## The Omnipotence Paradox and World Religions

Can God create a rock so heavy He could not lift it? --Author unknown

God does not, by the instant gift of His Spirit, make us always feel right, desire good, love purity, aspire after Him and His Will. Therefore either He will not, or He cannot. If He will not, it must be because it would not be well to do so. If He cannot, then He would not if He could; else a better condition than God's is conceivable to the mind of God. --George MacDonald, UNSPOKEN SERMONS, First Series, *The Eloi* 

The omnipotence paradox belongs to a family of apparently self-contradicting logic statements. This type explicitly addresses the omnipotence of God. The leading question is perhaps the most popular, but there are others. As the paper progresses, I will be referring to this question in particular unless specifically stated otherwise, although with appropriate adjustments I am sure the gentle reader can apply the lesson to any such paradox. In today's culture, they are often used by atheists as "proof" that God (presumably Jehovah, they are often quite vague on which god they mean when questioned) does not exist. The logic is this: if God is unable to create such a rock, then there is something He cannot do and therefore he is not omnipotent. Likewise, if there is a rock He cannot move, then there is also something He cannot do, and therefore not omnipotent. There are, of course, many approaches to answering this paradox. I will address many of them as we go along, but I want to talk about the paradox itself first so we can see what this question really asks. I think the gentle reader will be shocked just how poor an argument this really is.

Indeed, the two philosophers most famous for promoting this type of logic paradox were devout believers in God: the Jewish theologian Saadia Gaon and the Islamic theologian Averroes. Saint Thomas Aquinas, the man who made not one but five proofs of God, also dealt with this issue. But none of them dabbled in this to *disprove* God, but rather to understand who God was! And, as such, I think it is critical to demonstrate that this question only applies to monotheism, and even then only in certain cases.

I hope that it is obvious that such a logic puzzle would mean nothing to a polytheist. How can one truly call a given god in a pantheon omnipotent when other deities exist to thwart his desires? Even the "king gods," such as Zeus, whose words are not overtly challenged by the other gods, clearly cannot do everything on their own. Many such king gods were actually killed in their myths (such as Osiris and Odin), which ought to prove they are not omnipotent. But the real problem, and this will also be critical when we get to monotheism, is that the powers of polytheistic gods are spread out. If one were to go back in time to ancient Greece and ask this question about Zeus, one would likely hear something along the lines of, "What are you talking about? It's Gaia that forms rocks, and the rocks are held up by Atlas." The closest polytheism can come to having this question being meaningful would be dualism (i.e., only two gods exist, equal but opposite). Between the two of them, a rock of any size could theoretically be created, but the opposing natures they have makes it questionable if even the smallest piece of dust could be lifted by one if the other chose to prevent it. So this question, when posed to a pagan, is answered by, "Yes, so what?"

With monotheism, things get much more complicated, but fortunately we only have five gods with which to concern ourselves: Brahman (or equivalent), Yahweh (God of the Jews), Jehovah (God of

Christians), Allah (God of the Muslims), and the deist god. Two quick notes before I move on. For reasons I will only briefly describe here, I believe Zoroastrianism is really a dualistic religion. I also believe that Allah, while similar to Yahweh and Jehovah, is actually neither. For Zoroastrianism, it is true that Ahura Mazdā was good and "all powerful" as Yahweh and Jehovah are, and they also believed there was a demon (Angra Mainyu) who accounts for all the evil in the world just as Jews and Christians believe in Satan (more so Christians than Jews). But unlike Satan, who was allowed a certain amount of freedom by God, Ahura Mazdā is unable to stop Angra Mainyu. In other words, Satan needed permission (or at least the freedom) to do evil, but Angra Mainyu is able to achieve local victories over Ahura Mazdā at will. In a relatively short period of time, Angra Mainyu became just as powerful as Ahura Mazdā for all practical purposes. So there are now two gods in Zoroastrianism of equal but opposite power, hence dualism.

As for Islam, it is founded on the premise that Jews and Christians have made serious errors in who their God is, and that Allah sent Mohammad to correct these errors. As Islam denies important aspects of Yahweh and Jehovah, it cannot claim to have the same God. This is, of course, in stark contrast concerning the "differences" between Yahweh and Jehovah. Christians do not deny anything the Jews believe about Yahweh; they only built on it. In other words, Christians believe Jehovah is a better understood Yahweh, not a different God. Nonetheless, the differences in what was revealed between Yahweh and Jehovah are important for this paper, so I will continue to name God accordingly.

With monotheism, we need a different approach to the paradox. We need to know something about the God in question before we can make a judgment on how the paradox affects it. This was also true with polytheism, but by the virtue that each god represents some aspect of reality, to know of them automatically carried some understanding of their weaknesses as well. But if there is only one God, then all aspects of human understanding concerning Him needs to be accounted for in some manner. I have two methods I want to use to help us. The first one is God's relationship to us, and the second is by how we can know of Him. As a singular God, we only have three ways to describe a relationship with Him. He can be completely beyond us (transcendental), he can actually be part of us (immanent), or some combination thereof.

The deist god created the universe, set things in motion, and no longer interacts with His creation. This is the purely transcendental god. The question becomes, why didn't this god interact with the universe? Creating a rock so big that he could not move it is actually an explanation for this god's lack of interaction with the world. The world is made so perfect that nothing else can be done. Or perhaps he created the universe to be so great that he *is* helpless before it. Similar ideas could go on and on. In the end, the answer to the paradox is, "Of course, his inability to communicate with us is proof of it!"

On the opposite side, we have a universe that is god, and that god is the universe (such as Brahman). This god is reality, and reality is this god. This is the purely immanent god. The question of whether he could create a rock so large he could not lift it is self-explanatory: he *is* the rock, so of course he can't lift it up any more than we can lift ourselves up in the manner suggested by the paradox. Since reality does not exist outside of itself, where would lifting take it? So again, the answer is "yes."

Note that, up to this point, we have found that not only is the answer, "Yes, he could," but to suggest that the answer was "no" would contradict the existence of the gods. Disproving "god" is the goal of the atheist, yet this argument actually requires the opposite answer from what atheists expect in order to win the debate.

Now let us get to the so-called "Abrahamic" Gods, those who have some combination of transcendental and immanence in their understanding. Let us begin with Allah. Although not the god of deists, Allah is as close to it as possible without actually being it. Mysticism is punishable by death in Muslim countries. God spoke to Mohammad through an angel (Gabriel), and that is as close as man will ever come to Allah. It should therefore come as no surprise that the most famous man in omnipotence paradox history was the Muslim Averroes. He first proved Allah existed (through "teteological" proofs, which are not relevant to this paper), and then asked the question of why Allah didn't interact with the world. So when applying the omnipotence paradox to Allah, it is almost the same as the deist god. Averroes asked the question, and I think the best answer one can come up with is, "Yes, he can create such a rock and move it, but only about an inch."

We are now left with Yahweh and Jehovah. It is here that a healthy combination of transcendence and immanence can be found in the same god, so we need to try a different tactic to get answers. And interestingly enough, the Greeks actually conceptualized a Creator God that was remarkably similar to Yahweh/Jehovah. It wasn't until Saint Thomas Aquinas came along and gave us a new way of looking at things that we finally got an answer to the question. Today, we are so ingrained with Saint Thomas' ideas that it can be hard to appreciate exactly how powerful *ex nihilo* is and how valuable it is to our understanding of the omnipotence paradox.

While the Greeks did conceive of an all-powerful Creator God, I am not aware they ever gave this god a proper name. They did, however, give a name to the controlling consciousness of this god: *nous*. But more importantly, they believed that some "background" existed for the god to reside in, and that this background existed independent of the god. For this paper, I will call it Æther. Now, because this god existed against a background, we are allowed to ask about this god's form and matter because it has some type of shape when seen against the background. And once we do this, we fall right back into paganism and pantheism (such as Brahman), because the next logical question is whether or not this god, and we, are made of the same material as the Æther. I realize this is not intuitive, so let me explain by illustration.

If this god is made of the same material that we and the background are made of, then we have pantheism. If he is not, then we must begin to speculate on how this god is shaped, and from there we have paganism. So we find that we can answer the paradox using the logic already presented for pantheism and paganism. But we do have a twist to the previous story. The famous Euthyphro dilemma highlights the problem with its own logic problem: "Is the pious [or good] loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?" Does goodness come from the whims of the gods, or is goodness part of the nature of Æther? Just like the omnipotence paradox, the question is not to disprove the gods, but rather to try to understand them.

But with the Jews, things finally begin to get interesting with the paradox. While the Hebrews did believe in a God who created the universe *ex nihilo*, and one who routinely proved His power over the cosmos, they still didn't quite get past the idea that some version of Æther coexisted with Yahweh. In the sometimes overlooked part of Genesis 1:2, we see, "[a] darkness covered the abyss, while a mighty wind swept over the waters." Note that no mention is ever made of these waters being created; they are treated like they were was always there. Most theologians agree that the water is the primordial chaos, and inadvertently give tacit approval that this was the background that coexisted with Yahweh. But while Greeks and Hebrews shared this Æther concept, the Jews left no question as to the absolute power Yahweh had over it (the aforementioned "mighty wind" is the Holy Spirit, and Job 38:8,16 for example). While Yahweh is not explicitly identified as creating the Æther, it is not a background to His own existence. His complete mastery over it suggests it is a separate reality, and that He is completely

## independent of it.

But before I take this to the next level, I do believe this is the first demonstration ever of omnipotence where the paradox can be used by the skeptics of today: Yahweh was a master even over things that He did not create, and so we have the first "no" answer that today's skeptics want. No, God could not make a rock so big He couldn't move it because His creative power was not only over what was, but also over what wasn't yet. It is this "not yet" that I want to address now. Without *ex nihilo*, half of the criteria needed to make the paradox is not present, but only hinted at by the ancient Hebrews. In all fairness to them, they had no reason to know more, as the omnipotence paradox is a question for relatively advanced civilizations. The fact that they addressed it at all is amazing. But lest we think poorly of the ancients and their inability to fully embrace nonexistence, I think it is important to remember just how hard it is for us to really understand it, despite how easy it is to demonstrate.

Parents do not tell a child to "turn on" a dark when they send him to bed. We know that light is real and darkness is the absence of what is real (i.e., light). But for us to really apply this knowledge to our lives seems very difficult. We don't look at "evil" as the absence of "good," but rather something that exists like good does. We don't look at "death" as the absence of "life," but rather as a stage of life. The Hebrews had just as hard a time appreciating the idea of "nothingness" as we do today (and likely they had a harder time), but they nonetheless still understood that God not only had power over what is, but over what was not yet. I doubt a more comprehensive definition of omnipotence is possible. But the question essentially remained, and we still have the omnipotence paradox as asked by Saadia Gaon and Saint Thomas Aquinas: can God contradict Himself? And while few cared about this issue in the centuries that followed the time of Christ on Earth, it nonetheless lingered.

The next great theologian who sought to prove the existence of God was Saint Anselm. Saint Anselm's ontological proof of God was that anything one can imagine can only exist because there must be something even greater than it for it to be possible. Unfortunately, this "proof" fails, even though many people today still claim it is legitimate. The flaw in Saint Anselm's "proof" is that it doesn't so much prove that God exists as to describe what God would be like if he does exist. In other words, it is a tricky version of the *precipatio principii* fallacy. If one can imagine that \$10,000 in one's bank account is good, then God would be better still. Yes, if God does exist, then He would be better than having \$10,000, but it is *non-sequitur* to suggest that having wealth proves God exists. But Saint Anselm's idea does have benefits in other ways.

In light of the omnipotence paradox, the ontological answer is, "If you can imagine omnipotence to be a desirable thing, then God is greater still." This statement correctly suggests that our understanding of omnipotence is somehow limited, just our ability to understand things is indeed limited. Therefore we can expect there to exist aspects of omnipotence beyond our understanding. But Jehovah, being greater than omnipotence, can do better than what omnipotence suggests. I would compare this concept to "judging a book by its cover," with the omnipotence paradox being the cover of the book that is God. Still, I don't know if I would use this argument personally. One would be using a failed theory proving God to disprove a theory being used to disprove God. The ontological argument has a "slipperiness" that, even for those who approve of it, doesn't sit well when looked at in detail. If used against the skeptic it may come across as one not knowing what one is talking about. So we finally come to the time when we can discuss Saint Thomas Aquinas properly.

Now, while I do consider Jehovah to be Yahweh with the added revelations of Jesus for most theological matters, for the purpose of the omnipotence paradox this distinction is not relevant until the time of Saint Thomas Aquinas. It wasn't until he looked at Christianity with the light of Greek

philosophy that a truly new way to look at the paradox came along. Up to his time, scholars were happy to look at how Greek philosophy had influenced Christianity. And, as mentioned before, Yahweh and the Greek Unknown God had a lot in common (as Saint Paul pointed out at the Areopagus in Acts 17:22-34). Saint Thomas Aquinas, however, decided to look at what made Yahweh distinct from the Unknown God. Whereas others were trying to make Yahweh *fit* Greek philosophy, Thomas looked *at* Yahweh with Greek philosophy. Specifically, he took Exodus 3:14 ("I Am who Am") and asked what this really means. He also looked at the primordial waters of Genesis 1:2 as being "nothingness" instead of the Hebrew equivalent of Æther. By looking at these two passages, Saint Thomas realized that the essence of God was existence. While this discovery seems trivial today, it has everything to do with our understanding of God and *ex nihilo* today. The Euthyphro problem and the traps of the ontological proof went away!

Saint Thomas Aquinas, after realizing that God was existence itself, noted that existence is an action. "To be" must mean "to be doing something." There was no primordial Æther that coexisted with Jehovah, just nonexistence. For Jehovah to exist alone among nonexistence means that He was a self-sustaining existence. We can then see His true omnipotence, as "In the beginning" (Genesis 1:1) started when God created the abyss and primordial ocean. Therefore, anything that does exist, other than God, is an act of creation by God. This is *ex nihilo* in its purest form. This discovery has been the only meaningful rational discovery about God's nature that man has been able to come up with. So, how does the omnipotence paradox stand up to this discovery?

One approach that has been taken is to say that God can certainly create any sized rock, even of infinite size. This is possible because creation is an action. But to not lift it is the absence of action, and therefore opposed to the nature of God. The omnipotence paradox goes away because it is no longer a logical question, but a collection of words that fail to make an intelligible sentence. It's like asking if one can let enough light into a room so that it becomes dark. Yes, it uses real words and follows a proper grammatical pattern, but is still meaningless. The only way to word this paradox so that it is intelligible would be along the lines of, "Could God create a rock so large that He could move it?" And I doubt any Christian would have a problem saying, "Yes, of course!" But we can go even deeper into Saint Thomas' ideas.

As mentioned earlier, Saint Thomas Aquinas gave us not one "proof" of the existence of God, but five. Since his time, there have been many more proofs that followed his approach. But we only need to look at his five to show how all this works. Saint Thomas Aquinas claimed that motion, efficient cause (i.e., prime motivator), probability and necessity (i.e., matter), goodness and perfection (i.e., gradation of value) and design (i.e., intelligence) all prove the existence of something against which everything we observe must be measured (including our ability to measure it--goodness and perfection). But note that this does not necessarily prove that Jehovah is the answer to them. We know that some intelligent being, which we call "God," must have created each of them, but we don't have proof that only one such god is involved. Saint Thomas Aquinas proved the necessity of one or more gods, so the cosmological arguments could very well indicate a pantheon of gods like paganism. And we have already addressed how the omnipotence paradox doesn't work when applied to multiple gods. So all that remains to discuss is if there is indeed a single God, whom I call Jehovah, that has all five characteristics that Saint Thomas Aquinas applied to Him. And here is when one really has to understand the finer points of Saint Thomas' argument.

It is assumed by many that his cosmological argument is analogous to a series of dominoes --God set everything up and, when He was ready, pushed the first domino and has been watching them fall for the last 14.5 billion years. But the theory does not really work like that. As explained earlier, Saint Thomas Aquinas' God is the only self-sustaining being in existence; everything else that exists is dependent on God for its continued existence. Finite beings, from a subatomic particle to the universe itself, are not self-sustaining. Just like a man lost in the wilderness must constantly replenish his food supply or else it will be consumed, so too must finite particles be constantly renewed (or even replaced) or else they will consume themselves into nothingness. God, by being infinite, cannot consume Himself into nothingness because He is perpetually self-sustaining. God is not just the reason the dominoes are falling, He is the reason there are still more dominoes left to fall. When he decides no more dominoes will exist, the whole show will stop.

By understanding that each moment in time can only exist as a *willful action* on the part of God, we can stop looking at reality as an endless series of causes and effects as understood by science. Naturally enough, God the Law Bringer (a Jewish understanding) has decided that the universe will indeed act in a predictable manner of cause and effect. The point here is not to discredit science, but rather to show that science itself is only credible as long as God wills our reality to be predictable. When the will of God, in His infinite wisdom, decides something new is in order, then nothing we know from today's science will be relevant. God, having the ultimate power over motion, probability and necessity, can certainly will a rock into existence that cannot move, no matter how big or small this rock may be. Yet this rock, being finite, will consume itself into nothingness unless God continues to will it into being. And should his infinite wisdom declare that this rock shall at some point move, then it will be moved no matter what is in its way. So, the answer is that God can indeed create a rock that cannot be moved, but He can also change the property of that rock so that it must be moving irresistibly.

To explain this another way, Saint Thomas Aquinas never spoke of "power" or "limitations," he only spoke of "action" and "perfection." A rock is not made perfect by being mobile or immobile, nor is motion made perfect by the weight of the moved object. Creating a perfect rock and being able to move it perfectly are two separate actions, therefore no contradiction exists.

By now, the exasperated skeptic is likely to make a fatal mistake by quantifying his originally vague statement along the lines of, "God created the universe, right? Could he make a rock bigger than the universe, so big that even God couldn't move it around?" Now that the skeptic has made a more specific request, the theologian can easily tear the argument apart. Consider something along these lines -- "Well, to move something implies that time and space exists. Since this rock is outside the universe, then neither time nor space exists, and therefore movement is an absurd concept."

Note that, with the one and only exception of Jehovah, this paradox is either absurd or taken in stride when asked. And even in the case of Jehovah, it's not so much that the same conclusion can't be reached, it's just that one has to work at it a little. Indeed, this work does not imply that Christianity is wrong, but rather gives us a deeper understanding of our own reality. But the skeptic is apt to say that one is playing word games, apparently blind to the word game he is playing himself.

The goal of an atheist using the omnipotence paradox, as well as any other paradox they may come up with, is to create a nonsense statement and then challenge God to make it sensible. They will claim that they made a perfectly sensible statement because they used real words in a grammatically correct manner. But the omnipotence paradox, when used in this manner, only has the *appearance* of being sensible. It is only sensible when used to understand the nature of a god that is believed in, not in proving such a god does not exist. But the amazing thing is, despite the best efforts to stump God, atheists still fail! Can God create a round square? Well, man can project a square on a balloon to get that effect. Can a triangle have four sides? Yes, pyramids are made of triangles and pyramids have

four sides. And if man, in his finite wisdom, can answer these challenges, then how much better can God do with His infinite wisdom? This, by the way, is a proper use of the ontological argument. The fact that many skeptics don't like creative answers to their absurd questions is not the theologian's problem -- questions were asked and answers were given.

The Father said, That is a stone. The Son would not say, That is a loaf. No one creative *Fiat* shall contradict another. The Father and the Son are of one mind. The Lord could hunger, could starve, but would not change into another thing what His Father had made one thing. --George MacDonald, UNSPOKEN SERMONS, First Series, *The Temptation in the Wilderness* 

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