Religious Studies **41**, 55–69 © 2005 Cambridge University Press
DOI: 10.1017/S0034412504007449 Printed in the United Kingdom

Freedom, human and divine

T. J. MAWSON

St Peter's College, Oxford, OX1 2DL

Abstract: **In this paper I seek to show how God's freedom is not reduced or His power diminished by His inability to be less than perfectly good even though ours would be. That ours would be explains why it might prima facie appear to us that there is a 'conceptual tension' between some of the claims of traditional theism and reveals some interesting (well, to me anyway) differences between human freedom and divine freedom.**

Introduction

Wes Morriston starts a recent paper in this journal with a passage which sets out a dilemma for classical theism:

> Is choosing to do what one knows to be evil a genuine exercise of power? Or is the ability to make evil choices better characterized as a 'liability' to 'fall short' of one's proper good? In a recent paper in this journal I argued that both alternatives have implications that are unpalatable to most contemporary 'Anselmians'. If the ability to make evil choices is a bona fide active power, then an omnipotent being would necessarily have this power (even if it chooses never to exercise it). This is unacceptable to Anselmians, since it is inconsistent with the supposed necessity of God's moral perfection. But if, on the other hand, the 'ability' to choose evil is a mere 'liability' to fail in what one is trying for, then moral freedom – i.e. the freedom to choose between good and evil alternatives – is quite a bad thing. Since the contemporary Anselmians who were the principal targets of my paper endorse Plantinga's free-will defence, they should also be reluctant to accept this alternative.[1]

Having thus set out the dilemma, he goes on to criticize the response to it that I give in an earlier paper of mine, a paper which is itself a response to a still earlier paper of his.[2]

The intuitive plausibility of Morriston's original arguments and of his response to my response at least put the onus on 'Anselmians' such as myself – defenders of classical theism – to provide some diagnosis of why it initially appears that there is a conceptual tension between the claim that God is omnipotent and the claim that He is of necessity perfectly good – a diagnosis which turns, I have

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412504007449 Published online by Cambridge University Press

come to believe, on explaining why one and the same ability (to be less than morally perfect) can be a power for us even though it would be a liability for the most powerful being that is logically possible – God. This is the diagnosis that this paper seeks to provide. In doing so, it contradicts some (but not all) of what I have said earlier on the topic. Specifically, it contradicts my claim that this ability is a liability for us – finite humans – as well as for God. I had already submitted a draft of this paper before I heard that the camp I had previously occupied and recently vacated had been attacked by Morriston in his latest paper. Nothing I subsequently read in his paper persuaded me that I would be wise to move back and reoccupy it!

One might think that there's something rather philosophically 'unsportsmanlike' in my presenting a moving target like this. I am reminded of the incident when Candide asks Pangloss, 'So when you had been hanged, dissected, and beaten unmercifully and whilst you were rowing at your bench, did you still think that everything in this world is for the best?', to which Pangloss heroically replies, 'I still hold my original views, for I am still a Philosopher. It would not be proper for me to recant.' But whilst I claim to be a philosopher, I do not claim to be a Pangloss. My views change. I think it's more sporting to call it how one sees it and this is how I now see it.

Freedom

Philosophers are not at all agreed about what freedom involves. Fortunately, we do not need to know exactly what it involves to make some progress in understanding the traditional theistic claim that God is perfectly free, and resolving the prima facie tension between this and the other traditional theistic claim that He is of necessity perfectly good, that there's no possibility of His ever doing anything less than what perfect goodness would demand of Him. Of course, we need to know at least some of what freedom involves if we're to make any progress here. Most would agree that freedom requires the power to bring about what one wants to bring about. So, assuming that they're right, God's being perfectly free must entail Him not being in any way constrained in His power to bring about what He wants. Knowing this would be enough for our purposes, were it the case that nothing else that freedom might involve could be relevant to our concern with the prima facie tension between perfect freedom and necessary perfect goodness in God.

If we were then to wish to resolve this tension, we would only have to show how being unable to be less than perfect in no sense constrained God in bringing about what He wants; and the way to do that would obviously be to show – or maybe simply assert – that God could never want to do anything less than perfect. QED. But unfortunately there is more to our problem than this, in that constraining humans in what they can want to that which is demanded of them

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412504007449 Published online by Cambridge University Press

by perfect goodness does – thought-experiment seems to suggest – 'disempower' them. So, given that the theistic God is traditionally conceived of as all-powerful, for any satisfactory solution to our tension we'll need to show why God's not being able to want to do anything other than what perfect goodness demands does not in itself constrain, 'disempower', Him. Indeed, we'll need to show how the freedom we enjoy to be less than perfect is not compatible with omnipotence and omniscience, even though this freedom is in itself a power for less-than-all-powerful and less-than-all-knowledgeable creatures such as ourselves.

Let's start on this task by asking ourselves this: 'What might in principle constrain someone in bringing about what they want to bring about?'. One might plausibly suggest that the only things that constrain people in their actions are their not being sufficiently powerful and their not knowing what it is they are doing. In other words, one might plausibly suggest that if your answer to the question, 'Did you freely choose to do that?' is ever 'No', then that is either because you recognized that what you were doing was less than what you wanted to do, but simply did not have it within your power to do anything closer to what you wanted, or because you did not realize exactly what it was that you were doing as you were doing it.

The theistic God is omnipotent, so He could never be less than perfectly free in what He chose to do as a result of not having enough power to do anything closer to what it was He wanted to do. And He is omniscient, so He could never be less than perfectly free in what He chose to do as a result of not knowing exactly what it was He was doing. There are none of the limitations on God's freedom that there are on ours (and indeed that there would be on any being less than omnipotent or omniscient). God's ability to bring about what He wants is unconstrained by either a lack of power or a lack of knowledge; and it is in virtue of this that we must thus describe God as perfectly free. So far, so good.

Goodness

If philosophers are not at all agreed about exactly what freedom involves, there's at least an equal amount of dispute amongst them on the issue of exactly what goodness involves. Again then, it is fortunate that we don't need to know exactly what it involves to make some progress in our task, but – as with freedom – obviously we need to know something. Fortunately, within the objectivist camp on the field of debate about moral value, there is some consensus (otherwise it wouldn't be a camp), a consensus which we may – as all theists find themselves within this camp – assume for our purposes.

Goodness is a matter of behaving as one ought in one's relations with other people (and creatures more generally), and perfect goodness is a matter of doing the best thing that one can for them – whenever there is a best – and doing one

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412504007449 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of the best things that one can whenever two or more things are 'joint best' for them – i.e. are equally good and none is better. Of course, none of us are perfectly good towards one another. This, in itself, does not make us blameworthy. One is blamelessly less than perfectly good, for example, when one tries but fails to do the best or joint best that one believes one can for someone, failing either due to lack of power or lack of knowledge (as long as one does not by failing to do the best or joint best thereby also fail to do that which one ought to do, and one's failure is itself the result of one's negligence).

And one is blamelessly less than perfectly good towards someone even when one doesn't try to do the best or joint best that one can for them, as long as one tries to meet one's obligations towards them (and again as long as any failure to do so cannot be put down to one's own negligence). If I owe someone a certain number of tutorials and I give him or her this number, then in this respect I do all that I ought. It might have been better for this person were I to have given more than I owed, but I was not obliged to do so, and so if I decided not to do so, no blame attaches to me. My duty is fulfilled. My conscience is clear. We have the freedom to do this, to refrain from good acts that are not morally required of us, that is what are usually called acts of supererogation.

As well as being blamelessly less than perfectly good to one another, sometimes we are also blameworthily less than perfectly good to one another. Sometimes we do something which is not simply not the best or joint best that we could do for someone but something which we know we ought not to do. If I owe a pupil of mine a certain number of tutorials, and I could give him or her this number without any harm befalling anyone, and yet I choose to go down to the pub instead of being in my room at the times we have arranged, then – assuming I am aware of my duties – I have chosen to do that which I know that I ought not to do. I have chosen to do that, the doing of which will make me blameworthy. Of course, I no doubt hope that nobody will actually blame me, that I won't bump into my pupil in the pub where he or she will ask me what I'm doing there (to deflect me from asking the same question of him or her). But I have done what I needn't have done, and knew at the time I shouldn't do: I have not simply failed to give my pupil that which would have been the best I could give him or her; I have failed to give him or her that which he or she had a right to expect of me. My duty remains unfulfilled. My conscience is not clear. We have the freedom to do this too – to choose to fail to do what we know to be our duty.

If one is morally obliged to do something for someone in a particular situation, then it should be the case that one would do that thing for anyone in the same situation. When one does something good for people that goes beyond what one is obliged to do for them, it is not true that it should be the case that one would do the same thing for anyone in their situation. In the case of a supererogatory act, one cannot do it from a disinterested sense of duty; one can only do it for the sake of the person for whom one's doing it. In virtue of this

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412504007449 Published online by Cambridge University Press

necessary 'directedness' towards the good of the particular people for whom one is performing the act, it does not seem unnatural therefore to call acts of supererogation acts of love. God's perfect goodness then is His perfectly fulfilling His duties towards His creatures and, furthermore, whenever there is a logically possible best or joint best thing for Him to do for them, His doing that too – His perfectly loving them. Again then, so far, so good.

We have the ability to be less than perfectly good in each of the two ways sketched above. Does God have the ability to be less than perfectly good in either or both of these two ways? The traditional theistic answer to this has been that He does not have this ability: He cannot do anything less than that demanded by moral perfection. Doesn't that make Him less powerful than us then? 'No' – the answer is given – for the ability to do less than what perfect goodness demands would be a liability rather than a power for Him. To understand and assess this resolution to the prima facie tension between perfect freedom and necessary perfect goodness, we need then to consider why it is that we think that it is a power for us to be able to do less than that demanded by perfect goodness, and then go on to see whether it's plausible to maintain that it would be a liability for God.

Freedom to be less than perfect – a power for us

Let us start by asking the question, 'Why do we – finite humans – fail to be perfectly good?'; and let us continue by answering it. There are four possible reasons: we reasonably conclude that we don't have enough time/resources; we're unreasonable; we're ignorant; and/or we're selfish.

When we fail to go beyond our duty with regard to someone, this could be because we correctly judge ourselves to have fulfilled our duty and, reasonably enough, wish to spend what we judge to be our finite time and resources elsewhere. It would be good for my pupils to have extra tutorials, and this fact gives me a reason to give them extra tutorials, but it would be good for me if I occasionally had the chance to have a drink. I recognize that I am under no obligation to give my pupils extra tutorials (that's precisely what their being 'extra' means), and also that to do so would deprive me of the chance of ever getting to the pubs before they close. I am therefore, blamelessly, less good than I could be towards my pupils if I decide not to offer them extra tutorials but go to the pub instead. If I had more time available, I'd do both. But I don't. My action is certainly not altruistic, but it would be odd to call it 'selfish', for selfishness carries with it the implication of blameworthiness and, in that I have willingly fulfilled my obligations, I am not blameworthy. Perhaps we might best call such failures to be perfectly good 'reasonably self-interested' or 'expedient' failures.

What of the case when we fail to be perfectly good, not just in the sense of not doing the most good that we could do for others, but doing less than we

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412504007449 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ought to do for them? That, I suggest, must be due to one or a mixture of the following three reasons. Firstly, it might be because we know what we ought to do, but are acted on by factors beyond our control, e.g. overwhelming desires, and in this respect are thus unreasonable. I might genuinely want to give my pupils the tutorials that are their due but find that, due to my overwhelming desire for alcohol, I am nevertheless unable to bring myself to stay in my room at the times I have arranged these tutorials, as I know that the pubs are open then. To this extent, I am less than perfectly free: I am being acted on by forces that are beyond my control. (Of course, I might still be blameworthy for not giving these tutorials if the fact that my desires are beyond my control is itself the result of negligent choices I made earlier in life, e.g. my refusing to listen to those who told me that I was starting to drink too much.)

Secondly, it might be because we are ignorant – we just don't know what we should do. I am fully capable of staying in my room and giving my pupils the tutorials that are their due even when I know that the pubs are open, but I nevertheless often fail to do so as I have a terrible memory: I just forget that I've arranged tutorials and, in my ignorance of my obligations, go to the pub instead. (Again, I might still be blameworthy for not giving these tutorials if the fact that I have a terrible memory is my fault, or I do nothing to mitigate the effects of my terrible memory, e.g. keep a diary.)

Thirdly, we might be selfish. We could do our duty; we know we should; but we freely choose to do something else instead, something which we calculate will serve us better. I know that I should be giving someone a tutorial; I am fully capable of doing so; but I decide that I'll enjoy myself rather more in the pub, and that I'm going to prioritize my own enjoyment over doing what I should. This sort of action certainly deserves the name 'selfish' because it is straightforwardly the blameworthy (in contrast to blameless) pursuit of one's self-interest at the expense of another. I am not doing what is expedient for me within what I believe to be the parameters imposed by my duties to others; I am knowingly transgressing those parameters so that I might – as I think of it – more effectively pursue my own interests.

If the mere fact that it would be better for my pupils if they had more tutorials prevented me from ever choosing to leave my room, I'd be less empowered than if it didn't; if the mere fact that it is my duty to stay in the room at the times I have arranged their tutorials prevented me from leaving then, again I'd be less empowered too. It's a power – an ability that it's good to have – for me to be able to restrain myself from doing the best that I can for people, given that I take myself to have less than infinite time and resources available to me. And it's a power for me to be able, not simply to choose to fail to do the best that I can for people, but to choose to do what I know I oughtn't to do, given that sometimes it appears to me that I can best pursue my interests by failing to do my duty.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412504007449 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Against this line of thinking, one might argue that the ability to be less than perfect in these two ways isn't really a power, rather than a liability, if there's no way that exercising it could be in our best long-term interests. And if there's a God, then there is no way in which it could be in our best long-term interests. Only assuming a certain lack of epistemic access to the truth of theism will one be able to generate examples where it is, as one might say, 'subjectively' reasonable for one to conclude that it is in one's best interests to be less than perfect. On theism, it is not possible to generate examples of situations where it is *objectively* reasonable to be so, because on theism there cannot be any situation where it really is in someone's best interests to be so.

I like to think that this is a plausible counter-argument that deserves serious consideration. I like to think that because it's a counter-argument which I myself have previously endorsed.[3] But I've changed my mind over whether it deserves our endorsement. I am now inclined to say to it, 'Of course, but we *do* have a certain lack of epistemic access to the truth of theism'. It is a genuine power to be able to do that which appears to one to be most reasonable, even if it only appears to be most reasonable because one is suffering already from the liability of being less than omniscient. And it certainly sometimes seems most reasonable to be less than perfect in each of these two ways. It can't be a liability to be able to do that which one – reasonably enough from the evidence presented – judges oneself to have most reason to do; it must be a power, an ability which it's good for us to have.

In order to drive this point home against my former self, let us consider the following situation. A friend of yours has applied for three jobs, one with University A; one with University B; and one with the Quality Assurance Agency, the government body that inspects universities. You know that it would be morally good for your friend to work for either A or B, and in fact equally good to work for either; each is pursuing the same worthwhile goals. You also know that your friend is morally obliged not to work for the QAA. It is inherently evil, and one's just deluding oneself if one thinks that one might be able to reform it from the inside. It's like the Gestapo or Cheka in this respect, and in others too. Furthermore, you know that your friend won't be truly happy working for the QAA; although it gives out more important-sounding titles and pays better, in the end the intellectual and moral bankruptcy of the organization means that your friend would end up having a mid-life crisis if she worked for it. By contrast, you know that if your friend worked for either A or B, although there'd be less chance of an important-sounding title and less pay, your friend would realize that what she was doing was worthy, and ultimately end up a lot happier. Don't ask me how you know all this; let us just suppose for the sake of argument that you do.

Now your friend – not having your level of insight into these organizations, or into her own psychology – has made applications for all three positions and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412504007449 Published online by Cambridge University Press

gone off on a short holiday, leaving you with authority to open her letters whilst she's away and a contact telephone number should she need to make any decisions. So it is that one day you open a letter from A, a letter from B, and a letter from the QAA, each of which offers your friend a job with their respective organizations, jobs which your friend needs to telephone to accept within the next twenty-four hours. A failure to 'phone will be taken as a rejection of the job offer, the job thus being offered to someone else. Your friend will – it seems – have to choose between these three jobs.

It occurs to you that you could tell your friend the contents of the A and B letters and simply fail to mention the QAA letter. If you do this, your friend will be so excited about the A and B offers that she won't ask about whether there's any letter from the QAA. She will 'phone and accept one of the A or B jobs, which – as you know – will mean that she fulfils her obligations, does something that is positively worthy with her life, and does something which will ultimately be in her own best interests. Let me suppose that you know that there's no way you could ever be found out in this ruse. You have a choice yourself then: to preserve your friend's freedom to fail to do what would be ideal, to fail to do what she ought to do, and to fail to do what is in her own best interests, or to remove this freedom. What should you do?

Most peoples' intuition is that there's at least something to be said in favour of your telling your friend about the QAA letter, and thus preserving her ability to choose to do what is less than ideal, what she should not, in fact, do, and what is, in fact, not in her best interests. Why? Because having this sort of ability is in itself a good, i.e. it's a power for your friend even though it's not actually in her best interests for her to exercise it.

So, to sum up so far, *ceteris paribus*, we have more freedom if our knowing that a thing that we want to do is less than the best thing we could do does not in itself prevent us from doing it; and *ceteris paribus*, we have more freedom if our knowing that a thing that we want to do is something that we are under an obligation not to do does not in itself prevent us from doing it. Or, at least, this is so, given that we exist with a certain amount of epistemic uncertainty as to the truth of theism. That we have this ability/these abilities is in itself (contrary to what I myself have previously stated – sorry, moving target) good for us, even if exercising this freedom in the direction of doing less than is perfect is objectively a mistake (as it would be on theism). If we did know with absolute certainty that we would enjoy an everlasting life of perfect fulfilment in God's presence after our death, it would be obvious to us that it was a mistake to be less than perfect: it could not strike us as reasonable and expedient to 'conserve' our resources by failing to do for others all that we could, or to think that we could pursue our own interests more efficiently at the expense of others. If we did know these things with absolute certainty, then these abilities would be liabilities for us. But we don't know these things with absolute certainty, and so it is a power for us to

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412504007449 Published online by Cambridge University Press

be able to choose to do that which we know is less than perfect, and it is a power for us to be able to choose to do that which we know we ought not to do.

Now we must ask, 'Could these abilities ever reasonably be thought of as powers rather than liabilities for God?'. To appreciate how the answer to this might be the negative one that the solution to the prima facie tension between perfect freedom and necessary perfect goodness requires, given God's omnipotence, we need to appreciate the general point that whether a certain ability counts as a power or a liability can vary from context to context.

What's a power for one may be a liability for another

Let's consider the ability to commit suicide, by way of an example. We certainly very often have the ability to commit suicide. We are dependent on many things for our continued existence. If these things altered we cease to exist, and we usually have it within our power to alter many of these things. Is our dependency on these other things a sign of our strength – a power – or is it a sign of our weakness – a liability? Should we say, 'I have the power to be killed by lots of different things; I am therefore more powerful than Superman, who does not have the power to be killed by anything other than Kryptonite', or should we say, 'I have the liability to be killed by lots of different things; I am therefore less powerful than Superman, who does not have the liability to be killed by anything other than Kryptonite'? Obviously, we should say the latter; to be dependent on something for one's existence is a sign of weakness. Superman can only be killed by Kryptonite (if I remember correctly). So he is much more powerful than we are; but he still has a weakness. An omnipotent being, one might therefore think, would be stripped of *any* element of this liability – there would be nothing that could cause Him not to exist, not even Himself.

It's the 'not even Himself' bit tagged on the end of this argument that might make one nervous about it. Someone might agree that to be dependent on something other than oneself is a sign of weakness, but insist that depending on oneself – or more accurately one's will – for one's continued existence is no liability; it's a power. There's something plausible about these thoughts. Is having one's existence within the scope of one's own will to determine, a power or is it a liability? The example of the ability to commit suicide is a good one for our purposes as it is – I am about to argue – a power for creatures such as ourselves (and that's where the plausibility of these thoughts originates), but it could only be a liability for the most powerful being that there could be.

Consider the story told by Seneca of a young Spartan boy who, having been disgraced by allowing himself to be captured during a battle, would say nothing to his captors except for repeating over and over again the words, 'I shall not be a slave'. True to his word, the moment they warily unleashed him and gave him an order, he ran headlong into the nearest wall and smashed his head

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412504007449 Published online by Cambridge University Press

open on it, killing himself instantly. Seneca concludes by asking, 'When freedom is this close, can anyone still be a slave?'.

Seneca was, of course, a Stoic, and Stoics were in the habit of cheering themselves with these sorts of tales; you might not find them so bracing. But you might, nevertheless, agree that the boy gained in power at the moment that he had the issue of his continued existence brought back within the sphere of influence of his own will. If so, you will think that having one's existence depend on one's will can be a power rather than a liability. But – as this story well illustrates – circumstances where the ability to commit suicide is a power rather than a liability are circumstances where the person for whom it is a power is already terribly constrained by factors beyond his or her control, constrained in ways which are much greater than the power to commit suicide is liberating. Someone is in a terribly disempowered state if you can point out the most encouraging possibility open to them with the sentence, 'Look on the bright side: you could kill yourself'. Thus, surely we would say that, had the boy had the power to seize his captors' weapons, make his escape, and so on, then this would have rendered the ability to dash his head open on the nearest wall a liability once more; and he would have been much better off with these other abilities and without the ability to dash his head open on the nearest wall. That set of abilities would have been more power-granting.

One might be tempted to say something like the following at this stage, 'Well, he'd have been better off still if he'd retained the ability to dash his head open on the nearest wall, but – fully recognizing his other means of escape – never chosen to exercise it.' But to this one must consider saying that, if we add to the boy the power of being unable to make mistakes about his circumstances; the power of having a faculty of desire which never desires anything that it would be unreasonable to desire, and the power of never doing anything other than what he wants to do, we must say that he *could* never exercise this ability, which is the same as saying he can't have it as an ability. We might say then that the best situation for the boy would be one where he could dash his head open on the nearest wall if he ever chose to, but, knowing full well that this would be unreasonable, given that he can now make his escape by other means, and given that he cannot inadvertently do things he doesn't intend to do, and can't intend to do unreasonable things, he could never choose to dash his head open. Given, though, that an ability which one cannot exercise is an ability which one doesn't have, it would be a lot clearer – and a lot shorter – to say simply that the best situation for him would be one which involved *inter alia* him not being able to dash his head open on the nearest wall.

So, the boy Seneca told us about did have a genuine power to commit suicide by dashing his head against the nearest wall, although his ability to do so only counted as a power because of the other liabilities he was suffering under at that time. If this is right, then the abilities to choose to do what one knows is

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412504007449 Published online by Cambridge University Press

less than the best that one could do for someone, and to choose to do what one knows one ought not to do, could be genuine powers for us – far from all-powerful and far from all-knowledgeable creatures – as we've seen reason to believe that they are, yet nevertheless they could be liabilities for an all-powerful and all-knowledgeable God.

It follows from the above that for a full understanding of what is entailed by being all-powerful (by having the most power-granting set of abilities that is logically possible), one would have to compare sets of co-possible abilities to see which set one's intuition told one would be most power-granting, which it would be best to have. At this point I anticipate Morriston will disagree. For in his latest paper he says this:

> We may agree with Mawson that it is better not even to be *able* to choose evil (since such an ability springs from ignorance and/or irrational passions), in which case we must draw the conclusion that this ability does not belong to *the best possible combination of attributes*. But the question remains open as to whether the ability to choose evil is a genuine power or whether it must be included in *the maximum possible degree of power*. For all we have been shown so far, the proper conclusion might simply be that omnipotence does not belong to the best possible combination of attributes.[4]

The assumption here is of course that we can work out which abilities are powers and which liabilities without any evaluative thoughts ('Which of these would it be best to be able to do?') guiding us in our categorization. Then – with a derived and value-neutral concept of the maximum possible degree of power in hand – we can see that we have no reason to think that a being with this maximum degree of power wouldn't be able to do things which are less than perfect.

But this whole approach is, of course – if what I'm saying is right – confused. If, as I 'help' my wife in the kitchen, I have the ability to bring about the ruin of the dinner, this is not a power I enjoy – it is a liability that I (and she) suffer. A natural way of describing our culinary difficulty would be to say that I have less ability in the kitchen than she does, but one could equally, and it seems more precisely, say that I may have as many abilities as she in the kitchen, it's just that less of the abilities that I have are ones that it is good to have, less are powers. I would be a more powerful chef if I couldn't inadvertently ruin dinners (i.e. couldn't ruin them unless I took myself to have good reason to do so). Losing the ability to inadvertently ruin dinners would be losing ability whilst gaining in power, but we need an evaluative principle to tell us this – *ceteris paribus*, it's better not to ruin dinners than it is to ruin them – and thus to understand what a being with the maximum amount of power would be able to do we'll need some evaluative principles too. In order to solve our dilemma, we'll need to come up with some general principles that will tell us when the ability to be less than perfectly good will count as a power, and when

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412504007449 Published online by Cambridge University Press

it will count as a liability. Fortunately, we have already seen such principles lurking in the wings of our discussion; we need merely bring them centre stage.

Freedom to be less than perfectly good – a liability for God

I suggest that the ability to do what one knows one ought not do is only plausibly a power when one is in a situation where one wants an outcome that one reasonably believes one cannot achieve without deviating from what morality requires of one. God's omnipotence assures Him of being able to get whatever it is He wants without deviating from what morality requires. And His omniscience assures Him of knowing this. What about the ability to refrain from doing the best or joint best that one can for someone? Again, this is only plausibly a power when one is in a situation where it is reasonable for one to think that one has finite resources available to one, and thus that it is expedient to conserve them for other uses. And, again, God could never be in such a situation. Thus, the ability to be less than perfectly good will not feature in the most power-granting set of abilities.

To ask the question whether God would be more powerful if He had the ability to perform an action which is less than that demanded by perfect goodness is to ask whether He would be more powerful if He had the ability to perform an action which, of necessity, there is good reason for Him not to perform (it is less than that demanded by perfect goodness – He has more reason to perform that action which is demanded by perfect goodness instead), and which – being omnipotent – He need not perform in order to bring about any other state of affairs He might want to bring about. In other words, it is to ask whether He would be more powerful if He had the ability to perform an overall unreasonable action. To answer this question 'No' seems, then, obviously right. Such an ability would always be a liability for Him; it could never be a power.[5]

A natural thing to say at this stage would be something like the following: 'But, on this account, God wouldn't have been able to deviate from the demands of perfect goodness even if He'd wanted to, and surely that makes Him less powerful than a being who, as a contingent matter of fact, never deviates from these demands but could do so if He so chose.' This is a natural thing to say for us (because freedom to be less than morally perfect is indeed a power for us), but it's a confused thing to say because – unlike us – God could never have or take Himself to have any reason to deviate from what perfect goodness demands, and thus He could never want to deviate from what perfect goodness demands. Why can't God want to be less than perfect? Because nobody can want to be less than perfect as an end in itself. Recognizing that a certain action is less than what perfect goodness demands

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412504007449 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of one is, in itself, recognizing that one has reason to avoid doing that thing. People can only ever want to do actions which are, and which they know to be, less than what perfect goodness demands of them if they believe them to be the best means available to them in achieving some end which they desire, an end which they would therefore pursue by a means more in accord with the demands of perfect goodness, were they to be able to do so and know about it.

So God – due to His omnipotence and omniscience – cannot ever want to deviate from what perfect goodness demands. The thought that this inability of His to want to do less than what perfect goodness demands disempowers Him is rather like the one that God, in virtue of having an inability to commit suicide, must be less powerful in this respect than a being who, as a contingent matter of fact, doesn't commit suicide but could do so if he so chose. To turn people from this latter thought, we might perhaps say something like, 'An omnipotent being could commit suicide if He wanted to, but He could never have any reason to want to, and – being perfectly reasonable – could thus never want to commit suicide', but, given that He could never want to commit suicide, it would be equally true – and a lot shorter and clearer – to say, 'He could never commit suicide'. So we might try to turn people from the former thought by saying that God could be less than perfect if, *per impossibile*, He ever wanted to be, but, given that it is impossible that He ever want to be, so it would be equally true – and a lot shorter and clearer – to say that He couldn't ever be less than perfect.

To sum up then: God can do whatever He wants; He can't want to do anything that is less than what perfect goodness demands. Is the fact that He can't want to do anything that is less than what perfect goodness demands a constraint on Him? No, because of necessity no-one can want to do something that is less than what perfect goodness demands for the sake of its being less than what perfect goodness demands. In virtue of our lack of power, however, we can reasonably want to do something we know to be less than what perfect goodness demands for the sake of some end that would be good for ourselves, and which – in our ignorance – we suppose it is the only or most efficient means of achieving. In virtue of God's omnipotence (His being the most powerful being that is logically possible), He can't ever want to do an action that is less than what perfect goodness demands for the sake of something else that He similarly wants. His omnipotence assures Him of being able to achieve whatever end He might want by means in accord with what perfect goodness demands; His omniscience ensures that He knows this. And thus His omnipotence and omniscience disable Him from wanting to do anything other than what perfect goodness demands. They disable Him but they do not 'disempower' Him because not all abilities are always powers, and the ability to be less than perfect, whilst a genuine power for us, would be a liability for Him.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412504007449 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Conclusion – freedom, human and divine

Our discussion has revealed what I think of as rather interesting differences between creaturely freedom and divine freedom. In virtue of our not being omnipotent and omniscient, it is good for us – a power – that we can choose to do other than what perfect goodness demands. We can choose in our relationships with other creatures to do things which we know aren't the best that we could do for them, and, further, we can choose to do things that we know aren't simply not the best that we could do for one another, but are actually things we shouldn't do to one another. *Ceteris paribus*, our freedom would be reduced were we to lose these powers. In virtue of His being omnipotent and omniscient, it is good for God – an absence of a liability – that He cannot choose to do anything other than what perfect goodness demands. He cannot choose in His relationships with His creatures to do things which aren't the best or joint best that He could do for them (if there is a best or joint best), and He can't choose to do things to them that He shouldn't do. God's freedom is perfect because He doesn't have these liabilities. These differences between the sort of freedom that we enjoy and the sort of freedom that God enjoys stem from differences in our power and knowledge.

Given that a certain action's being what perfect goodness demands of one is, in itself, a reason for one to perform that action over any other, God's omnipotence ensures that He'll never have any countervailing reason that outweighs that provided by an action's being what perfect goodness demands of Him – and that thus prevents Him from doing it. And His omniscience ensures that He'll never erroneously take Himself to have any such reason. Our lack of omnipotence and omniscience make our freedom imperfect, in that we can only do some of what we want, and we can want to do what is less than perfect goodness demands of us. God's omnipotence and omniscience perfect His freedom in that He can do anything He wants, and He can only want to do what is perfectly loving towards us, His imperfect creatures.[6]

Notes

1. Wes Morriston 'Are omnipotence and necessary moral perfection compatible? Reply to Mawson', *Religious Studies*, **39** (2003), 441–449, 441.
2. The paper in which Morriston had previously argued for the thesis that the ability to do less than what perfect goodness demands is not only compatible with, but entailed by, omnipotence, and thus that traditional theism (with its commitment to the claim that God is omnipotent yet, of necessity, morally perfect) is incoherent is his 'Omnipotence and necessary moral perfection: are they compatible?', *Religious Studies*, **37** (2001), 143–160. His original argument finds parallels in Nelson Pike's 'Omnipotence and God's ability to sin', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, **6** (1969), 208–216, and Peter Geach's *Providence and Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), ch. 1. The paper in which I previously argued against Morriston and in favour of compatibility, and indeed of the stronger thesis that omnipotence entails necessary moral perfection is my 'Omnipotence and necessary moral perfection are compatible: a reply to Morriston', *Religious Studies*, **38**, (2002) 215–223.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412504007449 Published online by Cambridge University Press

3. *Ibid.*, *passim*. As already mentioned, some reasons not to endorse it are given by Morriston in his 'Are omnipotence and necessary moral perfection compatible? Reply to Mawson' – reasons I would now accept myself.
4. Morriston 'Are omnipotence and necessary moral perfection compatible? Reply to Mawson', 443.
5. Compare my 'Omnipotence and necessary moral perfection are compatible: a reply to Morriston', 220–221, where I make this point at slightly greater length.
6. I am grateful to the Editor for allowing me to add some material to my first draft in the light of the appearance of Morriston's 'Are omnipotence and necessary moral perfection compatible? Reply to Mawson'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412504007449 Published online by Cambridge University Press