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Omniscience and maximal power

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Abstract: **This essay examines a conflict between God's omnipotence and His omniscience. I discuss our intuitions regarding omnipotence and omniscience and describe a method by which we can decide whether a being is omnipotent. I consider the most promising versions of omnipotence and argue that they produce a genuine conflict with omniscience. Finally, I suggest that we can take the example of omniscience and generalize it to several of God's essential properties and thereby reveal incompatibilities that result even from sophisticated conceptions of divine attributes.**

The most prominent arguments against the traditional God of monotheism are arguments from evil, but deductive forms of these arguments have largely been abandoned.[1] One family of alternative deductive arguments available to the atheist is populated by the arguments from incompatibility, which attempt to take advantage of a purported incompatibility between two or more of God's attributes. If one of these arguments is sound, then God cannot possibly exist, because the concept of God is incoherent.

The alleged incompatibility between God's omnipotence and His necessary moral perfection has received some deserved attention recently.[2] An earlier paper presented a survey of several alleged incompatibilities within the concept of God, but the author chose to leave aside omnipotence, perhaps because of its historically obscure analysis and complex implications.[3] I regard omnipotence to be in genuine conflict with several of God's attributes, but I will concentrate upon omniscience in this paper. If I can demonstrate an incompatibility between omnipotence and omniscience, it will be a mechanical process to turn this incompatibility into a deductive argument for positive atheism,[4] and such an argument, if sound, will only be answerable by the abandonment of omnipotence from the definition of God.

Intuitions about power and omniscience

Much of the discussion in this paper centres on the attempt at a definition of 'omnipotent' that will be satisfactory to all parties. As this essay is concerned

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largely with the definition of a single term, I believe our intuitions – especially our pre-theoretical intuitions about power – will prove to be quite important. Perhaps the most common definition of 'omnipotent' among laypersons is 'the ability to perform any task', and if we take care with our definition of 'task' we can omit logically possible 'pseudo-tasks' such as 'to draw a square circle' or 'to meet a married bachelor'. At this point, we have reached what might seem to function as a useful definition of 'omnipotent', although a serious (and more popular) competitor will be examined later. To distinguish the various forms of omnipotence in this paper, I will call this first form, 'the ability to perform any logically possible task', 'T-omnipotence' after its focus upon tasks. For now, let us leave aside considerations about more sophisticated analyses of 'omnipotence' and decide what we can conclude, if anything, about this form of omnipotence in relation to God's omniscience.

The logically possible task 'to learn' will perhaps provide an example of a task God cannot perform. The argument would take advantage of the fact that an omniscient being cannot learn because she already knows everything. If this is so, we must decide that God is not T-omnipotent. Again, there are plausible ways to alter the definition of 'omnipotence', and motivations to discard T-omnipotence in favour of a rather different version, but let us remain with T-omnipotence for a moment longer. I believe it agrees with the intuitions of most that the possession of certain essential properties might non-trivially preclude the possession of omnipotence. Whether or not 'to learn' is genuinely a task God cannot perform, and whether or not 'the ability to perform any task' is the version of omnipotence we ought to use, it seems to remain intuitively plausible that we are in a position to discover such limitations and that these limitations result from essential properties that might, on their own, seem instead to grant a being more ability.

Capability and possible worlds

This paper is concerned with God's abilities. I hope now to describe an account of capability that will allow us to decide, for any person, S, and task T, whether S is capable of T. Perhaps the natural way to view capability of this sort is that, if and only if, S is capable of T, there is a possible world in which S performs T. This is a bi-conditional and therefore will function as a definition of 'capability'. I will examine each direction of the bi-conditional in turn.

Can we conclude that there is a possible world in which S performs T, given that S is capable of T? The reservation I have about this conclusion is as follows. Suppose it is necessarily a feature of the world that some condition, C, has obtained. Suppose that only if C weren't the case, then S could perform T. If this were the case, then there would be no possible world in which S performed T, but this inability is a consequence of the obtainment of C, not necessarily of some limitation that S possesses.

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As an example, consider the person, Smith, who is locked in an escape-proof room. Smith is supplied with food, water, and oxygen, but is not allowed to leave the room. Further, suppose that the person who constructed this room was sadly unappreciative of great literature, and failed to stock even a single book within. Smith is a fluent speaker and reader of several languages, possesses perfect eyesight, and has plenty of time on her hands, so there is a sense in which she is able to perform the task 'to read a book'. The fact that if she tried to perform 'to read a book', she would fail, derives from the limitations on her environment, not from anything about Smith's own characteristics.

If we add a further condition, that this room is permanently escape-proof and that Smith will therefore never get out, it begins to look as if Smith is indeed unable to perform the task of reading a book. If there were a metaphysically contingent limitation on Smith's ability to read books, it would be more plausible to claim she actually had the ability to read books. Yet if we view this limitation to be a necessary limitation, that is, that there is no possible world in which Smith reads a book, then our intuitions seem to indicate that Smith genuinely lacks that ability. If Smith is permanently locked in a room with no books, and no-one will ever add any books to the room or, say, provide Smith with a television link by which she could read a book, it makes sense to say Smith is the sort of being (the sort who is permanently locked in a room without books) who genuinely lacks the ability to perform 'to read a book'.

With these considerations, I believe it is evident that capability is best defined to range within possible worlds. If S is capable of T, then there is a possible world in which S performs T. This formulation is exceedingly simple, and I believe confusions about its consequences are resolvable in the manner outlined above. Yet if we are to develop a definition, we must assert a bi-conditional, and simply to take the converse of the first part of our definition will not suffice. For there is a problem with allowing performance of a task in a possible world to be sufficient for capability.

Suppose that Jane is an average human being. One consequence of this fact is that Jane is incapable of flying under her own power. Yet there is a possible world in which Jane undergoes a sophisticated operation during which large, feathery wings are grafted on to her back, and these wings provide her with the ability to fly under her own power. But surely we can't say that Jane is capable of such flight, despite the fact that her possible world counterpart is flying around happily on these new wings. My suggestion is that we add another stipulation that will allow us to define a bi-conditional that describes capability, thus: If, and only if, for subject S defined to have only a set of properties F, there is a person S′ in another possible world such that S′ has all and only the properties in the set F (except whether each has performed T, will perform T, is performing T, etc.), and S′ performs T, then S is capable of T.

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The maximal-power test[5]

The present definition of 'omnipotent' is 'the ability to perform any task', and that will continue to suffice for a while yet. If T-omnipotence is maximal power, then a being with the ability to perform any action is maximally powerful. If there is a task that a being, S, cannot perform, it may be possible to imagine a being, J, with more power than S, and the fact that we can imagine such a being would indicate that S is not maximally powerful; there is a being J with an ability that S does not possess.

Now I will say a few words about the set of tasks S can perform versus the set of tasks J can perform. It will not suffice simply to say that S is more powerful than a being, J, just in case the set of tasks S can perform is more pollent than the set of tasks J can perform; power (and therefore T-omnipotence) does depend upon the set of tasks each individual can perform, but in a more complicated way. In general, there are two sorts of tasks in this set: tasks that don't predicate a particular agent and tasks that do predicate a particular agent. Of the former variety, there are such tasks as 'to walk a dog', 'to bake a pie', 'to watch television', etc. Members of the latter subset include 'to cause Jones to walk a dog' and 'to cause Smith to bake a pie'. In general, each member of the latter subset will have several agent-variant analogues, such as 'to cause Smith to walk a dog'. When it appears that a being, S, can perform a task that J cannot, if this task predicates a particular agent, there will often be an agent-variant task J can perform that S cannot perform. For example: S can perform 'to cause S to choose freely to walk a dog', and J cannot, but J can perform 'to cause J to choose freely to walk a dog', and S cannot.

In addition, there will be some tasks that seem to be more 'power-granting' than other tasks; perhaps there is a set of tasks that both S and J can perform, and further, S can perform 'to run as fast as Achilles' while J can only perform 'to run as fast as a tortoise'. If we have fully described the tasks each can perform, then, while each set of tasks is equipollent with the other, S still seems to be more powerful than J if the only point at which they differ is at two different tasks, and the one J can perform is less power-granting than the one S can perform.

These considerations compose what I will call the 'maximal-power test'. To submit a being, S, to the maximal-power test, we question whether there could be a more powerful being. By our present definition of 'omnipotent', a more powerful being would be a being who could perform a task T that S could not perform, if S would have the ability to perform no corresponding task that is more power-granting than T. If S fails the maximal-power test, S is not omnipotent. And if there is a property, G, the possession of which necessarily entails that a being fail the maximal-power test, then G and omnipotence are incompatible. It is my purpose in the present paper to argue that omniscience is an example of such a property, G, and in addition, the existence of several other such properties

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indicates that even sophisticated definitions of 'omnipotence' do not solve the major problem philosophers of religion generally intended these definitions to solve: to preserve God's omnipotence.

Is anyone more powerful than God?

The discussion above suggests that God does not have the ability to learn, because there is no possible world in which a being with all of God's properties learns, and capability is defined over possible worlds. If there were a possible world in which God learns, then there would be a possible world in which a being that knew everything somehow learned something else. Yet learning occurs when someone comes to know something she didn't already know; the proposition expressing this putative possible world would be inconsistent and therefore it would not be a possible world after all. There is no possible world in which a being with God's properties learns.

We have found a task God is incapable of performing, 'to learn', and it will be helpful to refer to this discovery later.

P1 There is at least one task that God cannot perform.

I will argue that a consequence of P1 makes this inability a problem even under more sophisticated definitions of 'omnipotent' than 'the ability to perform any logically possible task'. Before we continue with an evaluation of the sophisticated definitions, however, let us be sure to develop what follows from P1. It is an immediate consequence of P1 that God fails the maximal-power test, because it is possible to imagine a more powerful being, one who can perform every task God can perform, plus one more task that God cannot perform, and God has no more power-granting analogue in His repertoire. We seem to know this being is possible because we know there is at least one (logically possible) task God cannot perform. This more powerful being cannot be omniscient because she has the ability to learn. Let us name this being 'Jane'.

There is one potential difficulty immediately evident. Perhaps Jane can indeed perform the task 'to learn', but it might seem that her failure to be omniscient is in fact a lack of power in a way that would cause her to perform just as badly in the maximal-power test. After all, God can perform the task 'to sculpt a statue that was sculpted by an omniscient being', or even 'to know everything', and Jane cannot perform these tasks. Yet Jane can perform the agent-variant task 'to sculpt a statue that was not sculpted by an omniscient being', as well as the task 'to know a sum of knowledge but not everything'. For any task defined only to be performable by an omniscient being, there is an agent-variant task defined only to be performable by a non-omniscient being; and further, there is a task, learning, for which there is not an agent-variant counterpart that God can perform – because learning does not predicate any agent at all.

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In general, for tasks that are defined so that Jane cannot perform them, there will be counterparts defined so that God cannot perform them, and the power of God and Jane will be equal in this respect. However, there is the further task 'to learn', and there does not seem to be a counterpart task in God's repertoire such that the ability to perform this task would grant Him more power.

> P2 It is possible to imagine a being more powerful than God, if power is indicated by the terms of T-omnipotence.

Jane is more powerful than God, in the end, because God is omniscient, and hence, omnipotence (here defined) is incompatible with omniscience. It is important to note that P2 is a consequence of P1.

It appears that some of God's essential properties can prevent Him from being omnipotent, by this definition. Flint and Freddoso present a similar example in their discussion of the problem:

> Suppose we claim that an agent, S, is omnipotent just in case S can perform any logically possible task … . This proposal rules out Smith as omnipotent simply on the ground that Smith cannot perform the logically possible task of saying something which is (at the same time) being said only by Jones.[6]

God cannot be maximally powerful if maximal power requires T-omnipotence; there are some logically possible tasks that God simply cannot perform. One example is 'to say something that is (at the same time) being said only by someone other than God'.

An attractive move to some theists is a redefinition of 'omnipotence' to mean 'the ability to perform any task consistent with one's nature' or 'the ability to perform any task it is logically possible for the being to perform'; let us call this 'C-omnipotence'. To learn is inconsistent with God's omniscience, so it is not logically possible for God to learn. Therefore, to the proponent of C-omnipotence, it is not a problem for God's omnipotence that He cannot learn. Yet C-omnipotence suffers from the well-known problem of McEar, a being who is defined only to be able to scratch his ear. By C-omnipotence, McEar would be omnipotent, because it is logically impossible for him to do anything other than to scratch his ear. Flint and Freddoso write: 'we find that we are forced to count as omnipotent the notorious weakling Mr McEar, who is capable of scratching his left ear but essentially incapable of performing any other task'.[7] Surely we must reject a definition that allows a being such as McEar (and even his cousin, McNothing, a being who cannot perform any task at all) to be omnipotent.

It appears clear that 'the ability to perform any task' is a useful indicator of maximal power, at least a better one than 'the ability to perform any task consistent with the actor's attributes'. Yet there is a more sophisticated version of 'omnipotence' that may allow God to pass the maximal-power test.

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'State-of-affairs' omnipotence

In fact, there are several logically possible tasks God cannot perform, such as 'to eat' (because He is immaterial), 'to produce non-counterfeit currency' (because He is not identical to any state's mint), and 'to do evil' (because He is morally perfect). If our definition of 'omnipotent' is 'the ability to perform any task', then the foregoing argument indicates that God fails to be omnipotent. I believe that the tasks mentioned just above are indeed impossible for God, and argumentation similar to the statements offered in denial of God's ability to learn would show that God is unable to perform these tasks as well.[8]

If apologists are to avoid these alleged conflicts with God's omniscience (and with His immateriality, His non-identity with any state's mint, and His moral perfection), perhaps the most promising route is to move away from T-omnipotence and toward 'state-of-affairs' conceptions of omnipotence. Promising versions of 'state-of-affairs' omnipotence generally take the form 'the ability to bring about any logically possible state of affairs that an agent can bring about'. If we made use of a simpler definition, 'the ability to bring about any logically possible state of affairs', we would run into problems concerning certain logically possible states of affairs such as 'it rains for the fourth time in Seattle this year'.[9] While this is certainly a logically possible state of affairs, it is not the case that an agent can always bring it about. Before it has rained on five occasions and after it has rained on three occasions in Seattle is the only period of time in which it is logically possible for an agent to bring about that state of affairs.

Let us consider Flint and Freddoso's final analysis of omnipotence:

> S is omnipotent at *t* in W if, and only if, for any state of affairs *p* and world-type-for-S L*s* such that *p* is not a member of L*s*, if there is a world W* such that:
>
> (1) L*s* is true in both W and W*, and
> (2) W* shares the same history with W at *t*, and
> (3) at *t* in W* someone actualizes *p*,
>
> then *S* has the power at *t* in *W* to actualize *p*.[10]

The notion of a 'world-type-for-God' refers to a set of counterfactuals of freedom, certain conditionals that may take the form 'under no circumstances will Smith freely adopt a puppy', or 'if Roberts is presented with a package, she will freely open it', so we must take the freedom of creatures on earth into account when we consider whether God possesses this form of omnipotence.[11] There may be certain states of affairs, such as 'Smith freely adopts a puppy', that no-one can bring about in virtue of their dependence upon a free choice that will never obtain, so we ought not require an omnipotent being to be able to bring about some states of affairs. And the only person who can make Roberts in the above example freely open the package is Roberts herself. The world-type-for-God is the set of

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counterfactuals of freedom over which God has no control, because the truth-values of these counterfactuals depend upon the activities of certain specified free agents. (It should be noted that God is in control over the truth-value of several counterfactuals of freedom, such as 'if God is presented with the choice to torture children maliciously, God will freely choose not to torture these children'. This counterfactual is not a member of the world-type-for-God.)

Let us call Flint and Freddoso's version 'S-omnipotence'. S-omnipotence is a sophisticated analysis. It avoids the problem of conflict with God's inability to perform 'to learn'. It takes into account the problems of certain states of affairs that no-one can actualize, despite their logical possibility. Yet Wes Morriston has recently argued persuasively that God fails to be S-omnipotent, because He does not have the ability to bring about certain logically possible states of affairs such as 'all innocent creatures being maliciously tortured forever'.[12] If God were only contingently morally perfect, or morally imperfect, He would have the ability to bring about this state of affairs. Therefore, it seems possible to imagine a more powerful being, one that is morally imperfect and able to actualize 'all innocent creatures being maliciously tortured forever'.

Morriston anticipates the objection an Anselmian might offer. Such an objection might appear as follows: God's existence determines the space of what is metaphysically possible, so the state of affairs mentioned above is simply not a genuine possibility, if God exists. God would not allow such a state of affairs, so no being could bring it about. I believe Morriston's response here is correct; in a situation such as this, it seems to square with our intuitions about omnipotence to decide, not that God is maximally powerful, but that *no* being can be maximally powerful, if God exists. Morriston writes,

> Suppose that there is a being just like the Anselmian God except that (a) although it is morally perfect, it is not necessarily so; and (b) its basic power extends to both good and evil choices. Would such a being not be more powerful – in some very intuitive sense of 'powerful' – than the Anselmian God is supposed to be? I think it would be. Does it matter if such a being is not 'really' ('metaphysically') possible? Again, I don't think so. Not if we are trying to see what it would take for our concept of omnipotence to pick out anything in the real world.[13]

If God's essence prohibits the existence of certain states of affairs, states of affairs that, intuitively, a maximally powerful being ought to be able to bring about, then if God exists, no being can be maximally powerful.

I believe Morriston successfully makes his case for the incompatibility of omnipotence and necessary moral perfection, but there is a bit more to be said. Suppose the apologist were to deny that God's moral perfection is *necessary*. Rather, the objection goes, God is simply morally perfect in the actual world. I would respond that the problem remains even with this change, because moral perfection must persist in an omnipotent and omniscient being. For it is morally imperfect to choose to cease being morally perfect, and surely an omnipotent

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and omniscient being couldn't be taken unawares and forced or coerced into abandoning its moral perfection. Therefore, I do not think this move will offer lasting relief to the apologist. Another possible response is to claim somehow that God actually does have the ability to bring about 'all innocent creatures being maliciously tortured forever'. But as the discussion above (in **Capability and possible worlds** above) indicates, He does not possess such an ability; there is no possible world in which He brings this about (in part because it is defined to be 'malicious' and therefore it would not be produced in an attempt to allow for a greater good). We may even modify it slightly to read 'all innocent creatures being maliciously tortured forever and no one ceasing to be morally perfect' to cover some rather unexpected actions taken by God in an attempt to avoid the 'trap' of moral perfection. I think Morriston's paper, taken together with these considerations, shows that a morally perfect being cannot pass the maximal-power test; God cannot be S-omnipotent.

We reach a similar result when we consider omniscience in place of moral perfection. In case the apologist refuses to accept Morriston's argument, or elects to abandon God's moral perfection, I will offer another possible incompatibility. (In fact, this will prove to be a family of incompatibilities, such that S-omnipotence actually provides no help over T-omnipotence in the first place.) Consider the state of affairs 'some person freely learns'. I will call this state of affairs 'L'. It should be clear at the outset that L is a logically possible state of affairs, and that there is a world with the same world-history as ours in which someone brings about L at some time. Related states of affairs that God cannot bring about are 'some person freely wonders', 'some person freely speculates', 'some person freely guesses', etc.

L is not a member of the world-type-for-God; L is not a counterfactual of freedom for some specified being. The point of Flint and Freddoso's stipulation was to avoid the fact that some states of affairs are impossible for God to bring about because they explicitly require God's influence upon the would-be free action of some other individual, but L mentions nothing about any other agent in particular. If we were to throw out states of affairs simply because they mention freedom, then we would be left with the absurd consequence that a completely unfree being – or who could bring about no states of affairs in which someone does something freely – could be omnipotent. So it appears that all three of Flint and Freddoso's conditions are satisfied, yet God cannot bring about L. Under S-omnipotence, God has failed to be omnipotent.

P3 There is at least one logically possible state of affairs that satisfies the conditions listed within S-omnipotence, that God cannot bring about.

Of course, there is the question of the use of 'freely' in our description of L. I believe L will suffice under either libertarian or compatibilist conceptions of

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freedom, and something similar will be compatible with hard determinism. Making L work for libertarians is a simple matter; humans freely choose to learn all the time, and succeed. If our compatibilist form of free will requires something about a lack of coercion from other agents, then it seems true that humans often learn without being coerced or caused to learn by distinct agents. Finally, to answer the hard determinist, we can amend L to read 'some person freely learns without being directly caused to learn by a distinct agent'. Perhaps 'freely learns' simply means 'chooses to learn, and (in part) because of that choice, succeeds'. There are other things to be said to cover related versions of 'freedom', but I think it's reasonably clear that worries about the nature of freedom will not prevent us from understanding the notion of a being freely performing some action. My position is that there is a clear sense in which humans freely learn, when this learning takes place because of the humans' own choices.

One possible objection is that L is too vague to count as a 'real' example of a suitable logically possible state of affairs. After all, every time God or Jane caused 'some person' to do T, He or she would be causing some specific person, S, to be doing T. The only way Jane could cause S to learn freely would be if the value of 'S' were Jane herself, and if this is the case, then God could bring about 'Jane unfreely learns', which Jane is unable to bring about. If it is true that every time Jane brings about L, she is bringing about 'Jane freely learns' and this state of affairs is therefore equivalent, then it might seem that the corresponding state of affairs 'Jane unfreely learns' is always available in God's repertoire. The best counter-response here is that 'Jane freely learns' and 'some person freely learns' are indeed distinct situations. It may be true that, as it happens, every time Jane brings about L, she is bringing about 'Jane freely learns', but it seems clear that we can understand the content of 'some person freely learns' without having to assign this state of affairs to a specific actor. It is not the case that every time L obtains, Jane has freely learned. Therefore, simply, the two are not equivalent. Every time Jane brings about L, she has freely learned, but it should not be surprising that some states of affairs obtain only in certain circumstances and can obtain as results of different sufficient conditions. We speak of 'some person' doing something fairly frequently, and we are certainly aware of when this state of affairs has obtained, so it makes sense to speak of it as if it's something a person can bring about.

A second objection is that God does indeed have the ability to bring about L, but only through what has been called *weak actualization*.[14] Perhaps God cannot directly cause L to come about, but perhaps it is true that for some person, S, if S were put into some set of circumstances, S would freely learn. If this is so, then God could bring about L by putting S into these circumstances. My response[15] is that, if a being is truly to be maximally powerful, it must have the ability to actualize states of affairs both strongly and weakly. A being that can strongly or weakly actualize some state of affairs is more powerful than a being that can only

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weakly actualize this state of affairs. That is, if you can bring about some states of affairs directly and I can only bring it about by coercing you to do it somehow, then, *ceteris paribus*, you are more powerful than I.

There is a further worry that afflicts any argument that takes advantage of the truth of counterfactuals of freedom, and this problem is that it's not clear that counterfactuals of freedom can in fact ever be true. Hoffman and Rosenkrantz make this point in their critique of Flint and Freddoso's analysis.[16] Hoffman and Rosenkrantz point out that for a subjunctive conditional to be true, it seems there must be some strong connection between its antecedent and its consequent; yet causation and entailment seem to be the only relations strong enough to make these conditionals true, and if the consequent of a counterfactual of freedom is caused or entailed to obtain, it is very dubious that it was freely performed. Finally, Morriston mentions[17] that it might be necessarily true that for some state of affairs, no free person would ever bring it about. Maybe every person would simply have a strong aversion to such a state of affairs, or maybe the state of affairs mentions a human being freely performing some action, yet no human being could have the mental capacity required to bring it about. It seems clear that the ability to actualize some state of affairs strongly must grant a being more power than the ability simply to actualize this state of affairs weakly.

With these objections out of the way, I will move to my next conclusion.

P4 It is possible to imagine a being more powerful than God, if power is indicated by the terms of S-omnipotence.

Even with the use of 'power' that S-omnipotence suggests, God has failed to pass the maximal-power test and is therefore not omnipotent. I will now examine five objections to P4.

First objection

Perhaps omniscience itself ought to be taken as a criterion for power. That is, one might argue, omniscient beings are more powerful than non-omniscient beings. The first thing to be said about this response is that it is a departure from the idea of power presented above and the idea of power within S-omnipotence; an acceptance of this principle requires a denial of 'state-of-affairs' omnipotence. It is considerably counter-intuitive to suppose that power is a matter of having a certain amount of knowledge, rather than being able to perform a wide variety of actions or to bring about a great many states of affairs. It is possible to imagine an omniscient being who seems to have very little power, perhaps a feeble sage who lives alone in a cave somewhere. The fact that this sage happens to know every fact does not seem to add much to her power, unless it allows her to perform more actions or bring about more states of affairs.

We might imagine that Jane, as an omnipotent being, could cause herself to learn any specific piece of knowledge she does not currently know, which seems

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to grant her as much power as she'd ever need. But God, while still omniscient, does not have the power to bring about L. This seems to be a logically possible state of affairs with a definite, interesting content, and there could be situations in which God would want to bring this about. On the other hand, it is hard to imagine a situation in which Jane would want to know some fact that she could not instantly teach herself. I suspect that the only force this objection carries is a result of the tacit supposition that omniscience will grant a person the ability to produce a greater number of logically possible states of affairs. For when we think of power granted by omniscience, I trust we immediately think of a person using her omniscience to perform certain actions or to effect certain states of affairs she wouldn't be able to without omniscience – yet as I believe I have demonstrated above, omniscience alone doesn't grant a person more 'power' (defined within S-omnipotence), but in fact limits her power.

This objection is similar to one T. J. Mawson has offered in a recent paper,[18] against Morriston's claim of incompatibility between omnipotence and necessary moral perfection.[19] Mawson denies that the ability to choose evil counts as a 'real' power; rather, to Mawson, God's choice to do evil would be a choice to perform an overall unreasonable action. Mawson concludes that '[the] fact that there is no possible world in which God performs an overall unreasonable action is obviously not an expression of weakness'.[20] I have two points to make about this objection. First, it would seem that this objection does not apply to the case of omniscience, because 'to learn' is in no clear way to perform an overall unreasonable action. In this respect, I think the incompatibility I have attempted to demonstrate is in fact more defensible than the incompatibility between omnipotence and necessary moral perfection. But my second point is that Mawson has not made the case that an omnipotent being need not have the ability to choose evil. An inability to choose evil, if Mawson is correct, would perhaps be a strength for an omniscient being such as God, because God would know that to choose evil would be unreasonable, but it does not follow that the ability to choose evil does not grant a being more power. If God weren't omniscient, then God would not in fact be choosing something unreasonable by choosing evil, and in such a scenario, the ability to choose evil would grant God more power. We can imagine a being that was not omniscient and not necessarily morally perfect, and this being would have more power than God.

Another interesting variant of this objection was offered by one of the referees of this journal. God can perform the task of eternally knowing some fact, H, whereas Jane can only perform the task of learning H. The objector would claim that the former task is more power-granting than the latter task.

My response is threefold. First, note that we may take the sum of God's knowledge to be equal to the sum of Jane's knowledge, minus one fact, H. Suppose this fact, H, is that my hourglass contains 1,000 grains of sand. (Jane, then, is the being who eternally knows everything except H.) My intuitions say that

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knowing H does not grant a person any power at all, or at least, not as much as the ability to learn grants. We would rate a person who was incapable of learning to be much less powerful than a person who was capable of learning, even if the latter happened not to know how much sand was in my hourglass while the former did. Again, I suspect that any intuition towards the notion that knowledge alone is power-granting derives from the supposition that one will be able to take advantage of this knowledge to perform some task or to bring about some state of affairs. When it is recognized that Jane has the power to learn H instantly, I think it should be accepted that eternally knowing H really does not afford a person any more power than the ability to learn affords. Second, the objector still faces the problem of *quantity* of tasks (or of states of affairs). God can eternally know H, and God can eternally know everything. Jane can learn H, and Jane can learn in general. But Jane can also forget, and she can wonder, and she can guess, whereas there seem to be no isomorphic and more power-granting tasks available to God. Finally, this objection only has a hope of success when T-omnipotence is preferred over S-omnipotence. It is impossible to *bring about* the state of affairs 'God eternally knows H', so this state of affairs does not figure into rating how powerful a being is. Therefore, Jane can bring about a greater quantity of states of affairs than God can. And I have provided reasons elsewhere (in the beginning of **'State-of-affairs' omnipotence** above) to prefer S-omnipotence to T-omnipotence, reasons I regard as decisive.

Second objection

Another alternative version of omnipotence would hold that the most powerful being that exists is by definition maximally powerful. But we do not seem to adopt this sort of definition for very many other properties. We do not say the being that knows the most is omniscient, and similarly, we should not say the being who is the most powerful must be omnipotent. If earth were all that existed, then we might say George W. Bush was omnipotent in 2002, but the combined power of every other human on the planet would certainly have been enough to overthrow him. It would seem that if Smith is simply the most powerful being, this leaves open the possibility that the orchestrated activities of other beings might be able to countermand her orders.

Third objection

The Anselmian might respond in a way similar to how she would criticize Morriston's paper. If God exists necessarily, and necessarily prevents any more powerful being from existing, then Jane is simply impossible. Yet a response Morriston mentions in his treatment of necessary moral perfection is available to us here. If God's existence constrains metaphysical possibility so carefully, it seems as if it would make more sense to say that no being can be maximally powerful if God exists, not that God would be maximally powerful if God exists.

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Morriston writes:

> We may, if we like, derive all sorts of surprising metaphysical impossibilities from our preferred brand of theism, but then there will be no guarantee that the modal structure of reality is compatible with the existence of an omnipotent being. As far as we can see, the most powerful conceivable being might be far more powerful than a being with the maximum metaphysically possible degree of power.[21]

If there were a lesser being than God, yet powerful enough that her existence prevented the existence of more powerful beings, this lesser being might, in that case, have a chance to pass the maximal-power test. Within this thought-experiment, we may reduce the power of the being in question at will. Surely a result that tells us that the most powerful existent (if it prevents more powerful beings from existing) always passes the maximal-power test must be rejected; if we aren't careful, we will be forced to conclude that if McEar and McNothing were the only persons in existence, and McEar's existence altered the space of metaphysical possibility so that no more powerful being could exist, McEar would be omnipotent. This would certainly be in strong disagreement with our pre-theoretical intuitions about power.

In another of Morriston's recent papers,[22] he responds to this possible objection more directly. Morriston argues that a maximally powerful being would have the maximum *conceivable* degree of power. Even if it were metaphysically impossible to bring about some conceptually possible state of affairs, to Morriston this fact should lead us to conclude, not that a being that could not bring about such a state of affairs would nevertheless be maximally powerful, but that no being could be maximally powerful. No person could ever instantiate the property 'omnipotent' if some states of affairs, possible *per se*, were only impossible because of the existence of some other being. Morriston concludes:

> I think it must be acknowledged that, whether or not He possesses the maximum metaphysically possible degree of power, the Anselmian God lacks the maximum *conceivable* degree of power. And that, I think, is all that is needed to show that the Anselmian analysis cannot be the correct analysis of the *concept* of omnipotence.[23]

I must agree with Morriston's diagnosis[24] that the apologist who employs the objection in question is confusing the question of how much power the best possible version of her God would possess, with the question of how much power we must require a being to possess before we will call it omnipotent.

I conclude that if God exists, He is not as powerful as Jane *would* be, even if Jane's existence would be logically or metaphysically impossible (by the hypothesis of God's existence, rather than *per se*). While the most powerful metaphysically possible being would be God, there would simply be no maximally powerful being, because certain beings would be such that, if they did exist, they would be more powerful than God – I believe this ought to be enough to disconfirm God's omnipotence.

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Fourth objection

The theist might argue that God is indeed capable of learning, because He could forget some fact and then relearn it. My response is that this tactic assumes an incorrect definition of capability (as presented in **Capability and possible worlds** above); the set of God's defined properties includes omniscience, and if God forgot some fact, then the being that was doing the forgetting in the possible world would not share all of the members of the set of God's properties. Therefore, there would still be no possible world in which a being with all of God's properties learned, so we would not be able to say that God was actually learning something. In fact, a consequence of our definitions of God and of capability is that God is incapable of forgetting anything, because no being that forgot something would possess all of the properties God is defined to have. There would have to be at least one such being in some possible world for God to have the capability to forget something. Furthermore, it is arguably a consequence of God's existence as a maximally great being that He is incorruptible,[25] in which case it would be impossible for Him to lose His omniscience.

Fifth objection

It may have happened that we have passed over an even more sophisticated definition of 'omnipotence' that will finally be compatible with omniscience. Hoffman and Rosenkrantz have presented a very careful analysis of 'omnipotent', and if even this definition fails to allow an omniscient being to be omnipotent, I believe we will be in a position to conclude that no plausible form of 'omnipotent' – plausible intuitively or plausible reasonably – will suffice. Hoffman and Rosenkrantz write:

> (D3) x is omnipotent at t = df.(s) (it is possible for some agent to bring about $s \rightarrow$ at t, x has it within his power to bring about s).[26]

There are important qualifications. The variable s ranges over only some states of affairs, roughly, (1) 'unrestrictedly repeatable' (such that it can happen, then not happen, then happen again, and so on) states of affairs; and (2) states of affairs such that something happens forever after. Further, these states of affairs must be describable in terms of happening in n minutes (where n is possibly equal to zero).

Let us consider the state of affairs L again. Right now, it is possible for some agent to bring about L (and 'in 0 minutes, L'). L is unrestrictedly repeatable: It is possible that someone freely learns, and then no one freely learns, and then someone freely learns again. So it appears that L is an example of a state of affairs that God cannot bring about, and therefore, that God is not omnipotent (nor is any omniscient being).

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To generalize and conclude

It should be apparent upon reflection that L is a member of a schema of unrestrictedly repeatable states of affairs. We might imagine E, 'some person freely eats', and M, 'some person freely changes him- or herself'. These are both unrestrictedly repeatable states of affairs that some agents bring about, but that God cannot bring about if He is non-physical and immutable, respectively. My position is that P3 is a consequence of P1, and such will be the case for any state of affairs within the schema 'some person freely performs task T' when only beings that lack one or more of God's properties are capable of performing T, and capability is defined the way I have presented it above. Further, it is a consequence of P2 and of P4 that God is not omnipotent. God must fail the maximal-power test if P2 and P4 are true. For almost any property that precludes the performance of a task T, such a property will be inconsistent with omnipotence. The motivation for the move from 'task' omnipotence to 'state-of-affairs' omnipotence is therefore completely undercut, because such a move affords absolutely no lasting relief from traditionally presented conflicts between God's omnipotence and His other essential properties. 'State-of-affairs' omnipotence seems to have been widely accepted since Flint and Freddoso,[27] but I believe this paper shows that 'state-of-affairs' does no better than 'task' omnipotence.

At this point, I recognize two options for the theist. She could present a further definition of 'omnipotent' with the hope that it will avoid the problem with persons freely performing actions God is incapable of performing, or she could simply abandon God's omnipotence in favour of others of His properties.

Suppose the theist were to add another condition to the range of states of affairs in Hoffman and Rosenkrantz's definition: '*s* must not stipulate the free action of a person'. This move would obviously not guarantee that God can bring about states of affairs in which He freely communicates with humans or creates the universe, and it simply seems ad hoc; humans and God both bring about states of affairs all the time in which a free person acts, and it genuinely seems that a being will be more powerful if it has the ability to bring about states of affairs from this additional set.

The alternative is simply to abandon God's omnipotence. It would seem that a maximally great being must not be omnipotent to be maximally great, and a non-omnipotent being can be omniscient (because she can bring about 'some person freely learns'), non-physical (because she can bring about 'some person freely eats'), and necessary (because she can bring about 'some person freely commits suicide').[28] It looks as though the gain for the theist with abandonment of God's omnipotence is very high, comprising at least these three important great-making properties, while the trade-off is only to decide that God is incapable of bringing about a relatively small number of states of affairs.[29] I conclude that by far the best

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response is to claim that God is not in fact maximally powerful, but only as close to omnipotent as a maximally great being can be.[30]

Notes

1. Two reasons for this abandonment are sophisticated versions of the free-will defence and of the unknown-purpose defence. A response to a deductive argument from evil must only show the possibility that some evil is metaphysically necessary for some greater good, and it is not particularly hard to tell such a story.
2. Wes Morriston 'Omnipotence and necessary moral perfection: are they compatible?', *Religious Studies*, **37** (2001), 143–160. See also Wes Morriston 'Omnipotence and the power to choose', *Faith and Philosophy*, **19** (2002), 358–367.
3. Theodore M. Drange 'Incompatible-properties arguments: a survey', *Philo*, **1**:2 (1998), 7–20.
4. By 'positive atheism' I mean the belief that God does not exist. There is some debate about the meaning of 'atheism' and some parties feel it need not refer to *disbelief*, but rather simply to *unbelief*.
5. This term did not originate here, but rather has become fairly common in the literature. It may derive from Thomas P. Flint and Alfred J. Freddoso 'Maximal power', in Alfred J. Freddoso (ed.) *The Existence and Nature of God* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 81–113.
6. Flint and Freddoso 'Maximal power', 84.
7. *Ibid*.
8. There is a further schema of tasks that God cannot perform, 'to perform x where x is a task not performed by an omnipotent being', but we should avoid a definition of 'omnipotent' that describes a property no being can possess; therefore let us alter T-omnipotence one more time to be 'the ability to perform any task that is not defined such that an omnipotent being has not performed it'. This definition avoids circularity because the sense of 'omnipotent' above is *de dicto*, part of the description of the action rather than one of the properties of the being in question.
9. Hoffman and Rosenkrantz provide similar examples. See Joshua Hoffman and Gary S. Rosenkrantz *The Divine Attributes* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 169–171.
10. Flint and Freddoso 'Maximal power', 99.
11. Hoffman and Rosenkrantz have pointed out that Flint and Freddoso's account requires the possibility that counterfactuals of freedom are true, but there are reasons to think such counterfactuals are necessarily false. For a counterfactual of freedom to be true, it seems as if there must be a causation or entailment relation between the antecedent and the consequent, but if such a relation exists, it seems the consequent cannot therefore describe the action in question as 'free'. See Joshua Hoffman and Gary S. Rosenkrantz 'Omnipotence', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2002 edn), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL=<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2002/entries/omnipotence/>.
12. Morriston 'Omnipotence and necessary moral perfection: are they compatible?'.
13. *Ibid*., 156–157.
14. Flint and Freddoso describe further the sense of 'weak' actualization and its application to the question in 'Maximal power', 85–86.
15. See Wes Morriston 'Omnipotence and the Anselmian God', *Philo*, **4** (2001), 15–18, for a similar response to this objection.
16. Hoffman and Rosenkrantz 'Omnipotence'.
17. Morriston 'Omnipotence and the Anselmian God', 17–18.
18. T. J. Mawson 'Omnipotence and necessary moral perfection are compatible: a reply to Morriston', *Religious Studies*, **38** (2002), 215–223.
19. Morriston 'Omnipotence and necessary moral perfection: are they compatible?'.
20. Mawson 'Omnipotence and necessary moral perfection are compatible', 221.
21. Morriston 'Omnipotence and necessary moral perfection: are they compatible?', 156.
22. Morriston 'Omnipotence and the Anselmian God'.
23. *Ibid.*, 14 (italics original).
24. *Ibid.*, 7. Morriston describes the problem in this helpful way in his abstract.
25. See Hoffman and Rosenkrantz in *The Divine Attributes*, 108. If God is maximally great, He is incorruptible, and this entails that He cannot lose any of His essential attributes.

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26. *Ibid.*, 172.
27. Flint and Freddoso 'Maximal power'.
28. It is an interesting question what an omnipotent being would be like, if we adopt S-omnipotence. This being would have a minimum of essential attributes that preclude the ability to bring about states of affairs of the form 'some person freely does T', where T is some task. If we were to take God's limitations as a starting point, it seems that the omnipotent being would be non-omniscient, material, morally neutral, contingent, and within time.
29. It is important to ask whether this God would be compatible with the God of the Bible. Jesus in Matthew 19.26 and Mark 10.27 asserts that all things are possible with God, but perhaps he could be taken to be saying that anyone can be saved with God's help, or that God can provide anything for any human.
30. I am grateful to Kenneth Clatterbaugh, to Philip Osborne, and to anonymous referees for this journal for helpful comments on this article.

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