

The Contradiction Approach to Solving Problems about Omnipotence

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Abstract: Some philosophers have claimed that the concept of *omnipotence* is implicitly inapplicable to anything. The well-known ‘stone problem’ is an argument to that effect: whether or not a being can create a stone too heavy for him to lift, there is something that he can’t do, and so he is not omnipotent. Some philosophers have replied that no action that falls under a contradiction lies within the scope of omnipotence. This reply employs what I call the contradiction approach. Many philosophers reject the contradiction approach, arguing that there are closely related problems that it cannot solve. In this paper I argue that, duly extended and modified, the contradiction can solve many such problems and is much more resilient than many philosophers think. However, the approach is not itself omnipotent and ultimately must give to a more metaphysical approach in order to salvage the possibility of omnipotence.

Keywords: Alternate descriptions, Contradiction approach, Omnipotence, Stone problem

I.

Just as a matter of professional responsibility, philosophers assume that there are serious problems with every important concept and take it that it’s their sworn duty to find out what they are, drag them into the open, and parade them about for all to see. With omnipotence, this has been going on since at least the Middle Ages. That being the case, and philosophers being the sort of people who like to solve problems as much as to unearth them, they’ve also developed a number of strategies for dealing with the problems *omnipotence* brings in its train. The problems are many, but the only one I’m only going to discuss at length here concerns contradictory or logically impossible actions.

II.

The nest of problems I'll be concentrating on involve direct attacks on the notion of omnipotence itself. Basically, the idea is to show that there's something conceptually wrong with omnipotence, that the notion is incoherent, inconsistent, self-contradictory, intrinsically inapplicable to anything, or some such thing. If any such line of argument is sound, the concept might as well be banished, for it would be useless.

To be more concrete and to get down to particulars, consider the following statement form

A can x,

where 'A' ranges over persons or personal beings, 'x' ranges over actions, considered as individual, datable occurrences, regardless of how complexly described, and the 'can' is strictly a 'can' of power. Although the man in the street thinks that omnipotence is the ability to do absolutely anything, many philosophers disagree and hold that even if God can't do certain things, that doesn't show that he isn't omnipotent. They think, in other words, that the 'x' in the above statement frame needn't range over all actions in order for A to be omnipotent. Put in terms of a 'definition,' these philosophers reject

(1) A is omnipotent if and only if, for every x, A can x,

a principle Descartes seems to hold.¹ With Aquinas leading the way,² the vast majority of philosophers have held that a more restricted principle is correct, or at least closer to the mark. One possibility is:

(2) A is omnipotent if and only if, for every 'x' that does not entail a contradiction, A can x.³

¹ Interesting articles on Descartes (1630, 1630, 1648) on omnipotence include Frankfurt (1964) and Alanen (1985). Trakakis (1997) explores the implications of a Cartesian conception of omnipotence for the Christian doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation, while Conee (1991) agrees with Descartes that a viable notion of omnipotence can include the power to do the impossible.

² See Aquinas (1963–1975).

³ Some philosophers hold that it is in fact impossible to define 'omnipotence,' at least if there are constraints on the term imposed by a traditional Christian conception of God. See LaCroix (1977).

The reason why (1) is rejected in favor of (2) is that an omnipotent being shouldn't be required to be able to do what can't be done. The concept of an ideal student doesn't fall apart if we imagine the student being required to be able to correctly answer ten questions on a test that has only five questions. The requirement is illicit and should be dropped. For much the same reason, the concept of an omnipotent being doesn't crumble if we imagine the being being required to be able to do what is impossible to do. The requirement is in error, not the concept of an omnipotent being.

Two illustrations will make this clearer. Suppose that 'x' is 'draw a triangle that isn't a three-sided figure.' 'x' then entails a contradiction, since 'draw a triangle that isn't a three-sided figure' entails 'existence of a triangle that isn't a three-sided figure,' and that's a contradiction in terms. Drawing a triangle that isn't a three-sided figure thus can't possibly be done. In accordance with (2), then, the fact that a being can't draw such a triangle doesn't show that it isn't omnipotent.

Illustration number two, one that, like illustration number one, dates back to the Middle Ages. Take 'x' to be 'create a stone too heavy for God to lift.' God's inability—for that matter, everyone's inability—to create such a stone doesn't count against an attribution of omnipotence to God or anyone else. The reason is that entailed by the very concept or word 'God' is 'a being able to lift any object, no matter how heavy.' 'Create a stone too heavy for Him—God—to lift' thus entails 'create a stone too heavy to lift by a being able to lift any object, no matter how heavy.' The latter concept entails a contradiction, however, since it entails 'existence of a stone too heavy to lift by a being able to lift any object, no matter how heavy.' It's impossible for there to be a stone too heavy for God to lift, and thus God's, or anyone else's, inability to create such a stone doesn't count at all against an attribution of omnipotence.⁴

Nor can this supposed problem with God's omnipotence be recovered simply by omitting the 'for Him' in the action description. The description would then mean 'create a stone too heavy for any being to lift,' which entails the original description, and thus the same response to the problem is available.

⁴ Many contemporary responses to the problem of the too heavy stone have their roots Aquinas's approach, including that taken in this paper. Attempts to stop the stone or keep it rolling have generated a great deal of contemporary literature. A number of short discussions appeared in *Sophia* in 1971: Londey (1971), Miller (1971), Englebretsen (1971), and King-Farlow (1971), with Englebretsen returning to the issue in (1979). Among many, many other discussions directly or indirectly related to rock and roll and logical consistency are Cowan (1965), McLean (1975), Rosenkrantz and Hoffman (1978), Schrader (1979), Rosenkrantz (1980), and Mele and Smith (1988).

(2), then, has its attractions as a definition of ‘omnipotence’ in not requiring God, or anyone else, to be able to draw impossible figures or create objects too heavy for omnipotent beings to lift. Moreover, it has the additional advantage of removing the stone without having to invoke any of God’s or anyone else’s other properties or perfections. As a problem, the stone may be heavy but not too heavy to be cast aside.

III.

But all is not peaches and cream. Unfortunately, the problem can return, and in a way that (2) can’t solve. (2) exploits what I call the Contradiction Approach to problems of omnipotence.⁵ What I mean by the Contradiction Approach is this. An action description, an ‘x,’ is considered, and either a contradiction is deduced from it, in which case the action, the x, is considered an impossible one, and thereby declared exempt from falling within the range of an omnipotent being’s powers; or no contraction is deduced, and the action is declared to fall within the range of an omnipotent being’s powers. If this general approach is to be successful, something more subtle, complicated, and sophisticated than (2) is needed.

To show as much, imagine that the last personal being Wilfrid thought about is God. Now consider

(M) God can create a stone too heavy for the last personal being Wilfrid thought about to lift.

Friends of the Contradiction Approach would say that since God can’t create such a stone, (M) is false. Their argument for thinking as much would be that if (M) were true, there could be a stone too heavy for the last personal being that Wilfrid thought about to lift, but that the existence of such a stone would mean that there’s something that God—the last personal being that Wilfrid thought about—couldn’t do, namely, lift the stone in question. That entails that God isn’t omnipotent, which is false.

But will this argument really do? It rightly doesn’t require God to be able to lift the stone in question, but why? Letting God off the hook receives no backing from (2), which is really all that the Contradiction Approach has to rely on. ‘Create a stone too heavy for the last personal being Wilfrid thought about to lift’ doesn’t entail a contradiction, and so the action in question isn’t covered under the exemptions allowed by (2). Thus, contrary to conclusion of the argument of the preceding

⁵ Logico-linguistic approaches to omnipotence include or at least play some role in Wolfe (1971), Anderson (1984), and Macbeath (1988). Plantinga (1967) was the first to note that co-extensive terms pose a problem for the Contradiction Approach.

paragraph, God is required to be able to create a stone too heavy for the last personal being Wilfrid thought about—God Himself—to lift. But God can't do that. And since He can't, He isn't omnipotent or, more strongly, doesn't exist at all. Principle (2) may have pushed the stone out the front door, but it's rolled in the back.

The best reply to this is that what argument of the preceding paragraph really shows isn't that God isn't omnipotent, but that principle (2) isn't really correct as it stands. (M) is indeed false, but since (2) entails that God isn't omnipotent, it needs to be modified to be completely adequate. That's why I said that something more complicated, subtle, and sophisticated than (2) is needed. But how should (2) be modified? One way is in terms of a being's nature:

(3) A is omnipotent if and only if, for every 'x' that does not entail a contradiction and every action x that is compatible with A's nature, A can x.

The reason that (M) arises as a counterexample to God's omnipotence is that (2) doesn't take into account the fact that God can be identified in an infinity of ways, yet few of those ways entail a contradiction when embedded in 'x.' The exclusive focus on contradiction thus opens the door for alternative ways of identifying God that don't entail a contradiction, and therefore the specification of actions that, on (2), tell against His omnipotence but really shouldn't. However, since God's nature is what it is independently of how He is identified, and independently of any contradiction or lack thereof in 'x,' this defect can be remedied in the way indicated in (3). Once A's nature is taken into account, in fact, requiring 'x' to entail a contradiction is really superfluous, since the performance of a 'contradictory' action is incompatible with every agent's nature.

IV.

Unfortunately, this won't work. If (2) is too narrow, not even allowing the possibility of attributing omnipotence to God, (3) is too broad, not allowing nearly enough to count against an attribution of omnipotence to God or anyone else. Pericles can't swim the length of the Mediterranean in an hour or dance in mid-air for days on end, and his inability to do so is due to his nature as a human being and the limitations that nature imposes. Many of the things Pericles can't do are due to his nature: running the marathon in less than a minute, lifting the Parthenon with his little finger, turning lead into gold. All of that is neither here nor there as far as his omnipotence is concerned—at least according to (3). It shouldn't be, of course; those

are limitations that demonstrate that Pericles isn't omnipotent. (3) is thus far too liberal a principle.

Preferable is to amend (2) very differently and attack the 'alternative identifications' problem as such, and at its root. This can be done by hewing to the Contradiction Approach in general but extending it so as to cover alternative identifying descriptions as well. In other words, needed is something like

(4) A is omnipotent if and only if, for every 'x' such that neither it nor any 'y' extensionally equivalent to it entails a contradiction, A can x.

The unwanted restrictions of (2) are lifted by (4), but the fact that Pericles can't clap his hands at the speed of light does count, and definitively, against his omnipotence. (4) thus ensures that Pericles isn't omnipotent but leaves it open whether God, at least as traditionally conceived, is. Of more minor but still of some significance is that (4) has the virtue of eschewing talk of 'logically possible actions.' Though commonly invoked, that concept mixes together concerns of logic and metaphysics in a confused and unexplained way.

V.

So far, all that's been discussed is the 'x' of 'A can x.' That's good but not good enough, because problems similar to those addressed in the last three sections also arise with the entire construction 'A can x.' The Contradiction Approach thus needs to be extended further if it's to be successful.

Consider Napoleon. One of his limitations is that he can't travel to a place where Napoleon is not. 'Travel to a place where Napoleon is not,' the 'x' here, isn't contradictory, however, nor is any phrase co-extensive with it. Napoleon's inability thus isn't excused under (4), as an exception built into it, and thus on (4) Napoleon has to be declared not omnipotent, just because he can't travel to a place where he is not. That's not right. His inability to travel to a place where he isn't shouldn't, largely for the reasons mentioned in section II, count against his omnipotence. If being required to do the impossible is illegitimate, so is a given being's being required to do what is impossible for him to do, if—and I would say only if—that impossibility is founded on metaphysical necessity and not something less philosophically august, such as mere physical or mental limitations. That others may be able to do what the individual in question can't is, in many cases, true, but not to the point. It's impossible for Napoleon to travel to a place where Napoleon is not, even though

Robespierre took such trips on a regular basis. His ability to do what Napoleon couldn't doesn't tell against The Little General's omnipotence, though.

It may be worthwhile to pause for a moment to mull over the general point just made, as it's an important one. The idea here is that in some cases one individual may be able to do something a second can't and yet that doesn't count against the second's omnipotence. This needs to be kept in mind not just in the context at hand (that is, in exploring the 'A can x' construction) but in any number of others as well, including some already mentioned. That Churchill can create an object too heavy for the creator (Churchill) to lift, but that God can't create an object too heavy for the creator (Him) to lift, doesn't tell against God's omnipotence.

To return to the issue at hand: one way to handle the problem is to require 'A can x' not to be contradictory. That will work for the immediate problem, but for reasons very similar to those advanced in section IV, it won't work for others in the near vicinity. Napoleon, for example, can't travel to a place where The Little General is not, but the corresponding positive 'A can x' claim, 'Napoleon can travel to a place where The Little General is not,' isn't contradictory. Talk of Mr. Bonaparte's nature also is of no significance and won't solve the problem. Better would be to retain the possibility of The Little General's omnipotence by amending the definition in terms of extensional equivalence in much the same way that (2) was amended in favor of (4).

(5) A is omnipotent if and only if, for every 'x' such that neither it nor any 'y' extensionally equivalent to it entails a contradiction, and every statement 'A can x' such that neither it nor any statement extensionally equivalent to it entails a contradiction, A can x.

The extensional equivalence spoken of here doesn't concern the sameness of truth values of propositions or sentences so much as the substitutivity of co-referring terms.

VI.

The Contradiction Approach has thus far held up well in defining *omnipotence*, and it would be nice to be able quit at this point and declare victory: attempts to wreak havoc with the concept, by showing that the notion is self-contradictory, incoherent, or inherently inapplicable to anything, are, all of them, ill-considered, and the Contradiction Approach enables us to show as much. We can thus retain the concept in good conscience and do so without mangling it to any appreciable extent—that

is, retain very much the same notion we started with. That, in turn, enables us to hold fast to the intuitively appealing belief that it's at least possible that some being is omnipotent. As I said, I'd like to be able to say all this, but unfortunately I can't. (5) isn't adequate as it stands.

To show as much, consider Pastijn. The only thing he can do is shine shoes. Imagine that he's the only person who can do only that. Pastijn can then be re-described as—we can take the 'A' to be—'the man who can only shine shoes.' Now let 'x' be 'perform an action other than shine shoes.' 'A can x' is thus: 'The man who can only shine shoes can perform an action other than shine shoes.' That claim is contradictory, and so on (5) the fact that Pastijn, the man who can only shine shoes, can't perform actions other than shine shoes—the fact that he can't reel, squeal, or kneel, for example—doesn't count against his omnipotence. That's obviously not right. Amending the definition of 'omnipotence' so that Napoleon's inability to travel to a place where The Little General is not doesn't count against his omnipotence has opened the gates far too wide.

One way to handle this problem and ensure that there aren't large numbers of severely limited beings running around who are, even so, omnipotent is to individuate actions in a fine-grained way. Individuating actions in a fine-grained way is taking them to be property exemplifications. Doing so needn't entail a commitment to actions actually being property exemplifications, only to, in this context (that is, as far as the determination of omnipotence is concerned), treating as such. Abilities to act would then also be individuated in an extremely fine-grained way. Thus, on this approach, performing an action other than shining shoes is (taken to be) a different action from reeling, squealing, or kneeling, since the property exemplified is different. Being able to perform an action other than shining shoes could then be exempted as a requirement for omnipotence, for doing so would be of no significance as far as omnipotence is concerned. In order to be omnipotent, Pastijn would still have to be able to reel, squeal, and kneel. Even better, since if a person reels, squeals, or kneels, he necessarily performs an act other than shine shoes, the exemption is purely nominal. In reality, Pastijn would be exempt from nothing of any importance as far as omnipotence is concerned.

One point about this reply should be noted, however. The attempt to handle the problem tendered above fails if there is an infinitely long 'spelled out' disjunctive term extensionally equivalent to 'can perform an act other than shine shoes,' say, 'can walk or talk or squawk or reel or squeal or kneel or...,' with the dots here marking a trail into infinite specification. The idea of such an infinite term is dubious, however, if not altogether incoherent, and so I don't think this response need be taken seriously.

VII.

All is far from over, however. If the above solves the problem at hand, it also seems to bring back the original problem. Suppose that the last act that Josephine thought about is traveling to a place where Napoleon is not. Let 'A' be 'Napoleon' and 'x' be 'perform the last act that Josephine thought about.' 'A can x' would then be: 'Napoleon can perform the last act that Josephine thought about.' If acts are individuated in a fine-grained way, the act in question wouldn't be the same act as traveling to a place where Napoleon is not, and thus the Little General would be required to be able to perform it—that is, be required to travel to a place where Napoleon is not—in order to maintain his omnipotence. But clearly such a requirement is illegitimate.

The problem here might be argued to be illusory, however, on the grounds that the argument of the preceding paragraph banks on a false premise. 'Perform the last act Josephine thought about' is a description co-extensive with 'travel to a place where Napoleon is not.' But traveling to a place where Napoleon is not is already exempted under (5), and thus because of the 'any statement extensionally equivalent to "A can x"' clause of (5), performing the last act Josephine thought about is exempted as well. The exemption is allowed because extensional equivalence, ushered in with 'the act,' holds sway and determines the act as traveling to a place where Napoleon is not. Reading names and descriptions referentially in (5) underscores the point. (I refer here to the referential/attributional distinction, as drawn by Donnellan and developed by others.) Alternatively put, the point is this. Despite the fine-grained individuation of acts, performing the last act Josephine thought about is (performing the act of) traveling to a place where Napoleon is not. In the case of Pastijn and sharpening pencils, there is nothing comparable. In that case, the act in question is 'an act other than,' and the definite description which generated the problem of Pastijn being omnipotent concerned the re-description of Pastijn, not the act.

VIII.

This sounds convincing, and I wish it were correct. But it isn't. Definite descriptions don't save the day. The description 'the last act' is embedded *within* the act description, and so doesn't usher in extensionality. The acts in question are: *performing the last act Josephine thought about*—with the emphasis on '*performing*' here—and *traveling to a place where Napoleon is not*. If acts are taken, even in this limited context, to be property exemplifications, and so individuated in a fine-

grained way, the act descriptions aren't coextensive, and the acts are two, not one. (5) thus can't be used to exempt Napoleon from having to perform the last act Josephine thought about in order to preserve the possibility of his omnipotence, even though it's impossible for him to make the journey. As mentioned two paragraphs back, then, the original problem does indeed return.

IX.

Can it be solved? Given the argumentative course of this paper, there is, however, a prior question that needs to be asked: Why has a problem that seemed to have been solved reemerged?

The less probing answer is that an extensional approach to some problems regarding omnipotence seems adequate and intuitive, but that an intensional approach to other problems also seems adequate and intuitive. But you can't have it both ways: either act descriptions are interpreted extensionally or intensionally, either in a non-fine-grained or a fine-grained way. If the contradiction approach is to succeed, it needs to avoid itself being contradictory at base. Perhaps extensionality and intensionality can harmoniously work together in ways in which they don't face off against each other (as they do above), and the contradiction approach thereby gain new life. I myself am not sure how that's to be done, however.

But I think that there's a more probing answer to the question of why a problem that seems to have been solved has reemerged. It's that the possibility or impossibility of omnipotence is a metaphysical matter, not a logical or linguistic one. The contradiction approach offers a logico-linguistic solution to a metaphysical problem. Although logic is useful, indeed indispensable, in addressing metaphysical problems, it can be and frequently is inadequate, by itself, to solve them, for what is metaphysically possible may well escape neat logical characterization. I think that that's the case here, although, as mentioned at the end of the previous paragraph, it's possible that that's not so. An omnipotent being, I'm inclined to say, can perform any action that isn't the actualization of or result in a metaphysically impossible state of affairs. Whether all such metaphysically impossible states of affairs can be linguistically captured in a formula that showcases contradictoriness isn't the central concern, though if all can be, life would be easier. But life frequently looms larger than logic, and reality larger than life.

X.

In sum, the Contradiction Approach, duly qualified and understood, offers prima facie satisfying solutions to some particularly worrisome problems about omnipotence. The approach is stronger and more resilient than many philosophers give it credit for. It has a lot to say for itself.

But the approach isn't itself omnipotent, and ultimately it ties itself in a knot. Ironically, it requires contradictory interpretations of some linguistic expressions in order to ensure that 'omnipotence' has neither too broad nor too narrow a range of possible application. Like Napoleon, it meets its Waterloo, or at least seems to. But like Napoleon, it also may return from exile, at least if, duly modified, it can deliver the metaphysical goods.

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