

Are the divine attributes singularly or mutually coherent?

This handout follows the handout on ‘The divine attributes’. You should read that handout first.

PERFECTION AND COHERENCE

If God is the most perfect possible being, then each of the perfections attributed to God must be possible, and the combination of the perfections must also be possible. Both of these requirements lead to difficulties. For example, it is unclear what it means to say that ‘God knows everything it is possible to know’. And the attributes can appear incompatible with each other. For example, can God will evil? Omnipotence suggests ‘yes’, perfect goodness suggests ‘no’. In the light of this, some philosophers say that God has the perfections he does to the greatest possible *degree* that is *compatible* with his having all perfections.

We will discuss a number of these issues, though there are others. A different kind of tension arises when we look not just at the idea of God on its own, but in the context of the world as we know, a world in which evil exists. If evil exists, then being good, wouldn’t God want to prevent it, and being omnipotent, wouldn’t God be able to? So why does evil exist, unless God is either not perfectly good or not omnipotent? This is discussed in the handout on the problem of evil.

OMNISCIENCE

Everlasting v. eternal

What is it to know everything it is possible to know? If God is everlasting, i.e. exists in time, then does God know what will happen in the future? If not, e.g. because we have free will and so God does not know what we will do, then it seems that there is something God does not know. Furthermore, as the future unfolds, God would gain new knowledge. But as the most perfect possible being, God is unchanging. Doesn’t his gaining knowledge mean his ‘omniscience’ increases? But if God gains knowledge, he wasn’t previously omniscient.

We may reply that if God does not know the future, this may not be a *restriction* on or *lack* in God’s knowledge. If it is *impossible* to know the future, e.g. because of the existence of free will, God not knowing the future is no failure; God still knows everything it is possible to know *at any given time*. And God’s gaining knowledge as time passes is consistent with God being omniscient: God always knows everything it is possible to know. It is just that *what* it is possible to know changes over time.

If God exists outside time, the problem doesn’t seem to arise. God never gains new knowledge, and God already knows what happens in the (our) future.

Knowing what God doesn't

If omniscience is knowing everything it is possible to know, then God should surely know everything that we know. However, some of what we know derives from *sense experience*, such as how red looks or how coffee tastes. God does not have sense organs, so could God know things like this?

We might argue that God does not know this, but that is no lack in knowledge, because only an *imperfect* being has this type of knowledge, since it relies on having a body. But we need to rephrase omniscience as 'knowing everything it is possible for a perfect being to know'.

Alternatively, we could argue that God does know these things. God knows everything that exists directly and immediately; how red looks and so on are real properties, and so God has direct knowledge of these properties, even though God doesn't have sense organs.

OMNISCIENCE, TRANSCENDENCE, AND PERFECT GOODNESS

Transcendence (of time) coheres well with omniscience, it seems, but it conflicts with God's perfect goodness in this way: free will is thought to be a good thing (it's an essential attribute of being a person), and as perfectly good, God wants the best for us. But can we have free will if God already knows all of our decisions in advance?

Simply being able to *predict* what someone is going to do is not enough to undermine free will. For example, you can predict that a friend of yours will help this old lady across the street, because he is a kind person, in a good mood, and has just said that this is what he will do. But it is different if we could predict an action with total certainty: the prediction is not simply reliable, but *infallible*. Furthermore, knowing someone's character enables knowledge of the general shape of their choices and actions, but not every minute detail.

Both these points cause problems in the case of God's knowledge. If God knows now what I will be doing on May 23rd, 2022, this can't simply be because he knows my character well! For a start, God must know whether I will be alive then, and could only know that if the future is fixed in some way, e.g. by physical determinism (the view that all physical events are determined by previous physical conditions plus the laws of nature). Second, God's (perfect) knowledge is surely infallible, not just reliable. For instance, much of God's knowledge is direct and immediate, not inferential. And if God is 'outside' time, then surely he knows all moments in time *in the same way*. Past, present and future are all the same to God. It is hard for us to understand how God can know the future in the same way as the past unless the future is fixed just as the past is. But if the future is fixed, do we have free will?

Perhaps we don't have free will – then there is no problem with God's being transcendent and omniscient. But then a different problem arises: if we don't have free will, is this compatible with God being perfectly good? The argument here is that free will is a great good that allows us to do good or evil and to willingly enter into a relationship with God or not. Without free will, if we couldn't choose how to live or what kind of person to be, how would our lives be meaningful or morally significant? As perfectly good, God would want our lives to be morally significant and meaningful, so he would wish us to have this ability. But this returns us to the problem above: can we have free will if God is outside time and knows everything that will happen?

OMNIPOTENCE

Omnipotence and the stone paradox

Can God create a stone that he can't lift it? If he can, then he will not be able to lift the stone. But otherwise, he can't create such a stone. Either way, it seems, there is something God cannot do. If there is something God can't do, then God isn't omnipotent.

This famous paradox makes an assumption we should question: it presupposes the possibility of something logically impossible. 'The power to create a stone an omnipotent being can't lift' is logically incoherent, so it's not a possible power. If God lacks it, God still doesn't lack any possible power. Alternatively, we may allow that God could create such a stone, but in that case, the stone is, *by definition*, impossible to lift (clearly it will not be the stone's *weight* that prevents its being lifted by God, so it must be some other, essential attribute). If God lacks the power to lift a stone it is logically impossible to lift, there is still no power God lacks.

Doing what God can't

How should we understand 'omnipotence'? Is it 'the power to do whatever it is logically possible to do'? I can go jogging, which shows it is a logically possible act, but God can't. So perhaps omnipotence is 'the power to do whatever it is possible for a perfect being (or the greatest possible being) to do'. One interpretation of this is 'maximal power' – it is not possible for any being to have more power overall than an omnipotent being.

A different response says that God possesses every power it is logically possible to possess. We need to take care in how we should identify and individuate powers. The power to go jogging isn't a distinct power. It is a combination of free will and the power to move my body in accordance with that free will, but subject to laws of nature. But this is not a power God lacks. God can't go jogging because God doesn't have a body. But this is not a lack of *power*. God has free will and God can move bodies, including my body, in accordance with his will. God can even move bodies without regard to the laws of nature. So there is no logically possible power I have that God lacks.

Omnipotence and perfect goodness

Can God commit evil? If God is perfectly good, then God cannot commit evil. But is this a lack of *power*? 'I could never do that' we sometimes say, faced with the option of something horrendous. This is not because we lack the power, but because we don't will it, or can't bring ourselves to will it. What does it mean for God not to be able will something? If God is 'morally incapable' of doing evil, is this a lack of power, or because God doesn't will it? But if God is perfectly good, should we say that God *can't* will it? Is God's will being different a logically impossible state of affairs? If it is *logically* impossible for God to will evil, how is God's will free?

Three possible solutions:

1. There is a distinction between powers and acts of will. God has the power to commit evil, and he can will it, but simply chooses not to.
2. There is no distinct 'power to commit evil', because 'evil' doesn't name a distinct act. To commit evil, God would have to do something, e.g. hurt someone unjustifiably.

God has all the powers to bring this about – there is no power he lacks to do whatever the evil act would be – but chooses not to act in that way.

3. There is no distinct ‘power to commit evil’, because evil is not a ‘something’, but an absence of good. Asking whether God can commit evil is like asking whether God can fail. Being ‘able’ to fail is not a power; failing demonstrates the lack of power to succeed. There is no ‘power to commit evil’ as committing evil is the result of the lack of power to do good. As God does not lack the power to do good, God cannot commit evil.

TRANSCENDENCE, IMMANENCE AND THE PERSONAL

A final puzzle: if God were wholly immanent, then God could not be personal, because the universe is not. On the other hand, if God were wholly transcendent, God would be very remote and different from us and creation. But is it possible for God to be both transcendent and immanent?

A particular example of the tension: One personal attribute is a free and rational will. We exercise our wills, make choices, in time. If God transcends time, how is God active *in* time? How can God bring things about, e.g. miracles, at a particular time? From God’s timeless perspective, all times are ‘simultaneous’. Furthermore, God’s will doesn’t undergo changes but is constant, so there is no time at which God makes a choice.

If, however, we say that God is immanent in time, then if God acts, God seems to undergo change, choosing to bring about *this* at this time, *that* at another time. God becomes much more like a person – is this compatible with God being transcendent?

One suggestion is that God doesn’t make choices in time, even though what he chooses to happen occurs in time. Or better, God’s actions aren’t in time; but what is *brought about* by his actions can be in time. If God cured someone of cancer in 2003, they were cured in 2003, but God didn’t choose or act in 2003.