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Catholic Philosophy - Part 3 - General Articles - Omnipotence



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"With God all things are possible"—Matthew 3:9

Catholic Dogma: God is almighty (De Fide)

If we grant the theists victory of the philosophical question "Does God exist?" we inevitably come to the question, "Does the Christian God exist?" This seems a valid question. For if the ontological proof is truly correct, then it implies that some being "which nothing greater can be conceived of" truly exists. A skeptic will ask what these "great-making" qualities are that make God the being "which nothing greater can be conceived". In answer to this, Catholic Christians posit a handful of divine properties that make God "great". The following list of properties are attributed to God by Catholic dogma:

Omnipotent

Omniscient

Omni-benevolent

Impassable

Infinitely Just

Infinitely Merciful

Eternal

Knowable by Nature

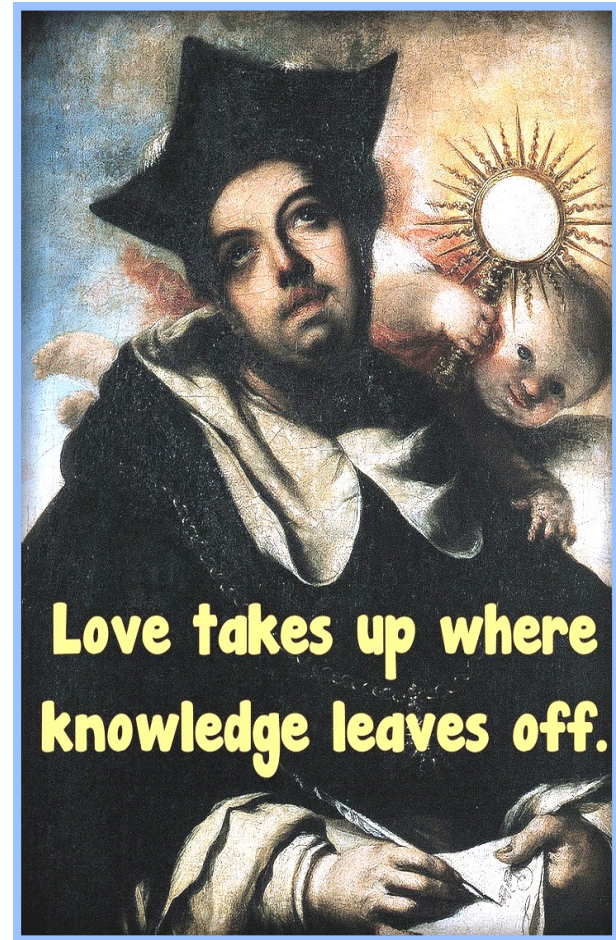
Omni-present

Absolutely Perfect

Absolute Immutability

The First Efficient Cause

If we are to answer the question, "Does the Christian God exist?" we must analyze the properties attributed to God and see if they are at least philosophically sound. In this first essay on God's qualities I wish to consider God's omnipotence (God's power) and some of the difficulties with the idea of God's omnipotence.



not lost. Therefore, a fallen Cherub such as Satan would be a deadly and horrific foe. A fallen angel, unchecked, would destroy everything in existence (morally and physically) and would seek to create a vacuum of despair. It is only by the power of God and the higher angels, that Satan is kept from literally destroying the Universe.

We can now see the consequence of the fall of Satan: Satan constantly seeks to destroy all that is good. The powerful fallen angel, source of evil, is one explanation for the evil we see in nature. Yet, a final question remains: why doesn't God stop the devil from spreading natural evil. We know God allows moral evil so that he can allow us to exist as creatures of free will, but why the natural evil? One solution is to recognize that justice demands retribution for evil. In this sense, the moral evils done by man are punished by natural evils. The human race is bound up as one family, and the evil done by one member merits punishment to all members. Therefore, the evil done by the first father and mother of the human race (Adam and Eve) merited punishment. Scripture attests to this fact:

And God said to Adam, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; 18 thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. 19 In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:17-30).

Therefore it is likely that God permits the devil and his army of fallen angels to prey on man and on all material things. Certainly this is a hard and difficult fact, but St. Paul recognized that suffering had a redemptive value. He believed that if a person experiences the unavoidable suffering of life, they can the suffering to draw themselves closer to God. A person bereft of the joys of the world can either despair or avail themselves to the deeper joy in God.

Thus, the existence of evil in creation is not incompatible with an all-good and all-powerful God. Evil is not a tangible thing created by a good God; instead it is an intangible lack of goodness caused by the abuse of free will of Satan. Ultimately, the problem of evil loses its force because P1 (premise one of the proof against God's existence) is false. Evil is not a tangible reality within the universe; therefore we acknowledge that God did create a perfect universe. However, the corruptions of the good universe entered it through the free choice of Satan. Thus, the loss of goodness within creation cannot be ultimately attributed to the work of God. We can be comforted with the knowledge that nothing can ultimately contest the power of God; eventually in the fullness of time, good will triumph over evil.

There are two major difficulties with an all-powerful being. The first problem has to do with the extent of God's power. Does omnipotence allow God to redefine logic or break the laws of logic? Does God's omnipotence mean that he is capable of sin? The second major difficulty is the apparent conflict between God's power and his omni-benevolence. Namely, if an all-good, all-powerful God exists, why does evil exist in the world he created? These questions are real problems for Christianity, and I wish to address each of them carefully.

The reader should also be aware, that many of the problems with God's omnipotence proceed from conflicts with his other "great-making" qualities. One possible solution to some of these conflicts is to abandon one of the properties which conflict. Another possible solution is to abandon Christianity entirely. As a devoted Catholic, I will not consider these "solutions" as valid alternatives. Indeed, I believe that most of these conflicts can be overcome or neutralized with some thought and a careful definition of the qualities of God. The definitions I will expound are Catholic definitions; in essence I will not address ad hominem arguments against non-Catholic doctrines. Instead, the following paper is a defense of the Catholic Faith from skeptics and not a general defense of the myriad of non-Catholic Christian doctrines. With this in mind I will proceed to analyze the first skeptical argument against God's omnipotence.

Problem 1: The problem of the scope of God's omnipotence

An Initial Definition of Omnipotence: God can do anything

The following question is often posed by skeptics of Christianity to bring about a conflict with the idea of omnipotence. The question often posed is, "Can God create a rock so heavy he can't lift it?" This question creates a dilemma in our initial definition of omnipotence. For if God can do anything then that means he must be able to create a rock he can't lift (even if it's infinitely heavy). Yet, if this were true then he would not be able to lift the rock; so we must conclude that God is not omnipotent. I think the argument can be broken down in the following manner

Def. Omnipotence means a person X can do anything.

P1. Person X can make an object heavier and heavier by way of omnipotent power.

P2. Because Person X is omnipotent, X should be able to make a rock so heavy X can't lift it.

P3. If Person X does not have the power to lift the rock this conflicts with omnipotence

C1. Person X is not omnipotent

I think this is not a valid argument against God's omnipotence because P2 does not make logical sense. The reason P2 is not logical, is that P2 basically says:

Suppose a Person X exists and is purportedly omnipotent

Omnipotent beings must be able to do A (create rocks)

Omnipotent beings must be able to do B (lift rocks)

X must be able to do A such that B is not possible otherwise X is not omnipotent.

Do you see the logical conflict here? Our skeptical argument asserts that God must be able to do A and B or he is not omnipotent (which makes logical sense) AND God must be able to do A in such a way that B is not possible or God is not omnipotent. The argument sets God's omnipotence up to fail by stating that in order to be omnipotent he must be able to do three things:

X must do A

X must do B

X must do A such that B is not possible

There is no logical way God can "do B" and "not do B" at the same time! I suppose we must conclude that there is one limit on God's power: logic. Yet, is that really a limit? Does the skeptic truly suppose that an illogical God is more powerful than a logical God? I don't believe so, and if the reader disagrees than re-read the above argument. The implication is that an illogical God either doesn't exist (by the stone-lifting example) or can't be discussed at all. For if God transcends logic, then we have absolutely no way of knowing or discussing him. Logic is the only mode by which we can make sense of the world in a rational manner. How can we even conceive of a being whose very nature is based on illogic? I submit that only a logical God is part of Catholic dogma. In fact, I will now give the reader the proper definition of omnipotence as defined by the first Vatican council:

Dogmatic Def: God is almighty (De Fide)

Def. of almighty: God has the power to execute all that He may wish, that is all that is real and possible. God's power is identical with God's essence

are endowed with free-will; this knowledge seems to be known a posteriori. If we grant that men have free will as part of their nature it becomes immediately obvious that free will allows men to freely choose between good and evil. Thus the possibility of man succumbing to evil is a consequence of free-will. This explanation of how evil exists in God's creation is called the free-will theodicy. The free-will theodicy successfully explains how evil can enter the creation of an all-good, all-knowing, all-powerful God. Evil is accounted for by the free choices of creatures. God permits free-will because he deems it a greater good to create creatures of will than to eliminate all possibility of evil.

The other three evils (physical, nature and death) seem to be unanswerable with the free-will theodicy. However, Christian doctrine does tie the existence of death and natural evil to the choice of a man; namely Adam, the first member of the human race. In attempting to answer this problem, St. Augustine sought to understand the nature of evil. He realized that evil is not a tangible thing; in a way evil is not a reality like goodness. Augustine believed that evil was a privation of goodness; a lack of something that should be. This astounding statement helps us to understand the very nature of evil and how it can exist in creation.

In truth, Augustine realized that all things of the universe (even the devil) were originally created entirely pure and good. They were morally and physically good in the sense that God had endowed them with existence. The goodness of God ensures that everything created by God is entirely good. However, the free choice of the devil to refuse submission to the divine will lead to a corruption and a dissolution of the natural powers of Satan's will. In a metaphysical sense, the will of Satan was corrupted by his choice to disobey God. This was the beginning and origin of all evil: for the choice of Satan lead to a corruption within the very will of Satan. It is important to realize that the source of evil is not God; the source comes from the fallen angel Satan. Because the very nature of angels is spiritual, the will is the primary mode of being for the angels. A corrupted angelic will would mean a fall from goodness (which is a positive reality created by God) into evil (which is a lack of goodness). Consequentially, the angelic nature of Satan ensured that he became entirely evil. There are two results of an "angelic fall" from good to evil. First, the initial corruption of the angelic will resulted in a permanent and indelible loss of goodness. Satan's very nature was weakened and transformed into an intangible lack of goodness. For an angel, there is no repenting and turning back after sinning because of the catastrophic loss within it's own nature. Secondly, Satan's power was unaffected by the corruption of the will. His natural powers over matter and spiritual beings (such as the lesser choirs of angels) were

A second way to solve the problem is to deny premise 2. One could accept that God is not all-good or all-powerful or all-knowing. For example, a God which is not all-good is not bound by his nature to create only good; he could create both good and evil. In a sense, if a Catholic were to take this position then he has already granted victory to the atheist. A Catholic must remember that it is an article of faith that God is all-good. In a similar manner, a Catholic cannot abandon the definition of God's power and knowledge. Therefore, a Catholic defender of the belief in God cannot reject premise 2.

A third way the proof can be defeated is to deny premise 3 or show that the conclusion does not follow from the premises. St. Augustine gives the traditional response to the problem of evil:

"Since God is the highest good, He would not allow any evil to exist in His works, unless His omnipotence and goodness were such as to bring good even out of evil."

I think Augustine would agree that God allows evil to exist so that the highest form of good can exist. Now we come to the inevitable question, "what is this highest form of good which God can draw exclusively from evil?" Essentially, everything that comes from God flows from his omni-benevolent nature. I think it is possible to reconcile evil with the omni-benevolent nature only if we define evil and treat each definition separately.

Definition of evil:

Moral Evil—That which contrasts with God's love and the principles of his nature

Physical Evil—Pain, the privation of goodness (deformities, starvation, etc.)

Evil in Nature—The effects of nature on Man (hurricanes, floods, disease, etc.)

The Evil of Death—The loss of life and the psychological aspects of death (fear, grief of lost loved ones)

If it can be shown that God draws a greater good from these evils, or that these evils do not conflict with the divine benevolence, then we can successfully show that the conclusion of the problem of evil does not follow from the premises.

Moral evil seems to proceed from the will of each person. This form of evil is committed in its simplest form when an individual makes a choice between two moral options, one of them good and the other evil. As Augustine noted, moral evil is a necessary consequence of the gift of free will. Free will is a part of the nature of man which allows him to choose either to accept the Creator or to reject the Creator. It should be noted that not all of God's creations are endowed with free will (such as stones, plants or perhaps even animals who are slaves to instinct). However, all men

Dogmatic Def: The Divine Attributes are really identical among themselves and with the Divine Essence (De Fide)

These two definitions proceed from the absolute simplicity of the divine Essence. The essence of God is his nature. The nature of God is defined as that which he is capable of. For example, for us humans our human nature is from what we derive all of our powers (be they cognitive, physical, emotional and psychological). Therefore our nature defines "what" we are while our person defines "who" we are. Since the cosmological argument for the existence of God concludes that God is in pure actuality it follows that he is entirely simple. The fact that he is simple also demands that the nature of God (his essence) is entirely simple. In this way, the divine attributes (omnipotence, omniscience, omni-benevolence, etc.) are really one and the same due to the simplicity of the divine Nature. Here is an explicit summary of my argument that all the divine attributes are really identical among themselves and with the divine essence:

P1. The cosmological argument proves the existence of a completely actualized God.

By the term "actualized God" we mean that God has no potentiality, only actuality. In this sense, God cannot change.

C1. A being of total actuality is entirely simple because of his unchanging nature.

P3. By entirely simple we mean that God's nature is entirely simple.

P4. If the nature of God is entirely simple, then all the divine attributes (omnipotence, omniscience, etc.) which describe his nature are entirely simple.

P5. The divine attributes of God's nature can only be entirely simple if the divine attributes are really identical among themselves and with the Divine Essence.

C2. The divine attributes are really identical among themselves and with the Divine Essence.

The reader may ask why I have gone through such pains to prove that God's attributes are one and the same. The reason I have done so is because I wish to justify a redefinition of God's omnipotence. Catholics believe that God's power is subject to logic, and I believe that I have

justified this premise already. However, there is another "constraint" on God's power which I have not yet named. This constraint becomes clear when we ask the question "Can God sin?" This is a very interesting question because if we say that God is absolutely incapable of sinning then this means that there is something God cannot do. Therefore, it follows that he is not omnipotent. For example, I have the power to steal a candy from a baby. This action would be a sin, yet it is within my power to do so. If we say God cannot possibly sin, then God would not have the power to steal the candy from the baby, thus we can't say that God is omnipotent. It is logically possible for God to steal the candy, yet if God can't sin then he is incapable of doing a logical possibility. One solution to this problem is to admit that God CAN sin, it's just that he refrains from doing so. Unfortunately, if we accept this solution then that means that it is conceptually possible that God could stop refraining from sinning and start sinning whenever he wants. Could you imagine a "God" who stopped refraining from sinning and started raping, pillaging and destroying randomly? Certainly this is not the Christian God! I submit that we have no reason to accept this alternative as true. In fact, it is my belief that God's omni-benevolence (God's all-goodness) prevents him from sinning. In this sense, God's omni-benevolence is another "restriction" on God's power. Now the skeptic may argue that it is ridiculous to keep redefining God's omnipotence to suit the Christian position. In response, I offer the following argument:

P1: The divine attributes are really identical among themselves and with the Divine Essence.

P2: Both omnipotence and omni-benevolence are divine attributes

C1: By premise 1, it follows that omnipotence and omni-benevolence are really identical among themselves and with the Divine Essence.

I have already proved that premise 1 is true previously in this paper. Additionally, premise 2 is true because these are definitional properties of the Christian God. Thus, the above argument is both logical and sound. So what is the consequence of the above argument? The above argument shows that omnipotence and omni-benevolence are not conflicting qualities in God's nature. Instead, these properties are our human way of understanding the infinite nature of God. We can't grasp the infinite nature of God with our finite intellects, so we must resort to assigning properties such as "power" and "goodness" to God's nature. Thus we are justified in redefining God's omnipotence as:

Def : God can do anything logically possible which does not conflict with his nature.

One final comment on the scope of God's omnipotence: a skeptic might suggest that if the above definition is true then that still means that a human can steal candy from a baby but God cannot. Does this suggest that we have the power to do something that is impossible for God? Yes, in a sense this is true. We have one power that God does not: we can sin. For what is sin? Sin is a direct violation of the Divine Will of God, which is always unified with his omni-benevolence. Since God's power is identical with his love, and his Will proceeds from his Nature then it is logically impossible for God to violate his own perfect Will of goodness. In this sense, it is logically impossible for God to violate his own divine Will. This does not mean that God is helpless to the whim of an infant (as the example seems to assert), only that God's very Nature is of such an essence that power and goodness are joined together in such a way that Evil can never proceed from it.

Problem 2: The problem of Evil

Now if evil cannot proceed from the combined qualities of omnipotence and omni-benevolence we seem to be in a real dilemma. Namely, how can an all-good and all-powerful God allow evil to exist in the world? This problem is called the problem of evil; and it is a very real problem for Catholic Christians. The classical atheist argument against the existence of God goes something like this:

P1. Evil exists in the world

P2. God is all-good and all-powerful and all-knowing

P3. An all-good, all-powerful, all-knowing God should only create a world of total goodness

C1. Yet P1 conflicts with P3 so we must conclude that an all-good, all-knowing, all-powerful God does not exist.

One way out of the problem is to deny premise 1. A few philosophers have actually done this (I think the Buddhists probably see reality in this manner), but this view does not seem to be that of orthodox Christianity. Not only does it seem obvious that evil exists (a posteriori), but it is a defined dogma of the Church that evil exists in our world as the direct result of the devil. Thus a rejection of premise 1 seems out of the question.