga's discussion of the case, since I am willing to concede, at least for the sake of argument, that there is a deep impossibility in the McEar example. But even if this is granted, I believe that there is a serious objection to Wierenga's account in the neighbourhood – one that holds whether or not it is possible for there to be anything with a nature like McEar's. For if all McEar can do is to scratch his left ear, then I think we should be able to tell – just from that – that McEar is not omnipotent. We should not have to consider whether McEar's limitation is essential or accidental. Either way, McEar is not omnipotent. Or so it seems to me.

My argument here does not depend on the claim that McEar would be 'omnipotent' (according to Wierenga's definition) because he can do anything that is logically compatible with his essence. The point is rather that, in the case of some powers, we don't need to decide whether they are compatible with a person's essence in order to know that he is not omnipotent if he does not possess them.

An omnipotent being, we have said, must have as much power as it is possible for anyone to have. Suppose, then, that there are two beings, B_1 and B_2 . B_1 can do

everything B_2 can do, but B_1 can actualize at least one further state of affairs, S , that B_2 cannot actualize. Clearly, B_2 is more powerful than B_1 . Surely that is, by itself, sufficient to show that B_2 does not have the maximum possible amount of power and is not omnipotent? Not so, on Wierenga's analysis. We must first determine whether actualizing S is compatible with B_1 's essential properties. Can this be right?

Let ϕ be a set of powers that includes such things as the power to create out of nothing and the power to suspend the laws of nature at will. Now I think it is plausible to say that the powers in ϕ are incompatible with the essence of some possible creatures. Certainly, they seem to be incompatible with *my* essence! God could, if He wished, create out of nothing or suspend the laws of nature whenever I ask Him to do so; but God cannot give me the ability to do these things on my own, since they are incompatible with my creaturely essence, and since even God cannot bring about logically impossible things.

Now it seems clear that a genuinely omnipotent being ought to have the abilities in ϕ . So the fact that I don't have them ought to be quite sufficient to show that I am not omnipotent. But if Wierenga is right, the fact that I lack these abilities does not even *count* against my being omnipotent. If I am not omnipotent, we will have to find some other reason for thinking so. Of course, it won't be hard to find a few! But that is irrelevant to the point I am making, which is that *not having the abilities in ϕ should by itself* – without reference to a creature's 'essence' – be sufficient to show that it is not omnipotent.

I believe this shows that EP above is seriously misguided. It is a mistake to build 'compatibility with one's essence' into the analysis of omnipotence. Consequently, we cannot reconcile God's inability to actualize E with His omnipotence merely by appealing to this general principle.

God as delimitter of possibility: more doubts about P2

A different, if somewhat limited, Anselmian attack on P2 is based on the claim that states of affairs like E ('all innocent creatures being maliciously tortured forever') are not genuinely possible. If this were so, then the fact that God cannot actualize them would not show that He lacks the maximum possible amount of power.

But why think that E is not a possible state of affairs? The argument goes like this. E is *so* bad that God's moral perfection prevents Him from so much as allowing its actualization. Since God exists and is morally perfect in every possible world, it follows that there is no possible world in which E obtains, in which case E is not a genuinely possible state of affairs.

This line is taken by Flint and Freddoso, as well as by Thomas Morris.¹¹ As these philosophers see it, God plays a very special role in the modal structure of reality.

As Morris puts it, God is the supreme ‘delimiter of possibility’. Since God exists in every possible world, nothing incompatible with His existence and nature is even possible. *God’s* limitations – unlike ours, and unlike McEar’s – are limitations on the very structure of reality. What is possible for Him is one of the things that determine which states of affairs are logically possible. Since God is essentially good, ‘worlds’ unworthy of being created are not genuinely possible worlds. States of affairs whose actualization God cannot allow are not genuinely possible states of affairs.

With this understood, the Anselmian can cheerfully acknowledge that the goodness of God’s nature prevents Him from actualizing worlds in which states of affairs like *E* obtain. And yet, so the story goes, this in no way compromises God’s omnipotence or prevents Him from having the maximum possible amount of power. No-one, no matter how powerful, could actualize states of affairs that are incompatible with God’s nature, and a large piece of our problem disappears.

Only ‘a large piece’, of course, because even if it provided a satisfactory explanation of God’s inability to actualize *some* evil states of affairs, the present proposal does not cover (and is not intended to cover) *all* the problem cases. It has nothing to say about those states of affairs that God’s necessary goodness prevents Him, but does not prevent others, from actualizing.

Think, for example, of an extreme case of thought control. Imagine someone who has been ‘brainwashed’ into believing that he is guilty of some crime. There is no sense in which he is responsible for what has happened to him. Someone else has ‘strongly actualized’ the state of affairs consisting in his believing that he is guilty. If Plantinga’s free will defence is as good as Flint and Freddoso believe, God’s necessary goodness is compatible with His *allowing* such things to happen. But presumably it is not compatible with His *causing* them to happen. Would God not be more powerful if He had the power to cause such things?

For states of affairs like these, some other solution is needed. As we have seen above, Flint and Freddoso attempt to provide for them by analysing omnipotence in such a way that it requires only that God be able weakly to actualize such states of affairs. I believe I have already shown that this is not sufficient for maximal power. If God does not have the power strongly to actualize such states of affairs, then it is easy to conceive of a being more powerful than God.

Leaving this point aside, let us concentrate our attention on those states of affairs that are the intended target of the present proposal – viz. those that are so evil that God cannot even *allow* their actualization. Suppose that there is no possible world in which *E* obtains because there is no possible world in which God allows it. Does the present proposal succeed in giving us a reason to think that God can possess maximal power even though He is unable to actualize *E*?

I doubt it. It seems to me that the main question is being put off rather than answered. ‘Why doesn’t God’s inability to actualize *E* count against his omnipotence?’ we ask. ‘Because *E* is not possible’, is the reply. ‘But why is *E* not

possible?’ ‘Because God cannot allow it’, we are told. Surely something has gone wrong here? God’s inability to do one thing is said not to count against His being omnipotent merely because there is something else that He can’t do! Why doesn’t this deeper inability show that God is not all-powerful?

A fanciful example may help to bring out the oddity of what is being proposed here. Suppose that one of God’s essential properties is an aesthetic aversion to the chiliagon – an aversion so strong that he cannot even allow the construction of chiliagon-shaped objects. If this were so, God would be unable to allow the construction of chiliagons. Would this not entail that God is not all-powerful? Not if our Anselmian theologians are right. Since God’s nature is a ‘delimiter of possibility’, it would show only that chiliagons are not genuinely possible.

My Anselmian opponents will doubtless deny that God could have an essential aversion to chiliagons. Since God’s nature is – *necessarily* – as it is, and since it does not include any such aversion to chiliagons, the ‘possibility’ I have floated is not a real possibility, and we don’t need to take it into account when framing our analysis of omnipotence.

This brings up a critical issue. When we say that omnipotence entails the maximum possible amount of power, what do we mean by ‘possible?’ And how do we go about deciding whether something is ‘possible’ in that sense?

Contemporary Anselmians (though not Anselm himself) make a sharp distinction between conceptual and metaphysical possibility. Conceptual possibility is comparatively straightforward. If, after careful thought, we can see no logical inconsistency or other absurdity in a concept, then we infer that its instantiation is possible. Metaphysical possibility is more difficult. There are fairly clear examples of things that are metaphysically possible (chiliagons, for example), and other clear examples of things that are not metaphysically possible (an intelligent prime number, say). But there is also a large grey area where we don’t know what to say. In this sense of ‘possible’, lots of things (McEer, perhaps, and states of affairs like *E*?) may not be metaphysically possible even though, *as far as we can see*, they contain no logical inconsistency.

In a well-known article¹² Peter van Inwagen argues that we know very little about the boundaries of metaphysical possibility, and he attempts to exploit this ‘modal scepticism’ (as he calls it) to defuse the problem of evil. Is there a possible world containing ‘higher level sentient creatures’ who suffer less than we do but which is not ‘massively irregular’ due to frequent divine intervention? Van Inwagen doesn’t know. For all we know, such a world may be metaphysically possible. But, for all we know, it may not be. Since we are poorly placed to make such judgments, van Inwagen thinks we are equally poorly placed to say whether God could have created a better world.

The importance of van Inwagen’s ‘modal scepticism’ in the present context is that it gives the Anselmian a seemingly easy response to the sort of objection I

have been urging. We may see no impossibility in God's having a necessary aversion to chiliagons, but that doesn't entail that this is possible in the relevant sense. So the Anselmian can reply, 'Even if your example is *conceptually* possible, it does not follow that it is *metaphysically* possible'.

But is metaphysical possibility the only sort of possibility that is relevant here? I am not sure. If we are trying to clarify the concept of omnipotence, then I think the modal scepticism that goes hand in hand with metaphysical possibility ought to give us pause. If we know so little about the boundaries of metaphysical possibility, it is at least not obvious that we should identify the degree of power required for omnipotence with the maximum *metaphysically* possible degree of power. *For all we know*, God's nature may include an aversion to all sorts of surprising things, many of which may be things that – intuitively – we think an omnipotent being ought to be able to do. Mustn't an adequate analysis of the concept of omnipotence be consistent with these sorts of intuitions?

At this point, the Anselmian may simply deny that he is in the business of analysing our crude pre-philosophical concept of 'being all-powerful'. Instead, he may say, he is trying to describe the essential features of that property which is picked out by our (no doubt very imperfect) concept of omnipotence. With regard to this task, metaphysical possibility is very much the subject under discussion, and it should not surprise us if a more accurate account of God's nature and God's relation to the world forced us to discard some of our intuitions about what an all-powerful being ought to be able to do.

Perhaps. On the other hand, it seems to me that if we stray too far from our pre-philosophical concept of omnipotence, we risk coming up with a fine analysis of something other than omnipotence. An analysis of the 'real nature' of water on which water isn't wet might be a fine account of something, but it would not be an account of the nature of water. Here too, I suggest, we must try to gain some insight into the nature of a certain (rather obscure) property, while remaining sufficiently true to the rough and inexact concept with which we began. If we are too quick to dismiss counter-examples on the ground that they are (or may be) only conceptually possible, we may open ourselves to the complaint that we have changed the subject. If we stray too far from our pre-philosophical criteria for applying the concept of omnipotence, there is no longer any guarantee that it is *omnipotence* that we have in our sights. We may speculate that the modal structure of reality is such that states of affairs like *E* are metaphysically impossible (in relation to God). But that provides no guarantee that our concept of omnipotence picks out a property that anything could have in a world with that modal structure.

I am suggesting that our intuitive criteria for making power comparisons should have a say in the analysis of omnipotence. If too much violence is done to them, then I think we can justly complain that the Anselmian has failed to provide an analysis of omnipotence. Instead of explaining what it is to be *all*-powerful, he has

merely explained how much power it is possible for someone to have, given the constraints of his own preferred theological position. That is an interesting and important project, but I do not believe that it provides us with a sound basis for rejecting P2.¹³

Doubts about P3

Before throwing in the towel, however, the Anselmian may wish to consider a completely different – and, to my way of thinking, more plausible – strategy for reconciling omnipotence with God’s inability to do evil. Rather than producing some tortured rationale for rejecting P2 (‘If God is omnipotent, He has the power to bring about *E*’), the Anselmian may focus on P3 (‘If God has the power to bring about *E*, then there is a possible world in which God brings about *E*’)? Is it really so clear that P3 is true?

Perhaps not. In ordinary life, there is all the difference in the world between someone who cannot do something evil because he lacks the power to do it and someone who cannot do it because he simply cannot ‘bring himself’ to do it. Suppose the man next door cannot rape a woman because he is paralysed. That’s one thing. Now suppose that he cannot do it because he cannot *bring himself* to do it – that it’s just not psychologically possible for him to rape anyone. That is another thing altogether. We may express this difference by saying that the first man does not have the (physical) power to rape anyone, whereas the second has the power, but cannot bring himself to exercise it.

When it is said that there is no possible world in which God actualizes states of affairs like *E*, we must ask *why* this is so before rushing to the conclusion that God is not omnipotent. Is God unable (in all those worlds) to actualize *E* because (in all of them) He does not have the power to do it? Or is it because God is so good in all those possible worlds that He simply cannot bring himself to exercise His power to do such a thing?

On the face of it, it is preposterous to suggest that God does not have the power to actualize states of affairs like *E* above. God surely has the power to make an innocent child. And God has the power to make a cattle prod. Presumably, He can place the cattle prod and the child in whatever position relative to one another He pleases, and keep them there for as long as He likes. When placed on the child, the cattle prod produces intense pain. Surely it follows that God has the power to actualize the state of affairs that consists in an innocent child being tortured for as long as you like. And this will be so whether or not God can bring Himself to exercise this power.

Assuming that God’s essential nature is such that He cannot bring himself to actualize states of affairs like *E*, it follows that P3 is mistaken. God may have powers that He does not choose to exercise in any possible world.¹⁴

Before the Anselmian can cheerfully accept this solution, however, he must deal with an important objection. Even if God has the power to actualize the likes of *E*, it still seems that He lacks the power to exercise His power to actualize such states of affairs. That is because He lacks a certain power over Himself – the power to bring it about that He chooses to actualize states of affairs like *E*. Will it not follow from this that God does not possess the maximum possible amount of power? That He is not *all*-powerful?

We can see how an Anselmian might go about answering this objection if we reflect briefly on another, related puzzle. It is generally thought that no necessarily existent being could commit suicide. Now suppose someone were to argue like this. ‘There could have been a being, Sam, who has as much power as God in other respects, but who can commit suicide. If, therefore, God cannot annihilate Himself, He does not possess the maximum possible amount of power.’

I think the Anselmian has a plausible reply to this. The objection has failed to give an example of a state of affairs that the imagined being (Sam) can actualize but which God cannot actualize. Neither God nor Sam can actualize the state of affairs that consists in *God's* being annihilated. Sam can commit suicide – he can bring about the state of affairs consisting in *Sam's* non-existence. But presumably God can bring about *that* state of affairs. So the objection fails to show that God does not have the maximum possible amount of power.

Might not a similar reply serve to show that God's inability to choose evil is not incompatible with maximal power? It is true, an Anselmian might say, that God does not have the power to actualize any state of affairs that consists in God's choosing to do something *God* would not be justified in doing. But that is not a possible power. Since there is no possible world in which *God* makes a wrong choice, there is no possible world in which *anything* causes God to go wrong. So the ‘power to make God choose wrongly’ is not a power that anyone could have had. And the fact that God lacks this (so-called) ‘power’ in no way counts against His having the maximum possible amount of (genuine) power.

‘But wait a minute!’ someone may reply. ‘Why couldn't there be a being – again call it ‘Sam’ – just as powerful as God is in other respects who has, in addition, the power to cause himself to make wrong choices? Wouldn't such a being be more powerful than God?’

No. Even if a being like Sam were possible, he would not be able to actualize the precise state of affairs that God cannot actualize, since he would not have the ability to cause *God* to make wrong choices. What Sam *can* do is to actualize the state of affairs that consists in ‘*Sam's* making a wrong choice’. Does that make God less powerful than Sam? Hardly. God (we may suppose) can make Sam make a wrong choice (though for logical reasons, God cannot make Sam *freely* make a wrong choice).¹⁵

When we put matters in this way, it doesn't look as if Sam has the edge on God in terms of power to cause evil choices. Sam can bring himself to do things that he

cannot bring God to do. God can bring Sam to do things that He cannot bring himself to do. So the objection collapses. From the fact that God cannot actualize any state of affairs that consists in *God's* making a wrong choice we cannot conclude that God does not have the maximum possible degree of power.¹⁶

If this is right, then God may well have the power to actualize states of affairs like *E* even though there is no possible world in which He exercises that power, and P₃ is false.

In defence of P₃

This is quite an attractive proposal. The distinction between being able to do something and being able to bring oneself to do it is not contrived or esoteric. It is one that we make in everyday life. And because it does not require us to deny that God has the power to actualize the likes of *E*, this proposal avoids some of the pitfalls we discussed earlier. Could this be the solution to the whole problem?

Before we can draw that conclusion with any assurance, we need to know more about what is meant by 'power' when it is said that God has the power to actualize *E*, and we need to know whether maximal power in that sense of 'power' is all that is required for omnipotence.

The sense of 'power' being invoked here seems to be a kind of conditional power. Aquinas puts the matter this way:

Nevertheless, the Philosopher says (Topic. iv, 3) that God can deliberately do what is evil. But this must be understood either on a condition, the antecedent of which is impossible – as, for instance, if we were to say that God can do evil things if He will. For there is no reason why a conditional proposition should not be true, though both the antecedent and consequent are impossible: as if one were to say: 'If man is a donkey, he has four feet'.¹⁷

If, *per impossible*, God were to choose to actualize an evil state of affairs, He would succeed. In that sense, He has the power to actualize it. But the antecedent of this conditional is impossible – God cannot choose to actualize an evil state of affairs.¹⁸

Following the lead of Aquinas, I propose the following definition of this kind of power.

CP A person *P* has the power to actualize a state of affairs *S* =_{df} if *P* were to choose to actualize *S*, she would succeed in actualizing *S*.

CP allows us to say that God has the power actualize *E*, even if He cannot bring himself to exercise that power. But it doesn't help much when we ask the next question. What does it mean to say that God does (or does not) have the power to bring Himself to actualize *E*? Presumably this power will have to be understood as the power to choose to actualize *E*. How, then, shall we analyse the power to choose?

Since the making of a choice is normally, at least, a basic act (one not done 'by' doing something else), there must be some choices that are immediately available

to God – and not merely available to Him *if* He does something else. If this is right, then the power to make choices (and thus to actualize those states of affairs that consist in one's making those choices) must be a *basic* power – one that is not further analysable. Obviously, CP throws no light at all on the nature of such basic powers.

So it looks as if we are going to need to distinguish two kinds of power – the power to actualize those states of affairs that consist in the making of one's own basic choices, and the power to actualize all other states of affairs. Let's call these two sorts of power 'basic power' and 'conditional power', respectively.

Which sense of 'power' is wanted in the analysis of maximal power and omnipotence? Basic power or conditional power? Or both? The present proposal considers only conditional power. But surely this is a mistake. No matter how much conditional power one has, that will not by itself make one omnipotent, since it leaves open the possibility of a being who is powerless to choose things that an omnipotent being ought to be able to choose. An example or two will make this clear.

Imagine first a being *B* who suffers from a kind of mental paralysis. If *B* could only decide what to do, she could do just about anything – her conditional power is as unlimited as can be. But when it comes to basic power, *B* is a weakling. Surely that is sufficient to show that she is not omnipotent?

Alternatively, suppose that *B* is a being whose power to choose is limited in various ways. *B* has, let us suppose, an irrational aversion to the colour purple. If *B* were to choose to make a purple shirt, she would succeed. In that sense *B* has the power to make a purple shirt. She just can't 'bring herself' to do so. Do we need to know more about what *B* can and cannot do to know that *B* is not omnipotent? Do we need to discover some limit in *B*'s conditional power before concluding that she does not have maximal power?

I take these examples to show that basic power is (also) relevant to the analysis of omnipotence. An omnipotent being must have great basic power as well as great conditional power. The next question is whether the limit imposed on God's basic power by His necessary moral perfection entails that He is not omnipotent. A simple thought experiment may help us decide.

Let's imagine a being *D* who is much like the Anselmian God with regard to its non-moral attributes. *D* has, let us suppose, as much conditional power as it is possible to have, and *D* has great basic power too. But *D*'s basic power is limited in the following way: *D* cannot choose to actualize any state of affairs that is not either evil in itself or else necessary for some other evil state of affairs. Unlike the Anselmian God, *D* has no difficulty whatever 'bringing himself' to torture children. What *D* cannot bring himself to do is to cause goods like sunsets and symphonies and babies' smiles unless he knows that they are required for some outweighing evil.

Does *D* have maximal power? I don't think so. *D* is enslaved by his own evil

passions – he is utterly incapable of choosing as he ought. Would it help to suppose that *D*'s wickedness is an essential feature of *D*, or that no-one other than *D* could cause *D* to choose the good? Again, I don't think so. There is a certain self-control that *D* lacks – a kind of self-control that is required for maximal power.

Here, then, is the problem. Why should we not make a parallel judgement about Anselm's God? As I have imagined *D*, he has as much conditional power as God. The restriction on *D*'s basic power is severe, but no more so than the restriction on God's basic power. So if the limitation on basic power is sufficient to render *D* non-omnipotent, why doesn't it do the same for God?

At this point, there will be a temptation for the Anselmian retort that, since God exists and since the existence of *D* is not compossible with the existence of God, nothing like *D* is metaphysically possible. For reasons that I have already gone into above, I do not think this is an adequate response. We may, if we like, derive all sorts of surprising metaphysical impossibilities from our preferred brand of theism, but then there will be no guarantee that the modal structure of reality is compatible with the existence of an omnipotent being. As far we can see, the most powerful conceivable being might be far more powerful than a being with the maximum metaphysically possible degree of power. The latter may be unable to do all sorts of things that, intuitively, an omnipotent being ought to be able to do. If we are interested in seeing what is required for omnipotence, we should not be too quick to throw out perfectly intelligible and consistently conceivable counter-examples on the ground that they are not compatible with our preferred version of theism.

It may again be useful to compare the problem posed by a necessarily perfect being's inability to make evil choices with the problem posed by the impossibility of a necessary being's committing suicide. I suggested above – and continue to believe – that this latter inability is not inconsistent with maximal power. This is a surprising result, but once the case is fully understood, I do not think we run foul of any strong pre-philosophical intuition about maximal power. How, we may well ask, could anything, no matter how powerful, annihilate something that (in virtue of its nature) cannot be annihilated?

But note how different the suicide case is from the one we are principally concerned with. The impossibility of God's committing suicide does not spring from the fact that He cannot choose to do so or from any limitation in His *basic* power. God does not have even conditional power to commit suicide. Even if – *per impossible* – God chose to commit suicide, He could not do so, because the non-existence of God is simply not a possible state of affairs.¹⁹

We said that both great basic power and great conditional power are required for omnipotence. Just how much of each? I have no idea, but I see no reason to deny that maximal power overall will require enough basic power to make *both* good and evil choices. A final thought experiment will make it clear why I think so.

Suppose that there is a being just like the Anselmian God except that (a)

although it is morally perfect, it is not *necessarily* so; and (b) its basic power extends to *both* good *and* evil choices. Would such a being not be more powerful – in some very intuitive sense of ‘powerful’ – than the Anselmian God is supposed to be? I think it would be. Does it matter if such a being is not ‘really’ (‘metaphysically’) possible? Again, I don’t think so. Not if we are trying to see what it would take for our concept of omnipotence to pick out anything in the real world.

An important qualification

An important qualification is in order. The argument of this section presupposes that it makes sense to speak of a power to choose evil. This will be denied by some philosophers. Those who, like Plato and Aquinas (to name only two), believe that one *necessarily* chooses what one conceives of as good, may insist that the ability to choose evil is not an active power, but a liability – a liability that is due either to ignorance or to weakness. If we are capable of choosing evil, that is either because we do not correctly identify it as evil, or else because our better judgement is overcome by the weight of irrational desires and inclinations.

The bearing of such a view on the analysis of omnipotence is clear. Omnipotence requires the maximum possible amount of active power – not maximum liability to error. In a well-known passage in the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas argues that God cannot sin precisely *because* He is omnipotent. ‘To sin is to fall short of a perfect action; hence to be able to sin is to be able to fall short in action, which is repugnant to omnipotence. Therefore it is that God cannot sin, because of His omnipotence.’²⁰ On Aquinas’s view, the ‘ability to fall short’ is not a genuine power. So far from being required for omnipotence, it is ‘repugnant’ to it. Now since choosing evil is a way of ‘falling short’ of what (at the deepest level) one is trying for, it follows that the inability to choose evil is not a weakness, but a strength. Since it provides security against failure, this unique inability entails *more* power, not less.

The proper analysis of will, and of weakness of will, is a difficult and much discussed problem – one that I cannot hope to resolve within the compass of the present essay. Here I shall confine myself to pointing out that most contemporary Anselmians cannot consistently accept Aquinas’s view of the matter. The reason is that they are libertarians who believe that human persons are free, in an incompatibilist sense, to choose between good and evil. Such freedom entails both the power to choose what one knows to be good and the power to choose what one knows to be evil. Anselmians who believe in this sort of freedom – and who tout the free will defence as a solution the logical problem of evil – are hardly in a position to deny that there is a genuine, active power knowingly to choose evil.²¹

Conclusion

We have been looking for a solution to our puzzle about omnipotence and necessary moral perfection – one that provides a strong reason for denying one of

P1–P3. P1 and P2 have survived the best efforts of Anselmians to refute them. P3 has also emerged (relatively) unscathed. Unless we are prepared to say that there is no active power – human or divine – knowingly to choose evil, I think it is fairly clear that true omnipotence must include the power to choose evil.

So what if (as I am inclined to think) P1–P3 are all true? What if there simply is no account of omnipotence that is both close enough to our pre-philosophical intuitions about power comparisons and at the same time perfectly consistent with necessary moral goodness? How big a problem would this be for the Anselmian conception of God?

Perhaps not so very big, after all. If P1–P3 are all true, then there is no possible combination of attributes that includes both omnipotence and necessary moral perfection. But it doesn't at all follow that God does not exist, or that God is not the greatest possible being, possessing the best possible combination of attributes. What follows is only that the best *possible* combination of attributes does not include both omnipotence and necessary moral perfection.

Two 'backup' positions are worthy of consideration. The first alternative is the one recommended by Nelson Pike. It continues to insist that God is omnipotent, but concedes that God is not morally perfect in every possible world. As long as God is morally perfect in the actual world, all is well.

For those who think that necessary moral perfection contributes more to the 'greatness' of God than omnipotence, a second alternative has much to recommend it. Perhaps the greatest possible being is (a) necessarily morally perfect; and (b) as powerful as is logically consistent with (a).²² That would make it very powerful indeed – powerful enough to create the world, powerful enough to perform all sorts of (good) miracles. Powerful enough to ensure that evil will finally be defeated, that world history will have a wonderfully good outcome, that virtue will not go unrewarded, and that innocent suffering will not go uncompensated. Such a being would have enough power to satisfy our deepest longings for love and peace and justice. In sum, it would have enough power not to detract in any way from God's greatness or make Him unworthy of unconditional worship and devotion.

Even with the restrictions on power that flow from necessary moral perfection, the greatest possible being would have enough power to satisfy the Psalmist. 'Great is your power', he wrote, but then added, 'your wisdom is *immeasurable*'.^{23,24}

Notes

1. As quoted by St Augustine in Henry Chadwick (transl.) *Confession* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 1.
2. Nelson Pike 'Omnipotence and God's ability to sin', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 6 (1969), 208–216.
3. Peter Geach *Providence and Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), ch. 1.

4. This example is borrowed from Thomas P. Flint and Alfred J. Freddoso 'Maximal power', in Alfred J. Freddoso (ed.) *The Existence and Nature of God* (Notre Dame IN and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 81–113.
5. The concept of 'maximal power' provides one useful test for omnipotence. But in order to rule out the possibility that, for any possible degree of power, a greater degree is also possible, one would need to define omnipotence in some other way – probably in a way that involves the troublesome little word, 'all'. If an omnipotent being can do 'all things' (in some suitably restricted sense of 'things'), then it may be plausible to say that no one could have more power than *that*.
6. Flint and Freddoso 'Maximal power'.
7. *Ibid.*, 102.
8. *Ibid.*
9. On the basis of their own (extraordinarily complicated) analysis of omnipotence, Flint and Freddoso would also reject P₂ of the reconstructed argument. I will not repeat their analysis here – but later I will consider and reject what I take to be their main argument against P₃.
10. Edward R. Wierenga *The Nature of God* (Ithaca NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1989), 16–17 (my italics). The label of this proposition is mine, not Wierenga's.
11. Thomas Morris *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1986), 108–136.
12. Peter van Inwagen 'The problem of evil, the problem of air, and the problem of silence', *Philosophical Perspectives*, 5 (1991), 35–165.
13. I would be much more favourably disposed toward the claim that the Anselmian God is a 'delimiter of possibility' if I thought the ontological argument was sound. But when those of us who don't think the ontological argument is sound are comparing different theologies and wondering whether the 'God' who figures in one or another of those theologies is omnipotent, it seems to me out of order just to assume that the Anselmian theology is the correct one. If the God who figures in a non-Anselmian theology has all the power possessed by the Anselmian God plus some power not possessed by his Anselmian counterpart, then I think non-Anselmians are well within their epistemic rights if they conclude that the Anselmian God is not omnipotent – or at least that this God is omnipotent only in a special, Anselmian, sense of the word. When the Anselmian replies that the alternative theology (the one with the more powerful God) is not metaphysically possible because the Anselmian God exists, this merely confirms my suspicion that he makes metaphysical possibility to be whatever it needs it to be in order to suit the requirements of his preferred theological position.
14. This sort of position is briefly defended in Thomas Morris 'Perfection and power', in *Anselmian Explorations* (Notre Dame IN: Notre Dame Press, 1987), 70–75.
15. God may not be able to bring Himself to exercise this power, but that is another matter.
16. However, a more serious objection may be found in the near neighbourhood. Consider the state of affairs consisting, not in *God's* making a wrong choice, and not in *Sam's* making a wrong choice, but in 'someone or other's *freely* making a wrong choice'. It might be argued that Sam is more powerful than God on the ground that Sam, but not God, can actualize this state of affairs. Below, I argue that God would be more powerful if He had complete control over His own choices.
17. Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologiae*, I. 25. 3.
18. I am assuming that some subjunctive conditionals with impossible antecedents are non-trivially true. I don't know how to improve on the standard semantics for subjunctive conditions; but this much seems clear to me. Subjunctive conditionals with impossible antecedents are not always trivially true. To see why, suppose our Anselmian friends are right and God necessarily exists. Then each of the following counterfactuals has an impossible antecedent: (a) If God did not exist, the world would not have been created by God; (b) If God did not exist, the world would have been created by God. It seems to me (and to a lot of other people) that that (a) is true and (b) false. For a helpful discussion of this issue, see Linda Zagzebski 'What if the impossible had been actual?', in Michael Beatty (ed.) *Christian Theism and the Problems of Philosophy* (Notre Dame IN and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 165–183.
19. I believe that Aquinas was exactly right in taking it to be true that 'if a man were an ass he would have four legs' but false that 'if a man were an ass he would have two legs'. See note 18 above.
20. Aquinas *Summa Theologiae*, I. 25. 3.

21. It is perhaps also worth noting that Anselm (not himself a free will defender) at one point speaks of 'the power not to sin or to serve sin' and of 'the power it [the will of the first man] had of sinning'. See ch. 2 'On free will', in Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (eds) *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 177.
22. If omnipotence is defined as the maximum possible degree of power consistent with God's *other* attributes, then of course omnipotence will be consistent with all of those attributes. But this amounts to no more than a verbal solution to our problem. Truth in advertising requires that the theist mean more than this when he says that God is all-powerful. For a more sympathetic treatment of this suggestion, see Morris 'Perfection and power', 70–75, and George Schlesinger 'Divine attributes' in his *New Perspectives on Old-Time Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 4–41.
23. My italics. See note 1 above.
24. I wish to express my thanks to the Editor and referees of *Religious Studies* for their helpful criticisms and suggestions.