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The *ratio omnipotentiae* in Aquinas

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Sommario: *1. The difficulty of omnipotence. 2. Some difficulties with Aquinas' notion of omnipotence. 3. Omnipotence as power to make all things makeable. 4. The meaning of "absolute power". 5. Power, beings and non-beings.*

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1. The difficulty of omnipotence

"Through faith, we hold many things about God which the philosophers were unable to discover by natural reason; for example, things concerning His providence and His omnipotence, and that He alone is to be worshipped; all of which are included under the article [of faith] on the unity of God."[1] With these remarkable assertions, Thomas Aquinas sought to resolve a doubt about the fittingness of the first article of the Christian faith, that there is one God. The doubt is one which can hardly take students of his by surprise. Indeed, few theologians would have been in a better position than he to formulate it.

The existence of one God, it runs, ought not to be an article of faith, because people can arrive at the knowledge of it by rational demonstration. Aristotle and many other philosophers have done so. This indicates that it is not *per se* a matter of faith, even if some people do hold it only by faith. In other words, what the first article of the faith contains seems to be nothing but one of those *praeambula fidei* which Aquinas himself was so careful to distinguish from the objects of faith properly so called, the *simpliciter credibilia.* But presumably only objects of faith properly so called, *per se* matters of faith, ought to constitute articles of faith[2].

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1 *Summa theologiae* II-II q.1 a.8 ad 1.

2 See I q.2 a.2 ad 2; II-II q.1 a.5 & resp. ad 3, q.1 a.6. See also I q.46 a.2 for its use of the expression *"articulus fidei".*

The reply, quoted above, is remarkable on several accounts: the scope that it assigns to the first article of the faith[3]; its sweeping pronouncement on the limits never surpassed by "the philosophers" in the knowledge of God[4]; and its implicit classification of three specific divine attributes as objects of *faith.* It is this last point which bears especially on the matter of the present study, the notion of omnipotence.

It is not my intention in this piece to try to unravel Aquinas' obviously complex understanding of the extent to which God's omnipotence falls within the scope of "natural reason". It is obviously complex because he himself gives every appearance of thinking it accessible to natural reason and of treating it that way[5]. Not that he has blatantly contradicted himself. In the passage quoted above, he does not quite say that men *cannot* know these things by natural reason, only that even the wisest of the pagans *did* not. And in his account of the object of faith (II-II q.1 a.5), he does not say that what pertains properly and *simpliciter* to the faith are only those truths about God which natural reason *cannot* under any circumstances know; rather, they include all those truths about God which are *in fact* not known rationally by anybody—that is, anybody who lacks faith.

There is certainly rich material here for anyone interested in getting at what Aquinas might have thought on the question of the distinctive contribution made by religious faith to philosophical knowledge. But I have opened this study, which is philosophical in scope, with these considerations merely as a way of keeping before us the difficulty of the general subject to be embarked upon. If none of "the philosophers", apparently not even the Philosopher, was able to get it right, then although believers may hope to fare somewhat better, they can hardly expect to have smooth sailing throughout!

In his well-known article "Omnipotence", Peter Geach has shown that there

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[3] God's omnipotence is asserted explicitly in the Creed. Aquinas argues that it entails His providence (II-II q.1 a.8 ad 2). That He is to be worshipped seems to follow likewise, since He is worshipped as the first principle of all (II-II q.81 a.1, resp. & ad 4), and since His principality is contained in the very notion of His power, "the principle of the divine operation proceeding into the exterior effect" (I q.14, *intro.*). That He *alone* is to be worshipped then follows upon the fact that He is one, and perhaps also upon the very way in which the act of faith bears upon Him: as the soul's last end (I-II q.62 aa.1, 3; II-II q.81 a.1, q.85 a.2).

[4] It is apparent from the passage itself that "philosophers" refers only to pursuers of wisdom who did not have faith, pagans. On some of the errors of the philosophers concerning divine providence, see I q.22 aa.2-3; concerning God's power, I q.25 a.5, and also *Quaestiones disputatae de potentia* q.1 a.5. That the *pagan* philosophers erred concerning God's exclusive right to worship needs no documentation; on the strict connection between faith and true worship, see II-II q.1 a.7 ad 2 and q.2 a.7 ad 3, in conjunction with II-II q.81 a.1 and q.85 aa.1 & 2.

[5] This is also true of divine providence. See I q.12 a.12, q.22, q.25, and esp. q.32 a.1: "that alone can be known about God by natural reason, which necessarily belongs to Him insofar as He is the principle of all beings; *and we have used this foundation above in the consideration of God*" (my emphasis). Indeed, in this same article he says that "those things about God that pertain to the unity of His essence"—the object of the first article of the faith!—"can be known by natural reason." As for God's exclusive right to worship, Aquinas appears more hesitant about reason's power to know it; again, see II-II q.81 a.1 and q.85 a.2.

is indeed no little confusion among believers on the subject of God's power[6]. Geach in fact suspects that not even Aquinas is wholly free of such confusion. In this paper I shall try to defend the notion of omnipotence that Aquinas puts forth in the *Summa theologiae.* In my opinion, this notion is fairly coherent, though his way of handling it is sometimes potentially confusing. I am not so convinced of the coherence of some of his earlier treatments of the subject; indeed, I believe, neither was he, at least if I am right that in the *Summa theologiae* he consciously rejects certain theses about divine power that he had previously upheld. It was in fact coming across one of these apparent shifts that got me started on this study. But I shall come back to the shifts, and before that to Geach's doubts, later.

Nowadays, in certain philosophical circles, omnipotence and notions related to it, e.g. "possible worlds", are handled with a good deal of nonchalance; perhaps because in those circles such notions are often little more than technical devices for dealing with problems of another order altogether. When that is the case, one is of course pretty much at liberty to define them in whatever way best suits one's purpose. There is not so much liberty when the point is to express (whether to affirm or to deny it) a real attribute of a God whose existence, and many of whose other attributes, are taken to have been established already. On the other hand, sometimes there may be even less liberty than there should be. As Geach points out in relation to the notion of omnipotence, piety sometimes has a way of exercising an undue influence on the mere delineation of the meaning of the terms used to speak about the divinity; terms which, after all, are not drawn from any direct apprehension of God, and which, if they are to convey knowledge, ought to be defined with due regard for the conditions imposed by the apprehensions from which they are drawn.

My present aim, then, is to obtain a workably precise notion of "omnipotence". I take it for granted that such an aim is pursued with a view to the question of whether, and on what grounds, it can truly be ascribed to God; but this paper will not proceed so far as to try to give a full answer to that question. The paper focuses on the thought of St Thomas, on the persuasion that he offers most of the material needed for the task; though here and there it may need a bit of tidying up. He himself acknowledges that even the question of the mere sense of the term "omnipotence" is no easy one: "*rationem omnipotentiae assignare videtur difficile*"[7].

Aquinas' basic answer to the question of the meaning of "omnipotence" can be formulated very briefly; so briefly that, in the next section, I shall merely state it and then go on at once to some of the difficulties that Professor Geach has raised about it. In addressing Geach's difficulties, I shall draw upon Ralph McInerny's short piece on Aquinas on omnipotence[8], which contains a reply to Geach that I

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[6] GEACH, P., "Omnipotence", in *Providence and Evil*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1977, pp.3-28 (First published in *Philosophy* 48 (1973) pp.7-20); hereafter "Geach".

[7] I q.25 a.3.

[8] MCINERNY, R., "Aquinas on Divine Omnipotence," in *L'Homme et son univers au moyen âge. Actes du septième congrès international de philosophie medievale,* ed. C. Wenin, Institut Superieur de Philosophie, Louvain-la-Neuve 1986, pp.440-444; hereafter "McInerny".

find both very helpful and, on a certain point, not fully satisfactory. In the subsequent section I shall develop an alternative way of handling this point. This will require some of that "tidying up" that I mentioned, since my reservations about McInerny's position also extend, in part, to Aquinas himself. It seems to me that Aquinas' account of what "omnipotence" means, at least as it is presented in the *Summa theologiae* (I q.25 a.3), is in fact so brief as to risk misleading anyone who considers only the answer itself and not the discussion preceding it; mostly by provoking questions that are not very much to the point. A glance back at that discussion will make it possible to give a slightly sharper formulation to the answer, without (I hope) altering its intention. Even this sharper formulation, however, will not suffice to remove all of the difficulties. What remains unresolved will be the object of the last two sections. It is closely connected with the famous distinction between "absolute" and "ordained" power; one of the "shifts" in Aquinas that I mentioned earlier concerns how to understand that distinction. His final way of understanding it, I believe, has consequences for the notion of omnipotence itself. The formulation need not be changed, but it must be taken with a strictness which, regrettably, Aquinas did not think necessary to alert us to in the *Summa theologiae*.

2. Some difficulties with Aquinas' notion of omnipotence

What is omnipotence? Power for all things. But what does "all things" embrace? All possible things, naturally. Things possible for any power in particular? No. Every power is either God's or a creature's, and God's power extends beyond what is in the power of any creature; but if we define omnipotence as the power for what God has the power for, then to say that God is omnipotent will be circular and utterly uninformative. "All possible things" makes no direct reference to anyone's or anything's power. It refers simply to whatever is intrinsically, "absolutely" possible. What does this include? Anything that can have the nature of a being, anything that can exist. Does this exclude anything? Nothing except that which contradicts itself, that whose very existence would entail its non-existence too. Omnipotence does not require the power to make self-contradictory things, because these are not possible things. To say that God is omnipotent is to say just what the archangel Gabriel said (Luke 1,37): "no word shall be impossible for God". What contradicts itself cannot be a word, because no mind can form a concept of it. Omnipotence, then, is power for all possible things.

One of Professor Geach's lesser difficulties with this account of omnipotence concerns the last claim, that what contradicts itself cannot be a word. It is somewhat surprising that Geach should take issue with this claim, at least if we consider what moved Aquinas to make it: the verse from Luke. For Geach is plainly anxious to uphold whatever the Christian faith requires about God's power. The verse from St Luke led Aquinas to judge that the Christian faith requires belief that no word is impossible for God. So if all meaningful formulae, including those that imply self-

contradictions, are to be counted as "words", then God must be held capable of bringing self-contradictions about; which Geach vehemently denies. Of course, Geach might wish to offer a different interpretation of the passage from Luke[9]. However, he does not take it up in his article; and I shall not discuss it further here. What I shall do instead is to offer a different interpretation of Aquinas.

Geach thinks that Aquinas is equating self-contradictions with gibberish, as though it were Aquinas' wish that "the idea that ... 'God can do so-and-so' would never turn out *false*" (Geach p.14). But Aquinas manifestly does not equate self-contradictions with gibberish, since, just like Geach, he holds that they have a truth-value. Self-contradictory propositions, and propositions affirming objects whose descriptions imply self-contradictions, are false—necessarily[10]. This is why he can judge their existence "impossible". If they were meaningless, it would be impossible to make any judgment about them at all, even that one[11].

Aquinas' real position hinges on the fact that for him, not everything meaningful, or intelligible *in the sense of* meaningful, can count as a "word". Only logically possible things can. In his vocabulary, a "word" is either a concept or a sign of a concept. This means that it expresses something that is one, one in the sense of

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[9] Apparently Luke's *rhêma*, rendered in the Vulgate by *verbum*, corresponds to a Hebrew term which can also mean "thing". Many modern translations use "thing" or the equivalent. This does not seem to help Geach much, since he is willing to let the term "everything" include self-contradictions (Geach p.7).

[10] See *De unitate intellectus* cap.V (near the end): the opposite of a necessary truth is something false and impossible (*falsum impossibile*), which not even God can effect.

[11] This comes out most clearly in the treatment of omnipotence in the *Summa theologiae*. Some earlier treatments, especially in the *Scriptum* on the *Sentences* (I d.42 q.2 a.2) and in the *De potentia* (q.1 a.3), might give the impression of supporting Geach's interpretation. In those places he says that self-contradictions fall outside the scope of power, because power always bears either on beings (productive power) or on non-beings (destructive power), and self-contradictions are not able to be either. The negative part impedes the affirmative part, and vice-versa.

This, however, need not be taken to mean that self-contradictory expressions are meaningless. For he is merely trying to show that they cannot be the term of any exercise of power; hence he could have said simply that even when power terminates in non-beings, they are never the non-beings that are self-contradictions. Power always terminates in the existence or non-existence of something definite, and self-contradictions are simply indefinite. More precisely, power terminates in non-beings by way of corrupting an already existing being or impeding the production a being; hence it is always a question of the non-being of something that is, in itself, able to be. Even if self-contradictions are non-beings, they are not so in the sense that they *lack* an existence that they might have. Their non-existence is so necessary that it cannot even be (efficiently) caused. This point at least somewhat resembles Aristotle's remark in the *Metaphysics* (IV.7, 1012a4) that if there were a middle between affirmation and negation, then there would have to be changes that are neither generations nor corruptions.

In any case, in the *Summa theologiae*, it is no longer necessary for Aquinas to show that self-contradictions are not possible non-beings, but only that they are not possible beings, in order to show that they are not possible objects of power; for there he reaches the position that the proper scope of power is always a range of *beings*. See below, pp. 33-36.

definable[12]; something able to be gathered under a single form. But self-contradictions cannot be embraced by a single form. This is because contradiction is precisely *formal* contrariety[13]. Self-contradictions contain *formally* incompatible elements, hence elements whose unity is impossible either to conceive or to affirm[14]. That is why they are necessarily false.

It is true that Aquinas remarks that it is more fitting to say that such things cannot come about, than that God cannot make them (I q.25 a.3); but he does not deny that "God can make them" is false. He only wants to insist that its falsehood is not on account of any weakness or incapacity in God. Self-contradictions simply do not fall within the range of things with which power can conceivably be concerned. The question whether someone does or does not have the power to perform them is rather badly posed.

Geach goes on to take issue with the claim that God can do everything logically possible, i.e. everything not self-contradictory. He gives just one example: to make a thing which its maker cannot afterwards destroy. To this I think Professor McInerny has given the correct reply (McInerny p.444). It is true that the formula, as stated, does not entail a contradiction; but only some of the intelligible substitutions for "its maker" leave it free of contradiction. Thus, on the one hand, "to make a thing which a creature cannot afterwards destroy" is indeed not self-contradictory; but it is also in God's power. On the other hand, "to make a thing which God cannot afterwards destroy" is self-contradictory. I might add that it is self-contradictory just in its own right, i.e. no matter who it is, God or someone else, whose power to make such a thing is in question. I stress this point because I wish to avoid retreating into the position that God's omnipotence is His power to do everything that is not a contradiction *for Him* to do.

I shall explain my own misgivings about this position in a moment. I do not object to it as strongly as does Geach, who thinks that even it is just too broad a description of God's power. His counter-example is changing the past. Before any given past event happened, it was logically possible for God to prevent it; so His preventing it is, in itself, not a logically impossible feat for Him to perform; and yet, according to Aquinas himself (I q.25 a.4), He cannot now perform it.

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[12] Aquinas consistently adheres to Aristotle's dictum (*Metaphysics* IV.7, 1012a22) that the thought which a word or a name is a sign of is a definition.

[13] This is why the non-existence of self-contradictions is a "law", something necessary; for "necessity follows upon the nature of form" (I q.86 a.3). Along this line, see *Summa contra gentiles* II.25: among the things excluded from God's power are the contraries of those scientific principles which are taken solely from the *formal* principles of things.

[14] At least, it is impossible to conceive or affirm the unity of *explicitly* contradictory terms. Terms that merely imply a contradiction might be able to be put together in a sort of definition, by a mind which, not grasping fully what each term entails, has not drawn out the contradictory implication; in that case, the unity of the terms might still be conceived in a sort "confused" concept (see I q.85 a.3 ad 3), under a form only vaguely grasped (and graspable), such that the "point of contradiction" remains hidden. See *Summa theologiae* I q.16 a.3; q.85 aa.6 & 7. In any case, however, this is irrelevant when it is a question of what is possible for the *divine* mind.

Once more, Professor McInerny has the reply. "Geach seems to be saying that Thomas holds that once a possibility, always a possibility" (McInerny p.443). Geach recognizes that for Aquinas, once something happens, and so changes from something possible not to happen into something impossible not to happen, the change is only in the creature, not in God. But he appears not to see that what Aquinas holds is that the thing's not happening becomes a *logical* impossibility. Of course, so long as the event is not considered as actually having happened, its not happening is logically possible; and so considered, it is something that God can prevent from happening. What is impossible is to consider it as something that actually happened and as now possible not to have happened. To make past events not to have happened is, in Aquinas' view, to bring about a sheer self-contradiction: that what was, was not. Here again, I note that the impossibility of God's doing the thing in question is not based on its being merely something contradictory for *Him* to do. Changing the past is, for Aquinas, something intrinsically self-contradictory.

The last notion of omnipotence that Geach considers and rejects is that it is in God's power to do every *future* thing that is not a contradiction for Him to do. His counter-example is based on the promises that God has made or might have made. If God promises to do something, then He cannot not do it. Yet, absolutely speaking, there is surely nothing self-contradictory in His not doing it.

This objection is to some extent like the one about changing the past. It overlooks this, that the impossibility of God's not doing the thing in question derives from the fact that His not doing it has taken on the character of a self-contradiction; for it is self-contradictory that God not do what He has promised to do—or so at least is Aquinas' opinion. However, this case is somewhat more complicated than that of changing the past, since here it is not a question of God's bringing about something in the world whose coming about is (or has become) intrinsically self-contradictory. Nor is it a question of His doing something that is generally a self-contradictory thing to do, viz. breaking a promise. It is a case of the His doing something that it is self-contradictory for *Him* to do. But what would be brought about through His doing such a thing might still not be something whose coming about is intrinsically self-contradictory. Yet God cannot bring it about, because to do so would be to break His promise.

Although Geach makes much of this point, it seems to me that its force depends almost entirely on a misunderstanding about what the question of God's omnipotence is a question of. It is a question of what God "by nature" has the power for. By contrast, the things that He cannot do because He has promised not to belong among the things that He cannot do merely because He has *chosen* not to. He has, so to speak, made Himself unable to do them. But it was in His power not to make Himself unable to to them; hence, absolutely speaking, they are in His power. If they were not originally in his power, it would make no sense for Him to have chosen or promised not to do them. His omnipotence is His *original* or "absolute" power for all things.

To answer Geach's objection in this way is to introduce the distinction

between absolute and ordained power. That distinction, though, raises issues which I do not wish take up quite yet. Instead, I wish at this point to argue that it is nevertheless a mistake to make omnipotence consist, in *any* case, in the power to do whatever it is not a self-contradiction *for God* to do; no matter how easy this makes it to meet Geach's or other objections to the way in which Aquinas describes God's omnipotence.

It is here that I disagree with McInerny, who says, "There is no doable thing that escapes God's power, because *doable thing* cannot be instantiated by (a) self-contradictory descriptions of feats and/or (b) non-self-contradictory feats the doing of which by God involves a contradiction" (McInerny p.444). (Presumably this pair could be reduced to "feats the doing of which by God involves a contradiction", since if some feat is self-contradictory, so is His doing it.) McInerny adopts this qualification because he wishes to maintain the practice of defining omnipotence as power for everything not self-contradictory, and because it is all too obvious that some expressions which do not intrinsically entail self-contradictions cannot describe possible objects of God's power. I should stress that I fully agree with his complaint about Geach's more restricted notion of "almightiness", defined as power "over" all things: "it seems to limit God's power to the things that actually are or will be, with disastrous consequences, among them that the creatures that are or will be seem the commensurate object of God's power" (McInerny p.443).[15] Aquinas' definition is both defensible and in need of clarification. But the qualification that McInerny proposes is not, I think, entirely clear.

As a way of characterizing omnipotence, McInerny's formulation can be taken in two ways: specifically, as *God's* power to do any feat that is not self-contradictory for *Him* to do, or generally, as *an agent's* power to do any feat that is not self-contradictory for *that agent* to do. If we take it in the second way, then it may well be true of God, and it may even be true only of God; but it is simply no good as a definition of omnipotence. This is because, if it *were* true of some being other than God, that being would still not be omnipotent. In other words, perhaps as a sheer matter of fact, God is the only being who has the power to do everything that is not a self-contradiction for that being to do. Maybe everything else falls short of the power it might conceivably have. But even if something else, i.e. some creature, had all the power it could conceivably have, it would not be omnipotent. For example, in Aquinas' doctrine, it could not make matter, since matter can be made only by creation, and only God can create. Obviously if it is not a self-contradiction for matter to be made, then omnipotence must include the power to make it.

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[15] McInerny does not say why such a consequence is "disastrous", but from the point of view of the Christian faith, answers are not hard to come by. It is not merely a question of the general principle of God's utter freedom and transcendence in relation to everything other than Himself. It is also a question of the very faith in the promises of God that Geach lays so much emphasis on. Drawing out what he means by God's "almightiness", Geach says, "In Heaven and on Earth, God does whatever he will" (p.5). But if God's power did not also exceed all the creatures that either are or, in the natural course of things, will be, then what grounds would be left for hope in the *new* Heaven and the *new* Earth which have been promised?

What if we take omnipotence instead to be specifically God's power to do any feat that is not self-contradictory for Him to do? One obvious objection to this is that it is highly unnatural as a definition of the *general* notion of omnipotence. Why bring precisely God, or any particular agent, into the picture? It would at least be odd to use this definition if it ever occurred to you to ask whether anything *else* is omnipotent; though maybe such a question is not likely to come up.

A more serious difficulty is that this definition comes extremely close to the account of omnipotence that Aquinas rejects as circular: what is in God's power is everything in God's power. Here, the claim would be that what is in God's power is everything that could conceivably (as a logical possibility) be in God's power. This is not actually circular, as the other is; but it strikes me as similarly disconcerting. This is because it appeals to, rather than conveys, a knowledge which someone asking for the definition cannot be presumed to have. It proceeds as though you already knew what God *is,* being thereby in a position to judge what things could conceivably be in His power, and what things could not; and of course you do not. But if you judge on the basis of whatever concept of God you happen to hold at the moment, then you may conclude that many things are in His power which in fact are not, or vice-versa. McInerny might reply that this only shows that the understanding of any one of God's attributes is enhanced by the understanding of the others. This is likely true, but why depend upon it more than you have too?

3. Omnipotence as power to make all things makeable

However, it is evidently something Aquinas himself says which makes McInerny take this line (McInerny p.441). One of the objections to divine omnipotence that Aquinas takes up in the *Summa theologiae* is that God cannot sin, and that therefore His power does not extend to everything. The reply offered is that the reason why He cannot sin is precisely that He is omnipotent. "To sin is to fall short (*deficere*) of a perfect action; hence to be able to sin is to be able to fall short in acting, which is repugnant to omnipotence."

This swift and clever reply was, I think, a bit of a slip on Aquinas' own part;[16] on two accounts. The first is that it is rather weak *as* a reply. Let us grant that one reason why God cannot sin is that He is omnipotent. Even so, this can hardly be the *objector's* reason for thinking that God cannot sin, since the objector is *doubting* His omnipotence.[17] Nor can it be the only good reason for thinking

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[16] Not that it was original of him. Peter Lombard, for instance, had said (I *Sent.* d.42): *"non ideo omnipotentiae Dei in aliquo detrahitur vel derogatur, si peccare non posse dicitur, quia non est hoc potentiae, sed infirmitatis. Si enim hoc posset, omnipotens non esset."* He in turn quotes Book XV of Augustine's *De Trinitate*:*"non ergo ideo Deus minus potens est quia peccare non potest, cum omnipotens nullatenus possit esse qui hoc potest."*

[17] As McInerny says (p.441), "Thomas thus takes the objection to say: God is not all powerful because He is all powerful." To take it in this way is not only to resolve it, but also to trivialize it.

that God cannot sin, since that would mean that impeccability entails omnipotence, which Aquinas cannot hold (see e.g. I q.62 a.8). Despite its apparent economy, the reply in fact tries, uncharacteristically for Aquinas, to prove more than it needs to. It tries to prove that an omnipotent God is necessarily not capable of sin. But it need only prove that an omnipotent God is not necessarily capable of sin. And this small flaw in argumentation grows into a nice circle if we incorporate the conclusion back into the very definition of omnipotence, as McInerny's formulation seems to allow or even to require us to do. For then, when we say that God's omnipotence is His power to do everything which is not a contradiction for Him to do, we would mean, in part, His power to do everything which does not contradict His omnipotence. Naturally, omnipotence cannot be thought to contradict itself; but this is surely not on account of what "omnipotence" means!

The reply's other weakness is much more substantial. It can mislead the reader, I think, as to the very meaning of omnipotence. This will take some explaining.

St Thomas takes "omnipotence" to express power of a certain range, power for everything possible. The notion of omnipotence therefore presupposes the notion of power. In an earlier article in the Question on God's power in the *Summa theologiae* (I q.25 a.1), and again in one of the replies in the article on omnipotence, he makes it clear that it is entirely a question of *active* power. Now, in this context, he wholeheartedly embraces Aristotle's definition of active power (*Metaphysics* V.12, 1019a25): "a principle of change in another, insofar as other", or as Aquinas puts it in I q.25 a.1, "a principle of acting upon another" (*principium agendi in aliud*). On the basis of this definition, he then goes on (ad 3) to make the striking assertion that in God, "power" cannot refer to any real principle of His *action;* it can refer only to a principle of His *effects.* The reason for this is that His action is identical with Him. It is not sufficiently *distinct* from Him, not sufficiently "other", to have any principle in Him; a principle and what it is a principle of must be distinct (see I q.41 a.4 ad 3). This is why, in the introduction to the series of Questions on God's activity (I q.14), Aquinas contrasts the treatment of God's power with the treatment of His knowledge and His will. His knowledge and His will pertain to immanent activities, activities that remain in the agent: understanding and willing. But "power is considered as a principle of the divine operation proceeding into an exterior effect".

This unavoidable restriction on the sense of "power" as attributed to God seems to me to be a very happy one, because it coincides rather nicely with the normal use of such terms as "power" and "strength" in human affairs.[18] It is true that we speak of a powerful or strong intellect, powerful or strong emotions, and so forth. But when we say without any qualification that someone is strong, the sense is usually physical; he has a great capacity to move, and to resist being

[18] See *In I Sent.* d.42 q.1 a.1: *nomen potentiae primo impositum fuit ad significandum potestatem hominis, prout dicimus aliquos homines esse potentes...et deinde etiam translatum fuit ad res naturales. Videtur autem in hominibus esse potens qui potest facere quod vult de aliis sine impedimento.*

moved by, other bodies. And when we say without qualification that someone is powerful, we usually mean that he has a great influence on other people. So power and strength are generally used to refer to "exterior" activities. With God, they must be used that way[19]. This restriction on them is not at all an impoverishment. On the contrary, it makes them more definite, and so more informative.

If power, in God, concerns only His external effects, then so does omnipotence, which after all is a term made up to describe God's power. The trouble with Aquinas' way of dealing with the objection concerning God's incapacity to sin, then, is that "sin", at least as Aquinas normally uses it, names *immanent* activity. "Of acts, some pass into exterior matter, such as to burn and to cut.... Some acts, however, do not pass into exterior matter, but remain in the agent, such as to desire and to know; and all moral acts, whether they be acts of virtues or of sins, are acts of this sort" (I-II q.74 a.1). If sin is immanent activity, then whether or not God is capable of it, His omnipotence simply has nothing directly to do with it. This is how Aquinas might have answered the objection: it is not to the point. Indeed, this is how he answers objections based on God's inability to undergo things or to be in any way passive. He does not say that passivity contradicts God's omnipotence. He simply says that omnipotence is a matter of active power, not passive (I q.25 a.3 ad 1).

In accordance with the restriction of God's power to exterior effects, it seems to me that we can also say: omnipotence is not always matter of the power to "do", even when this is restricted to genuinely active "doings". It is a matter, not of doing in general, but of *making.* Unfortunately, within the discussion of omnipotence in the *Summa theologiae* this point does not come out as clearly as it might, although I think that it is very much present there. It comes out much more clearly in the *Summa contra gentiles.* There he says that "power is not spoken of in God as a principle of action, but as a principle of what is made (*facti*)" (Bk.II ch.10), and he treats the question of God's omnipotence as the question of His power for every conceivable sort of *effect* (Bk.II ch.22). It is only in passing that Aquinas speaks this way in the treatment of omnipotence in the *Summa theologiae* (I q.25 a.3). This is when he says that what entails a contradiction "is not subject to omnipotence, not on account of a defect of the divine power, but because it cannot have the nature of something makeable (*factibilis*) or possible." In the rest of this article he uses only the word "possible".

Now obviously, if something is not possible at all, then it is not makeable. However, in the context of this article, Aquinas must be using even the word "possible" in a sense that makes it convertible with "makeable". That is, he cannot be using it in its broadest possible sense, that of "not impossible". For in this sense,

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[19] The only qualification that Aquinas makes to this point (I q.25 a.1 ad 3) is a concession to our "way of understanding". We cannot say that God has "power" for immanent activity if we mean it strictly, as a distinct principle of His activity; but it is permissible if we mean merely that in the creature (from which we draw the concept) "power" involves a sort of perfection, and that God has that much perfection (and more). But He has it so perfectly that it no longer takes the proper form of power.

God Himself is a "possible" being (see I q.41 a.4 ad 2); but He is not a possible object of His productive power, since He is not made or makeable. The absolutely possible beings that fall under His power cannot include an absolutely necessary being[20]. They must be absolutely possible *makeable* things, absolutely possible objects of productive power.

In other words, when Aquinas "restricts" the range of God's power to the things that are "absolutely possible", i.e. things that are not self-contradictory, a prior restriction must be taken for granted. He must be speaking only about the domain of things that are at least apparently makeable, things at least construable as objects of power. By this I mean things which, if they can exist at all, can exist only on account of power; things whose names at least signify objects of power, even if it turns out that what they signify is impossible and the appearance of makeability is false. When the inquiry concerns the range of an agent's power, the first things to be removed from consideration are those which are not even apparent objects of power; then one may go on to judge between the true and false objects. In the case of God's power, the only false objects are those which cannot exist at all, those whose existence is logically impossible. But the exclusion of these from the scope of His power is, logically, a step subsequent to that of excluding those things that cannot be objects of power anyway, whether or not their existence is possible (or even necessary). These are, so to speak, even more re-moved from His power than are logically impossible things; for they simply have nothing to do with power at all. They fall outside the scope of inquiry altogether.

Some examples of such things, things that are not even apparently makeable, would be: another God, something other than God whose existence does not depend upon Him, God's not existing or not being happy, any sin in God. To be sure, these are all self-contradictory too; but even before the contradiction in them is brought to light, they can be excluded from consideration on the grounds that they cannot be objects of power in any case. The things that are to be excluded from God's power precisely *because* they are logically impossible are those which are at least apparently makeable. Some examples of these would be: any passion in God, men that are not men, sighted blind men, men without souls, triangles with angles not equal to two right angles, changes in the past, things God has chosen not to make (these last are logically impossible when taken *composite*).

The examples in the preceding paragraph are all taken from *Summa contra gentiles* II.25, on the things that an omnipotent God "cannot" do. There, Aquinas first excludes from God's power everything implying passion in God; then he

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[20] This is not to say that they include only contingent things. Not everything that God makes or can make is something contingent, something with its own potency to be or not be. Some have only potency to be, and are necessary beings. But they are not intrinsically or absolutely necessary; rather, they are necessary *per aliud* (see I q.2 a.3, *tertia via*) and on the supposition of God's creative influence (see I q.50 a.5 ad 3). Their very potency to be (their essence, *virtus essendi*), and to be necessarily, is something made by Him; and He made it voluntarily, not by necessity.

excludes everything which cannot have the nature of an object of power, which he describes as *ens factum.* Of these, he first excludes those which cannot have the nature of beings, i.e. self-contradictory things; then he excludes those which cannot have the nature of *made* beings. Finally he excludes things God has chosen not to make, noting that these are "outside" God's active power only in a qualified sense or on a supposition, not absolutely speaking.

If we put this last class at the very beginning of the list, then the examples would start, I think, with what is least removed from God's power and move progressively toward what is most removed from it. What He has chosen not to make is perfectly makeable, and He can make it; that is why He had to *choose* not to. Passions, in general, are the objects of power *par excellence,* since they are precisely what something has been made to undergo by an agent; and in general God can make them—but not in Himself. Self-contradictory things cannot be made, because they cannot be. Then come things that both cannot be and, even if they could be, could not be *made* to be.

Despite appearances, the very last item in Aquinas' list, sin in God, is where it should be: in the position of what is furthest removed from God's power. I say despite appearances, because at first "sin" might seem to be like "passion": possible in general, but not possible in God. But we are talking about what is possible for Him to make; and sin is something that He cannot make, not only in Himself, but in anything at all. Of all things in any way nameable, sin is the most repugnant to Him, and indeed the thing least likely for anyone to think Him capable of; less even than self-contradictions, which, as Geach laments, some pious believers have thought Him capable of. Even more, as I shall explain toward the end of the paper, Aquinas' view is that properly speaking, sin is not "makeable" by anybody (though it is possible and causable). I shall not discuss this further here because I wish to give separate treatment, in the two final sections, to the point that God cannot make sin in anything at all. It poses a difficulty for our foregoing account of omnipotence which is especially instructive.

It should be noted at once, though, that calling sin the thing most repugnant to God does not in any way contradict the earlier claim that His inability to sin ought not to be *accounted for* primarily through its repugnance to His *omnipotence*, or through placing His sinning in the category of the self-contradictory things to which His *power* cannot extend. Of course His sinning *is* self-contradictory, perhaps more so than anything else one might think of Him doing. The earlier point was simply that, properly speaking, His inability to sin is neither on account of any logical impossibility of "sin" in general, nor on account of what power in general is, nor on account of what omnipotence taken *abstractly* is. Properly speaking the question of His sinning does not even belong to the discussion of His omnipotence, which is His power for all possible *exterior* things, all makeable things. The question of sin in God belongs properly to the discussion of His goodness.

With omnipotence so conceived, is it really true that it is logically incompatible with sin? Where is the contradiction in the notion of someone able to make everything makeable, but also able to act wickedly or unjustly in doing so? At

least on the face of it, if omnipotence excludes sin, it would seem to be only sin of a very different sort; not bad action or bad conduct, i.e. "moral" sin, but bad *production,* "technical" sin. (The Latin "*peccatum*" bears such usage much better than does "sin".) But even technical sin, the production of bad products, does not necessarily entail any defect of productive power; on the contrary, greater power, which includes greater skill, enhances the capacity for making bad products. This is the gist of Aristotle's remark that in matters of skill, as such, he who errs voluntarily is preferable. Only if we speak of technical "sin" as a maker's failure to make whatever it was that he intended to make (see I-II q.21 a.2 ad 2), is such sin repugnant to fullness of productive power. But, to repeat, why is fullness of productive power incompatible with the maker's acting wickedly or unjustly, in skillfully and successfully making what he intended to make?

Now, Aquinas does not actually take the repugnance between sin and omnipotence quite as far as McInerny wants to; that is, he does not explicitly make sin by an omnipotent being to be one of the self-contradictory things that fall outside the *object* of omnipotence. As argued earlier, this maneuver eventually redounds, problematically, upon the definition of omnipotence itself. In fact, in the *De potentia* (q.1 a.7), Aquinas is careful to point out that although inability to sin *follows* on omnipotence, it does not enter into its definition, since it does not concern the *object* of God's power, which is what "omnipotence" refers to.

Why, though, does he think that inablity to sin does at least follow on omnipotence? Sin is seen to be repugnant to omnipotence when we think, not of the abstract notion of omnipotence, but of the *root cause* of omnipotence, i.e. of what the real possession of omnipotence depends on. Omnipotence is productive power of unlimited range or extension. What unlimited extension of power depends upon is unlimited "quantity" or intensity of power[21]. And this in turn depends upon infinity or utter fullness of being. But what has utter fullness of being also has utter perfection, not only as regards production, also as regards immanent activity. Such perfection excludes the possibility of sin.

In other words, the full explanation of omnipotence also reveals an unlimited intellect and an unlimited will in the omnipotent subject; and these are incompatible with sin, which is a kind of defective immanent activity. God's intellect and will are in fact *so* perfect as to be identical with their activities. But, as discussed earlier, this very identity removes something of the nature of "power" from God's intellect and will; and this in turn is why the strict content of the notion of His power, and hence of His omnipotence, concerns only the effects of His productive activity.

So it is only in this rather long-winded fashion that what Aquinas says in the *Summa theologiae* is verified: "to be able to sin is to be able to fail in acting, which is repugnant to omnipotence". Omnipotence is not properly about acting at all,

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[21] See *De pot.* q.1 a.7: "infinite power" does not express the definition of omnipotence, but its cause.

but about making. But indefectibility in making does eventually entail indefectibility in acting[22].

It is now possible to turn to the problem raised by the fact that God cannot make sin in anything at all. To close this section, what has been argued hitherto may be summed up. It amounts to nothing more than a small change in the formula of omnipotence. St Thomas says that it is power for everything possible, which is everything except what contradicts itself. Sufficient attention to the meaning of "power" here makes it clear that this is not so broad as it might at first sound. It cannot mean sheer possibility for everything possible, i.e. sheer compatibility with every logically coherent predicate. "Power" here means solely active power, not generic possibility. However, at least in the *Summa theologiae,* what comes out rather less clearly, or even gets lost from view at one or two places, is that it means solely productive power: not all power to do, but only power to make.

Thus Geach has a point in rejecting the proposition "God can do everything not self-contradictory". But its drawback is not that it is false. At least, it is not false if we remember that the "can" refers to what is originally, "by nature" in God's power, and if we are allowed the move that McInerny insists upon, that of expanding "self-contradictory" to "self-contradictory for God to do". Rather, its drawback is that it overloads the concept of omnipotence beyond the limits of its usefulness. Omnipotence is the power to make everything makeable. Not, "everything makeable by God", but simply, "everything makeable". In comparison with "God can do everything", this relatively "modest" notion is much less likely to provoke barren disputes or mere puzzles of logic; and yet it seems to do sufficient justice to the sense of the traditional affirmation of God's omnipotence.

4. The meaning of "absolute power"

But *is* this formula sufficiently modest? At least one objection still remains. If this is what omnipotence is, then how can St Thomas hold both that God is omnipotent, and that it is impossible for Him to make anything engaged in sin (I q.49 a.2)? Obviously the notion of something engaged in sin is not self-contradictory. Moreover, Aquinas insists that sin, and in general every sort of evil, always requires a cause (I q.49 a.1). And he does allow that God can cause evils other than sin, at least by causing the goods which those evils necessarily accompany. But these are only "particular" evils, evils for this or that creature. Sin, however,

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[22] Fortunately it is not necessary here to take up the question of how far power and goodness are *generally* proportional to one another. We have a certain tendency to think of power as capacity for coercion, suppression or destruction; and to think of goodness as rather indifferent to "success". But perhaps they are less independent of each other than it seems. On power as chiefly productive and generative, see below pp. 20-22; on goodness as requiring "skill", see I-II q.57 a.3 ad 1: there cannot be good "use", i.e. good action, without skill. In the background of Thomas' outlook on this matter is surely Bk.IV, pros.2 of Boethius' *De consolatione philosophiae.*

or "moral evil" if you prefer, is evil *simpliciter*. It directly opposes the good of the whole created universe and even the uncreated good itself. This of course is why God cannot make it; to do so would be to act contrary to the love for His own good which is the motive of everything He does. It would entail His own sinning, which is inconceivable. He can cause various sorts of particular defects, but He cannot cause vice or wickedness. But does this not mean precisely that there are some makeable things that God cannot make, some possible things—possible *effects*—that are impossible for God?

The proper answer to this objection is, I believe, both fairly simple and very helpful for the purposes of this study. It consists in giving a strict construction to the term "makeable". This is helpful because it will serve to give a last touch of precision to our notion of omnipotence as power to make everything makeable.

This strict construction seems to me to be very much in keeping with Aquinas' account of divine omnipotence in the *Summa theologiae*. However, it is not so much in keeping with some of his earlier accounts, for instance, the *Scriptum* on the *Sentences* and the disputed questions *De potentia*; and in those accounts, he shows some willingness to adopt a different sort of answer to the objection. Although ultimately unsatisfactory, that other answer has a good deal of *prima facie* plausibility, and in Aquinas' time it could also boast of no little authority. It therefore merits some attention. The discussion of it will also provide an occasion to point out an element in Aquinas' thought on divine power which he retains in the *Summa theologiae* and which helps make it clear just how broad our more "modest" formulation of omnipotence really is, after all. So I shall examine this unsatisfactory answer first, and then return to the "proper" answer and the "strict construction" in the final section, as a way of bringing this study to its conclusion.

The unsatisfactory answer relies upon a certain kind of distinction between God's power and God's will. It may be put in more or less the following way. To make something (or rather, someone) vicious or wicked is "physically" in God's power, i.e. He has the "strength" and the "skill" for it; but He cannot *want* to. And of course it is impossible that He do something other than what He wants to. In other words, He cannot make vice or wickedness, but not because He is too "weak" or "inept" to do so; rather, because He is too good to do so. He has the power but not the inclination.

Professor Geach objects strongly to this sort of talk. Referring to the Scholastic distinction between God's *potentia absoluta* and His *potentia ordinata,* he says:

> The former is God's power considered in abstraction from his wisdom and goodness, the latter is God's power considered as controlled in its exercise by his wisdom and goodness. Well, as regards a man it makes good sense to say: 'He has the bodily and mental power to do so-and-so, but he certainly will not, it would be pointlessly silly and wicked.' But does anything remotely like this make sense to say about Almighty God? If not, the Scholastic distinction I have cited is wholly frivolous (Geach pp.19-20).

Professor McInerny dismisses what Geach says about *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata* as "more a misunderstanding than an objection" (McInerny p.443). It seems to me that it is both. It does involve a misunderstanding of what the scholastics generally meant by *potentia ordinata*; but it is also a serious objection to a position, and to a concept of God's "absolute power", which were certainly held by some medieval thinkers—for a while by Thomas Aquinas.

The history of the distinction between *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata* in God has been examined in great detail in recent scholarship. Naturally not all of the scholastic thinkers took it or used it in the same way, though it now appears that the differences among them were more subtle and complex than was once thought. This is obviously not the place to undertake a survey of them[23]. But it can be said that, in general, they did not mean it in quite the way Geach describes; at least, not as regards the notion of *potentia ordinata*. Geach's remark leaves the impression that "*potentia ordinata*" means something like "power used in an orderly, or wise, or good way". But in fact it generally meant "power used in accordance with what God has actually ordained". Thus, "what is within God's *potentia ordinata*" would mean "what God can do, given what He Himself has actually ordained or decided". For many of the medieval thinkers, including Aquinas, this is narrower than what God can do, speaking absolutely; it is narrower for the simple reason that He could have ordained something other than what He has actually ordained. There are many other things that He could have decided to do instead of what He has in fact decided to do. And had His decision been other than it is, the content of His *potentia ordinata* would also be other than it is.

This of course means that there are things that God could do, which He has not in fact done, is not doing, and will never do. Yet they are things that He really could do. To Aquinas, this is because, and only because, they are things that could be done wisely and well; it is absolutely impossible, not even conceivable, that He do anything unwise or bad. However, some of the things that He really could have

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[23] For an excellent general study and a thorough account of the history of the scholarship on the distinction, see COURTENAY, W.J., *Capacity and Volition. A History of the Distinction of Absolute and Ordained Power,* Pierluigi Lubrina, Bergamo 1990. Other recent studies: BEONIO-BROCCHIERI FUMAGALLI, M. (ed.), *Sopra la volta del mondo. Onnipotenza e potenza assoluta di Dio tra medioevo e età moderna,* Pierluigi Lubrina, Bergamo 1986; BIANCHI, L., "Onnipotenza divina e ordine del mondo fra XII e XIV secolo," *Medioevo* X (1984) pp. 105-153; COURTENAY, W.J., "The Dialectic of Omnipotence in the High and Late Middle Ages," in *Divine Omniscience and Omnipotence in Medieval Philosophy,* ed. T. Rudavsky, D. Reidel, Dordrect-Boston-Lancaster 1985, pp. 243-269; other essays by COURTENAY in his *Covenant and Causality in Medieval Thought. Studies in Philosophy, Theology and Economic Practice,* London 1984; RANDI, E., *Il sovrano e l'orologiaio. Due immagini di Dio nel dibattito sull'idea di 'potentia absoluta' nel XIV secolo,* Firenze 1987. On the distinction in Aquinas, see MOONAN, L., "St Thomas Aquinas on Divine Power," in *Dio e l'economia della salvezza. Atti del Congresso Internazionale per il VII Centenario di Tommaso d'Aquino,* Domenicane Italiane, Roma-Napoli 1974, vol.III pp. 366-407; PERNOUD, M., "Innovation in Ockham's References to the *Potentia Dei*", *Antonianum* 45 (1970) pp. 65-97; PERNOUD, "The Theory of the *'Potentia Dei'* according to Aquinas, Scotus and Ockam," *Antonianum* 47 (1972) pp. 69-95.

done are things which, given the *present* general order of things which He has in fact decided to institute, could not *now* be done wisely or well. An example that Aquinas gives in the *Scriptum* on the *Sentences* is that of making human beings have their feet above and heads below. Given the creatures that now exist, this cannot be done well or justly. Still, if God had done it, it would be good and just. This does not at all mean that His fiat overrules all principles of goodness or justice. Rather, it means that if He had done it, He would also have provided whatever other conditions might be necessary in order that it be good and just, in accordance with the uncreated wisdom and justice from which His fiat necessarily proceeds[24].

But this brings us right back to the problem at hand. At least those things whose descriptions necessarily entail something repugnant to God's justice are things which He simply cannot do or bring about. Yet not all such descriptions are self-contradictory.

The most obvious example of a description that entails this is "sin". However, for the purposes of mounting an objection, this is a rather poor example, because it is a description which emerges from the very comparison between the thing described and the uncreated principle of divine justice, the eternal law (I-II q.71 a.6). "Sin" *means*, formally, an act repugnant to the eternal law. Repugnance to God's justice does not merely follow upon the description "sin"; it is part of that description. So perhaps one could reply that for any thing in the actual created world which is now truly described as a sin, if that thing is taken in a merely material way, i.e. merely in itself and in abstraction from its relation to the eternal law or from its character as a sin, then it is still something God could bring about; not in the present order of things, but in some other possible created order in which such a thing would no longer be repugnant to the eternal law. Then there would be no conceivable thing outside God that He could not make; for there would be no conceivable thing outside Him which His wisdom could not find a way of bringing about in a manner befitting His goodness and justice.

But St Thomas explicitly denies this. For him, there are some descriptions which include no reference to God or comparison with His law, but which nevertheless entail repugnance to that law, necessarily. That is, there are some things, described in merely creaturely terms, which are sins in any "possible world". For instance, Aquinas regards lying as something of this sort. He does not *define* lying as a kind of sin; rather, he defines it simply as saying the opposite of what you think. Yet he judges that it is wrong, not just in the present order of things, but necessarily and intrinsically (II-II q.110 a.3).

The example of lying comes up in the course of one of Aquinas' treatments of God's absolute incapacity for making anything wicked, the treatment in the *De potentia*, to which I now turn. This is what I have labelled one of his "unsatisfactory" treatments, by the standard of the *Summa theologiae*. It is unsatisfactory for the very reason that Geach brings out. Indeed, it uses the expression "absolute power" in just the way Geach describes.

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[24] *In III Sent.* d.1 q.2 a.3; see also *Summa theologiae* I q.25 a.5 ad 2; I q.21 a.1 ad 3.

In the first Question of the *De potentia*, Article 5, Aquinas raises the issue "whether God can do something other than what He is doing, and not do what He is doing". Part of his resolution of this issue consists in a study of the ways in which God is said to be unable to do something. St Thomas draws two distinctions here. The first is between something that God absolutely cannot do, because some principle of His action does not extend to it, and something that He cannot do *ex suppositione*, e.g. on the supposition that He has wanted not to do it or has foreseen that He would not do it.

The second distinction is between two ways in which God is said absolutely not to be able to do something. This is based on a distinction between the principles from which His action originate, which are three: intellect, will and "*potentia naturae*" or physical power. The intellect directs the will, the will commands the power, and the power executes the action. These he reduces to two, will and power, since the intellect only moves or initiates action by presenting the will with its object. The distinction between will and power gives rise to the two ways in which God absolutely cannot do something: because His power cannot extend to it, and because His will cannot extend to it. The things that His power cannot extend to are those which entail a contradiction, as had been explained in Article 3. Those that His will cannot extend to are those which are prejudicial to His goodness.

With these two distinctions Aquinas can resolve the main issue easily (indeed, the first distinction would have sufficed). God can do many things other than what He is in fact doing, because there are many other things which are neither self-contradictory nor intrinsically prejudicial to His goodness. But what is of interest to us is what is implicit in the second distinction: namely, that there are some things, such as sin in a creature, which *are* prejudicial to His goodness, but which are *not* self-contradictory. These, it seems, must be held to fall within God's "physical power," *even though* they are outside the scope of His will. Aquinas does not say this in so many words, but the fourth objection and its reply convey it quite clearly.

The substance of this objection is that, absolutely speaking, God can only do what is within the order of His wisdom, so that it seems that He cannot do other than what He is doing. From the context it is evident that here, the "order of God's wisdom" means the order that He has actually ordained. The argument given is that, absolutely speaking, even the man Jesus Christ could not do anything against the order of wisdom, e.g. to lie; hence, *a fortiori*, God cannot do any such thing, absolutely speaking. In the light of the distinctions made in the body of the article, the reply to this objection is easy: Christ could not lie, absolutely speaking, not merely because to lie is contrary to the order that God's wisdom has actually ordained, but because it is prejudicial to His very goodness. So this is no proof that He could not have ordained, and done, many things other than what He is in fact doing. This is the article's main concern.

For us, though, the interesting, and somewhat confusing, point about the objection is that it holds that Christ could not lie, absolutely speaking, *even though*

"he could have said those words" (the words "*non novi eum*"), that is, *even though* they were in his "absolute power". The thought is that Christ could not say "*non novi eum*", not because to utter this phrase exceeded his physical or linguistic capacities, but because it would have been a lie. The potential confusion rests in the fact that some things are said to be in his "absolute power" which nevertheless he "absolutely cannot" do.

The reply to the objection does not reject this way of speaking or restrict it to Christ's humanity. On the contrary, the replies to the following two objections show why it is applicable to God. In those replies, "absolute power" is said to mean power considered "in itself", in sheer abstraction from God's other attributes. Of course St Thomas insists that this abstraction is based only on a distinction of reason between the divine attributes, not a real distinction. But he treats this distinction as a sufficient basis for saying that what is within God's "absolute power" is not the same as what He can do, "absolutely speaking"; for, as was explained in the body of the article, what He can do, absolutely speaking, depends not only on the extent of His power but also on the extent of His will. So there are some things that are within His power, considered "absolutely" or by itself, which He absolutely cannot do. He has the strength and skill, the "physical resources" for them; but He cannot bring them about, because He cannot want to bring them about[25].

This is precisely Geach's complaint. God's power for everything that is not self-contradictory is saved only by making a distinction between His power and His goodness. Geach thinks such a distinction, in God, to be spurious. Surely he is right. It is as though God had some parts which, taken by themselves or "absolutely", admitted of application to both good and bad uses; so that if it is impossible for them to be applied to bad uses, this is not on their account, but only on account of the part that applies them, His will.

In the *Summa theologiae* Aquinas does an about-face and firmly rejects this distinction.

> In us, in whom power and essence are something other than will and intellect, and intellect other than wisdom, and will other than justice, there can be something in our power, which cannot be in a just will or in a wise intellect. But in God, power and essence and will and intellect and wisdom and justice are the same. Hence nothing can be in the

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[25] According to Courtenay (*Capacity and Volition* p.29) a very influential source for this position was a text from Augustine (*Contra Gaudentium* I 30, 35; PL 43, 727; CSEL 53, 233): God "*poterat per potentiam, sed non poterat per iustitiam.*" The position was taken up by Anselm, who uses the example of Christ's lying; "*potuit et non potuit*", he says (*Cur deus homo* II.10; see Courtenay pp.33-34). Unfortunately, Courtenay's account of Aquinas' doctrine (pp.88-90) rests mainly on the *De potentia*; hence he speaks of the insistence "of Thomas and others that God is able to do something in power he is not able to do with a just will or wise intellect..." No note is taken of the contrast between the *De potentia* (together with the *Scriptum* on the *Sentences*) and the *Summa theologiae* (together with the *Summa contra gentiles*) on this point.

> divine power, which cannot be in His just will or in His wise intellect (I q.25 a.5 ad 1).

Here, the range of God's *potentia absoluta* becomes identical with what He can do "absolutely speaking"[26]. What He can do, absolutely speaking, is what He by nature has the power for. What is within His *potentia ordinata* is, as always, what He can do given His own choice and ordination. But even what He by nature has the power for is only what is, or can be, wise and just and good. There is no "absolute power" for anything which, by being repugnant to God's goodness, He "absolutely cannot do". To say otherwise, as the *De potentia* does, is willy-nilly to treat the distinction between God's power and His will as a real distinction, not a mere distinction of reason.

Thus, in the *Summa theologiae*, Geach's complaint about the concept of "absolute power" no longer applies. Yet in this very same place in the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas continues to insist that what is to be attributed to God's absolute power is "everything in which the nature of a being can be saved, as was said above". The place "above" was q.25 a.3, on God's omnipotence, in which he said that only what entails a contradiction falls outside God's power. It is true that there, when he takes up the question of God's incapacity for sin (ad 2), he no longer makes any distinction between what is within the scope of His power and what is within the possible scope of His will, as he did in the *De potentia*; he does not even use this distinction to give an acceptable interpretation of Aristotle's remark that "God and the virtuous man can do base things". He is only willing to go so far as to say that God *could* do them *if he wanted to*; being quick to add that conditional statements like this can be true even if the antecedent and the consequent are both impossible or necessarily false. So he does not in any way allow for God's power to extend to sins or wicked things. But if he does not explicitly contradict himself on whether God has some sort of power to make sins, does not what he says in I q.25 a.5 at least implicitly contradict the claim that God can make anything that is not self-contradictory? God may not be capable of making something that contradicts itself; but men certainly are!

5. Power, beings and non-beings

That what Aquinas says does not imply a contradiction is best shown, I think, not by McInerny's maneuver, but by emphasizing a point which is all too easy to overlook. Aquinas makes it clearly enough, but there is a sort of distracting fascination about the question of making things that contradict themselves. The point is that in the *Summa theologiae*, the first, and I would say chief,

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[26] Thus a slight qualification must be applied to Moonan's remark (*op.cit.* p.402): "On no point of substance did his understanding or use of the distinction [between absolute and ordained power] diverge from what he had established, before he was thirty, in the Commentary on the *Sentences*."

description given of the range of God's power is *not* "everything that does not contradict itself". It is rather, "everything that can have the nature of a being". Aquinas arrives at this description through an analysis of the nature of active power.

Active power is power to enact something; and, he says, what every agent enacts is, as such, like the agent[27]. Moreover, active power is always founded upon some actuality, some perfection, in the agent. A thing acts insofar as it is "in act". Hence, he says, the possible or "enactable" or makeable object that properly corresponds to a given active power, does so according to the nature of the act or the perfection upon which that power is founded. That is, the likeness of itself that an agent enacts through its active power is precisely a likeness of the feature from which its power derives; and this feature is always some act, some perfection. So the proper object of every productive and active power is some sort of actuality.

But the actuality upon which God's power is founded is one which embraces every sort of actuality whatsoever; it is a pure, infinite act of being. Hence the possible object that properly corresponds to His power is possible *being*, as such. Just as the proper object, or term of exercise, of the power to heat is heat, and the proper object of the power to teach is knowledge, so the proper object of God's active power is being. This is why anything that can have the nature (*ratio*) of a being is a possible object of God's power. And it is in this *sense* that He is omnipotent: He has the power for every possible actuality or perfection, everything that can share in the nature of a being[28].

How does this point help resolve the apparent opposition between God's power to make everything that is not a self-contradiction, and His incapacity to make anything wicked? It does so by giving further precision to the range of the things that I have called "construable as objects of power" or "construable as makeable". Not only does that range include only "creaturely" things, things other than or outside of God; it also includes only "positive" things, things whose notions are taken from some actuality, some perfection, some form of being. Only these can be, properly speaking, the term and *per se* result of activity; and active power is nothing but power for activity. In short, the proper scope of active power is always a range of *beings*, or more precisely, of objects that are apt or fit to be beings. What is distinctive about God's active power is that its proper scope is the range of *all* such possible beings[29].

Not every object that the mind can think of, not even every object that is not self-contradictory, is a being. And not every object that the mind can think of is even apt or fit or able to be a being. But of these, some are *apparently* possible

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[27] Lest the reader begin to try to think of counter-examples to *omne agens agit sibi simile*, it should be noted that this principle is, for Aquinas, more a definition of "agent", in the primary sense, than something that happens to be observed to be true of things already identified as agents. See I q.5 a.4. But of course he holds that agents can be observed to exist.

[28] See I q.4 a.1 ad 3: something is or has actuality just to the extent that it is, or shares in, being (*esse*).

[29] See *Summa contra gentiles* II.26: the causality of the divine intellect extends to all things not repugnant to the nature of being; *"huiusmodi enim omnia, quantum est de se, nata sunt sub ente contineri."*

beings; only, the appearance is false, because they contradict themselves. Some, on the other hand, do not even pretend to be possible beings. They have non-being in their very concept; for instance, "non-being", "defect", "privation". These are not "impossible beings"; they are possible (conceivable), but not possible *beings*. Given the nature of active power, these do not even pertain to the question of how far God's power extends.

This does not mean at all that God is positively incapable of effecting non-being, as though, for instance, it were not possible for Him to destroy anything. It means simply that non-being does not enter into the *proper* or *immediate* object of power at all, and that therefore the extent of His, or anything's, power is not properly *measured* relative to it. To say that He is all-powerful means "only" that He has the power for all the things that power can be power for. His power may *also* extend, in some remote or indirect way, to other sorts of things; but whether it does or not is incidental to the question whether He is omnipotent.

According to Aquinas, God's power does indeed extend, in some remote or indirect way, to many "other sorts of things", i.e. to many sorts of non-beings. It does so as a kind of indirect consequence; that is, insofar as it extends to the beings or the perfections that those non-beings necessarily accompany (I q.49 a.2). In fact, every sort of act of destroying is really of this sort: an act of producing some thing which is incompatible with the thing to be destroyed (see *De potentia* q.1 a.3). So if God has the power to produce every sort of thing, then He also has the power for every sort of destruction. It is even "possible for" God to annihilate things; though strictly speaking, this would not be by the *exercise* of His power, since that always terminates in a being, but by the mere cessation of its exercise (I q.104 a.3 obj.3 & reply). Thus it would be otiose, a misleading redundancy, to make omnipotence consist in the power to make all things *and* to destroy and annihilate all things.

The only sort of non-being to which God's power does not extend is the sort that forms the core of the notion of wickedness or sin. That sort of non-being is the lack of order toward His goodness. But it is no detriment to His power, even indirectly, that He cannot effect such a lack; for it is not even indirectly a possible object of power. Although it can be caused, it is not caused through "destruction", i.e. through the removal of one perfection by the production of some contrary perfection. There is no perfection that is *per se* contrary to the order toward God's goodness. That order is first lost, not through any positive removal or any production of a contrary perfection, but through the mere absence of adherence to the principle of the order (I q.49 a.1 ad 3). The lack of due order to God's goodness is in a bad *use* of a power and in what is attributed to that use, not in what is attributed to the power itself; at least, not when we are speaking of merely *productive* power, power to make, as we are at present. Properly speaking, the disorder of sin is not a makeable object at all, not even indirectly or remotely. At the same time, of course, Aquinas holds that whatever there is of entity or being or perfection in a given sort of sin, God has the power to make. And He also has whatever power is needed to bring the disorder of sin back to order (I-II q.93 a.6).

It is in this way, then, that Aquinas' insistence, in the *Summa theologiae*, upon the real identity between God's power and His will, is consistent with his affirmation of God's omnipotence. God's omnipotence is His "absolute" power for every possible being, and, absolutely speaking, every possible being is a possible object of His will[30]. For every possible being is, as such, a possible likeness of Him.

As discussed earlier, this way of speaking of God's absolute power differs from, and improves upon, the way employed in the *De potentia.* The immediate ground of this difference is a deeper appreciation, in the *Summa theologiae*, of the real identity between God's power and His will. But I would conjecture that the difference also depends, indirectly, on the fact that in the account of God's omnipotence in the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas finally draws out the implication of the position that non-being is only remotely or indirectly an object of power.

He did not always draw it out. Indeed, in his earliest treatment of God's omnipotence, in the *Scriptum* on the *Sentences*, he did not even maintain the position itself. There, he held that power can be "*either* for being *or* for non-being, such as a power for corrupting", and that God's power extends to everything which "is not repugnant to the nature of a being *or* to the nature of a non-being" (I d.42 q.2 a.2). He did not even try to explain how this is compatible with the claim made in the preceding article, that God can neither "sin, nor make sin in other things"; perhaps he would have taken McInerny's route. The corresponding article in the *De potentia* (q.I a.3) only partially alters this account. There he says that "all active power terminates in being"[31], and that if it ever extends to non-being, this is only as a kind of consequence. But he nonetheless continues to want to make God's power extend somehow both to everything that can be a being *and* to everything that can be a non-being[32]. As we have seen, he then goes on to solve the question of "making sin" by recourse to a distinction between what is within God's "absolute power" and what God is "absolutely able" to do; the former is everything that can be a being or a non-being, while the latter is restricted to what is compatible with His goodness. Aquinas does not want this to be more than a distinction of reason; but it *is* more, as he comes to acknowledge in the *Summa theologiae.*

The path toward the much more satisfactory solution of the *Summa theologiae* is opened up by a notion of omnipotence that fully respects his mature understanding of power in general. Power is always power for some range of possible beings. Omnipotence is power for all possible beings. The present study has, in effect, merely glossed this formula, putting it side by side with an equivalent one: power to make all things makeable.

This is a concept of omnipotence which is compatible with the real identity

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[30] See *Summa contra gentiles* II.26-27.

[31] Here the governing principle seems to be the one invoked explicitly in the *Summa theologiae*, that *omne agens agit sibi simile.*

[32] This in turn is why he is compelled to speak about self-contradictions as neither beings nor non-beings. In the *Summa theologiae*, self-contradictions can be excluded from God's power simply on the grounds that they are impossible, i.e. are necessarily not, beings. See above, n.11.

between God's power and His other attributes. At the same time, it has its own distinct meaning. It expresses the divine nature in its character as a principle of things made, products, objects of strength and skill. In the *Summa theologiae,* Aquinas is almost perfectly consistent in giving omnipotence this focus. It only gets a bit blurry, perhaps, in the reply to the objection about God's inability to sin.

Curiously, on the points at which the *Summa theologiae* and the *De potentia* have been seen to differ concerning omnipotence and "absolute power", Book II of the *Summa contra gentiles* sides, at least implicitly, with the *Summa theologiae*[33]. This is curious because Book II of the *Summa contra gentiles* appears to have been written as early as 1261 or 1262—up to four or five years *before* the *De potentia*, which is dated 1265-1266; while the *Prima pars* of the *Summa theologiae* was begun only shortly after the *De potentia*, in 1266[34]. Is the *De potentia* treatment to be explained by the fact that it belongs to a genuine disputed question? That is, are its "unsatisfactory" elements to be attributed more to the bachelor *respondens* than to the *magister*?[35] Or is it simply that Aquinas had not yet fully made up his mind? In any case, even if the *De potentia* position comes from the *respondens*, he may very well have learned it from the master, since it is nearly the same as the position of Aquinas' *Scriptum* on the *Sentences*. But we ought not to be surprised if St Thomas struggled with the question. It is evidently with the voice of personal experience that he cautions, *"rationem omnipotentiae assignare videtur difficile".*

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***Abstract**: È una costante della tradizione ebraico-cristiana, affermare che Dio sia onnipotente. Ma come va intesa l'"onnipotenza"? San Tommaso dice che essa significa potere ogni cosa possibile, e cioè ogni cosa che non contraddica se stessa. A questa posizione si oppongono diverse obiezioni, ad alcune delle quali pare di poter rispondere più facilmente dicendo che l'onnipotenza di Dio sia il suo poter tutto ciò che non è*

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[33] See *Summa contra gentiles* Bk.II ch. 7, 10, 22-27. Here omnipotence is understood simply as power for all possible *beings*; and although there is no *explicit* rejection of the distinction between the scope of God's power and the scope of His will, they are treated as though identical.
I have concentrated on the *Summa theologiae* treatment, in part because it is the better known, and above all because it gives more explicit attention to the question of the *meaning* of omnipotence. But as regards the overall handling of God's power, the *Summa contra gentiles* is, at least in some respects, both clearer and more complete.

[34] See WEISHEIPL, J.A., *Friar Thomas d'Aquino. His Life, Thought and Work,* Doubleday, Garden City 1974, pp. 359-363.

[35] See Weisheipl, *ibid.* pp.124-126.

una contraddizione per Lui. *Questa risposta, però, è debole; inoltre, il sostegno che trova in Tommaso non è che apparente. Una soluzione più soddisfacente si scopre alla luce di una restrizione fondamentale all'interno del concetto di "potere" da lui ammesso nel discorso su Dio. Questo potere vuol dire unicamente potere produttivo. L'onnipotenza, quindi, è il potere di* produrre *ogni cosa* producibile. *Ma anche per questa nozione sussiste una certa difficoltà, e una certa soluzione insoddisfacente. Quest'ultima sì viene insinuata da Tommaso nel* De potentia. *Essa implica una distinzione esagerata fra potere e volontà in Dio. Nelle due* Summae, *invece, c'è una soluzione migliore, che dipende da un concetto molto preciso del potere e del suo oggetto proprio. Il potere è sempre poter qualche* essere. *L'onnipotenza dunque sarebbe il potere di produrre ogni essere possibile.*