

## Establishing a New Standard for Divine Omnipotence

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### Abstract:

“Omnipotence” is one of the most critical terms in philosophy of religion. A significant amount of time has been devoted to determining precisely what omnipotence means and what it entails. The task of deciphering the meaning of omnipotence has generally been tied solely to specifying the kinds of tasks that an omnipotent being could do. Moreover, the discussion around this term has mostly been an investigation into what types of tasks an omnipotent being ought to be able to do, leaving out any discussion of *how* an omnipotent being goes about accomplishing those tasks. More than just the ability to carry out an action, the manner in which an operation is carried out can denote varying levels of power so when discussing omnipotence, the two aspects ought not to be addressed independently. As it is used in the philosophy of religion today and has been for a substantial amount of time, omnipotence is only concerned with the *what*, and not the *how* of divine acts. I argue that the *how* aspect of these divine acts is the real marker of omnipotence, and that such a reconceptualization of divine omnipotence can have consequences in both theology and philosophy.

**Keywords:** Divine; Attributes; Omnipotence; Efficiency; God; Christian; Religion

### Introduction

Omnipotence, a central term in nearly every philosophical discussion regarding the nature and characteristics of the Judeo-Christian God, seems like quite a straight-forward concept but anybody who has taken a first-year philosophy of religion course knows that this is just not the case. This essay serves as a condensed treatment of some considerations that I originally address throughout several chapters in Harper (2020). Fittingly, there are many interpretations of just precisely what possessing divine omnipotence entails, and even more interpretations of how these entailments can be interpreted to explain the kinds of tasks that God can or cannot carry out. My intent for this article is not to put forward an idea of what I think the *correct* interpretation of omnipotence is, nor is it to carry on with the debate of what kinds of tasks an omnipotent God can or cannot carry out, instead my aim is to start where the work of previous philosophers has ended and to present a way to re-conceptualize God’s omnipotence.

That is, I will argue that we ought not to evaluate God’s omnipotence solely in terms of *what* He can do, but that we must also assess it by taking into consideration *how* He goes about carrying out the tasks that he does. I argue that, in the case of evaluating omnipotence, the method by which an actions is carried out is just as important as the action itself. When discussing omnipotence the

process is an essential component of the product and the two are inextricably linked to one another. Up to this point philosophers have only discussed one aspect, largely neglecting to address the other essential component. To be sure, what I will go on to argue for in this essay will, if accepted, carry with it a slew metaphysical consequences; some, many, or even all, of which may be firmly resisted by classical theists since they may call for a substantially revised conception in the overall nature of the God of classical Judeo-Christian theism. In the interest of time and space, however, I will only briefly address one of these potential metaphysical consequences here and, aside from that brief digression, my aim is solely to discuss the divine attribute of omnipotence and how we ought to move forward with a new perspective.

### **Motivations**

My motivation for writing a paper on the topic of omnipotence is that, while it is an essential topic within almost any discussion about the nature of God, I have found myself unsatisfied with many of the contemporary and historical philosophical accounts of exactly how we are to interpret divine omnipotence and what exactly any of those interpretations entails in terms of what kinds of tasks we can reasonably expect an omnipotent God to be able to carry out. Any plausible account of omnipotence ought not only to be theologically and philosophically consistent within itself but ought also to provide us with a reasonable, applicable, practical guide regarding God's action. While some accounts may be stronger in the former, they lack in the latter, and while some may be stronger in the latter, they lack in the former. Some of these accounts will be discussed in the following section.

Although we do not seem to have a plausible account of omnipotence that satisfies both theoretical and practical aspects of the topic, the discussion of omnipotence has largely become stagnant within the philosophy of religion. It seems that a consensus has been reached, but this consensus does little, if anything at all, to tell us what kinds of tasks we can reasonably expect an omnipotent God to be able to carry out. While I do not endeavor to provide a stable and unifying theory to put this problem to rest, I propose that we need to take another look at the topic, with fresh eyes, and approach it from a new perspective. Approaching the subject of omnipotence from another angle, namely the *method* through which God brings about whatever it is that He brings about, paired with the existing work that deals exclusively with what kinds of tasks it is possible for God to do, may bring us closer to attaining a unified theory that more fully satisfies the theoretical and practical requirements of a plausible account of omnipotence.

### **Foundations**

To put forth a meaningful discussion on this topic, I must first present a sample of the foundational groundwork that has been laid by some other philosophers of religion on this topic. This groundwork will serve two functions. Firstly, it will allow for the arguments that I will go on to make to be comfortably situated within the greater historical dialogue. And, secondly, it will provide clarity to my proposed position since some of the ideas that I incorporate into my account

draw from accounts of omnipotence first our forth by other philosophers.

At a glance, and perhaps most naturally, many could take God's omnipotence to entail that He can do absolutely any task possible – a sort of unlimited and infinite power over anything and everything. This kind of omnipotence is most famously argued for by Rene Descartes and later defended by Harry Frankfurt in his 1964 essay "The Logic of Omnipotence."<sup>1</sup> Most evident through his May 27th letter to Mersenne in 1630<sup>2</sup>, Descartes argues that it is wrong to think that God can only do those tasks that can be described in a logically coherent way, writing that God is "...as free to make it false that all the radii of a circle are equal as to refrain from creating the world."

Similarly, in an earlier letter to Mersenne, Descartes writes "...we can be quite certain that God can do whatever we can understand, but not that He cannot do what we are unable to understand. For it would be presumptuous to think that our imagination extends as far as His power"<sup>3</sup>. Frankfurt, along the same lines as Descartes, would likely agree with Descartes in his interpretation that the "things that are beyond our imagination" include, and are reducible to, logically impossible tasks. Meaning that God can perform such things as drawing a square circle, making  $2+2=7$ , and creating a stone so heavy that God Himself cannot lift it<sup>4,5</sup>. For God, as would argue Descartes and Frankfurt, to carry out logically impossible tasks is the ultimate display of His power and, since His power is unlimited, there is no reason that logical possibility ought to play any factor in determining His abilities or the kinds of tasks that He can carry out.<sup>6</sup> This kind of interpretation of omnipotence is one that is not typically accepted as plausible in most contemporary philosophical discussions and is an interpretation that is far too strong for my purposes here.

A conception of omnipotence argued for by Kenneth Pearce and Alexander Pruss is a conception that approaches defining omnipotence in a slightly different way than has typically been done. Pearce and Pruss say that we need to examine, describe, and attribute omnipotence not solely by listing off various difficult tasks that an omnipotent being would and should be able to carry out, but we must simultaneously look at the being's will to carry out these tasks<sup>7</sup>. Without going into too much detail on their account, Pearce and Pruss argue that for a being to be truly omnipotent, rather than just being able to perform any difficult task that an omnipotent being should be able to accomplish this being's will must be properly positioned as well. For any being "x is omnipotent if and only if x has perfect freedom of will and x has perfect efficacy of will."<sup>8</sup> Of course, there is a lot more to be said about what specifically freedom of will and efficacy of will mean, in this sense, and Pearce and Pruss go on to flesh that out in the remainder of their essay, but the critical aspect of their account, for our purposes here, is that they conceive of omnipotence not solely being determined in terms of particular tasks being carried out; instead they conceive of it in terms of that *in addition to* another factor. In this specific case, that additional factor is the will of the acting being.

Of the overall debate surrounding the nature of God's omnipotence, Nick Trakakis writes that "[n]o matter how much controversy and debate may currently surround the extraordinary attribute of divine omnipotence, there is virtually complete consensus amongst philosophers and theologians that Aquinas is correct in saying that 'anything that implies a contradiction does not fall

under God's omnipotence'..."<sup>9</sup> so I do not choose to move forward with the views of omnipotence forwarded by Descartes and Frankfurt, as mentioned earlier. The conception of omnipotence that I adopt is closely related to the view first presented by Aquinas<sup>10</sup> and later forwarded by George Mavrodes<sup>11</sup> which do not argue for the irrelevance of logic when it comes to God's abilities to carry out specific tasks. Mavrodes argues that God's capabilities are limited by logic, in that He cannot carry out tasks that are logically impossible.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to that, due to God's nature, there are specific tasks that, while they may be logically possible to carry out for you or me, are not logically possible for God. The example used by Mavrodes is asking whether God can create a stone too heavy for Himself to lift, a classic dilemma traditionally used to question God's omnipotence. For if God cannot create a stone too heavy for Himself to lift then, through His inability to create such a stone, there is clearly at least one task that He cannot carry out, whereas if He can create the stone too heavy for Him to lift, through His inability to lift the stone there is still clearly another task that He cannot carry out. No matter how the question is answered, it seems that we arrive at the same conclusion: there is a task that is not inherently self-contradictory that God cannot perform, which means that God is not omnipotent. For Mavrodes, even though such a task is not self-contradictory for you or me, for a being whom we already view as omnipotent, this is a self-contradictory task, and cannot be appropriately seen as an object of power. He calls tasks like this "pseudo-tasks" and claims that the inability of God, or any omnipotent being, to carry out these pseudo-tasks is not damaging to the doctrine of omnipotence<sup>13</sup>.

The account of omnipotence put forth by Mavrodes<sup>14</sup> is useful as a starting point but one that must also be expanded on. Mavrodes' account does not include much examination of pseudo-tasks, apart from ones commonly discussed: ones such as drawing a square circle, or of creating a stone too heavy for God to lift. I aim to extend this list of pseudo-tasks to include tasks that are not within God's nature and, more specifically, methods by which God we would not expect God to act. That is to say, it cannot be considered an object of power to expect God to carry out tasks in ways that are not consistent with His nature, and thus if He cannot perform tasks in ways that are not within His nature, it ought not to be viewed as detrimental to the doctrine of omnipotence. This will be another case in which specific tasks, while they are possible to be carried out by us since there is no apparent contradiction precluding us from acting against our general nature, cannot be carried out by God since His nature is absolute to a maximal degree.

My focus of something that would be out of God's nature, taking from the two-tiered approach of Pearce and Pruss<sup>15</sup>, will be on God acting in a less than perfectly efficient way. Given God's great power and knowledge, it would be reasonable to suspect that, not only does He know the most efficient way to achieve certain ends, but He also can do whatever is necessary to achieve those ends most efficiently. For a being with such abilities, it would seem unnatural and unnecessary to go about actualizing some desire by any way other than the most direct and efficient way. Given this, acting in a less than perfectly efficient way is something that we ought to include in the realm of actions that are not within God's power to do, but poses no threat to His omnipotence. Anybody

who wishes to propose that God can act in a less than perfectly efficient way ought to have the burden of proof placed on them, and they are then tasked with providing a reasonable explanation for why we ought to expect God to act inefficiently. There seems to be no reasonable motivation for the claim that there is anything to be gained by God acting in a less than perfectly efficient manner so to venture that we can, even in rare circumstances, expect God to act inefficiently would be a difficult, unnecessary and counterintuitive claim to put forth. I call this position, and overall approach to omnipotence, that denies the possibility for God to act in a less than perfectly efficient way Divine Efficiency.<sup>16</sup> Let us apply this directly to the case of creation and divine intervention.

### **The position and Consequence**

In creating the world and all of the natural laws that govern it, God would have had the foresight and ability to create a world that thereafter carried on exactly how He so chose.<sup>17</sup> That is to say; He could have set up the initial physical conditions of the world in such a way as to allow for the natural laws to guarantee that certain events come to pass exactly as He would have wanted them to.<sup>18</sup> To assert that God needs to intervene in the natural world following its creation to actualize some state of affairs that He desires is merely to assert that God is acting in a less than perfectly efficient manner. To say that God intervenes in the natural world is to say the He is amending His initial creation and, for a being who could have created the world to play out in precisely the way that He wanted, the addition of divine intervention seems to be an unnecessary complication signaling something less than perfection. Again, the burden of proof here ought to be on the objector arguing for a more complex theory, providing us with reasonable assertions for why one would or should be inclined to posit a more complex account that carries with it no additional explanatory benefits.

Let us explore the concept of divine efficiency through an example that many of us will be familiar with. Let us imagine that Chris and Paul are both in the same upper-level philosophy course in their final year of university. They are both tasked with the final assignment of writing a philosophy paper on the epistemic justification of miraculous events. Let us also imagine that there is some objective marker that denotes a perfect philosophy paper, something greater than merely a 100% grade, rather something transcendent that make it THE perfect paper. The greatest conceivable paper, for lack of better term. Let us also imagine that the person who is grading these papers is required to choose one of the two papers as the superior one – which will also denote the better, or more powerful, student.

Now, let us finally imagine that, upon the due date of the assignment, both Chris and Paul independently, yet simultaneously, turn in assignments that are both identical and exemplify the perfect philosophy paper. They both exemplify the greatest conceivable philosophy paper yet, and it is not the case that *both* can be the greatest conceivable philosophy paper. We must also recall that, given the parameters of our thought experiment, our grader must choose one of the two papers as the superior one which, in turn, denotes the more powerful student.

Now, given that two final products are identical, how exactly are we to determine which of

these two young men wrote the best philosophy paper and, in turn, displayed more power in producing their respective philosophy papers?<sup>19</sup>, then how should we go about it?

To make such a decision, given the identical nature of the final products, we must explore the process by which each product came to be. In the first case, Chris wrote his philosophy paper in the traditional way with which many of us are familiar. Chris began by writing an outline for his paper, a draft, revised the draft by going through and making major and minor changes to his ideas, structure and overall presentation, and concluded with an editing stage in which he corrected all of the factual, grammatical and spelling errors that remained. After going through this process of construction, revision and correction over a period of time, Chris ended up with the perfect philosophy paper which he promptly submitted. On the other hand, Paul quietly sat down at his desk and wrote his paper from start to finish.

He did not go back to make any revisions, he did no editing and just ended up with the perfect philosophy paper which he, like Chris, promptly submitted. Now, if we are to choose which of these two young men displayed a higher degree of power in writing identical perfect philosophy papers, I would argue that it was Paul because of the high degree of efficiency with which he carried out his task. Surely, to be able to write the perfect philosophy paper is an excellent display of power, by any standards, but to draft one in the most efficient way possible, namely without having to go back and make any corrections or revisions, is a more magnificent display of power. Given two identical outcomes, the most desirable, powerful, and the best process of arriving at that outcome will generally be the most efficient one. Just as it is less efficient for us to write a philosophy paper using no punctuation and then go back and revise it by adding punctuation afterward than it is to write a perfect philosophy paper in the first place, it is less efficient for God to intervene in the world to actualize some particular state of events when He could have initially created the world in such a way that that state of affairs would come to pass naturally anyway. Now, rather than having just one thing govern the operation of the natural world (the natural laws), there is another entity that has been added to the equation to account for other aspects of the operation of the natural world (God).

Admittedly, it would be no extra effort for God to both create and introduce natural laws to govern the operation of the world while at the same time choosing to intervene within it actively, but this is merely an unnecessary and extra level of complication to the explanatory account of the processes in our world. So, just as Paul ought to be credited with the possession of greater power for his display of efficiency, so too must the deistic God.

Now, applied directly to the case of our world, this would mean that, in creating the world, God would be able to set it up in such a way as to allow for every event in the world to occur precisely as He so chose (if there happened to be any events that He desired to occur at some particular time or some particular place). To expect God to intervene in the natural order of things is to presume that He takes an indirect route.<sup>20</sup> In bringing about those particular desired events, where having taken a direct route (namely, initially setting it up so that the events would come to take place without His intervention) would have been more efficient and required no extra effort at all. There

is just no reason to think that God would consider anything less than a direct route in actualizing His will and, as such, it would be against His nature to do so. Following the reasoning from above, performing such a task is not in the nature of God, and therefore it is not really a task, instead, it is a pseudo-task whose preclusion poses no threat to the doctrine of omnipotence. So, just as we cannot reasonably expect God to act in nature, we also cannot deem His inability to do so as detrimental to His omnipotence. Of course, the objection can be raised that the most efficient way for any process to be carried out is for God to merely intervene and actualize it Himself, rather than taking the indirect route of setting up natural laws that then govern the actualization of these processes. The problem with such an objection that calls for simplicity, however, is that there is no debate that natural laws are in place and are functioning to facilitate natural processes in our universe, and by positing an active God to explain the actualization of some processes a second mode of operation now becomes present in our world. So, in calling for simplicity through the insertion of an active God, such an objection muddies the waters by adding a secondary mode of actualization to work alongside the evident laws of nature. This additional mode of action would be required only if God's act of creating the world had failed to do everything that would ever be needed.

### **Potential Objection**

One potential objection to what I have argued comes at the debate by introducing free will to the discussion. One could venture that God acting in the natural order of the world and circumventing natural laws is not a sign of diminished omniscience, omnipotence, or some other omni-attribute, rather it is simply an indication of the value that God placed on free will. This objection could go something along these lines: God values free will more than anything else (or at least it is near the top of his concerns) and in allowing creatures to have and display free will it is a consequence that certain potentially negative or unwanted states of affairs may come to pass. Rather than placing limitations on the free will of His creations, since He values it so much, God chooses to suspend or circumvent natural laws in order to bring about particular state of affairs that He so desires. This allows God's will to be done and for us to carry on without any intrusions on our free will and, as such, indicates no deficiencies in any of God's abilities.

While I have only presented a general outline of the possible objection it is easy to see how an objection of that nature could be easily put forth. The problem is, however, that such an objection waffles back and forth between two distinct targets and does not actually pinpoint the object of God's will. In the first case, the object of God's will is posited as the creation and continued existence of free will in His creations while in the second case the object of God's will is posited as bringing about some particular state of affairs. The proponent of this brand of objection cannot have it both ways and argue that both of these concerns top God's priority list. If God's desire, or top priority, was to create beings who exercised free will then He would simply do so in the most efficient way possible, namely through creating a world and populating it with creatures who enjoy free will. There is no need for the insertion of miracles or divine intervention. If, on the other hand,

His primary concern was to create a world that played out in such a way that certain states of affairs come to be, then He would simply create a world in which the natural laws bring it about that these states of affairs come to pass, with or without complete free will. An objection of this sort simply confuses what God's actual motivation and intent was or is. It is not important what the specific intent was but what is important is that there was one and that we ought to believe that God chose the most efficient way possible to actualize that intent.

## Conclusion

If, as I have argued, we ought to start evaluating God's omnipotence through, not just the kinds of acts He does but, how He does these acts, then this could have at least two significant and immediate ramifications for theology and philosophy of religion. In the first case, for theology, it would mean that theists would have to re-evaluate the nature of miracles and divine intervention seriously. If the theist hopes to maintain the existence of miracles and divine intervention or even to maintain the possibility of miracles and divine intervention, then this will have to be done at the expense of attributing God with a reduced sense of omnipotence.

Otherwise, the theist will have to deny the existence and possibility of all miracles and divine intervention to maintain a stronger sense of omnipotence that can be attributed to God.

Neither of these concessions leaves a particularly desirable outcome for theists, but this is the dilemma that they will have to deal with. In the second case, for the philosophy of religion, the adoption of such a conception of omnipotence would call for the reformulation of a substantial number of arguments for atheism. Since many arguments for atheism are based on unsatisfied expectations for particular acts or behaviors of God, these arguments will need to be revised because this new conception of divine omnipotence drastically changes what we can reasonably expect of God: namely, that we cannot expect Him to act in the natural world. So, the consequences for such a shift in conception will be felt both in the real world and in the pages of philosophy texts and would cause a substantial change in the way we talk about God and His active abilities.

## Endnotes:

1. Harry Frankfurt, "The Logic of Omnipotence," *Philosophical Review* 73, no. 2 (1964): 262-3.
2. Descartes, Rene, *Letter to Mersenne* (May 27, 1630).
3. Descartes, Rene, *Letter to Mersenne* (April 15, 1630).
4. Whether these tasks are logically impossible or not is irrelevant since, according to Descartes and Frankfurt, God could still carry them out either way. It has been argued, elsewhere, that creating a stone so heavy that He cannot lift is a logical impossibility for God, given His nature, even though there is no inherent contradiction within the task. This will be discussed more, shortly.
5. Frankfurt, "The Logic of Omnipotence," 262.
6. Kenneth Pearce and Alexander Pruss (2012) provide some good reasons against accepting Cartesian omnipotence, ultimately arguing that such an analysis of omnipotence fails.
7. Kenneth Pearce and Alexander Pruss, "Understanding Omnipotence," *Religious Studies* 48 (2012): 405.
8. Pearce and Pruss, "Understanding Omnipotence," 405.
9. Nick Trakakis, "The Absolutist Theory of Omnipotence," *Sophia* 36 (1997): 55.



10. St. Thomas Aquinas, "Summa Theologica, part 1," in *The Basic Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Anton C. Pegis (New York: Random House, 1945): 262-4.
11. George Mavrodes, "Some Puzzles Concerning Omnipotence," *Philosophical Review* 72, no. 2 (1963): 221-3.
12. Mavrodes, here, is building on an idea expressed by St. Thomas Aquinas in *Summa Theologica* in which he argues that God can only perform actions that are logically possible.
13. Mavrodes, "Some Puzzles Concerning Omnipotence," 223
14. Mavrodes, "Some Puzzles Concerning Omnipotence."
15. Pearce and Pruss, "Understanding Omnipotence."
16. "Divine Efficiency" is a term that is used by Edward D. Griffin in his 1833 book *Divine Efficiency Defended Against Certain Modern Speculations*, though I am applying it in a different sense here. Griffin seems to use the term to refer, primarily, to the process through which a believer can seek and confirm the truth of the existence of God. This is not the sense in which I mean to apply the term here, though some parallels could be drawn. Any discussion of the parallels or distinctions between mine and Griffin's applications of "divine efficiency," though I think would make an interesting discussion, are beyond the scope of this paper.
17. One could think of the kind of, what Richard Swinburne calls the spatial and temporal ordering of our universe in his 1979 book *The Existence of God*.
18. This is compatible with both free-will and deterministic lines of thought since, on this account, God could have chosen to set up the universe in whatever way He saw fit. I make no claims as to which of the two is preferable and to enter into a discussion on this is beyond the scope of this essay.
19. If we are to limit the evaluation of power to the production of the highest quality philosophy paper, and we are in a position where we have to decide which young man is more powerful.
20. While God acting would directly bring about an event, E1, in one sense, it is indirect in the sense that it is an external force coming in to change the natural course of events that could still have brought about E1.

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