

The paradox of the stone¹

On a traditional Christian conception of God, God is the most perfect possible being. This is thought to include perfect power - omnipotence. But is the concept of omnipotence coherent? If not, then the concept of an omnipotent being - God - is also incoherent. In this handout, we discuss an apparent paradox that the concept of omnipotence gives rise.

OMNIPOTENCE

Power is the ability to do things. As perfect, God will have perfect power, or the most power possible. The most obvious definition of omnipotence is 'the power to do anything' (Latin *omni-*, 'all'; *potent*, 'powerful'). But if God is the most perfect possible being, and therefore God's power may be the power to do anything possible and no more. Should we think that the power to do anything includes, for instance, the logically impossible; or is this not a possible power? Could God make $2 + 2 = 5$? Could God create a married bachelor? Some pious philosophers have wanted to say yes - logic is no limit on God's power. However, there is simply no way we can meaningfully say this.

Aquinas argues that the correct understanding of God's omnipotence is that God can do anything possible. What is impossible is a contradiction in terms - the words that you use to describe the impossible literally contradict each other. So any description of a logically impossible state of affairs or power is not a meaningful description, because it contains a contradiction. What is logically impossible is not anything at all.

Thus, the *limits* of the logically possible are not *limitations* on God's power. Even if God can't do the logically impossible, there is still nothing that God can't do.

THE PARADOX OF THE STONE

Can God create a stone that he can't lift? If the answer is 'no', then God cannot create the stone. If the answer is 'yes', then God cannot lift the stone. So either way, it seems, there is something God cannot do. If there is something God can't do, then God isn't omnipotent. Indeed, no being can be omnipotent. The concept of an omnipotent being is incoherent, because no being could have the powers to create a stone it can't lift and to lift that stone.

One reply to this paradox argues that it fails because it presupposes the possibility of something logically impossible. The claim that someone, *x*, can make something that is too heavy for *x* to lift is not normally self-contradictory. However, it

¹ This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for A Level: Metaphysics of God and Metaphysics of Mind* (London: Routledge), Ch. 2, pp. 30, 38-41

becomes self-contradictory - logically impossible - when x is an omnipotent being. 'A stone an omnipotent being can't lift' is not a possible thing; as a self-contradiction, it describes nothing. So 'the power to create a stone an omnipotent being can't lift' is not a possible power. If God lacks it, God still doesn't lack any possible power.

But this reply begs the question. It *assumes* that we can coherently talk of an omnipotent being. It assumes that in the phrase 'a stone that an omnipotent being can't lift', there is no problem with the term 'omnipotent being'. But if the concept of an omnipotent being is self-contradictory, then this isn't true. Until we know that the concept of an omnipotent being is a coherent concept, we can't legitimately use the concept, for example in arguing that 'a stone that an omnipotent being can't lift' is a logically impossible state of affairs. Now, the reply is supposed to be trying to *show* that the concept is not self-contradictory, but in order to do this, it has to assume that the concept is not self-contradictory. This is the fallacy of begging the question - an argument that assumes the truth of its conclusion in order to show the truth of its conclusion. So this reply fails.

A better response to the paradox is this. Suppose we allow that God can lift any stone, but cannot create a stone that he can't lift. 'God cannot create a stone which God cannot lift' only means that 'if God can create a stone, then God can lift it'. God can create a stone of any size and can then lift that stone. So is there a stone that God can't create? No. There is no limit on God's power of lifting stones, and so there is no limit on God's power of creating stones. That God cannot create a stone that he can't lift is no limit on the stones that God can create. So God lacks no power related to lifting or creating stones.