

## 12 Impossibility Arguments

Among the most telling atheistic arguments are those to the effect that the existence of any being that meets standard divine specifications is impossible – that there not only is not but could not be any such being.

All such arguments depend crucially on sets of divine specifications. A core traditional notion of God is one that specifies him as necessarily existent, omniscient, omnipotent, and morally perfect. God is also standardly conceived of as being a free creator, and is often spoken of as immutable or transcendent. Some impossibility arguments attack a single attribute – attempting to show that the notion of omniscience is logically incoherent on its own, for example. Others attack combinations of attributes – arguing that it is not logically possible for a being to be omniscient *and* a free creator, for example. If either form of argument succeeds, we will be able to show that there can be no God as traditionally conceived.

Because the arguments at issue operate in terms of a set of more or less clear specifications, of course, it is always possible for a defender of theism to deflect the argument by claiming that the God shown impossible is not *his* God. If he ends up defending a God that is perhaps knowledgeable but not omniscient he may escape some arguments, but at the cost of a peculiarly ignorant God. The same would hold for a God that is perhaps powerful but is conceded to be less than omnipotent, or historically important but not literally a creator. If the term “God” is treated as infinitely redefinable, of course, no set of impossibility arguments will force the theist to give up a claim that “God” in some sense exists. The impossibility arguments may nonetheless succeed in their main thrust in that the “God” so saved may look increasingly less worthy of the honorific title.

A more frequent reaction, perhaps, is not redefinition but refuge in vagueness: continued use of a term “God” that is allowed to wander without clear specification. Here as elsewhere – in cases of pseudoscience, for example – resort to vagueness succeeds in deflecting criticism only at the cost of diluting content. If a believer’s notion of God entails anything like traditional attributes of omniscience,

omnipotence, and moral perfection, the force of impossibility arguments is that there can be no such being. If a believer's notion of God remains so vague as to escape *all* impossibility arguments, it can be argued, it cannot be clear to even him what he believes – or whether what he takes for pious belief has any content at all.

In what follows I concentrate on central impossibility arguments turning on (1) omnipotence and (2) omniscience. Problems for the notion of a morally perfect being and against the co-possibility of some standard attributes are given a briefer treatment in a final section.

### I. THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF OMNIPOTENCE

Is it logically possible for any being to be omnipotent?

The traditional problem for omnipotence is the paradox of the stone: Could God create a stone too heavy for him to lift? If so, there is something God could not do – he could not lift such a stone. If not, there is again something God could not do – he could not create such a stone. In either case, there is something God could not do. It follows that there are things no God could do; neither he nor any other being (for we could substitute any other name for “God”) could be omnipotent.

The history of the problem is a competition between (1) refinements of a notion of omnipotence meant to capture the core of a traditional conception while avoiding such arguments, and (2) more sophisticated versions of the paradox of the stone intended to show that logical problems for omniscience remain.

If omnipotence means – as it certainly appears to mean – an ability to do anything, then there is an even simpler argument that there can be no omnipotent being. No being could create a square circle, or an even integer greater than two and smaller than four. Because there logically could not be such things, there could be no being that could create them. Here Aquinas' response has been influential: that what omnipotence requires is the ability to perform any task, and “create a square circle” does not specify a genuine task.<sup>1</sup> Quite generally, it can be held, contradictory specifications fail to specify anything – precisely because they are contradictory – rather than specifying something of a peculiarly contradictory type. If so, contradictory task specifications fail to designate genuine tasks, and thus fail to designate tasks required of any omnipotent being. With regard to contradictory specifications, at least, God and omnipotence are off the hook.

The paradox of the stone, however, is not escaped so easily. Here we can use a task specification that is clearly not contradictory. I could certainly create a mass of concrete too heavy for me to lift. Could God? If so, there would be something he could not do: lift that mass of concrete.

If not, there is again something he could not do, though even I could do it: create such a mass of concrete.

Here again one reaction has been to object to the task specification, on the grounds not that it is contradictory but that it contains token reflexives or indexicals: terms that shift in their designation with the person we suppose to be performing the task. The task at issue is specified as creating a mass of concrete too heavy for one to lift. But, it is objected, this is not a uniform task description: in my case it demands only that I create a mass of concrete that I cannot lift. In God's case it demands that God create a mass of concrete not that I cannot lift, but that God cannot.<sup>2</sup>

Are there tasks that are essentially indexical? There certainly seem to be. J. L. Cowan gives the example of tasks assigned in a wilderness survival course, such as building, alone and without aid, a boat that both will support its builder and that its builder can easily portage. Smith and Brown succeed. Jones fails. Have Smith and Brown not succeeded at a task that Jones has not? If there are any reflexive tasks of such a sort involving two inversely coordinated powers – such as creating and lifting a heavy stone – omnipotence as an ability to perform any task is simply impossible.<sup>3</sup>

In coordination with work in contemporary metaphysics, and perhaps in an attempt to escape from the problem of indexically specified tasks, more recent work on omnipotence has been formulated in terms of bringing about states of affairs. The core notion of an omnipotent being, on such an approach, would be one able to bring about any state of affairs. Without restrictions on “states of affairs,” however, it is unclear that such a move would avoid the difficulties of indexically specified tasks, since there appear to be indexically specified states of affairs as well. You and I may face the same state of affairs, for example, when neither of us has paid our taxes.

More recent work has also taken on a different character. The task of defending a full notion of omnipotence – as an ability either to perform any (consistently specifiable) task or to bring about any consistently specifiable state of affairs – seems to have been abandoned. In that sense a traditionally omnipotent God seems to have been given up as indefensible. As Peter Geach has put 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. . . .”<sup>4</sup> What has taken its place has been an attempt to formulate some lesser notion that does not fall victim to impossibility arguments and yet has enough connection with notions of exaggerated power to be able to claim *some* theological legitimacy.

There are a number of ways in which omnipotence has been limited, often tied to other attributes someone might wish to build into a notion of God. A number of philosophers have taken it to be impossible to change the past, and have on that basis constructed definitions of omnipotence that do not require an omnipotent being to bring about a past state of affairs.<sup>5</sup> Such a move seems to concede that God is temporally bound as well as less than fully omnipotent. Individual freedom has also appeared as a crucial issue. Can some other agent bring it about that an agent *freely* chooses a particular course of action? Are there counterfactuals of freedom, of the form "If agent *A* were in circumstances *C*, *A* would freely do *X*"? Some philosophers have assumed a negative answer to the first question and a positive answer to the second, and have as a result sought to define omnipotence so that it does not require bringing about states of affairs in which other agents make certain free decisions.<sup>6</sup> If God must be morally perfect, provision might be made so as to define omnipotence in a way that doesn't require an ability to do evil. If God's existence entails that this is a best possible world, on the other hand, some have argued that evil becomes impossible and thus that evil acts need not be written out of the definition of omnipotence.<sup>7</sup>

These offer various routes for definition. All, however, seem to concede the basic point of impossibility arguments: that omnipotence in any full and traditional sense cannot be maintained, and thus that any omnipotent God in that sense cannot exist. The rest is merely fiddling as to what less to settle for. It is interesting, nonetheless, to follow some of the recent attempts to define a crippled notion of omnipotence.

T. Flint and A. Freddoso present an account of omniscience that is limited in a number of the ways specified:

*S* is omnipotent at *t* in *W* if and only if for any state of affairs *p* and world-type-for-*S* *Ls* such that *p* is not a member of *Ls*, if there is a world *W\** such that:

- (i) *Ls* is true in both *W* and *W\**, and
- (ii) *W\** shares the same history with *W* at *t*, and
- (iii) at *t* in *W\** someone actualizes *p*,

then *S* has the power at *t* in *W* to actualize *p*.<sup>8</sup>

The core idea of the account is that those states of affairs required of an omnipotent being are only those states of affairs that *some* being could produce at that time: hence the two worlds *W* and *W\**, the specification of *p* as a state that someone actualizes in *W\**, and the limitation of omnipotence to *S* having the power to actualize *p* in *W*. Omnipotence is defined as omnipotence at a time *t*; the specification that *W* and *W\** share the same history prior to *t*, which introduces significant definitional dangers of its own, is an attempt to allow a being to qualify as omnipotent even though he cannot change the past. Finally, those *p*'s required for

omnipotence are restricted to those that are not included in the “world-type-for- $S$ ,” a set of counterfactuals of freedom regarding other agents “over whose truth-value [ $S$ ] has no control.”<sup>9</sup>

As a counterexample to this account, Hoffman and Rosenkrantz offer a state of affairs in which: “A snowflake falls and no omnipotent agent ever exists.” A nonomnipotent agent might well actualize such a state of affairs in a world  $W^*$  at  $t$ , they argue, by making a snowflake fall in a case in which it is true that no omnipotent being ever exists. Suppose a companion world  $W$  at which an individual, Oscar, becomes omnipotent for the first time at  $t$ . On the grounds that Oscar’s instantaneous omnipotence is possible, Hoffman and Rosenkrantz argue that Flint and Freddoso’s account must be inadequate, since on their account Oscar could not be omnipotent: there is another individual at a companion world  $W^*$  that can bring about a state of affairs that Oscar cannot.<sup>10</sup>

Edward Wierenga offers another limited account of omnipotence:

A being  $x$  is omnipotent in a world  $W$  at a time  $t =_{\text{df}}$  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  $t$ .<sup>11</sup>

Here the basic idea is to require for omnipotence only that a being be able to actualize those states of affairs that that being is essentially such that it can actualize. If God is essentially such that he cannot do evil, for example, that will not be required for him to qualify as omnipotent. If he is essentially such that he cannot create a rock too heavy for him to lift, that too will not be required in order for him to qualify as omnipotent.

Were it not for clause (ii), a powerless stone would qualify as omnipotent on such an account. Since it is essentially incapable of doing anything, there is nothing it is possible for it to do that it cannot strongly actualize. Addition of clause (ii), however, does not seem able to avoid the basic difficulty. A classic objection is that of McEar, a being that is essentially such that he is capable of doing only one thing: scratching his ear. Since he is capable of doing something, he satisfies clause (ii), and yet surely should not qualify as omnipotent.<sup>12</sup>

A third attempt at a satisfactorily restricted definition for omnipotence is offered by Hoffman and Rosenkrantz:

$X$  is omnipotent at  $t =_{\text{df}}$  for all  $s$  (if it is possible for some agent to bring about  $s$  then at  $t$   $x$  has it within his power to bring about  $s$ ).

Hoffman and Rosenkrantz explicitly limit this to cases of  $s$  that include only temporally repeatable events. To qualify as omnipotent, a being must merely be able to bring about any repeatable event that it is

possible for some agent to bring about. This definition escapes the counterexample they present against Flint and Freddoso, they argue – a snowflake falls and no omnipotent agent ever exists – because “no omnipotent agent *ever* exists” fails to qualify as a repeatable event.

It is clear that there are other easy counterexamples, however. Consider, for example: “A snowflake falls through no effort of an omnipotent being.” This is a state of affairs that a nonomnipotent can bring about, and is moreover a state of affairs such a being could bring about repeatedly. But no omnipotent being could bring it about. On Hoffman and Rosenkrantz’s account, therefore, there could still be no omnipotent being.

A genuinely traditional and unlimited notion of omnipotence, we have seen, is simply impossible: there impossibility arguments are victorious. Here I have tried to detail some of the sorrows of recent attempts at even crippled notions of “omnipotence.” New accounts of this sort, subject to new counterexamples, can be expected to continue.

It may be possible, however, to draw some general philosophical lessons from the examples above. In one way or another, essential indexicals continue as a major problem for even restricted notions of omnipotence. As long as indexically specified tasks or states of affairs are included, no “omnipotent” being, however defined, seems capable of doing even all the things that I can. The paradox of the stone is phrased in terms of indexicals, and several of the counterexamples above turn on indexicals or something similar, notably, states of affairs specified in terms of the nonexistence of or nonproduction by omnipotent beings. The one approach that seems to avoid these sorts of counterexamples is Wierenga’s, which demands for omnipotence only that a being be able to do all that it is logically possible for *that being* to do. Such an approach immediately faces the sorrow, demonstrable in terms of examples such as McEar, of demanding far too little of omnipotence. It might also be argued that even that account manages only to disguise rather than to escape the problems of indexicals: that a Wierenga-like definition, phrased in terms of what it is logically possible for *that being* to do, suffers as it does precisely because it builds an indexical into the definition itself. The role of indexicals in impossibility arguments regarding omnipotence is of particular interest because – as detailed in the following section – essential indexicals plague omniscience as well.

## 2. THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF OMNISCIENCE

Is it logically possible for any being to be omniscient?

Until relatively recently, impossibility arguments regarding omniscience have not been so clearly developed as those regarding omnipotence. There is no single argument against omniscience with the ancient

history and logical impact of the paradox of the stone, for example. There are, however, (1) a handful of major difficulties turning on different types of knowledge and (2) a set of severe difficulties turning on some of the more sophisticated findings of contemporary logic and set theory.

What would it be for a being to be omniscient? The core notion is undoubtedly that of a being that knows all that is knowable, or all that can be known. But it is clear that we speak of a variety of things as knowledge: knowing *that* something is the case (propositional knowledge), knowing *how* to do something, and knowing both things and feelings by acquaintance. I know that Albany is the capital of New York, for example, but I also know how to fix the lawnmower, I know the beauty of your smile and the sting of disappointment.

Knowing how raises clear impossibilities for any traditional and omniscient God. If God is a being without a body, he cannot know how to juggle, how to balance on the parallel bars, or how to compensate for a strained muscle in the right calf. If omniscience demands knowing everything that can be known, therefore, no disembodied being can be omniscient.<sup>13</sup> This form of difficulty can also be developed without appeal to other attributes. One of the things that I know is how to find out things that I do not know; I know how to find out what I do not know about the planet Jupiter, for example. Were an omniscient being to have all propositional knowledge, there would be nothing it did not know in the propositional sense. There must then be a form of knowledge *how* that I have but that any such being would lack: knowing how to find the propositional knowledge it lacks. Any being that possessed all propositional knowledge would for that very reason lack a form of knowledge how.

Knowledge by acquaintance also raises clear impossibilities for any traditional and omniscient God. Among those feelings that nonomniscient beings know all too well are lust and envy, fear, frustration, and despair. If a God is without moral fault, he cannot know lust or envy, and thus cannot qualify as omniscient. If a God is without limitation, he cannot know fear, frustration, or despair.<sup>14</sup> Here too the argument can be pressed without appeal to other attributes. One of the feelings I know all too well is the recognition of my own ignorance. An omniscient being would have no ignorance, and thus this is a feeling no omniscient being could know. There can then be no omniscient being.

Here as in the case of omnipotence, the theistic options appear to be limited to cutting omniscience down to some logically coherent size. A first move is to limit omniscience to propositional knowledge. Omniscience has often been defined, for example, as follows:

A being  $x$  is omniscient =<sub>df</sub> for all  $p$ ,  $p$  is true IFF  $x$  knows that  $p$ .<sup>15</sup>

This clearly will not do, since it allows an omniscient being to hold any number of false beliefs. An improvement that avoids that difficulty is the following:

A being  $x$  is omniscient  $\equiv_{df}$  for all  $p$ , (( $p$  is true IFF  $x$  believes that  $p$ ) and ( $x$  believes that  $p$  IFF  $x$  knows that  $p$ )).<sup>16</sup>

Limitation to merely propositional knowledge, however, is by no means enough to save a notion of omniscience. There appear, first of all, to be forms of knowledge that one being can have and that no other being can have. In comparison with the paradox of the stone as a perennial problem regarding omnipotence, it is of interest that these forms of knowledge involve essential indexicals.

Consider a case borrowed from John Perry.<sup>17</sup> I follow a trail of spilled sugar around and around a tall aisle in the supermarket, in search of the shopper who is making a mess. Suddenly I realize that the trail of sugar that I have been following is spilling from a torn sack in *my* cart, and that *I* am the culprit – *I* am making a mess.

What it is that I realize at that point is that

1. I am making a mess.

The interesting point is that this proposition is *not* the same as

2. Patrick Grim is making a mess,

nor can it be the same proposition as

3. *He* is making a mess.

where I am the “he” that is indicated.

We can easily construct stories in which I know (2) or (3) without knowing (1). In an amnesia case I may know that Patrick Grim is making a mess without realizing that I am Patrick Grim, for example. I may see that *he* is making a mess – that oaf in the fish-eye mirror – without yet realizing that oaf is *me*. What I express by (1) is not therefore simply what is expressed by (2) or (3).

One clear indication that (2) and (3) cannot express the same proposition as (1) is that (1) offers a complete explanation for things that (2) and (3) cannot. When I stop myself short in the supermarket, gather up my broken sack, and start to tidy up, my doing so may be quite fully explained by saying that I have realized what I express by (1). But it could not be fully explained by saying that I realize (2) or (3). For either of these to offer a *full* explanation for my behavior, we would have to add at least that I also know that I am Patrick Grim, or that I know that *he* is me.



What I know when I know (1) thus includes some aspect of knowledge to which expression using an indexical "I" or "me" is essential. Neither (2) nor (3), nor any other indication of me that is either merely descriptive or *de re* (of the thing), can capture what I know when I know (1). To capture *that* we need to add some additional knowledge that is itself indexical in character: the knowledge that *I* am Patrick Grim, for example, or that I am *he*.

Because of the role of the essential indexical, what I know when I know that I am making a mess is something that no other being can know. An omniscient being, it appears, would clearly have to know all that I know. Since I am not omniscient, and no other being can know what I know when I know that I am making a mess, there can be no omniscient being.<sup>18</sup> Here the essential indexical used is "I," but a similar argument can be phrased to show that no timeless being can know all that someone can know *now*, nor can a being that has no spatial location know what someone can know *here*.<sup>19</sup>

What routes remain open for the defender of omniscience in the face of the essential indexical? One route is to restrict omniscience to the propositional and to insist that indexical knowledge does not qualify as propositional. There are precedents for such a move in other work on indexicals. Consider, for example, the case in which I see the mess-maker in the fish-eye mirror at the end of the aisle and come to the conclusion that *he* is making the mess. My further realization a moment later that it is *I* who am making a mess, it has been proposed, involves no new proposition but merely a change of perspective.<sup>20</sup> But this is drastically counterintuitive. At the point at which I see the man in the mirror there is clearly something that I *haven't* yet realized and that I *don't* yet know: that it is *me* in the mirror and that *I* am making a mess. That is something I realize only a moment later, and it is clear that there is then something new I have learned, some new piece of information I didn't have before. That is precisely the role for which the term "proposition" is designed.

Another move, recently pursued by Yujin Nagasawa, is to follow some of the attempts outlined above at limited notions of omnipotence: to grant that it is impossible that anyone else know what I know when I know I am making a mess, but to cut omniscience down to size by redefinition. Though it is not made fully clear in Nagasawa, the basic idea is to define omniscience as having all propositional knowledge that it is possible for a particular being to have.<sup>21</sup> The account of omnipotence this immediately brings to mind is Wierenga's, which is hardly a promising start. A stone is essentially incapable of knowing anything. Were omniscience to require of a being knowing merely all that a being of that type could essentially know, any stone would qualify as

omniscient. There would be literally as many omniscient beings as grains of sand on a beach. Were we to require that an omniscient being know *something* and know all that such a being could essentially know (once again following Wierenga) we would be faced with the prospect of McIgnorant, who is essentially such that his knowledge is extremely limited and yet who would have to be declared omniscient on the basis of such a definition.

There are also a range of impossibility arguments regarding omniscience that use central results in set theory and central concepts from the limitative theorems of twentieth-century logic. For reasons of space I set aside the more complex of these, which parallel Gödel's theorems and related results.<sup>22</sup> There is, however, an elegant set-theoretical argument against the possibility of omniscience that can be presented fairly simply.

Omniscience, even if limited to the propositional and even if propositions were taken to exclude knowledge involving essential indexicals, would require a being to know all (objective) truths. It can clearly be established, however, that there can be no plurality of all truths. There is no "all" of the sort omniscience would require.

The result is most simply expressed in terms of sets: that there can be no set of all truths. For suppose any set of truths **T**:

$$\mathbf{T} = \{t_1, t_2, t_3 \dots\}^{23}$$

And consider the elements of its power set **PT**, containing all subsets of **T**:

$$\begin{aligned} &\{\emptyset\} \\ &\{t_1\} \\ &\{t_2\} \\ &\{t_3\} \\ &\cdot \\ &\cdot \\ &\cdot \\ &\{t_1, t_2\} \\ &\{t_1, t_3\} \\ &\cdot \\ &\cdot \\ &\cdot \\ &\{t_1, t_2, t_3\} \\ &\cdot \\ &\cdot \\ &\cdot \end{aligned}$$

To each element of the power set there will be a unique truth – at least the truth that that element contains a particular truth  $t_1$  as a member, for example, or that it does not contain  $t_1$  as a member:

$$\begin{aligned} t_1 &\in \{t_1, t_2, t_3\} \\ t_1 &\notin \{t_2, t_3\} \end{aligned}$$

By Cantor's theorem, we know that the power set of any set is larger – contains more members – than the set itself. There will then be more truths than are contained in  $\mathbf{T}$ . But  $\mathbf{T}$  can be taken as *any* set of truths. For any set of truths, we can show that there are more truths than it contains. There can therefore be no set of *all* truths.

This argument seems to strike at a crucial assumption essential to any notion of omniscience – that truth and knowledge themselves have an intrinsic maximum. With regard to both truth and knowledge, that assumption is provably false. If neither truth or knowledge can have a maximum degree, there can be no degree of knowledge that counts as maximal – and thus there can be no omniscience.

Is there any escape from the Cantorian argument? One reply, which appears in pieces by Richard Cartwright, D. A. Martin, Keith Simmons, and John Abbruzzese, concentrates on the term “set.”<sup>24</sup> If we speak of “all” the truths but refuse to collect them as a “one,” it is supposed, the argument can be avoided. It can be shown, however, that this move is futile; the argument does not depend in any essential way on reference to a single class, set, or collection of all truths. It has precisely the same force against omniscience if phrased directly in terms of formal relations and “many” truths, treated entirely in the plural.<sup>25</sup>

Another reply appears informally in work by Keith Simmons and Alvin Plantinga, developed formally in different ways by Gary Mar and Howard Sobel.<sup>26</sup> All of these attempt to disable the Cantorian argument by denying the diagonal. A crucial step in the full argument is that for any proposed mapping between (1) a supposed set of all truths and (2) the elements of its power set, there will be those truths that are not members of the set of truths to which they are assigned. This is the “diagonal.” None of these authors denies that there are precisely these truths. What they all attempt to deny is the step that follows: that there will then be some truth about them. Although such a move would work as a formal stop-gap, the *philosophical* demands it would entail seem to be flatly unacceptable, compromising the notion of truth itself. For the philosophical instantiation of such a move it would have to be maintained that there is a specific group of things – that there really are these things – but that there is *no* truth about them, not even that there are these things or that they are the things they are. Indeed the claim that there is no truth about precisely these things would, if true, be *itself*

a truth about them of precisely the sort that is being denied. This does not appear to be a way out.

Here we have concentrated on impossibility arguments regarding omniscience considered alone, just as we concentrated on impossibility arguments regarding omnipotence alone in the preceding section. Both of these attributes, however, also fall victim to mixed arguments. Can a being be both omniscient and morally perfect? Omnipotent and morally perfect? Omniscient and free?

### 3. THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF COMBINED ATTRIBUTES

Of the three major properties attributed to God in Western theism – omnipotence, omniscience, and moral perfection – impossibility arguments against the third are the least developed. One reason for this may be that conflicts between major ethical theories remain unresolved – should one approach the idea of moral perfection in terms of utilitarianism, deontology, or virtue theory? Far from seeming invulnerable to impossibility arguments, however, the notion of divine moral perfection seems ripe for them. This is an area worthy of further work.

There are also a range of impossibility arguments that turn on other attributes in combination with omnipotence, omniscience, or moral perfection. God is certainly conceived as a free agent, for example – indeed as a free creator. But is that conception consistent with other standard attributes?

It is far from clear that free choice is compatible with omniscience. One cannot make a free choice between options A and B, it can be argued, if one knows with complete certainty in advance that one will take course A. If so, since an omniscient God would know in advance (and from all eternity) all actions it would take, there can be no point at which such a God could make a genuine choice. Omniscience and freedom appear to be incompatible.<sup>27</sup>

Impossibility arguments regarding divine freedom and moral perfection are the subject of the classical Leibniz-Clarke correspondence.<sup>28</sup> Leibniz's problem was that God's moral perfection would entail that he must of necessity create the best of all possible worlds, and thus it could not be maintained that he was free to create any inferior world. Clarke insists on God's freedom, and therefore insists that he *could* create an inferior world, therefore contradicting a notion that God is of necessity morally perfect. Despite attempts on both sides to finesse a distinction in which God's choice is necessitated in one sense and not in another, the central difficulty remains.

Peter Geach and Nelson Pike have a similar exchange regarding omnipotence and moral perfection.<sup>29</sup> Both admit an inconsistency in

the idea that any being is both omnipotent and impeccable, or unable to do wrong. Because of that inconsistency, Pike denies impeccability. Geach, on the other hand, denies omnipotence. Either course results in the denial of a traditional God.

A simpler impossibility may lie in the notion of necessary moral perfection itself. Mark Twain contrasts his moral status with that of George Washington: "I am different from Washington; I have a higher, grander standard of principle. Washington could not lie. I can lie, but I won't." If God *cannot* act wrongly, it is impossible for him to face any real moral choices.<sup>30</sup> If so, he cannot be praised for making the correct choices, and if he is not morally praiseworthy, he can hardly qualify as morally perfect. *Necessary* moral perfection seems to exclude the possibility of precisely those choices that genuine moral perfection would demand.

Other impossibility arguments using multiple attributes abound. God's timelessness and immutability appear to be inconsistent with omniscience regarding tensed facts, knowable only at a particular time,<sup>31</sup> and immutability may similarly be inconsistent with the notion of a creator God.<sup>32</sup>

We have seen reason to believe that both omnipotence and omniscience are intrinsically impossible, and to suggest that the same may hold for necessary moral perfection as well. Further impossibilities follow from the assumption of such attributes in combination.

There is a related atheological argument of major importance that we have not considered here because it relies not on divine specifications alone but on an obvious but contingent fact as well. As such it fails to qualify as a pure impossibility argument in our sense. What that argument demands is the obvious but contingent fact that our world abounds with unnecessary suffering. This is the problem of evil, discussed in chapter 10 in this volume.

#### NOTES

1. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, part I, Q. 25, art. 3. See also J. L. Cowan, "The Paradox of Omnipotence," *Analysis* 25 (1965/supplement): 102–8, reprinted in Michael Martin and Ricki Monnier (eds.), *The Impossibility of God* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2003).
2. George Mavrodes takes such a tack in "Some Puzzles Concerning Omnipotence," *Philosophical Review* 72 (1963): 221–23.
3. J. L. Cowan, "The Paradox of Omnipotence Revisited," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 3 (1974): 435–45. Reprinted in Martin and Monnier, *The Impossibility of God*.
4. Peter Geach, *Providence and Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 4.
5. See, e.g., Thomas P. Flint and Alfred J. Freddoso, "Maximal Power," in A. Freddoso (ed.), *The Existence and Nature of God* (Notre Dame: University

- of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 81–113; Edward Wierenga, *The Nature of God: An Inquiry into Divine Attributes* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989); and Joshua Hoffman and Gary S. Rosenkrantz, *The Divine Attributes* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).
6. Here Flint and Freddoso, "Maximal Power," is a prime example.
  7. Hoffman and Rosenkrantz, *The Divine Attributes* and "Omnipotence," entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu>, accessed April 30, 2006.
  8. Flint and Freddoso, "Maximal Power," p. 99.
  9. *Ibid.*, p. 97.
  10. Joshua Hoffman and Gary S. Rosenkrantz, "Omnipotence Redux," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 49 (1988): 283–301, and "Omnipotence."
  11. Edward Wierenga, "Omnipotence Defined," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 43 (1983): 363–75, and *The Nature of God*, p. 25.
  12. McEar seems to appear for the first time in Alvin Plantinga's *God and Other Minds* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967), pp. 168–73. Flint and Freddoso claim to find a medieval anticipation of the basic argument, however, in an anonymous note added to one of the manuscripts of Ockham's *Ordinatio*. See Flint and Freddoso, "Maximal Power," pp. 109–10, n. 4.
  13. See Michael Martin, "A Disproof of the God of the Common Man," *Question* 7 (1974): 114–24. Martin develops the idea further in a chapter in *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), reprinted as "Conflicts between the Divine Attributes," in Martin and Monnier, *The Impossibility of God*. Similar issues are raised in Henry Simoni, "Omniscience and the Problem of Radical Particularity: Does God Know How to Ride a Bike?" *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 42 (1997): 1–22.
  14. The latter point is developed particularly nicely in David Blumenfeld, "On the Compossibility of the Divine Attributes," *Philosophical Studies* 34 (1978): 91–103, reprinted in Martin and Monnier, *The Impossibility of God*. See also Marcel Sarot, "Omniscience and Experience," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 30 (1991): 89–102, and Henri Simoni, "Divine Passability and the Problem of Radical Particularity: Does God Feel Your Pain?" *Religious Studies* 33 (1997): 327–47.
  15. This is Peter Geach's definition in *Providence and Evil*, and is equivalent to definitions offered by A. N. Prior in "The Formalities of Omniscience," *Philosophy* 37 (1962): 114–29; Richard Swinburne in *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977); James F. Ross in *Philosophical Theology* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969); and William E. Mann in "The Divine Attributes," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 12 (1975): 151–59.
  16. In "Conflicts between the Divine Attributes," Michael Martin recognizes this definitional difficulty but unfortunately fails to correct it. The definitions he considers are of the general form "Person P is omniscient = For any true proposition p, P believes that p, and P believes that p IFF P knows that p. . . ." Since the quantification here is limited to true propositions, it still allows an omniscient being to believe any number of falsehoods.

17. Perry, "The Problem of the Essential Indexical," *Nous* 13 (1979): 3–21. Perry's central argument here and in "Frege on Demonstratives," *Philosophical Review* 86 (1977): 474–97, is anticipated in Hector-Neri Castañeda, "'He': A Study of the Logic of Self-Consciousness," *Ratio* 8 (1966): 130–57. See also David Lewis, "Attitudes *de dicto* and *de se*," *Philosophical Review* 88 (1979): 513–43.
18. This argument is radically misunderstood as if it were an argument that turned essentially on feelings in John Abbruzzese, "The Coherence of Omniscience: A Defense," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 41 (1997): 25–34. For a corrective, see Grim, "The Being That Knew Too Much," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 47 (2000): 141–54, reprinted in Martin and Monnier, *The Impossibility of God*.
19. Related indexical problems for omniscience are developed by A. N. Prior in "Thank Goodness That's Over," *Philosophy* 34 (1959): 12–17, and "The Formalities of Omniscience," *Philosophy* 37 (1962): 114–29, both reprinted in *Papers on Time and Tense* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968).
20. See Perry, "Frege on Demonstratives," and Steven Boër and William Lycan, "Who, Me?," *Philosophical Review* 88 (1980): 427–66.
21. Yujin Nagasawa, "Divine Omniscience and Knowledge *de se*," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 53 (2003): 73–82.
22. These appear in Grim, "Logic and Limits of Knowledge and Truth," *Nous* 22 (1988): 341–67, and are fully developed in Grim, *The Incomplete Universe* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).
23. Despite the linear presentation, there is no suggestion here that any such set need be denumerable. The argument is generalizable to a set of any infinite size.
24. Richard Cartwright, "Speaking of Everything," *Nous* 28 (1994): 1–20; D. A. Martin, "Sets versus Classes," quoted in Keith Simmons, "On an Argument Against Omniscience," *Nous* 27 (1993): 22–33; John Abbruzzese, "The Coherence of Omniscience."
25. See Grim, *The Incomplete Universe*, and "The Being That Knew Too Much."
26. Keith Simmons, "On an Argument against Omniscience," paper presented at APA Central Division, New Orleans, April 1990. The importance of this particular objection is significantly reduced in Simmons's published paper, *Nous* 27 (1993): 22–33. Also see Alvin Plantinga and Patrick Grim, "Truth, Omniscience, and Cantorian Arguments: An Exchange," *Philosophical Studies* 71 (1993): 267–306; Gary Mar, "Why 'Cantorian' Arguments against the Existence of God Do Not Work," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 33 (1993): 429–42; and J. Howard Sobel, *Logic and Theism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
27. See, e.g., Tomis Kapitan, "Agency and Omniscience," *Religious Studies* 27 (1991): 105–20, and later discussion. A form of the argument also appears in Theodore M. Drange, "Incompatible-Properties Arguments: A Survey," *Philo* 1 (1998): 49–60, reprinted in Martin and Monnier, *The Impossibility of God*.
28. Samuel Clarke and Gottfried Leibniz [1717], *The Leibniz-Clarke Correspondence*, ed. H. G. Alexander (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1956). William Rowe offers a thorough discussion in "Divine Freedom," in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu>.

29. Peter Geach, "Omnipotence," *Philosophy* 48 (1973): 7–20, and *Providence and Evil*; Nelson Pike, "Omnipotence and God's Ability to Sin," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 6 (1969): 208–16.
30. It is indeed a tenet of Christian theology dating back at least to Augustine that the saints and angels have been perfected to the degree that they not only do not sin but are no longer *able* to sin, a perfection applied to God as well. See Pike, "Omnipotence."
31. See, e.g., William Lane Craig, "Omniscience, Tensed Facts, and Divine Eternity," *Faith and Philosophy* 17 (2000): 225–41.
32. For a range of often novel incompatibility arguments, see Drange, "Incompatible-Properties Arguments."