

OMNIPOTENCE AND THE VICIOUS CIRCLE PRINCIPLE

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Abstract. The classical paradox of the stone, namely, whether an omnipotent being can create a stone that the being itself cannot lift is traditionally circumvented by a response propounded by Thomas Aquinas, that even omnipotent beings cannot accomplish the logically impossible. However, in their paper ‘The New Paradox of the Stone’, Alfred R. Mele and M.P. Smith attempt to reinstate the paradox without falling foul of the Thomistic logical constraint. According to Mele and Smith, instead of interpreting the paradox as posing a competition between a pair of omnipotent beings – represented by God at two different times – the paradox can be reformulated as posing a question about simultaneous competition between a pair of omnipotent beings. The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to probe the possibility of the simultaneous existence of two omnipotent beings in view of the theological arguments for the „unicity of the omnipotent”.

In the Semitic or Abrahamic tradition, it is a conventional wisdom that God has the attribute of omnipotence. For example, in the *The Book of Genesis*, God appears to Abraham and declares, „I am the Almighty God” (Genesis 17:1). Also Jesus tells his disciples, „For God everything is possible.” (Matthew 19:26) Similarly, in commenting on human frailty and fickleness, the *Quran* reminds its audience, „God is able to do all things.” (2: 284)

Intuitively, the core constituents of the concept of omnipotence in this tradition can be captured by the following two conditions:

O is omnipotent if and only if

- (a) *O*’s power cannot be subject to any constraint, and
- (b) *O*’s power cannot be exceeded by anything else.

However, unlike some other divine attributes, the concept of omnipotence has not gone unscathed. Classically, the notion of omnipotence has been as-

sailed by the so-called paradox of the stone: namely, whether an omnipotent being can create a stone that the being itself cannot lift. The import of the paradox is to emphasize that an answer either affirmatively or negatively would belie the omnipotence of the being in question.

The paradox of the stone, however, is not just one problem for the concept of omnipotence but rather symptomatic of a range of problematic cases for the ascription of omnipotence to a being. Indeed, there are at least eight different paradoxes of omnipotence where each one can in turn be expressed in a number of variations. Nonetheless, the mainstay of all the eight paradoxes can be divided into the following two separate categories.

Category A

1. Paradox of the Stone: Can an omnipotent being create a stone that it cannot lift?
2. Paradox of Free Will: Can an omnipotent being create an agent with free will?
3. Paradox of Mathematical Necessity: Can an omnipotent being change the truth or falsity of mathematical statements?
4. Paradox of the Past: Can an omnipotent being undo the past?

Category B

5. Paradox of Quantum Randomness: Can an omnipotent being alter the random behavior of subatomic particles?
6. Paradox of Conservation of Energy and Matter: Can an omnipotent being create or destroy energy and matter?
7. Paradox of Suicide: Can an omnipotent being annihilate itself?
8. Paradox of Sin: Can an omnipotent being transgress?

The rationale for the bifurcation is the observation that the formulation of the problems for omnipotence in the second category heavily depends on one's views about a host of other subjects and issues. For example, in the cases of both quantum randomness and conservation of energy and matter, the construction of a paradox relies on certain assumptions about the nature of physical laws and the constitution of the universe. Or, in the case of the paradox of sin, the problem arises only if one also presumes that an omnipotent being cannot be capable of immorality and unethical behavior; in other words, the problem emerges only if one can establish at least a conceptual dependence of omnipotence on goodness and benevolence. Or, in the case of suicide, if one does not subscribe to the idea that an omnipotent being is

also necessary in nature, there seems to be no logical or conceptual problem with regard to an omnipotent being ceasing to be. In contrast, the problems in the first category are apparently the consequences of simple logical observations on the concepts therein, instead of relying on other assumptions – metaphysical or otherwise – for their derivation. Consequently, the focus of the discussion here will be the first type of problems that simply depend on logical and conceptual *faux pas* of omnipotence.

Correspondingly, the traditional theistic response to the problem of omnipotence has been catered towards the logical instability inherent in the concept. Indeed, Thomas Aquinas attempts to disentangle omnipotence from incoherence by claiming that the attribute in question only entails the capacity to bring about anything that is *logically possible*.¹ Thus, in the Thomistic tradition, the integrity of omnipotence is secured at the cost of *conceding* that even omnipotent beings cannot accomplish the *logically impossible*. Similarly, following in the footsteps of Aquinas, George Mavrodes declares that problems of omnipotence arise out of setting „pseudo-tasks” – ‘tasks whose descriptions are self-contradictory’ and fail to fall within the realm of possibility.² Consequently, tasks that logically cannot be performed do not impugn the doctrine of omnipotence and do not set limits on what an omnipotent being can do.

But, simple solutions often turn out to be pseudo-solutions. The „logical possibility” *constraint* on the concept of omnipotence seems to be a red herring after all, and the fundamental problem is still unresolved. Despite appearances, the Thomistic tradition is only delaying the reckoning as it is bedeviled by at least five problems.

Philosophical Dissentions. The first problem arises from the observation that not all fellow theists agree on the logical curtailing of omnipotence and divine power. Peter Damian, for example, writes in *De Divina Omnipotentia*,

It is impossible for contraries to exist together in the same subject. Moreover, this is correctly said to be impossible if one refers to a lack of ability in the nature. But the remark should not be applied to the Divine Majesty. For the one from whom nature takes its origin, easily removes the necessity of nature when He wills. The governor of created things is not subject to the

¹ See, for example, his *Summa Contra Gentiles*, tr. James F. Anderson, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975, Book II, Chapter 25.

² George Mavrodes, ‘Some Puzzles Concerning Omnipotence’, *The Philosophical Review*, 72: 221-3, 1963.

creator's laws; and the author of nature turns the natural order according to His chosen purpose.³

In his *Ordinatio*, William of Ockham also questions the imposition of logical constraint on divine potency:

Things are possible because God can do them. In other words, what God knows to be possible is a consequence of what he knows himself to have done. That is, for God, anything is possible, without any previous logical restriction whatsoever.⁴

And, he elaborates his conception further by noting that,

God Himself or the divine essence is one intuitive cognition both of itself and of everything else producible and not producible, that is so perfect and so clear that it is also an evident cognition of past, future, and present things ...⁵

Finally, among other detractors of the logical possibility response to the problem of omnipotence, one may refer to René Descartes' uncompromising stance. In a letter to Mersenne in April 1630, he remarks that mathematical truths 'have been laid down by God and depend on him entirely no less than the rest of his creatures.'⁶ And, more explicitly on the limits of divine power, in a letter to Arnauld in July 1648, Descartes writes,

I do not think that we should ever say of anything that it cannot be brought about by God. For since every basis of truth and goodness depends on his omnipotence, I would not dare to say that God cannot make a mountain without a valley, or bring it about that 1 and 2 are not 3.⁷

Challenging the Charge of Self-Contradiction. The second objection that may be leveled against the Thomistic maneuver is the observation that strictly speaking the descriptions of the first two problems of omnipotence, *i.e.* the Paradox of the Stone and the Paradox of Free Will, do not involve any self-contradiction. The questions can be posed *vis-à-vis* a human being, for example, without generating any self-stultifying consequences. Despite Mavrodes' protestation that the questions are self-contradictory, the contradiction surfaces only when the demands are pitched against the concept

³ T.J. Holopainen, *Dialectic and Theology in the Eleventh Century*, Leiden: Brill, 1996, pp. 37-8.

⁴ Marilyn McCord Adams, *William Ockham*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Volume III: The Correspondence, tr. John Cottingham *et al.*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 23.

⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 358-9.

of omnipotence and not in terms of the simple formulation of the tasks in themselves. Although Aquinas and Mavrodes may be right in characterizing a task like „drawing a square circle” as contradictory, asking whether something can create a stone that cannot be lifted is not contradictory. In other words, the contradictions only occur *in relation* to the notion of omnipotence and as such it would beg the question if the problems are dismissed on the grounds of self-contradiction. The tasks *qua* tasks are certainly devoid of any self-contradiction.

Refining the Logical Limitation Rule. In response to the preceding problem, it may be claimed that the logical possibility restriction is not only intended to exclude logically impossible tasks but also to preclude tasks that are not in themselves contradictory yet involve a contradiction if performed by an omnipotent being. That is, although attributing omnipotence to an entity entails the statement „An omnipotent being can make it to be that X in all cases where making-it-to-be-that-X involves no contradiction,” it does *not* entail the statement „An omnipotent being can make it to be that X where the entity’s-making-it-to-be-that X would involve a contradiction.” By this further refinement of the logical possibility limitation, one can save omnipotence from falling into the trap of tasks whose descriptions do not involve any contradiction but their *very* performance by an omnipotent being would embroil that being in contradictory states of affairs.

But, this second layer of logical restriction is not going to alleviate the problem and, indeed, leads to the further erosion of omnipotence by watering down its content to the extent that the concept can be equally applied to all and sundry. Since, as John Mackie rightly points out, any thing can be considered omnipotent if it could only do all that it was logically possible for it to do.⁸ On this compounded logical impossibility rendition of omnipotence, logical possibility coincides with practical possibility, and in cases of objects whose logical and practical possibilities are considerably limited, the entities in question are undoubtedly entitled to assume the mantle of omnipotence. In other words, where logical possibilities are exhausted by limited practical possibilities, the new logical definition would deem such objects to be omnipotent as they are only required to do what is logically possible for them to do. Moreover, this extra emendation of logical impossibility itself seems to encourage another paradox: namely, it is logically possible that an omnipotent being is not making anything to be!

⁸ John Mackie, „Omnipotence”, *Sophia* 1: 13-25, 1962.

Other Types of Impossibility. Even if the concept of omnipotence is circumscribed in terms of logical impossibility – whether in its simple version or compounded variant – to avoid the paradoxes of an unrestricted domain of application, still there is at least one other type of impossibility that does not fall under the category of logic – namely, mathematical necessity – which creates a problem of its own for omnipotence. According to the Paradox of Mathematical Necessity, even an omnipotent being cannot change the truth or falsity of mathematical statements. The paradox can be satisfactorily handled by the logical impossibility constraint only if one subscribes to some heavy-duty logicism that mathematics in some unequivocal and significant sense is *reducible* to logic. However, should one happen to reject strict logicism, one would be facing an additional type of necessity, *viz.* mathematical necessity, that cannot be circumvented by just imposing the logical restriction. One is thus forced to admit one other type of impotency in the concept of omnipotence.

Reinstatement of the Problem without Violating the Logical Possibility Constraint. The fourth problem with the Thomistic approach to omnipotence highlights the possibility of reformulating the paradox without falling foul of the logical constraint imposed by Aquinas and company on the concept of omnipotence. In their paper, ‘The New Paradox of the Stone’, Alfred R. Mele and M.P. Smith attempt to show that the paradox can still be produced within the proposed Thomistic framework for omnipotence.⁹ According to Mele and Smith, instead of interpreting the paradox as posing a competition between a pair of omnipotent beings – represented by God at two different times – the paradox can be reformulated as posing a question about *simultaneous* competition between a pair of omnipotent beings. To illustrate their reformulation, they set up the following scenario: Suppose, Fred, an omnipotent being, wishes to have an omnipotent companion and thus creates Barney.¹⁰ Later, however, there is a conflict between Fred and Barney over the location of a particular stone. Under the circumstances, there are three possibilities:

- (1) The stone moves because Fred wills to bring it about.
- (2) The stone stays stationary because Barney wills to bring it about.

⁹ Alfred R. Mele and M.P. Smith, ‘The New Paradox of the Stone’, *Faith and Philosophy*, 5: 283-90, 1988.

¹⁰ Fred and Barney are Mele and Smith’s own names for the two omnipotent beings.

- (3) The stone moves or stays stationary but not because of either Fred's or Barney's will.¹¹

Then, against the backdrop of the following statements:

- (a) There is no logical contradiction in a multiplicity of omnipotent beings.
- (b) Omnipotent beings, *à la* Aquinas, are not required to do the impossible.
- (c) It is impossible to thwart the will of an omnipotent being.

Mele and Smith conclude that in cases of simultaneous competition between two omnipotent beings, neither can emerge victorious. *The only possible resolution is a stalemate*. That is, the reappearance of the paradox in the form of two omnipotent beings whose omnipotence is simultaneously thwarted without, of course, breaching the logical limitation laid on omnipotence in the Thomistic treatment of the concept. Mele and Smith correctly point out that if it does not count against God's omnipotence that He cannot create a stone that He cannot move, then neither Fred's nor Barney's omnipotence is undermined by the stalemate ensuing from their conflicting wills. Thus, the paradox of omnipotence is reinstated through the observation that there is no logical impossibility in the simultaneous existence of two omnipotent beings.

But, as can be seen, the Achilles heel of Mele and Smith's argument is their statement about the logical possibility of the existence of at least two omnipotent beings. Should one happen to argue against their assertion about the possibility of a multiplicity of omnipotent beings, one would not be able to reinstate the paradox of omnipotence without impugning the Thomistic logical possibility constraint. Therefore, the viability or otherwise of their reformulation of the paradox depends ultimately on whether the existence of more than one omnipotent being is deemed logically possible or not.

Historically speaking, however, there has been a long tradition among Semitic theologians to argue for the „unicity of the omnipotent” and the impossibility of a multiplicity of omnipotent beings. For the purpose of discussion, I have chosen two influential arguments – one from Ghazali and the other from Duns Scotus – that complement each other's attempt to prove

¹¹ There is a fourth possibility: namely, the stone neither moves nor stays stationary – it gets destroyed, for example. But, as it does not affect the outcome of the scenario and in fact reinforces it, it has been left out for the sake of simplicity.

that there can be only one omnipotent being. Interestingly, both arguments are couched in terms of a *reductio* of a multiplicity of omnipotent beings, instead of directly arguing for the uniqueness or oneness of the instantiation or exemplification of omnipotence.

In the case of Ghazali, the following passage offers the gist of his *reductio*:

Were there two gods and one of them resolved on a course of action, the second would be either obliged to aid him thereby demonstrating that he was a subordinate being and not an all-powerful god, or would be able to oppose and resist thereby demonstrating that he was all-powerful and the first weak and deficient, not an all-powerful god.¹²

Basically, Ghazali's argument can be summarized in terms of the following statement: If there were two omnipotent beings, then their wills will coincide in every case and as such there will be no way of distinguishing one will from the other. That is, we will be facing the *problem of individuation*, should there be more than one omnipotent being.

On the other hand, Duns Scotus' *reductio* runs as follows:

Just as an omnipotent being can produce whatever is possible simply by willing that it should be, so also he can impede or destroy everything that is possible by willing that it should not be. But if *A* is omnipotent, he can will everything other than himself and so, by his will, cause everything to exist. ... But if *B* wills that none of these things should exist, then none will exist. Consequently, if two omnipotent beings exist, each will make the other impotent, not indeed by destroying the other, but because one of his positive will could keep non-existent what the other wills should exist.¹³

Again, paraphrasing Duns Scotus, his argument is thus: If there were two omnipotent beings, then their wills will conflict in every case and as such neither will would be capable of accomplishing anything. That is, we will be facing the *problem of impotence*, should there be more than one omnipotent being.

Thus, contrary to Mele and Smith's contention, Ghazali's and Duns Scotus' argumentation collectively contends that there are problems in the very possibility of a multiplicity of omnipotent beings. Such a possibility either leads to the impossibility of distinguishing one omnipotent being from another or results in the impotence of both omnipotent beings. Therefore, by

¹² A.L. Tibawi, *Al-Ghazali's Tract on Dogmatic Theology*, London: Luzac & Company, 1965, p. 40.

¹³ Duns Scotus, *Philosophical Writings*, tr. Allan Wolter, Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1962, p. 90.

probing the possibility of the simultaneous existence of two omnipotent beings and establishing its impossibility, it may be argued that Mele and Smith's reformulation of the paradox of the stone cannot even get off the ground, and the Thomistic solution of imposing the logical possibility constraint still manages to forestall the concept of omnipotence from being embroiled in contradictions and inconsistencies.

There are, however, a number of problems with the foregoing arguments for the „unicity of the omnipotent“. First, on behalf of Mele and Smith, it may be objected that Duns Scotus' argument from the problem of impotence *begs the question*. For, the observation that the existence of two omnipotent beings leads to a stalemate where the wills of both beings will be thwarted does not prove that there cannot be two omnipotent beings; it only evinces that in such a world neither will is going to prevail. Indeed, Mele and Smith used the very same scenario to show how the traditional paradox of the stone can rear its head even under the Thomistic restriction of logical possibility. Consequently, mutual cancellation of wills does not logically entail the impossibility of a multiplicity of omnipotent beings, unless one can offer an *independent* argument to show that mutual cancellation of wills excludes the existence of one or the other being in question. But, that appears to be a tall order if not an impossible one, for logically there is nothing incoherent about the existence of two beings whose wills may cancel one another – indeed, if nothing else, some of our daily interactions are the prime examples of such commonplace cancellation of each other's will. Hence, Mele and Smith would seem to be right if they dismiss Duns Scotus' argument from the problem of cancellation of wills as an instance of *petitio principii*, if not for being a clear case of *non sequitur*.

Secondly, even if one does not take any exception to the argumentation of Ghazali and Duns Scotus, the conclusion that there cannot be two omnipotent beings is not much of a solace to someone who wishes to assert the *existence* of one omnipotent being. From the impossibility of two omnipotent beings one cannot conclude the existence of one. For example, from the statement, „There cannot be two prime numbers between $n - 1$ and $n + 1$,“ one cannot logically conclude that there is one; indeed, in this case, it is impossible to have any number whatsoever, whether prime or not.

Thirdly, even if one goes along with the reasoning of Ghazali and Duns Scotus in their rejection of a multiplicity of omnipotent beings and accedes to their conception of omnipotence in terms of a being that „can will everything“, one may still raise the following question: Can an omnipotent being create another omnipotent being? Again, it should be borne in mind that there is nothing illogical about this question, and it does not seem to

flout any aspect of the Thomistic logical limitation. It sets out a task that can sensibly and without self-contradiction be posed, for instance, to a human being. Hence, under these circumstances, either the omnipotent being in question cannot create another omnipotent being, in which case it is not omnipotent after all. Or, the omnipotent being can create another omnipotent being, which in turn would lead to the conclusion that there can be at least two omnipotent beings. That is, contrary to the contention of Ghazali and Duns Scotus, in order to save the potency of omnipotence, one has to concede that the very concept of omnipotence renders a multiplicity of omnipotent beings a genuine possibility.

However, it should be emphasized that the import of the preceding question was not to achieve a cheap rhetorical victory, but to highlight something deeply troublesome about the concept of omnipotence and why, even within a Thomistic framework, the problem would resurface in one form or another. It may be recalled that, according to Mele and Smith, an examination of the concept of omnipotence indicates that there is nothing illogical to stop one from drawing the conclusion that, „There can be two omnipotent beings.” However, it was also seen how both Ghazali and Duns Scotus argued that by examining the concept of omnipotence, one may logically conclude that, „There cannot be two omnipotent beings.” That is, two contradictory statements are being derived from one and the *same* idea. Normally, on such occasions, one is counseled to conclude that the concept in question suffers from some sort of *incoherence*. It, therefore, seems as if one is similarly prodded to pronounce the concept of omnipotence incoherent.

In comparing the reasoning of Ghazali and Duns Scotus to that of Mele and Smith concerning the content of omnipotence, their contradictory outcomes clearly indicate that the concept is deeply problematic. But, why is the concept prone to so much difficulty and unrelenting troubles? Diagnosing the source of the paradoxical nature of omnipotence may help one to appreciate the irredeemable gravity of the situation. The incoherence inherent in the concept of omnipotence is fundamentally due to the fact that omnipotence, like the concept of *set* – or more specifically, the concept of *universal set* – intrinsically involves *self-reflexive universal quantification*. So long as the concept of omnipotence can quantify unrestrictedly over itself, it is set to engender paradoxical consequences. It is this universal reflexivity that entangles omnipotence in its self-referential applications, which culminate in contradictions that render the concept and class of omnipotence rather empty.

In this regard, there are some affinities between my diagnosis of the troubles of omnipotence in terms of its intrinsic self-reflexive universal

quantification and Bertrand Russell's *vicious circle principle*. In his attempt to deal with paradoxes, whether set-theoretic or semantic, as Russell did not recognize the viability of the dichotomy, he introduced the principle in order to prevent the occurrence of paradoxical consequences stemming from seemingly innocuous concepts and propositions. In terms of the genealogy of the principle, generally Henri Poincaré is credited with espousing some of its first formulations.¹⁴ Russell himself offers several versions of the principle that are not strictly equivalent, yet they were treated as variants of the same fundamental observation. In his 1908 paper, 'Mathematical Logic as Based on the Theory of Types', he presents the following definitions of the principle:

- (1) Whatever involves *all* of a collection must not be one of the collection.
- (2) If, provided a certain collection has a total, it would have members only definable in terms of that total, then the said collection has no total.
- (3) No totality can contain members defined in terms of itself.
- (4) Whatever contains an apparent variable must not be a possible value of that variable.¹⁵

Basically, Russell's restriction that whatever comprises an apparent variable should not be one among the possible values of that variable is logically tantamount to saying that one cannot quantify over a given class *C* when defining an element of *C* itself. For instance, before defining the predicate „is a prime number”, one has to define the range of objects that this predicate might be said to satisfy, *viz.* the set, *N*, of natural numbers. Russell thus recommends this restriction not as a theory but as a condition of adequacy, whereby concepts whose definitions fall foul of the vicious circle principle are called *impredicative* and the ones in conformity are referred to as *predicative* concepts. Now, should the claim that there are affinities between my diagnosis of omnipotence's problems and Russell's adequacy condition hold water, the concept of omnipotence would turn out to be an impredicative one on the vicious circle principle, and thus in need of major modifications. Yet, any attempt to curtail the self-reflexive universal quantification of omnipotence apparently leaves its object of instantiation

¹⁴ See, for example, Charles S. Chihara, *Ontology and the Vicious-Circle Principle*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1973.

¹⁵ Reprinted in his *Logic and Knowledge*, ed. Robert C. Marsh, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1964, pp. 63 & 75.

less worthy of attention and adoration,¹⁶ and, in Peter Damian's view, any individual keen on pointing out the divine limitations 'is rather fit for the branding iron.'¹⁷

In closing the paper, I would like to highlight the inherent instability of omnipotence with a final example in terms of a logical backlash arising from Ghazali's and Duns Scotus' discussion of omnipotence. They argue that, „There cannot be two omnipotent beings.” But, such an impossibility logically implies that nothing has the power of making it possible for two omnipotent beings to exist simultaneously. This in turn entails that there is a *limitation* or *constraint* on what can exist or what can be brought into existence. Yet, the very existence of such limitation or constraint shows that there is not even one omnipotent being. Ironically, the statement that there cannot be two omnipotent beings logically implies that there cannot be any.

¹⁶ Though not germane to the present discussion, it would be revealing to delve into the interesting psychological connection between veneration/worship and power.

¹⁷ Peter Damian, 'On Divine Omnipotence', in *The Power of God*, ed. Linwood Urban and Douglas N. Walton, New York: Oxford University Press, 1978, p. 64. He prefaces his penal edification for those who draw attention to the paradoxical nature of omnipotence by the remark: 'Despicable is he who makes such assertions'!

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