

SOUTHWESTERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

OMNIPOTENCE:
THE PARADOX OF THE STONE

PAPER SUBMITTED TO
DR JOHN LAING
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS OF THE COURSE
PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION
PHREL 4313

BY
JESS LARSON
NOVEMBER 11, 2004

OMNIPOTENCE: THE PARADOX OF THE STONE

“Can God create a stone such that He cannot move it?” The paradox of the stone has long been used by atheists as an attempt to disprove the Christian concept of God. For if God is omnipotent, as Christians hold, then there is nothing that God cannot do. If God is capable of creating a rock such that He then cannot move it, this shows God to be incapable of a task. On the other hand, if God cannot create a rock such that He cannot move it, this is seen to equally impugn God’s omnipotence. The fact that the analogy is easily seen in everyday life adds to its potency, for man regularly finds himself constructing things that he alone is incapable of moving. In order to examine this paradox, first, a definition of omnipotence must be examined.

Thomas P. Flint and Alfred J. Freddoso point to a distinction between God being “almighty” and “omnipotent.” They explain that “almighty” should be defined as God’s control over the world for He created it, while “omnipotent” refers to God’s ability to do everything in some sense or another. They contend that the orthodox believer does not need to give up a belief in God’s omnipotence.¹ To provide an adequate definition of God’s omnipotence a few philosophical points can be offered. D. W. D. Shaw offers five things that God cannot do. One, He cannot do the logically impossible. If a person is unable to give any meaning to a proposition, it is incoherent to speak of God doing it. Two, God cannot undo the past. Statements of omnipotence must be relativized to a time; they must be “tensed.” Three, God cannot cease to be Himself. This flows from an understanding that God has necessary existence. This should not be seen as a detriment to omnipotence, but a quality flowing from His omnipotence, for surely a God who necessarily exists is more powerful than one who is able to not exist. Four, God cannot renege on His promises. Five, God cannot know an actual something that is only possible. It is this last condition that is not well

¹ Thomas V. Morris, The Concept of God (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 135-137.

supported. Shaw argues that unless “determinism” carries the day, there must be room for doubt as to His knowledge of which exact possibility is to be realized. He grounds this in the fact that God takes “risk,” and without risk there is no freedom, and without freedom there is no love. Such conclusions, though, are made at great expense to God’s foreknowledge. The Bible presents God as knowing both past and future events. This is seen in descriptions of God as well as fulfillment of prophecy. Also, a deterministic view of events does not preclude freedom, for there are “compatibilist” explanations of freedom where risk is not the basis, and love remains genuine.²

Many have claimed that the Paradox of the Stone is an incoherent statement, and that incoherent statements remain incoherent even when “God” is placed before them. C. Anthony Anderson points out that omnipotence only requires the ability to do the possible, and therefore the Paradox of the Stone is not valid. In the case, though, that someone insists that the definition of omnipotence extend to logically impossible tasks as well, then both branches of reasoning are perfectly valid. If God can do the self-contradictory act of creating a stone that He cannot lift, there is no reason to refuse His being able to do the further self-contradictory task of lifting the stone He can’t lift.

If one swallows one impossibility, then why not two? But if one is prepared to dispense with rationality to preserve this belief, then why not just reject the argument for no reason? Or perhaps as good, accept it and believe in God’s omnipotence anyway. It is clear that these suggestions are the counsel of incoherence... It leads to a contradiction, and that is an offense against reason greater than which cannot be conceived.³

Another interesting approach to the Paradox of the Stone involves analyzing the logic underlying the paradox itself. If one is to answer affirmative to the question “Can God create a stone such that He cannot move it?”, then God’s omnipotence is impugned for there exists a task He is

² D. W. D. Shaw, *Scottish Journal of Religious Studies*. 13:2 (Autumn, 1992), 104-107.

³ C. Anthony Anderson, “Divine Omnipotence and Impossible Tasks: An Intensional Analysis,” *Int J Phil Rel* 15 (1984), 111-112.

incapable of, namely creating a rock He cannot move. On the other hand, if one is to answer negative to the question, God's omnipotence is, upon careful examination, not diminished. C. Wade Savage explains that this 2nd condition reduces to: if God can create a stone, He can move it. This flows from the logic:

- (A) There is nothing which is both true that God can make it and that God cannot move it
- (B) It is not the case that there is anything that God can make it and God cannot move it
- (C) If God can make anything, God can move it
- (D) Everything that God can make, God can move.

God can create stones of any weight, and God can move stones of any weight, but his ability to create is not limited by His ability to move. Savage rightly argues that:

God's inability to create a stone which He cannot lift is a limitation on His power only if (i) He is unable to create stones of any poundage, or (ii) He is unable to lift stones of any poundage—that is, only if He is limited in His power of stone-creating or His power of stone-lifting. In this case, God's inability to create a stone which He cannot lift is nothing more nor less than a necessary consequence of two facts of His omnipotence.⁴

If anything, the Paradox of the Stone adds support to the case for God's omnipotence by showing that an omnipotent being can move anything He can make. The crucial difference between a human's ability to move something he has fashioned is that he is not omnipotent. God's infinite moving ability is not a limit on his infinite creative ability. George Mavrodes explains rightly:

We must remember that nothing in the argument required the theologian to admit any limit on God's power with regard to lifting stones. He still holds that to be unlimited. And if God's power is infinite, then His power to create may run to infinity also without outstripping that first power. The supposed limitation turns out to be no limitation at all, since it is specified only by reference to another power which is itself infinite.⁵

Alfred R. Mele and M. P. Smith illustrate the Paradox in terms of two omnipotent beings in action. He terms the paradox presently being investigated the "old paradox." The examination can be conducted in terms of two competing omnipotent agents. The first is asked to create a stone that a

⁴ C. Wade Savage, "The Paradox of the Stone," *Philosophical Review* 76 (1967), 78-79.

⁵ George Mavrodes, "Some Puzzles Concerning Omnipotence," *Philosophical Review* 72, (1963), 223.

second is “unable to lift.” After having created a stone, though, the second lifts it. Thwarting an omnipotent being’s execution of a possible task is not possible. Victory in this situation is a function of the order of moves, not of relative power. The agent who moves last wins. This can be likened to a contemporary illustration of a baseball team filled with omnipotent players. What is the outcome when the omnipotent pitcher is pitted against the omnipotent batter? Following the scenario above, the pitcher pitches an infinitely good pitch which is met with an infinitely good swing. The batter, going second, wins the match-up, that is, until an omnipotent outfielder is accounted for who obviously catches the ball. The scenario is then explained in the sense of there only being one omnipotent being who completes each of these tasks sequentially. As long as the tasks are logically possible, the omnipotent agent is capable of achieving the tasks. Mele and Smith also speak of the “new paradox” which describes two agents attempting to do competing tasks simultaneously, such as trying to move the stone and prevent the stone from moving at the same time. This scenario ends in a stalemate. The solution offered by Mele and Smith, though, is that victory in this situation is conferred by chance. They explain that the stone might be moved by something not related to one of the agents and therefore be “uncaused.”⁶ How exactly this is possible is not clear. This conclusion seems to be incoherent. If the stone moved, the logical question is to ask what caused the movement and how is an omnipotent agent not in some way over it’s cause? Within a coherent definition of omnipotence there needs to be an understanding of causal power being effective power. God executes His intentions at will. Chance being used as a trump card either is incoherent or makes chance omnipotent and, therefore, “god.”

⁶ Alfred R. Mele and M. P. Smith, “The New Paradox of the Stone,” *Faith and Philosophy*, vol 5, no 3 (July 1988), 283-288.