An Implication of Omnipotence

If something is omnipotent, does that mean that it can overpower everything else? According to the traditional or standard theory, something would count as perfectly powerful only if it could overpower everything else. Other things have power, but the exercise of their power depends on the omnipotent being not interfering. According to the so-called "monopolistic" theory (MT), an omnipotent being can overpower everything else, too, since it is the thesis that an all-powerful being would literally have all the power there is. A third theory has been proposed by process theists, namely, that an omnipotent being cannot overpower everything else. Their answer to the problem of evil is not that evil occurs because God, lacking omnipotence, cannot prevent it. Process theists say that even though God is omnipotent, God cannot abolish the evil that God wants to eradicate.

It is true that advocates of the traditional theory have learned that the definition of "omnipotence" is not obvious. For example, few traditionalists still define "omnipotence" as "being able to do anything, the description of which is not self-contradictory," since it is possible that no omnipotent being exists, and it would be impossible for an omnipotent being to make a world in which it did not exist. A refinement or correction of the traditional theory was necessary. But the process theory of omnipotence strikes some philosophers of religion as not a correction, but as a self-contradictory proposal.

In this paper I shall address two major questions: (1) Can an omnipotent being lack the ability to overpower everything else? (2) Is the answer process theists give to the problem of evil satisfactory? My answer to both questions is "no." In this paper I do not wish to discuss the metaphysical scaffolding that might be used in connection with the basic tenets of the competing concepts of perfect power. Rather, I want to discuss the merits of arguments for and against the basic claims that distinguish the competitors. In this paper I shall argue that arguments for the incoherence of the traditional theory are flawed. In closing I shall suggest that the debate between advocates of the traditional and process theories of omnipotence might better be regarded as a debate about the plausibility of theodicies. Maybe the debate is about the implications of perfect *goodness*, rather than omnipotence.

Nelson Pike, in "Process Theism and the Concept of Power," defends the traditional theory of omnipotence and criticizes David Griffin's defense of the process theory. Griffin, in turn, responds to Pike in chapter 7 of his *Evil Revisited* (Griffin 1991: 130). Several issues surface in the exchange. Rather than become bogged down in the details of their debate, let us look at arguments for and against the thesis that if something is all-powerful, then it can overpower everything else. What is the case for and against such an "overpower" thesis?

Griffin offers an ordinary language argument for the thesis that an omnipotent being can lack the ability to overpower everything else. It emerges from his reply to Pike's defense of the traditional theory. I should note from the outset that it is difficult to render their debate clearly, since Griffin and other process theists bring in *another* thesis, namely, that if something had the power to overpower everything else, then it would be the *only thing* that has power. The reason they do this, is that they believe that advocates of the overpower thesis inconsistently contend that there are other things that have power, and that is why the traditional thesis is incoherent. If the traditional theory consists of *both* the overpower thesis and the belief that other things have power, then showing that the overpower thesis implies the monopolistic thesis would demonstrate the incoherence of the traditional thesis. But the question with which we began is whether the overpower thesis is true, not whether it implies the monopolistic thesis. The alleged implication of the monopolistic thesis is independent of that issue, unless it is assumed that the MT is false. How does the debate unfold?

Pike argues that a father can allow his daughter to move her own arm even though it is within his power to restrain her. This shows that it is possible for someone (the daughter) to have power even though someone else (the father) can overpower her. Pike uses another example: a father allows his daughter to move his arm although he has the power to move it himself. In this case the father has power that he does not exercise (Pike: 1982: 157).

Griffin counters that Pike's examples are instances of a lack of causation, rather than being "completely determined." Griffin alleges that the example would be a case of being overpowered only if the person's *desires* were controlled. But Griffin's reply is false. This is an instance of the girl's will being thwarted or overpowered even though her desires are not controlled. Griffin is right about the father/daughter example not being a case of being "completely determined" if the daughter's desires would have to be controlled for there to be complete determination. But

being completely determined is one thing, and being overpowered is another.

But let us not dwell on this point. Complete determination is a fitting topic of discussion. Since any libertarian would say that if God were to control a person's desires, that person's freedom would be curtailed, it could not be said that a person would *have* power that is not *exercised* in those circumstances. Further, the traditional theory of omnipotence implies that an omnipotent being *could* control (overpower) someone's desires, goals, *etc.* So, has it been proven that if an omnipotent being *could* overpower someone else's desires, *etc.*, but *did* not do so, then *only* the omnipotent being would have power? Has it been proven, in other words, that the traditional theory of omnipotence reduces to the monopolistic one? Here is Griffin's argument:

> If the father could really control all her activities – *all* her desires, all her emotional reactions to events, all her decisions, as well as all her bodily movements – we would *not* attribute to her any power of her own. We would at least not do so while he was completely controlling her. And if he had the power to turn her off and on, we would not say she had any power of her own, *in relation to him*, even in those times when he was not controlling her. All the power in the relationship would belong essentially to him; the situation would be *essentially* monopolistic. (*ER*: 130)

Griffin correctly notes that we would not say that someone has any power of her own while her desires, *etc.*, were being completely controlled. But what if her desires and decisions were not being controlled, even though they *could* be? Griffin says that it is all the same: ". . . we would not say that she has any power of her own, *in relation to him*, even in those times when he was not controlling her" (*ER*: 130). What is the point of Griffin's stress on the words "in relation to him" and "essentially?" In claiming "she has no power even when he is not controlling her," Griffin just means that she has no power that he cannot overpower. But that is not the same as saying that she has no power. Rather, it is merely a description in different words of what is implied by something being omnipotent, according to the traditional theory.

Again, when Griffin says that the omnipotent being *essentially* has all the power in the relationship, he seems to be stressing the claim that she has no power that he cannot overpower. The only other plausible

alternative is that Griffin is saying that only the omnipotent being has power as a matter of definition. The omnipotent being's power is alone a matter of necessary (as opposed to contingent) fact. However, to say that it is (merely) a *contingent* fact that non-omnipotent beings have power is not to say that it is not a fact *at all.* Pike puts the point quite well:

> And what is interesting here, I think, is that while the standard view of omnipotence does not appear to entail that beings other than God are devoid of power, it does entail that the exercise of power on the part of any finite being is importantly conditioned, *i.e.,* it is contingent upon God's willingness to refrain from exercising some power of his own. (PTCP: 154)

The argument I have been considering is, as far as I can tell, Griffin's only argument against the traditional theory of omnipotence that is not based on controversial metaphysical premises. Rather, it is an appeal to ordinary language. Taken as such, it fails. Merely stating the traditional theory in different words did not render a contradiction explicit. And noting that the power of finite beings is only a contingent fact, on the traditional theory, does not show that it is not a fact at all.

I do not wish merely to criticize Griffin's argument against the thesis that an omnipotent being could overpower everything else. I have a positive ordinary language argument for my belief that if anything is omnipotent, then it could overpower everything else.

My students are competent speakers of ordinary English; at least most of them are most of the time. I have presented the following argument to thousands of students and a handful of colleagues over the years. It is a *reductio ad absurdum* argument for the conclusion that there is at most one omnipotent being.

Suppose that there are two omnipotent beings, A and B. If A is all-powerful, then A could overpower B. But if A could overpower B, then B would not be all-powerful. Thus, our supposition that A and B are both all-powerful beings implies that B is not all-powerful. This contradiction means that there cannot be more than one all-powerful being.

The pivotal point of this argument is the "overpower thesis." If ordinary language were at odds with the overpower thesis, then students and colleagues would regularly challenge the argument. *But it has never been challenged.*

The fact that the argument has not been challenged cannot be explained plausibly by the hypothesis that students are intimidated. Some of them are not, and the students who are not afraid accept the argument, too. Furthermore, that hypothesis cannot explain the fact that my (in-house) colleagues do not oppose the argument. One might claim that my colleagues are so imbued with philosophical theory that their intuitions are unreliable. But they have diverse philosophical interests, and at least two are very impressed by ordinary language philosophy. Politeness might be offered as a reason why the argument has not been challenged. However, many students understand that politeness in a philosophy classroom does not require them to leave bad arguments unchallenged. Thus, if the argument were poor, those students would have challenged it. In addition to knowing that politeness does not require silence about poor arguments, colleagues understand that it can be helpful to challenge poor arguments. Thus, politeness cannot plausibly explain the explicit or tacit acceptance of the argument. Moreover, some students are anything but polite. Thus politeness could not plausibly explain their silence.

What about a combination of all the factors mentioned thus far: (1) intimidation, (2) unreliable linguistic intuitions, and (3) politeness? It must be admitted that these explanatory factors have a strength in combination that they do not enjoy singly. After all, some of my objections point out that the explanation offered does not cover all cases, and it is more difficult to argue for that claim, the more explanatory factors are proposed. Still, the combination of all three is not as simple as the factors considered singly. Moreover, there are many persons to whom I have presented the argument whose acceptance of the argument cannot be plausibly be explained by any of the explanatory factors I have considered. Thus, it is most likely that the only plausible explanation of the fact that my argument for there being at most one all-powerful being has gone unchallenged for years is that the thesis, "if anything is all-powerful, then it can overpower everything else," is grounded in ordinary language.

Why should we heed ordinary usage to the extent we have? Should we not just consider competing theories of omnipotence and eschew ordinary usage?

I think it is important to stress ordinary language because we use it in stating the problem of evil. Process theists consider their theism to be an answer to the problem of evil that is superior to traditional theism's response. Is it? To answer this question we must first say what the problem of evil is in the first place. What troubles believers is the beliefs that there is a God who is apparently good enough to want things to be

better, knowledgeable enough to know that things are not better, and powerful enough to make them better. In fact, believers are challenged because their God, being *all*-powerful, could create any world it desired, and, being *all*-good, would apparently want a better world. Process theists respond that (traditional) believers are mistaken about what it means to be all-powerful. Although process theists believe that God is "all-powerful" (*in scare quotes*), they also believe that God cannot do much of what is implied by the ordinary word "all-powerful."

It should be clear that the process proposal does *not* show that it is reasonable to believe in an all-knowing, all-good, and all-powerful (no scare quotes) God, despite the appearance of gratuitous evil. Rather, process theists think that the belief in an all-powerful (again, no scare quotes) God is *un*reasonable. Therefore, the process proposal does not *solve* the problem of evil; the proposal *avoids* the problem by rejecting a belief that generates it. The point is that the overpower thesis, which is rooted in ordinary language, is part of the very meaning of the problem of evil itself. Believers feel that evil poses a challenge to their theism because they believe God could unilaterally improve things. Therefore, there is something awry with process theists' claim that their answer to the problem of evil is superior to traditional theists' responses. After all, in order to be a superior *theistic* response, the problem must be *answered* in theistic terms, rather than *avoided*.

It is noteworthy that process theism, although it has some of the trappings of theism, is in one important respect the same as atheism. Atheism and process theism alike include the thesis that *(A) There does not exist anything that is all-good, all-knowing and all-powerful*. Process theists avoid atheism by substituting *(A*) There does exist something that is all-knowing, all-good and "all-powerful"* (*in scare quotes*). Naturally, traditional theists think that (A*) is an inferior substitute for a traditional God.

Perhaps theists should regard (A*) as a superior substitute. Perhaps they should think that the problem of evil as usually formulated is based on a confusion. Inasmuch as the problem of evil is based on traditional theism, which includes the usual understanding of perfect power and the belief that there are other beings who have power, then the problem of evil is based on two beliefs that process theists allege are inconsistent. If process theists are right about this alleged inconsistency, then the rational obligation to refrain from maintaining inconsistent beliefs would require us to reject the terms in which we have formulated the problem of evil. The alleged inconsistency is that if something could overpower everything else, then it would have all the power there is. Yet traditional theists also think that something being able

to overpower everything else is consistent with there being other beings who have power. What is more, virtually all theists add that human persons in fact have free will, which is a form of power. Thus, process theists allege that traditional theists make claims that imply that only God has power and that actual beings besides God have power.

How does Griffin turn this argument for the inconsistency of traditional theism into a positive argument against the overpower thesis? Here is what I take to be Griffin's (and process theism's) main argument against the overpower thesis.

1. If the overpower thesis were true, then the omnipotent being would have all the power there is.

2. If the omnipotent being had all the power there is, then nothing else would have power.

3. Thus, if the overpower thesis were true, then nothing else would have power.

4. There are actual beings besides the omnipotent being.

5. There are no powerless, actual beings [later labeled "thesis not-(Y)"].

6. Thus, actual beings besides the omnipotent being have power [from 4 and 5].

7. Thus, if there are actual beings besides the omnipotent being, then the overpower thesis is false.

8. Thus, the overpower thesis is false.

Traditional theists would dispute premisses 1 and perhaps 5. Are inanimate objects powerless actual beings? One might answer "yes" because inanimate objects do not do anything themselves (intentionally). On the other hand, the possibility of inanimate objects having causal powers would seem to be a reason for saying that inanimate objects are not powerless actual beings. At any rate, it appears that traditional theism is not committed to accepting or rejecting 5. A theist might dispute 5, but that is an independent consideration.

What about the case for premiss 1? We have already seen that Griffin's ordinary language argument does not prove "If the overpower thesis were true, then the omnipotent being would have all the power there is." Is there a metaphysical argument in its favor?

Griffin proffers an argument that at first appears to be *anti-metaphysical*, an argument that appears to hark back to logical positivism. Griffin uses an empirical criterion for meaning to argue for the meaninglessness of "powerless entities."

Talk about an empirical criterion of meaning is really a red herring, since Griffin infers the meaninglessness of what he calls *"premise (X)," namely, there are actual beings whose condition could be completely determined by something else,* from its falsehood. Griffin states:

> Accordingly, premise X should be rejected not simply as false, but as meaningless. . . .I [Griffin] did *not*, however, make clear my view that being meaningless and being false finally coincide with regard to metaphysical (as distinct from contingent) issues, so my statement does provide some basis for the view that I have *two* distinct arguments. (*ER*: 123)

Although Griffin's position looks inconsistent, Griffin explains that "there are powerless actual beings" (call it "thesis Y") has a surface meaning, and is therefore a claim that could be false, while lacking ultimate meaningfulness (*ER*: 125).

But what licenses the inference from premiss X to thesis Y? I shall argue that the inference from X to Y is unwarranted.

Suppose, continuing from above, that (9) there is a (traditionally) omnipotent being, and that (6) there are non-omnipotent beings. From (9) and (6) it follows that the omnipotent being could overpower the other beings completely, including their desires. (9) and (6), in other words, imply premiss (X): there *could be* powerless entities. But (X), there could be powerless entities, differs from the thesis that (Y), there *are* powerless entities; since (X) is consistent with (3), the omnipotent being never overpowers the non-omnipotent beings. And if (X) is consistent with (3), then (X) is consistent with (not-Y). Thus the inference from (X) to (Y) is fallacious.

Of course, Griffin thinks that (3) makes no difference, since be believes that *(not-X) actual beings necessarily have some power that cannot be overridden* (*ER*: 122). From (not-X), it follows that (9) or (6) is false, regardless of (3). It should also be noted, however, that (Y) does not

follow from (9), (6), and (not-X), except in the trivial sense in which anything follows from a contradiction. In that sense (Y) and its negation follow from those propositions. Griffin pretends to deduce what he regards as a metaphysical falsehood [namely (Y)] from (9) and (6), when he is in fact inferring (Y) from (9), (6), *and* also his metaphysical assumption of (not-X). This is not a discovery of a contradiction at the heart of traditional theism, but the manufacturing of one by importing an assumption that is inconsistent with it.

Still, traditional theism might be inconsistent with a true metaphysical principle. Thus we should consider what can be said against (not-X). The first argument for the possibility of actual beings having power that can be overridden consists of examples like those that Pike produces. If that is countered with the reply that only cases of controlling someone's desires would count as exceptions to (not-X), then I would shift to examples where someone's will melts because she has been given a drug. Think of cases of date rape, in which a woman is given a drug so that she is not able to consent or refuse, or drugs administered to prisoners of war to extract information from them. Therefore, it is *possible* for there to be actual beings who can be completely determined by someone else because it is (regrettably) *actual.*

Process theists might reply that no libertarian could allow for this possibility, the situation as I have described it being one where there are causally sufficient conditions for what a person does. And traditional theists are libertarians. But my reply is that libertarianism rules out causally sufficient conditions for a person's so-called "decisions," *as long as that person is free.* And the situation I have described is one in which persons do not act freely. Hence, premise (X) is true, while (not-X) is false.

I conclude that Griffin has not provided a good argument for the thesis that if an omnipotent being could overpower everything else, it would have all the power there is. Process theists base their answer to the problem of evil in part upon the alleged incoherence of the traditional theory of omnipotence. Griffin's arguments typify arguments process theists endorse on this subject. Hence the shortcomings of those arguments are shortcomings of the process theistic response to the problem of evil as well. Process theists have not, therefore, provided a good reason for believing that the problem of evil as I have sketched it is ill-conceived.

What traditional theists and other philosophers want from process theists are arguments for the superiority of their response to the problem of evil that do not proceed from controversial premises. Michael Peterson puts the matter well:

Process philosophers and theologians have conscientiously responded to the many challenges to their theodicy. However, many of these responses rely on assumptions and distinctions already implicit in process metaphysics and therefore do not begin from premises which most critics would accept. The persistent criticisms at least show that it remains to be seen whether process theodicists can establish, in a jargon-free and non-question-begging way, that their theodicy is both internally coherent and more adequate than traditional and other non-traditional theisms. (Peterson 1983: 332)

I have a suggestion for how process theists might make such an argument. The argument could set aside the question of the theory of omnipotence and concentrate instead on the alleged implications of perfect goodness. I think that process theists agree with atheists that

(G)   if an all-knowing and all-good God had the power unilaterally to prevent some evils that have in fact occurred, then God would have done so.

Traditional theists disagree with process theists about (G). Since the traditional concept of perfect power is built into thesis G's antecedent, process theists could argue with traditional theists about the same issue that occupies much of the debate between atheists and traditional theists. Of course, an argument for thesis (G) by itself would bolster the case for atheism. And even if process theists return to the concept of omnipotence and argue for thesis (A*), that is still a rejection of the belief in (traditionally-defined) God. In some sense, if either thesis (A*) or (G) is true, then God does not exist. But I think process theists would regard this as an unwelcome consequence.

References and their Abbreviations

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