

INTRODUCTION THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

Within the Western theistic tradition God is conceived as the Supreme Being, the only being worthy of worship because he is uniquely perfect. The most famous articulation of 'perfect-being theology' is by St Anselm (1033-1109) in his definition of God as 'something than which nothing greater can be conceived': a definition which requires that whatever qualities are attributed to God, God must possess them to an absolute and ultimate degree. Hence it is not just that God is the greatest conceivable being but rather that, being this being, he must possess all conceivable qualities to the greatest conceivable extent. Among those qualities traditionally applied to God three stand out: God must be all-powerful (omnipotent), all-knowing (omniscient) and all-good (omnibenevolent). These, however, are not the only attributes that have been so ascribed. Amongst others, it has been claimed that God's existence must be independent of any other existences – that God is accordingly a 'necessary' being, distinguishable from the 'contingent' beings of his creation; that God must be incapable of experiencing emotions or passions (and so impassible); that he must be independent both of matter (and so immaterial) and of time (and so eternal), and incapable of change (and so immutable). However, the application of these attributes raises serious philosophical difficulties, which may be broadly classified into three groups:

1. There are difficulties arising from alleged contradictions within one particular ascribed property. The most famous example here has to do with the attribute of omnipotence as illustrated in the paradox of the stone: 'Can God create a rock so heavy that he cannot lift it?' This question, it would appear, cannot be answered in a way that is consistent with God's omnipotence. For if we say that God can create a rock so heavy that he cannot lift it, then it must be conceded that God lacks the power to lift that rock; and if we deny that God can create a rock so heavy that he cannot lift it, then it must be conceded that God lacks the power to create that rock. Either way there is something that God cannot do, which highlights the absurdity of the notion of omnipotence. A variant of the same dilemma is the 'paradox of sovereignty' (Mackie, 1955):* 'Could a sovereign God create a law that binds himself?'¹ Another alleged contradiction arises from the conception of God as a being 'worthy of worship' (Rachels, 1971). Since only a being with an 'unqualified claim on our obedience' is worthy of worship, the believer must be required to abdicate his autonomy or independent judgment. But since autonomy is an essential requirement of moral decision, no being who is worthy of worship can make this demand. Hence the contradiction within the ascribed property: either being a moral agent means that one cannot be a worshipper (i.e., subservient to God's commands) or being a worshipper means that one cannot be a moral agent.

2. There are difficulties arising from alleged incompatibilities between one divine attribute and another. One such incompatibility appears to exist between

1 See Mackie, 'Evil and Omnipotence', ppI:172-178 below.

God's omnipotence and his moral perfection. For if God is morally flawless, then presumably there are a number of things he cannot do (for example, commit evil acts), which contradicts the claim that he should be able to do them, being omnipotent. Nor is it difficult to see where the incompatibility lies when God's omniscience is contrasted with his own ability to act freely as the only being whose actions are unconstrained (being omnipotent). An omniscient God must know what actions he will or will not perform in the future; but if God is omnipotently free in action, having a unique and infinite variety of choice, then what he will do cannot be known in advance. Thus either God is omniscient and knows beforehand what he will do – it being impossible for him not to do what he knows will be done (and is thus not omnipotent) – or God is an omnipotently free agent and therefore cannot know or infallibly predict what he will do at some later date (and is thus not omniscient). A survey of further dual-property incompatibilities is provided by Drange (1998).*

3. There are difficulties arising from an alleged incompatibility between certain divine properties and our empirical knowledge of the world. Here undoubtedly the most famous example – and for some indeed the decisive argument against the existence of God – derives from the evident fact of evil or suffering. That God is omnibenevolent (and thus wishes to eliminate evil) and omnipotent (and so has the power to eliminate evil) is, so it is claimed, inconsistent with the existence of evil. This dilemma – the so-called problem of evil – will be discussed extensively in Chapter 3. It should be noted here, however, that the 'free will defence', which is generally held to be the major objection to this line of argument – that God can create human beings who may freely choose to do good or evil – raises further paradoxes: of whether God, as an omnipotent and omniscient being, can create beings whose actions he can neither control nor predict; of whether a benevolent God, although not the specific causal agent of evil, remains culpable on grounds of moral negligence: he created the mechanism which generates evil, foresaw its consequences, but took no precautions against the harm that would be done.

In order to resolve these difficulties various redefinitions of God's attributes have been forthcoming. By way of example, consider two adjustments to the concept of omnipotence:

1. The argument of René Descartes (1596-1650) and William of Ockham (c.1287-1347) – that God's omnipotence implies the possibility of his bringing about any state of affairs whatsoever, including therefore logically impossible states of affairs (for example, the creation of a round square) – is rejected because, to follow St Thomas Aquinas (1224/6-1274)* and the Jewish theologian Maimonides (1186-1237), the possibility of an impossibility is a contradiction in terms. Thus, if we construe omnipotence not as the ability to do anything at all but as the power to do only that which is intrinsically possible, it is consistent with God's omnipotence that he cannot perform a self-contradictory task: God may be able to create the universe and restore the dead to life, but his omnipotence is not compromised if he cannot undo the past, know that which is false or indeed create a rock he cannot lift. The current debate on this issue is extensive. See particularly Kenny (1979), C. Wade Savage (1967), Mavrodes

(1977) Rosenkrantz and Hoffmann (1980b) and Swinburne (1977).

2. A still more radical alternative is to define omnipotence in terms of maximal power. While it is agreed that an omnipotent being cannot bring about conditions that are logically impossible, it is a 'fallacy of omnipotence' to suppose that God must therefore be able to bring about any state of affairs that is logically possible. There are, in other words, logically possible states that God cannot bring about. For while the concept of maximal power requires that God's power is unsurpassable and that accordingly no other being has more power than God, it does not mean that all power belongs to God or that all other agents are powerless. Thus there are others who can act as autonomous causal agents and bring about something that God cannot bring about. This is a central claim of the so-called 'process theology' associated with Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) and Charles Hartshorne (1897-2000). That God is dependent on, and relative to, actions he cannot control makes God's own emotional state much closer to our own. Deprived of the unilateral power to impose his will on his creation, his power becomes persuasive rather than coercive, allowing for a wide range of sympathetic responses and enjoyments within the divine life. For discussions sympathetic to this position, see Cobb and Griffin (1976), Schubert Ogden (1967) and Rabbi Harold Kushner in his immensely popular *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (1981).

Other more recent formulations of omnipotence have been provided by Torin Alter (2002), Flint and Freddoso (1983) Jerome Gellman (1977), Hoffman and Rosenkrantz (2002), George Mavrodes (1977), Richard Swinburne (1977), Charles Taliaferro (1983) and Edward Wierenga (1983, 1989). For more general discussions see Stephen Davis (1983), Kenny (1979), Morris (1991) and the collection of essays on omnipotence edited by Linwood and Walton (1978). Special mention should also be made of Richard E. Creel's study of Impassibility (1986). The important anthology edited by Martin and Monnier (2003) argues for the impossibility of God from a study of the divine attributes.

4. CHARLES HARTSHORNE: OMNIPOTENCE AS A THEOLOGICAL MISTAKE

Biographical Summary. The son of an Anglican priest, Hartshorne (1897-2000) was educated at Haverford College, and, after serving with the Army Medical Corps in France, completing his formal education at Harvard University. A scholarship abroad enabled him to study in Germany with Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). Returning to Harvard in 1925 he became for one semester assistant to Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) and was responsible for editing the collected papers of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), the founder of pragmatism. Thereafter Hartshorne became Professor of Philosophy at the universities of Chicago, Emory and finally Chicago, where he remained until his death aged 103. Hartshorne is also the first philosopher since Aristotle to be an expert in both metaphysics and ornithology. In his book on bird-song, *Born to Sing* (1992), he argues for the subjective life of birds and for the aesthetic enjoyment they derive from singing.

Philosophical Summary. Heavily indebted to Whitehead's philosophy, Hartshorne is the leading exponent of so-called 'process theology', also known as 'panentheism' or 'dipolar theism'. He argues that classical theism involves a monopolar prejudice, i.e., that God is active, not passive; necessary, not contingent; independent, not dependent; cause, not effect. Dipolar theism, by contrast, recognizes that the divine perfection requires both polarities: the abstract pole refers to the unchanging aspects of God's being (that he is absolute, eternal, necessary), the concrete pole to the aspects that do change: God's knowledge, for example, is dependent on what actually happens to exist, on unknown future events, on human choices that he cannot foresee, and accordingly the free decisions of creatures for evil and good become the destiny of both creatures and God. God is seen as more active, more personal and more like the biblical images of God as a loving father, sharing the joys and sufferings of his children. This contrasts with the classical doctrine of omnipotence – that God's power extends to all so that everything is determined by God – which Hartshorne regards as redundant and even blasphemous. Indeed, as an ideal of power omnipotence is inferior to the notion of an unsurpassable God whose being requires the freedom of his creatures, and who makes it possible for self-active agents to make themselves.

Bibliographical summary. Primary Sources: See particularly *The Divine Relativity* (1948), *The Logic of Perfection* (1962), *Man's Vision of God* (1964) and *Creative Synthesis and Philosophic Method, Philosophers Speak of God* (1953), edited with William Reese, contains perhaps the best summary of Hartshorne's philosophy. *Anselm's Discovery* (1965) is an influential analysis of the ontological argument. *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (1984)* is the most approachable of his books, written for the layman. See also *Existence and Actuality: Conversations with Charles Hartshorne* (1984), edited by Cobb and Gamwell. Aged 93, Hartshorne published an autobiography, *The Darkness and the Light* (1990) **Secondary Sources:** Volume 20 of the *Library of Living Philosophers*, ed. Lewis E. Hahn (1991), is devoted to Hartshorne. *Process Studies* (3, 1973) contains an extensive bibliography by Hartshorne's wife, Dorothy (also available from the Center for Process Studies, www.ctr4process.org/publications/Biblio/). Evaluations favourable to Hartshorne's position are provided by Cobb (1969), Cobb and Griffin (1976), Ogden (1966), Pittenger (1970), Sia (1989, 2004), and Viney (1985). For more critical assessments, see Basinger (1988), Boyd (1992), Dombrowski (1996), Gilkey (1969), Gruenler (1983), Hahn (1991) and Nash (1987).

Charles Hartshorne Omnipotence as a Theological Mistake¹³

The idea of omnipotence in the sense to be criticized came about as follows: to be God, that is, worthy of worship, God must in power excel all others (and be open to criticism by none). The highest conceivable form of power must be the divine power. So far so good. Next question: what is the highest conceivable form of power? This question was scarcely put seriously at all, the answer was felt to be so obvious: it must be the power to determine every detail of what happens in the world. Not, notice, to significantly influence the happenings; no, rather to strictly determine, decide, their every detail. Hence it is that people still today ask, when catastrophe strikes, Why did God do this to me? What mysterious divine reason could there be? Why me? I charge theologians with responsibility for this improper and really absurd question.

Without telling themselves so, the founders of the theological tradition were accepting and applying to deity the tyrant ideal of power. "I decide and determine everything, you (and your friends and enemies) merely do what I determine you (and them) to do. Your decision is simply mine for you. You only think you decide: in reality the decision is mine."

Since the theologians were bright people we must not oversimplify. They half-realized they were in trouble. Like many a politician, they indulged in double-talk to hide their mistake even from themselves. They knew they had to define sin as freely deciding to do evil or the lesser good, and as disobeying the will of God. How could one disobey an omnipotent will? There were two devices. One was to say that God does not decide to bring about a sinful act; rather, God decides not to prevent it. God "permits" sin to take place. Taking advantage of this decision, the sinner does his deed. Yet stop! Remember that God is supposed to decide exactly what happens in the world. If someone murders me, God has decided there shall be precisely that murderous action. So it turns out that "permits" has here a meaning it ordinarily does not have. Ordinarily, when X gives Y permission to do such and such, there are at least details in the actual doing that are not specified by X (and could not be specified, since human language can give only outlines, not full details, of concrete occurrences). But omnipotence is defined as power to absolutely determine what happens. I have Thomas Aquinas especially in mind here. God gives a creature permission to perform act A, where A is no mere outline but is the act itself in its full concreteness. So nothing at all is left for the creature to decide? What then is left of creaturely freedom?

The most famous of all the scholastics finds the answer, and this is the

13. *Omnipotence and other Theological Mistakes*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1984, pp. 10-26.

second of the two devices referred to above. God decides that the creature shall perform act A, but the divine decision is that nevertheless the act shall be performed “freely”. Don’t laugh, the saintly theologian is serious. Serious, but engaging in double-talk. It is determined exactly what the creature will do, but determined that he or she will do it freely. As the gangsters sometimes say, after specifying what is to be done, “You are going to like it” – in other words, to do it with a will. If this is not the despot’s ideal of power, what is?

What, let us ask again, is the highest conceivable form of power? Is it the despot’s, magnified to infinity, and by hook or crook somehow reconciled with “benevolence”, also magnified to infinity? This seems to have been the (partly unconscious) decision of theologians. Is there no better way? Of course there is.

After all, the New Testament analogy – found also in Greek religions – for deity is the parental role, except that in those days of unchallenged male chauvinism it had to be the father role. What is the ideal parental role? Is it that every detail is to be decided by the parent? The question answers itself. The ideal is that the child shall more and more decide its own behavior as its intelligence grows. Wise parents do not try to determine everything, even for the infant, much less for the half-matured or fully matured offspring. Those who do not understand this, and their victims, are among the ones who write agonized letters to Ann Landers. In trying to conceive God, are we to forget everything we know about values? To read some philosophers or theologians it almost seems so.

If the parent does not decide everything, there will be some risk of conflict and frustration in the result. The children are not infallibly wise and good. And indeed, as we shall argue later, even divine wisdom cannot completely foresee (or timelessly know) what others will decide. Life simply is a process of decision making, which means that risk is inherent in life itself. Not even God could make it otherwise. A world without risks is not conceivable. At best it would be a totally dead world, with neither good nor evil.

Is it the highest ideal of power to rule over puppets who are permitted to think they make decisions but who are really made by another to do exactly what they do? For twenty centuries we have had theologians who seem to say yes to this question.

Some theologians have said that, while God could determine everything, yet out of appreciation for the value of having free creatures, God chooses to create human beings to whom a certain freedom is granted. When things go badly, it is because these special creatures make ill use of the freedom granted them. As a solution of the problem of evil, this is perhaps better than the nothing that theorists of religion have mostly given us. But it is not good enough. Many ills cannot plausibly be attributed to

human freedom. Diseases no doubt are made worse and more frequent by people's not taking care of themselves, not exercising due care in handling food, and so forth. But surely they are not caused only by such misdoings. Human freedom does not cause all the suffering that animals undergo, partly from hunger, partly from wounds inflicted by sexual rivals or predators, also from diseases, parasites, and other causes not controlled by human beings.

There is only one solution of the problem of evil "worth writing home about." It uses the idea of freedom, but generalizes it. Why suppose that only people make decisions? People are much more conscious of the process of decision making than the other animals need be supposed to be; but when it comes to that, how conscious is an infant in determining its activities? If chimpanzees have no freedom, how much freedom has an infant, which by every test that seems applicable is much less intelligent than an adult chimpanzee? (One would never guess this fact from what "pro-lifers" say about a fetus being without qualification a person, so loose is their criterion for personality.)

There are many lines of reasoning that support the conclusion to which theology has been tending for about a century now, which is that our having at least some freedom is not an absolute exception to an otherwise total lack of freedom in nature, but a special, intensified, magnified form of a general principle pervasive of reality, down to the very atoms and still farther. Current physics does not contradict this, as many physicists admit. When will the general culture at least begin to see the theological bearings of this fact? . . .

Those who stand deep in the classical tradition are likely to object to the new theology that it fails to acknowledge "the sovereignty of God." To them we may reply, "Are we to worship the Heavenly Father of Jesus (or the Holy Merciful One of the Psalmist or Isaiah), or to worship a heavenly king, that is, a cosmic despot?" These are incompatible ideals; candid thinkers should choose and not pretend to be faithful to both. As Whitehead said, "They gave unto God the properties that belonged unto Caesar." Our diminished awe of kings and emperors makes it easier for us than for our ancestors to look elsewhere for our model of the divine nature. "Divine sovereignty" sounds to some of us like a confession, an admission that it is sheer power, not unstinted love that one most admires. . . .

Byron wrote, as last line to his Sonnet on Chillon, "For they appeal from tyranny to God." But how is it if God is the supreme, however benevolent, tyrant? Can we worship a God so devoid of generosity as to deny us a share, however humble, in determining the details of the world, as minor participants in the creative process that is reality?

To fully clarify our case against "omnipotence" we must show how the idea of freedom implies chance. Agent X decides to perform act A, agent

Y independently decides to perform act B. So far as both succeed, what happens is the combination AB. Did X decide that AB should happen? No. Did Y decide the combination? No. Did any agent decide it? No. Did God, as supreme agent, decide it? No, unless “decide” stands for sheer illusion in at least one of its applications to God and the creatures. The word ‘chance’, meaning “not decided by any agent, and not fully determined by the past”, is the implication of the genuine idea of free or creative decision making – ‘creative’ meaning, adding to the definiteness of the world, settling something previously unsettled, partly undefined or indeterminate. The combination AB, in the case supposed, was not made to happen by any intention of a single agent but by the chance combination of two intentions. Nor was it made to happen by the past; this is the idea of causal laws that physics is getting rid of and that some philosophers long ago gave good reasons for rejecting.

The new idea is that causal order is not absolute but statistical. It admits an element of chance or randomness in nature. Many of the leading physicists of recent times are quite explicit about this. But they were preceded in principle by some great Greek philosophers, some French philosophers of modern times, and the three most distinguished of purely American philosophers, Charles Peirce, William James and John Dewey. All events are “caused”, if that means that they had necessary conditions in the past, conditions without which they could not have happened, however, what is technically termed “sufficient condition”, that which fully determines what happens, requires qualification. Where there is little freedom, as in an inanimate nature, there are often conditions sufficient to determine approximately what happens, and for most purposes this is all we need to consider. Where there is much freedom, as in the behavior of higher, including human, animals, there are still necessary conditions in the past, but sufficient past conditions only for a considerable range of possibilities within which each decision maker finally determines what precisely and concretely happens at the moment in the agent’s own mind, that is, what decision is made. Even God, as the French Catholic philosopher Lequier said more than a century ago, waits to see what the individual decides. “Thou hast created me creator of myself.” Many decades later Whitehead, also a believer in God, independently put the point with the phrase “the self-created creature”; and the atheist Sartre in France wrote of human consciousness as its own cause, *causa sui*.

Determinists claim that what makes us free is that our “character” as already formed, plus each new situation, determines our decisions. So then the child was determined by the character already formed in its infant past and by the surrounding world, and this character by the preceding fetus and world, and that by the fertilized egg? What kind of freedom is that? By what magic do people miss the fact they are misusing words? Skinner is

right; once accept determinism and all talk of freedom is double-talk. The word 'voluntary' (liking it) is good enough for the determinist's freedom; why not stick to it, without trying to borrow the prestige of the glorious word 'freedom'? One's past character is now a mere fact, part of the settled world, almost like someone else's past character. One may be capable of creating a partly new and better character by using the genuine freedom, some of which one has already long had but perhaps has too little or too ill made use of.

Our rejection of omnipotence will be attacked by the charge, "So you dare to limit the power of God?" Not so, I impose no such limit if this means, as it seems to imply, that God's power fails to measure up to some genuine ideal. All I have said is that omnipotence as usually conceived is a false or indeed absurd ideal, which in truth limits God, denies to him any world worth talking about: a world of living, that is to say, significantly decision-making, agents. It is the tradition which did indeed terribly limit divine power, the power to foster creativity even in the least of the creatures.

No worse falsehood was ever perpetrated than the traditional concept of omnipotence. It is a piece of unconscious blasphemy, condemning God to a dead world, probably not distinguishable from no world at all.

The root of evil, suffering, misfortune, wickedness, is the same as the root of all good, joy, happiness, and that is freedom, decision making. If, by a combination of good management and good luck, X and Y harmonize in their decisions, the AB they bring about may be good and happy; if not, not. To attribute all good to good luck, or all to good management, is equally erroneous. Life is not and cannot be other than a mixture of the two. God's good management is the explanation of there being a cosmic order that limits the scope of freedom and hence of chance-limits, but does not reduce to zero. With too much freedom, with nothing like laws of nature (which, some of us believe, are divinely decided and sustained), there could be only meaningless chaos; with too little, there could be only such good as there may be in atoms and molecules by themselves, apart from all higher forms. With no creaturely freedom at all, there could not even be that, but at most God alone, making divine decisions – about what? It is the existence of many decision makers that produces everything, whether good or ill. It is the existence of God that makes it possible for the innumerable decisions to add up to a coherent and basically good world where opportunities justify the risks. Without freedom, no risks – and no opportunities.

Nothing essential in the foregoing is my sheer invention. I am summing up and making somewhat more explicit what a number of great writers have been trying to communicate for several centuries, or at least and especially during the last one hundred and fifty years.