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OMNIPOTENCE AND THE POWER TO CHOOSE: A REPLY TO WIELENBERG

Wes Morriston

Erik Wielenberg has recently proposed a novel definition of omnipotence. One of the virtues of Wielenberg's analysis is supposed to be that it makes omnipotence compatible with essential goodness. In the present paper, I try to show that Wielenberg does not succeed in reconciling omnipotence with essential goodness. Even if there is a *conditional* sense in which God has the "power" to do things he cannot choose to do, the fact that he cannot choose to do them shows that his *basic* power of choice is limited in a way that is incompatible with omnipotence.

In recent years, definitions of omnipotence have become more and more complicated. Indeed, they frequently employ so much technical apparatus and contain so many subordinate clauses and qualifications, that it is natural to wonder whether they have much to do with what an ordinary person might mean by saying that God is all-powerful. A refreshingly different approach is taken by Erik Wielenberg,¹ who proposes the following succinct definition.

(O2) *x* is omnipotent if and only if it is not the case that there is some state of affairs, *p*, such that *x* is unable to bring about *p* at least *partially* because of a lack of power in *x*.²

Before jumping to the conclusion that God is not omnipotent because he can't bring about some state of affairs, (O2) instructs us to ask *why* God cannot bring it about. Is it (at least partly) because of some lack of power in God? If so, then (O2) tells us that God is not omnipotent. But if it is entirely due to some other factor, then we have not succeeded in specifying a possible power that God lacks.

To see how this is supposed to work for obvious impossibilities, Wielenberg considers the case of the round square. No reasonable definition of omnipotence would entail that God is not omnipotent if he is unable to create a round square. (O2) handles this kind of case quite easily, since God's inability to produce such things is wholly explained by the fact that they are metaphysically impossible – and not even partly by a lack of power in God. No one, no matter how powerful, could create a round square. So the fact that God cannot create one does nothing to show that he is not omnipotent.



But there are other, more difficult cases to consider, and it is one of these that will be the subject of this paper. Like many other philosophers trying to understand omnipotence, Wielenberg is working under certain theological constraints. Since it is widely believed that God is essentially good, Wielenberg thinks he must explain why even an omnipotent God could not break his promises or cause innocent persons to suffer for no reason. Following Wielenberg, we can present the problem in terms of the following examples.

(ef) The earth is laid to waste by a flood.³

(ic) An innocent child is tortured for one thousand years.⁴

There doesn't seem to be anything metaphysically impossible about (ef) or (ic). But if God is essentially good, it is impossible for him to bring about either of them. If he were to bring about (ef), he would be breaking his promise to Noah. If he were to bring about (ic), he would be doing something that (to use Wielenberg's expression) is "essentially evil" – something "so intrinsically bad that necessarily, it is morally wrong for any being to bring [it] about."⁵

Here, too, Wielenberg thinks that (O2) does the job. The reason *why* God cannot break his promise not to bring on another flood, and cannot make an innocent child suffer for a thousand years is *not* that God is lacking in *power*. It is rather because he has "the highest possible degree of a certain property – moral goodness."⁶ Consequently, Wielenberg thinks (O2) gives us the result we want. Under (O2), the fact that God cannot bring about (ef) or (ic) is perfectly consistent with omnipotence.

There is, however, an obvious objection to this analysis that Wielenberg does not consider – one that will be the principal focus of the present paper.⁷ It goes like this.

Even if it is true that God does not lack the power to bring about (ef) or (ic), the fact remains that he cannot *exercise* this power. True enough, he cannot bring about (ef) or (ic) because he is essentially and perfectly good. But part of what that means is that there is something else that he cannot do – he cannot *choose* to bring about states of affairs like these. It follows – doesn't it? – that God's power of *choice* is limited in a certain way. How can that be consistent with omnipotence?

To defeat this objection, Wielenberg would need to show, not merely that God's essential goodness does not entail a deficiency in his power to bring about (ef) or (ic), but that it entails no deficiency in his power to *choose*. In order to assess the prospects for pulling this off, we need to dig a bit deeper. Two questions merit further exploration. (1) What do we mean by "power" in the present context? (2) How, exactly, is God's essential goodness supposed to "explain" his inability to make evil choices?

Wielenberg doesn't offer a general analysis of power. He says merely that there are "many different kinds of power that a being might have."⁸ Wielenberg distinguishes three types of power: (i) physical power (the power to lift weights, for example); (ii) mental power or intelligence; and (iii) what Wielenberg (rather oddly) calls "willpower." By "willpower", Wielenberg does not mean the power to make hard choices and stick to

them, or anything of that sort. He defines it rather as “a capacity for making things happen simply by willing them to happen.” The willpower of humans is obviously quite limited. God’s willpower, by contrast, extends to the entire universe. “He can create and destroy through the sheer force of His will.”⁹

The power to make choices does not seem to fit neatly into any of these categories. Obviously it isn’t a matter of having a “physical power” like the power to lift weights. What about “mental power?” Well, certainly, making a choice is a mental act of a certain kind. But that tells us nothing about what it is to have the *power* to perform such acts. And in any case, the power to make choices isn’t what Wielenberg has in mind by “mental power,” since he equates the latter with intelligence.

That leaves us with “willpower.” But the power to make choices doesn’t fit neatly into this category either. We don’t have to make choices *by* making other choices – we just make them. We don’t have to make them *by* doing some further act of “willing them to happen.” Choosing *is* willing.¹⁰

The following pair of distinctions may help us sort things out. First, let us distinguish between those actions that we perform *by* doing other acts, and those that we just do. When I throw a rock into a lake, I do so *by* moving hand and arm. I move hand and arm *by* flexing my muscles, and so on ... It is plausible to suppose that this series of embedded acts must have a first member – something that I just do, a basic act that I do not do *by* doing something else.

Very often, at least, this first act consists in what might be called “the forming of an executive intention” or (less grandiosely) “undertaking to perform an action of a certain sort.” This basic act may, or may not be, the upshot of deliberation. The agent’s motives and reasons (if any) may, or may not, be causally sufficient for the agent’s intention. Either way, the forming of this intention is a basic act of the agent – one that she does not do *by* doing any other act.

With this familiar picture in mind, we can also distinguish between what I shall call “basic” and “conditional” power. Basic power is the not-further-analyzable power to perform basic acts. It includes the power to form intentions, to will that something (else) happen, to make choices “*by*” just making them.

Conditional power, on the other hand, has to do with the *efficacy* of one’s will. A person exercises his conditional power when he does one thing *by* doing another. At a department meeting, for example, I have the conditional power to signal my desire to speak. *If* I choose to do so by raising my hand, I will succeed in communicating this desire to others by raising my hand.

But what about the power to *choose* to raise my hand? This power can hardly be analyzed as “if I choose to choose to raise my hand, then I will choose to raise my hand.” My power to *choose* to raise my hand – to form the relevant intention – is not a *conditional*, but a *basic* power.

How are conditional power and basic power related? Does conditional power always presuppose basic power? Or is it possible for a person to have the conditional power to do something even though she does not have the power to *choose* to do it? I think this is possible. For example, a person with an irrational aversion to dogs may be unable to bring herself

to choose one as a pet. But, as I am using this expression, she still has the conditional power to go to the humane society and bring home a dog. If she *were* to choose to do so, she would succeed.

On standard theological assumptions, then, God's inability to bring about (ef) and (ic) is not due to a deficiency in *conditional* power. God, we may suppose, has the maximum possible amount of this kind of power. If, *per impossible*, he chose to bring on another flood or to torture an innocent child for a thousand years, he would succeed in doing so.¹¹ The fact that God cannot bring about (ef) or (ic) is due, not to a lack of conditional power, but to the fact that he is by nature so perfectly good that he cannot bring himself to *exercise* his conditional power in these ways. He simply cannot bring himself to perform the required basic actions. He cannot *choose* to break his promises or to bring about an "essentially immoral" states of affairs.

What kinds and amounts of power are required for omnipotence? I do not have a precise answer, but I think it is at least clear that no amount of merely conditional power can be sufficient. To see why, imagine a being – call her Jill – who has unlimited conditional power, but who cannot bring herself to exercise it in any significant way. She would succeed at anything she tried. But she suffers from a kind of mental paralysis. She simply cannot bring herself to make the necessary choices.

Do we need to know more in order to know that Jill is not omnipotent? There is a certain power *over herself* that she lacks. Since her basic power of choice is so terribly limited, we can easily conceive of a being having all of Jill's conditional power plus a wide-ranging basic power of choice. All things considered, such a being would be far more powerful than Jill. Since Jill does not have the maximum conceivable amount of power, it follows that she is not omnipotent.

I think Wielenberg would disagree with me about this. At one point, he considers an example in which a series of otherwise maximally powerful "deities" are by nature "color-impaired" in such a way that they cannot bring about the following state of affairs:

(ro) There exists a red object.¹²

According to Wielenberg, this is not sufficient to show that the deities are not omnipotent. We must first ask *why* they cannot bring about (ro). If their inability is due to a lack of "willpower" – if, no matter how hard they concentrate on (ro) and "will" that it obtain, "nothing happens" – then they are not omnipotent. But if their inability is due only to the fact that they are not "acquainted" with certain colors, then Wielenberg declares that they are omnipotent.

After all, if each deity in the series really is powerful enough to create any object, then each deity in the series really is omnipotent, despite his various limitations.¹³

To back up this judgment, Wielenberg appeals to another imaginary example. Consider a strongman named "Hercules" who is strong enough

to lift objects of any weight. No one, no matter how strong, could lift a heavier weight. Wielenberg asks us to imagine “a series of beings like Hercules – that is, beings such that necessarily, no being is stronger.” However, each member of this series suffers from “a strange psychological condition.” Each is “terrified of any object over a certain weight.” And in the case of each strongman, this psychological condition is so “severe” that he “is unable to be in the same room with, much less actually lift, an object over a certain weight.” Despite the fact that some of the beings can bring themselves to lift weights heavier than those that others can bring themselves to lift, Wielenberg thinks we should say that the beings are all “equally strong.” From this he draws the following lesson:

I think the case is much the same with the series of deities. Each is equally powerful, despite the extreme variance in the kinds of objects that each can in fact create. And each is omnipotent.¹⁴

Surely something has gone wrong here? If the imagined deities are genuinely omnipotent, then it seems to me that they ought to be able to exercise their power to create red objects. If their lack of acquaintance with the color red makes it impossible for them to do so, then their ignorance eliminates a certain power – not the conditional power to create a red object, perhaps, but the basic power to *choose* to do so.

In this regard, Wielenberg’s analogy with physical strength is quite misleading. There is, of course, an obvious sense in which the terrified weightlifters are all maximally “strong.” But they are not equally *powerful*, precisely because the basic power of choice is more limited in those with lower terror thresholds. And because of the way in which each of them is ruled by his terror, we don’t need to know anything else about them in order to know that none of them could be omnipotent.

So I think Wielenberg draws the wrong lesson from the example of the strongmen. What this example does help us to see is that maximal *conditional* power is not sufficient for maximal power overall. And since the latter is required for omnipotence, Wielenberg is also quite wrong about the series of color-impaired deities. Even if their inability to create red objects is due to their lack of acquaintance with the color red, and even if they have maximal *conditional* power, it does not follow that they have maximal power overall. Basic power matters too.

What, then, of God’s inability to *choose* to make an innocent child suffer for a thousand years? I would say that if God cannot choose bring about such things, then his *basic power* is limited in such a way that he does not have maximal power overall.

We cannot avoid this conclusion by appealing to God’s unlimited conditional power. To have the *basic* power to do something is to be able to exercise that power *directly*. It would be absurd to defend the claim that God has the basic power to choose to bring about (ic), by saying that *if* he chose to choose it, he would succeed in choosing it.

Even so, Wielenberg may want to argue that since God’s inability to choose “essentially evil” states of affairs is due to his essential goodness, it is not due to a lack of power. But this is much too quick. Wielenberg’s oppo-

ment claims that essential goodness limits God's power to choose. It is plainly not adequate to reply that essential goodness does not limit God's power because it (and not a lack of power) is what explains God's inability to bring about evil. Lack of power can always be explained in other terms. Why can't I fly like a bird? Because I have a certain kind of body, and because the laws of physics are as they are. These facts – which can be described without reference to any lack of power in me – fully explain the fact that I cannot fly. But they also show – don't they? – that I do not have the power to fly. So before concluding that essential goodness does not limit God's power, I think we need to consider the situation much more carefully.

This brings us to the second of the two questions I said we needed to address. How, exactly, is God's essential goodness supposed to "explain" his inability to make evil choices? Perhaps the answer goes like this. In every possible world, God's moral character – his commitment to the good and his aversion to evil – is so strong that it causes him, always and everywhere, to choose the good. He cannot choose evil because he has no desires that are in competition with his preference for the good. He cannot even be *tempted* to choose evil.

On this picture, God's choice of the good is wholly determined by his character – by his deepest desires and values. And since God's moral character is one aspect of his nature or essence, he cannot change it. That is why no choice incompatible with his perfect moral character is even *possible* for him.

Let's suppose that this is right. Suppose that God's perfectly good nature, and nothing else, is what prevents him from choosing to bring about (ef) or (ic). Why doesn't that simply show that God is by nature limited in basic power? To help us decide, I suggest that we consult our intuitions about the following simple thought experiment.

Imagine a being – call him Jack – who has just as much conditional power as God. But Jack, unlike God, is *essentially* evil. In every possible world, Jack's moral character – his commitment to evil and his aversion to the good – is so strong that it causes him, always and everywhere, to choose evil. He cannot choose the good because he has no desires that are in competition with his preference for evil. He cannot even be *tempted* to choose the good. Jack enjoys the suffering of innocent children, and cannot abide the happiness of the virtuous. So he has no trouble choosing to bring about the likes of (ic). What Jack has a problem with is states of affairs like:

(rp) A righteous person lives in great happiness for a thousand years.

It is true, of course, that if Jack chose to bring about (rp), he would succeed in doing so. But Jack is so evil that he cannot bring himself to make such choices.

As far as I can see, Jack is not *less* powerful than Wielenberg supposes God to be. He has as much *conditional* power as God has. He also seems to have just as much *basic* power. It is true that Jack lacks the power to alter his (bad) character. But God also lacks the power to alter his (good) character. It seems to me, therefore, that God is omnipotent only if Jack is.

Is Jack omnipotent? I wouldn't say so. It is true that his evil choices are

wholly determined by his character – by his deepest desires and values. That is why he cannot choose to bring about (rp). But this doesn't show that he is not lacking in power. On the contrary, it seems to me that Jack is a slave to his own evil character – that he is wholly subject to evil desires and inclinations he is powerless to control (though admittedly he does not want to control them).

A final thought experiment will serve to back up my judgment that Wielenberg's God has less than the maximum conceivable amount of power. Imagine another being – call her Joan – who has just as much conditional power as God or Jack. If Joan chooses to bring something about, she succeeds. The difference is that Joan's basic power is not limited by the requirements of either an essentially good or an essentially evil character. Unlike God, Joan has the power to choose to bring about (ic). And unlike Jack, she has the power to choose to bring about (rp).

Although I might prefer to have God (and not Joan) in charge of the universe, my intuition is that Joan has more basic power – and is therefore more powerful overall – than either God or Jack. If this is right, then the limitations imposed by essential goodness and essential evil are genuine limitations on basic power. God might be better or greater because he cannot make evil choices – but the fact remains that he is less powerful than he would be if he were able to do so.¹⁵

Thus far, I have been assuming that basic power is something that one can have more, or less, of. If I can choose to do A and can also choose *not* to do A, then I have (in that respect) more basic power than I do if I can choose to do A but cannot choose not to do A. By this I do not mean that there is a separate "power" of choice for each thing one might choose. There may, for all I know, be just one basic power of choice – I claim only that this power may be more or less limited.

But even this claim may be challenged in the following way. Someone might agree with Descartes' claim that the power of will is indivisible – the same in God and in creaturely persons. On this view, one's "will" is the all-or-nothing power to affirm or deny a proposition, and to say yes or no to a proposed course of action. You either have this power or you don't. If Descartes were right about this, then it might seem that there is only one possible degree of basic power, in which case it would follow that God does not have less basic power than Joan.

I think it would be a mistake to draw any such conclusion. How much basic power you have is not only determined by how much of the faculty of "will" you have or even by how "strong" your will is. It is also determined by what you can apply it to. If, for example, you are completely ignorant of predicate logic, you cannot "choose" to prove (or not to prove) Completeness Theorem. And even if you are not ignorant of predicate logic, you will still be unable to make this choice if (like some undergraduate students) you have an irrational aversion to this type of reasoning. In either case, I would say, your basic power is limited in scope. Your will may be as complete or as "strong" as you please, but your basic power is no greater (in scope) than your ability to apply it to different possibilities.

So I remain convinced that Jack would be just as powerful overall as an essentially good being could be, and that Joan would be more powerful

overall than such a being could be. If this is right, then essential goodness is not compatible with omnipotence.

Some philosophers may not accept an argument based on imaginary examples like the ones I have been working with. They may insist that, since God exists and is omnipotent and perfectly good in every possible world, no such beings as Joan or Jack are "metaphysically possible."¹⁶ My own take on this is that, for purposes of analyzing the *concept* of omnipotence, the bare *conceptual* possibility of these examples is quite sufficient. If we can conceive of these "possibilities" without inconsistency or other obvious absurdity, then our intuitions about them should be taken seriously.¹⁷ (In any case, I do not think that Wielenberg could consistently disagree with me about this. For as we have seen, his arguments rely heavily on imaginary examples that are every bit as likely to be "metaphysically impossible" as any that I have floated.)

Even if the relevance of my thought experiments is conceded, I do not expect everyone to share my intuitions about them. The history of Christian philosophy is chock full of thinkers who link the concepts of power and goodness in a way that would (if correct) suggest a view of these imaginary cases that is very different from mine. Since these philosophers think that the ability to choose evil is a sign of impotence, and not of power, they would rank God ahead of Jack and Joan in the power scale.

This sort of view is well expressed by Anselm in the following passage, taken from his *Proslogium*:

...[W]hen someone is said to have the 'power' of doing or suffering something which is not to his advantage or which he ought not to do, then by 'power' here we mean 'impotence', for the more he has this 'power', the more adversity and perversity have power over him and the more is he powerless against them. Therefore, Lord God, You are the more truly omnipotent since You can do nothing through impotence and nothing can have power against You.¹⁸

On this view, the "ability" to change God's moral nature, or to make choices that are incompatible with his perfect goodness would not be a genuine power. More generally, to be "able" to do something that one knows one ought not to do is not any sort of power, but only "perversity" and "impotence." It is to have a weak character, one that cannot stand up to rogue desires and inclinations that run contrary to what one knows one ought to do.

The underlying assumption here seems to be that there is only one way in which God could choose to bring about a state of affairs that he knows he ought not to bring about. If he were subject to irrational or immoral inclinations, these might outweigh his deep will and cause him to choose evil.

On this view of the relation between goodness and power, the "ability" to make evil choices is not a power, but a *liability*. One's basic power cannot therefore include the "ability" to make choices that are irrational or immoral, because there is no such power. So far from being required for maximal power, such liability is utterly incompatible with omnipotence.

The implications for our “power ranking” of Jack, Joan, and God are as follows. Jack (the essentially evil being) would still be a relatively weak person because he cannot bring himself to what he ought. But Joan (whose basic power supposedly included the ability to choose either good or evil) would have impaired basic power because of her ability to make evil choices. To the degree that she is able to choose evil, she is subject to irrational influences that are incompatible with maximal power. Both Jack and Joan would have a significantly lower degree of basic power than God has (assuming that God is essentially good).

At this juncture, our discussion of omnipotence intersects with traditional controversies about weakness of will, and about free will and determinism. The resolution of those issues is beyond the scope of this short paper. For present purposes it will be sufficient to point out that this way of viewing the connection between goodness and power is utterly incompatible with the view of *moral freedom* that Wielenberg seems to hold, since he explicitly tries to show that his analysis of omnipotence makes room for the sort of incompatibilist libertarian freedom presupposed by the free will defense.¹⁹ Let me explain.

Free will defenders generally hold that God has endowed some of his creatures with moral freedom, where this is understood as the two-way power to choose between good and evil. These creatures have the power, not only to choose what they know to be good, but also to choose what they know to be evil. If the latter is not a genuine power, but a mere liability, then it is hard to see why anyone would think that moral freedom is good gift, and not a curse.

So I think that those who believe in moral freedom in the strong libertarian sense required by the free will defense will probably have to concede that a person who can choose both good and evil has greater basic power of choice than one who can choose only what he knows to be good. But in that case, a *maximally* powerful being, such as God is usually supposed to be, cannot be *essentially* good.

I have argued that maximal conditional power is not sufficient for maximal power overall, and that maximal power overall presupposes a much more wide-ranging basic power of choice than is allowed for by the doctrine of essential goodness. If this is right, then Wielenberg’s definition of omnipotence does not have one of the virtues that he claims for it – it does not give us an easy way of reconciling omnipotence with essential goodness. This may not be fatal to Wielenberg’s definition, since it would obviously be open to him to jettison the doctrine that God is both omnipotent and essentially good. But one way or the other, something has to go.

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NOTES

1. Erik J. Wielenberg “Omnipotence Again”, *Faith and Philosophy* vol. 7 no. 1 (January 2000), 26-57.
2. Wielenberg, 42.
3. Wielenberg, 40

4. Wielenberg, 40
5. Wielenberg, 40
6. Wielenberg, 40. Apparently, Wielenberg thinks that the highest possible degree of moral goodness must be an essential property of the person who possesses it.
7. I will not be discussing many other aspects of Wielenberg's fine paper. In particular, I will not consider his penetrating critique of alternative definitions of omnipotence, which seems to me to be largely correct.
8. Wielenberg, 39.
9. Wielenberg, 39.
10. Perhaps Wielenberg would say that choosing is the limiting case of "making things happen simply by willing them to happen." The idea would then be that whenever I choose to act, I make my choosing happen "by" doing that very act of choosing. But I cannot cite any textual support for this interpretation of Wielenberg's brief description of "willpower."
11. I assume, contrary to the standard semantics for counterfactuals, that subjunctive conditionals with an impossible antecedent are sometimes non-trivially true. For an excellent discussion of this issue, see Linda Zagzebski's "What If the Impossible Had Been Actual?" in Michael Beatty (ed.) *Christian Theism and the Problems of Philosophy* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 165-183.
12. Wielenberg, 43.
13. Wielenberg, 44.
14. Wielenberg, 44.
15. For a fuller development of this line of argument, see my paper, "Omnipotence and Necessary Moral Perfection: Are they Compatible?", *Religious Studies*, vol. 37 (June 2001), 143-160.
16. See Thomas Flint and Alfred J. Freddoso 'Maximal Power' in Alfred J. Freddoso (ed.) *The Existence and Nature of God* (Notre Dame IN and London: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 81- 113, and Thomas Morris *Anselmian Explorations* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1987), chapter three.
17. I develop this point much more fully in "Omnipotence and the Anselmian God," *Philo*, vol. 4, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 2001), 7-20.
18. Anselm *Proslogium* (chapter 7) in Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (ed.) *Anselm of Canterbury The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 90.
19. Wielenberg, 42-3.