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THE NEW PARADOX OF THE STONE REVISITED

Erik J. Wielenberg

Alfred Mele and M.P. Smith have presented a puzzle about omnipotence which they call "the new paradox of the stone." They have also proposed a solution to this puzzle. I briefly present their puzzle and their proposed solution and argue that their proposed solution is unsatisfactory. I further argue that if their suggested solution to the original paradox of the stone succeeds, a similar solution also solves the new paradox of the stone.

1. Introduction

In a not-so-recent article in this journal Alfred Mele and M.P. Smith present a puzzle about omnipotence which they call "the new paradox of the stone."¹ They propose a solution to the puzzle in the same article. After briefly presenting the puzzle and the proposed solution, I will argue that the proposed solution is unsatisfactory. I will further argue that if the solution to the original paradox of the stone suggested by Mele and Smith succeeds, a similar solution will also solve the new paradox of the stone.

2. The New Paradox of the Stone and Its Proposed Solution

The new paradox of the stone involves a pair of co-existing essentially omnipotent beings, Fred and Barney, and runs as follows:

Suppose that Fred attempts to lift a given stone and that Barney simultaneously attempts to keep the stone where it is. If we accept that any stone can be either moved or kept still, and accept also that an omnipotent being can move or keep still whatever can be moved or kept still, then it appears that the stone must both move and not move at the same time.²

The puzzle involves the following two states of affairs:

- (S1) There are two essentially omnipotent beings, Fred and Barney. Fred tries to move a certain stone; Barney simultaneously tries to keep that very stone at rest.
- (S2) A stone both moves and does not move at the same time.

Here is the puzzle:

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1. If (S1) is possible, then (S2) is possible.
2. (S2) is not possible.
3. Therefore, (S1) is not possible.

The puzzle turns on the claim that in a contest of the sort involved in (S1), Fred and Barney, both being omnipotent, would succeed in their respective efforts. Fred would succeed in moving the stone, and Barney would simultaneously succeed in keeping the stone at rest. Thus, (S1) entails (S2), and so the possibility of (S1) entails the possibility of (S2). (S2) is impossible; therefore, (S1) is impossible as well. Mele and Smith propose the following solution to this puzzle:

'moving a stone that an omnipotent being wishes to hold in place,' and 'holding in place a stone that an omnipotent being wishes to move,' do not describe logically possible tasks, so that even omnipotent beings cannot perform them. . .in the omnipotent face-off, both types of action. . .are impossible. . .Paradoxically, the omnipotence of each can be preserved provided that both are thwarted.³

This solution makes use of the following principle, which Mele and Smith allude to earlier in their paper:⁴

Thomistic Principle (TP): If A is an impossible task, then the fact that a given being cannot perform A does not imply that that being is not omnipotent.

Omnipotence does not require that one be able to perform (metaphysically) impossible tasks. Mele and Smith claim that the following two tasks are both impossible:

- A1: Moving a stone that an omnipotent being wishes to hold in place.
 A2: Holding in place a stone that an omnipotent being wishes to move.

In the imagined contest, Fred tries to perform A1 and fails. This does not threaten his omnipotence, given TP and that A1 is an impossible task. Similarly, Barney tries to perform A2 and fails. This does not threaten his omnipotence, given TP and that A2 is an impossible task. Both beings are thwarted, yet both remain omnipotent. Therefore, the first premise of the new paradox of the stone is false.

One might wonder what happens to the stone in such a contest. The answer given by Mele and Smith, briefly, is that the stone may move so long as it is not moved by Fred, and it may remain at rest so long as it is not kept at rest by Barney.⁵ The contest by itself does not determine what

will happen to the stone; that the stone moves and that the stone remains at rest are both compatible with the occurrence of a contest of the sort described by Mele and Smith.

3. *Why the Proposed Solution is Unsatisfactory*

Mele and Smith's solution relies on the claim that these two tasks are impossible:

A1: Moving a stone that an omnipotent being wishes to hold in place.

A2: Holding in place a stone that an omnipotent being wishes to move.

A question arises here: *Why* are these two tasks impossible? The impossibility of the two tasks cries out for explanation. What is needed is some plausible principle that implies that A1 and A2 are both impossible. Presumably the appropriate principle will be a principle about omnipotence, since moving a stone that a non-omnipotent being wishes to hold in place is not an impossible task.⁶ Omnipotence apparently makes all the difference. It is the involvement of omnipotent beings that somehow makes A1 and A2 impossible. But how? What might the relevant principle be?

At one point, Mele and Smith claim that "[t]hwarting an omnipotent being's execution of a possible task is *not* possible."⁷ They therefore hold this principle:

- P1. If A is a possible task and x is omnipotent, then thwarting x's attempt to perform A is an impossible task.

The principle is a plausible one; perhaps it is the principle we are looking for? Unfortunately, though the principle is plausible, it will not do the trick. The reason is that in the imagined contest, Fred is trying to perform A1 and Barney is trying to perform A2 — and A1 and A2 are both impossible. Thus, P1 simply does not apply to this case, since Fred is trying to thwart Barney's attempt to perform an *impossible* task (A2), and Barney likewise is trying to thwart Fred's attempt to perform an *impossible* task (A1).

A similar but crucially different principle would do the trick:

- P2. If A is an impossible task and x is omnipotent, then thwarting x's attempt to perform A is an impossible task.

This principle, if true, would apply to the case at hand and would imply that A1 and A2 are both impossible. But Mele and Smith are committed to the denial of this principle, since they hold that in the imagined contest, Fred thwarts Barney's attempt to perform A2 (an impossible task), and Barney thwarts Fred's attempt to perform A1 (an impossible task).⁸

There are other apparently plausible principles that would yield the

conclusion that A1 and A2 are both impossible, but Mele and Smith are committed to the denial of each of them:

- P3. Necessarily, if an omnipotent being tries to bring about a possible state of affairs *p*, then that being succeeds.

Mele and Smith are obviously committed to the denial of P3. These two states of affairs are both possible:

- (a) The stone involved in the contest moves.
- (b) The stone involved in the contest remains at rest.

Yet Fred's attempt to bring about (a) fails and Barney's attempt to bring about (b) fails. The same fate befalls this principle:

- P4. (i) Necessarily, if an omnipotent being tries to move a certain stone, then that being succeeds, and (ii) necessarily, if an omnipotent being tries to keep a certain stone at rest, then that being succeeds.

This principle would do the trick:

- P5. (i) Necessarily, if a being tries to move a stone that an omnipotent being wishes to keep in place, the former being fails, and (ii) necessarily, if a being tries to keep in place a stone that an omnipotent being wishes to move, the former being fails.

But of course P5 cries out for explanation in the same way that the claim that A1 and A2 are both impossible tasks does, and so P5 gets us nowhere in terms of explaining the impossibility of A1 and A2.

Of course, not every claim to the effect that a certain action or state of affairs is impossible requires explanation. But the ones that do not require explanation are *obviously* true. And even when it is relatively obvious that a certain state of affairs is impossible, it is often the case that its impossibility can be explained by appeal to still more obvious principles. Consider for example:

- (c) It is impossible that a round square exists.

This is an example of a claim about impossibility that is obviously true. Yet it can be explained by appeal to the following still more obvious principles:

- (d) Necessarily, anything that is a square has exactly four corners.
- (e) Necessarily, anything that is round has no corners.

- (f) Necessarily, there is nothing that has both four corners and no corners simultaneously.

All of this bears on Mele and Smith's solution to the new paradox of the stone in the following way. The claims that A1 is impossible and that A2 is impossible are not obviously true in the way that (c) is. Therefore, these claims require justification by appeal to other principles — presumably principles about omnipotence. Yet it appears that all the principles of the relevant sort are (i) inapplicable to the imagined contest, (ii) must be rejected by Mele and Smith, or (iii) are as puzzling as the claim that A1 and A2 are impossible tasks. Without a justifying principle, Mele and Smith's solution is unfounded and therefore unsatisfactory. We ought to look for a better solution.

4. *An Alternative Solution*

A better solution to the new paradox of the stone is suggested by Mele and Smith's proposed solution to the old paradox of the stone. The old paradox may be stated as follows:

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1. Either God can make a stone that He cannot lift or God cannot make a stone that He cannot lift.
2. If God can make a stone that He cannot lift, then He is not essentially omnipotent.
3. If God cannot make a stone that He cannot lift, then He is not essentially omnipotent.
4. Therefore, God is not essentially omnipotent.

The argument strikes right at the heart of the traditional Christian conception of God. If the argument succeeds, it proves that it is impossible that an essentially omnipotent being exists.

The first premise is a logical truth; (2) and (3) are the substantive premises. (2) can be supported as follows. Suppose God makes a stone He cannot lift. Then there is something He cannot do — namely, lift the stone in question. If there is something He cannot do, then He is not omnipotent. So if He makes a stone He cannot lift, He is not omnipotent. If He can make such a stone, then there is a possible world in which He does make such a stone. In that world, God exists but is not omnipotent; therefore, God is not essentially omnipotent. So if God can make a stone He cannot lift, He is not essentially omnipotent.

Premise (3) is much simpler to support. Suppose God cannot make a stone He cannot lift. Then there is something He cannot do — namely, make such a stone. And if there is something He cannot do, then He is not omnipotent, and so is not essentially omnipotent.

Notice that in attempting to justify each of (2) and (3), I made use of the following inference: there is something God cannot do; therefore, God is

not omnipotent. But if the Thomistic Principle is true, then this sort of inference fails just in case the thing God cannot do is something that cannot be done — just in case it is an impossible task.

Mele and Smith seek to exploit TP to solve the old paradox of the stone. They write:

We need take no position, however, on whether someone suitably clever could make a stone unliftable or unstoppable, even by an omnipotent being. For these deeds of lifting and stopping are either possible or they are impossible. If they are impossible, then the inability of an entity to perform them does not impugn its omnipotence. If they are possible tasks, on the other hand, the inability of another being to prohibit an omnipotent being from accomplishing them does not count against its omnipotence either. Thwarting an omnipotent being's execution of a possible task is *not* possible, and hence cannot be expected even of the omnipotent.⁹

Consider the following pair of tasks:

A3: Creating a stone that an omnipotent being cannot lift.

A4: Lifting a stone that was created by an omnipotent being who was trying to create an unliftable stone.

Mele and Smith's solution to the old paradox of the stone is as follows. Either A3 is possible or it is impossible. Suppose first that it is possible. In this case, God can create a stone that He cannot lift, and hence cannot subsequently lift the stone He has created. But God's inability to lift the stone in the imagined scenario does not imply that He is not omnipotent, since, by trying to lift the stone, He is trying to thwart His earlier omnipotent self's attempt to perform A3. And since we are assuming that A3 is possible, it follows by P1 that lifting the stone in question is impossible, and therefore, by TP, the fact that God cannot lift the stone in question does not imply that He is not omnipotent. So if A3 is a possible task, then premise (2) of the old paradox of the stone is false. Notice further that if A3 is a possible task, then A4 is an impossible task. This result will become significant when we return to the new paradox of the stone.

On the other hand, suppose that A3 is an impossible task. In this case, God cannot create a stone He cannot lift, but this does not imply that He is not omnipotent since A3 is an impossible task, and so by TP, the fact that God cannot create such a stone does not imply that He is not omnipotent. So if A3 is an impossible task, then premise (3) of the old paradox of the stone is false.

Notice further that if A3 is an impossible task, then there is no reason to suppose that A4 is an impossible task. For suppose an omnipotent being tries to create an unliftable stone. Since this task is impossible, that being will fail. One way the being might fail is by creating a liftable stone. Such a stone can subsequently be lifted by someone (otherwise it would be an unliftable stone), so lifting a stone that was created by an omnipotent being who was trying to create an unliftable stone is a possible task.

If A3 is a possible task, then premise (2) of the old paradox is false; if A3 is an impossible task, then premise (3) of the old paradox is false. A3 is either possible or impossible; therefore, at least one of the premises of the old paradox is false, and the argument is unsound.

A corresponding solution to the new paradox of the stone is as follows. Recall A1:

A1: Moving a stone that an omnipotent being wishes to hold in place.

Either A1 is possible or A1 is impossible. Suppose first that it is a possible task. In this case, Fred can move the stone that Barney wishes to keep in place. But Barney's inability to keep the stone in place does not imply that he is not omnipotent, since, by trying to keep the stone in place, he is trying to thwart Fred's attempt to perform A1. And since we are assuming that A1 is possible, it follows by P1 that keeping the stone in place is impossible, and therefore, by TP, the fact that Barney cannot keep the stone in place does not imply that he is not omnipotent. So if A1 is a possible task, then premise (1) of the new paradox of the stone is false; Fred will win the contest, and this does not threaten Fred or Barney's essential omnipotence.

Notice that if A1 is possible, then A2 is impossible. This result exactly parallels the relationship between A3 and A4: if A3 is possible, then A4 is impossible.

On the other hand, suppose that A1 is an impossible task. In this case, Fred cannot move a stone that Barney is trying to keep in place, but this does not imply that Fred is not omnipotent since A1 is an impossible task, and so by TP, the fact that Fred cannot create move such a stone does not imply that he is not omnipotent. So if A1 is an impossible task, then premise (1) of the new paradox of the stone is false; Barney will win the contest, and this does not threaten Fred and Barney's essential omnipotence.

If A1 is a possible task, then premise (1) of the new paradox is false; if A1 is an impossible task, then premise (1) of the new paradox is false. A1 is either possible or impossible; therefore, premise (1) of the new paradox is false, and the argument is unsound.

Notice that this solution, unlike the solution proposed by Mele and Smith, allows for the possibility that A2 is a possible task. This solution has it that A2 is possible if A1 is impossible. Again, this result parallels the relationship between A3 and A4. With respect to those two actions, it was suggested that if A3 is impossible, then A4 is possible.

The solution I have proposed to the new paradox of the stone exactly parallels Mele and Smith's proposed solution to the old paradox of the stone. Therefore, the two solutions stand or fall together. If one works, they both work, and if one fails, then they both fail. I find Mele and Smith's solution to the old paradox of the stone convincing, and so I am inclined to think that the solution to the new paradox of the stone that I have proposed is plausible. Given that it lacks the defect of Mele and Smith's solution discussed in the previous section, I conclude that my proposed solution to the new stone paradox is superior to that of Mele and Smith.¹⁰

NOTES

1. Alfred Mele and M.P. Smith, "The New Paradox of the Stone," *Faith and Philosophy* 5 (1988), 283-290.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 284.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 284-285.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 283.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 285.
6. Similar remarks apply to A2 of course.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 284.
8. Of course, Fred thwarts Barney not by moving the stone but rather by preventing Barney from keeping it at rest. Similarly, Barney thwarts Fred not by keeping the stone at rest but rather by preventing Fred from moving it.
9. *Ibid.*
10. I would like to thank Melissa Miksch and three anonymous referees for *Faith and Philosophy* for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper. Some of the ideas contained in this paper were presented in the philosophy of religion course I taught at DePauw University in the fall of 1999; I am grateful to the students in that course for helpful comments.