

### III. The Nature of God and Arguments for the Existence of God

Theism is characterized by belief in a God that possesses a unique set of characteristics or attributes. The theistic conception of God that is formed by the combination of these attributes has been troublesome through the centuries and has given rise to many questions and criticisms – by theists and nontheists alike – both of the individual attributes and the collective set of attributes. These problems persisted throughout the twentieth century and intensified in the last few decades. Some of the issues concerning the attributes are old ones revisited in light of our changing knowledge of the natural world as a result of the development of science. Others are logical issues that have been given new “twists” by contemporary scholars, quite independently of contingent matters. The coherence of the attributes that comprise the concept of God is fundamental to theism since the viability of theism must begin with the viability of the concept of God. Sorting through the difficulties surrounding the traditional attributes of the theistic deity is such a fundamental problem that Richard Swinburne devotes approximately two-thirds of what many consider his seminal work, *The Coherence of Theism*, to an explanation and defense of the coherence of these attributes. Although there are many disagreements among theists that need to be explored, I shall take Swinburne’s view as typical of the traditional theistic concept of God: namely, “that there exists eternally an omnipresent spirit, free, creator of the universe, omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, and a source of moral obligation.”<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of the first part of this chapter is to examine critically both various new difficulties that have been raised concerning these attributes as well as various new interpretations of old difficulties that have existed for centuries. Analytic philosophy, with its central emphasis on conceptual and linguistic analysis, has resulted in the availability of much finer honed tools of analysis for use by contemporary philosophers of religion in the process of examining the concept of God. Although, in several instances, we may agree that the arguments have been taken to a “higher level,” in the end, there is still significant disagreement concerning the various individual predicates as well as the set of predicates that

<sup>1</sup> Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, Revised Edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 99.

comprise the concept of God. Since it is impossible to treat all of the controversies associated with the different traditional attributes of God here, I shall focus instead on the problems and issues that appear to have dominated the literature in the second half of the twentieth century. These are the controversies arising from traditional theistic claims concerning God's omnipotence, omniscience, eternity, impassibility, and necessary existence.<sup>2</sup>

### OMNIPOTENCE

Careful, conceptual analysis of the notion of omnipotence has demonstrated the powerful effects of analytic philosophy – frequently frustrating but often clarifying as well. The literature resulting from various attempts to define omnipotence and the criticisms directed at those attempts is extensive, and I can do nothing more here than suggest some of the major sources.<sup>3</sup> Richard LaCroix has argued that a general definition of omnipotence is not possible, and George Mavrodes has responded by attempting to provide such a definition. Both Joshua Hoffman and Bruce Reichenbach have agreed that Mavrodes's definition is inadequate. Few of the contemporary discussants in the matter of God's omnipotence, including Mavrodes, have followed Descartes in maintaining that God can do everything, including the logically impossible. Most have followed Aquinas in maintaining that God can do everything that is logically possible. Thus, theism does not require God be able to create square circles or make the same person both married and a bachelor at the same time. I shall assume here that logical possibility establishes the range of discourse for all actions so that we can begin to understand better the notion of omnipotence by saying that God can do everything that can be done. Does this amount to a limitation upon what God can do? It does not appear so. We can certainly say, "Well, God cannot create square circles." However, if we understand possible actions as delimited by logical possibility, then creating square circles is not a possible action and thus is not *something* that God cannot do. Other difficulties in understanding the notion of omnipotence involve actions that seem to be prohibited by God's nature. God cannot commit suicide or sadistically torture young children just for the fun of it given his nature. So a further limitation that can be placed on the range of possible actions for God is that God can do everything that is not contrary to God's nature. There are other limitations that must be added as well. Most have thought that God cannot change the past. God

<sup>2</sup> I do not treat here the work of Charles Hartshorne, since his view of the divine attributes is so intimately connected with his process philosophy. See his *Man's Vision of God and the Logic of Theism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1941) and *The Divine Relativity: A Social Conception of God* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1948).

<sup>3</sup> Several of the exchanges have taken place in *Philosophical Studies*. See Richard LaCroix, "The Impossibility of Defining Omnipotence," *Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 32, 1977, pp. 181-90; George Mavrodes, "Defining Omnipotence," *Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 32, 1977, pp. 191-202; Richard LaCroix, "Failing to Define Omnipotence," *Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 35, 1979, pp. 219-22; Joshua Hoffman, "Mavrodes on Defining Omnipotence," *Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 35, 1979, pp. 311-15; and Bruce Reichenbach, "Mavrodes on Omnipotence," *Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 37, 1980, pp. 211-14. Also see Anthony Kenny, *The God of the Philosophers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), Chapter VII; Stephen T. Davis, *Logic and the Nature of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1983), Chapter 5; and Edward R. Wierenga, *The Nature of God* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989), Chapter 1. For Alvin Plantinga's notion of omnipotence, see the discussion of his modal version of the ontological argument below.

may be able to affect metaphysically contingent states of affairs before and while they are happening, but once an event has happened and is in the past, even God cannot make it not happen or change the way in which it happened. While a certain amount of agreement has developed concerning the need for most of these qualifications, the exact wording is important and has been the source of frequent disagreements.<sup>4</sup> The question becomes one of whether or not the notion of omnipotence, suitably qualified, is a coherent one.

### THE PARADOX OF THE STONE

Even when the "restrictions" or qualifications are added to the notion of omnipotence, many difficult conceptual issues remain. Much of the current discussion concerning God's omnipotence has been prompted by recently developed paradoxes that are thought by some to arise from the notion of omnipotence, even given that God's power is understood as the ability to do everything that is logically possible and that is consistent with God's nature. One such paradox is "the paradox of the stone," which poses the question of whether God can create a stone so heavy that he cannot lift it.<sup>5</sup> Either God can or cannot. So, if God can create such a stone, there is at least one thing that God cannot do – lift it. If God cannot create such a stone, then there is at least one thing that God cannot do – create it. In either case, it seems impossible for God to do something that is not obviously logically impossible and that is not obviously inconsistent with God's nature.

The paradox of the stone has prompted a number of responses that employ different techniques in efforts to address the apparent paradox.<sup>6</sup> One comes from George Mavrodes, who argues that the supposed paradox is spurious since the notion of a stone that is too heavy for God to lift is contradictory; hence, the lifting of such a stone involves a logically impossible state of affairs. A person might certainly make an object that is too heavy for that person to lift, but *on the assumption that God is omnipotent*, the phrase "a stone too heavy for God to lift" means "a stone that cannot be lifted by Him whose power is sufficient for lifting anything."<sup>7</sup> Mavrodes suggests that the contradictory nature of "a stone too heavy for God to lift" can be seen by comparing the lifting power and the creating power of God. If one takes the paradox seriously and thinks that it forces some limitation on God's omnipotence, one might choose to maintain the full power of God's infinite ability to lift things and restrict God's ability to create by admitting that God cannot create such a stone. In such a case, has one given up anything?

<sup>4</sup> Edward R. Wierenga provides a summary and discussion of the different versions of the different qualifications in *The Nature of God*, p. 14-18.

<sup>5</sup> Wade C. Savage, "The Paradox of the Stone," *Philosophical Review*, Vol. 76, 1967.

<sup>6</sup> In addition to the responses discussed here, see Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967), pp. 168-73; Peter Geach, "Omnipotence," *Philosophy*, Vol. 48, 1973, reprinted as Chapter 1 of *Providence and Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); and G. B. Keene, "A Simpler Solution to the Paradox of Omnipotence," *Mind*, Vol. 69, 1960. For a critical discussion of different responses to the paradox of the stone, see Stephen T. Davis, *Logic and the Nature of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1983), Chapter 5.

<sup>7</sup> George Mavrodes, "Some Puzzles Concerning Omnipotence," *Philosophical Review*, 72, 1963, pp. 221-23. Reprinted in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, edited by Michael Peterson et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), to which the page numbers here refer, p. 113.

Mavrodes thinks not. Since God's power to lift is infinite, then God's ability to create is still infinite also since God can still create everything that it is possible to lift; therefore, God is not limited in lifting or creating power.<sup>8</sup>

The main difficulty with Mavrodes's solution to the paradox of the stone is that it proceeds on the basis of the assumption that God is omnipotent; however, as Richard Swinburne points out, the main thrust of Savage's paradox is to call into question the coherence of the very notion of omnipotence.<sup>9</sup> Mavrodes's claim that the phrase "a stone too heavy for God to lift" is self-contradictory hinges upon God's being omnipotent, but one can hardly use the notion of omnipotence to resolve the paradox until the paradox has been resolved.

Whereas Mavrodes's response to the paradox of the stone assumes that God cannot do logically impossible things, Harry Frankfurt takes a different line in "The Logic of Omnipotence" by arguing that a response to the paradox does not require such an assumption.<sup>10</sup> If we reject the principle that God cannot do logically impossible things, then, Frankfurt points out, a solution to the paradox comes very easily. If God can do logically impossible things, then if God can create the stone, he can just as easily lift it, that is, doing one logically impossible thing, he can do another.<sup>11</sup> Frankfurt's response to the paradox of the stone, which relies upon the principle that God can do logically impossible things, gives away too much since it amounts to abandoning logic altogether. If the main force of the paradox is to attack the notion of omnipotence as logically incoherent, then this "response" seems to strengthen the paradox instead of solving it by apparently admitting that the notion of omnipotence is fundamentally paradoxical and even contradictory.

Richard Swinburne has also responded in length to the paradox of the stone. After considering several different formulations of the notion of omnipotence, Swinburne finally settles upon the following (which is [D] in his scheme):

[D]: a person P is omnipotent at a time *t* if and only if he is able to bring about any logically contingent state of affairs after *t*, the description of which does not entail that P did not bring it about at *t*.<sup>12</sup>

Swinburne relies upon [D] to defuse the paradox. When one introduces temporal operators into the definition of omnipotence, then one can no longer talk of omnipotence *simpliciter*, but one must talk of omnipotence relative to a particular time. [D] allows logically for a person to be omnipotent at one time and not at another, and Swinburne maintains that "in the ordinary sense of 'person,'" a person may choose to exercise his omnipotent ability in such a way to make himself cease

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, p. 158.

<sup>10</sup> Harry Frankfurt, "The Logic of Omnipotence," *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 73, 1964, pp. 262-63. Reprinted in *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*, edited by Louis Pojman (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1998), to which the page numbers here refer.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 282.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, p. 156.

to be omnipotent at some future time.<sup>13</sup> So, if God chooses to exercise his ability to make the stone at *t*, he will cease to be omnipotent after *t*. While Swinburne sees his temporal-referenced, modified account of omnipotence as nonrestrictive, it is questionable that [D] retains a notion of omnipotence that would be acceptable to traditional theists. In the first place, there is no “ordinary sense of ‘person’” according to which it makes sense to talk of a person being omnipotent at all. It is only in an *extraordinary* sense and only in the unique case of God that omnipotence is even associated with the notion of personhood, which suggests that there must be something logically unique about the property.

Understood as a power to act, perhaps upon others or oneself, omnipotence is either an internal relation or an external relation, and given that omnipotence is predicated of persons only in the case of God, it appears that it must be an internal relation. However, [D] makes omnipotence an external relation because, according to [D], God can still be God and yet give up omnipotence. [D] also threatens to turn all of God’s attributes into external relations. If God can exercise omnipotence at *t* to give up omnipotence, then presumably God could exercise omnipotence at *t* to give up omniscience or goodness or any of his other attributes as well. If he could not, then he would not be omnipotent at *t*. Would God still be God after *t* if God exercised his omnipotence at *t* to give up omnipotence, omniscience, and goodness? Undoubtedly not, and whatever understanding we have of God that prevents God from remaining God if he gives up omniscience and goodness also prevents God from remaining God if he gives up omnipotence.<sup>14</sup> The question of whether God can at one time be omnipotent and at another time not be omnipotent focuses attention upon another set of problems with the notion of omnipotence.

### THE PARADOX OF OMNIPOTENCE

Other contemporary discussion of the notion of omnipotence has been prompted by what is commonly called “the paradox of omnipotence.”<sup>15</sup> The paradox of omnipotence arises in connection with the issue of free will and the problem of evil (which is discussed at length in Chapter VI) and was first explicitly raised by J. L. Mackie. The paradox is put in deceptively simple terms: can God make things that he cannot control?<sup>16</sup> Either an affirmative or negative answer to this question appears to result in serious problems for maintaining the coherence of the notion of omnipotence. Mackie distinguishes between different levels of omnipotence – specifically between first-order omnipotence, which is the unlimited power to act, and second-order omnipotence, which is the power to determine that powers to act exist. The paradox arises because if God has second-order omnipotence, then God

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161. For a discussion of temporal considerations in the notion of omnipotence as well as a distinction concerning different levels of omnipotence (“first-order” and “second-order” omnipotence), see J. L. Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence,” *Mind*, Vol. 64, 1955, pp. 200-12.

<sup>14</sup> There are other considerations involved here as well. For example, powers are sometimes distinguished from attributes that are distinguished from relations. I maintain that powers and attributes can best be analyzed in terms of relations, though I have not argued for this position here.

<sup>15</sup> The terminology is sometimes confusing here since some scholars refer to the paradox of the stone as the paradox of omnipotence. I use the two different designations here to try and maintain the distinction between the two problems.

<sup>16</sup> Originally in J. L. Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence,” *Mind*, Vol. 64, 1955. Also in J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1982), pp. 160ff.



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