

Omnipotence, supreme goodness, and evil¹

According to a traditional Christian and Islamic conception of God, God is omnipotent. The most obvious definition of omnipotence is ‘the power to do anything’ (Latin *omni-*, ‘all’; *potent*, ‘powerful’). But if we understand God as the most perfect possible being, we can say that omnipotence is the power to do anything possible and no more. However, God is also considered to be supremely good. This raises the question, can God do evil? And this question raises the challenge that our concept of God as both omnipotent and supremely evil could be incoherent.

- P1. To commit evil is to fail to be supremely good.
- P2. If God is supremely good, then God cannot commit evil.
- C1. Therefore, if God is supremely good, there is something that God cannot do.
- C2. Therefore, God cannot be both supremely good and omnipotent.

Here are three possible responses to this argument that attempt to show that it *is* coherent to think of God as both omnipotent and supremely good:

1. God has the power to commit evil, and he can will it, so he is omnipotent. However, he always chooses not to, so he is supremely good.
2. There is no distinct ‘power to commit evil’, because ‘evil’ doesn’t name a distinct act. To commit evil, God would have to do something, e.g. hurt someone unjustifiably. God has all the powers to bring this about - there is no power he lacks to do whatever the evil act would be - but chooses not to act in that way.
3. In *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas argues that there is no distinct ‘power to commit evil’, because evil is not a ‘something’, but an absence of good. Asking whether God can commit evil is like asking whether God can fail. Being ‘able’ to fail is not a power; failing demonstrates the lack of power to succeed. There is no ‘power to commit evil’ as committing evil is the result of the lack of power to do good. As God does not lack the power to do good, God cannot commit evil.

¹ This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2014) *Philosophy for AS* (London: Routledge), Ch. 3, p. 167