Understanding the Attributes of God

Gijsbert van den Brink
Marcel Sarot
(eds.)

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Finally, we believe that in the end we owe everything to God. *Soli Deo gloria!*

Gijsbert van den Brink & Marcel Sarot
7. Capable of anything?

The Omnipotence of God

Gijsbert van den Brink

1 The Bible on God’s Power

Words like ‘almighty’ and ‘the Almighty’ are not very common in the Bible. Unlike the nouns ‘almightiness’ and ‘omnipotence,’ however, they are not completely absent either. As far as the New Testament is concerned most translations contain exactly ten examples, of which nine occur in the book of Revelation, and one in 2 Corinthians (6:18). In all cases, what we are dealing with is a rendering of the Greek term pantokrator, which means something like: ruler over all. In most translations (classic as well as contemporary) of the Old Testament, we encounter the terminology of omnipotence more regularly – in the King James Version for instance no less than fifty times, thirty of which are in the book of Job. Here one must of course also enquire into the root words that lie behind the translations. These turn out to be the Hebrew words shaddai and sebaoth, preceded in most cases by a divine name or epithet. The precise meaning of both words is, however, still a matter of controversy among Old Testament scholars.

Interestingly, this corpus of factual data about the occurrence of omnipotence terminology in the Bible has been subject to two different interpretations. Those who subscribe to the most recent interpretation begin by stating that omnipotence terminology is strikingly less prominent in the Bible than in much of everyday religious language. They point out that the noun ‘omnipotence’ is even wholly absent from the Bible and that, where in the Old Testament ‘the Almighty’ is spoken of, it is not at all certain whether this translation does justice to the original meaning of the relevant Hebrew titles. They grant that both shaddai and sebaoth are probably titles indicating power, but add that ‘power’ is a much more general and less pronounced concept than the very specific ‘all-mightiness.’

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1 In this article, the words ‘almightiness’ and ‘omnipotence’ are used interchangeably, although it is acknowledged that they have a slightly different flavour.

2 E.g. Hendrikus Berkhof, Christian Faith (Grand Rapids 1986), 140-147; R. Feldmeier, ‘Nicht Übermacht noch Impotenz,’ in: W.H. Ritter e.a., Der Allmächtige: Annäherungen an ein umstrittenes Gottesprädikat (Göttingen 1997), 13-42 (see especially the conclusion on 36f.).
As far as the New Testament is concerned, it is pointed out that *pantokrator* as well means something different from what we normally understand by omnipotence or almightiness. The Greek term does not indicate a Jack-of-all-trades, a kind of master magician, but a royal sovereignty which is effectively extended over all things. But how literally should this ‘all’ be understood? The Corinthians text, for example, quite clearly has a strong Old Testament flavour. Here, the appellation *pantokrator* can in all likelihood be traced back to *sebaoth*, in which the all-encompassing element of ‘almighty’ is, as mentioned before, not present. The same applies to many of the nine texts in Revelations, all of which appear in an eschatological-liturgical context anyway: that is, they show how God is worshipped as the One who will be almighty in the future, rather than that He is by definition almighty in Himself.

We might call this interpretation the *minimising interpretation*, since it tends towards the conclusion that God is in fact not presented as almighty in the Bible at all. Those who subscribe to this interpretation often refer, in support of their position, to the many biblical narratives in which God seems to give in to human beings, and even lets their sins take their course unhindered. And they insist that the life of Jesus of Nazareth shows ‘that God is not an Imperial Caesar God of knock-down power, but a creative servant God of invincible love.'

On the whole, they cannot avoid the impression that, according to the Bible, God’s power is in fact *limited* in various ways. No doubt God has power, perhaps even *superior* power, but surely He is not omnipotent, i.e. not *all*-powerful.

This conclusion can of course be reached only if the relevant data are interpretatively connected in the outlined specific way. The second interpretation, which perhaps might be labelled the classical one, requires a less loaded reading of the Biblical data on omnipotence, and comes across therefore as both less surprising and less artificial. Those who subscribe to this interpretation point out, for example, that the Septuagint uses the term *pantokrator* no less than 170 times for the Hebrew titles *shaddai* and *sebaoth*. This could of course indicate a tragic theological bias on the part of the Septuagint translators. But is it not more natural to suppose that they were more familiar with the intricacies of Hebrew speech than we are? And even if that is not granted, so that the omnipotence terminology in the Bible was only dragged in at a later stage, then still everything points to the fact that...

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the Bible, at least implicitly, does attribute omnipotence to God. God's unparalleled deeds in creation and redemption, the miracles related in the Bible, not least the resurrection of Christ, the way in which He is acclaimed as king of kings and Lord of lords (1 Tim. 6:15) – all of this suggest an unlimited divine power.

As far as the meaning of the biblical concept of omnipotence is concerned, this second interpretation usually does not choose sides in the 'king or magician' dilemma sketched earlier. The biblical concept of divine omnipotence includes not only God's actual reign over humanity and the universe, but also His unlimited capacity for action. In support of this last claim, which has occasionally been doubted, one could point to the frequency with which phrases like 'all things are possible for God' appear in virtually all layers of the biblical literature (see Gen. 18:14, Jer. 32:17, Job 42:2, Matt. 19:26, Mark 14:36, Luke 1:37, Phil. 3:21 etc.). Particularly noteworthy is a text like Philippians 3:21, in which both shades of meaning, the capacity for action and the actual rule, are together applied to Christ in their strong mutual association: '... by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.' God, at any rate, is capable of doing more things than He in fact does and has done. The claim made for example by Emil Brunner that God's omnipotence in the original biblical context is limited to His reign as actually exercised, is therefore mistaken. 5

All in all, we cannot escape the conclusion that this second interpretation, more than the first, does justice to the totality of the biblical testimony. According to the Bible, God is all-powerful in the sense that He rules over everything, and that His capacity for action knows no bounds. It is important to establish this, because it is often suggested that the concept of omnipotence, along with other so-called 'omniattributes,' stems from Greek soil. However, it turns out that in the Greek philosophical tradition omnipotence is not a part of divine perfection. After all, actual deeds, as well as the possession of the capacity for action, presuppose situations of deficiency and need in which action is required. Ideally, however, such situations do not occur. Thus the highest principle in the great Greek systems of thought (the idea of the Good in Plato, the unmoved Mover in Aristotle, the One in Plotinus etc.) is never portrayed as actively involved in the world; it is not in need of performing actions!

The emphasis on the activity, and by extension the omnipotence of God is, on the other hand, characteristic of the judaico-christian tradition. And the classical interpretation of the biblical texts is at this point – 'God is all-powerful' – completely accurate. It comes as no surprise, then, that most theologians who deny God's omnipotence, do not base that denial on an appeal to Scripture, but on an implicit

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or explicit denial that Scripture is the source and norm of our knowledge of God. Having said this, however, we must also try to do justice to the elements of truth that gave rise to the minimising interpretation. For the minimising interpretation is not simply misguided. On the contrary, an engagement with the ‘biblical ABC’ which is not satisfied with remaining at a superficial level, leads inevitably to some qualifications to the simple ‘God can do everything’-view, with which the classical interpretation is often all too easily equated. Among these qualifications, at least the following five should be included.

In the first place, in the Bible the acknowledgement of God’s omnipotence is never a theoretical position adopted as part of a proper metaphysics, but is always embedded in the praxis of everyday life. It functions, not so much as a factual (let alone an empirically verifiable) truth claim, but rather as an expression of trust based on an interpretation of history with the eyes of faith. Throughout, the context is one of prayer and promise, of hope against hope (e.g. Jer. 32: 17, 27), but also of joy and confession. As the Psalmist expresses it:

The LORD is King! Earth, be glad!
Rejoice, you islands of the seas!
(Ps. 97:1, GNB)

One could also point to the liturgical setting of the omnipotence texts in Revelations. That God is omnipotent is not an abstract, lifeless conviction, but an object of faith, hope, and worship, grounded in the concrete, wondrous discoveries that were made during the history of salvation. Abraham came to recognize it when Sarah became pregnant, Job when God revealed His power in creation, the disciples when Jesus astonished them by his miracles.

This makes it clear, secondly, that in the Bible God’s omnipotence is always indissolubly connected with the deeds that God performs in salvation history. God’s omnipotence is not simply the ability to do anything as such, but is a power with ‘content,’ which consists in the ability to realise His purposes. This is prototypically exemplified in the way the people of Israel came to know God as the God who led them out of the Egyptian bondage. The power of God is a liberating power that sets the oppressed free. At the same time, in the history of Israel God’s power also turns out to be of a judging nature. This became especially clear in the exile, which the people of Israel could not but interpret as God’s judging reaction to their dis-

7 See e.g. Powell, Biblical Concept of Power, 6, 73; Daniel L. Migliore, The Power of God (Philadelphia 1983), 48-59.
obedience to the Torah. Furthermore, in recent years Old Testament scholars have showed renewed interest in the creative power of God.\(^8\) God is not only the God of a small band of slaves, He is the Creator of heaven and earth whose power is evident in the immensity of nature and its regularities (cf. Job 38-41). To summarise: talk of the scope of God’s power always occurs in the Bible in the immediate context of the experience of God’s deeds in creation and history.

It should be added, thirdly, that the acts through which God realises His power do not occur in an unbroken series. Often, God’s people finds itself on the verge of despair when God’s active intervention fails to appear.\(^9\) Sometimes, there is even the impression of a complete failure of God’s active involvement in the world. Here the crucifixion, as described in the gospels, is paradigmatic. ‘He saved others; he cannot save himself,’ it is shouted at the cross (Matt. 27:42), and apparently this is true. God is engaged in a struggle against the opposing forces of sin and death, and on Calvary it becomes clear just how real that struggle is. Every form of docetism, which suggests that God is only partly engaged in this struggle and is in fact elevated above it in omnipotent serenity, is misplaced here. That is also why the image of the magician, which we mentioned earlier, is inadequate after all. A magician realises his intentions effortlessly. God realises His purposes with humanity and the world only along the detour of a dynamic and dramatic history, in which He increasingly gets more personally involved, to the point of going to the cross. And there it would even seem as if God loses His omnipotence altogether!

In this regard it is, fourthly, significant that in the Bible, precisely with reference to the cross of Christ, not only power, but also weakness is attributed to God (1 Cor. 1:25). It is clear from the context that this weakness by no means detracts from the power of God, but serves precisely to bring to light its very specific character. The cross does not show that God is incapable of realising His intentions (that misunderstanding is done away with at Easter!), but it does show that the way in which He does so can be quite contrary to all our human understandings of power. As a result, from our human perspective God’s ways are often seen as ways of weakness and foolishness. According to conventional human standards, Christ’s self-sacrifice on the cross was such an act of weakness. But this weakness turns out to be indicative of the very specific nature of the power of God: it is on the cross, more than anywhere else, that God realises His deepest salvific purposes with humanity. So also in such an unexpected, counter-intuitive way God is powerful. In the Bible, therefore, omnipotence is something different than infinitely enlarged human power. God’s power is completely determined and filled by His being.\(^{10}\)

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\(^{9}\) See e.g. Psalm 77, and many others.

\(^{10}\) Cf. Roger White, ‘Notes on Analogical Predication and Speaking about God,’ in: Brian Hebble-
Fifthly, it should come as no surprise at this stage of our enquiry that the Bible often speaks of acts that God cannot perform. For instance, He cannot swear by someone higher than himself (Hebr. 6:13), He cannot lie (Hebr. 6:18), He cannot deny Himself (2 Tim. 2:13) and He cannot be tempted by evil (Jas. 1:13). In all these cases we are not dealing with acts that are in themselves logically impossible. On the contrary, they are all acts performed daily by human beings. However: God cannot perform them, for they are contrary to His being and character: no one is higher than God Himself is, God is perfectly good, completely true to himself, not drawn towards evil etc. According to the Bible, therefore, God's omnipotence does not entail His being 'capable of anything' – it is not without reason that this expression has negative connotations in everyday language! – but it is limited and informed by His unique character.

By qualifying the classical concept of omnipotence along these lines, justice can be done to the elements of truth in the 'minimising' interpretation, without this leading to a denial of the biblical basis for the doctrine of omnipotence.

2 Omnipotence in the Theological Tradition

One of the most important decisions in the history of the church has been the excommunication of Marcion and the rejection of all forms of cosmic dualism. After all, from that time onwards it was clear that the church did not wish to speak of God as just powerful, or even very powerful, but as the one who, in the final analysis, possesses all power. That does not mean that other beings have no power, but it does mean that God is the source of any power exercised by other beings. The centrality of this concern in early Christian theology can be gleaned from the fact that omnipotence is the only divine attribute explicitly mentioned in the Apostles' Creed.

It is also notable that the Apostles' Creed, with its opening formula credo in Deum patrem omnipotentem ('I believe in God the Father almighty'), connects God's omnipotence closely with His fatherhood. That fatherhood concerns, first of all, the divinely created world. God is the Father of Jesus Christ, He is also in a special sense the Father of the believer, and certainly both of these senses are also implied - but the compilers of the Creed did think, first of all, of creation as the object of God's fatherhood. A. de Halleux has argued, in an essay in which he

thwaite & Stewart Sutherland (eds.), Philosophical Frontiers of Christian Theology (Cambridge 1982), 208-221; Paul Helm, The Providence of God (Leicester 1993), 224-228.

investigates the relevant patristic texts, that in confessing God’s omnipotence the early church thought especially of God’s loving care for this very same creation.\textsuperscript{12} It is as Father that God created the universe, it is as the Almighty that He still carries and sustains it every day.

However this may be, it is certain that the term \textit{pantokrator} primarily denoted God’s actual reign over the universe, rather than His ability to realise all kinds of states of affairs. \textit{Pantokrator} says something about what God actually does with regard to the world, not about all the things which He might in theory be able to do. The same goes for the Latin term \textit{omnipotens}, which became the standard rendering of \textit{pantokrator} as soon as Latin took over from Greek as the dominant language. When God was called \textit{omnipotens} it was originally meant to say that He rules over all things. Later a different understanding of the title \textit{omnipotens} also came to the fore, however, namely as an abbreviation of \textit{qui omnia potest}, ‘He who can do everything.’ It was Augustine who consciously stimulated this broadening of meaning. ‘Who else is \textit{omnipotens} than He who can do everything!’ he exclaims at one point.\textsuperscript{13} Thus, the divine omnipotence becomes conceived of as the possession of unlimited capacities by God, more or less irrespective of the way in which these are exercised in God’s acts of creation and providence.

This extension of meaning is sometimes regretted in contemporary theology. Peter Geach, for example, is of the opinion that the original understanding of the term \textit{omnipotens} is authentically Christian, and that the attribution of omnipotence to God in this sense is a non-negotiable for the faith, also today. However, the later ‘God can do everything’ interpretation is, according to him, an inauthentic perversion of the original confession of omnipotence, which leads to ‘intractable problems and hopeless confusions.’\textsuperscript{14} But as I have already attempted to show, this later interpretation also has a solid biblical background, so that it need not be regarded as less authentic than the ‘God rules over everything’ interpretation. From an historical perspective Geach’s thesis is therefore highly questionable. To what extent Geach is justified in claiming that the ‘God can do everything’ account of omnipotence leads to intractable problems from a \textit{systematic} point of view, we shall consider more closely in the next section.

\textsuperscript{12} André de Halleux, ‘Dieu le Père tout-puissant,’ \textit{Revue Théologique de Louvain} 8 (1977), 401-422.

\textsuperscript{13} Augustine, \textit{De Trinitate} IV, 20.

\textsuperscript{14} Peter Geach, \textit{Providence and Evil} (Cambridge 1977), 4f.; according to Geach, no graspable sense has ever been given to the sentence ‘God can do everything’ ‘... that did not lead to self-contradiction or at least to conclusions manifestly untenable from the Christian point of view’ (ibid.). Geach’s criticism is comparable to that of Emil Brunner mentioned above (footnote 5).
In medieval scholasticism we see a continuation of the early church’s reflection on the concept of omnipotence. In particular, the distinction between potentia absoluta and potentia ordinata begins to play an important role from the early Middle Ages onwards. The original intention of this distinction can easily be grasped from the way in which Thomas Aquinas uses it. By it Aquinas simply means to say that God does not do everything that He is capable of doing. By potentia absoluta he means God’s power irrespective and apart (‘ab-soluta’) from God’s will, by potentia ordinata the power of God as He has decided to realise it in the order willed by Him. During the Middle Ages this order was discerned both in nature with its regularities and in the church where grace was distributed according to the sacramental order.

The pair of concepts thus constituted, for a long time, a successful attempt at avoiding both the Scylla of determinism and the Charybdis of arbitrariness. On the one hand, the still very virulent determinism deriving from Greek philosophy was overcome: after all, God does not necessarily act, as Abelard and others thought, in accordance with the existing order. He does not coincide with that order, nor is His power exhausted by it. Rather, God also has ‘absolute power,’ apart from and also over the order decreed by Him. On the other hand, the idea (which might be evoked by this anti-determinism) that God could in practice use His power completely arbitrarily, was effectively countered by the notion of the potentia ordinata: in practice God realises His power, unlimited as it may be, only in accordance with the order willed and decreed by Him. In this way God’s power is not in tension with His faithfulness and righteousness; we cannot therefore expect just anything from God, but we know where we stand with Him. God is certainly almighty, but not on that account ‘capable of anything’!

Eventually, however, we again see a significant shift of meaning occurring. Some would localise the first steps in this direction as early as the second half of the 13th century, in the work of John Duns Scotus, others deny that. In any case, it is uncontroversial that the shift is visible at the end of the 13th century, and becomes

15 See on its use in the earliest period, Lawrence Moonan, *The Medieval Power Distinction up to its Adoption by Albert, Bonaventure, and Aquinas* (Oxford 1994). Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford 1994), 224, wrongly suggests that the distinction was introduced only by William of Ockham.
16 E.g. in his *Summa Theologiae* I, 25, 5.
17 So the notion of absolute power functions as a kind of ‘dialectical standby ... to underline the contingency of creation, ... the fact that it does not have either to be what it is or even to be at all’; Francis Oakley, *Omnipotence, Covenant and Order: An Excursion in the History of Ideas from Abelard to Leibniz* (Ithaca 1984), 50f.
18 On Scotus’ use of the distinction, see my *Almighty God: A Study of the Doctrine of Divine Omnipotence* (Kampen 1993), 78-80, and cf. the further literature referred to there.
more and more apparent during the 14th and 15th centuries. Once again the tendency is to move towards a broadening of the possibilities attributed to God. Due to various factors, the idea begins to emerge that God could in practice act outside the order decreed by Him from time to time. In such cases He does not act from His ordained power, de potentia ordinata, but de potentia absoluta, as if His absolute power constituted a separate reservoir of power. When God acts from His potentia absoluta, He is really capable of anything. Theologians from Scotist and late-nominalist circles in particular (the Thomists used to be more hesitant) translated this idea into concrete examples. Gabriel Biel, Adam Woodham, Robert Holcot and others argue that in His absolute power, God might for example tell a lie, refrain from fulfilling a promise made in Scripture, awaken an attitude of hatred towards Himself in people, destroy someone who loves Him, and all of that without acting unjustly ...19

It comes as no surprise that the 16th century Reformation, with its emphasis on the reliability of God’s words and promises and on the steadfastness of His covenant, radically parted ways with these mode of thinking. In many places John Calvin expresses his abhorrence of what he calls the ‘chimera of the absolute power.’20 Apparently unaware of its original meaning, he completely rejects the distinction between God’s absolute and ordained power. For him, God uses His omnipotence wholly in the service of His goodness and justice. In fact, in Calvin we even find no separate treatment of divine omnipotence as we find it in the scholastics; obviously, he did not think the subject could be dealt with properly in isolation from the mighty deeds of God in creation and salvation history.21

Meanwhile, the Reformers’ protest did not put a definite end to speculations about the scope of God’s power. A bold effort to think through consistently just how far God’s omnipotence reaches, was made, rather surprisingly, by René Descartes. In an intriguing theory, the connection of which with the rest of his philosophy is still a matter of dispute, Descartes elaborated the idea that also the ‘eternal truths’ were created by God and subject to His power. By ‘eternal truths’ he meant the laws of logic, basic mathematical axioms, fundamental scientific intuitions et cetera. Of course God wanted these regularities to remain unchanged, so that we may rely on them, but undoubtedly they fall within the reach of the divine omnipotence. In terms of a standard example: if God wanted ‘2+2=5,’ then that would have been the case. We should not exclude this possibility just because it transcends the limits of

19 See in more detail Van den Brink, Almighty God, 83-87.
20 Cf. e.g. Institutes III 23, 2 (commentum absolutae potentiae).
conceivability. In the final analysis, Descartes argues, our powers of conception are limited, and God’s power is unlimited.

Even if Descartes’ conception was possibly inspired by a profound religious motivation, it failed to find much approval in the theological tradition. Obviously it was felt that a true tribute to God is not necessarily the same as heaping the greatest possible ‘metaphysical compliments’ upon God. Nonetheless, Descartes has taken the concept of omnipotence to its most extreme limit. After him we find no further developments in the theological reflection on the scope and nature of God’s omnipotence. What we do encounter, however, are continuous efforts at resolving the conceptual difficulties signalled by the tradition. In §3 we shall consider the shape of these difficulties and the available solutions. Much more acute is the fact that, in the later theological reflection, and especially in our age, the doctrine of omnipotence as such came under strong pressure. In §4 we shall consider the background to this development.

3 Conceptual Problems regarding ‘Omnipotence’

As soon as we attempt to give a clear-cut definition of the concept of omnipotence, we stumble upon a number of conceptual problems. Let us begin with the obvious definition that we have already encountered above: omnipotence is the ability to do everything. Or, formulated more precisely:

D1 x is omnipotent = x has the ability to realise any and every state of affairs.

Here the problem immediately arises of whether x can also realise states of affairs such as ‘a square circle,’ or ‘John is a married bachelor,’ or ‘2+2=5.’ There are good reasons for denying this. After all, an expression like ‘making a square circle’ constitutes a meaningless combination of words, since a circle is by definition round rather than square; and, as C.S. Lewis has already noted, meaningless combinations of words do not suddenly acquire meaning by having the words ‘God can’ prefixed to them. A square circle is not a possible state of affairs, but a logical contradiction, and logical contradictions are simply not realisable.

In the theistic tradition, this inherent limitedness of the concept of omnipotence was already recognised at an early stage, and omnipotence was consequently defined as the ability to realise all logically possible states of affairs (thus explicitly in e.g. Maimonides and Thomas Aquinas). However, this ‘limitation’ of God’s

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power continued to meet resistance by believers of a more fideistic inclination. Could the laws of logic really set limits to the power of God? Should we, with our tiny human understanding, dare to claim that God could not do something just because it is contrary to our logic? Interestingly, this intuition has again received philosophical-religious articulation and elaboration in recent years. Some even speak of a ‘neo-cartesian school’ in which it is denied that there could be true propositions which are true apart from God’s will. Even propositions like ‘2+2=4’ would then be true, and according to some neo-cartesians also necessarily true, only because God wanted them to be so.

Other, more Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion argue, however, that propositions like ‘2+2=4,’ ‘2+2=5’ etc. are not at all true or false in the sense that they do, or do not, constitute representations of external reality. What we are dealing with here, according to them, are rules that indicate how we employ our thought forms and concepts in a meaningful way. The laws of logic are prescriptive rather than descriptive speech acts. For example, ‘2+2=4’ prescribes: ‘in the language game called mathematics, always use the symbol "4" as a substitute for the sum of two symbols "2."’ And of prescriptive speech acts (such as ‘Close the door!’), we simply cannot say that they are true or false. Neo-cartesian thinkers retort by pointing out that the language game called mathematics is surely somehow connected with concrete, describable reality, as is shown by the fact that through the application of mathematical laws reliable bridges, trains, and a thousand things more can be made! Consequently, the question arises with regard to those laws (as with regard to all reality), whether they could have been different. If so, they presumably can be seen as subject to the power of an omnipotent being.

Thus we see how even the simplest definition of omnipotence already raises conceptual difficulties, for which, to this very day, no unanimous solutions are available. Let us, for convenience’s sake, assume for now that the neo-cartesians are in the wrong, and that an almighty being by no means has the power to realise any state of affairs that is logically impossible. In that case D1 is an inadequate definition of omnipotence, and we shall have to replace it with D2:

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D2 \; x \text{ is almighty } = x \text{ has the ability to realise every logically possible state of affairs.}
\]

But is D2 really adequate? A very old and well-known objection to the correctness of D2 is the so-called ‘paradox of the stone’: can an omnipotent being make a stone which is so heavy that afterwards it cannot lift it anymore? In itself the existence of

a stone which is so heavy that its maker cannot lift it, is a logically possible state of affairs. But if an omnipotent being must therefore be capable of realising this state of affairs, then doubts arise about its omnipotence! After all, there might then be a stone which it cannot lift. Surely that would detract from its omnipotence. Conversely, it is clear that a being which cannot produce such a stone, cannot claim the title ‘omnipotent’ either.

One should be careful of the rejoinder that we are dealing here with a trivial question, which only serves to show how easily philosophical theologians let themselves be tempted by absurd subtleties. There is, after all, an important theological variant of the stone paradox: can an almighty God create people, not as puppets, but as free and autonomously acting persons? It is clear that, if God could not do that, He would not, on the basis of D2, be omnipotent, for the existence of free and autonomous persons is logically possible. But at the same time it may be asked whether God could still be called omnipotent if He could do that. Could He then still keep the course of world history under His control? That is a question which, on theological grounds, may have to be answered differently from the stone paradox. But the conceptual structure of both problems is, at least at first sight, identical. The renewed interest in the stone paradox during the last few decades is therefore not devoid of all relevance.

Insofar as the stone paradox is not regarded as proof of the internally inconsistent character of the concept of omnipotence (i.e. of ascribing all abilities to one and the same subject), the solutions that have recently been offered basically adopt one of two strategies. First of all, some authors claim that it is simply logically impossible for an almighty being to make a stone which it cannot lift, or, more generally, an object which it cannot control. Now, precisely because these kinds of acts are logically impossible, the ability to perform them does not belong to the requirements that must be satisfied, according to D2, by an omnipotent being. The fact that an omnipotent being cannot produce the stone under consideration detracts as little from its omnipotence, as does the fact that it cannot produce a square circle!

Secondly, some authors claim that there is no reason why an omnipotent being could not make the stone under consideration. The only implication of having this capacity is that, as soon as it is exercised, the maker of the stone thereby sacrifices its omnipotence. As long as an almighty being can make the stone, without actually doing it, however, its omnipotence remains undiminished. Only when the production of the stone is actually performed, does the maker deprive itself of its omnip-

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25 Thus e.g. George I. Mavrodes, ‘Some Puzzles Concerning Omnipotence,’ in: Urban & Walton (eds.), Power of God, 131-134.
otence. And why should the ability of depriving itself of its omnipotence not also be among the acts that can be performed by an omnipotent being?\textsuperscript{26}

These two standard solutions to the stone paradox are not mutually exclusive. Which of the two is applicable depends on what sort of omnipotence one has in mind. If one views omnipotence as an essential attribute of a being which necessarily exists (e.g. of God in the classical theistic view), then only the first solution offers a way out. After all, it is then logically impossible for this being to sacrifice its omnipotence. In terms of classical theism: without omnipotence God would no longer be God. His essence would be destroyed, and that is impossible since God is imperishable and exists necessarily (as God). However, if one views omnipotence as an accidental attribute, that is to say as an attribute which one could lose without thereby also losing one’s essential identity, then the second solution applies. The omnipotent being continues to exist after having made the stone, but is no longer omnipotent. After all, through the making of the stone a logically possible state of affairs comes into existence, which the almighty being cannot realise, namely the lifting of the stone under consideration. Conceptual problems like the paradox of the stone arise, therefore, when we do not distinguish clearly to what sort of being we are in fact attributing omnipotence. Is it a being which is regarded as possessing omnipotence as part of its essence, or as an accidental attribute? That makes a difference.

Similarly, it makes a difference to the nature of its omnipotence which further essential attributes an omnipotent being has. In the theistic tradition, among other properties impeccability has been ascribed to God as an essential attribute. This ascription expresses the conviction that God, in view of His perfect goodness, cannot possibly sin. Now one could say: a God who cannot sin, cannot do everything which can logically be done, and is therefore not omnipotent on the basis of D2. But if that is the case, then only a being which possesses no further essential attributes can truly be called omnipotent. This position, however, has huge consequences. For if omnipotence is God’s only essential attribute, then it is His very essence: God is omnipotence. And as such, He is indeed necessarily capable of anything!

If we wish to avoid this conclusion, we have to adapt D2. Usually that is done by stipulating that an almighty being has to be capable of performing every logically possible action insofar as it is in accordance with its nature. Thus, when impeccability belongs to God’s nature, it is logically impossible for God to sin, but this fact does not detract from His omnipotence.

In this way D2 is usually replaced by

\textsuperscript{26} Thus e.g. Richard Swinburne, \textit{The Coherence of Theism} (Oxford 1977), 152-158.
D3: \( \chi \) is omnipotent \( = x \) has the ability to realise every state of affairs which it is logically possible for \( x \) to realise.

Is this, in the end, what we mean by omnipotence? That is highly debatable. The current discussions on the definition of the concept of omnipotence are haunted by a fictitious figure, who drives philosophers of religion to near desperation, because he illustrates convincingly the problematic nature of D3. He is called ‘Mr McEar,’ because he has as an essential attribute that He is incapable of doing anything but scratching behind his ear (including all other actions implied by that). On the basis of D3, Mr McEar, even though he can do almost nothing, would have to be regarded as omnipotent! After all, for McEar it is logically impossible to realise any state of affairs other than ‘McEar scratches behind his ear.’ Precisely because anything else is logically impossible for him, it does not detract from his omnipotence. In other words: on the assumption of D3 even the most powerless being can be called omnipotent!

One could of course attempt, at this point, to tinker with D3. For example, one could add the condition that an almighty being must possess the maximum number of abilities that are reconcilable with the remaining conditions.\(^27\) Then Mr McEar is clearly disqualified. But then one must take great conceptual pains to prevent God from being ‘disqualified’! That can only be achieved by denying any other essential attribute to Him, or by condemning the definition of omnipotence to the proverbial death of a thousand qualifications. The latter is exactly what happens in much philosophical-religious literature.

Jerome Gellman has shown that the root of the difficulties is to be found in the fact that the quest has been for a purely formal definition, and does not take into account the concrete abilities we would want to attribute to an almighty God for theological reasons. The ability to scratch behind one’s ear, for example, is not relevant here, but the ability to be perfectly sinless probably is. Gellman claims that the concept of omnipotence is not adequately definable apart from this theological context.\(^28\) Indeed, one can infer the failure of the search for a context-free analysis of the concept of omnipotence from the great number of increasingly complex definitions, all of which are found wanting.\(^29\) And even if one of these ‘literal’ definitions might turn out to be convincing after all, it won’t do justice to what is meant by God’s almightiness in theology and the language of faith.

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\(^{29}\) Cf. Van den Brink, *Almighty God*, 140f.
It is for this reason that we conclude this section with a definition that attempts to take into account the theological context in which the concept of omnipotence functions:

D4 God is omnipotent = God has the ability to realise all states of affairs that are logically possible for Him to realise, given His perfect being.

Conceptually, this definition is strictly consistent. But it is a very different sort of definition than D1 to 3! D1 to 3 provide 'open' definitions in the sense that, with the help of them, various possible candidates for the title 'omnipotent' can be tested as to the accuracy of their claim. D4, however, simply takes as its point of departure God's omnipotence as a theological datum, and limits itself to the explication of its meaning.

What is not stipulated in D4 is what exactly God's perfect being consists in. Several routes could be followed to sort this out. First of all, one could attempt to determine this by following the route of Anselmian perfect being theology. Like Anselm, starting from a preconceived idea of what perfection amounts to one may specify which great making properties constitute God's perfect being. Then, however, the question of a theological criterion arises unavoidably. For how are we to decide between mutually conflicting intuitions about what does, and does not, contribute to perfection? Moreover, conceptual problems about the compatibility of essential attributes like those considered above return with a vengeance. Secondly, therefore, we might prefer to follow the alternative approach of revelation theology, which starts not from any preconceived notion of perfection, but from the way in which God has concretely revealed Himself in history as attested in the Bible. Perhaps, however, the approaches of biblical and philosophical theology are not mutually exclusive, but can fruitfully complement each other in the quest for a doctrine of God which is on the one hand close to the believers' faith, and on the other hand neither opaque nor inconsistent but conceptually coherent.

4 Is the Doctrine of Omnipotence Still Credible Today?

The concept of a unicorn is conceptually entirely in order; one could undoubtedly give a perfectly adequate definition of it. However, from that we can obviously not

30 See Anselm's Prologion, and cf. e.g. Thomas V. Morris, Anselmian Explorations (Notre Dame 1987).
31 See e.g. K.H. Miskotte's critique of a philosophical doctrine of God in his Bijbels ABC (Amsterdam 1966), and cf. my Almighty God, 176-184.
conclude that unicorns actually exist. Similarly, from the fact that the concept of omnipotence can be consistently described, one cannot infer that there exists an omnipotent being, or that God is omnipotent. Here we are not concerned with showing that the latter is plausible, since this largely depends upon the plausibility of the encompassing theological framework in which talk of an omnipotent God is embedded. It is conceivable, however, that there are certain considerations related to the doctrine of omnipotence as such, which make it extremely implausible.

In fact, such considerations seem to be quite dominant in the current cultural climate. For instance, in line with Freud, many people still regard it as self-evident that the idea of omnipotence originated as a projection of our human desires onto a supposed deity, which took over the role of the father image from our early childhood. Against this it may be pointed out that we do not normally desire a God who, as the almighty, is also responsible for the evil that befalls us. To other thinkers, especially feminists, the idea of omnipotence appears implausible because, it is claimed, it reflects a magnified version of a typically male preoccupation with power. Here one could pose the question whether such an intrinsic connection between power and masculinity is in fact demonstrable, and also whether the exclusivity and uniqueness of the predication of omnipotence to God in the theological tradition has been sufficiently taken into account. If God alone is almighty, then no man has the right to behave as if he were almighty; and if God is almighty, not in the manner of an oppressive tyrant, but in the manner of the Redeemer who liberates His people from oppression and violence, then the doctrine of omnipotence cannot serve as legitimisation for any form of power abuse.

Rather than exploring these objections any further here, we shall concentrate on two others that have become more deeply embedded in our cultural climate since the Enlightenment, and that are therefore experienced much more widely as considerations that detract from the plausibility of divine omnipotence. I am referring to the objection that belief in an omnipotent God makes it impossible to attribute true responsibility, freedom and autonomy to human beings, and the objection that belief in a God who is both omnipotent and perfectly good is falsified by the sheer weight of the pain and suffering in the world. Of course, both these issues are among the perennial problems associated with the idea of an omnipotent God, and have been topics of discussion throughout the ages. Yet, in our time they have acquired an unprecedented intensity. Ever since the Enlightenment, people have unambiguously understood themselves as free and autonomous over against any and every authority; and since the two world wars in the 20th century, the problem of evil
has been imprinted more deeply on the European soul in particular, than ever before.

As far as the relation between omnipotence and freedom is concerned, the most elaborated attempt at thinking through the modern concept of freedom with regard to its repercussions for the doctrine of omnipotence, has been made within process theology. Process theologians claim that, as soon as one attributes a relevant kind of freedom to human beings, one cannot simultaneously defend the traditional doctrine of omnipotence anymore. According to process thinkers like Charles Hartshorne and David Griffin, the classical doctrine of omnipotence implies that God has all power, and that other beings are therefore powerless. However, when certain beings do in fact possess a certain degree of freedom — and process thinkers argue that this applies not only to people, but to all existing entities — then that entails that they are not entirely powerless. Rather they also possess power, and God cannot therefore possess all power: He is not almighty.

It is contestable, however, whether in this way justice is done to the traditional doctrine of omnipotence or to the conceptual relation between omnipotence and freedom. Nelson Pike has pointed out that what lies behind the omnipotence-criticism of process theologians is a substantialist concept of power. It is suggested that power is like a sort of substance: if one has it, someone else cannot also have it at the same time. There can be only one owner of a particular amount of power at a time, just as substantial objects usually have only one owner at a time. Thus, if I for example have all coins of a certain type, you have none. However, this view of the nature of power is neither typical of the theological tradition, nor conceptually sound. For obviously, several beings can simultaneously have power with regard to one and the same action. The fact that my cat is capable of moving the ball in the garden twenty inches, does not exclude me from possessing the same power. It is only once I have started to exercise that power, that my cat will no longer be capable of bringing about the same removal. The distinction between the possession and the use or exercise of power is therefore of crucial importance in this regard.

The same applies to the classical doctrine of omnipotence. The fact that, in this doctrine, all power is attributed to God, does not imply that God exerts this power at every moment. Neither does it imply, therefore, that other beings, like humans, have no power. As long as God does not use His power to realise a particular state of affairs, it is quite possible for free creatures to use their power to realise that state of affairs. In principle they can even do this freely, i.e. without being somehow

forced into doing it. By the same token they may if they wish also use their power to realise the opposite state of affairs. Only when God intervenes directly in order to realise or prevent such a state of affairs – but then we would rightly speak of a miracle! – are other beings deprived of this possibility.

Thus from a conceptual point of view, human freedom consists in the space God provides for humanity, not by sacrificing or limiting His own power, but by not continually actualising it. That God can do everything, does not mean that God also does do everything. He can also grant to human beings their own possibilities for action. That does not in the least detract from His omnipotence or providence, for God can intervene at every desirable moment, and will in any case do so eschatologically. So it turns out that the doctrine of omnipotence is entirely compatible with human freedom. It is not only compatible with ‘freedom’ in the weak sense of ‘voluntariness’ (which leaves open the possibility of determinism; I can voluntarily do that which I could not have left undone because of my determinedness), but also with freedom in the strong sense of choice and alternativity. In modern thought, this latter type of freedom is considered to be the only relevant one.

Just as incisive is, lastly, the second difficulty which in our time more than before is experienced with regard to God’s omnipotence, namely the problem of evil and suffering. This problem has many facets, among them of course very existential ones, but here we shall concentrate on the philosophical-theological aspect. To be sure, it is generally acknowledged that Alvin Plantinga and others have succeeded in showing, by elaborating the so-called ‘free will defense,’ that God’s omnipotence and perfect goodness are logically compatible with evil and suffering in the world. But that still says very little about the plausibility of belief in God’s omnipotence and goodness in the face of evil. Atheistic and agnostic thinkers point to the great amount of apparently quite meaningless suffering that occurs in the world. They argue that it is especially this kind of suffering which renders the existence of a good and almighty God extremely unlikely! Some theists respond that we human beings are, epistemologically, simply not in a position to draw such a conclusion, but that appears to be a cop-out. Therefore, many theologians opt for dropping one of the two claims at issue, mostly the claim that God is omnipotent.

35 Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids 1974), 7-64.
Yet we may wonder whether the existence of apparently pointless suffering renders the existence of an omnipotent, wholly good God implausible indeed. For let us imagine that every instance of suffering in the world would have a point in that it leads, perhaps often in a way we do not comprehend, to some important higher goal unattainable without it. Suppose we would know every suffering to be meaningful and justified in this way, because otherwise God, in His omnipotence and love, would have prevented it. In that case it would not be clear why we should make any effort to prevent suffering. After all, some important higher good will be served by it, which is unattainable without that suffering. Every plea for morally responsible action would then be meaningless, since all the evil that we instigate or maintain would (in some incomprehensible way) eventually be beneficial to the victims. We would not be capable of really harming someone. But then we would not be responsible people anymore. Presumably, we would not even be persons in any relevant sense of the word.

Thus, if we are to be free and morally responsible persons, then it must be possible for things to go truly wrong through our actions and omissions. Or to put this in theological terms: then we must have been created with the possibility of sinning, that is to commit absurd, pointless evil. Precisely by allowing the possibility of real evil (which isn't good for anything) in creation, God makes of our human existence a serious and valuable thing, since this possibility is a prerequisite for moral life. From this perspective, the existence of unjustifiable and pointless evil in the world constitutes no argument against the existence of an omnipotent, perfectly good God.

Many other questions will have to be left untouched within the scope of this chapter, such as why there are such large amounts and such intense forms of apparently meaningless suffering, and why apart from moral evil there is so much natural evil in the form of diseases, earthquakes et cetera. One more question, however, we cannot escape, and that is whether the end of a fully personal human life justifies the means of the possibility of evil and suffering. What if someone were to say: in that case it is better to have no free and morally responsible people at all! The ideal of human existence in freedom and responsibility, in love and care, is not worth the high cost of so much suffering. Certainly that is an intelligible reaction in many

38 See William Hasker, 'The Necessity of Gratuitous Evil,' Faith and Philosophy 9 (1992), 23-44; ‘... one may undergo physical and mental suffering, torture, degradation, and death, but all of this will be more than compensated for by the benefits ... which will come to one as a result of that suffering’ (27f.).

39 Cf. on the first question Hasker, 'Necessity,' 33-37, and on the second e.g. my 'Natural Evil and Eschatology,' in: Gijsbert van den Brink, Luco J. van den Brom & Marcel Sarot (eds.), Christian Faith and Philosophical Theology (Kampen 1992), 39-55.
situations. But whether it is an adequate reaction cannot be decided by means of rationally conclusive arguments.\(^40\) We are dealing with matters here, which, because of our limited understanding, we cannot fully grasp. And consequently we either turn away from God in outrage, or we entrust ourselves to Him in faith. We protest, with Iwan Karamazow in Dostoyevski’s novel, against a God who allows such a sea of agony, or we hold, with Paul, that the sufferings of this present time cannot be compared with the glory that is going to be revealed to us (Rom. 8:18).

In the latter case, we cannot easily do without the belief in God’s omnipotence. For if one thing is clear, it is that evil will not, by itself, turn to good. In this connection, Christians should elaborate the doctrine of God’s almightiness in a trinitarian way. For them, the cross of Christ is the most profound revelation of divine omnipotence: even this absurd and horrendous evil is evidently not too much for Him to deal with. He transforms the cross, as the ultimate manifestation of human sin, into the source of reconciliation. That offers hope for the future: eschatologically, God will be victorious over sin and suffering. And in the school of faith, the Spirit of God teaches us to see all things, including our own suffering, with the ‘eye of faith’ in this perspective. Then life acquires meaning also in suffering in that, and insofar as, it is made to serve the coming of God’s Kingdom.

In sum, the claim that God is almighty is, given the amount and the intensity of evil in the world, certainly not self-evident, but a matter of faith which in the final analysis cannot be rationally demonstrated. Considered from the framework of faith, however, the doctrine of omnipotence is still credible, especially when it is elaborated in a trinitarian-theological way. When confronted with the problem of evil, the trinitarian view of God’s power is more adequate than a purely philosophical notion of omnipotence, since the former not only offers a theoretical explanation but also provides us with insights as to how we might come to terms with the evil we encounter in everyday life. The ordinary philosophical arguments, on the other hand, offer only ‘cold and abstract comfort.’\(^41\) They show us neither how God in Christ took human evil upon Himself and reconciled it, nor how, through His Spirit, He teaches us to live out of that reconciliation and leads us on the way towards His Kingdom.

\(^40\) ‘This is a question of ultimates involving a choice between two irreconcilably different ultimate moral universes’; Vincent Brümmer, Speaking of a Personal God (Cambridge 1992), 146.

5. Conclusion

We can elucidate the claim that God is omnipotent or almighty by carefully distinguishing between a theologically informed and a literal or philosophical concept of omnipotence. Having attempted to do this, we may conclude that the theologically informed concept is more adequate than the purely philosophical notion of omnipotence at three levels. First, in the Bible God's power is certainly depicted as all-powerfulness; but God's power is of a very specific nature, determined and 'filled' as it were by His perfect character. Correspondingly, the Christian tradition has usually rejected both the denial of the unlimited scope and of the specific nature of God's power. Second, at a conceptual level it is notoriously difficult to formulate a consistent definition of the philosophical concept of omnipotence. On the other hand, when we take into account the specific religious context in which the concept functions it can be adequately defined without great difficulties. Third, when we presuppose the philosophical concept of omnipotence it is problematic to formulate a response to the problem of evil which is not only conceptually consistent but also religiously relevant. If we draw upon its (trinitarian) theological background, however, such a response, though not easy, is certainly possible.

In the end, then, Peter Geach's distinction between two rival notions of divine power, a correct theological one and a confusing philosophical one (to be dubbed 'almightiness' and 'omnipotence' respectively), is vindicated in a sense. To be sure, it is not the case, as Geach has it, that the theological notion merely refers to God's power over all things whereas the philosophical concept has primarily to do with God's power to do all things. These two types of power cannot be so easily disentangled. Rather, the theological notion of God's power pertains to both God's actual power over things and God's abilities to do things, but in a way which from the beginning takes into account God's perfect character. The philosophical concept of omnipotence, on the other hand, abstracts from the original religious context of belief in God's power, and as a result causes some important theological, conceptual and existential troubles.