

## **OMNIPOTENCE**

### **Related exam questions:**

- Could anything be omnipotent? (2001/6)
- Could an omnipotent being change the past? (2003/9)
- “... to attempt the impossible problem of reconciling infinite benevolence and justice with infinite power in the Creator of a world such as this ... not only involves absolute contradiction of an intellectual point of view but exhibits to excess the revolting spectacle of a Jesuitical defence of moral enormities.” (J. S. Mill) How might Mill be wrong? (2005/6)
- Should God be thought of as omnipotent or just as the most powerful being there is? (2006/6)
- “An omnipotent being can do any possible action. Some possible actions would be morally wrong. A morally perfect being would be not just sinless but incapable of doing a wrong action. So no-one could be both omnipotent and morally perfect.” (Or: therefore there is no God.) Discuss. (2011/9; variants: 2009/9, 2005/11)
- Could a being be both omnipotent and omniscient? (2013/13)
- “When people have tried to read into ‘God can do everything’ a signification not of Pious Intention but of Philosophical Truth, they have only landed themselves in intractable problems and hopeless confusions; no graspable sense has ever been given to this sentence that did not lead to self-contradiction.” (Geach) Could it be the case that God can do everything? (2014/2)

**Plus:** Consider the following argument:

- (1) If God kept meddling with natural processes, then we wouldn’t have an environment where we can plan ahead, and if God kept meddling with the activity of humans, then we wouldn’t be able to act freely.
- (2) Even though God is omnipotent, he cannot do the impossible: if P entails  $\sim Q$ , then God cannot bring it about that P&Q (in our case, P = our being able to plan ahead and act freely, Q = God doesn’t interfere).
- (3) If God doesn’t meddle with natural processes and the actions of humans, then there is evil (assuming that there are people and natural processes).
- (4) It is providentially important that humans be able to plan ahead and act freely.
- (5) Therefore, even though God is omnipotent and God is perfectly good, God will create a world where there’s evil.

This is one possible version of the so-called Free Will Defense, a purported refutation of the claim that the evil in the world is evidence against God’s existence. Is it sound? Specifically, is (2) true?

### The analytic issue

Intuitively:

(O1) x is omnipotent = x can do anything

(O1) may suggest that omnipotence is the power to engage in any sort of activity: x is omnipotent iff x can lift the Himalayas, destroy the Moon etc. This is slightly off the mark: an omnipotent being can surely bring about states of affairs that do not consist in him or her doing anything. For example, he or she can bring about that pigs fly. To make this clear, it is safer to change (O1) into

(O2) x is omnipotent = for any states of affairs E, x can bring about E.

Or, using the concept of propositions,

(O3) x is omnipotent = for any proposition P, x can make P true.

**Problem 1:** There appear to be propositions that not even God can make true, e.g.

(P<sub>1</sub>)  $2 + 2 = 5$

(P<sub>2</sub>) As of today, World War 2 didn't happen.

**Problem 2:** There appear to be propositions that God cannot make true if God is necessarily omnipotent, omniscient, and necessarily morally perfect, such as

(P<sub>3</sub>) There is a stone that God cannot lift.

(P<sub>4</sub>) God forgets something.

(P<sub>5</sub>) God sins.

(Note that, without the underlined bit, (P<sub>3</sub>)–(P<sub>5</sub>) do not challenge the claim that God is omnipotent in the sense of (O3). God can be omnipotent and morally perfect yet be such that he can make (P<sub>3</sub>)–(P<sub>5</sub>) true. That would mean that God can shed his/her omnipotence and moral perfection.)

Does it follow that God isn't omnipotent? Or is it the case that (O2) and (O3) are not the right definitions of omnipotence? If the latter, can (O1) still be salvaged somehow?

**Please read:**

Alvin Plantinga: God, Freedom, and Evil, 34–44.

+ Thomas Morris: "Perfection and power"

+ Wes Morriston: "Omnipotence and necessary moral perfection: are they compatible?"

**Optional readings:**

Erik J. Wielenberg: "Omnipotence again" (Wielenberg tries to reconcile (O1) with the impossibility of (P<sub>1</sub>)–(P<sub>5</sub>) by distinguishing between lacking the power to do something and necessarily refraining from doing it).

Alvin Plantinga: Does God have a Nature?, 94–146. (Discusses Descartes' infamous claim that God can bring it about that  $2+2=5$ )