

QUALITATIVE OMNIPOTENCE

Shandon L. Guthrie

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I. Introduction

Both past and contemporary philosophers of Christianity have expounded various views of divine omnipotence, not the least of which is Thomas Flint's and Alfred Freddoso's remarkable contribution to the subject as seen in their landmark essay "Maximal Power."⁽¹⁾ I do not wish to presume a full-fledged presentation of divine omnipotence in the present article simply because of the extremely nuanced understanding behind this controversial attribute of God. But I do desire to offer a definition of omnipotence that may avoid the usual problems associated with it when construed apart from possible worlds semantics. Freddoso and Flint, for example, offer a definition that explains how God can be omnipotent despite His apparent limitation of not being able to change hard historical events. Moreover, their contribution offers a definition that takes into account *states of affairs* instead of raw power. The worry is that God cannot actually Himself perform the act of lust at a certain time but He *can* bring about that state of affairs in someone else so that God can create those circumstances where, say, Thomas will freely lust at a given time. Much of the earlier criticisms offered against divine omnipotence have been deflected well by Freddoso's and Flint's contribution. However, I want to offer a defense of God's omnipotence when understood in terms of mere, raw power. This is not to put any distance between me and "Maximal Power" but to argue against those that object to God's omnipotence, even construed as raw power, still cannot be made to show its incompatibility with God's omnibenevolence. In effect, regardless of the status of "Maximal Power," even objections based on the raw power view are unconvincing. I move to offer, not a new definition of omnipotence, but a critique of such an argument strategy against *any* sort of omnipotence in God. To do this, I shall emphasize the appropriate focus, not in a maximal *quantity* of actions possible for God but, rather, in a maximal *quality* of actions that only a truly omnipotent being could enact. On such a view, it might not be relevant whether or not a being's own ontology limits one from omnipotence if that ontology reduces the number of actions possible. Instead, what is required is that a being who is omnipotent ought to be performing a qualitatively maximum set of abilities which are qualitatively weightier than performing a superior numerical amount yet containing a qualitatively moral deficiency. Because it is possible to construe God's abilities in a holistic sense so that God's omnipotence is not seen in a vacuum but in connection with His omnibenevolence, then the objectors to God's omnipotence must regroup.

II. Understanding Two Main Difficulties With Defining Omnipotence

There are two essential difficulties that proponents of divine omnipotence must face. First, a sufficient definition of omnipotence cannot simply be one that concerns anything logically possible for a being to do. Many well-meaning theists presume that to do anything logically possible is a sufficient guarantor of the attribute of divine omnipotence. But nostalgic philosophers will recall the infamous character McEar who satisfies this definition of omnipotence yet is enormously weak. McEar, for those who are unfamiliar, is a being that is incapable of anything except scratching his own ear *per* his nature. Yet if omnipotence is to be

understood as whatever is logically possible for any being to enact then it appears that McEar satisfies just such a criterion. So,

1. B is omnipotent if and only if B can do anything logically possible for B.

It remains feasible for McEar to be adorned with the title of being omnipotent since his ontological status is consistent with (1). McEar can do anything logically possible for him in that he scratches his ear. It just happens to turn out that McEar's pool of logically possible options is limited to *only* scratching his own ear. But something is obviously wrong here if we must consider McEar omnipotent.

A second definition of omnipotence entails that a being is omnipotent if and only if that being is the type that God is. This naturally rides on the coattails of the previous definition since it may well be that (1) is true; however, something more must be said to avoid the intuitively incorrect conclusion that enormously weak beings can still be rendered omnipotent. And this secondary stipulation that a being is omnipotent just in case he is God engenders nothing more than circular reasoning for it confesses:

2. B is omnipotent if and only if B can do anything logically possible for B and is identical to or the same type as God.

This is an unacceptable stipulation to (1) because it basically adds that any being is omnipotent if that being is God. But, critics wonder, why would any definition for God's omnipotence be crafted in such a way as to assume that whatever God is capable of is what omnipotence must be? It is clearly question-begging and unimpressive.

As I noted in the introduction, there have been some good attempts (not to mention some not-so-good attempts) at solving these difficulties. And I do not wish to minimize their impacting contributions to the subject that have led to a more formidable understanding of divine omnipotence. In fact, I endorse Flint's and Freddoso's definition! Instead, I want to offer an additional feature that may be conjoined with a traditional understanding in order to bring about a holistic definition of divine omnipotence that will essentially keep the critics off of our backs . . . at least for now.

III. Qualitative Omnipotence

Before I elucidate the specific necessary condition for omnipotence based on the quality of the totality of actions, I shall first explicate what I have deemed the Greater Benevolence Principle that I think is important for me to proffer in comparing the quality of two or more actions.

3. The Greater Benevolence Principle (or GBP) = def.
For any logically possible action A available at *t*, A is greater than \sim A if and only if A either promotes an optimal balance of good over evil or A is neutral and does not prohibit an optimal balance of good over evil.

There are many instances of exercising power that would feed the notion that the more things someone can do, the more power that person has. And this is certainly generally true. And even if one takes the Flint-Freddoso approach (that maximal power needs to rely on one's ability to actualize states of affairs instead of mere tasks if and only if it is possible for someone to actualize such states of affairs at *t*), the quest for such maximal power entails one's ability over any rivals to actualize the most states of affairs possible. Again, these are considerations are of quantity -- and rightly so in that case! But what about those instances of power that are considered *greater* than other instances, whether we speak of raw power or states of affairs, where quantity is not the only deciding factor? For example, the oft-cited cliché

4. The pen is mightier than the sword

seems to make a great deal of sense on a popular level. However, with a little thought it may be factually false if the mere quantity of power were considered. The pen clearly does less damage than a sword in terms of blunt force. But, admittedly, a sword cannot be made to write binding contracts. However, the sword could be made to threaten someone in a coercive "contractual" fashion (e.g., "You will initiate computer fraud on my behalf and I will spare your life!). We could perhaps nitpick the differences and similarities through several imaginative exchanges and teeter to either side depending on our fertile imaginations and lack of better things to do with our lives. But what is it about this cliché that seems true or, at the very least, seems relevant in exemplifying its intended message? To answer this, we will need to know what the intended message actually is. The cliché seems to refer to the superiority of a heart-felt willingness to contractually agree to something over meeting the same end result as a response to force or violence. When so understood, the fact that someone would freely agree to a course of action or obligation in terms of diplomacy is putatively greater than a coercive threat into doing so. But why is this so? If we examine this illustration in terms of mere quantity of potency (say, the actual work required to bring about the desired effect) then there is no instance I can imagine where more work is being accomplished by the pen over the sword. For example, if a landlord were preparing to fill his brand new apartment building with 100 new tenants then this could be accomplished by having people respond to a promotional speech at a convention followed by a sign-up sheet at the booth. But I can imagine the landlord being able to "convince" just as many potential tenants by standing on a street corner and forcibly rounding up people at gunpoint sufficient to fill the building with 100 new tenants. The net result is that the exact same consequence manifests in both cases: 100 tenants are brought in to occupy the new apartment building. Yet, we are not prepared to say that the pen is just as mighty as the sword. Nor should our intuitions about the landlord-tenants situations be resolved by saying that one instance is not greater than another. I certainly think, regardless if I can precisely codify what the important difference is, that the luring of new tenants via promoting the new facility at a convention seems "mightier" than the coercive tactic of forcibly rounding up people at gunpoint. To change someone's heart so that they freely alter their course of action as to bring about a desired result is just greater than bypassing one's freedom and forcibly bringing about the desired result.

The GBP (the Greater Benevolence Principle) is a good device to show why the pen is indeed mightier than the sword. The illustration above serves to show that the cliché "the pen is mightier than the sword" can be qualitatively greater than another apart from mere quantitative considerations thus making it a true statement.

Although many definitions offered for omnipotence focus on the number of acts possible for such a being to do, I think critics of divine omnipotence must consider this resolution to the two criticisms noted in the previous section. My defensive view (for I am not proposing a new definition) suggests that if a being is omnipotent then she is capable of doing what is logically possible for her to do and, at the same time, is also producing those actions that promote an optimal or non-perturbing balance of moral good over evil. In a symbolic representation, this definition is seen as:

$$4. O \rightarrow (L \& G \& t)$$

or, in short, that if a being is omnipotent then he always acts in accordance with the Greater Benevolence Principle:

$$5. O \rightarrow GBP$$

So it could be a necessary condition for omnipotence when anything that is logically possible for a being to do is realized (L), that any action to ensue will promote an optimal balance of good or avoid perturbing it (G), and that these things must be true at the time of that action (*t*). What can disqualify one from being omnipotent is when any violation of the three basic attributes given here occur. If one is not capable of enacting anything logically possible for that being to do then such a being is not omnipotent. The same is

true if a being does not act in such a way as to promote or maintain an optimal balance of moral good. What is curious is this reference to t . Why must it be the case that these two features must be conjoined with time t ? The only reason I presently see is that what a being is capable of at, say, t_1 may not be the same capability possessed at t_2 . For example, an omnipotent being at t_1 may be capable of bringing about the creation of the universe. But that same being who possesses the qualities of (L) and (G) but who now exists in t_2 cannot bring it about that the creation of the universe did not happen.⁽²⁾ This is to say that neither is the hard-soft fact distinction relevant in qualitative omnipotence. The feature of specifying t distinguishes us from perceiving logically possible courses of action versus temporally possible courses of action. The temporal limitations may ultimately be reducible to the logical limitations but I find it important to stress a potentially omnipotent being's "whenness" in considering if some being is actually capable at a given time of being omnipotent. Does this mean that omnipotence cannot be realized in a being if that being is timeless? Well, that might entail a modification of the definition such that:

$$6. O \rightarrow (L \ \& \ G \ \& \ [t \vee \sim t_0.])$$

This is to say that the action considered is either at some point in time or in none of the subsets of time. In other words, the action considered is either happening at some time or beyond time altogether. This additional disjunct in the consequent's conjunct will allow us to forget about the controversial issues about God's temporal status (e.g., whether or not God is in time, is timeless, or is omnitemporal).⁽³⁾ If a redundancy is manifest in a certain temporal framework that the philosopher perceives God in then I think that t could be dropped from the equation without doing any damage to the definition *writ large*.

The key attribute here is (G). If an omnipotent being must act in such a way as to promote an optimal balance of moral good, then weak-powered beings such as McEar could not be omnipotent. McEar would have to be bounded by qualities that assist him in promoting an optimal balance of good. However, in this example, this is not the case. McEar can only scratch his ear and is being bounded by a great number of features that keep him from being able to maximize any amount of good toward others or from contributing to the actual world any limitations on those things that would perturb the optimal balance of good over evil. And if any being falls short of acting in such a way as to promote or maintain such an optimal balance, then she would not be deemed omnipotent even if extremely powerful - she need only be deficient in one act where such an act is purely neutral or sinister:

$$7. (N \vee S) \rightarrow \sim G$$

Logically, any violation of any of the distinct conjuncts in the initial formula will render that person non-omnipotent. I am simply connecting the denial of (G) with a distinct act that is either sinister (S) or purely neutral (N). I shall now discuss this issue of neutrality.

This issue prompts a final question in comprehending my defense. What happens when we arrive at, say, t_5 where an action may be purely neutral? It may be apparently neutral for God to create someone whose name is "James" instead of "Peter." There may be no significant repercussions from a moral perspective for God to choose one over the other. Yet this may simply be an epistemological perspective. Perhaps God actually enacts this seemingly neutral act by permitting someone to be named "James" instead of "Peter." However, it may be of some importance at a later time. Perhaps by being named "James" this person develops a fondness with the New Testament figure James, the relative of Jesus. It may be that this fondness leads to the incommensurate good of receiving Jesus as his savior. And had he been named "Peter" he would not have developed such a connection and may have even detested his New Testament namesake such that he develops a stubbornness from ever accepting Jesus as his savior. This would make the apparent neutrality a congenial condition for some future benevolent end result. But this can only be true if (G) is plausible.

Regarding why (G) is a plausible consideration, I have two considerations. First, in an Anselmian framework, God must be the greatest conceivable being. As the greatest conceivable being this being must not only be omnipotent but also omnibenevolent (or "all-good") among other attributes. If I could conceive

of a being as only being powerful and not all-good, then my conception of a being that is greater than that would be the model of the greatest conceivable being - one that *is* all-good as well. So, those great-making properties are necessarily included in a being that can be conceived to be no greater. This means that any conclusion about omnipotence will necessarily be linked with omnibenevolence if we are seeking omnipotence in the context of the greatest conceivable being. And notice that this is not tautological as (2) previously mentioned entails. Secondly, I must emphasize the implications of neutrality by pointing to theological support. In the New Testament, from which many conceptions of classical theism hinge, we are told that "all things work together for good to those who love God."⁽⁴⁾ On this understanding, there is a theological motif for us to interpret acts of apparent neutrality such that they may ultimately operate as to promote an optimal balance of moral good. This would not only make the instances similar to "James" possible but even quite probable in a biblical context. In short, there may be *no* pure acts of neutrality! I submit that the greatest conceivable being - the God of the New Testament - would satisfy the seemingly anomalous feature of neutrality when holistically considered such that any act an omnipotent being does will promote an optimal balance of good over anything else.

IV. Concluding Remarks

Whether this essay ends up being a theological staple in future considerations of divine omnipotence or not, I was very awakened to the idea that omnipotence could be perceived from a qualitative perspective instead of merely through a quantitative one when considering critiques of omnipotence in relation to omnibenevolence. If my work on this subject spawns further dialogue or research - even to a corrected deflection that better fits my intent - then I shall deem this work as having fulfilled its purpose. My desire is to see God magnified and if my contribution is in any way indicative of this then praise be to God, the omnipotent one.

ENDNOTES

1. A. Freddoso and T. Flint, "Maximal Power" in Alfred J. Freddoso, ed., *The Existence and Nature of God* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).
 2. Flint and Freddoso have pointed out in their essay that a being need not have the capability to change the past in order to be considered omnipotent. She simply needs to be able to change the present and future. Thus, since the past at one time was God's future and present, He was still in situations where the past could have been changed (for any number of subjunctive counterfactual statements are true).
 3. My fear is that in the interpretation that God is timeless then it seems that God must still be able to change the past if every temporal point in the universe is simultaneous with God's frame of reference - if I understand the view correctly. In this case, the "past" is still God's "present" as well as "future" such that anything could be changed at any given time. And if it is true that Lincoln was assassinated by John Wilkes Booth then it could still be true someday that Lincoln was never assassinated. But I could be wrong about this and, consequently, about making *t* a conjunct in the biconditional. For a good treatment of the various interpretations of God's relationship to time, see Gregory E. Ganssley, ed., *God and Time: Four Views* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2001).
 4. Romans 8:28 (*New King James Version*).
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