

## **Anything You Can Do God Can Do Better**

### Abstract

The Paradox of the Stone is a familiar argument that purports to show the incoherence of the notion of an omnipotent God. This paper argues that the paradox loses all force once one accepts two plausible principles regarding the nature of divine omnipotence. The solution to the paradox proposed here is importantly different from the traditional one proposed by such philosophers as Mavrodes, Mayo and Plantinga. The paper also considers, and rejects, a common strategy for bolstering the paradox, one that appeals to an apparent ability that is lacked by God yet possessed by ordinary folk. It is argued that the strategy rests on an equivocation.

# Anything You Can Do God Can Do Better

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## I. The Paradox of the Stone

Atheists have long been fond of tormenting theists with the following dilemma, commonly known as the ‘Paradox of the Stone.’

### Argument 1 (Paradox of the Stone)

(1a) Either God can create a stone that he cannot lift, or God cannot create a stone that he cannot lift;

(1b) if God can create a stone that he cannot lift, then God is not omnipotent;

(1c) if God cannot create a stone that he cannot lift, then God is not omnipotent;

therefore,

(1d) God is not omnipotent.

However, if the theist adopts two perfectly plausible and innocuous principles regarding the nature of omnipotence, she may quite rationally reject the Paradox of the Stone, thus escaping the atheist’s challenge with her belief in God’s omnipotence quite unshaken.

The first of these principles derives from familiar theistic doctrine. At least since Aquinas, most philosophers have held that omnipotence is consistent with the inability to perform a certain class of tasks: namely, *impossible tasks*. To illustrate the point, consider the following (bad) paradox, the ‘Paradox of the Square Circle,’ against omnipotence.

### Argument 2 (Paradox of the Square Circle)

(2a) God cannot draw a square circle;

(2b) if God cannot draw a square circle, then God is not omnipotent;

therefore,

(2c) God is not omnipotent.

This paradox does not undermine God's omnipotence because drawing a square circle is an impossible task. Our being unable to draw a circle or a square on a mathematics examination may indicate a lack of skill in constructing geometric shapes, but God's being unable to draw a square circle does not indicate any such lack.<sup>1</sup> Hence, theists reject Argument 2, on the grounds that premiss (2b) is false.

Applying this point to the Paradox of the Stone, we have the following principle.

Principle 1 *God's inability to create a stone that he cannot lift may undermine his omnipotence only if creating such a stone is a possible task.*

The second principle builds on the idea that, simply by definition, an omnipotent being is, *inter alia*, a being that can lift anything that it is possible to lift; possessing the ability to lift anything that it is possible to lift, so the idea goes, is just part of what it is to be an omnipotent being. Given that this is so, such a description as 'a stone that cannot be lifted by an omnipotent being' seems no more coherent than 'a square circle,' and the task of creating the former seems no more possible than that of creating the latter. Hence, we have the following principle.

Principle 2 *If the task of creating a stone that God cannot lift is a possible task, then God is not omnipotent.*<sup>2 3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This example is provided by Mavrodes (1963, p. 221).

<sup>2</sup> There is a controversy regarding exactly what is the relevant sense of possibility with respect to Principles 1 and 2. As the second referee for *American Philosophical Quarterly* pointed out, Principle 2 seems least plausible with logical possibility, more plausible with metaphysical possibility, and extremely plausible

Anderson (1984) calls the most common theistic response to the paradox, which is often attributed to Mavrodes (1963), Mayo (1960), and Plantinga (1967), the ‘standard solution’. According to the standard solution, since God is omnipotent such a description as a ‘stone that cannot be lifted by God’ is no less incoherent than a ‘square circle’ and hence, given the above principles premiss (1c), turns out to be false.<sup>4</sup> However, the standard solution is untenable because it presupposes that God is omnipotent. Since the

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with nomological possibility. Since this paper argues against the atheist, it is assumed throughout, in the interests of charity, that the atheist can make enough sense of the relevant notion of possibility to motivate Principles 1 and 2. For discussion of this issue see: Anderson (1984), Trakakis (1997), Wielenberg (2000), Wierenga (1983).

<sup>3</sup> Principle 2 is not entirely uncontroversial. Richard Swinburne (1973), for example, denies it. According to Swinburne, if it is possible to create a stone that God cannot lift, then God could be omnipotent and yet have that ability. If he exercised that ability, Swinburne says, God would cease to be omnipotent. However, according to Swinburne, God could remain omnipotent as long as he does not exercise it. Swinburne writes, ‘The solution which I have given to the paradox [of the stone] means that a truly omnipotent being ... is able to make a stone too heavy for him to cause subsequently to rise, that is to lift. So he will be able to abandon his omnipotence’ (p. 235). Swinburne’s position is set aside in the main text for the following two reasons. First, his claim entails that God is not necessarily omnipotent, a thesis that is inconsistent with the standard Judaeo-Christian doctrine of omnipotence. There is not sufficient space to discuss the cogency of Swinburne’s non-standard doctrine here. Second, it seems that in order to defend his position, Swinburne needs to answer the following crucial question: How can God be rightly regarded as being omnipotent when there is a possible being that can create a stone, the existence of which immediately undermines God’s omnipotence? Again, there is no space to discuss this issue here. The authors wish to thank an anonymous referee for this journal for bringing their attention to Swinburne’s argument.

<sup>4</sup> Strictly speaking, Plantinga’s objection is not simply that (1c) is false. It is, rather, a disjunctive whose first horn is that (1c) is false. See Plantinga (1967).

aim of the paradox is to show that God is *not* omnipotent, theists cannot legitimately make such a presupposition. In the following is outlined a new solution to the paradox, one which also appeals to the two principles but does not presuppose that God is omnipotent.

In order to explain the new solution, it will help to introduce a little formalisation.

Let us adopt the following dictionary.

- $xAy =$  “ $x$  is able to create a stone that  $y$  cannot lift”
- $Ox =$  “ $x$  is omnipotent”
- $g =$  God

Then the Paradox of the Stone may be stated as follows.

Argument 1\*

$$(1^*a) \ gAg \vee \neg gAg$$

$$(1^*b) \ gAg \rightarrow \neg Og$$

$$(1^*c) \ \neg gAg \rightarrow \neg Og$$

therefore,

$$(1^*d) \ \neg Og$$

Interestingly enough, the above symbolisation reveals that the first premiss (1\*a) is superfluous in the paradox, as (1\*b) and (1\*c) are intuitionistically sufficient for deriving (1\*d)<sup>5</sup>:

Argument 1'

$$(1'a) \ gAg \rightarrow \neg Og \tag{1*b}$$

$$(1'b) \ \neg gAg \rightarrow \neg Og \tag{1*c}$$

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<sup>5</sup> The authors thank an anonymous referee for this point.

(1'c)   $Og$	Assumption
(1'd)     $gAg$	Assumption
(1'e)     $\neg Og$	(1'a), (1'd)
(1'f)   $\neg gAg$	(1'c), (1'e), (1'd)-(1'e)
(1'g)   $\neg Og$	(1'b), (1'f)
therefore,	
(1'h) $\neg Og$	(1'c), (1'g), (1'c)-(1'g)

It is always taken for granted that Argument 1\* is an accurate formulation. However, as Argument 1' clearly shows, Argument 1\* is misleading because premiss (1\*a) is unnecessary.

In order to formalize the two principles, we need some way in which to represent a task's being impossible. It shall be assumed that a task  $k$  is impossible just in case it is impossible that anyone could have the ability to perform  $k$ . Thus, the two principles may be stated as follows.

Principle 1\*  $(\neg gAg \rightarrow \neg Og) \rightarrow \diamond \exists x(xAg)$

Principle 2\*  $\diamond \exists x(xAg) \rightarrow \neg Og$

Now it can be shown that the Paradox of the Stone contains yet a further superfluous premiss. That is, given Principles 1\* and 2\*, we can eliminate not only premiss (1\*a) but also premiss (1\*b). As the following argument shows, using Principles 1\* and 2\*, it is possible to derive conclusion (1\*d) from premiss (1\*c) *alone*.

### Argument 3

(3a)  $\neg gAg \rightarrow \neg Og$  (1\*c)

(3b)  $(\neg gAg \rightarrow \neg Og) \rightarrow \diamond \exists x(xAg)$  Principle 1\*

(3c)  $\diamond \exists x(xAg)$  (3a), (3b)

(3d)  $\diamond \exists x(xAg) \rightarrow \neg Og$  Principle 2\*

therefore,

(3e)  $\neg Og$  (3c), (3d)<sup>6</sup>

In less formal terms, Argument 3 may be put as follows. Premiss (1c) says that God's inability to perform a certain task, namely, the task of creating a stone that he cannot lift, undermines his omnipotence. However, Principle 1 says that God's omnipotence cannot be undermined by his inability to perform that task unless it is a possible task. Hence, given this principle, (1c) implies that the task of creating a stone that God cannot lift is a possible task. Yet Principle 2 says that, if it is possible to create a stone that God cannot

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<sup>6</sup> An anonymous referee correctly points out that there is another proof of  $\neg Og$ , one which relies on (1\*a) instead of Principle 1\*:

(1)  $gAg \vee \neg gAg$  (1\*a)

(2)  $\neg gAg \rightarrow \neg Og$  (1\*c)

(3)  $\diamond \exists x(xAg) \rightarrow \neg Og$  Principle 2\*

(4)  $| gAg$  Assumption

(5)  $| \exists x(xAg)$  (4)

(6)  $| \diamond \exists x(xAg)$  (5)

(7)  $| \neg Og$  (3), (6)

(8)  $| \neg gAg$  Assumption

(9)  $| \neg Og$  (2), (8)

therefore,

(10)  $\neg Og$  (1), (4)-(7), (8)-(9)

lift, then God is not omnipotent. Hence, given Principles 1 and 2, it follows from (1c) that God is not omnipotent.

Argument 3 clearly shows that it is not the case that the theist *might* opt to challenge (1c) of the Paradox of the Stone, as the standard solution does, but that the theist is *obliged* to challenge (1c). This is because of the embellishment just given of Argument 3, and the acceptability of the two principles to both sides of the debate. (1c), as it were, is isolated as the *only* possible culprit from the theist's point of view. Indeed, the theist can reject (1c) by saying: "Argument 3 shows that, if premiss (1c) is true, then God is not omnipotent. However, as a theist, I believe that God is omnipotent. Therefore, I reject premiss (1c)." And now, of course, the atheist is in quite a bind. What might she say to persuade the theist to accept (1c)? It seems that, in order to convince the theist that (1c) is true she must first convince her that God is not omnipotent; but that is precisely the conclusion of the paradox! In order for the theist to be convinced via the Paradox of the Stone that God is not omnipotent, she must first be convinced that God is not omnipotent.

In sum: Once Principles 1\* and 2\* have been accepted, premisses (1\*a) and (1\*b) are unnecessary and the atheist can derive the conclusion that God is not omnipotent with premiss (1\*c) *alone*. However, it is possible for the atheist to derive that conclusion only if she presupposes it to begin with. That is, in order to for the atheist to persuade the theist to accept the presupposition of the paradox, she has to persuade the theist to accept the conclusion of the paradox in the first place.

It is important to emphasise again that the solution just proposed is importantly different from the standard solution, which has been widely accepted by theists over four decades. The standard solution says that the paradox is fallacious because it contains a



false premiss, (1\*c). However, it has been shown that the paradox is (informally) fallacious, not because it has a false premiss, but because it is question-begging. An argument is question-begging if a premiss of the argument (implicitly or explicitly) assumes that the conclusion is true.<sup>7</sup> The Paradox of the Stone is question-begging because, as has been seen, given Principles 1\* and 2\*, premiss (1\*c) of the Paradox of the Stone does implicitly assume the conclusion that God is not omnipotent. Contrary to the standard solution, the proposed solution does not erroneously presuppose that God is omnipotent.

It has been contended that the atheist can derive (1\*c), viz.,  $\neg gAg \rightarrow \neg Og$ , only by presupposing its conclusion,  $\neg Og$ . That is, the atheist can argue for (1\*c) only by presupposing  $\neg Og$  and then introducing  $\neg gAg$ , to form the vacuously true conditional,  $\neg gAg \rightarrow \neg Og$ . As it has been claimed, this way of arguing for (1\*c) begs the question against theism. At this point, however, the atheist might reject the argument by claiming that there is another, independent, derivation of (1\*c) that does not beg the question. If there is an independent, non-question-begging proof of (1\*c), then the theist, who holds Principles 1\* and 2\*, has to accept Argument 3 and give up her belief that God is omnipotent.

The atheist might try to derive (1\*c) by arguing as follows: “It is conceptually true that omnipotent beings can do anything, so, where  $Y$  ranges over tasks, we have  $\forall Y \forall x (Ox \rightarrow Yx)$ . But then, since  $xAg$  is a task, we have  $\forall x (Ox \rightarrow xAg)$ . By another universal elimination, we have  $Og \rightarrow gAg$ . From this, by contrapositive, we get  $\neg gAg \rightarrow$

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<sup>7</sup> See Macintosh (1991) for the issue of traditional arguments about the existence of God and question-begging.

–*Og*, which is (1\*c). Therefore, (1\*c) is true.”<sup>8</sup> This argument is unsuccessful because it is *not* conceptually true that omnipotent beings can do anything. As it was stated in the beginning of this paper, at least since Aquinas, most philosophers have held that omnipotence is consistent with the inability to perform impossible tasks. For, as the failure of the Paradox of Square Circle teaches, being unable to perform an impossible task does not indicate a lack of skill.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, one should not exclude too quickly the possibility that there is some other way to derive (1\*c) independently, but at present the authors cannot think of one.

## II. Omnipotence and Abilities

However, the above rejection of the Paradox of the Stone might strike some as too rapid, especially in light of the oft-cited fact that ordinary folk, such as you and I, are perfectly capable of creating stones that we cannot lift. If we have such an ability, one may ask, how can it be that an omnipotent being lacks it? The proponent of the Paradox of the Stone may attempt to build on this kind of intuition in order to provide independent grounds for premiss (1c). Perhaps the following argument might suffice.

### Argument 4 (Revised Paradox of the Stone)

(4a) If God is omnipotent, he can do anything that Hulk Hogan can do;

(4b) Hulk Hogan can create a stone that he cannot lift;

therefore,

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<sup>8</sup> Thanks to the second referee for this point.

<sup>9</sup> Again, there is a controversy regarding exactly what is the relevant sense of possibility here. See Footnote 2.

(4c) if God is omnipotent, he can create a stone that he cannot lift.

Conclusion (4c) is equivalent to (1c), by contraposition.<sup>10</sup> And, as we have seen, (1c) implies that God is not omnipotent, given the two premisses. Hence, if Argument 4 is sound, the atheist will have succeeded in disproving God's omnipotence.

The rationale for (4a) is simple: if Hulk Hogan can do some action  $\phi$ , then doing  $\phi$  must be possible; and if God is omnipotent, he can do anything that it is possible to do; therefore, if God is omnipotent and Hulk Hogan can do  $\phi$ , then God can do  $\phi$  also. Premiss (4b) also looks quite uncontroversial. We may suppose that, although Hulk Hogan is stronger than most men, he is, nonetheless, perfectly capable of making say, a

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<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting that there is now a master argument against God's omnipotence that uses as premisses only (4a), (4b) and (1b), and does not need the instance (1a) of excluded middle. Let ' $xCy$ ' be " $x$  is able to do  $y$ " and ' $s$ ' be 'creating a stone that its creator cannot lift.' Using also the formalisation that we adopt in the main text, this can be shown as follows:

(1)   $Og$	Assumption
(2)   $Og \rightarrow \forall p(hCp \rightarrow gCp)$	(4*a)
(3)   $hCs$	(4*b)
(4)   $gAg \rightarrow \neg Og$	(1*b)
(5)   $\forall p(hCp \rightarrow gCp)$	(1), (2)
(6)   $gCs$	(3), (5)
(7)   $gAg$	(6) is equivalent to (7)
(8)   $\neg Og$	(4), (7)
therefore,	
(9) $\neg Og$	(1), (8), (2)-(8)

Thanks to Neil Tennant for this point. Notice that this argument fails for the same reason that Argument 4 fails.

500kg stone that its creator—viz., Hulk Hogan himself—cannot lift; there is nothing self-contradictory in this.<sup>11</sup> Notice that neither (4a) nor (4b) presupposes that God is not omnipotent. Hence, Argument 4 avoids being question-begging in the way that the Paradox of the Stone has just been shown to be.

Let ‘ $xCy$ ’ be “ $x$  is able to do  $y$ ”, where  $y$  ranges over tasks, and ‘ $s$ ’ be ‘creating a stone that its creator cannot lift.’ The apparent validity of Argument 4 may be shown as follows.

Argument 4\*

(4\*a)  $Og \rightarrow \forall p(hCp \rightarrow gCp)$

(4\*b)  $hCs$

therefore,

(4\*c)  $Og \rightarrow gCs$

However, this new argument is invalid, because it equivocates on the word ‘its creator’: in (4\*b) ‘its creator’ refers to Hulk Hogan; but in (4\*c) ‘its creator’ refers to God. In effect, whereas (4\*b) states that Hulk Hogan has an ability to create one kind of stone—i.e., the kind that *Hulk Hogan* cannot lift—(4\*c) states that an omnipotent God has an ability to create an entirely different kind of stone—i.e., the kind that *God* cannot lift. While both of them can be described as an ‘ability to create a stone that its creator cannot lift,’ in fact each of them represents a quite distinct ability. The fact that two abilities fall under the same description does not entail that they are one and the same.

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<sup>11</sup> For example, Mavrodes (1963) writes, “The form “ $x$  is able to draw a square circle” seems plainly to involve a contradiction, while “ $x$  is able to make a thing too heavy for  $x$  to lift” does not. For it may easily be true that I am able to make a boat too heavy for me to lift. So why should it not be possible for God to make a stone too heavy for Him to lift?” (1963, p. 221).

Using the formalisation in the previous section again, it follows, by definition, that  $hCs$  is equivalent to  $hAh$ , and  $gCs$  is equivalent to  $gAg$ . The comparisons between  $hAh$  and  $gAh$  and between  $hAg$  and  $gAg$  are fair because they involve abilities to perform the same tasks. However, the comparison between  $hAh$  and  $gAg$ , upon which Argument 4 relies, is not fair, because  $xAh$  and  $xAg$  involve abilities to perform two different tasks.

In order to illustrate this point consider the following example. Suppose that Lisa can hold her child in her arms but that Nick cannot hold his child in his arms. In such circumstance, Lisa might claim, “Nick, I have an ability that you lack—that is, the ability to hold one’s own child.” On the face of it her claim is correct. However, if one examines it carefully by focusing on the word ‘one,’ then one finds that Lisa is misleadingly comparing two different abilities. The one is Lisa’s ability to hold, say, her one year old baby, and the other is Nick’s ability to hold, say, his forty-seven year old son. It is misleading to compare those two different abilities as if they are the same.

Returning to the Revised Paradox of the Stone, in order to remove the equivocation, and make the argument valid, it must be reformulated as follows:

Argument 5

(5a) If God is omnipotent, he can do anything that Hulk Hogan can do;

(5b) Hulk Hogan can create a stone that God cannot lift;

therefore,

(5c) if God is omnipotent, God can create a stone that God cannot lift.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> One might think that this argument fails immediately because (5a) is subject to counterexamples. For instance, even if God is omnipotent, God cannot write an autobiography of Hulk Hogan, which Hulk Hogan can do. We set aside this objection to (5a) for the following two reasons. First, it is controversial whether or not God should still be regarded as being omnipotent if he cannot write an autobiography of

Clearly, however, premise (5b) implies that God is not omnipotent. The atheist could affirm the truth of (5b), then, only by assuming that God is not omnipotent. But this would be to beg the question against theism once again.

It is concluded, therefore, that either the Revised Paradox is plainly invalid, on account of an equivocation, or it is every bit as question-begging as the original.<sup>13</sup>

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Hulk Hogan. One might think that the alleged fact that God cannot undermines his omnipotence. Second, it is not entirely clear that God really cannot write an autobiography of Hulk Hogan. One might think that once a relevant task involved in writing the autobiography is spelled out properly it is mistaken to think that God cannot write it.

<sup>13</sup> We would like to thank Neil Tennant and two anonymous referees for *American Philosophical Quarterly* for their helpful comments and constructive suggestions.

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