

Jacek Wojtysiak
John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin

The Paradox of the stone and two concepts of omnipotence

Introduction

The history of science has often experienced crises arising from the realisation of internal contradiction within a given theory, or its collision with other theories and observation-based data. These crises did not spare philosophy either. We could even venture to say that philosophy is in constant state of crisis and these crises stimulate its growth. The task standing before philosophy is the detection and elimination of contradiction among the most abstract notions especially prone to it. Given that natural theology (including the theory of Divine attributes) is a part of philosophy, this dynamic greatly affects this discipline, too. It would be hard to expect God, a being so distant from our common experience and our conceptual capacities, to be cognitively accessible without any intellectual puzzles and obstacles.

We could then search for three types of contradiction in the theory of Divine attributes:

- (a) contradiction within a given attribute: a difficulty with its coherent determination or description;
- (b) contradiction between particular attributes: difficulties in their consistent collective definition;¹
- (c) contradiction between particular attributes and world phenomena: difficulties in reconciling the definitions of these attributes with our knowledge of the world.

¹ Ch. Taliaferro [2009: 29] calls the puzzles connected with the contradiction (a) — ‘internal puzzles,’ and the puzzles connected with the contradiction (b) — ‘external puzzles.’

An example of the demonstration of the first contradiction is the so-called paradox of the stone. This famous (known in philosophy and theology at least since the fourteenth century) paradox challenges the inner coherence of omnipotence — the key Divine attribute. In my article I will present the paradox and some ways of its solution.

The presentation of the paradox

The paradox of the stone could be reconstructed as follows:

- (P1) God is omnipotent, and therefore can cause any state of affairs.
- (P2) If God can cause any state of affairs, He can also create *a stone so heavy that He cannot (will be unable to) lift it.*
- (P3) God can create *a stone so heavy that He cannot (will be unable to) lift it.*
- (P4) If God can create *a stone so heavy that He cannot (will be unable to) lift it*, He is not omnipotent, for there is a state of affairs which He cannot cause or bring about — i.e. the state of affairs of *His being able to lift a stone so heavy that He cannot lift it* (and, consequently, the state of affairs of the existence of such a stone as lifted by God).
- (P5) God is not omnipotent.

As we can see, having assumed the thesis of God's omnipotence (P1), we ended up with a thesis contradictory to it (P5). Therefore, as the above reasoning instructs us, one cannot grasp the notion of Divine omnipotence in a coherent way.

We can also say — following Ch. Taliaferro [2009: 29] — that the paradox leads to the statement 'there is at least one act God cannot do:' He cannot lift a stone which is too heavy for Him (if He can create it) or He cannot create such a stone (if He can lift any stone). Hence, God cannot do all, i.e. He is not omnipotent.

It is important to note that in the strict sense, God, as a non-physical being, cannot do any physical activity (like lifting stones) and cannot have any physical quantity (like having a given force to do it). Nevertheless, he has power which can be manifested in various activities and physical quantities, and it should transcend all physical activities and quantities, which are finite by nature. Therefore the phrase 'God's being able or unable to lift *a stone so heavy that He cannot lift it*' is correct.

In my opinion there are two key solutions of the stone problem or two main strategies for avoiding the paradox. I call the first of them *the impossibility strategy* and the second one *the 'yes' strategy*.

The impossibility strategy

The simplest and the most common way of eliminating this paradox, and others like it, is the introduction of a restriction that it is not true that God can cause any state of affairs, but it is only true that God can cause any possible state of affairs. In this case the premise (P1) should be replaced by the premise:

(P1') God is omnipotent, and therefore can cause any possible state of affairs.

In the light of the premise (P1') the premise (P3) is false because the existence of *a stone so heavy that God cannot lift it* is a state of affairs which is impossible — its elements (as it was the case of a square circle) are mutually exclusive. The impossibility of *a stone so heavy that God cannot lift it* or the incoherence of the notion of such a stone can be demonstrated in the different ways. Here are some samples of them:

- (i) *a stone which God cannot lift* would be a being greater (in some respect) than God, i.e. it would be greater than the being than which (with all respects) nothing greater exists;
- (ii) *a stone which God cannot lift* would have (has) 'a mass so large (i.e. so big) that a being who can lift any mass cannot lift it (i.e. that God cannot lift it)' [M. J. Murray and M. Rea 2013: 16];
- (iii) 'because, necessarily, an omnipotent agent can move any stone, the state of affairs, *that there is a stone so heavy for a [him] to lift it*, is impossible' [J. Hoffman and G. Rosenkrantz 2010: 274];²
- (iv) 'you and I can build objects so heavy that we cannot lift them, but a being that can do anything possible cannot (for logical reasons) create an object that such a being cannot lift' [Taliaferro 2009: 29];
- (v) creating the above-mentioned stone belongs to 'things "ability" to do which is really a matter of impotence, not power' or omnipotence [B. Leftow 2009: 169].³

In order to make the points (i)-(v) clearer, let us notice that:

- (i') if there is *a stone which God cannot lift*, God — contrary to one of his main descriptions — is not the greatest being;
- (ii')-(iii') if there is *a stone which God cannot lift*, God — contrary to one of the consequences of his description — cannot lift every stone;

² For the authors: *a* = an omnipotent agent, i.e. God.

³ The author explains here Peter Lombard's (and some other medieval scholars') views.

- (iv') if there is *a stone which God cannot lift*, God — contrary to more general consequence of his description — cannot do all;
 (v') if there is a (created by God) *stone which God cannot lift*, God — contrary to other his description — is not perfect.

As a result, we can come to the conclusion that because the notion of *a stone which God cannot lift* leads to a contradiction, we must abandon this notion and say that such a stone is impossible. As we have seen, the impossibility strategy removes the paradox by undermining the possibility of the crucial component of the truthmaker for its premise (P3).

It is noteworthy that the impossibility strategy presupposes the following definition of omnipotence:

- (D) (*x*) (*x* is omnipotent if and only if *x* can bring about or actualize all possible states of affairs). [Cf. J.P. Moreland and W.L. Craig 2003: 528-529; Leftow 2009: 170; J. Hoffman and G. Rosenkrantz 2010: 272-275; Murray and M. Rea 2013: 18]

Unfortunately, as the above-mentioned authors suggest, most contemporary philosophers of religion reject this definition because there are many different possible states of affairs, e.g. John's (incompatibilist or libertarian) free decision of drinking green tea, which cannot be made by God. I ignore here this problem assuming that it (at least partially) disappears, if the term 'possible states of affairs' is used in the broad (metaphysical rather than logical) meaning or is supplemented by some restrictions.

The 'yes' strategy

Let us point out that not all philosophers are likely to accept the solution based on the impossibility strategy. Why? There are three reasons for it:

- (R1) One can claim that we do not have an unquestionable criterion of possibility or impossibility. It is true that non-contradiction (or contradiction) is a good candidate for this criterion. Let us remember, however, that we can detect it in the number of statements which are formulated within a given conceptual scheme. It would be hard to ensure that this scheme is adequate for everything that exists.
- (R2) We can venture further and say that only God knows or dictates the whole of what is or can be, and thus it is only Him who sets the criterion of possibility and impossibility (we will come back to this point later).

(R3) In any case, what matters most to a theologian is the question, would not God be limited in his omnipotence if He could not cause impossible things? If he could not, the Biblical and intuitively convincing phrase ‘nothing is impossible with God’ (Luke 1: 37) would be merely metaphorical or limited. As Leftow [2009: 189] put it, ‘how anything can truly *be* impossible if an omnipotent being exists. ... how an unlimited power can face limits set by the bounds of metaphysical possibility. ... it limits God’s power if he can do only what is absolutely possible.’

If you agree on at least one of these reasons, you must say ‘yes’ answering the question ‘Can God create *a stone so heavy that He will be unable to lift it?*’ and, consequently, accept the premise (P3). In this case the only way out of the paradox is to deny the premise (P4). It is possible by stating that God’s ability to create *a stone so heavy that He cannot lift it* does not imply that there is or will be (or even can be) such a stone.

I will not embark upon the great theological controversies concerning the limits of Divine omnipotence. According to the supporters of the radical version of its conception, God is limited by nothing, not even by contradictory states of affairs. If He wanted, He could create them as well. In such a case, how do they solve the paradox of the stone? They claim that God does not create *a stone so heavy that He cannot lift it*, but it is not because it is contradictory or impossible as such, but because He does not want to create it. Why? Because it would undermine His highest authority or majesty (or broader: His superior ontic position or absolute priority). God’s omnipotence does not consist in His power causing all possible or non-contradictory states of affairs, but in His power causing literally all states of affairs. The limits of God’s omnipotence are determined by His will, but not by the (external to Him) scope of objective possibilities.

Someone can say that the ‘yes’ strategy is similar to the solution (i) or (v) (of the impossibility strategy). Both maintain that Divine superiority or perfection is the basis of non-existence of *a stone so heavy that God cannot lift it*. But there is a great difference between them. According to the impossibility strategy God cannot cease be omnipotent, perfect, the highest etc. (therefore P3 is false). In turn, according to the ‘yes’ strategy God can but does not want (therefore P3 is true but P4 is false). Thus the controversy over the paradox of the stone turns out to be a part of the broader debate concerning the (possibilist or voluntarist) conception of God and His omnipotence.

Let me point out one more thing: the radical voluntarist approach emerged clearly (also in opposition to St Thomas Aquinas) rather relatively late, probably in late Middle Ages, and was picked up later by thinkers such as R. Descartes. This approach meets many objections. One of them says: God capable of accomplishing logically impossible things would be evil by nature. It is, however, hard to agree

with the supporters of this objection, because the case of evil is excluded by the fundamental condition imposed on Divine omnipotence: it has to be accorded with His perfectly good will.

The more sophisticated objector claims that an unlimited ‘omnipotent agent could bring about impossible states of affairs such as *that a horse is not an animal*, and *that there is a round square*. This would violate the laws of deductive logic, in particular, the law of non-contradiction’ [Hoffman and Rosenkrantz 2010: 272]. Let us notice, however, that the objector mistakenly presupposes that in God ‘can’ (or ‘could’) implies ‘wants’ (or even ‘must’) and forgets that the ultimate source of everything what exists is God’s perfectly rational will. As a result, if one remembers both matters, one should say that God ‘could bring about impossible states of affairs’ but He never wants to do them and, in fact, He never does. It is a case by the nature of His will.

Reconciliation?

Can both the models of Divine omnipotence under discussion be reconciled? I suppose yes. According to B. Leftow we have two leading theological intuitions:

(I1) ‘God can do only what is absolutely possible’ [Leftow 2009: 189-190]

and

(I2) ‘if God is omnipotent, nothing independent of God determines what God can do’ [Leftow 2009: 189].⁴

They seem to be mutually exclusive. But we can find a principle which enables both intuitions to be preserved. According to it ‘God can do only what is absolutely possible’ but ‘what states of affairs are possible is not independent of an omnipotent God.’ [Leftow 2009: 189] All possible states of affairs are possible and all impossible states of affairs are impossible only due to God Himself. But what does it mean ‘God Himself’ — His nature or His will? If in God His nature is identical with His will, one can claim that the theological possibilist and the theological voluntarist say the same or describe God in two respects which are different only in our minds. But maybe the antecedent of the last conditional is not true and I am not successful in reconciling both alternative approaches.

⁴ Strictly speaking, Leftow uses the formula: ‘(x) (if x is omnipotent, nothing independent of God determines what x can do)’ and assumes that $x = \text{God}$.

Conclusion

As we can see, the paradox of the stone can be eliminated. Its elimination, however, leads to a dilemma associated with alternative methods of its elimination and alternative conceptions of Divine omnipotence. In any case, even the solutions provided here can provoke doubts and problems. Therefore, it is not surprising that the debate on the definition of omnipotence has stirred the minds of scholars to this day. Still, if some were tempted to regard this fact as a depreciation of the value of natural theology, I would point out that the polemic over the definition of knowledge, which is a debate of epistemology, another prominent philosophical discipline, seems to be even further from being solved. Being fully aware of our cognitive limits, let us not expect to arrive at undisputable theses in philosophy. Instead, let us try to understand the intellectual dilemmas which philosophical theologians have to face. Their ultimate solution depends not only on the initial theological intuitions, but also on many non-undisputable solutions adopted from other philosophical disciplines.

At the end, it is worthwhily to add that the question of Divine attributes, in particular omnipotence, is the favourite topic in analytic philosophy of religion in English-speaking milieus. Each of the recalled companions, guides or handbooks on the subject devotes a vast chapter to this problem, often written with remarkable analytic refinement. Unfortunately, due to the nature of the analytical method, these attributes tend to be discussed in isolation (as some distinct puzzles), apart from their integral theory. The paradox of the stone as a alleged key to the problem of omnipotence is here the typical example.

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Abstract

In the article I present the paradox of the stone and two main ways of its solution. The first of them presupposes that God can bring about only possible states of affairs. In turn, according to the second one God can cause literally all states of affairs which He wants to do. As a result, I claim that both the ways out of the paradox are connected with two different — possibilist and voluntarist — conceptions of God and His omnipotence. Maybe both the approaches can be reconciled by B. Leftow's principle that 'what states of affairs are possible is not independent of an omnipotent God'. Finally, I note that being fully aware of our cognitive limits, let us not expect to arrive at undisputable solutions in philosophical theory of Divine attributes.

Keywords: the paradox of the stone, Divine attributes, omnipotence, philosophical theology.