

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 5 | Issue 3

Article 5

7-1-1988

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Recommended Citation

Mele, Alfred R. and Smith, M.P. (1988) "The New Paradox of the Stone," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 3 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol5/iss3/5>

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THE NEW PARADOX OF THE STONE

Alfred R. Mele and M. P. Smith

The traditional paradox of the stone may be interpreted as posing a competition between a pair of omnipotent beings, represented by God at two different times. The new paradox poses a question about simultaneous competition between a pair of omnipotent beings. We make use of an attractive Thomistic response to the former paradox in arguing that the latter situation is logically possible.

Fred, an omnipotent being, wishes to have an omnipotent companion. So he creates Barney. Having created Barney, however, Fred begins to doubt that either of them is omnipotent.

Fred finds it troublesome that neither he nor Barney can create a stone too heavy for the other to lift, throw a baseball too fast for the other to hit, or too far for the other to catch, and so on. On the other hand, Fred feels as strong as ever. How could the appearance of a new face on the scene lessen his own intrinsic abilities? He can't ask Barney if he feels the same as before, of course; but if Barney were not omnipotent, wouldn't that impugn Fred's omnipotence as well? He had tried to create another omnipotent being, after all, and when one tries to do something and fails, one can't very well call oneself omnipotent.

There is a way out for Fred, propounded by Thomas Aquinas.¹ Even omnipotent beings, he said, cannot accomplish the logically impossible. Fred's failure to create a peer need not count against his omnipotence, provided that the task is an impossible one.

Some have thought the task to be impossible, on the grounds that the coexistence of two omnipotent beings is impossible. If there were two omnipotent beings, then, in cases of disagreement, at least one would find itself thwarted. But an omnipotent being cannot be thwarted. Hence there cannot be two omnipotent beings.²

This line of reasoning ignores the implications of the thesis it seeks to employ. That Fred cannot make a stone too heavy for Barney to lift, or throw a ball too fast for Barney to hit, does not count against his omnipotence, provided that Barney is omnipotent too. An omnipotent being can lift any stone, no matter how heavy, or hit any pitch, no matter how fast. Since it is *impossible* for there to be a stone too heavy for an omnipotent being to lift, or a ball too fast for him to hit, it does not count against Fred's omnipotence that he cannot make a stone heavy enough, or throw a ball hard enough, to thwart such a being.³



It might be objected that we have unduly restricted the means available to omnipotent beings in their attempts to create immovable or unstoppable stones. Fred is not limited to creating stones of different weights, or throwing them at different speeds. There may be any number of ways in which a stone could be immovable or unstoppable; it might be extremely *slippery*, for example.

We need take no position, however, on whether someone suitably clever could make a stone unliftable or unstoppable even by an omnipotent being. For these deeds of lifting and stopping are either possible or they are impossible. If they are impossible, then the inability of an entity to perform them does not impugn its omnipotence. If they are possible tasks, on the other hand, the inability of another being to prohibit an omnipotent being from accomplishing them does not count against its omnipotence either. Thwarting an omnipotent being's execution of a possible task is *not* possible, and hence cannot be expected even of the omnipotent.⁴

Thus the Thomistic solution to the original paradox of the stone seems to allow a multiplicity of omnipotent beings. In fact, the question, "Can God create a stone that he cannot lift?", poses a competition between a pair of omnipotent beings, represented by God at different times. If the fact that God cannot now create a stone that he will be unable to lift later does not count against his omnipotence, then the fact that Fred cannot create a stone that Barney would be unable to lift should not count against Fred's omnipotence.

So far our omnipotent duo has been alternating, each taking a turn at attempting to outdo the other. This pattern is the result of the way that the stone paradox is usually stated, involving as it does different temporal stages of the same being. In the traditional stone paradox, each omnipotent being, represented by a temporal stage of God, gets exactly one turn. The omnipotent being to make the last move, the later temporal stage, always wins. Once understood, the outcome of the stone paradox is no harder to predict than that of a (finitely long) game of one-upmanship between Fred and Barney—say a friendly slam-dunk contest in basketball. The situation is more confusing, however, if we allow competitions without a sequence of turns.

Suppose that Fred attempts to lift a given stone and that Barney simultaneously attempts to keep the stone where it is. If we accept that any stone can be either moved or kept still, and accept also that an omnipotent being can move or keep still whatever can be moved or kept still, then it appears that the stone must both move and not move at the same time. Since an omnipotent being's endeavor to perform a possible task cannot be thwarted, Barney cannot block Fred's attempt to move the stone, nor can Fred thwart Barney's attempt to keep the stone stationary. So the stone must move and it must not move.

Alternatively, we might decide along Thomistic lines that 'moving a stone that an omnipotent being wishes to hold in place,' and 'holding in place a stone

that an omnipotent being wishes to move,' do not describe logically possible tasks, so that even omnipotent beings cannot perform them. Would the stone then neither move nor not move? The Thomistic account may be capable of preserving the omnipotence of both Fred and Barney. But what happens to the stone?⁵

One suggestion is that, as a consequence of the struggle, the stone might go out of existence. If the disputed stone ceases to exist, then it will not have moved (if this implies having a different location afterwards), nor will it have remained stationary (if this implies having the same location afterwards). Thus, there is something that can happen to the stone.

Other contests would not be resolved by this trick, however. Suppose that Fred undertakes to destroy a given stone that Barney wishes to preserve. Here, the intended tasks aim, not at contrary states of affairs, but at *contradictory* states. Does *this* contest have a possible outcome?⁶

We shall argue shortly that it does. Let us return first, however, to the main bout over the motion/rest of the stone. We suggest that the stone can move provided that Fred doesn't move it, and that it can remain unmoved so long as Barney doesn't stop it from moving. More precisely, the stone can move provided that *nothing* moves it, and it can remain at rest provided that *nothing* keeps it from moving. That is, what is impossible in the scenario at issue are certain types of *action*, not the states of affairs which those actions would produce. Nothing can move a stone that an omnipotent being wills to hold still, and nothing can hold a stone that an omnipotent being wills to move. So in the omnipotent face-off, both types of action—moving the contested stone and holding it in place—are impossible. But the stone's moving and the stone's remaining still are, nevertheless, possible states of affairs. In a world in which there are *uncaused* events, the contested stone may either move or not move, even though it is impossible for anything to move it or to hold it in place—including omnipotent beings like Fred and Barney. Paradoxically, the omnipotence of each can be preserved provided that both are thwarted.

On our suggested solution to the new⁷ stone paradox, neither Fred nor Barney will prevail. Nevertheless, their omnipotence is not impugned, since on the Thomistic line even omnipotent beings cannot do the impossible. Nor are we committed to the absurdity that the stone (assuming that it does not cease to exist) can neither move nor not move, since either may happen provided that its happening is uncaused. Even head-to-head competition between omnipotent beings over incompatible states of affairs is possible in a world in which events may be uncaused. And this is true even when the states are contradictories and not merely contraries. In the destruction/preservation case, e.g., the stone may either continue to exist or cease to exist, provided that the outcome is uncaused.

Of course, we still have no way of telling what will happen to the contested

stones in such cases, but at least we know that it is possible for something to happen to them. When the intended tasks aim at contradictory states of affairs, the outcome, we can confidently say, will be uncaused. Its being uncaused is the result of simultaneous competition between omnipotent beings. When the contest is over contrary states of affairs, there will be some distinct caused or uncaused resolution.

Suppose that Barney tries to keep a particular stone in place, that Fred attempts to move it, and that, as it happens, the stone moves. We have argued that the omnipotence of both can be preserved if the stone's motion (or, in another case, its lack of motion) is uncaused. But one might think that Fred does cause the stone to move in the case under consideration. After all, if he had not intervened, the stone would not have moved; for there would have been nothing to prevent Barney from keeping the stone in place. Thus, one might contend, Fred is causally responsible for the stone's moving, and therefore the stone's moving is not uncaused.

The confusion here is not difficult to locate. One must distinguish between causing the stone to move and causing a condition under which it is possible for the stone to move. On our suggestion, Fred renders impossible Barney's keeping the stone stationary. Similarly, Barney makes it impossible for Fred to move the stone.⁸ Jointly, they create a situation in which the stone's behavior may be uncaused. Rather than causing the stone to move, Fred's activity (in conjunction with Barney's) makes it possible for the stone to undergo uncaused motion (or uncaused non-motion).

One who grants that the stone's movement has no direct or proximate cause might wish to contend that Fred's behavior is an indirect cause of the stone's moving; for his activity helps to generate the first-order stalemate condition under which the stone moved. But this is mistaken. An indirect cause of an event, *E*, contributes to the causation of *E* by causing something else that contributes, either directly or indirectly, to the causation of *E*. Ultimately, any indirect cause of *E* is linked to *E* by a proximate cause. However, the stone's movement, *ex hypothesi*, has no proximate cause. Fred's behavior cannot be an indirect cause of the stone's moving, since there is no direct cause.

The reader may still have a related worry. Since Barney was able to prevent Fred from moving the stone, wasn't he able as well to prevent the contested stone from moving *simpliciter*? After all, if Barney succeeds in preventing Fred from moving the stone, it would seem he can succeed in preventing *anything* from moving it. Surely, then, he can prevent the stone's moving?⁹

This worry derives from the erroneous supposition that having the ability to prevent anything from moving the stone is sufficient for having the ability to prevent the stone from moving. In a world in which uncaused events occur, the stone may move even if nothing moves it. Hence, it doesn't follow from an

agent's being able to prevent anything from moving the stone that it is able to prevent the stone from moving.

Moreover, the assumption that Barney, in our scenario, is able to prevent the stone from moving leads quickly to absurdity. Barney's prospective act of preventing the contested stone from moving is on all fours with Fred's prospective act of causing that stone to move. And, *ex hypothesi*, Barney is no more powerful than Fred. Hence, if we are entitled to suppose that Barney is able to execute his intention to prevent the stone from moving, we are entitled as well to suppose that Fred can execute his contrary intention. But omnipotent beings succeed in doing whatever they intend to do, provided that their doing it is possible. Consequently, given the assumption under consideration, Barney prevents the stone from moving while Fred causes it to move. And this, of course, is a logical impossibility!

Barney is able to prevent Fred from moving the stone in our example. Indeed, he does prevent Fred from moving it: if he had not interfered, Fred would have moved the stone. However, this is quite compatible with Barney's being unable to prevent the contested stone from moving, i.e., unable to cause it to remain stationary. To keep the stone from moving he must do more than stalemate Fred—he must *defeat* Fred.

Now, there are scenarios in which an uncaused resolution would render one of our heroes victorious over the other. Suppose, e.g., that Fred knows that the uncaused result of any possible simultaneous competition between him and Barney over the stone would be the stone's moving and that he battles Barney with the intention of setting the stage for this uncaused result.¹⁰ The stone's moving constitutes a victory for Fred, even though he does not move it; for it is the desired goal of an effective plan of action and is achieved in the way represented in the plan.¹¹

Is Barney's omnipotence impugned in this scenario? Not at all. Though it was possible for Fred, in battling Barney, to bring about a condition under which the stone would move, Barney could not similarly produce circumstances under which the stone would remain unmoved; for the upshot of simultaneous competition could only be the stone's uncaused motion. Barney's best effort, given Fred's resistance and the foreknown uncaused result of any simultaneous competition, could only help to generate the first-order stalemate condition under which Fred would win a second-order victory. But Barney's plight is no worse than that of the first player in a finite sequential contest between two omnipotent beings. From the fact that a stone-maker cannot create a stone that an omnipotent being cannot then lift, it does not follow that the former is not omnipotent. There, victory is a function of the order of moves, not of relative power. In the latest Fred/Barney scenario, similarly, victory is conferred by chance, and defeat does not establish limited power.

The Thomistic resolution of the original paradox of the stone allows for a multiplicity of omnipotent beings. This should not be surprising, since the original stone paradox is just a disguised contest between a pair of omnipotent beings. The new paradox of the stone, in which the contest is made explicit and allowed to be simultaneous rather than sequential, raises more serious problems. Even here there is no logical contradiction, however. We see no logical difficulties peculiar to a host of omnipotent beings, once the individual case is admitted.

This may suggest to some readers that the Thomistic resolution of the old paradox of the stone is *too good*. As omnipotence is ordinarily conceived, an omnipotent being's causal power is *effective* power—he executes his intentions at will. However, the Thomistic line makes room for omnipotent beings whose intentions to alter the world are never effective. Suppose that some possible world is partially populated by a pair of omnipotent beings who are in constant conflict over what might be called “supra-preventive” states of affairs. Neither intends merely to *prevent* the other from executing its intentions; rather each intends, in everything that it does, to accomplish something above and beyond this, e.g., to destroy the stone that the other wishes to preserve. Suppose further that neither can tell in advance what the result of simultaneous competition will be. These beings will accomplish less than the ordinary human agent.

This problem is not peculiar to a Thomistic conception of omnipotence. Few philosophers would require of an omnipotent being that it be able to do what is logically impossible, even if they reject the Thomistic idea that the ability to perform any logically possible action is a *necessary* condition of being omnipotent.¹² At the heart of the problem lies the very plausible assumption (*VPA*) that an omnipotent being will actualize any possible state of affairs that it intends to actualize, provided that its actualizing the state is possible.¹³ However, in cases of simultaneous competition of the sort just described between omnipotent beings, neither can emerge victorious. The only possible resolution is a stalemate. But if this is right, then given *VPA*, neither is able to do what it intends in these cases.

Does it follow that the competing omnipotent beings in our latest imaginary world are in fact impotent? Not at all. They may each be possessed of boundless power. *Their* problem lies in their aspirations.¹⁴

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NOTES

1. *Summa Theologiae* Ia, q. 25, art. 3. Cf. George Mavrodes, “Some Puzzles Concerning Omnipotence,” *Philosophical Review* LXXII (1963): pp. 221-223.

2. Cf. Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio* I, distinction 2, nn. 178-181; reprinted in L. Urban & D. Walton, eds., *The Power of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 91f. Louis Werner rebuts several variations of this argument in his "Some Omnipotent Beings," *Critica* 5 (1971): 55-69; reprinted in Urban & Walton, pp. 94-106.

3. If Barney is not *essentially* omnipotent, there are possible worlds in which he is not omnipotent. In some such world there is a stone that Barney tries and fails to lift. However, we are concerned in this paper only with possible worlds in which both of our main characters are omnipotent. One way to restrict the discussion to this block of worlds would be to suppose that both characters are essentially omnipotent. But one of us is skeptical about essential properties for individuals. Consequently, we simply stipulate that such assertions in this paper as "an omnipotent being cannot be thwarted" are to be read as expressing only *de dicto* modalities.

It is worth noting that if a particular omnipotent being can render itself non-omnipotent, then, other things being equal, there is nothing to exclude the possibility of its creating a stone that it cannot lift. One way to accomplish the trick is as follows: first, the being irretrievably sheds enough of its stone-lifting power that it is now too weak to lift stones weighing more than n pounds; then it creates a stone weighing more than n pounds. Can we suppose, similarly, that if Fred is omnipotent, he should be able to limit Barney's stone-lifting power and then create a stone too heavy for Barney to lift? Suppose that Barney does not cooperate. Suppose, indeed, that Barney intends to retain all of his power and to limit Fred's stone-creating capacity. What happens then? The central argument of this paper applies to this contest as well.

4. This is not to deny that there are possible tasks that cannot be performed by omnipotent beings—e.g., the task of lifting a stone such that, while one is lifting it, it is being lifted solely by a non-omnipotent being. But in such cases no agent *thwarts* an omnipotent being's execution of the possible task.

5. Cf. Mavrodes's final, unanswered query (p. 270) in his "Necessity, Possibility, and the Stone which Cannot be Moved," *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (1985): 265-271.

6. Werner contends—mistakenly, as we shall show—that if two omnipotent beings will contradictory states of affairs (e.g., that a particular stone continue to exist beyond t and that that stone cease to exist at t), there is no possible resolution, and that it is therefore "logically impossible for there to be two [omnipotent beings] with contradictory wills" ("Some Omnipotent Beings," p. 100 in Urban & Walton).

7. We do not mean to take credit, of course, for the idea of dueling omnipotent beings. See the references in note 2.

8. Strictly speaking, what is impossible are the following: (1) "keeping stationary a stone that an omnipotent being wills to move"; and (2) "moving a stone that an omnipotent beings wills to hold in place." In each case an omnipotent being "makes" a task impossible by making it true that the prospective task fits one or the other of the descriptions.

9. A similar question can be raised about Fred's preventive ability, of course.

10. Though uncaused events are difficult, if not impossible, to predict, omnipotence is often linked to omniscience and an omniscient being's knowledge of "future" events need not involve prediction.

11. Cf. Myles Brand, *Intending and Acting* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984), Ch. 1, Sec.7.

12. For objections to this idea, see, e.g., Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), pp. 150-152; Edward Wierenga, "Omnipotence Defined," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 42 (1983): 363-375; and Thomas Flint & Alfred Freddoso, "Maximal

Power,” in A. Freddoso, ed., *The Existence and Nature of God* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1983), pp. 81-113.

13. Notice how weak the assumption is. The claim is not that, if it intends to do so, an omnipotent being will actualize any possible state of affairs that can be actualized, but only that, if it intends to do so, it will actualize any possible state that *it* can actualize. Even so, the same cannot be said of ordinary non-omnipotent beings. For example, even the best basketball players occasionally miss freethrows that they are both able to make and intend to make. (Notice also that *VPA* states only a *necessary* condition of omnipotence, and that it consequently is not challenged by the possible existence of some clearly non-omnipotent being who, due in part to extreme limitations on what it is possible for it to do, will actualize any possible state that it intends to actualize, provided that *its* actualizing the state is possible.)

14. We wish to thank an anonymous referee for valuable criticism of the penultimate draft and for useful references to the literature on omnipotence. Revisions were written during Mele’s tenure of a 1985/86 *NEH* Fellowship for College Teachers.