

# Chapter One

# THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

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# INTRODUCTION

## THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

Within the Western theistic tradition God is conceived as the Supreme Being, the only being worthy of worship because he is uniquely perfect. The most famous articulation of ‘perfect-being theology’ is by St Anselm (1033-1109) in his definition of God as ‘something than which nothing greater can be conceived’: a definition which requires that whatever qualities are attributed to God, God must possess them to an absolute and ultimate degree. Hence it is not just that God is the greatest conceivable being but rather that, being this being, he must possess all conceivable qualities to the greatest conceivable extent. Among those qualities traditionally applied to God three stand out: God must be all-powerful (omnipotent), all-knowing (omniscient) and all-good (omnibenevolent). These, however, are not the only attributes that have been so ascribed. Amongst others, it has been claimed that God’s existence must be independent of any other existences – that God is accordingly a ‘necessary’ being, distinguishable from the ‘contingent’ beings of his creation; that God must be incapable of experiencing emotions or passions (and so impassible); that he must be independent both of matter (and so immaterial) and of time (and so eternal), and incapable of change (and so immutable). However, the application of these attributes raises serious philosophical difficulties, which may be broadly classified into three groups:

1. There are difficulties arising from alleged contradictions within one particular ascribed property. The most famous example here has to do with the attribute of omnipotence as illustrated in the paradox of the stone: ‘Can God create a rock so heavy that he cannot lift it?’ This question, it would appear, cannot be answered in a way that is consistent with God’s omnipotence. For if we say that God can create a rock so heavy that he cannot lift it, then it must be conceded that God lacks the power to lift that rock; and if we deny that God can create a rock so heavy that he cannot lift it, then it must be conceded that God lacks the power to create that rock. Either way there is something that God cannot do, which highlights the absurdity of the notion of omnipotence. A variant of the same dilemma is the ‘paradox of sovereignty’ (Mackie, 1955): ‘Could a sovereign God create a law that binds himself?’<sup>1</sup> Another alleged contradiction arises from the conception of God as a being ‘worthy of worship’ (Rachels, 1971). Since only a being with an ‘unqualified claim on our obedience’ is worthy of worship, the believer must be required to abdicate his autonomy or independent judgment. But since autonomy is an essential requirement of moral decision, no being who is worthy of worship can make this demand. Hence the contradiction within the ascribed property: either being a moral agent means that one cannot be a worshipper (i.e., subservient to God’s commands) or being a worshipper means that one cannot be a moral agent.

2. There are difficulties arising from alleged incompatibilities between one divine attribute and another. One such incompatibility appears to exist between God's omnipotence and his moral perfection. For if God is morally flawless, then presumably there are a number of things he cannot do (for example, commit evil acts), which contradicts the claim that he should be able to do them, being omnipotent. Nor is it difficult to see where the incompatibility lies when God's omniscience is contrasted with his own ability to act freely as the only being whose actions are unconstrained (being omnipotent). An omniscient God must know what actions he will or will not perform in the future; but if God is omnipotently free in action, having a unique and infinite variety of choice, then what he will do cannot be known in advance. Thus either God is omniscient and knows beforehand what he will do – it being impossible for him not to do what he knows will be done (and is thus not omnipotent) – or God is an omnipotently free agent and therefore cannot know or infallibly predict what he will do at some later date (and is thus not omniscient). A survey of further dual-property incompatibilities is provided by Drange (1998).
3. There are difficulties arising from an alleged incompatibility between certain divine properties and our empirical knowledge of the world. Here undoubtedly the most famous example – and for some indeed the decisive argument against the existence of God – derives from the evident fact of evil or suffering. That God is omnibenevolent (and thus wishes to eliminate evil) and omnipotent (and so has the power to eliminate evil) is, so it is claimed, inconsistent with the existence of evil. This dilemma – the so-called problem of evil – will be discussed extensively in Chapter 3. It should be noted here, however, that the 'free-will defense', which is generally held to be the major objection to this line of argument – that God can create human beings who may freely choose to do good or evil – raises further paradoxes: of whether God, as an omnipotent and omniscient being, can create beings whose actions he can neither control nor predict; of whether a benevolent God, although not the specific causal agent of evil, remains culpable on grounds of moral negligence: he created the mechanism which generates evil, foresaw its consequences, but took no precautions against the harm that would be done.

In order to resolve these difficulties various redefinitions of God's attributes have been forthcoming. By way of example, consider two adjustments to the concept of omnipotence:

1. The argument of René Descartes (1596-1650) and William of Ockham (c. 1287-1347) – that God's omnipotence implies the possibility of his bringing about any state of affairs whatsoever, including therefore logically impossible states of affairs (for example, the creation of a round square) – is rejected because, to follow St Thomas Aquinas (1224/6-1274) and the Jewish theologian Maimonides (1186-1237), the possibility of an impossibility is a contradiction in terms. Thus, if we construe omnipotence not as the ability to do anything at all but as the power to do only that which is intrinsically possible, it is consistent with God's omnipotence that he cannot perform a self-contradictory task: God may be able to create the universe and restore the dead to life, but his omnipotence is not compromised if he cannot undo the past, know that which is false or indeed create a rock he cannot lift. The current debate on this

issue is extensive. See particularly Kenny (1979), C. Wade Savage (1967), Mavrodes (1977) Rosenkrantz and Hoffmann (1980b) and Swinburne (1977).

2. A still more radical alternative is to define omnipotence in terms of maximal power. While it is agreed that an omnipotent being cannot bring about conditions that are logically impossible, it is a 'fallacy of omnipotence' to suppose that God must therefore be able to bring about any state of affairs that is logically possible. There are, in other words, logically possible states that God cannot bring about. For while the concept of maximal power requires that God's power is unsurpassable and that accordingly no other being has more power than God, it does not mean that all power belongs to God or that all other agents are powerless. Thus there are others who can act as autonomous causal agents and bring about something that God cannot bring about. This is a central claim of the so-called 'process theology' associated with Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) and Charles Hartshorne (1897-2000). That God is dependent on, and relative to, actions he cannot control makes God's own emotional state much closer to our own. Deprived of the unilateral power to impose his will on his creation, his power becomes persuasive rather than coercive, allowing for a wide range of sympathetic responses and enjoyments within the divine life. For discussions sympathetic to this position, see Cobb and Griffin (1976), Schubert Ogden (1967) and Rabbi Harold Kushner in his immensely popular *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (1981).
3. Other more recent formulations of omnipotence have been provided by Torin Alter (2002), Flint and Freddoso (1983) Jerome Gellman (1977), Hoffman and Rosenkrantz (2002), George Mavrodes (1977), Richard Swinburne (1977), Charles Taliaferro (1983) and Edward Wierenga (1983, 1989). For more general discussions see Stephen Davis (1983), Kenny (1979), Morris (1991) and the collection of essays on omnipotence edited by Linwood and Walton (1978). Special mention should also be made of Richard E. Creel's study of Impassibility (1986). The important anthology edited by Martin and Monnier (2003) argues for the impossibility of God from a study of the divine attributes.

# 1. THOMAS AQUINAS

## THE OMNIPOTENCE OF GOD

**BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY.** Born in 1225 at Roccasecca in southern Italy, Aquinas joined the Dominican order in 1244, much to the disapproval of his aristocratic family, and rapidly established himself as a student of extraordinary intellectual talent. From 1245 to 1252 he studied at Cologne under Albert the Great, where he encountered the work of Aristotle, and subsequently taught at Paris and Rome, where he acted as advisor and lecturer to the papal court. He died on his way to the Council of Lyons in 1274. His enormous philosophical output culminated in his unfinished *Summa Theologiae* (also known as *Summa Theologicae*, ‘The Sum of Theology’. Later editions and translations also use the title *Summa Theologica* or ‘The Theological Sum’). Begun in 1256, the *Summa* presents the most complete statement of his philosophical system. Aquinas was canonized in 1323 and proclaimed Doctor of the Church (Angelicus Doctor) in 1567. His philosophy was recognized by Pope Leo XIII in the encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879) as the official theology of his church and so made mandatory in all Roman Catholic education.

**PHILOSOPHICAL SUMMARY.** One would suppose that everything is possible for an omnipotent God. This Aquinas denies and, in line with other medieval theologians, points to some fairly obvious limitations on God’s power, from the fairly trivial fact that God cannot perform the creaturely acts of walking or sitting to the much more important restriction that God cannot sin. However, Aquinas is equally adamant that God cannot perform impossibilities (such as making round squares): ‘nothing’, he says, ‘which implies a contradiction falls under the omnipotence of God’. Aquinas’ example is the absolute impossibility of a man becoming a donkey: a man is rational and a donkey is not, and the two cannot therefore be conjoined. For the same reason God cannot change the past because for the past not to have been implies another contradiction. Such impossibilities, however, should not be taken as a defect in God’s power because such things have no real existence but are rather descriptions of what cannot be: ‘Hence it is better to say that such things cannot be done, than that God cannot do them.’ God’s power accordingly ranges only over the logically possible: if, therefore, something can be, God can bring it about. Thus his inability to construct a married bachelor does not detract from his omnipotence. Nor is Aquinas saying that God can only create the empirically possible, for this would be to deny miracles, which are violations of the laws of nature caused by God. These, then, could occur because to contradict a law of nature is not a logical contradiction.

**PRIMARY SOURCES.** In the 1960s the English, Irish and American Dominicans completed a new translation of the *Summa* in sixty volumes. There are, however, several useful collections by

Martin (1988), McDermott (1993) and McInerny (1998). Notice should also be taken of P.J. Kreeft's survey *Summa of the Summa* (1990) and Walter Farrell's extraordinary summary of the entire work in four volumes (1938-1942).

**SECONDARY SOURCES.** The best modern introduction is by Brian Davies (1992), who also provides an excellent short introduction, *Aquinas*, in the Outstanding Christian Thinkers series (2002). F.C. Copleston's *Aquinas* (1955) remains valuable, as does Etienne Gilson's *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (1956). For large-scale modern studies, see Eleonore Stump (2003), McInerny (2004), Thomas O'Meara (1997) and Pieper (1991). There are many collections of essays, of which the following are particularly useful: *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Rik Van Nieuwenhove & Joseph Wawrykow (2004) and *Aquinas' Summa Theologiae*, ed. Brian Davies (2005); and *Summa Theologiae: Questions on God*, ed. Brian Leftow and Brian Davies (2006). For specific discussions of Aquinas' concept of God, see Leo Elders (1990), W.J. Hankley (1987) and Christopher Martin (1997). For a biography, see J.A. Weisheipl (1974), and the lengthy essay in Volume 14 of the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*: [www.newadvent.org/](http://www.newadvent.org/).

Thomas Aquinas

## THE OMNIPOTENCE OF GOD<sup>1</sup>

**Objection 1.** It seems that God is not omnipotent. For movement and passiveness belong to everything. But this is impossible with God, for He is immovable, as was said above (2, 3). Therefore He is not omnipotent.

**Objection 2.** Further, sin is an act of some kind. But God cannot sin, nor "deny Himself" as it is said in 2 Tim. 2:13. Therefore He is not omnipotent.

**Objection 3.** Further, it is said of God that He manifests His omnipotence "especially by sparing and having mercy" [Collect, 10th Sunday after Pentecost]. Therefore the greatest act possible to the divine power is to spare and have mercy. There are things much greater, however, than sparing and having mercy; for example, to create another world, and the like. Therefore God is not omnipotent.

**Objection 4.** Further, upon the text, "God hath made foolish the wisdom of this world" (I Cor. 1:20) a gloss says: "God hath made the wisdom of this world foolish . . . by showing those things to be possible which it judges to be impossible." Whence it would seem that nothing is to be judged possible or impossible in reference to inferior causes, as the wisdom of this world judges them; but in reference to the divine power. If God, then, were omnipotent, all things would be possible; nothing, therefore impossible. But if we take away the impossible, then we destroy also the necessary; for what necessarily exists is impossible not to exist. Therefore there would be nothing at all that is necessary in things if God were omnipotent. But this is an impossibility. Therefore God is not omnipotent.

On the contrary, It is said: “No word shall be impossible with God” (Luke 1:37).

I answer that, All confess that God is omnipotent; but it seems difficult to explain in what His omnipotence precisely consists: for there may be doubt as to the precise meaning of the word “all” when we say that God can do all things. If, however, we consider the matter aright, since power is said in reference to possible things, this phrase, “God can do all things,” is rightly understood to mean that God can do all things that are possible; and for this reason He is said to be omnipotent. Now according to the Philosopher (Metaph. v, 17), a thing is said to be possible in two ways. First in relation to some power, thus whatever is subject to human power is said to be possible to man. Secondly absolutely, on account of the relation in which the very terms stand to each other. Now God cannot be said to be omnipotent through being able to do all things that are possible to created nature; for the divine power extends farther than that. If, however, we were to say that God is omnipotent because He can do all things that are possible to His power, there would be a vicious circle in explaining the nature of His power. For this would be saying nothing else but that God is omnipotent, because He can do all that He is able to do.

It remains therefore, that God is called omnipotent because He can do all things that are possible absolutely; which is the second way of saying a thing is possible. For a thing is said to be possible or impossible absolutely, according to the relation in which the very terms stand to one another, possible if the predicate is not incompatible with the subject, as that Socrates sits; and absolutely impossible

when the predicate is altogether incompatible with the subject, as, for instance, that a man is a donkey.

It must, however, be remembered that since every agent produces an effect like itself, to each active power there corresponds a thing possible as its proper object according to the nature of that act on which its active power is founded; for instance, the power of giving warmth is related as to its proper object to the being capable of being warmed. The divine existence, however, upon which the nature of power in God is founded, is infinite, and is not limited to any genus of being; but possesses within itself the perfection of all being. Whence, whatsoever has or can have the nature of being, is numbered among the absolutely possible things, in respect of which God is called omnipotent.

Now nothing is opposed to the idea of being except non-being. Therefore, that which implies being and non-being at the same time is repugnant to the idea of an absolutely possible thing, within the scope of the divine omnipotence. For such cannot come under the divine omnipotence, not because of any defect in the power of God, but because it has not the nature of a feasible or possible thing. Therefore, everything that does not imply a contradiction in terms, is numbered amongst those possible things, in respect of which God is called omnipotent: whereas whatever implies contradiction does not come within the scope of divine omnipotence, because it cannot have the aspect of possibility. Hence it is better to say that such things cannot be done, than that God cannot do them. Nor is this contrary to the word of the angel, saying: “No word shall be

impossible with God.” For whatever implies a contradiction cannot be a word, because no intellect can possibly conceive such a thing.

**Reply to Objection 1.** God is said to be omnipotent in respect to His active power, not to passive power, as was shown above (1). Whence the fact that He is immovable or impassible is not repugnant to His omnipotence.

**Reply to Objection 2.** To sin is to fall short of a perfect action; hence to be able to sin is to be able to fall short in action, which is repugnant to omnipotence. Therefore it is that God cannot sin, because of His omnipotence. Nevertheless, the Philosopher says (Topic. iv, 3) that God can deliberately do what is evil. But this must be understood either on a condition, the antecedent of which is impossible – as, for instance, if we were to say that God can do evil things if He will. For there is no reason why a conditional proposition should not be true, though both the antecedent and consequent are impossible: as if one were to say: “If man is a donkey, he has four feet.” Or he may be understood to mean that God can do some things which now seem to be evil: which, however, if He did them, would then be good. Or he is, perhaps, speaking after the common manner of the heathen, who thought that men became gods, like Jupiter or Mercury.

**Reply to Objection 3.** God’s omnipotence is particularly shown in sparing and having mercy, because in this is it made manifest that God has supreme power, that He freely

forgives sins. For it is not for one who is bound by laws of a superior to forgive sins of his own free will. Or, because by sparing and having mercy upon men, He leads them on to the participation of an infinite good; which is the ultimate effect of the divine power. Or because, as was said above (21, 4), the effect of the divine mercy is the foundation of all the divine works. For nothing is due to anyone, except on account of something already given him gratuitously by God. In this way the divine omnipotence is particularly made manifest, because to it pertains the first foundation of all good things.

**Reply to Objection 4.** The absolute possible is not so called in reference either to higher causes, or to inferior causes, but in reference to itself. But the possible in reference to some power is named possible in reference to its proximate cause. Hence those things which it belongs to God alone to do immediately – as, for example, to create, to justify, and the like – are said to be possible in reference to a higher cause. Those things, however, which are of such kind as to be done by inferior causes are said to be possible in reference to those inferior causes. For it is according to the condition of the proximate cause that the effect has contingency or necessity, as was shown above (14, 1, ad 2). Thus is it that the wisdom of the world is deemed foolish, because what is impossible to nature, it judges to be impossible to God. So it is clear that the omnipotence of God does not take away from things their impossibility and necessity.



## 2. GEORGE MAVRODES SOME PUZZLES CONCERNING OMNIPOTENCE

**BIOGRAPHICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL SUMMARY.** Professor of Philosophy at the University of Michigan, Mavrodes (b. 1926) here applies St Thomas' concept of God's omnipotence to the paradox of the stone, and concludes that, since the paradox involves a logical contradiction, the notion of divine omnipotence remains intact.

### George Mavrodes SOME PUZZLES CONCERNING OMNIPOTENCE<sup>1</sup>

The doctrine of God's omnipotence appears to claim that God can do anything. Consequently, there have been attempts to refute the doctrine by giving examples of things which God cannot do; for example, He cannot draw a square circle.

Responding to objections of this type, St. Thomas pointed out that "anything" should be here construed to refer only to objects, actions, or states of affairs whose descriptions are not self-contradictory. For it is only such things whose nonexistence might plausibly be attributed to a lack of power in some agent. My failure to draw a circle in the exam may indicate my lack of geometrical skill, but my failure to draw a square circle does not indicate any such lack. Therefore, the fact that it is false (or perhaps meaningless) to say that God could draw one does no damage to the doctrine of His omnipotence.

A more involved problem, however, is posed by this type of question: can God create a stone

too heavy for Him to lift? This appears to be stronger than the first problem, for it poses a dilemma. If we say that God can create a stone, then it seems that there might be such a stone. And if there might be a stone too heavy for Him to lift, then He is evidently not omnipotent. But if we deny that God can create such a stone, we seem to have given up His omnipotence already. Both answers lead us to the same conclusion.

Further, this problem does not seem obviously open to St Thomas' solution. The form "x is able to draw a square circle" seems plainly to involve a contradiction, while "x is able to make a thing too heavy for x to lift" does not. For it may easily be true that I am able to make a boat too heavy for me to lift. So why should it not be possible for God to make a stone too heavy for Him to lift?

Despite this apparent difference, this second puzzle is open to essentially the same answer as the first. The dilemma fails because it consists of asking whether God can do a

self-contradictory thing. And the reply that He cannot does no damage to the doctrine of omnipotence.

The specious nature of the problem may be seen in this way. God is either omnipotent or not.<sup>2</sup> Let us assume first that He is not. In that case the phrase “a stone too heavy for God to lift” may not be self-contradictory. And then, of course, if we assert either that God is able or that He is not able to create such a stone, we may conclude that He is not omnipotent. But this is no more than the assumption with which we began, meeting us again after our roundabout journey. If this were all that the dilemma could establish it would be trivial. To be significant it must derive this same conclusion from the assumption that God is omnipotent; that is, it must show that the assumption of the omnipotence of God leads to a *reductio*. But does it?

On the assumption that God is omnipotent, the phrase “a stone too heavy for God to lift” becomes self-contradictory. For it becomes “a stone which cannot be lifted by Him whose power is sufficient for lifting anything”. But the “thing” described by a self-contradictory phrase is absolutely impossible and hence has nothing to do with the doctrine of omnipotence. Not being an object of power at all, its failure to exist cannot be the result of some lack in the power of God. And, interestingly, it is the very omnipotence of God which makes the existence of such a stone absolutely impossible, while it is the fact that I am finite in power which makes it possible for me to make a boat too heavy for me to lift.

But suppose that some die-hard objector takes the bit in his teeth and denies that the phrase “a stone too heavy for God to lift” is

self-contradictory, even on the assumption that God is omnipotent. In other words, he contends that the description “a stone too heavy for an omnipotent God to lift” is self-coherent and therefore describes an absolutely possible object. Must I then attempt to prove the contradiction which I assume above as intuitively obvious? Not necessarily. Let me reply simply that if the objector is right in this contention, then the answer to the original question is “Yes, God can create such a stone.” It may seem that this reply will force us into the original dilemma. But it does not. For now the objector can draw no damaging conclusion from this answer. And the reason is that he has just now contended that such a stone is compatible with the omnipotence of God. Therefore, from the possibility of God’s creating such a stone it cannot be concluded that God is not omnipotent. The objector cannot have it both ways. The conclusion which he himself wishes to draw from an affirmative answer to the original question is itself the required proof that the descriptive phrase which appears there is self-contradictory. And “it is more appropriate to say that such things cannot be done, than that God cannot do them”.<sup>3</sup>

The specious nature of this problem may also be seen in a somewhat different way.<sup>4</sup> Suppose that some theologian is convinced by this dilemma that he must give up the doctrine of omnipotence. But he resolves to give up as little as possible, just enough to meet the argument. One way he can do so is by retaining the infinite power of God with regard to lifting, while placing a restriction on the sort of stone He is able to create. The only restriction required here, however, is that God

must not be able to create a stone too heavy for Him to lift. Beyond that the dilemma has not even suggested any necessary restriction. Our theologian has, in effect, answered the original question in the negative, and he now regretfully supposes that this has required him to give up the full doctrine of omnipotence. He is now retaining what he supposes to be the more modest remnants which he has salvaged from that doctrine.

We must ask, however, what it is which he has in fact given up. Is it the unlimited power of God to create stones? No doubt. But what stone is it which God is now precluded from creating? The stone too heavy for Him to lift, of course. But we must remember that nothing in the argument required the theologian to admit any limit on God's power with regard to the lifting of stones. He still holds that to be unlimited. And if God's power to lift is

infinite, then His power to create may run to infinity also without outstripping that first power. The supposed limitation turns out to be no limitation at all, since it is specified only by reference to another power which is itself infinite. Our theologian need have no regrets, for he has given up nothing. The doctrine of the power of God remains just what it was before.

Nothing I have said above, of course, goes to prove that God is, in fact, omnipotent. All I have intended to show is that certain arguments intended to prove that He is not omnipotent fail. They fail because they propose, as tests of God's power, putative tasks whose descriptions are self-contradictory. Such pseudo-tasks, not falling within the realm of possibility, are not objects of power at all. Hence the fact that they cannot be performed implies no limit on the power of God, and hence no defect in the doctrine of omnipotence.

### 3. J. N. FINDLAY

## A DISPROOF OF GOD'S EXISTENCE

**PHILOSOPHICAL SUMMARY.** The article 'Can God's Existence be Disproved?' (1948) by J.N. Findlay (1903-1987) is one of the classics of modern philosophy, Hartshorne ranking it alongside Kant's criticisms of the classical arguments for God's existence. Findlay here offers a formal disproof of divine existence by juxtaposing two essential attributes: (1) God to be God must be the proper object of religious worship, and (2) so that he can be this proper object, God's non-existence must be impossible (i.e., his existence must be 'necessary') since it makes no sense to say that one could worship any being as God if that being could cease to be (i.e., a being whose existence is 'contingent'). The turning-point in the argument comes, however, when Findlay, following Kant, maintains that 'necessary existence' is impossible: nothing can be conceived to exist that cannot also be conceived not to exist. We thus arrive at what Hartshorne has called 'Findlay's paradox': (1) a contingent being would not deserve worship; (2) a necessary being is a logical absurdity; or to express it another way: (1) only necessary being can be the object of religious devotion; (2) necessary being cannot be attributed to an actually existing God. What religion requires is thus denied by logic. For if it is (a) logically possible that God does not exist (i.e., if we conceive God as contingent), then God's existence is not merely doubtful but *impossible*, since by definition nothing capable of non-existence could be God at all. But if we say (b) that God is therefore not capable of non-existence (i.e., that his existence is necessary), we are repeating that his existence is not merely doubtful but actually *impossible*, since nothing incapable of non-existence can exist.

**PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SOURCES.** Findlay's article initially appeared in the journal *Mind* (April 1948) but has subsequently been reprinted many times, most notably in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* ed. Flew and MacIntyre (1955). This collection also included criticisms of Findlay by G.E. Hughes and A.C.A. Rainer, together with Findlay's response. Hartshorne's assessment of Findlay's argument was published in *Anselm's Discovery*, (1965, pp. 255-261), to which Findlay responded in 'Some Reflections on Necessary Existence', in the Hartshorne Festschrift *Process and Divinity*, ed. Reese and Freeman (1964, pp. 515-527). Perhaps the most important criticism of Findlay is, however, provided by Norman Malcolm, who argues against the idea that 'necessary being' is a meaningless concept. See 'Anselm's Ontological Arguments', *Philosophical Review* (1960, pp. 41-62). See also the collection of essays on Findlay edited by Martin and Westphal (1985).

J. N. Findlay

## DISPROOF OF GOD'S EXISTENCE<sup>1</sup>

The course of philosophical development has been full of attempted proofs of the existence of God. Some of these have sought a basis in the bare necessities of thought, while others have tried to found themselves on the facts of experience. And, of these latter, some have founded themselves on *very general facts*, as that something exists, or that something is in motion, while others have tried to build on *highly special facts*, as that living beings are put together in a purposive manner, or that human beings are subject to certain improbable urges and passions, such as the zeal for righteousness, the love for useless truths and unprofitable beauties, as well as the many specifically religious needs and feelings. The general philosophical verdict is that none of these 'proofs' is truly compelling. The proofs based on the necessities of thought are universally regarded as fallacious: it is not thought possible *to* build bridges between mere abstractions and concrete existence. The proofs based on the general facts of existence and motion are only felt to be valid by a minority of thinkers, who seem quite powerless to communicate this sense of validity to others. And while most thinkers would accord weight to arguments resting on the special facts we have mentioned, they wouldn't think such arguments successful in ruling out a vast range of counter-possibilities. Religious people have, in fact, come to acquiesce in the total absence of any cogent proofs of the Being they believe in: they even find it positively satisfying that something so

far surpassing clear conception should also surpass the possibility of demonstration. And non-religious people willingly mitigate their rejection with a tinge of agnosticism: they don't so much deny the existence of a God, as the existence of good reasons for believing in him. We shall, however, maintain in this essay that there isn't room, in the case we are examining, for all these attitudes of tentative surmise and doubt. For we shall try to show that the Divine Existence can only be conceived, in a religiously satisfactory manner, if we also conceive it as something inescapable and necessary, whether for thought or reality. From which it follows that our modern denial of necessity or rational evidence for such an existence amounts to a demonstration that there cannot be a God.

Before we develop this argument, we must, however, give greater precision to our use of the term 'God'. For it is possible to say that there are nearly as many 'Gods' as there are speakers and worshippers, and while existence may be confidently asserted or denied of some of them, we should feel more hesitant in the case of others. It is one thing, plainly, to pronounce on God's existence, if he be taken to be some ancient, shapeless stone, or if we identify him with the bearded Father of the Sistine ceiling, and quite another matter, if we make of him an 'all-pervasive, immaterial intelligence', or characterize him in some yet more negative and analogical manner. We shall, however, choose an indirect approach, and pin God down for our purposes as the

‘adequate object of religious attitudes’. Plainly we find it possible to gather together, under the blanket term ‘religious’, a large range of cases of possible action, linked together by so many overlapping<sup>2</sup> affinities that we are ready to treat them as the varying ‘expressions’ of a single ‘attitude’ or ‘policy’. And plainly we find it possible to indicate the character of that attitude by a number of descriptive phrases which, though they may err individually by savouring too strongly of particular cases, nevertheless permit us, in their totality, to draw a rough boundary round the attitude in question. Thus we might say, for instance, that a religious attitude was one in which we tended to abase ourselves before some object, to defer to it wholly, to devote ourselves to it with unquestioning enthusiasm, to bend the knee before it, whether literally or metaphorically. These phrases, and a large number of similar ones, would make perfectly plain the sort of attitude we were speaking of, and would suffice to mark it off from cognate attitudes which are much less unconditional and extreme in their tone. And clearly similar phrases would suffice to fix the boundaries of religious feeling. We might describe religious frames of mind as ones in which we felt ready to abase ourselves before some object, to bend the knee before it, and so forth. Here, as elsewhere, we find ourselves indicating the felt character of our attitudes, by treating their inward character as, in some sense, a concentrated and condensed substitute for appropriate lines of action, a way of speaking that accords curiously with the functional significance of the inward.<sup>3</sup> But not only do we incorporate, in the

meanings of our various names for attitudes, a reference to this readiness for appropriate lines of action: we also incorporate in these meanings a reference to the sorts of things or situations to which these attitudes are the normal or appropriate responses. For, as a matter of fact, our attitudes are not indifferently evoked in any setting: there is a range of situations in which they normally and most readily occur. And though they may at times arise in circumstances which are not in this range, they are also readily dissipated by the consciousness that such circumstances are unsuitable or unusual. Thus fear is an attitude very readily evoked in situations with a character of menace or potential injury, and it is also an attitude very readily allayed by the clear perception that a given situation isn’t really dangerous. And anger, likewise, is an attitude provoked very readily by perverse resistance and obstructive difficulty in some object, and is also very readily dissipated, even in animals, by the consciousness that a given object is innocent of offence. All attitudes, we may say, presume characters in their objects, and are, in consequence, strengthened by the discovery that their objects have these characters, as they are weakened by the discovery that they really haven’t got them. And not only do we find this out empirically: we also incorporate it in the meanings of our names for attitudes. Thus attitudes are said to be ‘normal’, ‘fully justified’ and so forth, if we find them altered in a certain manner (called ‘appropriate’) by our knowledge of the actual state of things, whereas we speak of them as ‘queer’ or ‘senseless’ or ‘neurotic’, if they aren’t at all modified by this knowledge

of reality. We call it abnormal, from this point of view, to feel a deep-seated fear of mice, to rage maniacally at strangers, to greet disasters with a hebephrenic giggle, whereas we think it altogether normal to deplore deep losses deeply, or to fear grave dangers gravely. And so an implicit reference to some standard object – which makes an attitude either normal or abnormal – is part of what we ordinarily mean by all our names for attitudes, and can be rendered explicit by a simple study of usage. We can consider the circumstances in which ordinary speakers would call an attitude ‘appropriate’ or ‘justified’. And all that philosophy achieves in this regard is merely to push further, and develop into more considered and consistent forms, the implications of such ordinary ways of speaking. It can inquire whether an attitude would still seem justified, and its object appropriate, after we had reflected long and carefully on a certain matter, and looked at it from every wonted and unwonted angle. And such consideration may lead philosophers to a different and more reasoned notion of the appropriate objects of a given attitude, than could be garnered from our unreflective ways of speaking. And these developments of ordinary usage will only seem unfeasible to victims of that strange modern confusion which thinks of attitudes exclusively as hidden processes ‘in our bosoms’, with nothing but an adventitious relation to appropriate outward acts and objects.

How then may we apply these notions to the case of our religious attitudes? Plainly we shall be following the natural trends of unreflective speech if we say that religious

attitudes presume superiority in their objects, and such superiority, moreover, as reduces us, who feel the attitudes, to comparative nothingness. For having described a worshipful attitude as one in which we feel disposed to bend the knee before some object, to defer to it wholly, and the like, we find it natural to say that such an attitude can only be fitting where the object revered exceeds us very vastly, whether in power or wisdom or in other valued qualities. And while it is certainly possible to worship stocks and stones and articles of common use, one does so usually on the assumption that they aren’t merely stocks and stones and ordinary articles, but the temporary seats of ‘indwelling presences’ or centres of extraordinary powers and virtues. And if one realizes clearly that such things are merely stocks and stones or articles of common use, one can’t help suffering a total vanishing or grave abatement of religious ardour. To feel religiously is therefore to presume surpassing greatness in some object: so much characterizes the attitudes in which we bow and bend the knee, and enters into the ordinary meaning of the word ‘religious’. But now we advance further – in company with a large number of theologians and philosophers, who have added new touches to the portrait of deity, pleading various theoretical necessities, but really concerned to make their object worthier of our worship – and ask whether it isn’t wholly anomalous to worship anything limited in any thinkable manner. For all limited superiorities are tainted with an obvious relativity, and can be dwarfed in thought by still mightier superiorities, in

which process of being dwarfed they lose their claim upon our worshipful attitudes. And hence we are led on irresistibly to demand that our religious object should have an unsurpassable supremacy along all avenues, that it should tower infinitely above all other objects. And not only are we led to demand for it such merely quantitative superiority: we also ask that it shouldn't stand surrounded by a world of alien objects, which owe it no allegiance, or set limits to its influence. The proper object of religious reverence must in some manner be all-comprehensive: there mustn't be anything capable of existing, or of displaying any virtue, without owing all of these absolutely to this single source. All these, certainly, are difficult requirements, involving not only the obscurities and doubtful significance of the infinite, but also all the well-worn antagonisms of the immanent and transcendent, of finite sinfulness and divine perfection and preordination, which centuries of theological brooding have failed to dissipate. But we are also led on irresistibly to a yet more stringent demand, which raises difficulties which make the difficulties we have mentioned seem wholly inconsiderable: we can't help feeling that the worthy object of our worship can never be a thing that merely happens to exist, nor one on which all other objects merely happen to depend. The true object of religious reverence must not be one, merely, to which no actual independent realities stand opposed: it must be one to which such opposition is totally inconceivable. God mustn't merely cover the territory of the actual, but also, with equal comprehensiveness, the territory of the possible. And not only must the existence

of other things be unthinkable without him, but his own non-existence must be wholly unthinkable in any circumstances. There must, in short, be no conceivable alternative to an existence properly termed 'divine': God must be wholly inescapable, as we remarked previously, whether for thought or reality. And so we are led on insensibly to the barely intelligible notion of a Being in whom Essence and Existence lose their separateness. And all that the great medieval thinkers really did was to carry such a development to its logical limit.

We may, however, approach the matter from a slightly different angle. Not only is it contrary to the demands and claims inherent in religious attitudes that their object should exist 'accidentally': it is also contrary to those demands that it should possess its various excellences in some merely adventitious or contingent manner. It would be quite unsatisfactory from the religious standpoint, if an object merely happened to be wise, good, powerful and so forth, even to a superlative degree, and if other beings had, as a mere matter of fact, derived their excellences from this single source. An object of this sort would doubtless deserve respect and admiration, and other quasi-religious attitudes, but it would not deserve the utter self-abandonment peculiar to the religious frame of mind. It would deserve the *δουλεία* canonically accorded to the saints, but not the *λατρεία* that we properly owe to God. We might respect this object as the crowning instance of most excellent qualities, but we should incline our head before the qualities and not before the person. And wherever such qualities were manifested, though perhaps



less eminently, we should always be ready to perform an essentially similar obeisance. For though such qualities might be intimately characteristic of the Supreme Being, they still wouldn't be in any sense inalienably his own. And even if other beings had, in fact, derived such qualities from this sovereign source, they still would be their own qualities, possessed by them in their own right. And we should have no better reason to adore the author of such virtues, than sons have reason to adore superior parents, or pupils to adore superior teachers. For while these latter may deserve deep deference, the fact that we are coming to participate in their excellences renders them unworthy of our worship. Plainly a being that possesses and imparts desirable qualities – which other things might nevertheless have manifested though this source were totally absent – has all the utter inadequacy as a religious object which is expressed by saying that it would be idolatrous to worship it. Wisdom, kindness and other excellences deserve respect wherever they are manifested, but no being can appropriate them as its personal perquisites, even if it does possess them in a superlative degree. And so we are led on irresistibly, by the demands inherent in religious reverence, to hold that an adequate object of our worship must possess its various qualities in some necessary manner. These qualities must be intrinsically incapable of belonging to anything except in so far as they belong primarily to the object of our worship. Again we are led on to a queer and barely intelligible Scholastic doctrine, that God isn't merely good, but is in some manner indistinguishable from his own (and anything else's) goodness.

What, however, are the consequences of these requirements upon the possibility of God's existence? Plainly, (for all who share a contemporary outlook), they entail not only that there isn't a God, but that the Divine Existence is either senseless<sup>4</sup> or impossible. The modern mind feels not the faintest axiomatic force in principles which trace contingent things back to some necessarily existent source, nor does it find it hard to conceive that things should display various excellent qualities without deriving them from a source which manifests them supremely. Those who believe in necessary truths which aren't merely tautological, think that such truths merely connect the possible instances of various characteristics with each other: they don't expect such truths to tell them whether there will be instances of any characteristics. This is the outcome of the whole medieval and Kantian criticism of the Ontological Proof. And, on a yet more modern view of the matter, necessity in propositions merely reflects our use of words, the arbitrary conventions of our language. On such a view the Divine Existence could only be a necessary matter if we had made up our minds to speak theistically whatever the empirical circumstances might turn out to be. This, doubtless, would suffice for some, who speak theistically, much as Spinoza spoke monistically, merely to give expression to a particular way of looking at things, or of feeling about them. And it would also suffice for those who make use of the term 'God' to cover whatever tendencies towards righteousness and beauty are actually included in the make-up of our world. But it wouldn't suffice for the full-blooded worshipper, who

can't help finding our actual world anything but edifying, and its half-formed tendencies towards righteousness and beauty very far from adorable. The religious frame of mind seems, in fact, to be in a quandary; it seems invincibly determined both to eat its cake and have it. It desires the Divine Existence both to have that inescapable character which can, on modern views, only be found where truth reflects an arbitrary convention, and also the character of 'making a real difference' which is only possible where truth doesn't have this merely linguistic basis. We may accordingly deny that modern approaches allow us to remain agnostically poised in regard to God: they force us to come down on the atheistic side. For if God is to satisfy religious claims and needs, he must be a being in every way inescapable, One whose existence and whose possession of certain excellences we cannot possibly conceive away. And modern views make it self-evidently absurd (if they don't make it ungrammatical) to speak of such a Being and attribute existence to him. It was indeed an ill day for Anselm when he hit upon his famous proof. For on that day he not only laid bare something that is of the essence of an adequate religious object, but also something that entails its necessary non-existence.<sup>5</sup>

The force of our argument must not, however, be exaggerated. We haven't proved that there aren't beings of all degrees of excellence and greatness, who may deserve attitudes approximating indefinitely to religious reverence. But such beings will at best be instances of valued qualities which we too may come to exemplify, though in lesser degree. And not only would it be idolatrous

for us to worship them, but it would also be monstrous for them to exact worship, or to care for it. The attitude of such beings to our reverence would necessarily be deprecating: they would prefer cooperative atheists to adoring zealots. And they would probably hide themselves like royal personages from the anthems of their worshippers, and perhaps the fact that there are so few positive signs of their presence is itself a feeble evidence of their real existence. But whether such beings exist or not, they are not divine, and can never satisfy the demands inherent in religious reverence. And the effect of our argument will further be to discredit generally such forms of religion as attach a uniquely sacred meaning to existent things, whether these things be men or acts or institutions or writings.

But there are other frames of mind, to which we shouldn't deny the name 'religious', which acquiesce quite readily in the non-existence of their objects. (This non-existence might, in fact, be taken to be the 'real meaning' of saying that religious objects and realities are 'not of this world'.) In such frames of mind we give ourselves over unconditionally and gladly to the task of indefinite approach toward a certain imaginary focus<sup>6</sup> where nothing actually is, and we find this task sufficiently inspiring and satisfying without demanding (absurdly) that there should be something actual at that limit. And the atheistic religious attitude we have mentioned has also undergone reflective elaboration by such philosophers as Fichte and Erigena and Alexander. There is, then, a religious atheism which takes full stock of our arguments, and we may be glad that this is so. For since the religious spirit is one of reverence

before things greater than ourselves, we should be gravely impoverished and arrested if this spirit ceased to be operative in our personal and social life. And it would certainly be

better that this spirit should survive, with all its fallacious existential trimmings, than that we should cast it forth merely in order to be rid of such irrelevances.

## 4. CHARLES HARTSHORNE

# OMNIPOTENCE AS A THEOLOGICAL MISTAKE

**BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY.** The son of an Anglican priest, Hartshorne (1897-2000) was educated at Haverford College, and, after serving with the Army Medical Corps in France, completing his formal education at Harvard University. A scholarship abroad enabled him to study in Germany with Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). Returning to Harvard in 1925 he became for one semester assistant to Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) and was responsible for editing the collected papers of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), the founder of pragmatism. Thereafter Hartshorne became Professor of Philosophy at the universities of Chicago, Emory and finally Chicago, where he remained until his death aged 103. Hartshorne is also the first philosopher since Aristotle to be an expert in both metaphysics and ornithology. In his book on bird-song, *Born to Sing* (1992), he argues for the subjective life of birds and for the aesthetic enjoyment they derive from singing.

**PHILOSOPHICAL SUMMARY.** Heavily indebted to Whitehead's philosophy, Hartshorne is the leading exponent of so-called 'process theology', also known as 'panentheism' or 'dipolar theism'. He argues that classical theism involves a monopolar prejudice, i.e., that God is active, not passive; necessary, not contingent; independent, not dependent; cause, not effect. Dipolar theism, by contrast, recognizes that the divine perfection requires both polarities: the abstract pole refers to the unchanging aspects of God's being (that he is absolute, eternal, necessary), the concrete pole to the aspects that do change: God's knowledge, for example, is dependent on what actually happens to exist, on unknown future events, on human choices that he cannot foresee, and accordingly the free decisions of creatures for evil and good become the destiny of both creatures and God. God is seen as more active, more personal and more like the biblical images of God as a loving father, sharing the joys and sufferings of his children. This contrasts with the classical doctrine of omnipotence – that God's power extends to all so that everything is determined by God – which Hartshorne regards as redundant and even blasphemous. Indeed, as an ideal of power omnipotence is inferior to the notion of an unsurpassable God whose being requires the freedom of his creatures, and who makes it possible for self-active agents to make themselves.

**PRIMARY SOURCES.** See particularly *The Divine Relativity* (1948), *The Logic of Perfection* (1962), *Man's Vision of God* (1964) and *Creative Synthesis and Philosophic Method, Philosophers Speak of God* (1953), edited with William Reese, contains perhaps the best summary of Hartshorne's

philosophy. *Anselm's Discovery* (1965) is an influential analysis of the ontological argument. *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (1984) is the most approachable of his books, written for the layman. See also *Existence and Actuality: Conversations with Charles Hartshorne* (1984), edited by Cobb and Gamwell. Aged 93, Hartshorne published an autobiography, *The Darkness and the Light* (1990).

**SECONDARY SOURCES.** Volume 20 of the *Library of Living Philosophers*, ed. Lewis E. Hahn (1991), is devoted to Hartshorne. *Process Studies* (3, 1973) contains an extensive bibliography by Hartshorne's wife, Dorothy (also available from the Center for Process Studies, [www.ctr4process.org/publications/Biblio/](http://www.ctr4process.org/publications/Biblio/)). Evaluations favourable to Hartshorne's position are provided by Cobb (1969), Cobb and Griffin (1976), Ogden (1966), Pittenger (1970), Sia (1989, 2004), and Viney (1985). For more critical assessments, see Basinger (1988), Boyd (1992), Dombrowski (1996), Gilkey (1969), Gruenler (1983), Hahn (1991) and Nash (1987).

Charles Hartshorne

## OMNIPOTENCE AS A THEOLOGICAL MISTAKE<sup>1</sup>

The idea of omnipotence in the sense to be criticized came about as follows: to be God, that is, worthy of worship, God must in power excel all others (and be open to criticism by none). The highest conceivable form of power must be the divine power. So far so good. Next question: what is the highest conceivable form of power? This question was scarcely put seriously at all, the answer was felt to be so obvious: it must be the power to determine every detail of what happens in the world. Not, notice, to significantly influence the happenings; no, rather to strictly determine, decide, their every detail. Hence it is that people still today ask, when catastrophe strikes, Why did God do this to me? What mysterious divine reason could there be? Why me? I charge theologians with responsibility for this improper and really absurd question.

Without telling themselves so, the founders

of the theological tradition were accepting and applying to deity the tyrant ideal of power. "I decide and determine everything, you (and your friends and enemies) merely do what I determine you (and them) to do. Your decision is simply mine for you. You only think you decide: in reality the decision is mine."

Since the theologians were bright people we must not oversimplify. They half-realized they were in trouble. Like many a politician, they indulged in double-talk to hide their mistake even from themselves. They knew they had to define sin as freely deciding to do evil or the lesser good, and as disobeying the will of God. How could one disobey an omnipotent will? There were two devices. One was to say that God does not decide to bring about a sinful act; rather, God decides not to prevent it. God "permits" sin to take place. Taking advantage of this decision, the sinner does his deed. Yet

stop! Remember that God is supposed to decide exactly what happens in the world. If someone murders me, God has decided there shall be precisely that murderous action. So it turns out that “permits” has here a meaning it ordinarily does not have. Ordinarily, when X gives Y permission to do such and such, there are at least details in the actual doing that are not specified by X (and could not be specified, since human language can give only outlines, not full details, of concrete occurrences). But omnipotence is defined as power to absolutely determine what happens. I have Thomas Aquinas especially in mind here. God gives a creature permission to perform act A, where A is no mere outline but is the act itself in its full concreteness. So nothing at all is left for the creature to decide? What then is left of creaturely freedom?

The most famous of all the scholastics finds the answer, and this is the second of the two devices referred to above. God decides that the creature shall perform act A, but the divine decision is that nevertheless the act shall be performed “freely”. Don’t laugh, the saintly theologian is serious. Serious, but engaging in double-talk. It is determined exactly what the creature will do, but determined that he or she will do it freely. As the gangsters sometimes say, after specifying what is to be done, “You are going to like it” – in other words, to do it with a will. If this is not the despot’s ideal of power, what is?

What, let us ask again, is the highest conceivable form of power? Is it the despot’s, magnified to infinity, and by hook or crook somehow reconciled with “benevolence”, also magnified to infinity? This seems to have been the (partly unconscious) decision of

theologians. Is there no better way? Of course there is.

After all, the New Testament analogy – found also in Greek religions – for deity is the parental role, except that in those days of unchallenged male chauvinism it had to be the father role. What is the ideal parental role? Is it that every detail is to be decided by the parent? The question answers itself. The ideal is that the child shall more and more decide its own behavior as its intelligence grows. Wise parents do not try to determine everything, even for the infant, much less for the half-matured or fully matured offspring. Those who do not understand this, and their victims, are among the ones who write agonized letters to Ann Landers. In trying to conceive God, are we to forget everything we know about values? To read some philosophers or theologians it almost seems so.

If the parent does not decide everything, there will be some risk of conflict and frustration in the result. The children are not infallibly wise and good. And indeed, as we shall argue later, even divine wisdom cannot completely foresee (or timelessly know) what others will decide. Life simply is a process of decision making, which means that risk is inherent in life itself. Not even God could make it otherwise. A world without risks is not conceivable. At best it would be a totally dead world, with neither good nor evil.

Is it the highest ideal of power to rule over puppets who are permitted to think they make decisions but who are really made by another to do exactly what they do? For twenty centuries we have had theologians who seem to say yes to this question.

Some theologians have said that, while

God could determine everything, yet out of appreciation for the value of having free creatures, God chooses to create human beings to whom a certain freedom is granted. When things go badly, it is because these special creatures make ill use of the freedom granted them. As a solution of the problem of evil, this is perhaps better than the nothing that theorists of religion have mostly given us. But it is not good enough. Many ills cannot plausibly be attributed to human freedom. Diseases no doubt are made worse and more frequent by people's not taking care of themselves, not exercising due care in handling food, and so forth. But surely they are not caused only by such misdoings. Human freedom does not cause all the suffering that animals undergo, partly from hunger, partly from wounds inflicted by sexual rivals or predators, also from diseases, parasites, and other causes not controlled by human beings.

There is only one solution of the problem of evil "worth writing home about." It uses the idea of freedom, but generalizes it. Why suppose that only people make decisions? People are much more conscious of the process of decision making than the other animals need be supposed to be; but when it comes to that, how conscious is an infant in determining its activities? If chimpanzees have no freedom, how much freedom has an infant, which by every test that seems applicable is much less intelligent than an adult chimpanzee? (One would never guess this fact from what "pro-lifers" say about a fetus being without qualification a person, so loose is their criterion for personality.)

There are many lines of reasoning that support the conclusion to which theology

has been tending for about a century now, which is that our having at least some freedom is not an absolute exception to an otherwise total lack of freedom in nature, but a special, intensified, magnified form of a general principle pervasive of reality, down to the very atoms and still farther. Current physics does not contradict this, as many physicists admit. When will the general culture at least begin to see the theological bearings of this fact? . . .

Those who stand deep in the classical tradition are likely to object to the new theology that it fails to acknowledge "the sovereignty of God." To them we may reply, "Are we to worship the Heavenly Father of Jesus (or the Holy Merciful One of the Psalmist or Isaiah), or to worship a heavenly king, that is, a cosmic despot?" These are incompatible ideals; candid thinkers should choose and not pretend to be faithful to both. As Whitehead said, "They gave unto God the properties that belonged unto Caesar." Our diminished awe of kings and emperors makes it easier for us than for our ancestors to look elsewhere for our model of the divine nature. "Divine sovereignty" sounds to some of us like a confession, an admission that it is sheer power, not unstinted love that one most admires. . . .

Byron wrote, as last line to his Sonnet on Chillon, "For they appeal from tyranny to God." But how is it if God is the supreme, however benevolent, tyrant? Can we worship a God so devoid of generosity as to deny us a share, however humble, in determining the details of the world, as minor participants in the creative process that is reality?

To fully clarify our case against "omnipotence" we must show how the idea of freedom implies chance. Agent X decides to

perform act A, agent Y independently decides to perform act B. So far as both succeed, what happens is the combination AB. Did X decide that AB should happen? No. Did Y decide the combination? No. Did any agent decide it? No. Did God, as supreme agent, decide it? No, unless “decide” stands for sheer illusion in at least one of its applications to God and the creatures. The word ‘chance’, meaning “not decided by any agent, and not fully determined by the past”, is the implication of the genuine idea of free or creative decision making – ‘creative’ meaning, adding to the definiteness of the world, settling something previously unsettled, partly undefined or indeterminate. The combination AB, in the case supposed, was not made to happen by any intention of a single agent but by the chance combination of two intentions. Nor was it made to happen by the past; this is the idea of causal laws that physics is getting rid of and that some philosophers long ago gave good reasons for rejecting.

The new idea is that causal order is not absolute but statistical. It admits an element of chance or randomness in nature. Many of the leading physicists of recent times are quite explicit about this. But they were preceded in principle by some great Greek philosophers, some French philosophers of modern times, and the three most distinguished of purely American philosophers, Charles Peirce, William James and John Dewey. All events are “caused”, if that means that they had necessary conditions in the past, conditions without which they could not have happened, however, what is technically termed “sufficient condition”, that which fully determines what happens, requires qualification. Where

there is little freedom, as an inanimate nature, there are often conditions sufficient to determine approximately what happens, and for most purposes this is all we need to consider. Where there is much freedom, as in the behavior of higher, including human, animals, there are still necessary conditions in the past, but sufficient past conditions only for a considerable range of possibilities within which each decision maker finally determines what precisely and concretely happens at the moment in the agent’s own mind, that is, what decision is made. Even God, as the French Catholic philosopher Lequier said more than a century ago, waits to see what the individual decides. “Thou hast created me creator of myself.” Many decades later Whitehead, also a believer in God, independently put the point with the phrase “the self-created creature”; and the atheist Sartre in France wrote of human consciousness as its own cause, *causa sui*.

Determinists claim that what makes us free is that our “character” as already formed, plus each new situation, determines our decisions. So then the child was determined by the character already formed in its infant past and by the surrounding world, and this character by the preceding fetus and world, and that by the fertilized egg? What kind of freedom is that? By what magic do people miss the fact they are misusing words? Skinner is right; once accept determinism and all talk of freedom is double-talk. The word ‘voluntary’ (liking it) is good enough for the determinist’s freedom; why not stick to it, without trying to borrow the prestige of the glorious word ‘freedom’? One’s past character is now a mere fact, part of the settled world, almost like someone else’s past character. One may be capable of creating a partly new and



better character by using the genuine freedom, some of which one has already long had but perhaps has too little or too ill made use of.

Our rejection of omnipotence will be attacked by the charge, “So you dare to limit the power of God?” Not so, I impose no such limit if this means, as it seems to imply, that God’s power fails to measure up to some genuine ideal. All I have said is that omnipotence as usually conceived is a false or indeed absurd ideal, which in truth limits God, denies to him any world worth talking about: a world of living, that is to say, significantly decision-making, agents. It is the tradition which did indeed terribly limit divine power, the power to foster creativity even in the least of the creatures.

No worse falsehood was ever perpetrated than the traditional concept of omnipotence. It is a piece of unconscious blasphemy, condemning God to a dead world, probably not distinguishable from no world at all.

The root of evil, suffering, misfortune, wickedness, is the same as the root of all good, joy, happiness, and that is freedom, decision making. If, by a combination of good management and good luck, X and Y harmonize in their decisions, the AB they bring about may be good and happy; if not, not. To

attribute all good to good luck, or all to good management, is equally erroneous. Life is not and cannot be other than a mixture of the two. God’s good management is the explanation of there being a cosmic order that limits the scope of freedom and hence of chance-limits, but does not reduce to zero. With too much freedom, with nothing like laws of nature (which, some of us believe, are divinely decided and sustained), there could be only meaningless chaos; with too little, there could be only such good as there may be in atoms and molecules by themselves, apart from all higher forms. With no creaturely freedom at all, there could not even be that, but at most God alone, making divine decisions – about what? It is the existence of many decision makers that produces everything, whether good or ill. It is the existence of God that makes it possible for the innumerable decisions to add up to a coherent and basically good world where opportunities justify the risks. Without freedom, no risks – and no opportunities.

Nothing essential in the foregoing is my sheer invention. I am summing up and making somewhat more explicit what a number of great writers have been trying to communicate for several centuries, or at least and especially during the last one hundred and fifty years.

## 5. THEODORE M. DRANGE INCOMPATIBLE-PROPERTIES ARGUMENTS

**BIOGRAPHICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL SUMMARY.** Drange (b. 1934) is Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at West Virginia University, whose work is widely discussed on the internet (see [www.infidels.org/library/modern/theodore\\_drange/](http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/theodore_drange/)). In the following extract Drange lists twelve divine attributes, excluding omnipotence, and then presents a disproof of God's existence based on alleged contradictions between two or more of them.

### Theodore M. Drange INCOMPATIBLE-PROPERTIES ARGUMENTS<sup>1</sup>

Atheological arguments (arguments for the nonexistence of God) can be divided into two main groups. One group consists of arguments which aim to show an incompatibility between two of God's properties. Let us call those 'incompatible-properties arguments'. The other group consists of arguments which aim to show an incompatibility between God's existence and the nature of the world. They may be called 'God-vs.-world arguments'. A prime example of one of those would be the Evidential Argument from Evil.<sup>2</sup> This paper will survey only arguments in the first group. . . .

To generate incompatible-properties arguments, it would be most helpful to have a list of divine attributes. I suggest the following. God is:

- |                  |                |
|------------------|----------------|
| (a) perfect      | (g) personal   |
| (b) immutable    | (h) free       |
| (c) transcendent | (i) all-loving |

- |                 |                                    |
|-----------------|------------------------------------|
| (d) nonphysical | (j) all-just                       |
| (e) omniscient  | (k) all-merciful                   |
| (f) omnipresent | (l) the creator of<br>the universe |

This is certainly not a complete list, for there are other properties that have been ascribed to God. For example, the list excludes omnipotence. Furthermore, I am not claiming here that there is any one person who has ascribed all of these properties to God. I would say, though, that each of the properties has been ascribed to God by someone or other.

It would be of interest to consider whether there are pairs of properties from the given list which are incompatible with each other. For each such pair, it would be possible to construct incompatible-properties argument for God's nonexistence. The present essay aims to study that issue in the style of a survey. It will not

go into the relevant philosophical issues in any great depth. Nor will it consider the further matter of whether anyone has actually claimed the existence of a being which possesses any of the incompatible pairs. It is assumed in the background, however, that there are indeed such people. Let us proceed, then, to consider various possible incompatible-properties arguments.

### ***1. The Perfection-versus-Creation Argument***

Consider the pair (a)–(l), which takes God to be perfect and also to be the creator of the universe. It seems that those properties might be shown to be incompatible in two different ways. The first way is as follows:

#### **Version 1**

1. If God exists, then he is perfect.
2. If God exists, then he is the creator of the universe.
3. A perfect being can have no needs or wants.
4. If any being created the universe, then he must have had some need or want.
5. Therefore, it is impossible for a perfect being to be the creator of the universe (from 3 and 4).
6. Hence, it is impossible for God to exist (from 1, 2, and 5).

Premise 3 might be challenged on the grounds that a perfect being, full of love, could desire to share his love with others. Thus, a perfect being could have a want, which would make premise 3 false. I suppose the only problem with this is that if a being wants something that he does not have, then he cannot be perfect, for he would be

in a certain way incomplete. Whether or not this adequately defends premise 3 is hard to say. There is a certain unclarity, and perhaps subjectivity, in the idea of “perfection” which poses an obstacle to any sort of rigorous reasoning about the concept.

Premise 4 might also be challenged. Perhaps God created the universe accidentally. For example, he “slipped and fell”, thereby creating a mess, which turned out to be our universe. In that case, God would not have had any need or want in creating the universe, and premise 4 would be false. There are difficulties with this, however. First, almost every theist who takes God to have created the universe takes it to have been done deliberately, not accidentally. And second, if the creation were accidental, then that in itself would imply that God is imperfect (since perfect beings do not have accidents), and that would be another basis for the Perfection-vs.-Creation Argument. Thus, this sort of challenge to premise 4 itself runs into problems.

#### **Version 2**

1. If God exists, then he is perfect.
2. If God exists, then he is the creator of the universe.
3. If a being is perfect, then whatever he creates must be perfect.
4. But the universe is not perfect.
5. Therefore, it is impossible for a perfect being to be the creator of the universe (from 3 and 4).
6. Hence, it is impossible for God to exist (from 1, 2, and 5).

The usual reply to this line of thought is that whatever imperfections the universe may

contain, they are the fault of mankind, not God. Thus, the universe was indeed perfect when God first created it, but it later became imperfect because of the actions of humans. This could be taken as an attack on the argument's premise 3, construed to imply that what is perfect must remain so indefinitely. I shall not pursue the many twists and turns that this issue might take. It is essentially the same as what is called the "Deductive Argument from Evil," which is a topic beyond the scope of the present survey. Let us instead move on to a new argument.

## ***2. The Immutability-versus-Creation Argument***

Let us now consider the pair (b)–(1), which takes God to be immutable (unchangeable) and also the creator of the universe. This argument, too, comes in different versions. However, I shall consider just one of them here.

1. If God exists, then he is immutable.
2. If God exists, then he is the creator of the universe.
3. An immutable being cannot at one time have an intention and then at a later time not have that intention.
4. For any being to create anything, prior to the creation he must have had the intention to create it, but at a later time, after the creation, no longer have the intention to create it.
5. Thus, it is impossible for an immutable being to have created anything (from 3 and 4).
6. Therefore, it is impossible for God to exist (from 1, 2, and 5).

Premise 3 might be challenged on the grounds that the loss of an intention through the satisfaction of it is not a genuine change in a being. If a man wants something, X, and then obtains it, he has not thereby changed his attitude toward X. It is not that he once had a pro-attitude toward X, but now he has a con-attitude toward it. So long as he is satisfied with X, his attitude remains unchanged. This may very well be true, but why claim that the only genuine change there can be in a being is a change in attitude? Why not allow that there can be other sorts of genuine change, and one of them is the loss of an intention through the satisfaction of it? Until some clear answer to this question is given, premise 3 seems to have some merit.

Premise 4 might be attacked in at least two different ways. It has been claimed that both the concept of "prior to the existence of the universe" and the concept of "God existing within time" are bogus. Time is a part or aspect of the universe itself and so there cannot be a time 'before the universe.' And God is a timeless being, so the idea of God having a certain property at one time but lacking it at a later time is misguided. Since God is not within time, he cannot have properties at particular times.

My response to both objections is that creation is a temporal concept. This is built into the very definition of 'create' as "to cause to come into being". X cannot cause Y to come into being unless X existed temporally prior to Y. Thus, if indeed there was no time prior to the existence of the universe, then it is logically impossible for the universe to have been created. In that case, there could not possibly

be a creator of the universe. And, furthermore, if indeed God does not exist within time, then he could not have been the creator of the universe, because, by the very concept of creation, if the universe was created at all, then its creator must have existed temporally prior to it. So if God, being timeless, did not exist temporally prior to anything, then God cannot have been the creator of the universe.

There is another objection to premise 4 which is similar to one we considered in relation to argument 1. It is that 4 would be false if the universe were created unintentionally. Again, it should be mentioned that people who believe that the universe was created also believe that it was created intentionally. But I would like to point out another possible response here. In place of the concept of intention, it would be possible to appeal to some other concept in the construction of argument 2. One candidate for that would be the concept of performing an action. In order for someone to create something, even if it is done unintentionally, the creator must perform an action, and that action must take time. Thus, there must be a time during which a creator is performing a certain action and a later time (after the action has been performed) during which he is no longer performing that action. It could be argued that this, too, represents a change in the being who is performing the action. Thus, this would be another reason for maintaining that an immutable being cannot create anything (whether intentionally or not).

### ***3. The Immutability-versus-Omniscience Argument***

This argument is based on an alleged incom-

patibility between attributes (b) and (e) on our list. It, too, comes in different versions, one of which is the following:

1. If God exists, then he is immutable.
2. If God exists, then he is omniscient.
3. An immutable being cannot know different things at different times.
4. To be omniscient, a being would need to know propositions about the past and future.
5. But what is past and what is future keep changing.
6. Thus, in order to know propositions about the past and future, a being would need to know different things at different times (from 5).
7. It follows that, to be omniscient, a being would need to know different things at different times (from 4 and 6).
8. Hence, it is impossible for an immutable being to be omniscient (from 3 and 7).
9. Therefore, it is impossible for God to exist (from 1,2, and 8).

The usual place at which this argument is attacked is its premise 4. It is claimed that a timeless being can know everything there is to know without knowing propositions about the past and future. Consider the following two propositions as examples:

- A. The origin of the planet Earth is in the past.
- B. The end (or destruction) of the planet Earth is in the future.

The claim is that a timeless being need not know propositions A and B in order to know everything there is to know, because such a being could know the exact dates of both the origin and the end of the earth and that would suffice for complete knowledge. That is, A and B would be “covered”, and so it would not be necessary for the omniscient being to know A and B in addition to those dates.

But, of course, this claim can be challenged. To know the dates of the origin and the end of the earth does not entail knowing propositions A and B. To know A and B requires being situated within time (somewhere *between* the origin and end of the earth), so they are not anything that a timeless being could know. However, they certainly are things that an omniscient being must know. Thus, the given objection to premise 4 of the argument above is a failure.

It should be noted that a somewhat different incompatible-properties argument could also be constructed using the divine attribute of transcendence instead of immutability. The argument would focus on the point that a transcendent being must be timeless, and a timeless being cannot know propositions about the past and future. However, an omniscient being, as shown above, must know propositions about the past and future. Therefore, it is impossible for a transcendent being to be omniscient. The incompatibility would be between attributes (c) and (e) on our list. Such an argument could be called “the Transcendence-vs.-Omniscience Argument”. The same issues would be raised in it as were raised, above, in connection with the Immutability-vs.-Omniscience Argument.

#### 4. *The Immutable-versus-All-Loving Argument*

Here the alleged incompatibility is between attributes (b) and (i). The argument may be expressed as follows:

1. If God exists, then he is immutable.
2. If God exists, then he is all-loving.
3. An immutable being cannot be affected by events.
4. To be all-loving, it must be possible for a being to be affected by events.
5. Hence, it is impossible for an immutable being to be all-loving (from 3 and 4).
6. Therefore, it is impossible for God to exist (from 1, 2, and 5).

To be affected is to be changed in some way, so premise 3 is pretty much true by definition.

Premise 4 might be challenged, but when the nature of love is contemplated, it is seen that 4 must also be true. The concept of love that is relevant here is that of *agape*, which is the willingness to sacrifice oneself for the sake of others. If events were to call for some sacrifice on God’s part, then, to be loving in the relevant sense, he must go ahead and perform the sacrifice. Since that requires being affected, the truth of premise 4 is assured.

This argument is a particularly forceful one. There is another argument which is very similar to it, which pits immutability against the property of being a person (property [g] on our list). It could be called the “Immutability-vs.-Personhood Argument.” The basic idea behind it would be that in order to genuinely be a person

(or personal being), it is necessary that one be capable of being affected by what happens. I think that that one, too, is quite forceful, but I shall not pursue it here. (For a similar argument, see section 6 below.) We have done quite enough with the divine attribute of immutability.

### ***5. The Transcendence-versus-Omnipresence Argument***

Here the incompatibility is between properties (c) and (f). The argument may be formulated as follows:

1. If God exists, then he is transcendent (i.e., outside space and time).
2. If God exists, then he is omnipresent.
3. To be transcendent, a being cannot exist anywhere in space.
4. To be omnipresent, a being must exist everywhere in space.
5. Hence, it is impossible for a transcendent being to be omnipresent (from 3 and 4).
6. Therefore, it is impossible for God to exist (from 1, 2, and 5).

The usual place at which this argument is attacked is premise 3. It is claimed that to transcend space does not entail being totally outside space. A being could be partly inside space and partly outside. Consider the Flatland analogy: a three-dimensional object transcends Flatland, and yet it exists within the Flatland dimensions (as well as outside). So, God could be like that. He exists within space (and, indeed, everywhere in space!) but he also exists outside space, the latter feature being what warrants calling him “transcendent.”

My only objection here is that the Flatland analogy does not quite make the idea of transcendence intelligible. We understand perfectly well how a three-dimensional object might “transcend” Flatland while still being (partly) within it. However, this is still talking about objects in space. To try to extend the analogy so as to talk about something that is “outside space as well as within it” is unsuccessful. That is something that we are totally unable to comprehend. In the end, the very concept of transcendence that is appealed to here is incoherent. This illustrates the point that defenses against incompatible-properties arguments may very well lead to incoherence or other objections to theism.

### ***6. The Transcendence-versus-Personhood Argument***

This is an even better argument for bringing out the relevant incoherence. It pits property (c) against property (g), instead of against (f):

1. If God exists, then he is transcendent (i.e., outside space and time).
2. If God exists, then he is a person (or a personal being).
3. If something is transcendent, then it cannot exist and perform actions within time.
4. But a person (or personal being) must exist and perform actions within time.
5. Therefore, something that is transcendent cannot be a person (or personal being) (from 3 and 4).
6. Hence, it is impossible for God to exist (from 1, 2, and 5).

Again, premise 3 might be challenged on the grounds that a transcendent being could be both partly inside time and partly outside time, with the latter feature being what warrants the label ‘transcendent’. That is, God is said to perform actions within time but also to have a part or aspect that extends outside time. However, this notion of “partly inside time and partly outside” is definitely incoherent. No one has a clue what that might mean. To pursue such a line of thought might evade the charge of “incompatible properties”, but it leads directly to the charge of incoherence, which is just as bad, if not worse.

Premise 4 might also be challenged. It might be said that its concept of personhood is too limited and that persons (or personal beings) could exist totally outside time. I am inclined to resist this sort of conceptual expansion. If the concept of personhood is extended that far, then it ceases to do the work that it was supposed to do, which was to make God into a more familiar figure. Furthermore, if persons (or personal beings) can exist totally outside of time, then it becomes unclear what it might mean to speak of ‘persons’ (or ‘personal beings’) at all. The boundaries of the class become so blurred that the concept becomes vacuous.

Closely related to the concept of personhood is the concept of being free, which is property (h) on our list. An argument similar to 6, above, one which might be called the “Transcendent-vs.-Free Argument,” could be constructed, pitting property (c) against property (h). In its corresponding premise 4, the point would be made that, in order for a being to be free, it must exist and perform actions within time. Otherwise, there would be no way for any freedom to be manifested. Almost all theists, it

should be noted, accept the idea that God is a free agent, and thus are inclined to say of him that he (at least occasionally) performs actions within time. If they call God “transcendent” at all, then they would aim to attack premise 3 of the arguments in question, not premise 4. Of course, as pointed out above, to attack premise 3 leads one to make incoherent statements, so such a maneuver cannot be regarded to be successful.

### ***7. The Nonphysical-versus-Personal Argument***

Let us consider pitting property (d) against property (g). Then we get an argument which might be formulated in a very short way, as follows:

1. If God exists, then he is nonphysical.
2. If God exists, then he is a person (or a personal being).
3. A person (or personal being) needs to be physical.
4. Hence, it is impossible for God to exist (from 1-3).

Premise 3 has been advocated by Kai Nielsen, who wrote: “we have no understanding of ‘a person’ without ‘a body’ and it is only persons that in the last analysis can act or do things.”<sup>3</sup> But not all nontheists would accept 3. One who does not is J.L. Mackie.<sup>4</sup> This argument turns on the issue of whether the idea of a “bodiless person” is consistent and coherent. That is a difficult and highly controversial issue, and I shall not pursue it here in this survey.<sup>5</sup>

It should be noted that the divine attribute of being nonphysical might also be taken to be



incompatible with still other divine attributes, such as being free and being all-loving, which would give rise to slightly different incompatible-properties arguments. All such arguments, though, would lead into the same sort of difficult and controversial issues as does the Nonphysical-vs.-Personal Argument, and so should not be regarded to be among the most forceful of the various atheological arguments available.

### ***8. The Omnipresence-versus-Personhood Argument***

Similar considerations arise when we pit property (f) against property (g). The argument may again be formulated in a brief way, as follows:

1. If God exists, then he is omnipresent.
2. If God exists, then he is a person (or a personal being).
3. Whatever is omnipresent cannot be a person (or a personal being).
4. Hence, it is impossible for God to exist (from 1-3).

The point of premise 3 is similar to that for the previous argument. When we contemplate what it means to be a person (or a personal being), we see that it conflicts with being omnipresent. What sorts of things might be omnipresent, anyway? Perhaps a gravitational field would serve as an example. They would all appear to be items in a different *category* from persons, so to try to assimilate them would be to commit a category mistake. Persons can no more be omnipresent than they can be odd or even (in the mathematical sense).

### ***9. The Omniscient-versus-Free Argument***

We now come to a more complicated argument, which pits property (e) against (h). One way of formulating it is presented by Dan Barker.<sup>6</sup> A slightly different version may be formulated as follows:

1. If God exists, then he is omniscient.
2. If God exists, then he is free.
3. An omniscient being must know exactly what actions he will and will not do in the future.
4. If one knows that he will do an action, then it is impossible for him not to do it, and if one knows that he will not do an action, then it is impossible for him to do it.
5. Thus, whatever an omniscient being does, he must do, and whatever he does not do, he cannot do (from 3 and 4).
6. To be free requires having options open, which means having the ability to act contrary to the way one actually acts.
7. So, if one is free, then he does not have to do what he actually does, and he is able to do things that he does not actually do (from 6).
8. Hence, it is impossible for an omniscient being to be free (from 5 and 7).
9. Therefore, it is impossible for God to exist (from 1, 2, and 8).

Some have denied that omniscience entails knowing all about the future. They say that omniscience only entails knowing what there is to know. But the future actions of free

persons are open and not there to be known about. Thus, not even an omniscient being could know about them. This may provide a basis for rejecting premise 3 of the argument.

This sort of objection to 3 can be attacked in many different ways. One way would be to affirm that an omniscient being would indeed need to know all about the future. All propositions about the future are either true or false, and an omniscient being, by definition, must know the truth of any proposition that is in fact true. Furthermore, theists, often following the Bible on this point, commonly attribute unrestricted knowledge of the future to God.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, if God does not know the future actions of any free beings, then there is very little, if any, pertaining to the future about which he can be certain. For no matter what the situation may be, there is always a chance that it will be affected by such actions.

Another way to attack the given objection is to maintain that, even if God does not know about the future actions of other free agents, he must know about his own future actions. One reason for this is that God's actions are all based on perfect justice and immutable law. There is never any caprice in them. His purposes and intentions have remained steadfast from all eternity, so anyone who totally understands God's purposes and intentions, as he himself does, would be able to infallibly predict his actions. It follows that God must know what he himself will and will not do in the future, which would establish the truth of premise 3 if it is taken to refer to God.

Premise 4 is a consequence of the definition of knowledge. If a proposition is known to be true, then it must be true and cannot be false. So, if X knows that Y will do Z, then it

is impossible for Y not to do Z. And this is so even where X and Y are the same person.

Premise 6 says that a free agent can do what he doesn't do. That may sound odd at first, but when it is understood correctly, it seems correct. Suppose we identify what Y does as "act Z". Then in order for Y to be free, prior to doing Z, it must have been possible for Y to do Z and it must also have been possible for Y not to do Z. If it were not possible for Y not to do Z, then Y's doing of Z could not be regarded as a free act. Free acts are avoidable. You can't be free if you had to do the thing that you did. This seems intuitively right, though some forms of compatibilism might reject it. It is not a totally settled issue in philosophy. I leave it to the reader to ascertain whether or not premise 6 is correct. If it is, then I think the argument goes through.

### ***10. The Justice-versus-Mercy Argument***

The last argument to be considered in this survey pits property (j) against property (k). It may be formulated as follows:

1. If God exists, then he is an all-just judge.
2. If God exists, then he is an all-merciful judge.
3. An all-just judge treats every offender with exactly the severity that he/she deserves.
4. An all-merciful judge treats every offender with less severity than he/she deserves.
5. It is impossible to treat an offender both with exactly the severity that he/she deserves and also with less severity than he/she deserves,

6. Hence, it is impossible for an all-just judge to be an all-merciful judge (from 3-5).
7. Therefore, it is impossible for God to exist (from 1, 2, and 6).

I have heard it said by Christians that the way God judges offenders depends on whether or not they are true believers. If they are, then he is lenient with them, but if they are not, then he treats them with exactly the severity they deserve (which can be pretty bad). By this Christian way of speaking, God is said to be both an all-just and an all-merciful judge. He is all-just in giving everyone an equal opportunity to become a true believer and thereby come to receive leniency, but he is also all-merciful in that every true believer, without exception, receives mercy. This way of viewing matters would be an attack on both premise 3 and premise 4, above.

I would respond by maintaining that premises 3 and 4 come closer to capturing ordinary language than the given Christian way of speaking. According to the latter, God treats some offenders more leniently with regard to what they deserve than he does other offenders. It does not seem that such a judge would (or should) be called “all-just.” And similarly, since he does not treat all offenders

less severely than they deserve, he would not (and should not) be called “all-merciful” either. Instead of being both all-just and all-merciful, the Christian God, as described, would be neither.

As with many of the previous attacks on the incompatible-properties arguments, this one turns on semantical issues. In a sense, it is all a matter of semantics, for the issue of whether or not certain property ascriptions conflict with certain other property ascriptions depends very much on what exactly they mean. Theists could defend against the arguments by denying that the property terms in question mean what the proponents of the arguments claim they mean. Often such denials lead to still other difficulties for the theist. A full presentation and defense of incompatible-properties arguments should explore such implications and fully pursue the many issues, whether semantical or not. That project is beyond the scope of the present essay.

My aim was simply to survey several of the more common (and a few not so common) incompatible-properties arguments for the nonexistence of God. Just which of those arguments are sound and which of them are most effective in discussions and debates with theists are further issues that are certainly worth pursuing.

## 6. RICHARD R. LA CROIX THE PARADOX OF EDEN

**BIOGRAPHICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL SUMMARY.** La Croix is a Professor of Philosophy at the State University College at Buffalo. In his amusing essay on the Eden story, La Croix highlights an alleged contradiction, a contradiction not between two attributes but between an attribute and a particular religious story: in this case God's command in the story of Adam and Eve that they should not eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. La Croix argues that Adam and Eve either did know or did not know that obeying God was good and disobeying him bad; and further, in both cases, that God, being omniscient, would also know whether they knew or not. If they knew that they should obey him, then God's test of their righteousness was unfair because clearly nothing could be gained by disobeying God. If, on the other hand, they did not know that they should obey him, then their subsequent punishment was unfair. Given, therefore, that in either case God acts unjustly, a just God does not and cannot exist.

### Richard R. La Croix THE PARADOX OF EDEN<sup>1</sup>

In the book of Genesis, we are told that God created Adam and Eve and put them in the garden of Eden. God also placed in the midst of the garden of Eden the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Adam and Eve were permitted to eat of any of the trees in the garden of Eden, but God commanded them not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The forbidden fruit was eaten by Adam and Eve, and God punished them for their disobedience (see Gen. 3:16–19).

Notice that there is a difficulty with this story. Before they ate the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve either knew that obeying God is good and disobeying God is evil, or they did not

know this. If they knew it, then Adam and Eve would have already possessed the knowledge of good and evil, and through his omniscience God would know this, and he would also know that Adam and Eve would not very likely be tempted to eat the forbidden fruit because they would have nothing to gain by disobeying God. So, since God's command not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was an inadequate and unfair test of the righteousness of Adam and Eve if they already possessed the knowledge of good and evil, God acted unjustly by making this command if they already had this knowledge.

On the other hand, if Adam and Eve did

not know that obeying God is good and disobeying God is evil, then they could not have known that it was wrong or evil to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. So, since God punished Adam and Eve for doing something that they could not have known to be wrong or evil, God acted unjustly

by punishing them. It would appear to follow that whether or not Adam and Eve knew that obeying God is good and disobeying God is evil, God acted unjustly. But, then, God is just at one time and unjust at another time. Consequently, being just is not a necessary or essential property of God.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Critically analyze the following remarks by Descartes: ‘The mathematical truths which you call eternal have been laid down by God and depend on him entirely no less than the rest of his creatures. . . . Please do not hesitate to assert and proclaim everywhere that it is God who has laid down these laws in nature just as a king lays down laws in his kingdom. . . . It will be said that if God has established these truths he could change them as a king changes his laws. To this the answer is: Yes he can, if his will can change. . . . In general we can assert that God can do everything that is beyond our grasp but not that he cannot do what is beyond our grasp. It would be rash to think that our imagination reaches as far as his power.’ Letter to Mersenne, 15 April 1630, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. III, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch and Anthony Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) pp. 22-23.
2. Outline Aquinas’ argument that God’s inability to do logically impossible things implies no limitation of his power.
3. What is the paradox of the stone? Attempt to resolve it.
4. Critically assess Findlay’s Paradox.
5. What problems arise from saying that God is perfectly free but yet incapable of sin?
6. Is the notion of God’s omniscience incompatible with his creation of free and autonomous human beings?
7. Comment on Whitehead’s claim (quoted by Hartshorne) that the traditional concept of divine omnipotence gives ‘unto God the properties that belonged to Caesar.’
8. Is God’s omnipotence more appropriately defined in terms of coercive or persuasive power?
9. Which of the property-incompatibilities listed by Drange do you consider the most persuasive?
10. Give an alternative account of the Adam and Eve story that avoids the difficulties presented by La Croix.

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## GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

An author's name followed by an asterisk (\*) indicates an extracted text

### 1. Thomas Aquinas

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## 2. Charles Hartshorne

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## 6. Omniscience

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## NOTES

### Introduction: The Attributes of God

1. See Mackie, 'Evil and Omnipotence', pp. 162-168 below.

### 1. Thomas Aquinas: The Omnipotence of God

1. *Summa Theologica*, Part I, trans. The English Dominican Province, New York, Benzinger Bros., 1911-1936. Available at [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org).

### 2. George Mavrodes: Some Puzzles Concerning Omnipotence

1. *Philosophical Review*, 72, 1963, pp. 221-223.

2. I assume, of course, the existence of God, since that is not being brought in question here.

3. St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*.

4. But this method rests finally on the same logical relations as the preceding one.

### 3. J. N. Findlay: Disproof of God's Existence

1. 'Can God's Existence be Disproved,' in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre, London, Macmillan, 1955, pp. 52-55.

2. This word is added to avoid the suggestion that there must be one pervasive affinity linking together all the actions commonly called 'religious'.

3. Whatever the philosophical 'ground' for it may be, this plainly is the way in which we do describe the 'inner quality' of our felt attitudes.

4. I have included this alternative, of which I am not fond, merely because so many modern thinkers make use of it in this sort of connection.

5. Or 'non-significance', if this alternative is preferred.

6. To use a Kantian comparison.

#### 4. Charles Hartshorne: Omnipotence As a Theological Mistake

1. *Omnipotence and other Theological Mistakes*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1984, pp. 10-26.

#### 5. Theodore M. Drange: Incompatible-Properties Argument

1. *Philo*, 1, 2, 1998, pp. 49-60. Reprinted in *The Impossibility of God*, ed. Michael Martin and Ricki Monnier, New York, Prometheus Books, 2003, pp. 185-197.

2. See p. 126 below.

3. *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1982, p. 36.

4. *The Miracle of Theism*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1982, pp. 1-2.

5. For reasons that support the incoherence of 'disembodied persons', see Drange, *Nonbelief and Evil*, appendix E, section 2.

6. 'The Freewill Argument for the Nonexistence of God' [online], [www.ffrf.org/fttday/august97/barker.html](http://www.ffrf.org/fttday/august97/barker.html) [August 1997].

7. For a long list of biblical references to God's knowledge of the future free actions of humans, see Drange, *Nonbelief and Evil*, appendix B, section 2.

#### 6. Richard R. La Croix: The Paradox of Eden

1. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 15, 1984, p. 171. Reprinted in *The Impossibility of God*, ed. Michael Martin and Ricki Monnier, Amherst, New York, Prometheus Books, 2003, pp. 127-128.