Omnipotence

According to orthodox monotheism, our universe was created by a very powerful being. On one version of this view, the powerful being creates time but is not itself in time. On a second version of this view, the powerful being creates time, and, *in consequence*, is itself in time. On a third version of this view, the powerful being does not create time but is nonetheless itself in time. We can finesse worries about the difference which these variations might make to the description of the powers of the being in question by focusing on the powers that the being possesses at different stages in the causal order of the world of which our universe is a part. (Of course, this suggestion immediately prompts questions about the relationship between temporal order and causal order; however, we don't need to consider these questions here.)

Consider the powers of the being at a stage in the causal order that is prior to the creation of our universe. According to orthodox monotheism, the powerful being chooses to make a universe—and if it had not made this choice, then our universe would not have come into existence. Moreover, according to orthodox monotheism, the choice that the powerful being makes is free, and the freedom in question is libertarian: in the very circumstances in which the choice is made, the powerful being could have made a different choice.

What different choices could the powerful being have made? Well, according to orthodox monotheism, every feature of the universe is either such that the very powerful being chose to make the universe that way, or else such that the very powerful being chose to allow that feature of the universe to be determined as the outcome of an objectively chancy process (e.g. the free choices of free agents, where the freedom in question is libertarian). For choices about those parts of the causal order in the universe which are not downstream from any objectively chancy processes, then the only limitations which the powerful being has are those which are logically required by the nature of the powerful being: it can make any logically possible initial segment of a universe whose creation is not logically inconsistent with the essential properties of the powerful being. However, for choices about those parts of the causal order in the universe that are downstream from objectively chancy processes, the powerful being is limited by its own essential properties and by the outcomes of the causally prior objectively chancy processes.

According to orthodox monotheism, the powerful being is both all-knowing and perfectly good. If—as many suppose—the powerful being is essentially perfectly good, then it seems plausible to hold that this imposes a severe constraint on the power of the powerful being: it cannot do anything that is logically ruled out by perfect goodness. This constraint might be very severe indeed: it might be, for instance, that there is a unique best initial segment of a universe, and that the perfect goodness of the powerful being requires that it bring about this initial segment of a universe if it brings about any initial segment of a universe. (If the perfect goodness of the powerful being also required that it bring about this initial segment rather than refrain from entering into the business of

universe building, then it seems that we should have to take back the claim that the powerful being freely chose to make the universe, at least on the assumption that freedom is given a libertarian analysis.) Even if there isn't a unique best initial segment of a universe, it might still be that the powerful being can only bring about a very limited range of initial universe segments compared to other possible beings. (Suppose, for example, that the powerful being can make lesser free beings that have the capacity to make universes. It might well be that one of these lesser beings could make a much greater range of initial universe segments than the powerful being can make.)

A range of views is possible about the knowledge of the powerful being. The most attractive view—it seems to me—is to suppose that the knowledge of the powerful being is limited both by logic and by position in the causal order: given that the powerful being is causally upstream from an objectively chancy part of the causal order, then the powerful being does not and cannot have full knowledge of that part of the causal order. Moreover, the powerful being cannot have knowledge that is forbidden by the essential nature of the powerful being: perhaps, for example, there is knowledge that a perfectly good being cannot have, but that a being that is not perfectly good can have. Even if there are these limitations on the knowledge of the powerful being, it is not at all clear that these limitations lead to any further restrictions on the power of that being. First, there might not be anything that is ruled out by these limitations. Second, even if there are things ruled out by these limitations, those things might have no impact on the powers of the powerful being. Rather than pursue these considerations further, I shall simply set considerations about the extent of the knowledge of the powerful being to one side.

To summarise the discussion to this point, then: we can divide the discussion of the powers of the powerful being who is supposed to have created the universe into two parts. First, when it comes to the "initial segment" of the universe—i.e. that "part" of the universe that is causally prior to any objectively chancy processes—the powerful being is limited only by its own essential properties and the laws of logic: it can make any initial segment of a universe other that those whose creation is logically ruled out by the essential properties of the being in question or by the laws of logic alone. If we suppose that the "initial segment" of the universe has a sequential causal structure, then we might think that there is a further constraint: at any point in the causal structure, the powerful being is limited by the earlier parts of the causal structure. However, on the plausible assumption that the powerful being has total control of the universe until the occurrence of the first objectively chancy process, there is no reason to think that the powerful being could want to revise its plan somewhere between the beginning of the universe and the point at which the first objectively chancy process occurs. (Remember: we're taking it for granted that the powerful being is vastly knowledgeable.) Given that the powerful being is essentially vastly knowledgeable, there is no possible world in which it "deviates" from its initial plan prior to the occurrence of the first objectively chancy process.

Second, when we consider a point that is downstream in the causal order from one or more objectively chancy processes, there are more limitations on what the powerful being can do. It is still limited by its own essential nature. It is still limited by logic. It is also limited by the fact that it is at a certain point in the causal order: it cannot "undo" the

prior causal order. And it is limited in another way by the causal order to the point at which it is now "located": given the constraints imposed by the essential nature of our powerful being, there may be many things that a different powerful being could do that our powerful being is unable to do *given* the causal history of the universe to that point. To take a contentious example: it might be that there are some causal histories that could develop under the governance of our powerful being that it is unable to allow to lapse into non-existence (given the essential nature of that powerful being), even though a different powerful being (with a different essential nature) might be able to allow a universe with a suitably similar history to lapse into non-existence.

On the view just sketched, there are three main features of the powers of the powerful being under discussion. First, it is directly responsible for the existence of the universe, and for many of the features that the universe possesses: it was at one time free to choose not to create the universe; and, at least at earlier times, it was free to make it the case that the universe possess features quite different from those that it actually possesses. Second, it is "indirectly" responsible for all of the other features that the universe possesses, in the sense that those features are possessed by the universe only because the powerful being permitted those features to arise as the result of objectively chancy processes. (This is not to say that the powerful being chose these features, or that it approves of them; rather, the point is just that it played a crucial causal role in the present possession of these features by the universe.) Third, despite the second of the points just noted, there remains a sense in which the powerful being retains "ultimate authority" over the universe: there can be nothing that happens in the universe that is logically inconsistent with the permission of the occurrence of that thing by the powerful being. Within the limits of the constraints imposed by its own nature and the prior causal history of the universe, the powerful being has "power of veto" over everything that happens. If, for example, it is consistent with the essential nature of the powerful being to allow the existence of the universe to lapse if the objectively chancy processes yield sufficiently bad results, then the powerful being has the power to allow the universe to pass out of existence in those circumstances.

Of course, this sketch leaves many questions unanswered. For example, it might be wondered whether the powerful being has the ability to give up its "power of veto" over the events that occur in the universe (to the extent that it has this power). It seems to me that it is plausible to suppose that it is not compatible with the essential nature of the powerful being—as that being is standardly conceived in orthodox monotheism—to allow that the powerful being does have power to give up this kind of "power of veto". Even if this matter is controversial, it will probably do no harm to add this supposition as a simplifying assumption for the purposes of the present discussion.

However, one thing that does plausibly emerge from the above discussion is that there are many limitations on the power of the powerful being under discussion. There are many things that it cannot do that it is at least possible for other creatures to do. There are many states of affairs that it cannot directly bring about that it is at least possible for other creatures to directly bring about. There are many indefinitely repeatable states of affairs that it cannot directly bring about that it is at least possible for other creatures to directly bring about. And so forth. Since standard philosophical accounts of omnipotence

typically deny one or more of these consequences of the above account, it seems to me that the above account presents a challenge for extant accounts of omnipotence. Either the above account of the powers of the powerful being is an account of what it is to be omnipotent, or else—contrary to the received view—it isn't correct to claim that the powerful being is omnipotent.

In this paper, I propose to examine some recent accounts of omnipotence, with a view to answering the question whether we should take the above account of the powers of our powerful being to be an account of omnipotence. In particular, I shall be interested in the question whether one can reasonably hold that it is possible for there to be creatures that have powers that vastly exceed those of an omnipotent being. (More exactly, if we suppose that there is actually a powerful being of the kind described, and if we hold that it is omnipotent, then there are other possible worlds in which there are different beings that have vastly greater powers than an omnipotent being.) However, I shall also be interested in independent criticism of extant accounts of omnipotence—in particular those provided by Hoffman and Rosenkrantz, and by Flint and Freddoso—and in the question whether these accounts can be improved upon.

I shall begin by criticising the two most promising extant accounts of omnipotence (those adverted to at the end of the preceding paragraph). After providing various reasons for finding these accounts unsatisfactory, I shall go on to make some suggestions about how the notion of omnipotence should be understood. Finally, I shall provide some reasons for thinking that the being whose powers were outlined in the initial part of this paper is not plausibly claimed to be omnipotent.

I

Joshua Hoffman and Gary Rosenkrantz—Rosenkrantz and Hoffman (1980), Hoffman and Rosenkrantz (1988), Hoffman and Rosenkrantz (2002b)—provide the following analysis of omnipotence. (I have preserved their own—perhaps sometimes unfortunate—formulations and formalism, except for the introduction of the term "suitable" as a handy label for a sub-class of states of affairs that they define but do not name):

Def[n]: x is <u>omnipotent at t</u> **iff** for all suitable states of affairs that s, if it is possible for some agent to bring it about that s, then at t x has it within its power to bring it about that s.

Def[n]: A state of affairs that s is <u>suitable</u> **iff** it satisfies the following condition: either (1) the state of affairs that s is unrestrictedly repeatable, and of the form 'in n minutes, p', and if the state of affairs that p is a complex state of affairs, then each of the parts of the state of affairs that p is unrestrictedly repeatable and possibly brought about by someone; or (2) the state of affairs that s is of the form 'q forever after', where the state of affairs that q is a state of affairs that satisfies (1).

Def[n]: A state of affairs that s is <u>unrestrictedly repeatable</u> **iff** the state of affairs that s is such that: $\forall n \exists t_1 \ldots \exists t_n$ (($t_1 < \ldots < t_n$ are periods of time which are sufficient intervals for the

state of affairs that s, and the state of affairs that s obtains at t_1, and the state of affairs that s does not obtain at t_2, and the state of affairs that s obtains at t_3, and …, and the state of affairs that s obtains at t_n) $\leftrightarrow$ n is odd)

Def^n: A period of time t is a <u>sufficient interval</u> for a state of affairs that s **iff** the state of affairs that s is such that it is possible that s obtains throughout a time period which has the duration of t.

Claim: Necessarily, for any state of affairs that s, if an agent a brings it about that s, then either s is an unrestrictedly repeatable state of affairs that it is possible for some agent to bring about, or else a brings it about that s by bringing it about that q, where the state of affairs that q is an unrestrictedly repeatable state of affairs that it is possible for some agent to bring about.

There are various kinds of criticisms that can be made of this account of omnipotence. On the one hand, there are technical questions to be raised concerning the formulation and interpretation of the account. On the other hand, there are serious questions to be raised about the adequacy of the account. These questions concern both the conformity of the account to pre-theoretic intuitions concerning the abilities of an omnipotent being, and the choice of primitive concepts that are used in the account. Owing to limitations of space, we shall pursue only some of the questions that might be asked under these various headings.

1. The definition of suitability relies on the notion of a *part* of a state of affairs. Here is how Rosenkrantz and Hoffman explain this notion:

> Intuitively, a complex state of affairs is any state of affairs which is either constructible out of other states of affairs by use of the logical apparatus of first-order quantification theory enriched with whatever modalities one chooses to employ, or else analysable into states of affairs which are so constructible. The components of a complex state of affairs, s, are those states of affairs out of which s, or s's analysis, is constructible. For example, the state of affairs, Oscar is tall and strong, is either identical with, or analysable into, the following conjunctive state of affairs: Oscar is tall & Oscar is strong. Similarly, the state of affairs, Oscar is not tall, is either identical with, or analysable into, the state of affairs, Oscar exists & ~ (Oscar is tall).

There are many questions not answered by this passage. However, it is clear that Rosenkrantz and Hoffman commit themselves to both conjunctive states of affairs and to negative states of affairs. Hence, it seems a reasonable conjecture that they will allow disjunctive states of affairs. But consider the following disjunctive state of affairs: *in ten minutes, either there is just one F but (after two more minutes) there is never again just one F, or there are just two Fs but (after two more minutes) there are never again just two Fs, or there are just three Fs, but (after two more minutes) there are never again just three Fs, or … or (after two more minutes) there are just n Fs but there are never again just n Fs, or … .* Clearly, this state of affairs is unrestrictedly repeatable. (Suppose that an

agent brings it about that there is one F, and then no Fs, and then two Fs, and then no Fs, and then three Fs, and then no Fs, etc, with appropriate time intervals for the existence and non-existence of Fs. Then the state of affairs in question will be unrestrictedly repeated.) Moreover, this state of affairs is not suitable—because it is complex and yet has parts that are not unrestrictedly repeatable—and it is not a state of affairs that can be brought about by an agent's bringing about of some other unrestrictedly repeatable state of affairs. So this is a counter-example to the analysis of Rosenkrantz and Hoffman: there are states of affairs which it should be possible for omnipotent beings to bring about but which this analysis does not require omnipotent beings to have the power to bring about.

Once the trick is seen, it will be noted that there are simpler examples that can be used to make the same kind of point. For instance, consider the following state of affairs: *in ten minutes, either Parmenides lectures and Plato sleeps forever after, or Plotinus lectures and Aristotle sleeps forever after*. This state of affairs is not suitable—because it is complex and yet has parts that are not unrestrictedly repeatable—and it is not a state of affairs that can be brought about by an agent's bringing about of an unrestrictedly repeatable state of affairs. So, even though this state of affairs is plainly a state of affairs that an omnipotent being ought to be able to bring about, the analysis of Rosenkrantz and Hoffman does not require that an omnipotent being be able to bring it about. However, while these examples do point to *a* flaw in the analysis of Rosenkrantz and Hoffman, it is plausible to suggest that this puncture can be easily patched.

Perhaps what we need is a *revised definition of suitability*. First, a state of affairs s is *suitable* iff it is either of the form *in n minutes, p* or the form in *n minutes p forever after,* where p is *happy*. Second, a state of affairs is *happy* iff it satisfies the following recursive definition: (i) all unrestrictedly repeatable atomic states are happy; (ii) all state of affairs of the form 'in n minutes, p' where p is happy are themselves happy; (iii) all states of affairs of the form 'p forever after' where p is happy are themselves happy; (iv) all states of affairs all of whose parts are happy are themselves happy. With this revised definition of suitability, it seems that we can handle even the more complex case mentioned initially—for, under this revised definition, both problematic states of affairs now count as suitable.

Perhaps there is a different way of effecting a patch. Consider the following state of affairs (suggested by the discussion in the previous paragraph): *in ten minutes, there will be one F for ten minutes, and then no Fs for ten minutes, and then two Fs for ten minutes, and then no Fs for ten minutes, and then three Fs for ten minutes, and then no Fs for ten minutes, and then …, and then n Fs for ten minutes, and then no Fs for ten minutes, and then … .* One way in which this state of affairs could be brought about is via the bringing about of many states of affairs, each of which satisfies the conditions for suitability: in ten minutes, there will be one F for ten minutes; in twenty minutes, there will be no Fs for ten minutes; in thirty minutes, there will be two Fs for ten minutes; in forty minutes, there will be no Fs for ten minutes; etc. So the suggestion is that the claim that Rosenkrantz and Hoffman make should be replaced by the following **claim**: *Necessarily, for any state of affairs that s, if an agent a brings it about that s, then either s is a suitable state of affairs that it is possible for some agent to bring about, or else a brings it about that s by*

bringing it about that the states of affairs that q_1, that q_2, …, that q_n, …, obtain, where each of the states of affairs that q_i is a suitable state of affairs that it is possible for some agent to bring about. Given this claim, we can further restrict the class of states of affairs that is quantified over in the definition of omnipotence.

2. Both the revised and unrevised versions of the Rosenkrantz and Hoffman account of omnipotence depend upon numerous controversial metaphysical assumptions. The account is carefully crafted to ensure that an omnipotent being is not required to be able to bring about the past—and so those who think that it is possible to bring about the past will have reason to be dissatisfied with it. Moreover—and this is the point upon which we shall now focus—the means whereby it is ensured that an omnipotent being is not required to be able to bring about the past has consequences for other controversial metaphysical claims. Consider, for example, a state of affairs in which Wittgenstein hits Russell with a poker. While Wittgenstein and Russell were alive, this is a state of affairs that an omnipotent being ought to have been able to engineer. Moreover, while they were alive, it seems that this state of affairs should have qualified as *suitable*: after all, Wittgenstein could hit Russell with a poker over and over again. However, now that Wittgenstein and Russell are dead, it might—for all that we know—be metaphysically impossible for this state of affairs ever to be realised again. Of course, an omnipotent being could make perfect replicas of Wittgenstein and Russell, and have the former hit the latter with a poker—but that would not be a state of affairs in which *Wittgenstein* hits *Russell* with a poker. And, in that case, it should not follow that a being fails to be omnipotent because it cannot bring about the state of affairs in which Wittgenstein hits Russell with a poker—even though this *is* a consequence of the Rosenkrantz and Hoffman analysis of omnipotence!

The example that I have chosen is controversial. If you think that Wittgenstein and Russell are really immortal immaterial souls who could be reincarnated in appropriate bodies, then you will think that the example fails. But there was nothing in the form of the example that relied upon the choice of *people* as the objects in question. Consider, instead, a state of affairs in which the Colossus of Rhodes is polished with a chamois. There was a time when someone could have done this. But, now that the Colossus of Rhodes has been utterly destroyed, not even an omnipotent being can bring it about that the Colossus of Rhodes is polished with a chamois unless it is metaphysically possible for the Colossus of Rhodes to be put back together again. Yet whether this is possible arguably depends upon the nature of the microphysical constitution of the universe: if there is no microphysical level at which all of the constituents of the Colossus of Rhodes have been preserved, then there is at least some *prima facie* plausibility to the claim that an omnipotent being could do no more than make a replica of the Colossus of Rhodes. Moreover, even if you think that this example also fails, you should surely have qualms about tying the analysis of omnipotence to plainly controversial metaphysical views about the identity of objects over time.

3. Controversial metaphysics enters into the analysis of Rosenkrantz and Hoffman in other more serious ways. Consider, for example, the state of affairs of *annihilating everything*; or, if you think that that isn't a logically possible state of affairs, consider

instead the state of affairs of *annihilating the spatiotemporal manifold and all its contents*. An omnipotent being should surely be able to bring time to an end. But it is not obvious that there is any way of tweaking the analysis that is offered by Rosenkrantz and Hoffman in order to accommodate this point. Annihilating everything is not unrestrictedly repeatable; and nor is it at all obvious how the state of affairs of there being nothing at all could be brought about by means of the bringing about of a state of affairs that is unrestrictedly repeatable.

Perhaps it might be said that the state of affairs of there being nothing at all—or the state of affairs in which there is no time—is a state of affairs in which there is nothing *forever after*. However, even if this claim were allowed to stand, it would not save the analysis offered by Rosenkrantz and Hoffman, since it is not the case that there being nothing forever after—or there being no time forever after—is ultimately analysable in terms of an unrestrictedly repeatable state of affairs. Even on the amended account of suitability that we proposed above, it remains the case that any suitable state of affairs must be composed of, or analysed in terms of, unrestrictedly repeatable *atomic* states of affairs. At the very least, it is hard to see how bringing time to an end could be analysed in terms of the performance of some action that could be repeated at indefinitely many future times, or the bringing about of some state of affairs that could obtain at indefinitely many future times.

4. The definition of unrestricted repeatability is stronger than required. As formulated by Rosenkrantz and Hoffman, it requires the assumption that either it is possible for time to have no beginning, or else it is possible for time to have no end, so that it is possible for time to be infinite. Using the rather dubious formalism upon which Rosenkrantz and Hoffman rely, this amounts to the assumption that: $\exists w \forall n \, \exists t_1 \ldots \exists t_n \ldots [(t_1 < \ldots < t_n \ldots$ are periods of time which are sufficient intervals for the state of affairs that s, and the state of affairs that s obtains at t_1, and the state of affairs that s does not obtain at t_2, and the state of affairs that s obtains at t_3, and …, and the state of affairs that s obtains at t_n) $\leftrightarrow$ n is odd]. But it would suffice for the definition merely to have: $\forall n \exists w \, \exists t_1 \ldots \exists t_n \, [(t_1 < \ldots < t_n$ are periods of time which are sufficient intervals for the state of affairs that s, and the state of affairs that s obtains at t_1, and the state of affairs that s does not obtain at t_2, and the state of affairs that s obtains at t_3, and …, and the state of affairs that s obtains at t_n) $\leftrightarrow$ n is odd]. On the Rosenkrantz and Hoffman formulation, opponents of completed infinities are unable to accept their analysis of omnipotence; on the proposed revision, this is not the case.

5. The account that Rosenkrantz and Hoffman offer of the parts of complex states of affairs allows that the parts of an analysis of a state of affairs are parts of that state of affairs. This allowance does real work for Rosenkrantz and Hoffman in their argument for the conclusion that the state of affairs in which Plato freely decides to write a dialogue is not suitable. On their account, this state of affairs can be analysed as a conjunction of three states of affairs: (1) Plato's deciding to write a dialogue; (2) there being no antecedent sufficient causal condition of Plato's deciding to write a dialogue; and (3) there being no concurrent sufficient causal condition of Plato's deciding to write a

dialogue. However, on their account, (2) is a state of affairs that is not possibly brought about by anyone, since it is a state of affairs entirely about the past.

There are various reasons for being worried about Rosenkrantz's and Hoffman's account of Plato's freely deciding to write a dialogue.

First, the analysis assumes a controversial libertarian account of freedom. If compatibilists have the correct view of freedom, then the Rosenkrantz and Hoffman analysis of omnipotence collapses immediately.

Second, if the standards for analysis are as liberal as those indicated in the example, then there are other cases that provide food for thought. Consider, for example, the bringing into existence of an *original* novel, or musical composition, or the like. This seems like something that an omnipotent being ought to be able to do, and yet any analysis here will plausibly involve a state of affairs that is entirely about the past: either the bringing into existence of an original novel requires the bringing into existence of a token of a type of which no tokens had existed previously, or it requires the bringing into existence of a token by a process which is suitably independent of the prior existence of other tokens of this type. So, if Rosenkrantz and Hoffman have a good argument for not requiring an omnipotent being to be able to bring about Plato's freely deciding to write a novel, then they also have a good argument for not requiring an omnipotent being to be able to compose a novel, or a piece of music, or the like. But that's not a good result: surely an omnipotent being ought to be able to bring original novels and pieces of music into existence!

Perhaps it might be said that the **claim** that Rosenkrantz and Hoffman endorse offers them an avenue of reply: an omnipotent being could bring an original novel into existence *by* bringing a novel token into existence in circumstances in which there has not previously existed a token of the type to which that novel belongs. But, if this is a good reply here, then surely we can say the same thing about Plato's freely deciding to write a dialogue: an omnipotent being could bring this about *by* bringing it about that Plato decides to write a dialogue in circumstances in which there are no prior or concurrent sufficient causal conditions for Plato's writing a dialogue. If Plato is rational, then one way of getting him to decide to write a dialogue is by giving him overwhelmingly good reasons to do so (perhaps by making him an offer that no reasonable person refuses!). It seems that there are grounds for fearing that there is some tension between the provision concerning parts in the definition of suitability, and the claim about the bringing about of non-suitable states of affairs by means of the bringing about of suitable states of affairs. Or, at the very least, there are grounds for thinking that the account of Rosenkrantz and Hoffman needs to be supplemented with a precise account of both the notion of an *analysis* of a state of affairs, and the notion of one state of affairs being brought about *by* the bringing about of another state of affairs. Without this supplementation, even absent any other problems with their analysis of omnipotence, it is not possible to judge that their analysis is successful.

Third, given that we have adopted a libertarian conception of freedom, it is unclear why we should think that the problem with bringing it about, that there are no antecedent sufficient causal condition of Plato's deciding to write a dialogue, is that this requires us to bring about the past. Suppose that I want to bring it about that, tomorrow, Plato freely decides to write a dialogue. Surely, given my omnipotence, I can bring it about that the decisions that Plato makes tomorrow are free decisions, i.e. surely I can make it the case that there are no antecedent or concurrent sufficient causal conditions for the decisions that Plato makes tomorrow. Moreover, as already indicated, it seems that, consistent with this provision, I could also bring it about that tomorrow, Plato freely decides to write a dialogue. However, what I cannot do is to establish some antecedent or concurrent sufficient condition for Plato's deciding to write a dialogue tomorrow while also ensuring that there are no antecedent or concurrent sufficient conditions for Plato's deciding to write a dialogue tomorrow. If bringing about a state of affairs requires the establishment of an antecedent or concurrent sufficient condition for the occurrence of that state of affairs, then, on the libertarian conception of freedom, no one—other than Plato!—can bring it about that Plato freely decides to write a dialogue.

The fact identified towards the end of the last paragraph—viz. that Rosenkrantz and Hoffman appear to have misidentified the difficulty that appears to arise in the case of the bringing about of free decisions—suggests a *fourth* criticism of their argument in connection with free decision. We might agree with their analysis of free action, and hence suppose that Plato freely decides to write a dialogue just in case conditions (1), (2) and (3) are satisfied. But it doesn't follow from this agreement that, just because each of conditions (1), (2) and (3) is separately such that it can be brought about by someone, it is possible for someone to jointly bring about (1), (2) and (3). Now, perhaps it might be objected that this observation points to no difficulty for the analysis, since it is part of the definition of omnipotence that an omnipotent being is only required to be able to bring about suitable states of affairs that it is possible for someone to bring about. But, alas, it seems that there *is* someone—namely, Plato—who can bring it about that Plato freely decides to write a dialogue tomorrow. So, even with the amendments that I have proposed to the accounts of suitability, unrestricted repeatability, and the key claim, it seems that the Rosenkrantz and Hoffman account of omnipotence is unsatisfactory.

Fifth, it seems worth noting that it is not at all clear that the Rosenkrantz and Hoffman analysis really does rule that (2) is not an unrestrictedly repeatable condition that can be brought about by someone, because it is actually not at all clear—despite their explicit claim to the contrary—that (2) is entirely about the past. They claim that their analysis can handle the apparent counterexample that an omnipotent agent cannot bring it about that *a raindrop fell at t (where t is a past time)* because a raindrops falling at t is not an unrestrictedly repeatable event. And they claim that their analysis can handle the apparent counter example that an omnipotent agent cannot bring it about that *a raindrop fell* because it is logically impossible for any agent to bring about the past. However, an agent can bring it about that it is true in ten minutes time that a raindrop fell by bringing it about that a raindrop falls in five minutes time. Similarly, it seems that an agent can bring it about that it is true in ten minutes time that there are no antecedent or concurrent sufficient causal conditions for the decisions that an agent makes at that time—so there is

good reason to think that there is nothing in the analysis provided by Rosenkrantz and Hoffman that rules out the bringing about of condition (2). At t, I cannot bring it about that a raindrop fell prior to t, but that does not mean that I cannot bring it about that it is true at some later time t' that *a raindrop fell* (at some time between t and t'). While their analysis does rule out "bringing about the past" in the sense of "bringing about a state of affairs prior to the time at which one is acting" it does not rule out "bringing about the past" in the sense of "bringing about conditions prior to some other (more distantly future) state of affairs that one brings about".

6. Collecting together the various criticisms that have been made thus far, it seems to me that we can conclude that *unrestricted repeatability* is not well suited to playing a central role in the analysis of omnipotence. *First*, that a certain state of affairs is unrestrictedly repeatable at some moments in the history of the universe does not guarantee that that state of affairs is unrestrictedly repeatable at other moments in the history of the universe. (This is the lesson of the example about Russell and Wittgenstein, and the example about the Colossus of Rhodes.) *Second*, that a certain state of affairs is unrestrictedly repeatable at some moments in the history of the universe does not guarantee that there is more than one agent for whom it is logically possible to bring about that state of affairs. (This is the lesson of examples concerning the free choices of free agents. While *I* can bring it about that I freely choose strawberry over chocolate again and again and again—simply by so choosing—libertarian analyses of freedom rule that it is logically impossible for anyone else to have this ability.) *Third*, there are states of affairs that an omnipotent being ought to be able to bring about that seem likely to resist any analysis in terms of unrestricted repeatability: e.g. bringing time to an end, bringing the universe to an end, bringing the existence of the omnipotent being to an end, bringing the omnipotence of the omnipotent being to an end, etc. (Of course, some of these cases are controversial. But I take it that it would not be easy to dismiss *all* of them.) Even if the technical bugs in the analysis offered by Rosenkrantz and Hoffman can be eliminated, there is thus very good reason to suppose that the result will not be a satisfactory account of omnipotence.

II

Thomas Flint and Alfred Freddoso—Flint and Freddoso (1983)—offer the following analysis of omnipotence:

Def^n: S is <u>omnipotent</u> at t in W **iff** for any state of affairs p and world type for S, Ls, such that p is not a member of Ls, if there is a world W* such that: (1) Ls is true in both W and W*; and (ii) W* shares the same history with W at t; and (3) at t in W* someone actualises p; then S has the power at t in W to actualise p.

Def^n: A <u>counterfactual of freedom</u> is a proposition of the form: if individual essence P were instantiated in circumstances C at time t and its instantiation were left free with respect to action A, then the instantiation of P would freely do A.

Def^n: A <u>world-type</u> is a consistent set of propositions such that exactly one of each counterfactual of freedom and its negation are the members of the set.

Def^n: A <u>true world-type</u> is a world-type all of whose members are true.

Def^n: A <u>world-type for S</u> is a subset of a true world-type consisting of counterfactuals of freedom or their negations about agents other than S.

Def^n: An <u>immediate</u> state of affairs is a state of affairs whose obtaining at time t does not depend on what states of affairs obtained or will obtain at times other than t.

Def^n: The <u>sub-moment</u> of t is the set of all immediate states of affairs that obtain at t.

Def^n: Worlds W and W* <u>share the same history at t</u> iff they share the same sub-moments in exactly the same order for every time prior to t.

Once again, there are various kinds of criticisms that can be made of this analysis of omnipotence; once again, I do not claim that I shall address all of these kinds of criticisms in what follows.

1. As other commentators have noted, the Flint and Freddoso analysis is controversial not merely because it assumes a libertarian analysis of freedom but, in particular, because it assumes that there are true counterfactuals of freedom concerning both actual and merely possible agents. Furthermore, the Flint and Freddoso analysis assumes that time should be given a tensed (three-dimensionalist) analysis, and that time travel into the past is impossible. Given the controversial nature of all of these claims, it is far from clear that it is desirable for an analysis of omnipotence to be committed to them. Moreover, it is not at all clear that the Flint and Freddoso analysis can be recast to fit the metaphysical predilections of those who disagree with them on some or all of these controversial matters. (This point has added significance because Flint and Freddoso claim that it is a virtue of their approach that it provides a "secular" analysis of omnipotence, i.e. an analysis that is subject only those "non-theological" constraints that emerge from careful reflection about powers and the relationships that hold between powers and properties. At the very least, it is worth asking whether the particular package of controversial metaphysical views upon which Flint and Freddoso rely is really properly thought of as "non-theological" or "secular". I doubt, for instance, that there are very many non-theists who are attracted to this particular collection of views.)

2. Some commentators have proposed a controversial alleged counter-example to the analysis of Flint and Freddoso that deserves attention. Suppose that we agree that an agent can actualise conjunctive states of affairs of the form "A&B" and "A while B" by actualising the state of affairs A in circumstances in which the state of affairs B obtains. Then, for example, consider a situation in which S is the only agent who has any role in actualising the state of affairs that A. Given our assumption, S can actualise the conjunctive state of affairs: *A and no agent other than S plays any role in actualising A*, and S can also actualise the conjunctive state of affairs: *A and no omnipotent agent plays any role in actualising A*. But surely no omnipotent agent can actualise either of these states of affairs, contrary to the demands of the Flint and Freddoso analysis. (See

Gellmann (1989) and Hoffman and Rosenkrantz (2002) for other examples of this kind of objection to the analysis of Flint and Freddoso.)

It is not obvious that this kind of counter-example is fatal, at least when taken in isolation. In particular, it seems that it is open to Flint and Freddoso to insist that, in order to actualise a conjunctive state of affairs, an agent must actualise each of the conjuncts of that state of affairs. If one actualises the state of affairs that A in circumstances in which B obtains, then the conjunctive state of affairs A&B certainly comes to obtain—but it is not true that one actualised the conjunctive state of affairs, since the obtaining of B was not in any sense something that was under your control. Of course, this suggestion adds to the theoretical debt of the Flint and Freddoso account—since we now require a substantive explanation of the notion of a conjunctive state of affairs, in order to accommodate cases like Gellmann's "Someone doing R to himself autonomously"—but, at the very least, the possibility that such an account might be constructed ought not to be ruled out prior to the conduct of a fair investigation of the proposal.

3. Flint and Freddoso assume that, if Jones is in circumstances C at t, then Jones can bring it about that *if Jones were in C at t, he would freely decide at t to let out the dog*, by freely deciding to let out the dog. Now, consider the conjunctive state of affairs: *the cat comes in and if Jones were in C at t, he would freely decide at t to let out the dog*. We can easily imagine circumstances in which Jones can bring about this conjunctive state of affairs at t: perhaps, for example, he can do this by freely choosing to open the door to allow the dog out. Suppose, now, that S is omnipotent. Since the state of affairs *the cat comes in and if Jones were in C at t, he would freely decide at t to let out the dog* does not belong to Ls, it follows from the Flint and Freddoso account of omnipotence that an omnipotent being can bring about this conjunctive state of affairs even though it cannot bring about one of the conjuncts. Not good. (Remember, we have already seen that, in order to meet other putative counter-examples, it appears that Flint and Freddoso need to suppose that, in order to bring about a conjunctive state of affairs, an agent must bring about each of the conjuncts of that state of affairs. So Flint and Freddoso cannot just insist that this is a harmless consequence of their account.)

Perhaps you might think that the problem is easy to fix. While many conjunctions of states of affairs, some of whose conjuncts belong to Ls and some of whose conjuncts do not belong to Ls, constitute counterexamples to the analysis of Flint and Freddoso, we can handle this difficulty simply by insisting that any state of affairs that entails a state of affairs that belongs to Ls also belongs to Ls. For, given this patch, the state of affairs *the cat comes in and if Jones were in C at t, he would freely decide at t to let out the dog* belongs to Ls, and hence is not something that S is required to be able to bring about if S is omnipotent. But our difficulties are not over. For consider, instead, the disjunctive state of affairs: *if Jones were in C at t, he would freely decide at t to let out the dog or if Jones were in C at t, he would freely decide at t to go to the bathroom*. Given that Jones is in circumstances C at t, then, according to Flint and Freddoso, Jones can bring about this disjunctive state of affairs either by freely deciding to let out the dog or by freely deciding to go to the bathroom. But the disjunctive state of affairs does not belong to Ls, and so it follows from the Flint and Freddoso analysis that an omnipotent being can bring

about this disjunctive state of affairs even though an omnipotent being can bring about neither of the disjuncts. Not good.

Perhaps you might think that this problem is also easy to fix. While disjunctions, all of whose disjuncts belong to Ls, constitute counterexamples to the amended form of the analysis offered by Flint and Freddoso, we can handle this difficulty simply by insisting that any state of affairs entailed by a state of affairs that belongs to Ls itself belongs to Ls. Given this patch, the state of affairs *if Jones were in C at t, he would freely decide at t to let out the dog or if Jones were in C at t, he would freely decide at t to go to the bathroom* belongs to Ls, and hence is not something that S is required to be able to bring about if S is omnipotent. But, if we say this, then out difficulties have grown much worse! For consider. Suppose that S belongs to Ls and that N is an arbitrarily chosen proposition. Since S&N entails S, S&N belongs to Ls (by our first patch). Since S&N belongs to LS, N belongs to Ls (by our second patch). So N belongs to Ls, i.e. there are no propositions that do not belong to Ls. Disaster!

Perhaps there is some way of fixing this difficulty, e.g. by adopting a non-classical logic. However, it seems to me that the onus here is clearly on the defenders of the analysis to provide an amendment of their account that meets these difficulties. Failing the provision of such an amendment, we have good reason to say that the analysis is a failure.

4. Suppose that S is omnipotent at t in W. Suppose further that, leaving S aside, there is no agent in W who, acting alone, can bring it about that p in any world W* that shares its history with W, but that there is a group of agents in W who, acting together, can bring it about that p in some world W* that shares its history with W. (Consider, for example, the state of affairs of bringing it about that *a particular car is raised one metre above the ground using nothing but human muscle power*. Suppose that no human acting alone can bring about this state of affairs, but that there are groups of four people who are able to bring it about that the car is raised one metre above the ground using nothing but human muscle power.) As things stand, the Flint and Freddoso definition would allow that a being is omnipotent even if it cannot bring it about that this particular car is raised one metre above the ground using nothing but human muscle power. And that seems wrong.

Perhaps a fix is not far to seek. Rather than saying that, given the other conditions, an omnipotent being is able to bring about any state of affairs that *any agent brings* about in some world that shares the history of the omnipotent being, say instead that an omnipotent agent is able to bring about any state of affairs that *any agents bring* about in some world that shares the history of the world of the omnipotent being. With this amendment, in the world of our example, an omnipotent being would be required by the analysis to have the power to bring it about that the car in question is raised one metre above the ground using nothing but human muscle power. However, this patch creates at least the potential for a different kind of objection: if there are states of affairs that can only be brought about by the united actions of more than one agent, then the modified analysis will now require that an omnipotent agent is able to do things that it is impossible for any solo agent to do. (Consider, for example, the state of affairs that *if everyone in the room were free with respect to giving to Oxfam at t, then everyone in the*

room would freely chooses to give to Oxfam at t. If there is more than one person in the room, and if everyone in the room is free with respect to giving to Oxfam at t, then this state of affairs can only be brought about by the joint free choices of the agents in the room. So, if this state of affairs does not belong to Ls—which, of course, it does not under the formulation that Flint and Freddoso give to their definition—then it is also a counter-example to the patched proposal.)

5. Flint and Freddoso follow the standard practice of Molinists in distinguishing between two different kinds of actualisations of states of affairs: an agent S <u>strongly actualises</u> a state of affairs p just in case S causally determines p's obtaining; and agent S <u>weakly actualises</u> a state of affairs p just in case S strongly actualises T's being in situation C where it is true that if T were in C, then T would either weakly or strongly actualise p, for some agent T other than S. However, in their definition, holding the other conditions fixed, they claim merely that an omnipotent being has the power to actualise any state of affairs that some other being can actualise. While Flint and Freddoso are content with this claim—in effect, the claim that an omnipotent being has either the power to strongly actualise, or the power to weakly actualise, any state of affairs for which it is true that some being has either the power to strongly actualise or the power to weakly actualise that state of affairs—it is not at all clear that they are right to be thus content.

Suppose that a heavy object needs to be lifted onto a shelf. Suppose that you can bring it about that the object sits on the shelf either by lifting it up there, or by asking someone else to put it there (in circumstances in which, were you to ask, the person in question would lift the object onto the shelf). Suppose further that I can only bring it about that the object sits on the shelf by asking someone else to put it there (in circumstances in which, were I to ask, the person in question would lift the object onto the shelf). I think that there is a very strong intuition that, in these circumstances, no further information is required in order to reach the conclusion that *I* am not omnipotent. Given that you can strongly actualise *this* state of affairs whereas I can *only* weakly actualise this state of affairs, it follows that I am less powerful than you. Moreover—I think—the intuition persists even if we add the assumption that I am never without my helper, so that I am never in a situation in which you can strongly actualise a state of affairs that I am unable even to weakly actualise.

This example can be adapted to pose trouble for the Flint and Freddoso analysis. Suppose that there are lots of states of affairs that have nothing to do with freedom of the will that S can only weakly actualise, but which other agents can strongly actualise. Then, whatever else may be true, it seems to me that it cannot be the case that S is omnipotent. Omnipotence cannot be so fragile as this analysis requires; it cannot be that S changes from being omnipotent to failing to be omnipotent simply because some other agents—those who would bring about the target state of affairs if placed in the appropriate circumstances—are removed from the world. Setting aside cases directly concerned with freedom—e.g. states of affairs such as Jones' freely letting the dog out—an omnipotent being should be able to strongly actualise any state of affairs that other agents are able to strongly actualise.

6. Here is a tempting objection to the analysis of Flint and Freddoso: Consider a world W in which there is only one agent, S, at time t. Any world W* that shares the history of W to t will also contain just the one agent, S, at time t. So, no matter what powers are possessed by S, it follows that S is omnipotent: anything that S does in W*, S has the power to do in W. But, if, for instance, S is unable to lift heavy objects, then it is plain that S is not omnipotent. (Note that Ls is empty if S is the only agent.) Or, consider instead a world W in which there are n agents at time t, one of whom—S—is able to do anything that any of the other agents is able to do. Any world W* that shares the history of W to t will also contain just these n agents with just those powers that they have in W. So, no matter what powers are possessed by S, it follows that S is omnipotent: anything that any agent does in W*, S has the power to do in W. But, again, if, for instance, S is unable to lift heavy objects, then it is plain that S is not omnipotent.

I take it that this tempting objection is based on a misunderstanding. If W and W* share histories to t, it does not follow that their sub-moments are shared at t; rather, all that follows is that their sub-moments are shared at all times prior to t. Thus, even though there is only one agent with limited powers in W at t, there may be many agents with all manner of powers in W* at t, even though W and W* share their history to t. However, while this response may suffice to overthrow the tempting objection, it raises further questions in its train. In particular, one might wonder whether there *are* possible worlds of the kind that this analysis requires. Certainly, there are many philosophers who would deny that there are possible worlds in which scores of powerful agents pop into existence simultaneously and yet uncaused. If you are worried by the suggestion that any old string of sub-moments constitutes (the supervenience base for) a *possible* world, then you have reason to worry about the commitments required by the Flint and Freddoso analysis.

Perhaps there is a deeper philosophical point to be made here. Flint and Freddoso want their analysis to have the consequence that an omnipotent agent is not required to change the past. But it seems to me that the reasons that Flint and Freddoso have for making this insistence carry over to reasons for holding that an omnipotent being is not required to change the present either. If we ask what states of affairs an agent has the power to bring about at t—where what we mean is that we are considering the agent at t, and asking what he then has the power to bring about—then we are asking about those states of affairs that the agent has the power to make obtain at times strictly later than t. (There is an alternative way of understanding the question about the states of affairs that an agent has the power to bring about at t, where what we mean is that we are considering possible states of affairs that might obtain at t, and we are asking which of these states of affairs were within the power of the agent to bring about at times strictly earlier than t. But this is clearly not the sense intended by Flint and Freddoso.) At time t, no one has—nor can have—the power to bring about states of affairs that obtain at t; it is already too late for that! However, if this is right, then it seems that some quite fundamental adjustment to the analysis of Flint and Freddoso will be required.

7. Collecting together the threads of the above discussion, it seems to me that we can conclude that the Flint and Freddoso analysis is in a state of serious disrepair. *First*, considerations about the bringing about of conjunctive states of affairs seems to lead to

the conclusion that either the analysis is subject to decisive counter-examples or else it collapses completely because all states of affairs belong to Ls. *Second*, questions about what it is possible for an agent at time t to bring about at time t lend considerable support to the suggestion that an analysis couched in terms of what agents do in *possible* worlds that share the history of a world to time t are subject to intractable difficulties. (I think that there is good reason here to think that the notion of shared world histories is not well-suited to play a key role in the analysis of omnipotence, even if one accepts the claim that it is impossible to bring about past sub-moments.) *Third*, there are various kinds of problematic—or, at any rate, controversial—metaphysical commitments that are built into the Flint and Freddoso analysis with which—at least in my view—an adequate analysis ought to have no truck. And, *fourth*, there are other difficulties with the analysis of a more or less technical nature (including, for example, the difficulties raised by the distinction between strong and weak actualisation of states of affairs). Given all of these difficulties, it seems to me that there is very strong reason to say that, even if the various technical bugs could be repaired, it seems most unlikely that this kind of approach will lead to a satisfactory analysis of omnipotence.

III

There is one other recent analysis of omnipotence that is regularly given serious consideration when the question of the correct analysis of omnipotence is raised. Edward Wierenga (1983)(1989) claims that *a being x is* <u>omnipotent</u> *in a possible world w at time t* ***iff*** *it is true in w both that (i) for every state of affairs that p, if it is logically possible for the history of the world to be as it is until t and for x to strongly actualise the state of affairs that p at t, then x has it within its power to strongly actualise the state of affairs that p at t; and (ii) there is at least one state of affairs that x has within its power to strongly actualise at t.*

Various objections to this analysis have been noted in the literature. Many of these objections turn on the observation that a being is not omnipotent if there are *essential* limitations on what it can do that are not shared by other beings. Suppose that there is a being, O, which, as a matter of logic, is only able to strongly actualise a limited range of states of affairs, but which actually has within its power the ability to strongly actualise all of those states of affairs that it is logically possible for this being to strongly actualise. (There are references in the literature to beings that are essentially able to do nothing other than scratch their ears, or that are essentially unable to tie their shoelaces, and the like. To these suggestions, Wierenga (1989:29) makes the plausible reply that it is not possible that there are such beings. However, all that the objector needs is the claim that it is possible for some being to satisfy two conditions: (i) that there are essential limitations on what it can do; and (ii) that it has within its power the ability to strongly actualise all of those states of affairs that it is logically possible for it to strongly actualise. Since it seems very plausible to suppose that there are beings that are essentially limited in what they can do—I do not suppose, for example, that Wierenga will deny that we are essentially limited in what we can do—I think that it is very hard to find good reason to deny that the kinds of beings appealed to in this counterarguments are possible beings.)

But now, suppose, not only that it is possible that there is a being such as O, but also that there are other beings that have within their power to do all the things that O is able to do, and more besides, because these other beings do not have the essential limitations that O has. It seems quite clear that we should not suppose that O is omnipotent, even granted the further assumption that there are some states of affairs that O has within its power to strongly actualise, if there is (or could be) something that is able to strongly actualise all that O can strongly actualise, and more besides. *A being that is—or can be—<u>dominated</u> by another being with respect to powers and abilities is plainly not a being that is omnipotent.* (Plainly? I think so. If you can do everything that I can do, and more besides, then it seems to me to be evidently true that you are more powerful than I. But it is simply an analytical truth that nothing can be more powerful than an omnipotent being.)

It might be thought that, omnipotence is not merely incompatible with domination by another being but, in fact, requires domination of all other possible beings: if O is omnipotent, then there is nothing that it cannot bring about that some other being can bring about. This thought has often been explicitly rejected by those interested in the analysis of omnipotence. So, for example, Hoffman and Rosenkrantz (2002:2) claim that "[I]t [does not] follow that a being with maximal power can bring about whatever any other agent can bring about. If a can bring about s, and b cannot, it does not follow that b is not overall more powerful than a, since it could be that b can bring about more states of affairs than a can, rather than the other way around. This comparative sense of 'omnipotence' as maximal power appears to be the only sense that has a chance of being intelligible."

There are various different kinds of problems with this observation.

First, the analysis that Rosenkrantz and Hoffman go on to offer is not couched in terms of "the comparative sense of 'omnipotence' as maximal power": on their analysis, an omnipotent being has it within its power to being about any *suitable* state of affairs that it is possible for some agent to bring about. So, in fact, Rosenkrantz and Hoffman implicitly commit themselves to a *restricted* version of the dominance principle that they explicitly disavow. Of course, nothing that has been said here rules out the possibility that there are states of affairs that are not unrestrictedly repeatable and that can be brought about by some agent's bringing about of an unrestrictedly repeatable state of affairs, and yet which cannot be brought about by some other being's bringing about of that or any other unrestrictedly repeatable state of affairs, even though that other being can bring about any suitable state of affairs that it is possible for some agent to bring about. But, equally, there is nothing in the Rosenkrantz and Hoffman analysis to guarantee that a being which satisfies their definition of "omnipotence" can bring about more states of affairs than any other possible being.

Second, even if we do want to allow that dominance fails—i.e. that an omnipotent being *need not* be able to do everything that can possibly be done by other beings—we surely should not then try to distinguish omnipotent from non-omnipotent beings in terms of the <u>number</u> of states of affairs that it is possible for these beings to bring about. Consider two

beings, each of which can bring about an infinite number of states of affairs, and suppose further that there is no being that can bring about a number of states of affairs with a higher infinite cardinality. Should we insist, without making any further enquiries, that neither can be omnipotent, since neither can bring about *more* states of affairs than the other? But what if one dominates not only the other, but all other possible beings? If—perhaps *per impossible*—there were a possible being that could bring about any state of affairs that it is possible for any other possible being to bring about, then that being would plainly be omnipotent. (Moreover, this is so even if the cardinality of the collection of states of affairs that it can bring about is no greater than the cardinality of the collection of states of affairs that can be brought about by other actual or possible beings).

Third, it is surely just a mistake to suppose that analyses of "omnipotence" couched in terms other than those of "maximal power" are "unintelligible". On the contrary, it seems that there is a straightforward argument to the conclusion that "dominance" analyses of "omnipotence" are straightforwardly "intelligible". After all, it is clear that we *can* develop S5 models in which it is true that there are agents who, in given worlds at given times, can bring about any state of affairs that it is possible for some agent to bring about in those circumstances. (Consider, for example, models in which there are many agents in many worlds who have exactly the same powers, and then one agent in one world who has all of the powers of all of the other agents in all of the other worlds, and more besides.) But surely the existence of these models is all that we need to table in order to establish the "intelligibility" of the "dominance" analysis of "omnipotence". Of course, this kind of consideration can hardly establish the *correctness* of the "dominance" analysis of "omnipotence", though it is hard to see why it should not be taken to make a significant contribution to the case. (There is a *secular* concept here for which a label is required. "Omnipotence" looks like a good candidate.)

Quite apart from what one thinks of the above critique of the Hoffman and Rosenkrantz discussion of "maximal power", it seems to me that we are in a position to set down a condition, the satisfaction of which will tell us that agent A is *not* omnipotent in world w at time t: *There is an agent A' in world w' at time t' such that: (i) there are no differences between how w is at t and how w' is at t' apart from differences in how A is in w at t and how A' is in w' at t'; and (ii) A' in w' at t' has capacities and powers that A in w at t lacks but A in w at t does not have capacities and powers that A' in w' at t' lacks.* This condition is able to do useful work for us. Consider how I am now. There is a world, otherwise identical to ours at t, in which I am replaced by a being that has all of the powers and capacities that I have at t, except that that being can run a little faster than I can. So I am not omnipotent. (Of course, the history of that other world may well be very different from the history of our world, particularly at earlier times in history. What matters is the near-duplication at time t.)

There is more to be said about whether this necessary condition for omnipotence can be developed into an analysis of omnipotence, but proper exploration of this idea will have to be deferred to another occasion. Perhaps it is worth noting here that it is pretty clear that it won't do to suggest that *an agent A is omnipotent in world w at time t **iff** there is*

no agent A', world w' and time t' such that: (i) there are no differences between how w is at t and how w' is at t' apart from differences between how A is in w at t and how A' is in w' at t'; and (ii) A' in w' at t' has capacities and powers that A in w at t lacks but A in w at t does not have capacities and powers that A' in w' at t' lacks. This says, roughly, that a being is omnipotent iff it isn't dominated by any other similarly located being; and that's plainly too weak. Perhaps we might suggest that *an agent A is omnipotent in world w at time t **iff** there is no agent A', world w' and time t' such that: (i) there are no differences between how w is at t and how w' is at t' apart from differences between how A is in w at t and how A' is in w' at t'; and (ii) A' in w' at t' has capacities and powers that A in w at t lacks.* This says, roughly, that a being is omnipotent iff it dominates every other similarly located possible being. Maybe that's right, though there are issues about the ways in which "location" can constrain powers that need to be explored in order to arrive at a satisfactory assessment of the proposal. (A being should not get to be counted as "omnipotent" simply because its "location" rules out the possession of abilities and powers that beings in other "locations" can have. However, if we suppose that it is possible for there to be action at a distance and creation *ex nihilo*, then it is not clear that there are any necessary constraints associated with "location".)

IV

In the light of the discussion of the preceding three sections, we are now better placed to answer the question whether the being discussed in the opening part of this paper is omnipotent. We shall divide the discussion into several parts.

Suppose, *first*, that the being discussed in the first section is not a necessary existent (so that there are possible worlds in which this being does not exist). That is, suppose that there is a contingently existing creator of our universe, and that that creator is very powerful, very wise, and essentially perfectly good. Given that this being is merely contingently existing, there seems to be no reason not to suppose that it is possible that there is a being just like it in a world that is otherwise identical to ours at all times except for the fact that the being in question is not *essentially* perfectly good (but is rather essentially morally indifferent). Furthermore, it is very plausible to suppose that this other being will dominate the being described in the first section of this paper: that other being will be able to do all that the described being can do, and more besides. So, given only the point that being dominated is sufficient to rule out being omnipotent, we can conclude that the being described in the first section of this paper is not omnipotent.

Suppose, *second*, that we make the same assumptions as did in the previously discussed case, except that we give up on the requirement that the being described in the initial part of this paper is *essentially* perfectly good, and hold instead that our being is merely contingently perfectly good. The difference between these hypotheses can be described as follows: to be perfectly good is to be such that you always act for the best no matter what circumstances are thrown at you; whereas to be essentially perfectly good is to be such that it is *impossible* for you to act for anything less than the best no matter what circumstances are thrown at you. I cannot see any reason why a perfectly good being should not have within its power the ability to do the most horrendous evil; it is

consistent with always acting for the best that one is able to act for much less than the best. Consequently, in this case, we cannot conclude that the being described in the first section of this paper is not omnipotent merely on the basis of considerations about domination.

Suppose, *third*, that we suppose that the being described in the opening part of this paper is a necessary existent, and that it is necessarily very powerful, very wise, and perfectly good. Even given all of these assumptions, it may still be possible to describe circumstances in which that being is dominated by another being. Plausibly, prior to any other acts of creation, it was possible for our being to make another very powerful and very wise being, and to give it a free hand in the enterprise of creating universes. Moreover, it is also plausible to think that our being could have made this other being such that, whenever their wills clashed, neither one prevailed (but, rather, events continued as if neither act of willing had occurred). If our being were to proceed in this way, and if the being that it created were less than perfectly good, then there is no reason why it should not turn out to be the case that, from the moment of its creation, the newly created being dominates the necessarily existent being. (Remember: what is required for domination is that the one being can do all that the other being can do, and more besides. Since perfect goodness greatly constrains action, a being of similar power and wisdom that is not perfectly good will plausibly dominate a being that is perfectly good. Note, too, that there is nothing in the imagined scenario that requires that our perfect being give up its "right of veto" over the universe: it can still "veto" any actions on the part of the created being that it wishes to "veto".)

If what I have argued here is correct, then we have the following conclusions. *First*, we need only appeal to uncontroversial considerations about dominance in order to rule that the being described in the opening section of this paper is *not* omnipotent, unless we hold that this being is merely contingently perfectly good. *Second*, if we hold that the being described in the opening section of this paper is merely contingently perfectly good, then we have no guarantee that we can consistently maintain that this being is omnipotent, but we do have a guarantee that we have adopted a religiously unappealing conception of the creator of the world. (In view of the horrendous evils of this world, why should we suppose that the creator *is* perfectly good if we have already acknowledged that, at best, the creator is merely contingently perfectly good? If there are any virtues that attach to belief in a perfectly good creator, these virtues must arise from the *a priori* support that attaches to this belief.) *Third*, in light of the previous two conclusions, it seems plausible to claim that we should draw a careful line between the (secular) idea of *omnipotence*, and the (religious) idea of *divine power*. The reason for this need not be—as Geach (1973a)(1973b)(1977) has it—that the (secular) idea of omnipotence is hopelessly confused, and beyond hope of coherent explication. Rather, it seems that, if the (secular) idea of omnipotence is capable of coherent explanation, then it will turn out to be quite distinct from the (religious) idea of divine power, at least if that idea is captured in anything like the account that was given at the beginning of this paper.

Even philosophers who are more or less sympathetic to the line that I have taken in this paper may think that there is another alternative, viz. to insist that there is no (secular)

idea of omnipotence, and to hold that that notion of divine power outlined at the beginning of this paper is just an account of omnipotence. Taliaferro (1998:75) is one philosopher who might be taken to be sympathetic to just such a position. While what he actually says—viz. that *a being is omnipotent **iff** there is no other being that both has a greater scope of power and possesses a greater compossible set of excellent properties*— is manifestly mistaken—since it entails that if there were just one miserably puny being, that being would be omnipotent—it seems clear enough that what motivates his proposal is the thought that to be omnipotent is just to have whatever powers God actually happens to have. While I would be happy enough to give Taliaferro the word "omnipotence" for this purpose, I think that it should be borne in mind that there is a by now fairly well-established use of the word "omnipotence" in the philosophical literature that does not conform to this account. It seems that there is a (secular) conception of omnipotence, and it seems that it is possible for something other than a being possessed of divine power to have the thus conceived property (if it is possible for anything at all to have the property). Since Taliaferro is plainly prepared to live with the consequence that he would need to *say* that there can be beings whose scope of powers vastly exceed those of omnipotent beings, there is perhaps no need to quarrel further with the line being here canvassed.

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