

Omnipotence

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1. The Problem

Theists typically hold that God is almighty or all powerful, that, in some sense, he is able to do anything. But theists are usually quick to add that there are many things God cannot do. For example, Augustine claims that God is unable to die or be deceived, and he concludes that "it is precisely because He is omnipotent that for Him some things are impossible. Anselm adds that God "cannot be corrupted, or tell lies, or make the true into the false (such as to undo what has been done)."2 And Aquinas gives a lengthy list of things God cannot do, including moving, failing, tiring, making the past not to have been, making himself not to be, and making what he did not foreknow that he would make.3

Moreover, holding that various limitations on ability are compatible with being omnipotent is not restricted to the Christian tradition. The tenth-century Jewish philosopher Saadiah ben Joseph spoke of "those absurdities that cannot be attributed to divine omnipotence, such as the bringing back of yesterday and causing the number five to be more than ten."4 And in the twelfth century Moses Maimonides wrote, "that which is impossible has a permanent and constant property, which is not the result of some agent, and cannot in any way change, and consequently we do not ascribe to God the power of doing what is impossible. No thinking man denies the truth of this maxim; none ignore [sic] it, but such as have no idea of Logic.... It is impossible that God should produce a being like Himself, or annihilate, corporify, or change himself. The power of God is not assumed to extend to any of these impossibilities."5

The diversity of inabilities allegedly compatible with being omnipotent may seem to make the giving of a clear account of omnipotence a hopeless task. As Peter Geach puts it, "When people have tried to read into 'God can do everything' a signification not of Pious Intention but of Philosophical Truth, they have only landed themselves in intractable problems and hopeless confusions; no graspable sense has ever been given to this sentence that did not lead to self-contradiction or at least to conclusions manifestly untenable from the Christian point of view."6 Geach's animadversions notwithstanding, I think it is possible to give a coherent account of omnipotence without landing in hopeless confusions. My strategy is to begin by categorizing some of the limitations on ability that are compatible with being omnipotent. I then introduce two technical concepts, and in terms of them I formulate a definition of omnipotence. Finally, I show that this definition accords with my initial list of conditions on omnipotence and that it can be defended against objections.

2. Conditions on Omnipotence

An omnipotent being can do anything (subject to the restrictions to be discussed). How is this to be understood? The claim that someone can do anything is a universal claim. Hence, it involves quantifying over entities of some kind. But what kind? An omnipotent being has, according to Anthony Kenny, "every power which it is logically possible to possess."7 Kenny thus quantifies over powers. Some discussions of the Paradox of the Stone, on the other hand, seem to presuppose that an omnipotent being can perform any

possible task.⁸ I confess that I find both powers and tasks somewhat obscure, unless they are to be understood in terms of bringing about states of affairs. But then we might as well speak directly of bringing about states of affairs. Accordingly, I assume that what is required to define omnipotence in a way that takes account of the limitations on ability that are compatible with being omnipotent is a specification of the relevant conditions C in the following schema:

(O) A being x is omnipotent=df for every state of affairs A satisfying conditions C, x is able to bring about A.

My first condition on an adequate definition of omnipotence, then, is that (A) omnipotence is to be understood in terms of the ability to bring about states of affairs. On this point there is considerable agreement in recent literature.⁹

In Geach's presentation, God is omnipotent just in case he can do everything, but as the quotation from Maimonides suggests, (B) God need not be able to do what is logically impossible in order to be omnipotent. As Aquinas put it, the "phrase, God can do all things, is rightly understood to mean that God can do all things that are possible."¹⁰ In the same passage Aquinas goes on to suggest that being able to do anything logically possible is a necessary condition of being omnipotent. He says, "God is called omnipotent because he can do all things that are possible absolutely.... A thing is said to be possible or impossible absolutely, according to the relation in which the very terms stand to one another: possible, if the predicate is not incompatible with the subject, as that Socrates sits; and absolutely impossible when the predicate is altogether incompatible with the subject, as, for instance, that a man is an ass."¹¹ On this suggestion, schema (O) above yields a definition of omnipotence by specifying condition C as the condition of being logically possible. But such a definition would not permit the following additional restrictions on omnipotence, and it does not seem to accord with what Aquinas himself says elsewhere.

Some states of affairs are such that, although they are possible, it is not possible that anyone bring them about. Perhaps the state of affairs of no one ever bringing anything about is an example; necessary states of affairs, such as $5 + 7$ being equal to 12, provide a better example. Moreover, some states of affairs are such that, although it is possible that someone bring them about, there is no reason to think that an omnipotent being should be able to bring them about, at least not in any strong sense of 'bring about.'¹² Suppose that Claude is essentially nonomnipotent and that A is some action within his power. Then it might be that Claude can freely do A and, hence, bring about the state of affairs of Claude's freely doing A. But it is not possible that an omnipotent being bring about this state of affairs, since if anyone other than Claude were in any strong sense to bring about Claude's doing A, then Claude would not do A freely. I will say more about this claim below, but for now let us, at least tentatively, draw the moral that (C) an omnipotent being need not be able to bring about a state of affairs which it is impossible that that being bring about.

A state of affairs that is within the power of an omnipotent being at one time may no longer be within the power of that being at a later time. Several of the philosophers and theologians we quoted in section I held that an omnipotent being need not be able to change the past. Perhaps changing the past is just a special case of doing something impossible, but merely noting that changing the past is impossible does not explain why, for example, the state of affairs of Socrates' never engaging in philosophy can no longer be brought about not even by an omnipotent being. It is no doubt possible that God bring about this state of affairs—there are possible worlds in which he does bring it about. Moreover, at one time God was able to bring it about. But he is not able to do so now; it is too late. The moral in this case is that (D) an omnipotent being need not be able to do something that is incompatible with what has already happened.¹³

Many theists who believe that God is omnipotent also hold that he is unable to sin; so they apparently think that being unable to sin is compatible with being omnipotent. Aquinas not only held that the two are compatible but also thought that it followed from the claim that God is omnipotent that God cannot sin. Aquinas's argument, however, in which sinning is identified with "falling short in action" and in which it is assumed that "to be able to fall short in action is repugnant to omnipotence,"¹⁴ may leave some unpersuaded. Nevertheless, the weaker claim of compatibility can be made plausible.

To avoid certain theological complexities, let us speak of God's ability to do what is morally wrong rather than of his ability to sin. Since God is typically conceived of as essentially morally perfect, it is reasonable to think that theists who have attributed omnipotence to God have intended a concept which allows that an omnipotent being who is essentially morally perfect need not be able to do what is morally wrong. More generally, (E) an omnipotent being need not be able to do anything incompatible with its having the essential properties it has. Doing something incompatible with having the essential properties one has is, of course, merely a special case of doing what is impossible for one to do. So for an essentially morally perfect being, doing what is wrong is just a special case of doing what it is impossible for that being to do. But noting this does not explain why certain states of affairs are not within God's power. For example, God has promised never "to lay waste the earth" with a flood.¹⁵ It surely seems possible that he lay waste the earth with a flood; but given that he has made a sincere promise not to do so and that he is omniscient and morally perfect, God is unable now to do so.¹⁶ But what exactly is the connection between doing wrong and laying waste the earth with a flood? It is not simply that if God were to lay waste the earth with a flood, then he would be doing something wrong; for if he were to lay waste the earth with a flood, he would not have first promised not to. The definition of omnipotence to be proposed below allows for a resolution of this puzzle.¹⁷

A definition of omnipotence that accords with what theists have actually meant when they have attributed omnipotence to God ought to allow that an omnipotent being can lack the abilities just listed while not allowing that clearly nonomnipotent beings satisfy the definition. I now introduce two technical concepts to be employed in the definition of omnipotence.

3. Initial Segments and Strong Actualization

The first technical concept I employ is that of an initial segment of a possible world.¹⁸ It seems clear that two possible worlds could be alike up to a certain time and then diverge. For example, there might be a pair of worlds W and W' which are alike up until a certain time t , but in W Jones freely commences to mow his lawn at t whereas in W' Jones freely refrains from mowing his lawn at t . Before t , W and W' seem indistinguishable; we can describe them as sharing an initial segment that terminates at t .

The concept of an initial segment is naturally introduced by reference to free action, but this approach is not required. A pair of worlds could be alike up until the time that an indeterministic event occurs: perhaps in one such world a subatomic particle is emitted with a certain spin whereas in the other world it is emitted with opposite spin. Or perhaps two worlds sharing an initial segment are such that determinism is true in one of them, but the other is deterministic only until an event occurs which does not occur in the other world.

I think that the concept of an initial segment is an intuitive one, but it is difficult to make it precise. The reason is that, to continue with our first example, as alike as W and W' are, they do differ in some respects before t . In W , but not in W' , it is true before t that Jones will mow his lawn at t ; in W , but not in W' , Jones has before t the property of being such that he will mow his lawn at t ; and in W but not W' , someone may correctly believe before t that Jones will mow his lawn at t . Nevertheless, it is possible to be somewhat more explicit about what initial segments are like. First, there is an existence condition:

(1) For every world W and time t , there is a state of affairs $S(W, t)$ which is an initial segment of W terminating at t .

Furthermore, initial segments are complete, in the sense that no world has more than one initial segment terminating at the same time. Thus, we have the following uniqueness condition:

(2) If $S(W, t)$ and $S'(W, t)$ are initial segments, then $S(W, t) = S'(W, t)$.

If two worlds share an initial segment up to a certain time, then they share all their initial segments terminating at earlier times. More formally,

(3) If $S(W, t) = S(W', t)$ then, for every time t' such that t' is earlier than t , $S(W, t') = S(W', t')$.

Thus, if two worlds share an initial segment terminating at a time t , it does not follow that the worlds diverge at t ; but if they share an initial segment up to t , then at t or later something happens in the one world that does not happen in the other.

Moreover, if two worlds share an initial segment, then the same things exist in each world prior to the time at which the worlds diverge. That is,

(4) If $S(W, t) = S(W', t)$, then for all x , x exists before t in W' if and only if x exists before t in W .

Finally,

(5) A proposition p is true in an initial segment $S(W, t)$ if and only if it is not possible that $S(W, t)$ obtain and p be false.

An initial segment of a world W , then, is a state of affairs which is included in W and which includes just those states of affairs which obtain in both W and in any world as like W as can be until something happens in the one that does not happen in the other.¹⁹

The second technical concept I employ is that of strongly actualizing a state of affairs.²⁰ In the previous section I spoke of "bringing about" a state of affairs, but in so doing I ignored an important distinction. Perhaps the primary sense of 'bringing about' is causal; in this sense, to bring about a state of affairs is to cause it to obtain.

Finer distinctions can be made here. For example, some of the states of affairs we cause to obtain we cause directly. These are ones we bring about but not by bringing about some other state of affairs; exactly which states of affairs we bring about directly, however, is a matter of some controversy. Roderick Chisholm suggests that 'anything an agent brings about directly is a change within himself.'²¹ In contrast, Donald Davidson holds that "our primitive actions, the ones we do not do by doing something else, are mere movements of the body.... We never do more than move our bodies: the rest is up to nature."²² Both Chisholm and Davidson are concerned with human, nonomnipotent agents; perhaps we need not settle the issues they raise in order to apply the concept of strongly actualizing a state of affairs to candidates for omnipotence. God, after all, is an immaterial spirit, and internal changes (at least if these are changes internal to a body) and bodily movements are both inappropriate to characterize his direct action. Perhaps in God's case, every state of affairs he causes to obtain he brings about directly; he wills that a certain state of affairs obtain, and it does. Let us say that if God causes a state of affairs to obtain, then he strongly actualizes it.²³

We can often arrange it that some state of affairs obtains without causing it to obtain. Sometimes this is due simply to the intimate but noncausal connections that hold between states of affairs.²⁴ Perhaps, for example, Socrates did not cause Xanthippe's becoming a widow, but there is some sense in which by drinking hemlock, he nevertheless brought it about. Another, and for our purposes more interesting, kind of case is that in which a person can arrange it that some state of affairs obtains by inducing someone else to cause it to obtain. Thus, I may be able to bring it about that the window is open by politely asking you to open it. What is common to both of these cases is that there is something the agent can strongly actualize which is such that if the agent were to strongly actualize it, some additional state of affairs would obtain as well. Let us describe this as weak actualization, and define it as follows:

(6) x weakly actualizes a state of affairs S if and only if there is some state of affairs T such that (i) x strongly actualizes T , and (ii) if x were to strongly actualize T , S would be actual.²⁵

One consequence of (6) is that any state of affairs an agent strongly actualizes is thereby one the agent weakly actualizes. It will be convenient to have a notion of weak actualization that excludes strong actualization, so let us say that whoever weakly but not strongly actualizes a state of affairs strictly weakly actualizes it. Having introduced this cumbersome locution, let us henceforth avoid it and use the term 'weakly actualize' to mean strictly weakly actualize.²⁶

Whether an agent can weakly actualize a given state of affairs depends in part upon the truth of those counterfactual conditionals which are the requisite instances of clause (ii) of (6). These counterfactual conditionals cannot themselves be within the direct control of the agent; for if I strongly actualize T, for example, and strongly actualize its being the case that if I were to strongly actualize T then S would obtain (where S is contingent), it follows that I strongly actualize S and, thus, do not weakly actualize it.

Are there any counterfactual conditionals, not within God's direct control, which enable him to weakly actualize some states of affairs? Perhaps ones representing certain noncausal connections between states of affairs are like this. For example, perhaps the conditional If God were to strongly actualize Jones's having a child then anyone who is a sister of Jones is an aunt, though true, is not one God can cause to be true. If so, by strongly actualizing Jones's having a child, God can weakly actualize anyone who is Jones's sister being an aunt.

An especially interesting class of counterfactual conditionals is the class of those Plantinga calls "counterfactuals of freedom." These are counterfactual conditionals reporting what an agent would freely do in particular circumstances, that is, they are propositions of the form:

(7) If Jones were in circumstances C, then Jones would freely do action A.

I assume that no agent distinct from Jones can strongly actualize Jones's freely doing A. Perhaps someone else could cause Jones to do A, but if someone did, Jones would not do freely. Thus, not even God can strongly actualize Jones's freely doing A. However, if (7) is true and God can strongly actualize Jones's being in circumstances C, then God is able to weakly actualize Jones's freely doing A. So counterfactuals of freedom provide a second avenue by which God can weakly actualize various states of affairs.

A counterfactual of freedom is typically contingent, that is, it is true in some possible worlds and false in others.²⁷ Perhaps it is true that

(8) If you were to offer me four hundred dollars for my bicycle I would freely sell it to you.

There are nevertheless other possible worlds in which I would not accept your offer, worlds in which (8) is false. Moreover, pairs of related counterfactuals, for example, (8) and

(9) If you were to offer me ten dollars for my bicycle I would freely sell it to you,

typically are logically independent of each other. That is, there are worlds in which (8) and (9) agree in truth value and worlds in which they do not. An interesting consequence of these features of counterfactuals of freedom is that it can happen that although it is logically possible for an agent to weakly actualize a certain state of affairs, the agent is unable to do so. This is because it can happen that all of the counterfactuals required to satisfy the second condition of (6) (for some free action) are contingently false. For example, it is logically possible that for every state of affairs A you can strongly actualize, the counterfactual,

(10) If you were to strongly actualize A I would freely sell you my bicycle,

is false. In that case, you would be unable to weakly actualize my selling you my bicycle, even though it is logically possible that you do so. An omnipotent being can be in a similar situation.²⁸ It is logically

possible (though no doubt monumentally unlikely) that for every state of affairs A an omnipotent being can strongly actualize, the proposition

(11) If anyone were to strongly actualize A I would sell him or her my bicycle

is false. These propositions are all contingent, and they are, for the most part, logically independent of one another; accordingly, it is possible that they are all false.²⁹ But in a world in which every such instance of (11) is false, an omnipotent agent is unable to weakly actualize my selling him or her my bicycle. This can be the case even if there are other worlds in which that omnipotent being is able to weakly actualize this state of affairs. So being able to weakly actualize every state of affairs it is possible for one to actualize is not a necessary condition of being omnipotent.³⁰

The moral I draw from these considerations is that it is the ability to strongly actualize states of affairs that is relevant to omnipotence. In the next section I incorporate this idea into a definition of omnipotence.

4. A Definition of Omnipotence

I suggest that omnipotence be understood as follows:

(o*) a being x is omnipotent in a world W at a time t =df In W it is true both that (i) for every state of affairs A , if it is possible that both $S(W, t)$ obtains and that x strongly actualizes A at t , then at t x can strongly actualize A , and (ii) there is some state of affairs which x can strongly actualize at t .

According to (O*), what is required for a being to be omnipotent is that it be able to strongly actualize any state of affairs which is such that that being's strongly actualizing it is compatible with what has already happened. The second clause is added to preclude essentially impotent things, for example, stones, from trivially satisfying the definiens.

It is clear that (O*) satisfies the conditions on omnipotence that we developed in Section 2. It satisfies condition (A) by defining omnipotence in terms of the ability to bring about states of affairs. Nor more precisely, the ability to strongly actualize states of affairs. And it satisfies conditions (B) and (C) by not requiring that an omnipotent being be able to bring about states of affairs that are impossible for it to bring about. If it is compatible with what has happened that an agent strongly actualize a certain state of affairs, it is a fortiori possible that the agent strongly actualize that state of affairs.

According to condition (D) an omnipotent being need not be able to do something that is incompatible with what has already happened; (O*) accords with this by not requiring an omnipotent being to strongly actualize anything at a time such that the agent's strongly actualizing it then is incompatible with the initial segment up to that time. In particular, although it is logically possible that God

make it the case that Socrates never engages in philosophy, (O*) does not require that God be able now to bring about this state of affairs in order to qualify as omnipotent. The reason is that S (the actual world, now) (' S (now)' for short) includes Socrates' having engaged in philosophy. Hence it is not possible both that S (now) obtains and that God strongly actualizes Socrates' never engaging in philosophy. So (O*) does not require that God be able to bring about this state of affairs in order to be omnipotent. Aquinas, after the passage quoted above, went on to say that "some things . . . were at one time in the realm of possibility, while they were yet to be done, which now fall short of being possible, since they have been done."³¹ Aquinas thus appears to hold that a state of affairs can be possible at one time but not at a later time. However, whether a state of affairs is possible does not vary over time; rather, what can vary over time is whether a state of affairs is possible in conjunction with what has already happened, and it is this variability that (O*) is designed to accommodate.

Our final condition, (E), entails that an omnipotent being who is essentially morally perfect need not be able to do what is morally wrong. As we saw, of course, doing something wrong is for an essentially morally perfect being no more than a special case of doing something that it is impossible for that being to do. But laying waste the earth with a flood is not something impossible for God to do, so must God be able to do it in order to be omnipotent? The answer is that if God has promised not to lay waste the earth with a flood, then S(now) includes not only God's being essentially morally perfect but also his having made such a promise and its being wrong to break it. Hence, S(now) is incompatible with God's strongly actualizing the laying waste of the earth with a flood. So (O*) does not require that God must be able to bring about this state of affairs in order for God to be omnipotent.

So (O*) satisfies our conditions on an adequate definition of omnipotence; accordingly, it does not, I believe, require too much of an omnipotent being. It is more difficult to show that (O*) requires enough. In the next section I consider two objections to this definition, both of which allege that beings who are less than omnipotent can satisfy the definiens of (O*).

5. Two Objections

It might be objected that the fact of God's foreknowledge makes trouble for (O*). Let A be some state of affairs that God will strongly actualize at some future time t. Since God is omniscient, he knows before t that he will actualize A at t. So S(t) includes God's knowing before t that he will actualize A at t. But then S(t) is incompatible with God's not actualizing A at t. According to (O*), then, God need not be able to refrain from actualizing A at t in order to be omnipotent. The point can be generalized: since God has foreknowledge of all of his actions, he need not be able to do anything other than what he does do in order to be accounted as omnipotent. Worse, this objection can be generalized further: if God foreknows everything I do, then I need only be able to do what I do in order to be omnipotent; but I am able to do what I do and I am not omnipotent.³²

My reply is that what God foreknows before t is not included in the initial segment S(t). Recall that I introduced initial segments by suggesting that a pair of worlds would share an initial segment if they were alike up until a time t at which, for example, in one of the worlds Jones freely commences to mow his lawn at t whereas in the other world Jones freely refrains from mowing his lawn at that time. Clearly there could be a pair of worlds like this in which God exists; and in the one God knows before t that Jones will freely commence to mow his lawn at t whereas in the other God knows before t that Jones will freely refrain from mowing his lawn at t. Since God's foreknowledge is not the same in both worlds, it is not part of the initial segment the two worlds share. And since, by (2) above, no world has more than one initial segment terminating at a given time, God's foreknowledge of Jones's action is not a part of some other initial segment (terminating at t) which is a segment of the first world but not the second. More generally, God's foreknowledge at a time of anyone's future free action is not part of the initial segment up to that time.³³

A second objection is that essentially limited and hence nonomnipotent beings can satisfy the definiens of (O*). Consider McEar, a man essentially capable only of scratching his left ear.³⁴ If McEar were merely accidentally capable only of scratching his left ear, then it would be logically possible both that S(now) obtain and that, say, McEar strongly actualize his taking a step. Since McEar is unable to strongly actualize his taking a step, (O*) would have the proper result that McEar is not omnipotent.

But McEar's limitation is alleged to be essential. There is no possible world in which he exists and in which he is capable of doing anything other than scratch his left ear. And since he is capable of scratching his left ear, he is able, so the objection goes, to do everything such that his doing it is compatible with what has already happened. Hence, according to (O*), McEar is omnipotent.³⁵

The objector presumably does not mean to assert that McEar really exists, for no doubt there is no such unfortunate creature. Rather, the objector holds that it is possible that McEar or a similarly essentially limited being exists, and thus concludes that it is possible that a being satisfy (O*) without being omnipotent. But is it really possible that there be such a being? Necessarily, scratching one's ear takes time.

Accordingly, it is necessary that there are infinitely many intervals of time t such that anyone who is able to scratch his ear is also able to scratch his ear throughout t . So if McEar is able to scratch his ear, he is able to do infinitely many things.³⁶ Moreover, if McEar can scratch his ear, he must be able to do so by moving some other part of his body, perhaps his arm, in the appropriate way. But then McEar can also move his arm, contract his muscles, disturb adjacent air molecules, and do countless other things as well. So it does not seem possible that there be such a being as McEar.

A natural way of strengthening the objection is to claim that it is possible that there is a being with a wide range of abilities who is nevertheless essentially incapable of performing some other action (say, tying a shoe, remembering the second stanza of our national anthem, or creating *ex nihilo*) which an omnipotent being ought to be able to do.³⁷ But is it really possible that there be a being whose abilities are essentially limited in this way? For any agent who is incapable of tying a shoe, it would seem to be at least possible that God confer on the agent greater powers that include the ability to tie a shoe. In that case, it would be possible for any such limited being to do more than it is able to do. So it seems to me that the objection from essentially limited beings is unpersuasive.

6. The Paradox of the Stone

Appealing to (O*) will allow us to give a resolution of the so-called paradox of the stone, a familiar formulation of which, due to C. Wade Savage, is as follows:

(12) Either God can create a stone which he cannot lift, or God cannot create a stone which he cannot lift.

(13) If God can create a stone which he cannot lift, then he is not omnipotent.

(14) If God cannot create a stone which he cannot lift, then he is not omnipotent

Therefore,

(15) God is not omnipotent. (12) (13) (14)³⁸

Savage remarks that "what the argument really tries to establish is that the existence of an omnipotent being is logically impossible."³⁹ We should therefore examine whether the argument succeeds. Savage's response is to note, in effect, that the antecedent of (14) is equivalent to

(14a) If God creates a stone then he can lift it,

and he claims that since (14a) does not express a limitation on ability, it is a mistake to conclude from it that God is not omnipotent. Thus, Savage holds that (14) is false. However, this reply is inadequate; for if (X4a) is true, then there is a state of affairs God cannot strongly actualize, namely, his creating a stone which he cannot lift, and that is surely some sort of limitation on ability.

George Mavrodes also rejects (14), but on the grounds that, since God is essentially omnipotent, creating a stone which God cannot lift is logically impossible.⁴⁰ As we have seen, God need not be able to do what is impossible in order to be omnipotent; since (X4) assumes otherwise, it is false. Although this solution has a certain plausibility, several philosophers have accused it of question-begging. Richard Swinburne, endorsing a point made by Savage, writes that "the point of the paradox is to show that the concept of omnipotence is incoherent. It is therefore begging the question to assume that a certain person, if he exists, has that property, whether by definition or not."⁴¹ It is not entirely clear to me that a theist is not entitled to appeal to his or her views in attempting to defend those views against a charge of inconsistency, but if we can find a solution to the stone paradox that does not make such an appeal, so much the better.

Swinburne's own approach is to deny (13). He daims that if God has the ability to create a stone that he cannot lift, it does not follow that God is not omnipotent unless God exersises that ability. Since Swinburne thinks that God could have this ability without exercising it, he believes that (13) is false. Swinburne thus holds that "the omnipotence of a person at a certain time includes the ability to make himself no longer omnipotent."⁴² Now if God has the ability to make himself no longer omnipotent, then it is possible that he make himself not omnipotent, since no one has the ability to do anything impossible. Hence, if God has the ability to make himself no longer omnipotent, then, God is not essentially omnipotent. Thus Swinburne's solution involves assuming the denial of Mavrodes' assumption. Many theists think that God is essentially omnipotent, however, so Swinburne's solution is not open to them.

Swinburne assumes not only that an omnipotent being need not be essentially omnipotent but also that such a being could lose its omnipotence. But is it possible for an omnipotent being to lose its omnipotence? This question is difficult, but perhaps we can give a reply to the argument without answering it. Let us say that an enduring property is a property it is not possible to lose. More precisely,

(16) P is an enduring property for x =df (i) it is possible that x has P and (ii) necessarily, for every time t if x has P at t, then x has P at every later time at which x exists.⁴³

If a property is essential to a thing, then it is enduring for that thing; any property a given thing cannot possibly lack is a property it cannot possibly lose. But the converse is not true. A property could

be enduring for a thing without being essential to it. Each of us has the property of having been born, and that is a property we cannot lose; hence, it is enduring for each of us. But it is not essential to us. Presumably we existed before we were bom, and, somewhat more controversially, it is possible that God create us as full grown adults. So it is possible that we exist without having been born. Accordingly, this property is enduring for each of us without being essential to any of us.⁴⁴

Now let us apply some of these ideas to the paradox of the stone. We should first note that for the argument to apply to omnipotence as defined by (O*), the crucial second and third premisses should be understood as

(13') If God can strongly actualize there being a stone which he cannot lift then he is not omnipotent,

and

(14') If God cannot strongly actualize there being a stone which he cannot lift then he is not omnipotent.

Next, let us ask whether omnipotence is an enduring property or, in particular, whether it is an enduring property for God. If it is not, then for the reasons Swinburne gives, (13') is false. If omnipotence is not an enduring property for God, it does not count against his omnipotence if he has the ability to do something that results in his losing his omnipotence.

So suppose that omnipotence is enduring for God, and let us call the state of affairs of there being a stone God cannot lift, ' T'. According to (O*), (14') is true only if God's strongly actualizing T is compatible with what has already happened. But on the assumption that omnipotence is enduring for God, God's strongly actualizing T is compatible with what has already happened only if God is not now omnipotent. For if God is already omnipotent, his being omnipotent is included in the initial segment up to now, and that segment is not compatible with God's strongly actualizing T if omnipotence is enduring for God. So if omnipotence is enduring for God, God's strongly actualizing T is compatible with what has already happened only if God is not now omnipotent. Hence, on the assumption that omnipotence is enduring for God, (14') is true only if God is not now omnipotent; that is, (14') by itself presupposes the condUsion of the argument. Thus, without further defense, (14') is useless for establishing that God is not omnipotent.

In sum, either omnipotence is enduring for God or it is not. If it is not, (13') is false. If it is, (14) stands in need of support. Either way, the argument is defective, and we have been able to arrive at this conclusion without either assuming with Mavrodes that God is essentially omnipotent or assuming with Swinburne that omnipotence is not enduring for God.⁴⁵

7. Atemporal Omnipotence My account of omnipotence has been designed to allow that God's abilities change over time. But an influential tradition within classical theism holds that God is "outside of time." On this view, God does not have differing abilities at different times. We shall discuss a cluster of related ideas, including timelessness, eternality, and immutability, in Chapter 6. For now, however, I want merely to indicate how the ideas we have developed about omnipotence may still apply even if God is not "in time."

A key condition in (O*) is

(17) In W x can strongly actualize A at t .

But a timeless being does not have its abilities at times. So the condition specified by (7) would seem not to apply to a timeless being. Our project, then, is to find a way of interpreting (7) in such a way that it applies to a timeless being.

In the tradition which holds that God is outside of time, it is usually held that God performs a single eternal act, which, however has a vast array of temporal effects.⁴⁶ One way to think of the sum of all of these effects is as a very large state of affairs. Let 'T(W)' designate, for a given world W , the largest state of affairs God strongly actualizes in W . That is, God strongly actualizes T(W) in W , and for any state of affairs A that God strongly actualizes in W T(W) includes A .⁴⁷ So if God is timeless in W , we may think of him as timelessly strongly actualizing T(W).

Now those who think of God as outside of time also usually concede, as indeed they should, that even though it has always been true that God is (timelessly) strongly actualizing T(a) (where a is the actual world), God could have done something else. The relevant sense of "could have" here may well need explanation, since on this view there never was a time at which God was faced with a choice between T(a) and some distinct T(W) and at which he decided to embark on T(a). But however this sense of "could have" is to be understood, it is clear that in some sense God could have done something other than what he is doing. So I shall assume that God could have strongly actualized a different state of affairs

In order to interpret (17) we need to be able to express what it is for God to be able to do something at a time (say, now). It will not do to say that he can do something now just in case it is part of something he could have done, for as we saw in Section 2, some things God could have done it is now too late for him to do. We can capture the right idea, I think, if we introduce a second restriction to initial segments. Thus, I propose interpreting (17) as

(17') There is a world W' such that (i) $S(W', t) = S(W, t)$, (ii)

T(W') includes A 's occurring at t , and (iii) either God (tenselessly) strongly actualizes T(W') or God could have strongly actualized T(W').

The idea is that whether (in the actual world) God can now strongly actualize, say, Socrates' coming into existence should depend on what has already happened and not merely on whether God from his atemporal perspective has (tenselessly) the power to actualize a state of affairs including Socrates' coming into existence now. Instantiating clause (i) to the actual world thus specifies a restricted class of worlds that share an initial segment up to now with the actual world. And what God can do now is, roughly, anything he does in any of those worlds. More precisely, he can actualize any state of affairs included in the largest state of affairs he in fact (tenselessly) strongly actualizes (T(a)), and he can actualize any state of affairs included in a state of affairs T(W') such that (i) T(W') is the largest state of affairs God strongly actualizes

in some world W' sharing an initial segment up to now with the actual world, and (ii) God (tenselessly) could have strongly actualized $T(W')$.

With this interpretation of (17), the hard part of our project is accomplished. There remains the task of incorporating this interpretation into (O^*) , which I present without further comment:

(O^+) a being x is omnipotent in W =df In W it is true both that (i) for every time t and state of affairs A , if it is possible that both $S(W, t)$ obtains and that x strongly actualizes A 's obtaining at t , then there is a world W' such that (a) $S(W', t) = S(W, t)$, (b) $T(W')$ includes A 's occurring at t , and (c) either x (tenselessly) strongly actualizes $T(W')$ or x could have strongly actualized $T(W')$, and (ii) there is some state of affairs which x can strongly actualize.

We have seen in this chapter that it is possible to give the concept of omnipotence a relatively clear account that accords with what theists who have attributed omnipotence to God have said and that can be defended against various philosophical objections. Moreover, this account can be modified, if we like, to allow for atemporal omnipotence. In the next chapter we shall turn our attention to the concept of omniscience

NOTES

1. Augustine, *City of God*, V, 10, trans. Gerald Walsh et al., ed. Vernon Bourke (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1978), p. 109.
2. Anselm, *Proslogion*, VII, trans. M. J. Charlesworth (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), p. 1979.
3. Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, 1, 2, 25. Compare the list offered by an early twentieth-century Dutch theologian: "Scripture . . . teaches that there are certain things which God cannot do: he cannot lie, he cannot repent, he cannot change, he cannot be tempted with evil." Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God* trans. and ed. William Hendriksen (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1951), p. 244 (translation of *Cereformeerde Dogmatiek*, vol. 2, 3d ed., 1918).
4. Saadia ben Joseph, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, Treatise VII (variant), chap. 1, trans. Samuel Rosenblatt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), p. 412. Cf. *Introductory Treatise*, chap. 5, p. 25.
5. Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, Pt. 1, chap. 15, trans. M. Friedlander (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1904), p. 279.
6. Peter Geach, *Providence and Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 4. The quotation is from chap. 1, previously published as "Omnipotence," *Philosophy* 48 (1973):7-20. Chap. 2 was previously published as "An Irrelevance of Omnipotence," *Philosophy* 48 (1973):327-333. Richard LaCroix has also recently argued that it is impossible to define omnipotence. See his "The Impossibility of Defining 'Omnipotence,'" *Philosophical Studies* 32 (1977):181-190.
7. Anthony Kenny, *The God of the Philosophers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 96.
8. For example, C. Wade Savage, "The Paradox of the Stone," *Philosophical Review* 76 (1967):74-79
9. See George Mavrodes, "Defining Omnipotence," *Philosophical Studies* 32 (1977):191-202; Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), chap. 9; Gary Rosenkrantz and Joshua Hoffman, "What an Omnipotent Agent Can Do," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 11 (pg.80):1-1g; Thomas Flint and Alfred Freddoso, "Maximal Power," in *The Existence and Nature of God*, ed. Freddoso (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), pp. 81- 113; Stephen Davis, *Logic and the Nature of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1983), chap. 5; and Edward

Wierenga, "Omnipotence Defined," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 43 (1983):363-375, from which the present chapter derives. A rather different sort of definition is given by James F. Ross in *Philosophical Theology* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), p. 211, and in "Creation," *Journal of Philosophy* 77 (1980):614-629.

It would be illuminating, but well beyond the scope of this work, to examine each of these proposals in detail. I merely mention some relevant literature and indicate some broad areas of agreement and disagreement. Mavrodes' definition has been criticized by Richard LaCroix in "Failing to Define Omnipotence," *Philosophical Studies* 34 (1978):219-222, by Joshua Hoffman in "Mavrodes on Defining Omnipotence," *Philosophical Studies* 35 (1979):311-315, and by Bruce Reichenbach in "Mavrodes on Omnipotence," *Philosophical Studies* 37 (1980):211-214. Kenny's definition has been discussed by W. S. Anglin in "Can God Create a Being He Cannot Control?" *Analysis* 40 (1980):220-223. Ross's definition has been criticized by William Mann in "Ross on Omnipotence," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 8 (1977):142-147. I am not persuaded by the published criticism of Mavrodes' definition, but I note an objection to it, as well as to the definitions of Kenny, Swinburne, and Rosenkrantz and Hoffman below. Rosenkrantz and Hoffman attempt to repair their definition in the light of this objection, and they also attack the definitions of Flint and Freddoso and Wierenga in "Omnipotence Redux" (forthcoming). I do not believe, however, that their criticism of my definition is decisive. Davis's proposal is somewhat incomplete, but if the missing details are supplied in the way I recommend, his proposal turns out to be the same as mine. See my review of his book *Faith and Philosophy* 3 (1986):88-91. The paper by Flint and Freddoso and my paper are remarkably similar, despite their having been produced entirely independently. I attribute that to good sense and the pervasive influence of Alvin Plantinga. Flint and Freddoso think that my definition is subject to the McEar objection, to be discussed below. Their definition appeals to a particular account of accidental necessity which I reject in Chapter 4, Section 2, below, and it does not, I believe, specify a necessary condition of omnipotence.

10. Aquinas, S. T., *Ia*, 25,3. The quotation is from *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Anton Pegis, vol. X (New York: Random House, 1945), p. 261. This restriction is accepted by the authors mentioned in the previous note. Its importance has also been emphasized by George Mavrodes in "Some Puzzles Concerning Omnipotence," *Philosophical Reviews* 72 (1963):221-223. As is well known, Descartes apparently denied that God is limited to what is possible. See the references in Harry Frankfurt, "The Logic of Omnipotence," *Philosophical Review* 73 (1964):262-263. For a recent discussion of Descartes' views on this topic, see Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Marquette: Marquette University Press, 1980), pp. 95-140.

11. Aquinas, S.T., *Ia*, 25, 3

12. By 'bring about in a strong sense' I mean strongly actualize, a concept to be introduced in the next section.

13. Several previous attempts to define omnipotence (including those of Kenny, Mavrodes and Ross) fail to take this condition into account. Swinburne's final definitions [D] and [E] (*Coherence of Theism*, pp. 152, 160) also violate this condition unless we understand his use of the phrase, 'logically contingent state of affairs after t' along the lines of his remark that "we must understand here by a state of affairs x being a logically possible state of affairs after t that x be not merely logically possible and after t but also that x be a state of affairs logically compatible with all that has happened at and before t" (p. 151)

14. Aquinas, S.T., *Ia*, 25, 3, ad 2. See also Nelson Pike, "Omnipotence and God's Ability to Sin," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 6 (1969):208-216.

15. Gen. 9:11

16. I am not here endorsing the general claim that God is unable to break promises. For someone who does make this claim, see Geach, *Providence and Evil*, chap. 2, and his "Can God Fail to Keep Promises?" *Philosophy* 52 (1977):93-95.

17. According to Richard La Croix (in "The Impossibility of Defining 'Omnipotence'"), "an omnipotent being is able to bring about . . . a state of affairs which is such that if it is brought about then it has the property of having been brought about by a single being who has never at any time been omniscient. " Presumably the kind of state of affairs LaCroix has in mind is one that has essentially the property of having been brought about solely by a nonomniscient being, if brought about at all. (In "Omnipotence Defined," nn. 10 and 21, I consider several other interpretations of La Croix's contention.) But in the case of an essentially omniscient being, LaCroix's claim violates condition (E). And in the case of a contingently omniscient being, LaCroix's claim violates condition (D). If a being is omniscient, that is a fact that is already the case, and so an omnipotent being need not be able to do something incompatible with that.

18. I borrow the term from Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 175-176.

19. The concept of an initial segment seems to be related to the concept of accidental necessity, to be discussed in Chapters 3 and 4. It is tempting to think that a proposition p is accidentally necessary at a time t in a world W just in case p is contingent and true in $S(W, t)$. I wish that I were able to give a detailed explanation of initial segments or of accidental necessity, but I know of no completely satisfactory account. Accordingly, rather than have my treatment of omnipotence depend upon a controversial analysis of the concept of an initial segment, I shall assume that our intuitive grasp of this concept is adequate for the purpose of coming to a clearer understanding of omnipotence. Some detailed attempts to explicate the concept of accidental necessity will be examined in Chapter 4.

20. The distinction between strongly actualizing and weakly actualizing a state of affairs is also introduced in Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, pp. 172-173. I take 'strongly actualize' to be a single word (the space is silent). Thus, the phrase 'to strongly actualize' is not a split infinitive.

21. Roderick Chisholm, *Person and Object* (La Salle, 111.: Open Court, 1976), p. 85.

22. Donald Davidson, "Agency," in *Agent, Action, and Reason*, ed. Robert Binkley et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), p. 23.

23. In his "Self-Profile," Plantinga has a different proposal. There he says that God strongly actualizes a state of affairs S if and only if God causes S and God causes every contingent state of affairs S^* such that S includes S^* . (Recall that one state of affairs includes another just in case it is not possible that the former obtain without the latter obtaining as well.) As a general account of strong actualization, Plantinga's Proposal is too restrictive, since it would follow that I never strongly actualize anything. Any state of affairs I cause to obtain, for example, my arm's raising or my endeavoring to walk includes some state of affairs as my hand's existing or my existing that I do not cause to obtain. See Alvin Plantinga, ed. James Tomberlin and Peter van Inwagen (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1985), p. 49.

24 See Jaegwon Kim, "Noncausal Connections," *Noes* 8 (1974):41-52.

25. Cf. Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, pp. 172-173, and his "Self-Profile," p.49

26. Another consequence of (5) is that an agent who can strongly actualize something can weakly actualize necessary truths as well as any proposition that would be true no matter what the agent did. I shall not try to revise (5) to avoid this consequence; I am content to note that weak actualization is a technical concept that might not correspond precisely to any ordinary notion of 'bringing about.'

27. I defend this assumption against objections in Chapter 5

28. The argument that follows is inspired by Plantinga's argument that there are possible worlds God cannot actualize. See his *The Nature of Necessity*, pp. 180-184, and "Self-Profile," pp. 50-52.

29. The qualification that they are for the most part independent is required because there are specifications for 'A' as my being offered an amount between fifty and one hundred dollars and my being offered seventy-five dollars such that necessarily, if (1) is true in the case of the former it is true in the case of the latter. What I claim is that there is no instance of 'A' which is such that, necessarily, if (1) is false under that interpretation then it is true under some other interpretation.

30. The fact that an omnipotent being can be unable to weakly actualize certain States of affairs logically possible for the being to weakly actualize can be used to construct counterexamples to the definitions of omnipotence proposed by Kenny, Mavrodes, Rosenkrantz and Hoffman, and Swinburne.

31. Aquinas, S.T., Ia, 25, 4, ad 2.

32. This objection is considered by Aquinas, S. T., Ia, 25, 5, obj. 1.

33. The objection just discussed bears some resemblance to the argument from the accidental necessity of the past for the conclusion that divine foreknowledge is incompatible with human free will. That argument is discussed more fully in Chapters 3 and 4.

It is not only God's foreknowledge of future free actions that is excluded from initial segments; his foreknowledge of certain other things is excluded as well. This is because, as we saw above, there are various ways in which worlds can share initial segments and then diverge. In any such case God's foreknowledge of the divergent events is not included in the initial segments that the respective worlds have in common.

34. La Croix, in "The Impossibility of Defining 'Omnipotence,'" p. 187, so dubs a character introduced by Plantinga in *God and Other Minds* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), p. v70. It was Mavrodes who called attention to the question of whether the limitation in such cases is essential. See his "Defining Omnipotence," p. 280. Flint and Freddoso endorse this objection in "Maximal Power," p. 112, n. 23, as do Hoffman and Rosenkrantz in "Omnipotence Redux." Though McEar is a recent invention, Flint and Freddoso quote an anonymous note to a manuscript of Ockham's: "Nor is a being said to be omnipotent because he can do all things which are possible for him to do . . . since it would follow that a minimally powerful being is omnipotent. For suppose Socrates performs one action and is not capable of performing any others. Then one argues as follows: 'He is performing every action which it is possible for him to perform, therefore he is omnipotent.'" "Maximal Power," p. X 10, n. 4. They cite Ockham: *Opera Theologica*, ed. Gerald Etzkorn and Francis Kelly, vol. 4 (St. Bonaventure, N.Y.: Franciscan Institute, 1979), p. 611.

35. To make the objection fit (O*) more precisely, we would need an assumption such as that McEar is essentially capable only of strongly actualizing his scratching his ear. I think we can resolve this objection without stating it in these more cumbersome terms.

36. This point, stated in terms of strong actualization, is that if McEar is able to strongly actualize his scratching his ear, then he is able to strongly actualize his strongly actualizing his scratching his ear throughout t , for infinitely many intervals t .

37. Cf. Hoffman and Rosenkrantz, "Omnipotence Redux."

38. Savage, "The Paradox of the Stone," p. 74. I have deleted the parenthetical remarks Savage appends to (13) and (14).

39. Ibid., p. 75. Cf. J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind* 64 (1955):200-212, who gives a version of the argument (asking whether God can create a being he cannot control) and who claims that it shows that "we cannot consistently ascribe to any continuing being omnipotence in an inclusive sense." (p. 212).

40. Mavrodes, "Some Puzzles Concerning Omnipotence."

41. Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, p. 154.

42. Ibid., p. 158.

43- (16) allows that a property can be enduring for one individual but not another. This is as it should be, since being as tall as Socrates is a property that some of Socrates' colleagues may have had but that was enduring only for Socrates. We could say that a property is enduring simpliciter if, necessarily, it is enduring for everything that has it.

44. Anyone unconvinced by this example may substitute having been born in a log cabin, which is surely enduring to anyone who has it but not essential.

45. The structure of this response to the argument owes much to the treatment by Plantinga in *God and Other Minds*, pp. 168-173, although he does not consider the question whether it is possible for a being to lose omnipotence. Several others have given disjunctive solutions having to do instead with whether omnipotence is an essential property of whoever has it. They claim that if God is essentially omnipotent then (14') is false, and if God is not essentially omnipotent then (13') is false. See Flint and Freddoso, "Maximal Power," p. 99, and Hoffman and Rosenkrantz, "What an Omnipotent Agent Can Do," and "The Omnipotence Paradox, Modality, and Time," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 18 (1980):473-479. However, this approach does not succeed in identifying a flaw in the argument. In particular, it does not follow from the assumption that God is not essentially omnipotent that (13) is false; it may be that, although omnipotence is not essential to God, it is nevertheless enduring for him. In that case, if God could bring it about that there is a Stone he cannot lift, it would follow that he is not omnipotent.

46. Sources of the doctrine of divine timelessness are cited in Chapter 6. On the topic of God's eternal act, see, for example, Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, "Eternity," *Journal of Philosophy* 78 (1981):429-458.

47. This idea and definition are from Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, p. 181, cf. his "Self-Profile," p. 50.