


Key words:


Omnipotent – All powerful

Omniscient – All knowing

Omnibenevolent- All loving

Eternal- Timeless, atemporal outside the constraints of time

Everlasting- Lasting forever on the same time line as humanity. Sempiternal.

Is it possible to be omnipotent?

The Omnipotence Paradox

Being omnipotent involves being able to do anything, but there seem to be some impossibilities eg. “failing a test”.



Perhaps being omnipotent itself is impossible and the whole notion could be self contradictory.



Biblical evidence for God’s omnipotence.

“And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.” Genesis 1:3



The creation story shows God’s power over the entire universe.

“Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son.” Genesis 8:14



Sarah was well past childbearing age when God blessed her with a child.

“...with God all things are possible.” Matthew 19:26



Jesus declares God is omnipotent.



Descartes’s view of God’s omnipotence



To say God is omnipotent means God can do **absolutely anything**, even if it is a logical contradiction.

Eg. Draw a square circle

Descartes believed God has NO limitations. As God is the source of logic God can suspend the laws of logic and do what he wants. For example, God made the laws of maths, so he can change them.

What about evil?



Evil exists and there is too much empirical to deny this.

This creates a philosophical argument against the existence of an omnipotent, omnibenevolent and omniscient God called the

**Problem of Evil.** Eg. If God really is all powerful why can’t he stop evil?

**For Descartes the Problem of Evil isn’t a problem. God can be capable of evil (as he is all powerful) and capable of love (as he is all loving) at the same time, as he is able to defy the laws of logic.**

This is not a widely accepted view!

Many theodicies (arguments which aim to justify the existence of God and evil in the world) state moral evil exists as a result of free will. We have to have free will in order to be autonomous beings who can freely chose to love God. Without free will our actions would be robotic and be meaningless.

Therefore, we have to accept that evil and suffering might occur as people can use free will to make poor decisions. If God is not bound by logic (as Descartes claims!) then surely it should have been possible to create humans with free will, without the consequence of evil. Evil and suffering DO exist so it would seem that that God is choosing not to prevent suffering, and this makes it hard to reconcile with the claim God is all loving.



Other criticisms of Descartes

- Descartes’ view is just nonsensical. The logical contradictions Descartes claims God can do are simply NOT THINGS. To say God can’t get more than 100% on a test does not diminish God’s power.
- If God can do ANYTHING he becomes an arbitrary tyrant who cannot be relied upon. God’s rules can change at any point and this would make it impossible for humans to have relationship with him.
- The Bible does not support Descartes either. It clearly states some things are impossible for God.

“it is impossible for God to lie” Hebrews 6:18

How else can omnipotence be understood?

**Aquinas & Swinburne: God can do everything that is within his own nature and which is logically possible.**

*(This view spans 1000s of years- this gives the argument longevity/ it has stood the test of time ☺)*

**“Everything that does not imply a contradiction is among those possibilities in respect of which God is called omnipotence.” Aquinas**

Aquinas:

- God is completely omnipotent meaning he is charge of the whole world- creating and sustaining.
- Logical contradictions are not “things”.
- So God can do anything logically possible, but it does not limit God’s power to say he “can’t” do something which is logically impossible.
- Therefore, God cannot do anything which is inconsistent with his nature. For example, God is incorporeal (has no body) so cannot get tired, go swimming etc.

Swinburne:

- God can do everything, but “everything” needs to be understood properly.
- Self contradictory definitions do NOT refer to “things”. Eg. A stone too heavy for God to lift is not a thing.
- But this is not a challenge to God’s power as God is capable of doing all real things.
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**Peter Vardy & John Macquarrie: God limits his own power for the benefit of humanity.**

*Why would a view of God’s power being limited gain popularity in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century?*

- ✓ After the horrors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (eg. The Holocaust) some Christians needed to re evaluate the idea of God’s omnipotence.
- ✓ Existentialist ways of thinking (putting focus on free will and finding our own meaning) have become more popular and these views often emphasise the freedom humans have of their own path, things don’t just happen because God wills them to.



**Vardy:**

- God is not in control of the world and the whole of history, like a chess player moving around pieces. Not everything in the universe happens because of the will of God.
- The universe is perfectly suited the existence of free and rational beings and for it to stay that way God's power must be limited.
- God created the universe in this way and limitations to his power are self imposed. We can still call God omnipotent as only he can limit his own power.

“God is limited by the universe he has chosen to create...his limitation does not however, lessen God in any significant way”

**Macquarrie:**

- God is not constrained by logic, the physical world or the actions of humans, but has self imposed limitations due to his love for humanity.
- This idea of God having self imposed limitations is useful when explaining how Jesus was the Son of God, as Jesus did not display all of God's power. Eg Jesus wasn't timeless or incorporeal.
- Theologians have developed a doctrine known as kenosis. This means “self emptying”. God deliberately emptied himself of some divine attributes in order to make the incarnation (Jesus coming to earth in human form) possible.

“And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death”

**John Macquarrie: Is the debate of God's omnipotence an issue of religious language?**

- When we apply the word “power” to God it cannot be applied literally with a human understanding of power in this world.
- To speak of the power of God is to use an analogy. In agreement with Aquinas, Macquarrie stated there will always be elements of God which are unknowable to use, but through analogy we can **partially** understand and express some key ideas.

**Charles Hartshorne: God should be understood as unsurpassably great rather totally powerful.**

- God should be thought of as a being whose power cannot be surpassed, rather than as a being with total power.
- Total power is not impressive. To have total power means nothing can put up any resistance to God. So, total power is as impressive as someone winning a race against no competitors. It would be far more impressive if you win the race whilst facing a challenge from other competitors.



**What do we mean when we say God is omniscient and is it problematic?**



- If God knows the future He will know all the decisions we will make through our lives. So, do we really have free will? God's knowledge is infallible- it cannot be mistaken. If God knows something will happen this Friday IT WILL HAPPEN. The event is fixed and is unchangeable. Chocolate cake example.
- But.. Freedom of choice is an essential part of the three Abrahamic faiths. With freedom of choice comes moral responsibility and the appropriate judgement from God.

**Friedrich Schleiermacher**

- Schleiermacher compared the knowledge God has of us to the knowledge of a good friend. If am going to lunch with Mr Cooper I can be fairly certain he will take me to a burger restaurant. Does my knowledge of this future choice restrict his actions?
- NO
- Schleiermacher claims it is the same for God. Just because He knows what we will do, our choices remain unforced and we are therefore still morally responsible for our actions.
- However, when I say Mr Cooper will take me to a burger restaurant I am making a reliable guess. I could be mistaken. God's knowledge is different- it is infallible- cannot be mistaken.
- It is the certainty of God's omniscient knowledge that makes it harder to reconcile with genuine human choice.

**What does the Bible say?**

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart;”  
Jeremiah 1:5

- God made us all individually and uniquely.
- God chose to make us a specific way and what we would chose to do at every specific point of our lived.
- So perhaps God can be held responsible for our actions, including moral evil?




What is God's relationship with time?


When it comes to God's relationship with time there are two main schools of thought. God is eternal OR God is everlasting.

**God is eternal and a temporal:**

- God exists in every part of history: every part of the past, every part of the present and every part of the future.
- “Time” is a created element of the world – God is not bound/ limited by it.
  - ☺ This view is appealing because it allows God to be limitless.
  - ☺ If God is not bound by time his omnipotence is not “threatened”- would God be less powerful if he didn't know the future.
  - ☺ It also allows God to be immutable (unchangeable) and this is important if God is perfect.

**Augustine:** if God was everlasting and existed on the same timeline as humans, then what was God doing in all that spare time before creation? Augustine states that the biblical account of creation points to a timeless God who chose to create but also transcends notions of “before” and “after”. God is always.

**Aquinas:** we need to remember when we talk of God we are using limited human language. We have to use human language- it is all we have, but it will never allow us to fully know or understand God. Part of God will always be unknowable. When we talk of God's attributes we need to avoid talking things literally and take into account the unknowability of God.

**Can an unchanging God be capable of love?**



It would seem the answer is no, as love requires a changing emotional response. But surely an unchanging God would always feel the same, regardless of whether his creation is happy or suffering.



According to Aquinas God can be loving. Yes, God's nature and will cannot change- they are immutable. However, Aquinas states God is still capable of relationships and therefore love, because his creation changes and this relationship is dynamic.

Is the view that God is everlasting/ sempiternal more or less appealing?

<u>More appealing</u>	<u>Less appealing</u>
Seems to solve the issue of humans having genuine free will.	Certainly would not meet Anselm's definition God "that than which nothing greater can be conceived".
Makes it easier to reconcile the existence of evil alongside an all loving God, as God is responding to these events.	Would God really be worthy of the titles "all" powerful, knowing etc.
Supported by Charles Hartshorne and Richard Swinburne.	Would God really be worthy of the titles "all" powerful, knowing etc.
	This would lead to a much more limited God who would have to wait and see the outcomes of events / actions.

**Boethius: Can God be omniscient and just?**



There is lots of evidence in scripture about divine reward and

punishment, but is it fair that it happens? 

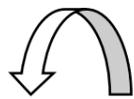
Boethius claimed that it would be unjust for us to be rewarded or punished according to our actions, if we had no choice over them.

**"for men are driven to good or evil not by their own will, but by the fixed necessity of what is to be."**

The Consolation of Philosophy, Book V

If God has knowledge of what we will do in the future and God's knowledge is infallible (cannot be mistaken) then we have no choice but to carry out those actions. If we don't have choice, how can we be justly rewarded or punished?

The solution is to acknowledge that God sees things differently to humans. Humans are limited by time



The past is fixed



The present is fleeting.



The future is uncertain

God does not have a past, present or future. **God exists in a simultaneous present.**

God is not limited, or bound by time. God is able to see our past, present and future and has perfect knowledge of what we will freely do. **Past, present and future all happen at the same time for God.**

A simultaneous present is impossible for our finite human brains to understand or imagine.

It is mistaken to say God knows what decisions we will make "in advance" because for God there is no "in advance". All events happen at the same time for God.

Just because God sees something happening, it does not mean he caused it to happen. God views our timeline "as though from a lofty peak above them".

So we are genuinely free so it is fair for God to judge us.

**Anselm: the four dimensional approach to the timelessness of God.**

Humans live in a presentist way. **Presentism:** the view that only the present exists. The past is gone and cannot be changed. The future hasn't happened yet.

In contrast to this...Anselm believed that God was not constrained by space or time. God can see the choices we make in the "past, present and future" but they are still free choices. Remember "past, present and future" are relative terms for us, but happen simultaneously for God.

**Swinburne's view of God in time**

God has to exist within time to respond to use with love. Support with King Hezekiah's illness (Isaiah 38: 1-5).

However, there is biblical evidence to suggest God is outside of time.

**Evaluation.**

- Is the simultaneous present an incoherent theory – Anthony Kennedy. Response: the idea is incoherent because the human mind is limited, but just because we can't imagine, doesn't mean it can't be the case.
- Anselm's theory very similar to Boethius- strength.
- Swinburne- God's judgement can be fair, but we must consider him everlasting not eternal. Biblical debate.

**What does it mean to say God is all-loving and is it a coherent idea?**



Old Testament: Looks at God's love for Israel (the holy nation of his chosen people) rather than particular individuals.

New Testament: Focus on Agape love and love in action.

Hebrew term- *Hesed*- mercy/Grace. God's love is not caused by a special quality in an object/ person/ place, rather that object/ person/ place is loveable because of God's love. Israel is not loved by God because it has a special lovable quality, instead Israel has special worth because of God loving it.

"The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples".  
 Deuteronomy 7:7

**Key discussion of God's love in the Old Testament: The Book of Hosea.**

Woe to them,  
 because they have strayed from me!  
 Destruction to them,  
 because they have rebelled against me!  
 I long to redeem them  
 but they speak about me falsely.  
 Hosea 7:13

God wants to restore his loving relationship with his people, but he also punishes them. Many see God's punishment as an act of love and justice.

- Is it really loving to destroy whole towns? *God's punishment can be seen as an element of justice and therefore His love.*
- If God can suffer does this limit his omnipotence as he is no longer impassible (incapable of suffering). *Perhaps it is part of the nature of an all powerful God that He can suffer. Remember Aquinas said God can do anything that is possible, but not a logical contradiction.*
- God's ever-changing response to humans seems incompatible with God being viewed as eternal and immutable. *Perhaps God must be viewed as everlasting instead.*

**Is God's love reliable?** In Hosea God's relationship and love for humans seems a little stormy. However, there is lots of evidence to suggest God's love IS reliable.

"Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;  
 his love endures forever."  
 Psalm 118:1

Old Testament: why should we love other people?

In the Old Testament it teaches that because God loves us, not only should we love God, but that makes others worthy of our love. In response to God's love for us, we should show love and concern about the welfare of others. The moral responsibility to show love and concern about the welfare of others weighs most heavily on Israel, as God's chosen people.

'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'  
**Exodus 19: 4-6**

After being saved from slavery a special role was bestowed upon the Hebrews. This included becoming a kingdom of priests, setting an example for the rest of the world: a holy nation set apart because of their special relationship with God.

Old Testament: The responsibility of Israel. The Book of Amos.

Amos emphasises the idea that due to the special nature of God's love for Israel, the nation of Israel have great responsibility. However, with this responsibility comes consequences. They were singled out to be punished.

It also emphasises the idea that **if God is good he must be just. With justice comes the requirement for judgement**- God must confront evil and punish it. However, the long term goal is to restore relationships.

"You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins."

**Amos 3:2**

God's love in the New Testament



**Agape love:** an altruistic love felt for human kind. No connection to bodily desire.

**Altruism:** putting the needs of others before oneself.

Agape love has the connotations that love is not simply an emotion, rather it is shown through action. The importance of action is shown in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats.

"Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him."

**1 John 4:7-9**

God is not just the best example of a loving being, God IS the source of love. God demonstrated this by becoming incarnate in Jesus. The love of God requires that people reciprocate love for each other. Our love for one another is a reflection of God

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.  
**1 Corinthians 13**

Love is the greatest of the three things that last forever.

Love should underpin everything a Christian does

The most significant claim against God's love is the seemingly unfair suffering of humanity. This would be supported by philosophers such as Hume and JS Mill.

Natural evil is the hardest to justify as acts of nature are out of our hands, yet should be under the control of an omnipotent being. So, why is a supposedly all loving and all powerful being letting thousands die from illness?

However, Aquinas states that when we talk of God we are using analogy to gain an insight into God, but we will never truly understand God. Meaning we will never truly understand the nature of God's love and how suffering could be an important element of this.

Supported by Moltmann.

<sup>12</sup> "For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known."  
<sup>13</sup> And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love"  
**1 Corinthians 13: 12-13**

Only after death will we understand God's nature.

