

God's Goodness Needs No Privilege: A Reply to Funkhouser

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In his paper "On Privileging God's Moral Goodness," Eric Funkhouser argues that the properties of omnipotence and necessary goodness are incompatible. Funkhouser argues further that attempts to solve this problem have sometimes led theists to mis-define 'omnipotence' and to corrupt "a perfectly good word." Interestingly, Funkhouser does not take the upshot of his argument to be that there is something conceptually amiss with the concept of God, but only with its explication by philosophers of religion. Funkhouser has no particular beef with the view that God is necessarily good and has whatever power is consistent with that, provided that such power is seen to fall short of omnipotence.

I am not persuaded by Funkhouser's argument. I see no philosophical, semantic, or even lexical difficulties in assigning to God the properties of necessary goodness and omnipotence. This paper is an attempt to explain why.

Section 1: A brief aside

Before launching into Funkhouser's argument, I'd like to first note that while the problem that concerns Funkhouser is indeed a prima facie problem for the compossibility of omnipotence and necessary goodness (or as Funkhouser sometimes says *impeccability*), the difficulty can be generated even on a somewhat weaker conception of divine goodness. The problem (such as it is) concerns the compatibility of omnipotence with God's being unable to do certain things because of his "perfect goodness." Let's say a being is perfectly good if it never violates a moral principle that applies to it, and if it

acts in accordance with all relevant moral principles. Now if perfect goodness is an essential property of God, then it follows that there are no worlds in which God acts against a moral principle, and we are on our way to generating the incompatibility problem. However, the same difficulty can be generated even if we think of God's perfect goodness as *stable* and not essential. A property P is *stable* for a being B at a world W iff (a) B exemplifies P at all times in W and (b) there is nothing B can do to make it the case that B ceases to exemplify P in W. Put somewhat differently, if a person has a property in a stable way, there are no worlds accessible to her in which she doesn't have it. Exemplifying a property in a stable way is, for all practical purposes, as limiting as having that property essentially. For example, suppose that in world W1, Ray has the stable (but accidental) property of being blind. Then not only does Ray not see—Ray *can't* see in W1, even though there are other worlds in which Ray has 20/20 vision.

Now if God's perfect goodness is stable but accidental, then there are no worlds accessible to God where God violates a principle or fails to act in accordance with moral principles. Thus there are no worlds accessible at which God does something wrong, and the prima facie problem at the heart of Funkhouser's paper is with us even if God's perfect goodness is not essential.

Section 2: Funkhouser's First Argument

Since his argument is commendably clear, I won't spend much time rehearsing it. The fundamental idea is that a necessary condition of being omnipotent is that it not be possible that there be a being who is able to do everything you do and more besides. But if God is necessarily good (or impeccable) then God can't do anything that would violate

a moral principle. But we can conceive of a being who is able to do everything God can do but who lacks impeccability. Such a being would also be able to do actions that violate moral principles. So such a being would be able to do everything God can do and then some. But since it is a necessary condition of omnipotence that it is not possible that there is a being who can do everything an omnipotent being can do and more besides, then God is not omnipotent.

Later in his paper, Funkhouser offers a second version of the argument that doesn't depend on the possible existence of a being who can do everything an impeccable God can do and then some. However, in this section of my paper, I want to focus on the original argument. We'll have a look at the second version in the next section.

As noted above, Funkhouser's argument depends on this premise:

P3. There is a possible being with the power to bring about all the states of affairs that God can bring about and then some (e.g. morally bad states of affairs).

Funkhouser concedes that the Anselmian theist will reject P3. For according to the Anselmian conception of God, God is the greatest possible being, the being with the greatest possible array of the great-making properties. So such a being will exist necessarily and be the most powerful being at any world at which it exists.¹ But then it will be the most powerful being at every world, so there are no worlds at which there is a being with the power to bring about the states of affairs that God can bring about and then some. So there is no such possible being, and P3 is false. Now it might be that we can *conceive* of a being that can do everything God can plus various immoral acts, but this is just an instance of conceivability being a poor guide to possibility.

Funkhouser thinks this reply is inadequate. Why? Perhaps surprisingly, he aims his response not at the heart of the Anselmian's argument but instead at her explanation for why the ability to conceive of a person more powerful than the Anselmian God is not a reliable sign that such a person is possible. Funkhouser writes:

[T]he typical examples of alleged conceivability-to-possibility failures are different in kind. They involve either a misdescription of a genuine possibility (e.g., conceiving of watery-stuff as water instead of the distinct chemical kind XYZ) or a sketchy conception due to ignorance of scientific or mathematical/logical facts (e.g., conceiving of this exact same physical stuff but without consciousness, or conceiving of the falsity of Fermat's Last Theorem). My conception of a being with the powers of God, plus the powers to bring about immoral states of affairs, fits neither pattern. It does not involve a misdescription, since I am not assigning any name at all to the being I imagine—I am simply imagining it with certain powers. Nor does this conception seem to play on any scientific or logical ignorance—How could adding the power to stab the innocent violate a law of nature or logic? Instead, such a “possibility” is supposed to be ruled out by some strange, *sui generis* force of metaphysical necessity. The mind boggles when contemplating the nature of this force that forestalls the realization of the more-powerful being I imagine. One could always claim that conceivability is no guarantee of possibility, but for particular cases an explanation of the alleged failure should be at hand.²

So Funkhouser agrees that the third premise of his original argument is true only if the Anselmian conception of God (at least when construed as demanding the impeccability of God) is logically impossible.

Here's the essence of what I take to be Funkhouser's argument against Anselmianism:

There is a possible being B who can do everything the Anselmian God (were one to exist) can do and more besides. So there is a world W at which B is the most powerful being. But the Anselmian God, if he exists, is the most powerful being at every world in which he exists and he is necessarily existent. Since B is the most powerful being in W, the Anselmian God doesn't exist at W, and hence doesn't exist at any world. His existence is, then, logically impossible. Now it might be that we can *conceive* of a being who exists at all worlds and who is the most powerful being at every world at which he exists but this is just an instance of conceivability being a poor guide to possibility.

But what's to stop the Anselmian from using an argument structurally like Funkhouser's against Funkhouser himself? After all, the Anselmian can reasonably say that there seems to be nothing incoherent in her concept of a necessary being who is the most powerful being at any world at which it exists; that is, this is conceivable. And it isn't as though this conception depends on either a misdescription or ignorance of some fact of science/math/logic. Therefore, we should think it possible, and any argument for its impossibility must be mistaken. So the Anselmian can give the following argument that, it seems to me, is on epistemic equal-footing with Funkhouser's:

There is a possible being, G, who necessarily exists, is impeccable, and who is the most powerful being at every world at which he exists. There is, then no world at which there is a being, B, who can do everything the G can do and more besides. That is to say, B's existence is logically impossible. Now it might be that we can *conceive* of a being who can do everything G can do and more besides but this is just an instance of conceivability being a poor guide to possibility.

This argument seems to me at least as good as Funkhouser's. And if we have a argumentative draw here, then the Anselmian is within her epistemic rights in rejecting premise three of Funkhouser's original argument.

I suggested above that the Anselmian's and Funkhouser's arguments are equally plausible, but that actually seems to me to be giving too much credit to the latter. For Funkhouser's argument depends crucially on there being a very cozy relationship between conceivability and possibility. Surely the only reason Funkhouser will give for thinking it possible that there exists a being who can do everything God is thought able to do and then some is that we can conceive of such a thing. But the theist is unlikely to claim that her primary reason for thinking that the Anselmian God exists is that she can conceive of it. So conceivability is playing a larger role in Funkhouser's possibility claim than it is in that of the theist.

We should be wary of claims that, in almost all cases, the conceivable is possible. For if logical possibility is an objective and fundamental metaphysical category, then it would seem highly surprising if the powers of conceivability with which God, or Mother Nature, has blessed us would track the logically possible. One can recognize that,

existence proofs aside, conceivability is the best available guide to possibility. But that doesn't mean that it is, all things considered and in *every* context, a good guide.

Particularly when we are considering matters very far from the concerns of our everyday lives (where it is practically important that we have some sense of what is possible and what isn't), we should not put too much stock into the conceptions and mental pictures we can draw as revealing to us the scope of the possible.³

Section 3: Funkhouser's Second Argument

Although he stands by his original argument and the truth of its third premise, Funkhouser recognizes that what he has to say on the matter is unlikely to convince the Anselmian. So later in his paper he offers a version of the argument that does not require that controversial premise. Loosely, the newer version argues that because there are things that limited beings like humans can do that God cannot (things that do not themselves depend upon our metaphysical limitations), God is not omnipotent. Humans can and do violate moral principles; God doesn't and can't. But if there are thing that we can do and that God can't, then God isn't omnipotent.

This version of the argument turns our attention where I think it should have been all along. The problem isn't that there are possible beings with *more* power than God, but only that there are beings with powers that God lacks (because that means that there are limits to what God can do that aren't *logical* limits). If God is impeccable there are things that God can't do that we would expect an omnipotent being to be able to do, if for no other reason than that *we* are able to do them.

I believe that in the first argument and in the second, premise two can be reasonably resisted. Recall that this premise reads:

2. God does not have the power to (i.e., cannot) bring about morally bad states of affairs. God is impeccable, or essentially morally good.

(Assumption)

In his defense of 2, Funkhouser argues against the following objection: from the claim that God is impeccable together with the facts as we know them, it does follow that there are things God can't do that other possible and actual individuals can. But, the objector will continue, the reason God can't do these things is not because God lacks the *power* to do them but because God (necessarily) lacks the *will* to do them. Funkhouser's second premise mistakenly equates "S cannot X" and "S lacks the power to X." As it turns out, I think this objection is not as easily dispensed with as Funkhouser believes.

Let's consider an example of Funkhouser's: God cannot stab an innocent child for no reason. One who accepts impeccability will agree with Funkhouser that not only will God not do such a thing; God cannot do such a thing. Funkhouser and I agree on this. But Funkhouser wants to go from "God cannot do X but others can" to "God is not omnipotent." Now I grant such an inference is tempting; it is not for nothing that accounts of omnipotence are often formulated in terms of the ability to perform actions. Yet I think such accounts are wrong and such an inference is to be resisted. We can learn something about the nature of power and its relation to intentional action by seeing why power limitations don't follow from ability limitations.

Suppose we raise the question of whether I can lift the rather large rock in front of me. It might seem that if we ask if I have the power to lift it, we've asked the same question. As Funkhouser notes, Erik Wielenberg has provided an example in which these two questions might seem to come apart. For if the stone is suitably greased, I might not have the ability to lift it, even though I would have that ability were it not greased. In such a case it is natural to say that I have the power to lift the stone (i.e., I am generally capable of lifting objects of that size and weight) even though I can't lift the stone (or, as we are not using the expression, I now lack the ability to lift the stone).

While I think that Wielenberg's case is telling as far as it goes, I want to suggest that there are better analogies to argue against the thesis that what one can do is precisely the same as what one has the power to bring about.⁴

Accounts of omnipotence in particular, and of power in general, in terms of what *states of affairs a being can bring about* are misleading in at least one important way. To see this, let's note that when we care about such accounts we aren't interested in what states of affairs a being might bumble into or somehow inadvertently produce. Instead, we are interested in the states of affairs the agent is in a position to bring about via actions. And not just that. For actions can and often do have unintended side effects. And, again, when we wonder about the abilities or potency of an agent, we aren't asking about what she might accidentally produce as the result of an action intended to produce some other end. What we want is an account of what that being is in a position to bring about intentionally. It would seem that it will do no harm, even on the view that potency is to be explicated by what states of affairs the being is capable of producing, if we instead focus on what we might call 'successful acts.' A successful act is an act that is

successful in producing the end to which it is aimed. So if I have the power to lift a stone, then we can say somewhat more perspicuously, that I can perform the success-act of lifting the stone. Let's assume that we are only interested in success-acts, and so henceforth, I'll drop the modifier "success" and speak only of acts.

So I can lift the stone iff I can perform the act of lifting the stone. Let's suppose furthermore that if I can perform the act of lifting the stone, then there is some possible world in which I am otherwise much as I am now and I do lift the stone.⁵ So to find out more about what must be the case if I can in fact lift the stone, we must think about what must happen at these worlds in which I actually do perform the action of lifting the stone. Because we are here interested only in actions that produce the effects at which they aim, we can consider only what must be true in order for one to perform such an act.

So let's consider this claim:

1: I can lift a stone weighing 100 pounds

Now given our necessary and sufficient condition for 'can' statements it follows that

2: I can perform the act of lifting a stone weighing 100 pounds.

And given our necessary condition for performing an action it follows that

3: There is a world W at which I am much as I am now where I perform the act of lifting a stone weighing 100 pounds.

But what does (3) require? That a pair of conditions obtain: I must have the capacity to lift the 100-pound stone and I must have the all-things-considered desire to lift it. If I have only the capacity, the stone will remain unlifted. If I only have the all-things-considered desire, the stone will remain unlifted. But if I have the all-things-considered desire and the capacity, then I will perform the act of lifting the stone.⁶

Therefore we can say that, given (1), (2), and (3) the following is true:

4: At W , I have the all-things-considered desire to lift the stone and the capacity to lift the stone.

Let's complicate things just a bit. Suppose I had some horrible experience with a hot-pink object when I was a child that left me with an uncontrollable aversion to hot-pink things. I simply cannot make myself knowingly touch them. Now let's assume that I regularly lift gray stones weighing 100 pounds. Still, it may occur to us to wonder if the following is true:

5: I can perform the act of lifting a hot-pink stone weighing 100 pounds.

On the one hand, it seems silly to think that (2) is true but (5) is false. How could the mere color of the object sap me of my lifting strength? Yet it also seems true to say that you can't lift an object that you can't touch, and if I literally can't knowingly touch any hot-pink object, then I can't knowingly touch the stone in question, and so I can't perform the act of lifting it. Although we might be tempted to think there is a paradox here (I both can and cannot lift hot-pink stones), this conflict is resolvable using the distinctions above.

I can lift a stone in W only if there is a world where I am fundamentally like I am in W and in which I lift the stone. Now, given my deep-seeded aversion to hot-pink objects, there is no world at which I am fundamentally like I am at the actual world (we are supposing) and I lift the hot-pink stone. So I cannot lift it and (5) is false. However, there is nothing particularly puzzling or paradoxical about this because we are assuming that I can lift a stone only if I have the capacity for lifting stones of that weight and an ability to will to lift this particular stone. So my being unable to lift the stone doesn't

entail that I lack the capacity for lifting stones that size or that I even lack the capacity to lift that stone (since its weight is well within my lifting range). My inability in this case is a failure of my will and not my capacity for stone lifting.

So I cannot lift the stone, although I do have the capacity to lift it. Does this mean that I lack the *power* to lift it? I don't see why. If I have the power to lift a 100-pound gray stone but lack the power to lift a 100-pound hot-pink stone, then these are distinct powers. But why should we think that? As far as I can see, the only reason to individuate powers this finely is the conviction that "S cannot do X" entails "S lacks the power to X." But once we see that the explanation for the former can be a failure of *will* rather than capacity, we should see that the entailment fails to hold. Indeed, these considerations might be taken to show that by "capacity" we've really been picking out the very same concept that we pick out when we use "power" in these contexts.

Now Funkhouser has a response to the kind of reply I've been detailing. Funkhouser thinks that the distinction between (in my terms) what a being has the *ability to will* on the one hand and what a being has *the capacity to do* on the other is untenable for God. In other intelligent beings, Funkhouser avers, the will and the capacity to do things are distinct faculties. Regarding the earlier example of involving the hot-pink rock, we can say that *qua* the faculty of the will, I cannot lift it but *qua* my capacity for lifting, I can. Yet in God there is not supposed to be any such distinction between faculties; the doctrine of divine simplicity requires a lack of complexity in the mind and will of God. Instead of talking of two distinct faculties, then, we must speak of God's "will-power"—a combination of what God is able to will and has the capacity to do. What God can do is what God has the will-power to do. So if there are things God is unable to do, the

explanation must be simply that God lacks the will-power, and not that, for example, God has the capacity to do them but lacks the will. Therefore, if God cannot do something, God simply lacks the will-power to do it.

My reply to this is two-fold. Although the doctrine of simplicity has been a historically important doctrine in Christian theism, it no longer holds the sway it once held over theologians. So if cornered, a theist might be willing to grant whatever complexity is necessary for a separation of God's will and God's capacities.

However (and this is the second part of my reply) such a concession isn't necessary. Suppose with Funkhouser that the literal, metaphysical truth is that God has neither will nor capacity but has instead the joint will-power. So, given our earlier example, there are no worlds at which this will-power extends to the stabbing of innocent children. But there are worlds at which it extends to the stabbing of physically similar beings of the same size and consistency. Furthermore, there are worlds at which God destroys entire galaxies but none at which his destroying such galaxies fails to be morally justified. Given a thorough description of all worlds consistent with God's will-power and those inconsistent with God's will-power, we will be able to see that the former set will be exactly the same as the set of worlds that would be consistent with God's having distinct faculties in virtue of which God is omnipotent and impeccable. And the latter will be the very same set as the set that is inconsistent with God's having those distinct faculties. But since even Funkhouser seems willing to grant that God would be omnipotent and impeccable were God's will and God's capacities distinct, and since uniting the faculties does nothing to limit or expand the worlds and actions open to God, we should surely conclude that God is omnipotent and impeccable even if God's will and

power are united. That is, Funkhouser claims that because of the doctrine of simplicity, God can't be both omnipotent and impeccable; but if we hold everything else the same except for the unity of God's will and capacity, then omnipotence and impeccability are compossible. Yet it is hard to see how the unity of God's will and capacity could somehow deprive God of power given that the separation of the will and power would have made no difference at all with respect to which worlds might have been actual. Therefore, we should conclude that divine simplicity does not provide Funkhouser with a satisfactory reply to the objection to premise two of his original. Hence we should conclude that the objection holds and that "God cannot do X" fails to entail that "God lacks the power to do X." Hence we should fail to conclude that there is a conflict between omnipotence and impeccability.⁷

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¹ I'm here assuming that the Anselmian conception of God entails that if God exists, then God is the most powerful being at any world at which he exists and that he exists at all worlds. Of course, this entailment only holds if, necessarily, being necessarily existent and the most powerful being at all worlds at which the being exists are possibly exemplified, compossible, and jointly better to have than to lack. Funkhouser would, I believe, reject this entailment of the Anselmian conception but for the present it will do no harm to suppose, with the standard Anselmian, that this entailment holds.

² Funkhouser, page xxx.

³ For more on this limited modal skepticism, see Peter van Inwagen's paper "Modal Epistemology" in *Philosophical Studies* 92 (1998), pp. 67-84.

⁴ In what follows, I am indebted to Thomas V. Morris's discussion in chapter 4 ("The Power of God") of his book *Our Idea of God* (Notre Dame Press, 1991).

⁵ It should be noted the qualification "I am much like I am now" is needed to avoid the consequence that a quadriplegic is able to lift a 100-pound stone. I take it that even though the quadriplegic can lift the stone in worlds at which he isn't a quadriplegic, that shouldn't incline us to say that he can lift a stone in those worlds at which he is a quadriplegic.

⁶ To say that the combination of capacity and all-things-considered desire is sufficient for my performing the action is an oversimplification, and for more than one reason. First, there may be cases involving weakness of will or depression in which it would be natural to say both that a person has the capacity and all-things-considered desire to X but nevertheless fails to X. Second, one may have the all-things-considered desire and the capacity yet fail to do X because she can't accomplish X each time she tries. To borrow from J.L. Austin's example, a golfer might have the desire to sink a difficult 40 foot putt, and, being an accomplished golfer, have the capacity to make it but lack the ability to sink it every time she tries. Both kinds of problems show that more would need to be said if my aim here were to give a satisfactory account of agency. But these kinds of difficulties are presumably not relevant for the purpose at hand and so it will suffice to make note of them and move on.

⁷ Thanks to Eric Funkhouser for discussion and detailed comments on earlier drafts of this paper.