Giving Up Omnipotence

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1   Introduction

Consider the traditional concept of God. He is understood to have all perfections. Among these are essential omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence. Take omnipotence. It has a simple, intuitive gloss: An omnipotent being can do anything. One way of interpreting this gloss is as follows:

O1: A subject is omnipotent if and only if that subject can bring about any state of affairs.

O1 is problematic. One problem is that it requires too much of an omnipotent being. First, O1 entails that a being that cannot create a round square or make $2 + 2$ equal 5 is not omnipotent. Second, O1 entails that a being that cannot create a rock that an omnipotent being cannot lift is not omnipotent.[1] Such inabilities do not seem to preclude omnipotence.[2]

Another problem is that O1 does not fit with the other divine attributes. One instance of this problem concerns the tension between God's omnipotence and His essential omnibenevolence. An essentially omnibenevolent being always prefers the good to the bad and is therefore unable to do evil. Consider, then, the following state of affairs:

(Torture): God tortures an innocent just for fun.

Given O1, a subject is omnipotent only if that subject can bring about (Torture). But God, if He is essentially omnibenevolent, cannot bring about (Torture). It seems, therefore, that God cannot be both omnipotent and essentially omnibenevolent.

This problem is an instance of a much more general, but much less recognized, problem. For example, God is said to be essentially omniscient. So He essentially knows everything and believes nothing false. But consider the following state of affairs:

(Math): God believes $2 + 2 = 5$.

If O1 is true, then a subject is omnipotent only if that subject can bring about (Math). However, if God is essentially omniscient, He is unable to bring about (Math). Thus, God cannot be both omnipotent and essentially omniscient.

For another example, God is said to be essentially eternal. Consider, then, a state of affairs such as:

(Destruction): God destroys Himself.

O1 requires that an omnipotent being be able to bring about (Destruction). God, in virtue of His essential eternality, cannot bring about (Destruction). So it seems that God cannot both be omnipotent and essentially eternal.

The general problem is this: For any essential property God has, there is an ability that He does not have. In particular, He is unable to bring about any state of affairs in which He does not have the relevant property. The absence of such abilities seems to preclude omnipotence.

Many alleged solutions to the problem of fit with essential omnibenevolence have been discussed. Some authors (Pike 1969; Nagasawa 2008) maintain that God is only contingently omnibenevolent so He is able to bring about (Torture). Other authors (Flint and Freddoso 1984; Hoffman and Rosenkrantz 1988, 2012; Pearce and Pruss 2012; Wierenga 1989) maintain that it is metaphysically impossible for God to bring about (Torture) and for this reason a theory of omnipotence should not require Him to be to be able to do so. Still other authors (Feldman 1986; Leftow 2009; Wielenberg 2000) maintain that while it is not possible for God to bring about (Torture), He still has the power to do so.

I will show that none of the standard solutions is both plausible and sufficiently general. After making trouble for the standard responses, I will go on to offer my own solution to the general problem: God is not omnipotent. This may at first seem like a significant loss for the theist. However, I will show that the cost of giving up omnipotence is surprisingly small. In particular, the theist may abandon the doctrine that God is omnipotent without scaling back the extent of God's power and without denying that He has all perfections[3].

2   The Conciliatory Response

A seemingly attractive response (Pike 1969; Nagasawa 2008) to the problem of fit between omnipotence and essential omnibenevolence is to concede that God is not essentially omnibenevolent. If God is only contingently omnibenevolent, then He could torture an innocent just for fun. It is just that He chooses not to. While this response is initially appealing, it seems to be much less attractive as a solution to the more general problem. An extended conciliatory response would require denying that God is essentially omniscient, that God is essentially eternal, and so on. Indeed, one would have to deny that any object[4] has any essential properties at all. If the conciliatory response seems only slightly revisionist, the extended conciliatory response seems much more radically revisionist. Those who are attracted to the basic conciliatory response would not welcome this consequence.[5] Given that it is not plausible as a solution to the general problem, then, the conciliatory response leaves the broader problem unsolved and appears to lose its initial appeal.[6]

3 The Response from Metaphysical Impossibility

Another seemingly attractive response (Wierenga 1989) to the problem of fit is to revise the definition of omnipotence:

O2: A subject is omnipotent if and only if that subject can bring about any state of affairs that it is metaphysically possible for that subject to bring about.

Notice the difference between O1 and O2. O2 does not require that an omnipotent being be able to bring about any state of affairs whatsoever. Only the ability to bring about any state of affairs that it is metaphysically possible for that being to bring about is required. This small change provides solutions to the problems for O1 identified above.

First, O2 allows for a solution to the internal problems for omnipotence identified above. There are no metaphysically possible states of affairs in which a square is round or $2 + 2 = 5$. So, it is not metaphysically possible for any subject to bring about such a state of affairs. Furthermore, it is analytic that an omnipotent being can lift a stone of any weight. To require that an omnipotent subject be able to create a stone too heavy for an omnipotent being to lift is to require that the subject be able to bring about a state of affairs in which there is a rock too heavy to be lifted by a subject that can lift a rock of any weight. But it is not metaphysically possible for any subject to bring about this state of affairs. So O2 does not require that a subject be able to bring about any of these states of affairs in order to count as omnipotent.

Second, O2 allows for a solution to the problem of fit with the gloss of omnibenevolence. God is essentially omnibenevolent. Thus, He is essentially unable to do evil. Given this essential limitation, it is not metaphysically possible for God to torture an innocent just for fun. So, given O2, God may be omnipotent even though He cannot bring about (Torture). And, unlike the conciliatory response, O2 provides the basis for a general solution to the problem of fit. It is not metaphysically possible for God to bring about (Math) or (Destruction). So O2 does not require that God be able to bring about such states of affairs in order for Him to be omnipotent.

While O2 allows for a solution to the problem of fit, it seems to introduce a new problem. Consider Plantinga's (1967) widely discussed McEar.[7] He is a normal human with the exception that he is essentially unable to do anything other than scratch his ear. So, for example, McEar is essentially unable to bring about a state of affairs such as:

(Star): A red star begins to exist.

Now, apply the reasoning above about God and (Torture) to McEar and (Star). McEar is essentially unable to do anything other than scratch his ear. So it is not metaphysically possible for McEar to bring about (Star). These considerations apply to every other state of affairs aside from those in which McEar scratches his ear. McEar can scratch his ear. There is no metaphysically possible state of affairs in which he does anything else. So he can bring about any state of affairs

that it is metaphysically possible for him to bring about. Thus, O2 delivers the judgment that McEar is omnipotent. This is a problem. Obviously McEar is not omnipotent. So despite its initial attractiveness and despite its ability to provide a unified solution to the broader problem of fit, this variant of the response from metaphysical impossibility will not work. O2 must be abandoned.

Fortunately, there is another attractive variant (Hoffman and Rosenkrantz 1988; Feldman 1986; and Flint and Freddoso 1983; Pearce and Pruss 2012) of the response from metaphysical impossibility. O2 seemed to depart too far from O1. But there is another theory, part way between O1 and O2, that seems to be a much better candidate for a theory of omnipotence:

O1.5: A subject is omnipotent if and only if that subject can bring about any metaphysically possible state of affairs.

Notice the difference between O2 and O1.5. O2 only required that an omnipotent being be able to bring about any state of affairs that it is metaphysically possible for it to bring about. O1.5, on the other hand, requires that an omnipotent being be able to bring about any metaphysically possible state of affairs whatsoever.

O1.5, like O2, has the resources to deal with the problem of fit with essential omnibenevolence. Consider again (Torture). (Torture) is not metaphysically possible. After all, God is essentially omnibenevolent. So, there is no possible world at which He tortures an innocent just for fun. And, if there is no such possible world, then (Torture) is not a metaphysically possible state of affairs. Thus, O1.5 does not require that God be able to bring about (Torture) in order to count as omnipotent. Like the response from O2, this response is naturally extended into a solution to the more general problem of fit. For example, God is essentially omniscient. There is no possible world at which He believes $2 + 2 = 5$. So (Math) is not a metaphysically possible state of affairs and O1.5 does not require that God be able to bring about (Math) in order to count as omnipotent. Similar considerations apply to (Destruction) and all other instances of the problem.

This response, furthermore, provides a natural solution to the internal problems for omnipotence discussed earlier—God cannot bring about a state of affairs in which $2 + 2 = 5$ or in which an omnipotent being makes a rock that an omnipotent being cannot lift because these are not metaphysically possible states of affairs. These considerations provide a satisfying explanation for why the relevant internal problems for omnipotence are only pseudo-problems. Since this response seems so natural in the case of these other problems, it makes the use of this strategy in solving the problem of fit all the more appealing.

Unlike O2, this version of the response from metaphysical impossibility does not suffer from the McEar problem or any of its popular variants.[8] Consider again (Star)—the state of affairs in which a red star begins to exist. (Star) is clearly a metaphysically possible state of affairs. McEar, however, is not able to bring about (Star) since he is only able to scratch his ear. So O1.5 delivers the judgment that McEar is not omnipotent. God, on the other hand, is able to bring about (Star). So parallel considerations do not apply to Him. Thus,

O1.5, unlike O2, delivers the judgment that God is omnipotent while McEar is not.

I think this version of the response from metaphysical impossibility is as good as it gets. Unfortunately, even this improvement is problematic. For suppose there is a theology according to which God is essentially unable to directly move red objects.[9] Now imagine that there is a red ball in the center of the galaxy and consider the following state of affairs:

(Move): God directly moves the red ball to my office.

The reasoning above about God, (Torture), (Math), and (Destruction) applies equally to God and (Move). God can get the ball to my office indirectly. He could create a gust of cosmic wind or create a team of interstellar astronauts and get the ball into my office by one of these means. But God, according to this theology, is essentially unable to directly move red objects. So there is no possible world at which He directly moves the red ball from the center of the galaxy to my office. Thus (Move) is a metaphysically impossible state of affairs. So O1.5 allows the proponent of such a theology to maintain that God is omnipotent even though He cannot bring about (Move). This is a problem. If God were unable to bring about (Move), then He would not be omnipotent. Directly moving a red ball from the center of the galaxy to my office seems like something an omnipotent being should be able to do. The God of such a theology would not be omnipotent. For this reason, the mere metaphysical impossibility of (Torture), (Math), and (Destruction) is not enough to vindicate God's omnipotence in the absence of His ability to bring these states of affairs about. The response from metaphysical impossibility, it seems, is unable to solve the problem of fit.

First Objection: There are already well known problems for O1.5 (due to Plantinga [1974, pp. 169-84]). Consider:

(Math 2): $2 + 2 = 4$.

(Past): Socrates was not a philosopher.

(Dance): I freely dance in the office.

(Math 2) is a necessary and therefore metaphysically possible state of affairs. But one might think that God cannot bring such states of affairs about. Similarly, (Past) is a metaphysically possible state of affairs. But it seems that God cannot now bring it about. Finally, (Dance) is a metaphysically possible state of affairs. But God cannot bring about (Dance) without my free cooperation. So if O1.5 is true, then God is not omnipotent since He cannot bring about (Math 2) or (Past) or (Dance). But it seems like the inability to bring about these states of affairs should not preclude omnipotence. So O1.5 is false. Thus, my example does not add anything to the discussion.

Response: In light of the problems Plantinga has identified, more sophisticated O1.5 type theories have been advanced (e.g. Hoffman and Rosenkrantz 1988, 2012; Flint and Freddoso 1983). However, none of these theories abandon

the guiding idea behind O1.5. The theories in question are revised to accommodate the point that there are some metaphysically possible states of affairs that an omnipotent being need not be able to bring about. In other words, they are revised to deal with the worry that O1.5 requires *too much* of an omnipotent being. Consider the revised theories:

H&R: x is omnipotent at t iff for any state of affairs, s, [that satisfies some technical definitions] if it is possible for some agent to bring about s, then at t, x has the ability to bring about s.

F&F: x is omnipotent at t iff for any state of affairs if there is a possible world W^* [that satisfies some technical definitions] such that at t in W^* someone actualizes s, then x has the power at t in W to actualize s.

Notice that each of these theories, like O1.5, have the following implication: an omnipotent being need not be able to bring about any metaphysically impossible states of affairs whatsoever. H&R requires that it is possible for some agent to bring about the state of affairs. Otherwise an omnipotent being need not be able to bring it about. F&F requires that there be a possible world at which someone actualizes the state of affairs. Otherwise it is not a state of affairs that an omnipotent being must be able to bring about. My point, however, is that O1.5 requires *too little* of an omnipotent being. The mere fact that a state of affairs is metaphysically impossible is not enough to show that an omnipotent being need not be able to bring it about. In the example, (Move) and (Beauty) are metaphysically impossible states of affairs. The revised theories, just like O1.5, deliver the judgment that God would be omnipotent even if He were unable to bring about (Move) and (Beauty). For this reason, even the much more sophisticated O1.5 type theories H&R and F&F must be rejected since they do not abandon the guiding idea behind O1.5 and therefore share with O1.5 the implication that the God of the crazy theology is omnipotent even though He cannot bring about (Move) or (Beauty). Indeed, I am only aware of a few contemporary authors (i.e. sometimes Feldman [1986], Leftow [2012], and sometimes Pearce and Pruss [2012]) who think that an omnipotent being must be able to bring about at least some impossible states of affairs[10].

Second Objection: There is, in fact, a metaphysically possible state of affairs in the neighborhood of (Move) that the relevant God cannot bring about. Consider:

(Move 2): A red ball is moved by someone, but not indirectly moved by anyone, to my office.

(Move 2) seems to be metaphysically possible. But the God of the relevant theology cannot bring it about. So O1.5, does not, in fact, allow that such a God is omnipotent[11].

Response: I do not think this is a problem for my argument. Suppose the proponent of the crazy theology insisted that his God is omnipotent according to O1.5 because he accepts the following doctrine:

(Providence): Necessarily, for any event, if that event obtains, then God at least indirectly causes that event to obtain.

So God might create some being. And then that being might cause the ball to move. But in that case God indirectly causes the ball to move. And no being would just pop into existence uncaused and then move the ball. In other words, in order for (Move 2) to be metaphysically possible, it would require that either (i) God directly moves the red ball or that (ii) someone with no causal connection to God directly moves the red ball. Given God's essential properties, (i) is metaphysically impossible. Given (Providence), (ii) is metaphysically impossible. Thus, (Move 2) is metaphysically impossible. And so the proponent of the crazy theology can maintain that God is omnipotent, according to O1.5, even though He is unable to bring about (Move 2)[12].

Third Objection: O1.5 does not allow that the God of this mistaken theology is omnipotent. Instead, O1.5 entails that such a theology entails a necessarily false thesis-that God cannot do something that is, in fact, metaphysically possible. Any theology that entails a necessary falsehood is mistaken. The theology simply has the metaphysics wrong.

Response: It seems to me that this objection is mistaken. If you don't like having God in this example, then restate the example with someone else. Suppose Pedro has all the essential limitations traditionally attributed to God. He is essentially unable to believe $2 + 2 = 5$, to torture an innocent for fun, and to destroy himself. And suppose, in addition to this, Pedro is essentially unable to directly move red objects, to create beautiful stones, and to do a bunch of other things. O1.5 delivers the judgment that Pedro is omnipotent. But Pedro isn't omnipotent. So O1.5 is false. I do not see how one could consistently allow Plantinga's McEar, Wielenberg's color impaired deities, van Inwagen's Demiourgous, or any other of the many examples like this in the literature, and fail to admit Pedro to this discussion[13].

Fourth Objection: One could simply bite the bullet[14]. Why not accept the result that the God of the crazy theology is omnipotent even thought He is unable to directly move red objects?

Response: Keep adding essential limitations to God. Suppose, for example, that the theology just discussed also held that God is essentially unable to create beautiful stones. Now consider the following state of affairs:

(Beauty): God creates a beautiful stone.

Familiar reasoning shows that, given O1.5, the God of such a theology is omnipotent even though He cannot bring about (Beauty) or (Move). The advocate of such a theology would be able to maintain that there is no possible world at which God creates a beautiful stone. So (Beauty) is not a metaphysically possible state of affairs. And O1.5 mistakenly allows that such a god is omnipotent.

If you are not convinced yet, just note that you can keep adding limitations like this to God and O1.5 will continue to judge Him to be omnipotent. Eventually it becomes impossible to bite the bullet. Consider, for example, TIB. TIB is essentially trapped in a box and essentially unable to do anything other

than give telepathic instructions to his devoted minions outside the box. TIB's ability to dream up instructions is so great, and the range of abilities distributed among his devoted minions is so vast, that TIB can bring about any metaphysically possible state of affairs. If TIB wants to bring about a state of affairs in which everyone in the office smiles, then he can send out instructions and one of his devoted minions will make it happen. If TIB wants to bring about a state of affairs in which a comet hits the earth, then he has at least one minion that can do it. All TIB must do is give the order. For any metaphysically possible state of affairs, TIB can bring it about in this way.

Now, imagine you are speaking with a TIB theologian. You are arguing about whether TIB is omnipotent. You point out that there are numerous states of affairs that TIB cannot bring about that he should be able to bring about if he is omnipotent. These include:

(Escape): TIB gets out of the box.

(Move$_{\mathbf{TIB}}$): TIB directly moves the red ball to my office.

(Minionless): TIB gets something done outside the box without sending instructions to his minions.

The TIB theologian then responds in the familiar way. Given TIB's essential inabilities, no possible being can bring about (Escape) or (Move$_{TIB}$) or (Minionless). If no possible being can bring about a state of affairs, then an omnipotent being need not be able to bring it about. Thus, TIB's inability to bring about (Escape) or (Move$_{TIB}$) or (Minionless) does not preclude his being omnipotent. Furthermore, these states of affairs are metaphysically impossible. And omnipotence only requires the ability to bring about possible states of affairs[15]. So TIB's inability to bring about (Escape) or (Move$_{TIB}$) or (Minionless) does not rule out his omnipotence. O1.5 delivers the judgment that TIB is omnipotent. And therefore TIB is omnipotent.

This line of reasoning is mistaken. TIB is not omnipotent. And since O1.5 judges TIB to be omnipotent, it is false and cannot form the basis of a successful solution to the problem of fit. In general, merely showing that a state of affairs is metaphysically impossible is not enough to show that it is not in the purview of omnipotence.

4   The Power but Not Possibility Response

Another response to the problem of fit (Wielenberg 2000; Leftow 2009) with essential omnibenevolence is to introduce a new theory of omnipotence:

O3: A subject is omnipotent if and only if there are no states of affairs that that subject is unable to bring about at least partly because it lacks the power to do so.

This response invokes a distinction between ability and power. It is maintained that a being may be unable to bring about a state of affairs while still having

the power to bring about that state of affairs. This thought may be motivated by way of an example. Consider the property of being the physically strongest possible person. Call this property 'omni-strength'. Now, suppose that Hercules is an incredibly strong human, has promised not to lift any ten pound stones, and is essentially so honest that he is unable to break promises. Next, suppose someone proposes to test whether Hercules is omni-strong by asking Hercules to lift a ten pound stone. Because of his essential honesty, Hercules is unable to do so. But this demonstration of inability fails to prove that Hercules lacks omni-strength. For the inability in question is not in any way due to a lack of physical strength. Rather, the inability is due to Hercules' essential honesty. This example is taken to illustrate that inabilities to lift preclude omni-strength only if such inabilities are at least partly due to a lack of physical power. An inability that is due entirely to something else does not preclude omni-strength. Similarly, the proponent of O3 would say, an inability precludes omnipotence only if that inability is due in part to a lack of power. If the inability is due to something else, then that inability does not preclude omnipotence.

O3, viewed in this context, seems to provide a solution to the problem of fit with the gloss of omnibenevolence. God is not able to bring about (Torture). But this is not because of a lack of power on His part. It is instead because He has the highest degree of moral goodness, is essentially omnibenevolent, and would therefore never do such a thing. So O3 allows that God is omnipotent even though He cannot bring about (Torture) just as Hercules may be omni-strong even though he is unable to lift a ten pound stone. Again, this solution seems extendable to other problems of fit. God is unable to bring about (Math) because he is essentially omniscient and not because of a lack of power. Similarly, He is unable to bring about (Destruction) due to his essential eternality rather than to a lack of power.

Someone (Morriston 2002) might think that O3 still suffers from a problem of fit. Consider a state of affairs such as:

(Preference): God prefers the bad to the good.

Now, God is unable to bring about (Preference). He is essentially omnibenevolent. So at every possible world He prefers the good to the bad. And, one might think, this is due to a lack of power on His part. For what could explain why God cannot bring about (Preference) other than a lack of power? It seems that although God cannot do evil because of his preferences, He cannot bring about (Preference) because He lacks the power. So while Wielenberg's response to the problem of fit may succeed in the case of (Torture), it does not succeed in the case of (Preference).

It seems to me that O3 has the resources to deal with this objection. If we grant, that the reasoning about God and (Torture) is sound, then parallel reasoning about God and (Preference) equally shows that O3 has the resources to deal with this variant of the problem of fit. What other than a lack of power could explain God's inability to bring about (Preference)? Well, consider again (Torture). It was said that God is unable to bring about (Torture) not because of a lack of power but because of His essential omnibenevolence. In particular,

God's inability to bring about (Torture) is due to His essentially preferring the good to the bad. The proponent of O3 can then offer the same explanation in the case of (Preference). God would be doing evil, one might think, if He were to bring about (Preference). He essentially prefers not to do evil. So His inability to bring about (Preference) has the same explanation as his inability to bring about (Torture). It is not a lack of power that explains why God is unable to bring about (Preference). If this response works in the case of (Torture), it seems to work equally well in the case of (Preference). For this reason, it seems to me that O3 does provide a nice response to the problem of fit.

Unfortunately, however, O3 is not without difficulties. In particular, it is unclear how the ability to bring about a state of affairs is distinct from the power to bring about that state of affairs. It is true that there is an intuitive notion here that does not need any explanation. But 'power' and 'ability' seem to be different names for that single familiar concept[16]. A solution to the problem of fit that only invoked this intuitive notion could not be charged with obscurity. O3, however, is accompanied by the insistence that power and ability are distinct. So at most one of them is the intuitive, familiar concept. The other is, it seems, an unfamiliar concept with the name of a more familiar concept. O3, then, needs to be accompanied by an explanation of which of the two, power or ability, is our intuitive notion and which is the unfamiliar concept. Furthermore, O3 needs to include an explanation of what the relevant unfamiliar concept is supposed to be. Without such an explanation, O3, at best, purchases a solution to the problem of fit at the cost of severe obscurity. This renders the alleged solution inadequate. Or, at the very least, it suggests that O3 is too obscure to evaluate since it is unclear what the relevant unfamiliar concept is and how it is supposed to be applied. This is very different than the case of Hercules. It is at least somewhat plausible that physical strength is distinct from lifting ability. They seem like very different, but both easily graspable, concepts.[17] Ability and power, on the other hand, clearly do not come apart in the same way as strength and lifting ability. The only natural, intuitive notions of these concepts seem to be identical.

Fortunately, there is a version of the response (Feldman 1986)[18] from power but not possibility that does not have this problem. The spirit of the response does not depend in any important way on invoking an implausible or obscure distinction between power and ability and then maintaining that God has the power to bring about (Torture) but not the ability. Instead, one may simply say that God does in fact have the power or ability to bring about (Torture). He could torture an innocent if He wanted to. But it is just that He essentially prefers not to do so. For any possible world you pick, God has the relevant power, he just chooses not to exercise it. So although there is no possible world at which God brings about (Torture), He does not lack the ability to do so. His power is simply necessarily unexercised. As with the other variant of this response, it is easy to see how it can be extended into a solution to the more general problem of fit.

This variant of the response from power but not possibility is an improvement. In many ways it is attractive. However, there is a remaining prob-

lem. The solution requires denying an assumption that seems obvious to most philosophers and action theorists.[19]In particular it requires the acceptance of necessarily unexercised powers. Now, I do not mean to insist on orthodoxy. The truth of a view does not follow from its status as orthodox. However, it seems to me that the response from power but not possibility is plausible only if it is accompanied by an explanation of why orthodoxy is wrong about the existence of necessarily unexercised powers. Without such an explanation, this response is significantly robbed of its interest.

There are some examples (Hill [2005], p. 129) that are plausibly read as cases of necessarily unexercised powers. One might think that such cases provide a reason to go against orthodoxy. Consider the President[20]. He has the power to destroy the earth. He can press a button. The button will set off a series of bombs. And if all goes as planned the earth will be destroyed. But one might think God's essential omnibenevolence would prevent Him from allowing all to go as planned. So if the President were to press the button, God would step in at some point to prevent the earth's destruction. Since God exists at all possible worlds and since He is essentially omnibenevolent, there is no world at which the President succeeds in destroying the earth. So the President's power is necessarily unexercised.

I admit that this case is plausibly read as one in which the President has a necessarily unexercised power. But it seems to me that it is equally plausibly read as a case in which the President lacks the power to destroy the earth. The President may have a lot of power. He may have so much power that *per impossible* were he to try to exercise it and God did not exist the President would succeed in destroying the earth. But it is not obvious to me that having that amount of power is the same as having the power to destroy the earth. In fact, it still seems to me that if it is impossible for the President to destroy the earth, then he lacks the power to destroy the earth. So given the presence of an alternative reading of the case that is consistent with orthodoxy, it seems to me that we should stick with orthodoxy. And therefore this variant of the power but not possibility response cannot be made to work.

5 Giving Up Omnipotence

So far we have examined some of the most interesting and promising attempts to solve the problem of fit by explaining how omnipotence can be possessed by a being with God's essential properties. It seems to me that none of these attempts is successful. Perhaps there is some other solution that will fare better. But at this point I think it is worth considering the cost of giving up omnipotence and the benefits that it might yield. If the price is right, then the need to find a solution preserving God's omnipotence may seem far less pressing.

Let us stipulate that 'the traditionalist' is a theist who understands God in accordance with the description used at the beginning of this paper. So according to the traditionalist, God has all the perfections and among these perfections is essential omnipotence. Let us further stipulate that 'the revisionist' is a theist

who maintains that God has all these properties except for omnipotence and is as powerful as is consistent with His having each of these other properties (e.g. essential omniscience, essential omnibenevolence, and so on). What would the traditionalist theist lose by going revisionist? What would it cost a theist to abandon the doctrine that God is omnipotent?

It seems to me very little. For example, the traditionalist and the revisionist do not disagree about the extent of God's power. For any state of affairs the revisionist thinks God cannot bring about, the traditionalist agrees that He cannot bring it about. The revisionist thinks God cannot torture an innocent just for fun. The traditionalist agrees. The revisionist thinks God cannot believe $2 + 2 = 5$. The traditionalist agrees. The revisionist thinks God cannot destroy Himself. The traditionalist agrees. So, going revisionist does not require scaling back the extent of God's power.

Nor do the traditionalist and the revisionist disagree about whether there are beings with powers that God does not have. The revisionist thinks there are beings that can torture an innocent just for fun. The traditionalist agrees. Similarly for beings that can believe $2 + 2 = 5$ or commit self destruction. Again, the traditionalist and revisionist are in agreement.

Furthermore, the traditionalist and the revisionist need not disagree about whether God is a maximally perfect being or possesses all the perfections. The revisionist may maintain that God lacks omnipotence not because of a lack of power or perfection, but because omnipotence is a defective concept and does not correspond to a genuine property. Or, at the very least, its application is extremely unclear and it is difficult to tell exactly what it would take for a subject to count as omnipotent. Or, even if omnipotence is not a defective concept, it is unclear whether it is really a perfection. The revisionist may maintain that God has all the perfections. But omnipotence is not among them. However, there is a genuine power property that is a perfection—being as powerful as is consistent with being essentially omniscient, essentially omnibenevolent, and so on. This is the property that the traditionalist has always rightly seen as a perfection but has often wrongly identified under the guise of 'omnipotence'. God has this property together with the other perfections. So the revisionist need not lose the doctrine that God is maximally perfect.

As far as I can see, there is only one thing the revisionist must give up. She must modify the extension of the concept of omnipotence. The traditionalist holds that God is to be classified as omnipotent. The revisionist holds that He is not. The revisionist loses the claim that God is included in the extension of concept omnipotence. This is the cost of going revisionist. However, once we see that the dispute is not about the extent of God's power or about whether other beings have powers that He does not or about whether God is maximally perfect, this seems like a very small price to pay.

Contrast this cost with those of retaining the doctrine that God is omnipotent. One such cost is that the traditionalist is left without any remotely promising theory about a property that God allegedly has. All the theories canvassed above are either obscure or have clearly incorrect results. This is one weighty cost.

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Another cost is that, while scrambling to preserve God's omnipotence, the traditionalist is under pressure to deny one of God's essential properties after another. There is pressure to give up essential omnibenevolence, essential omniscience, and essential eternality. Essential omnipresence and numerous other essential properties that the traditionalist attributes to God could be added to the list. The same tension with omnipotence that pressures the traditionalist to give up any one of these properties also pressures the traditionalist to give up all the others. And, unlike what the revisionist must do in the case of omnipotence, this is not simply pressure to change the names of God's various epistemic, moral and other properties without making any substantive changes to what God might have been like or what those properties are. Rather, the pressure is to make much more substantial changes to the traditionalist's theology than that. God really could have believed $2 + 2 = 5$. He really could have tortured an innocent just for fun. He really could have destroyed Himself. Such pressure is another, this time extremely weighty, cost of remaining traditionalist.

Given that the cost of going revisionist is so small and the cost of remaining traditionalist is so high, it is worth casting this discussion in terms of what is gained by abandoning the doctrine that God is omnipotent? It seems to me quite a lot. The most difficult problems of fit between the divine attributes are simply and elegantly resolved without making any modifications to traditional views about the extent of God's power and without rejecting or modifying any of the other attributes traditionally ascribed to Him. God is just as powerful as the traditionalist has always thought. And the powers He lacks, to torture innocents[21], to believe false things, to destroy Himself, are not excellent making powers. Giving up omnipotence just isn't a big deal.

First Objection: Geach (1973) and Howard Sobel (2004) have also suggested giving up omnipotence and have offered, on behalf of the theist, power properties in place of omnipotence. Since other people have done this, my account of God's power property is nothing new.

Reply: There are respects in which my view is an improvement on what has come before. Geach argues that God's power property is not omnipotence but almightiness. As others (Van Inwagen [2006, p. 24]) have pointed out, however, Geach's account of God's power property "tells us nothing about what God is able to do" and is a power that could be had by a "being who was able to create only pebbles." My account, on the other hand, tells us exactly what God is able to do. If it is not precluded by being essentially omnibenevolent or essentially omniscient or essentially eternal, then God can do it. Nothing about being able to create things other than pebbles is precluded by having such essential properties. So no being that is only able to create pebbles can have the power property I attribute to God. According to Howard Sobel (2004, pp. 355-67), God's power property is being an only necessarily self-limited being (ONSLIP). He holds that this power property is not a perfection, that beings much less powerful than God are also ONSLIPs (p. 355), that omnipotence is an entirely unproblematic property, and that the conciliatory response is a viable way to demonstrate that omnipotence is unproblematic. My account of

God's power property, on the other hand, preserves the doctrine that God's power property is a perfection. And, for the reasons I point out in relation to Geach's proposal, my account of God's power property is not one that could be had be had by far less powerful creatures. Furthermore, my discussion of this topic departs from Howard Sobel's in two other ways. I argue that omnipotence *is* a problematic property. And I argue that the conciliatory response does not succeed in showing otherwise.

Second Objection: Either I think God is maximally powerful or I do not. If I do not, then my view has a significant cost: I have to give up the doctrine that God is maximally powerful. If, on the other hand, I *do* think God is maximally powerful, then whatever my account of maximal power is will be a satisfactory analysis of omnipotence as well. And so there is no need to give up omnipotence.

Response: I think talk of 'maximal power' in this context can mean four things. One thing it can mean is the ability to bring about any (even impossible) state of affairs. Another thing it can mean is the ability to bring about any metaphysically possible state of affairs. A third thing it can mean is being omnipotent. A fourth thing it can mean is being the most powerful possible being (this is roughly how Hill [2005, p. 160] understands maximal power). My view is that God is not maximally powerful in the first, second, or third senses. However, I think God is *almost but not quite* maximally powerful in the second sense (due to Plantinga's examples). And I think God *is* maximally powerful in the fourth sense. Now, is it a significant cost of my view that God is not maximally powerful in the first sense? No. For the traditionalist already thinks God is not maximally powerful in that sense. What about the second sense? Again, my view has no cost at all. The traditionalist agrees with me that God cannot bring about just any metaphysically possible state of affairs (due to Plantinga's examples). So I am no different than the traditionalist here. Is it a significant cost of my view that God is not maximally powerful in the third sense? That will depend on whether giving up omnipotence is a significant cost. And I have tried to argue that it is not. But, as I said, I *do* think God is maximally powerful in the fourth sense. So, if I think there is a sense in which God is maximally powerful, why isn't that sense of maximal power a satisfactory account of omnipotence? My answer is that construing the sense in which I think God is maximally powerful as a theory of omnipotence would yield:

O4: S is omnipotent if and only if S is the most powerful possible being.

But O4 is false for the same reason that O1.5 false. If God were exactly like He actually is except that He was essentially unable to directly move red objects, then He would still be the most powerful possible being. But He wouldn't be omnipotent. That is why the sense in which I think God is maximally powerful is not a satisfactory account of omnipotence.

Third Objection: My view is too uninformative. It isn't clear how much power I think God has. I never say exactly which states of affairs I think He can bring about.

Response: I think that, for any state of affairs, one can find out whether God can bring that state of affairs about by answering two questions:

Q1: Is the state of affairs metaphysically impossible?

Q2: Is the state of affairs one of Plantinga's counterexamples to O1.5?

If the answers to Q1 and Q2 are both "No", then my view is that God can bring about the state of affairs in question. If the answer to at least one of the questions is "Yes", then my view is that God cannot bring about the relevant state of affairs. How do we determine which states of affairs are metaphysically impossible? In some cases (e.g. a state of affairs in which 2 plus 2 equals 5) we know by consulting our intuitions. In other cases (e.g. a state of affairs in which God believes 2 plus 2 equals 5) we know by consulting either Scripture or Tradition.

Final Objection: Suppose one grants that my objections to the theories of omnipotence considered here are persuasive. Suppose one grants that my view doesn't have these problems. Even granting all this, it remains true that, on the face of it, the thesis that omnipotence should not be counted as one of the divine attributes incurs a very heavy burden of proof. Part of this burden is to show, not just that extant theories of omnipotence are problematic, but also that any theory of omnipotence someone at some point might dream up is problematic. I have failed to meet this burden of proof. So my argument is unconvincing.

Response: Forget for a moment about my own view of God's power property and imagine that the final section of this paper had been written differently. Suppose I had instead offered a new theory of omnipotence. Now imagine that someone raised an objection: By offering a new theory of omnipotence the author incurs a very heavy burden of proof. He must not only show that all extant theories have problems that his theory lacks; he must also show that no possible theory anyone could ever dream up has problems that his theory doesn't have. I think the objector here is asking for too much. I think a reasonable response would be this: One legitimate way for philosophy to proceed is by introducing new theories and comparing their costs and benefits to extant theories. It is asking way too much for a decisive proof that no better theory could ever be dreamed up. Now, why is my view of God's power property any different? Why do I have a heavy burden of proof that I wouldn't have if I had instead given a new theory of omnipotence? Here is one answer: My view is radically revisionist. Radically revisionist views have a much higher burden of proof than only slightly revisionist views. If that is the answer, then my response is this: I have tried to argue that my view is only slightly revisionist. It is not a dispute about how much power God has or whether He has all perfections. Part of my view is that there is only a slight difference between me and the traditionalist. If I am right, then my view is not radically revisionist. And therefore I do not have the very heavy burden of proof the objector places on me.

6   Conclusion

In this paper I have defended two claims. First, the most promising solution to the general problem of fit is to give up the doctrine that God is omnipotent. As we have seen, the most interesting and important attempts to preserve God's omnipotence in the face of the problem of fit are unsuccessful. Second, I argued that God's lack of omnipotence is not a significant loss for the theist. Little, if anything, is lost by abandoning the doctrine of omnipotence.

Acknowledgments

Notes

[1] I am assuming that there are impossible states of affairs. If there are not, then O1 is identical to O1.5 which I discus below. In that case my criticisms of O1.5 below apply equally to O1

[2] Some interpreters of Descartes, such as Frankfurt (1964), claim that he endorsed O1 and held that a subject is omnipotent only if that subject can create a round square and make 2 + 2 equal 5. While most commentators think this is an especially bizarre view, I think all the other theories of omnipotence on offer are no less problematic than O1.

[3] Appealing to these and other considerations, I also show that my account of God's power property is an advance over existing attempts to abandon omnipotence in the literature due to Geach (1973) and Howard Sobel (2004).

[4] To see that this reason as follows: If Socrates is essentially human, then God cannot bring about a state of affairs in which Socrates is not human. If some being other than God is essentially omniscient, then God cannot bring it about so that being believes 2 + 2 = 5. In general, if any object, O, has any essential property, P, at all, then God cannot bring it about that O does not have P. So the problem of fit, perhaps, extends not just to God's essential properties but to the essential properties of creatures.

[5] Pike (1969) and Nagasawa (2008) both hold that God has at least some of the relevant essential properties and would not accept the implications of the extended conciliatory response. Pike (1969, p. 209), for example, suggests that God is omnipotent even though He is essentially immaterial and therefore unable to swim the English Channel or ride a bicycle. Nagasawa holds that God is omnipotent even though He is unable to believe 2 + 2 = 5. It seems to me that the considerations they give for rejecting essential omnibenevolence are, for example, equally considerations for rejecting other alleged essential properties that they take God to have. Similarly, the considerations motivating them to retain the relevant essential properties are equally considerations that motivate retaining essential omnibenevolence. Such views, it seems to me, are inconsistently motivated.

[6] I do not mean to suggest that there are no other considerations that favor rejecting the doctrine that God is essentially omnibenevolent. Perhaps essential omnibenevolence is incompatible with freely choosing the good over the evil. If so, then that may be a reason to hold that God is not essentially omnibenevolent. I find this line of thought to be somewhat plausible. My only point is that, since it cannot be generalized, rejecting the doctrine of essential omnibenevolence is not an adequate response to the more specific problem of fit.

[7]Many authors who defend O2 type theories (e.g. Wierenga 1989) argue that McEar is impossible or modify O2 so that it does not judge McEar to be omnipotent. While it is very plausible that McEar is impossible for the reasons Wierenga indicates and that the relevant modifications do enable O2 to evade Plantinga's McEar objection, there are variants of the McEar example (such as Wielenberg's [2000] color impaired deities or van Inwagen's [2006] Demiourgous) that do not have the problematic features of Plantinga's McEar and, additionally, threaten even the most elaborate revisions of O2. See Oppy (2005) for additional, more formal, criticisms of these elaborate revisions.

[8]This version of the response from metaphysical impossibility is able to withstand many McEar type objections discussed in the literature on omnipotence (including the powerful cases introduced in Wielenberg [2000]). For example, Wielenberg discusses a deity that is essentially unable to bring about red states of affairs. But (Star) is a metaphysically possible state of affairs. Wielenberg's deity cannot bring it about. So O1.5 delivers the judgment that the relevant deity is not omnipotent. Yet, O1.5 still allows that God is omnipotent. For states of affairs in which God does evil such as (Torture) are not metaphysically possible.

[9]By 'S directly moves O' I mean that there exists a causal chain beginning with the event of S's willing O to move and ending with the event of O's movement with no other events in the causal chain.

[10]This is relevant to Pearce and Pruss's (2012) theory. Consider:

P&P: x is omnipotent if and only if x has perfect efficacy of will and x has perfect freedom of will.

x has perfect efficacy of will if and only if, necessarily, if x were to will p, then x would intentionally bring about p. Perfect freedom of will does not require the ability to will just anything. It does not, for example, require the ability to will the truth of necessary falsehoods.

It seems to me that P&P has the same problem as O1.5. Suppose God is just like He actually is with the exception that (i) He is essentially unable to bring about (Move) and (ii) He is essentially unable to will that (Move). Given (i), (Move) is impossible. And, perfect freedom does not require the ability to will the impossible. Thus, God has perfect freedom. Moreover, God has perfect efficacy. For it is impossible that He will (Move). And perfect efficacy only concerns possible willings. So P&P has the result that the God of the crazy theology is omnipotent.

Pearce and Pruss offer another variant of P&P according to which impossible willings are relevant to perfect efficacy. This does not have the problem O1.5 has. But consider:

(Unnecessary): Every necessary truth is false.

Now, consider two worlds at which *per impossible* God wills (Unnecessary). At one world God's will is frustrated. At the other His willing succeeds and every necessary truth becomes false. One world has only a few false necessary truths. The other has infinitely many. The larger the violation of necessary truth, the greater the distance of the world. Thus, the first world is closer to the actual world than the second world. So, given P&P, God is not omnipotent.

[11]A related objection: It is true that the inability to directly move the red ball precludes omnipotence. And this *seems* to imply that God's inability to bring about (Move) precludes His omnipotence. However, it has no such implication. For there are possible beings that can directly move the red ball. And there are no possible beings that can bring about (Move). So although the inability to directly move the red ball rules out omnipotence, the inability to bring about (Move) does not. God's omnipotence, therefore, is not precluded by His inability to bring about (Move).

I think I have the resources to respond to this objection. My view is that which impossible states of affairs are in the purview of omnipotence partly depends on which subject is being evaluated. Consider:

(McStar): McEar creates a red star.

Given McEar's essential limitations, (McStar) is metaphysically impossible. No possible subject can bring it about. Still, I think McEar's inability to bring about (McStar) precludes his omnipotence. Here is an argument: An omnipotent being must be able to create a red star. Since McEar cannot bring about (McStar), he lacks this ability. So his inability to bring about (McStar) precludes his omnipotence. Now compare this with God. God cannot

bring about (McStar). But I don't think this precludes His omnipotence. For His inability to bring about (McStar) does not imply that He he is unable to create a red star. In general, I accept the following line of thought: Suppose the ability to perform some action, A, is required by omnipotence. Suppose also that someone's inability to bring about a state of affairs, S, entails that she cannot perform A. Then her inability to bring about S precludes her omnipotence. Now, God's inability to bring about (Move) entails that He is unable to perform the act of directly moving the red ball. And since the ability to perform that act is required for omnipotence, God's inability to bring about (Move) rules out His omnipotence.

[12]Another response: My point is that being unable to directly move red objects should be sufficient to rule out a subject's omnipotence. But it is not sufficient on O1.5. So O1.5 cannot be the correct theory of omnipotence.

[13]Another point in response: It is mistaken to maintain that O1.5 does not judge the God of the mistaken theology to be omnipotent. Consider parallel reasoning from an atheist's perspective. Suppose God (necessarily) fails to exist. What should the atheist say about O1.5 and God's omnipotence? Here is one thing she could say: She could say that O1.5 doesn't deliver the judgment that God is omnipotent. For traditional theism entails a necessarily false thesis. And any theology that entails a necessary falsehood is mistaken. The theology simply has the metaphysics wrong.

Such reasoning would be mistaken. O1.5 does not fail to deliver a judgment about whether God is omnipotent merely because theism has the metaphysics wrong. O1.5 takes information about what is metaphysically possible as input and delivers judgments about who is omnipotent as output. Whether theism or atheism is true, O1.5 judges God to be omnipotent. The atheist should say this to the theist: Your theology is wrong. Your metaphysics is mistaken. But O1.5 classifies God, understood according to your theology, as omnipotent.

Now go back to the mistaken theology. We should say about the imagined proponent of the mistaken theology what the atheist should say about us. Your theology is wrong. Your metaphysics is mistaken. But O1.5 classifies God, understood according to your theology, as omnipotent. The fact that a theology is mistaken does not imply that O1.5 fails to deliver a judgment about whether God, as understood by that theology, is omnipotent.

[14]Another version of this objection: A devoted Leibnizian could easily bite the bullet here. She already thinks that there is only one world, the actual world, and that God couldn't have done anything other than what He in fact did. So if He didn't directly move the red ball to my office, then there is no world at which he does so. And doing so is not required for omnipotence. So she would have no problem allowing that the God of the crazy theology is omnipotent.

I do not think this objection is successful. Consider the most prominent contemporary form of Leibnizianism (Kraay 2011). Kraay holds that there is exactly one possible world-the Theistic Multiverse (TM). TM is the best possible world and consists of all and only universes which are worth creating and sustaining. A universe, for Kraay, is a spatiotemporally interrelated, causally closed aggregate. Now, although Kraay thinks that TM is the only possible world, he thinks we can still preserve modal talk. In particular, he proposes that modal talk be analyzed in terms of universes rather than worlds. So a statement like 'God could have directly moved the red ball to my office' should be analyzed as 'There is a universe in TM at which God directly moves the red ball to my (counterpart's) office.' So the idea is to preserve our modal talk even though ultimately there is only one possible world. Now, this is relevant to the present discussion for the following reason: If God is essentially unable to directly move red objects, then there is no universe in TM at which God directly moves the red ball to my (counterpart's) office. And so our modal talk cannot, in this case, be preserved. So it seems to me that a contemporary Leibnizian like Kraay would be just as unhappy about this result as a non-Leibnizian.

[15]Someone might reasonably wonder: I have rejected the claim that an omnipotent being needs to be able to bring about every impossible state of affairs. So how am I to decide which impossible states of affairs are in the purview of omnipotence and which are not?

My answer is that I do not decide by appealing to some principle that tells me which impossible states of affairs are required and which are not. I instead decide by appealing to intuitions about specific cases. This is the the same method commonly used to decide which possible states of affairs are in the purview of omnipotence. So, for example, we have the

intuition that McEar must be able to bring about a state of affairs in which a comet hits the earth in order to count as omnipotent. Similarly, I have the intuition that TIB must be able to get something done outside of the box without sending telepathic instructions to his minions to count as omnipotent. So I decide by using intuition. And that is the standard way to decide.

Now, one might reasonably be disappointed that I haven't given some elegant and easy to apply principle that tells us which states of affairs (possible or impossible) are in the purview of omnipotence and which are not. But to give such a principle would be to give a theory of omnipotence. And my view is that omnipotence is a mess and that there is no successful theory to be given. So my view predicts that no such principle exists.

[16]Or, alternatively, there are many different intuitive notions marked by 'power' and 'ability'. And Wielenberg is free to use 'power' to talk about one of these and 'ability' to talk about another. But Wielenberg has not said enough for us to get a clear grasp of which of these intuitive notions he means by which term and whether such intuitive notions really deliver the result he wants.

[17]Consider a very strong person who is essentially in a coma. She has great physical strength. But she has no lifting ability. Or consider two beings: Hecrcules1 and Hercules2. Hercules1 is very physically strong. Hercules2 is equally physically strong but also essentially afraid of picking up stones that weigh exactly ten pounds and for this reason unable to do so. It is plausible that Hercules1 and Hercules2 are equally physically strong but differ in lifting ability.

[18]Feldman's preferred response to most problems of fit, however, is the response from metaphysical impossibility. Aquinas is plausibly interpreted as offering a similar solution to this problem (in *Summa theologiae*, First Part, Question 7, Article 2).

[19]Pearce (2011) uses this assumption to criticize the O3 variant of the response from power but not possibility. Van Inwagen (1983) endorses the assumption. Lewis (1981), when criticizing van Inwagen, does not dispute the assumption. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on abilities takes the assumption for granted, discusses in detail the sense in which it is true, and does not consider rejecting it.

[20]The other example I have heard is this: God could give me the power to torture an innocent for eternity. But He would only give me that power if He knew I would not exercise it. So there is no world at which I exercise the relevant power. And therefore there are necessarily unexercised powers.

[21]As I discuss in an earlier footnote, my own view is that considerations involving free will motivate the view that God is not essentially omnibenevolent. I find additional motivation for the view that some of God's other attributes, such as omniscience, are not essential since such a view makes the Incarnation much easier to accommodate. However, in the body of the paper I am trying to think these issues through on behalf of a theist that is more traditionalist than I am.

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