Two puzzles about omnipotence

This handout follows the handout on ‘The divine attributes’. Read that handout first.

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. In this handout, we consider two puzzles about omnipotence.

Omnipotence and the Paradox of the Stone

Mavrodes, ‘Some puzzles concerning omnipotence’

Can God create a stone that he can’t lift? If the answer is ‘no’, then God cannot create the stone. If the answer is ‘yes’, then God cannot lift the stone. So either way, it seems, there is something God cannot do. If there is something God can’t do, then God isn’t omnipotent.

George Mavrodes argues that this famous paradox makes a faulty assumption: it presupposes the possibility of something logically impossible. The claim that someone, x, can make something that is too heavy for x to lift is not normally self-contradictory. However, it becomes self-contradictory – logically impossible – when x is an omnipotent being. ‘A stone an omnipotent being can’t lift’ is not a possible thing; as a self-contradiction, it describes nothing. So ‘the power to create a stone an omnipotent being can’t lift’ is not a possible power. If God lacks it, God still doesn’t lack any possible power.

Alternatively, here’s a slightly different solution. Suppose we allow that God can lift any stone, but cannot create a stone that he can’t lift. But given that there is no limit on God’s power of lifting stones, there is, in fact, no limit on God’s power of creating stones. So God lacks no power related to lifting or creating stones.

On either solution, the paradox does not show that God lacks any possible power. So it is no objection to God being omnipotent.

Savage, ‘The paradox of the stone’

Wade Savage raises the following objection to Mavrodes’ argument. Mavrodes uses the concept of an omnipotent being to argue that ‘a stone that an omnipotent being cannot lift’ is a self-contradiction. But the paradox is trying to show that the concept of an omnipotent being is self-contradictory. To bring this out, we should phrase the argument like this (p. 76):

1. Either x can create a stone which x cannot lift, or x cannot create a stone which x cannot lift.
2. If $x$ can create a stone which $x$ cannot lift, then, necessarily, there is at least one task which $x$ cannot perform (namely, lift the stone in question).
3. If $x$ cannot create a stone which $x$ cannot lift, then, necessarily, there is at least one task which $x$ cannot perform (namely, create the stone in question).
4. Hence, there is at least one task which $x$ cannot perform.
5. If $x$ is an omnipotent being, then $x$ can perform any task.
6. Therefore, $x$ is not omnipotent.

If the concept of an omnipotent being is self-contradictory, then an omnipotent being cannot exist. If we assume that an omnipotent being can exist, then we beg the question against the paradox.

However, Savage argues that there is a solution to the paradox. Although he doesn’t notice it, it is the same solution as Mavrodes’ second solution. (3) is false. For clarity, let’s substitute God for ‘$x$’. ‘God cannot create a stone which God cannot lift’ only means that ‘if God can create a stone, then God can lift it’. This does not entail that there is something that God cannot do. God can create a stone of any size and can then lift that stone. There is no limitation of God’s power here.

**OMNIPOTENCE AND SUPREME GOODNESS**

The second puzzle concerns the coherence of saying that God is both omnipotent and perfectly, or supremely, good.

1. To commit evil is to fail to be supremely good.
2. If God is supremely good, then God cannot commit evil.
3. Therefore, if God is supremely good, there is something that God cannot do.
4. Therefore, God cannot be both supremely good and omnipotent.

Here are three possible solutions:

1. God has the power to commit evil, and he can will it, so he is omnipotent. However, he always chooses not to, so he is supremely good.
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. Aquinas argues that there is no distinct ‘power to commit evil’, because evil is not a ‘something’, but an absence of good (*Summa Theologica*, Part 1, Question 25, Article 3). 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.