IV. OMNIPOTENCE AND GOD’S ABILITY TO SIN

NELSON PIKE

IN the first chapter of the Epistle of James (verse 13) it is said that “God cannot be tempted by evil.” This idea recurs in the confessional literature of the Christian tradition,1 and is stated in its fullest form in the theological doctrine of God’s impeccability.2 God is not only free from sin, He is incapable of moral deviation. God not only does not sin, He cannot sin. This is generally held to be part of what is communicated in the claim that God is perfectly good. On the surface, at least, this doctrine appears to be in conflict with the traditional Christian doctrine of divine omnipotence. An omnipotent being is one that can do all things possible. But, surely, it is possible to sin. Men do this sort of thing all the time. It would thus appear that if God is perfectly good (and thus impeccable) He cannot sin; and if God is omnipotent (and thus can do all things possible), He can sin.

This argument appears to be sophistical. We are tempted to dismiss it with a single comment, viz., it involves an equivocation on the modal element in the statement “God can (cannot) sin.” In the long run, I think (and shall try to show) that this single remark is correct. But that’s in the long run; and in the interim there is a complicated and interesting terrain that has not yet been adequately explored. In this paper I shall discuss this matter in detail. After working through what I judge to be a number of conceptual tangles that have accumulated in this literature on this topic, I shall end by making a suggestion as to how the various senses of “God can (cannot) sin” ought to be sorted out.

I

I shall begin by identifying three assumptions that will work importantly in the discussion to follow.

First, I shall assume that within the discourse of the Christian religion, the term “God” is a descriptive expression having an identifiable meaning.

It is not, e.g., a proper name. As part of this first assumption, I shall suppose, further, that “God” is a very special type of descriptive expression—what I shall call a title. A title is a term used to mark a certain position or value-status as does, e.g., “Caesar” in the sentence “Hadrian is Caesar.” To say that Hadrian is Caesar is to say that Hadrian occupies a certain governmental position; more specifically, it is to say that Hadrian is Emperor of Rome. To affirm of some individual that He is God is to affirm that that individual occupies some special position (e.g., that He is Ruler of the Universe) or that that individual has some special value-status (e.g., that He is a being a greater than which cannot be conceived).

Secondly, I shall assume that whatever the particular semantical import of the term “God” may be (i.e., whether it means, for instance, “Ruler of the Universe,” “a being which no greater can be conceived,” etc.), the attribute-terms “perfectly good,” “omnipotent,” “omniscient,” and the like, attach to it in such a way as to make the functions “If x is God, then x is perfectly good,” “If x is God, then x is omnipotent,” etc., necessary truths. It is a logically necessary condition of bearing the title “God,” that an individual be perfectly good, omnipotent, omniscient, and so on for all of the standard attributes traditionally assigned to the Christian God. If we could assume that in order to be Emperor (as opposed to Empress) of Rome one had to be male (rather than female), then if “x is Caesar” means “x is Emperor of Rome,” then “If x is Caesar, then x is male” would have the same logical status as I am assuming for “If x is God, then x is perfectly good,” “If x is God, then x is omnipotent,” etc.

If there is an individual (e.g., Yahweh) who occupies the position or has the value-status marked by the term “God,” then that individual is perfectly good, omnipotent, omniscient, etc. If He were not, then He could not (logically) occupy the position or have the value-status in question. However, with respect to the predicate “perfectly

1 See, for example, the Westminster Confession, ch. V, sect. IV and the Longer Catechism of the Eastern Church, sects. 156–157.
2 See the Catholic Encyclopedia (New York, Robert Appleton Co., 1907).
good,” I shall assume that any individual possessing the attribute named by this phrase might not (logically) have possessed that attribute. This assumption entails that any individual who occupies the position or who has the value-status indicated by the term “God” might not (logically) have held that position or had that status. It should be noticed that this third assumption covers only a logical possibility. I am not assuming that there is any real (e.g., material) possibility that Yahweh (if He exists) is not perfectly good. I am assuming only that the hypothetical function “If \(x\) is Yahweh, then \(x\) is perfectly good” differs from the hypothetical function “If \(x\) is God, then \(x\) is perfectly good” in that the former, unlike the latter, does not formulate a necessary truth. With Job, one might at least entertain the idea that Yahweh is not perfectly good. This is at least a consistent conjecture even though to assert such a thing would be to deny a well-established part of the Faith.\(^3\)

I now want to make two further preliminary comments—one about the predicate “omnipotent” and one about the concept of moral responsibility.

Pre-analytically, to say that a given individual is omnipotent is to say that that individual has unlimited power. This is usually expressed in religious discourse with the phrase “infinite power.” St. Thomas explicated the intuitive content of this idea as follows: “God is called omnipotent because He can do all things that are possible absolutely.” As traditionally understood, St. Thomas’ formula must be given a relatively restricted interpretation. The permissive verb “do” in “do all things possible” is usually replaced with one of a range of more specific verbs such as “create,” “bring about,” “effect,” “make-to-be,” “produce,” etc.\(^5\) God’s omnipotence is thus to be thought of as creative-power only. It is not to be understood as the ability to do anything at all, e.g., it is not to be interpreted as including the ability to swim the English Channel or ride a bicycle. God is omnipotent in that He can create, bring about, effect, make-to-be, produce, etc., anything possible absolutely. For St. Thomas, something is “possible absolutely” when its description is logically consistent. Thus, on the finished analysis, God is omnipotent insofar as He can bring about any consistently describable object or state of affairs. In his article on “omnipotence” in the Catholic Encyclopedia,\(^6\) J. A. McHugh analyzes the notion in this way. It seems clear from the context of this piece that McHugh meant to be reformulating St. Thomas’ view of the matter. I might add that I think this restricted interpretation of the pre-analytical notion of infinite power is an accurate portrayal of the way this concept works in the ordinary as well as in most of the technical (theological) discourse of the Christian religion.

Now, let us suppose that an innocent child suffers a slow and torturous death by starvation. Let it be true that this event was avoidable and that no greater good was served by its occurrence. Let it also be true that neither the child (or its parents) committed an offense for which it (or its parents) could be rightly punished. This is a consistently describable state of affairs (whether or not it ever occurred). I think it is clear that an individual that knowingly brought this state of affairs about would be morally reprehensible.

We can now formulate the problem under discussion in this paper more rigorously than above. God is omnipotent. When read hypothetically, this statement formulates a necessary truth. On the analysis of “omnipotent” with which we are working, it follows that God (if He exists) can bring about any consistently describable state of affairs. However, God is perfectly good. Again, when read hypothetically, this statement formulates a necessary truth. Further, an individual would not qualify as perfectly good if he were to act in a morally reprehensible way. Thus, the statement “God acts in a morally reprehensible way” is logically incoherent. This is to say that “God sins” is a logical contradiction.\(^7\) Hence, some consistently describable states of affairs are such that God (being perfectly good) could not bring them about.\(^8\) The problem, then, is this: If God is both omnipotent and perfectly good, there are at least some consistently describable states of affairs that He both

\(^3\) The truth of this assumption is argued at some length by C. B. Martin in the fourth chapter of his Religious Belief (Ithaca, Cornell Press, 1964).

\(^4\) Summa Theologica, Pt. I, Q. 25, a 3. This passage taken from The Basic Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, ed. by Anton Pegis, p. 263.

\(^5\) These verbs are sometimes called “factive verbs.”

\(^6\) New York, Robert Appleton Co., 1911.

\(^7\) There is probably some distinction to be made between acting in a morally reprehensible way and sinning. However, for purposes of this discussion, I shall treat these concepts as one.

\(^8\) I am here assuming that if God brings about a given circumstance, He does so knowingly. God could not bring about a given circumstance by mistake. I think this follows the idea that God is omniscient.
can and cannot bring about. There would thus appear to be a logical conflict in the claim that God is both omnipotent and perfectly good.

I think it is worth noting that the problem just exposed is not the same as the classical theological problem of evil. The problem of evil is generally formulated as follows: Evil exists. If God exists and is omnipotent, He could have prevented evil if He had wanted to. If God exists and is perfectly good, He would have wanted to. Since evil in fact exists, it follows that God does not exist. This argument is supposed to point up a conflict between the attribute of perfect goodness and the attribute of omnipotence. But the conflict is not of a rigorous sort. So far as this argument goes, it is logically possible for there to exist a being who is both perfectly good and omnipotent. The argument is supposed to show only that since it is contingently true that evil exists, it is contingently false that omnipotence and perfect goodness are possessed by a single individual. However, the problem we are now discussing has a sharper report than this. The argument generating this latter is supposed to show that there is a direct logical conflict between the attribute of perfect goodness and the attribute of omnipotence. No contingent premiss is employed (such as, e.g., that evil exists) and the conclusion drawn is that it is logically impossible (not just contingently false) that there exists an individual who is both omnipotent and perfectly good.

II

In reply to objection 2, article 3, question 25, Part I of the Summa Theologica, St. Thomas Aquinas writes as follows:

To sin is to fall short of a perfect action; hence to be able to sin is to be able to fall short in action, which is repugnant to omnipotence. Therefore, it is that God cannot sin, because of his omnipotence. Now, it is true that the philosopher says that God can deliberately do what is evil. But this must be understood either on condition, the antecedent of which is impossible—as, for instance, if we were to say that God can do evil things if He will. For there is no reason why a conditional proposition should not be true, though both the antecedent and the consequent are impossible; as if one were to say: If a man is an ass, he has four feet. Or, he may be understood to mean that God can do some things which now seem to be evil: which, however, if He did them, would then be good. Or he is, perhaps, speaking after the common manner of the pagans, who thought that men became gods, like Jupiter or Mercury.

In this passage St. Thomas offers three suggestions as to how the problem we are discussing might be solved. (I do not count the suggestion made in the last sentence of this passage because it is clear that St. Thomas is not here talking about God but about individuals such as Jupiter or Mercury who are mistakenly thought to be God by certain misguided pagans.) Let us look at these three suggestions:

(A) St. Thomas begins with the claim that “to sin is to fall short of a perfect action.” He then says that an omnipotent being cannot fall short in action. The conclusion is that God cannot sin because He is omnipotent. Essentially this same reasoning is developed in slightly more detail in the seventh chapter of St. Anselm’s Proslogium. Anselm says:

But how art Thou omnipotent, if Thou are not capable of all things? or, if Thou canst not be corrupted and canst not lie... how art Thou capable of all things? Or else to be capable of these things is not power but impotence. For he who is capable of these things is capable of what is not for his good, and of what he ought not to do and the more capable of them he is, the more power have adversity and perversity against him; and the less has he himself against these.

Anselm concludes that since God is omnipotent, adversity and perversity have no power against Him and He is not capable of anything through impotence. Therefore, since God is omnipotent, He is not capable of performing morally reprehensible actions.

This argument is interesting. Both Thomas and Anselm agree that God is unable to sin. Their effort is to show that instead of being in conflict with the claim that God is omnipotent, the assignment of this inability is a direct consequence of this latter claim. However, I think that the reasoning fails. Let us agree that to the extent that an individual is such that “adversity and perversity” can prevail against him, to that extent is he weak—morally weak. He is then capable of “falling short in action,” i.e., of doing “what he ought not to do.” So far as I can see, an individual that is able to bring about any consistently describable state of affairs might well be morally weak. I can find no conceptual difficulty in the idea of a diabolical omnipotent being. Creative-power and moral strength are readily discernible concepts. If this is right, then it does not follow from the claim that God is omnipotent that He is unable to act in a morally reprehensible way. In fact, as was set out in the original statement of the problem, quite the opposite

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8 This passage is taken from The Basic Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, op. cit., p. 264.
10 This passage is taken from S. N. Deane, St. Anselm (LaSalle, Open Court, 1958), p. 14.
conclusion seems to be warranted. If a being is able to bring about any consistently describable state of affairs, it would seem that he should be able to bring about states of affairs the production of which would be morally reprehensible. St. Thomas’ first suggestion thus seems to be ineffective as a solution to the problem we are confronting. (I shall have something more to say on this topic in the fourth section of this paper.)

(B) The Philosopher says that God can deliberately do what is evil. Looking for a way of understanding this remark whereby it can be squared with his own view on the matter, St. Thomas suggests that what Aristotle may have meant is that the individual that is God can do evil if *He wants to.* Thomas adds that this last statement might be true even if it is impossible that God should want to do evil and even if it is also impossible that He can do evil. The point seems to be that although the statements “The individual that is God wants to do evil” and “The individual that is God can do evil” are false (or impossible), the conditional statement containing the first of these statements as the antecedent and the second of these statements as the consequent, might nonetheless be true.

Consider the statement: “Jones has an ace in his hand if he wants to play it.” This statement has the surface grammar of a conditional, but it is not a conditional. The item mentioned in the “if . . .” clause does not condition the item described in the rest of the statement. If Jones has an ace in his hand, he has an ace in his hand whether or not he wants to play it. What, then, does the “if . . .” clause do in this statement? I think that it serves as a way of recording a certain indeterminacy as to what will be done about (or, with respect to) the unconditional fact described in the rest of the statement. Whether or not this last remark is precisely right, the major point to be seen here is this: The statement “Jones has an ace in his hand if he wants to play it” is false if the statement “Jones has an ace in his hand” is false. We are here dealing with a use of “if . . .” that does not fit the analysis usually given conditional statements such as “I shall be nourished if I eat.”

Now consider the statement: “Jones can wiggle his ear if he wants to.” I think that this is another instance in which “if . . .” operates in a non-conditional capacity. If Jones has the ability to wiggle his ear, he has the ability whether or not he wants to wiggle his ear. The question of whether he wants to wiggle his ear is independent of whether he has the ability to do so. As in the case above, what the “if . . .” clause adds in this statement is not a condition on the claim that Jones has an ability. It serves as a way of recording the idea that there is some indeterminacy as to whether the ability that Jones has will be exercised. But again, I am less concerned with whether this last remark about the function of the “if . . .” clause is precisely right than I am with the relation between the truth values of “Jones can wiggle his ear if he wants to” and “Jones can wiggle his ear.” In this case, as above, if Jones does not have the ability to wiggle his ear, then the statement “Jones can wiggle his ear if he wants to” is false. If the second of the above statements is false, then the first is false too.

St. Thomas says that the statement “God can sin if He wants to” is true. He adds that both the antecedent and the consequent of this conditional are “impossible.” The trouble here, I think, is that “God can sin if He wants to” is not a conditional statement; and the most important point to be seen in this connection is that this statement is false if its component “God can sin” is false. But, St. Thomas clearly holds that “God can sin” is false (or impossible)—he says that God’s inability to sin is a consequence of the fact that He is omnipotent. The conclusion must be that “God can sin if He wants to” is also false (or impossible). Thomas has not provided a way of understanding The Philosopher’s claim that God can deliberately do what is evil. As long as St. Thomas insists that God does not have the ability to sin (which, he says, follows from the claim that God is omnipotent) he must deny that God can sin if He wants to. He must then reject The Philosopher’s claim that God can deliberately do what is evil if this latter means that God can sin if He wants to.

(C) Still looking for a way of understanding the idea that God can deliberately do what is evil, St. Thomas’ next suggestion is that God can do things which seem evil to us but which are such that if God did them, they would not be evil. I think that there are at least two ways of understanding this comment.

First, Thomas may be suggesting that God has the ability to bring about states of affairs that are, in fact, good, but which seem evil to us due to our limited knowledge, sympathy, moral insight, etc. However, even if we were to agree that this is true, Thomas could draw no conclusion as regards the starving-child situation described earlier. We have specified this situation in such a way that it not only seems evil to us, but is evil in fact. We have included in our description of this case that the child suffers
intensely; that this suffering is not deserved and that it might have been avoided. We have added that the suffering does not contribute to a greater good. Thus, this line of reasoning does not really help with the major problem we are discussing in this paper. We still have a range of consistently describable states of affairs that God (being perfectly good) cannot bring about. We thus still have reason to think that God (being perfectly good) is not omnipotent.

Secondly, St. Thomas may be suggesting that God has the ability to bring about any consistently describable states of affairs (including the starving-child situation), but that if He were to bring about such a situation, it would no longer count as evil. Let “evil” cover any situation which is such that if one were to (knowingly) bring it about (though it is avoidable), that individual would be morally reprehensible. The view we are now considering requires that we append a special theory about the meanings of the other value-terms involved in our discussion. In particular, it requires that when applied to God, the expressions “not morally reprehensible” and “perfectly good” be assigned meanings other than the ones they have when used to characterize individuals other than God. If a man were knowingly to bring about the starving-child situation, he would be morally reprehensible. He could no longer be described as perfectly good. But (so the argument goes) if God were to bring about the same situation, He might still count as perfectly good (not morally reprehensible) in the special senses of “not morally reprehensible” and “perfectly good” that apply only to God.

I have two comments to make about this second way of understanding St. Thomas’ claim that God can do things that seem evil to us but which are such that if He did them, they would not be evil.

First, in my opinion the view we are now entertaining about the theological use of “perfectly good” and “not morally reprehensible” is one that was decisively criticized by Duns Scotus, Bishop Berkeley, and John Stuart Mill.\textsuperscript{11} If God were to bring about circumstances such as the starving-child situation, He would be morally reprehensible and thus not perfectly good in the ordinary senses of these phrases. If we now contrive some special phrases (retaining the tabletures “not morally reprehensible” and “perfectly good”) that might apply to God though He produces the situation in question, this will be of no special interest. Whatever else can be said of God, if He were to bring about the starving-child situation, He would not be an appropriate object of the praise we ordinarily convey with the phrase “perfectly good.” He would be an appropriate object of the blame we ordinarily convey with the phrase “morally reprehensible.” We might put this point as follows: If we deny that God is perfectly good in the ordinary sense of “perfectly good,” and if we cover this move by introducing a technical, well-removed, sense of “perfectly good’ that can apply to God though He brings about circumstances such as the starving-child situation, it may appear that we have solved the problem under discussion in this paper, but we haven’t. We have eliminated conflict by agreeing that God lacks one of the “perfections,” i.e., one of the qualities the possession of which makes an individual better (more praiseworthy) than he would otherwise be. Unless a being is perfectly good in the ordinary sense of “perfectly good,”” that being is not as praiseworthy as he might otherwise be. It was the sense of “perfectly good” that connects with the idea of being morally praiseworthy (in the ordinary sense) that gave rise to the problem in the first place. Surely, it is this sense of “perfectly good” that religious people have in mind when they characterize God as perfectly good.

The second remark I should like to make about this second interpretation of St. Thomas’ third suggestion is that the view assigned to St. Thomas in this interpretation is one that he would most likely reject. I shall need a moment to develop this point.\textsuperscript{12}

Consider the word “triangle” as it occurs in the discourse of geometry. Compare it with “triangle” as it is used in the discourse of carpentry or woodworking. Within the discourse of geometry, the criteria governing the use of this term are more strict than are the criteria governing its use in the discourse of carpentry. The geometrical figure is an exemplary (i.e., perfect) version of the shape embodied in the triangular block of wood. We reach an understanding of the geometrical shape by correcting imperfections (i.e., irregularities) in

\textsuperscript{11} See Scotus’ Oxford Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard, Q. II (“Man’s Natural Knowledge of God”), second statement, argument IV; Berkeley’s Alciphron, Dialogue IV, sects. 16-22 (especially sect. 17); and J. S. Mill’s An Examination of Sir William Hamilton’s Philosophy, ch. 6. What follows in this paragraph is what I think constitutes the center of these three discussions.

\textsuperscript{12} The next two paragraphs are taken almost without change from the Introduction to my book God and Timelessness (London, Routledge and Kegan-Paul, 1969). What I say here about the relation between “triangle” as used in the discourse of geometry and “triangle” as used in the discourse of carpentry is very much like a thesis developed by John Stuart Mill in the text mentioned above.
the shape of the triangular block. Now, let's ask whether “triangle” has the same meaning in the two cases. We might answer this question in either way. Once the relation between the criteria governing its use in the two cases is made clear, no one would be confused if we were to say that “triangle” has the same meaning in the two cases, and on one would be confused if we were to say that “triangle” has different meaning in the two cases. Regarding the relation between the criteria, the following point seems to me to be of considerable importance: If a block of wood is triangular, it has three angles that add up (roughly) to 180 degrees and its sides are (roughly) straight. At least this much is implied with respect to a geometrical figure when one characterizes it as a triangle. By this I mean that if one could find reasons sufficient for rejecting the claim that a given thing is a triangle as “triangle” is used in the discourse of carpentry (suppose that one of its sides is visibly curved or suppose it has four angles), these same reasons would be sufficient for rejecting the claim that the thing in question is a triangle as “triangle” is used in the discourse of geometry. In fact, more than this can be said. If one could find slight irregularities in the shape of a thing that would cause some hesitation or prompt some reservation about whether it is a triangle as “triangle” is used in the discourse of carpentry, such irregularities would be sufficient to establish that the thing in question is not a triangle as “triangle” is used in the discourse of geometry.

According to St. Thomas, finite things are caused by God. They thus bear a “likeness” to God. God’s attributes are exemplary-versions of the attributes possessed by finite things. We reach whatever understanding we have of God’s attributes, by removing “imperfections” that attend these qualities when possessed by finite things.13 With respect to the predicate “good,” St. Thomas writes as follows in the Summa Theologica (Pt. I, Q. 6, A. 4):14

Each being is called good because of the divine goodness, the first exemplar principle as well as the efficient and telic cause of all goodness. Yet it is nonetheless the case that each being is called good because of a likeness of the divine goodness by which it is denominated.

Again, in questiones disputatae de veritate (XXI, 4), St. Thomas says:

Every agent is found to produce effects which resemble it. Hence, if the first goodness is the efficient cause of all things, it must imprint its likeness upon things which it produces. Thus each thing is called good because of an intrinsic goodness impressed upon it, and yet is further denominated good because of the first goodness which is the exemplar and efficient cause of all created goodness.

Shall we say that “good” has the same meaning when applied to God as it has when applied to things other than God (e.g. Socrates)? As above, it seems to me that the answer we give to this question is unimportant once we get this far into the discussion. We might say that “good” has the same meaning in the two cases, and we might say that it has different meanings in the two cases. We might even say (as St. Thomas sometimes says) that we are here dealing with a case in which “good” is “midway between” having the same meaning and having different meanings in the two cases. However, as above, the following point has importance regardless of how one answers the question about same or different meanings. When St. Thomas affirms that God is good, I think he means to be saying at least as much about God as one would say about, e.g., Socrates, if one were to affirm that Socrates is good. A study of “good” in non-theological contexts reveals at least the minimum implications of the corresponding predication statements relating to God. If we could find reasons sufficient for rejecting the claim that a given thing is good as “good” is used in discourse about finite agents, these same reasons would be sufficient for rejecting the claim that the thing in question is good as “good” is used in discourse about the nature of God. In fact, if we could find moral irregularities sufficient to cause hesitations or prompt reservations about whether a thing is good as “good” is used in discourse about finite agents,

13 In the Summa Theologica (Pt. I, Q. 14, a.1) St. Thomas says:

Because perfections flowing from God to creatures exist in a higher state in God Himself, whenever a name taken from any created perfection is attributed to God, there must be separated from its signification anything that belongs to the imperfect mode proper to creatures. (Quoted from The Basic Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, op. cit., p. 136.)

14 Both of the following passages were translated by George P. Klubertanz, S. J., Thomas Aquinas on Analogy (Chicago, Loyola Press, 1960), p. 55. For a good analysis of St. Thomas’ views on the topic of theological predication, see the whole of Klubertanz’ discussion in ch. III. For an enlightening discussion of how poorly St. Thomas has been understood on this topic (even by his most illustrious interpreters) see Klubertanz’ remarks in ch. I and Berkeley’s discussion of St. Thomas in Alcephon, IV, sects. 20–22. According to Berkeley, St. Thomas’ doctrine of “analogy by proportionality” is to be regarded as an expression of the view we are now discussing.
these irregularities would be sufficient to establish that the agent under consideration is not good as “good” is used in the discourse of theology.

So far as I can see, St. Thomas would not endorse a technical, well-removed sense of the phrase “perfectly good” that could apply to God even if God were to bring about circumstances or states of affairs the production of which would be morally reprehensible (in the ordinary sense of “morally reprehensible”). When St. Thomas says that God is good, he means to be saying that God possesses the exemplary version of the quality assigned to Socrates in the sentence “Socrates is good.” This is to say that while Socrates is good, God is perfectly good. But on this understanding of the matter, God could not be perfectly good were He to bring about the starving-child situation described earlier. If Socrates were to bring about such a situation, we would probably refuse to describe him as “good.” At the very least, we would surely have hesitations or reservations concerning his moral goodness. But, if such an action would be sufficient to cause hesitations concerning an application of “good” in discourse about finite agents, this same action would be sufficient to defeat an application of “good” in discourse about the nature of God. In this latter context, “good” means “perfectly good.” The logic of this phrase will not tolerate even a minor moral irregularity.

III

I want now to discuss an approach to our problem that is very different from any of those suggested by St. Thomas. It is an approach taken by J. A. McHugh in the Encyclopedia article mentioned above. I think we can best get at the center of McHugh’s thinking if we start with a review of that side of the problem generated by the concept of perfect goodness.

God is perfectly good. This is a necessary statement. If a being is perfectly good, that being does not bring about objects or states of affairs the production of which would be morally reprehensible. This, too, is a necessary truth. Thus, the statement “God brings about objects or states of affairs the production of which would be morally reprehensible” is logically contradictory. It follows that God cannot bring about such states of affairs. But, McHugh argues, this should not be taken as a reason for denying God’s omnipotence. As St. Thomas has pointed out, a being may be omnipotent and yet not be able to do an act whose description is logically contradictory. (A being may be omnipotent though he is not able to make a round-square.) Since the claim that God acts in a morally reprehensible way is logically contradictory, God’s inability to perform such acts does not constitute a limitation of power.

Consider the following argument: The term “Gid” is the title held by the most efficient of those who make only leather sandals. “Gid makes leather belts” is thus a logical contradiction. It follows that the individual that is Gid cannot make leather belts. But Gid may still be omnipotent. Though He does not have the ability to make leather belts, our analysis of “omnipotence” requires only that an omnipotent being be able to do an act whose description is logically consistent and “Gid makes leather belts” is logically inconsistent. Thus, Gid’s inability to make leather belts does not constitute a limitation on his power.

I think it is plain that this last argument is deficient since its conclusion is absurd. I think, too, that in this case, two difficulties are forced pretty close to the surface.

First, the description of the kind of object that Gid is (allegedly) unable to make (viz., leather belts) is not logically contradictory. What is contradictory is the claim that Gid makes them. But our definition of “omnipotent” requires only that the state of affairs brought about be consistently describable (excluding, therefore, round squares). It does not require that a statement in which it is claimed that a given individual brings it about be consistent. Thus, if Gid does not have the ability to produce leather belts, he is not omnipotent on St. Thomas’ definition of “omnipotent.” If it follows from the definition of “Gid” that the individual who bears this title cannot make leather belts; and if this entails that the individual in question does not have the creative-ability to make belts, the conclusion must be that, by definition, the individual who bears this title is a limited being. I think the same kind of conclusion must be drawn in the case of God’s ability to sin. If it follows from the definition of “God” that the individual bearing this title cannot bring about objects or states of affairs the production of which would be morally reprehensible; and if it follows from this that the individual bearing this title does not have the creative power necessary to bring about such states of affairs though they are consistently desirable; the conclusion is that the individual who is God is not omnipotent on the analysis of “omnipotent” that we are supposing. The fact (if it is a fact) that this
creative limitation is built into the definition of "God" making "God sins" a logical contradiction does not disturb this conclusion. The upshot is, simply, that the term "God" has been so specified that an individual qualifying for this title could not be omnipotent. (Of course, this is awkward because it is also a condition of bearing this title that the individual in question be omnipotent.)

The second difficulty in the argument about Gid is this: The term "Gid" has been defined in such a way that "Gid makes leather belts" is logically contradictory. The conclusion drawn is that Gid cannot make belts. What this means is that if some individual makes leather belts, this is logically sufficient to assure that the individual in question does not bear the title "Gid." But it does not follow from this (as is supposed in the argument) that the individual who is Gid does not have the ability to make leather belts. All we can conclude is that if he does have this ability, it is one that he does not exercise. Thus, as is affirmed in the argument, the individual who is Gid might be omnipotent though he cannot make leather belts (and be Gid). If we suppose that he is omnipotent, we must conclude that he has the ability to make belts; but since, by hypothesis, the individual in question is Gid, we know (analytically) that he does not exercise this ability. Again, I think the same is true with respect to the argument about God's inability to sin. The term "God" has been so specified that the individual who is God cannot sin and be God. But it will not follow from this that the individual who is God does not have the ability to sin. He might have the creative power necessary to bring about states of affairs the production of which would be morally reprehensible. He is perfectly good (and thus God) insofar as He does not exercise this power.

IV

If we collect together a number of threads developed in the preceding discussions, I think we shall have enough to provide at least a tentative solution to the problem we have been discussing. I shall proceed by distinguishing three ways in which the statement "God cannot sin" might be understood.

"God cannot sin" might mean: "If a given individual sins, it follows logically that the individual does not bear the title 'God'." In this case, the "cannot" in "cannot sin" expresses logical impossibility. The sentence as a whole might be rewritten as follows: \( N(x) \) (If \( x \) is God then \( x \) does not sin.) On the assumptions we are making in this paper, this statement is true. We have supposed that the meaning of the title term "God" is such that it is a logically necessary condition of bearing this title that one be perfectly good and thus that one not perform actions that are morally reprehensible.

Secondly, "God cannot sin" might mean that if a given individual is God, that individual does not have the ability to sin, i.e., He does not have the creative power necessary to bring about states of affairs the production of which would be morally reprehensible, such as, e.g., the starving-child situation described earlier. In this case, the "cannot" in "cannot sin" does not express logical impossibility. It expresses a material concept—that of a limitation of creative-power (as in, e.g., "I cannot make leather sandals"). On St. Thomas' analysis of "omnipotence" if the individual who is God (Yahweh) cannot sin in this sense, He is not omnipotent. Further, I think there is strong reason to suspect that if the individual that is God (Yahweh) cannot sin in this sense, He is not perfectly good either. Insofar as the phrase "perfectly good" applies to the individual that is God (Yahweh) as an expression of praise—warranted by the fact that this individual does not sin—God could not be perfectly good if He does not have the ability to sin. If an individual does not have the creative-power necessary to bring about evil states of affairs, he cannot be praised (morally) for failing to bring them about. Insofar as I do not have the physical strength necessary to crush my next door neighbor with my bare hands, it is not to my credit (morally) that I do not perform this heinous act.

Thirdly, "God cannot sin" might mean that although the individual that is God (Yahweh) has the ability (i.e., the creative power necessary) to bring about states of affairs the production of which would be morally reprehensible, His nature or character is such as to provide material assurance that He will not act in this way. This is the sense in which one might say that Jones, having been reared to regard animals as sensitive and precious friends, just cannot be cruel to animals. Here "cannot" is not to be analyzed in terms of the notion of logical impossibility and it does not mark a limitation on Jones's physical power (he may be physically able to kick the kitten). It is used to express the idea that Jones is strongly disposed to be kind to animals or at least to avoid actions that would be cruel. We have a special locution in English that covers this idea. When we say that Jones cannot be cruel
to animals, what we mean is that Jones cannot bring himself to be cruel to animals. On this third analysis of “God cannot sin,” the claim conveyed in this form of words is that the individual that is God (Yahweh) is of such character that he cannot bring himself to act in a morally reprehensible way. God is strongly disposed to perform only morally acceptable actions.

Look back for a moment over the ground we have covered.

McHugh noticed that the statement “God sins” is logically incoherent. He thus (rightly) concluded that God cannot sin. He was here affirming that the semantical import of the title term “God” is such that an individual could not (logically) bear this title and be a sinner. McHugh’s conclusion (“God cannot sin”) was thus intended in the first sense just mentioned. But McHugh then went on to suppose that God cannot sin in a sense of this phrase that connects with the notion of omnipotence. This is the second sense mentioned above. This conclusion was not warranted. The individual who bears the title “God” (Yahweh) might have the creative power necessary to bring about objects or states of affairs the production of which would be morally reprehensible even though “God sins” is logically contradictory. The conclusion is, simply, that if an individual bears the title “God,” He does not exercise this creative-power.

St. Thomas and St. Anselm said that God cannot sin in that “adversity and perversity cannot prevail against Him.” This appears to be the claim put forward in the Epistle of James 1:13—the claim embodied in the theological doctrine of God’s impeccability—viz., “God cannot be tempted by evil.” The individual that is God has a very special kind of strength—moral strength, or strength of character. He is, as we say, “above temptation.” Both Thomas and Anselm concluded that God’s inability to sin has a direct connection with the notion of omnipotence. It is because God is omnipotent that He is unable to sin. This line of reasoning confuses the second and third senses of the statement “God cannot sin.” If we say that the individual who is God cannot sin in this second sense (i.e., in the sense that connects with the idea of creative power and thus with the standard notion of omnipotence) this is not to assign that individual strength. It is to assign Him a very definite limitation. The strength-concept in this cluster of ideas is the notion of not being able to bring oneself to sin. God has a special strength of character. But this latter concept is expressed in the third sense of “God cannot sin.” As I argued earlier, this third sense appears to have no logical connection with the idea of having or lacking the creative power to bring about consistently describable states of affairs. It thus appears to have no logical connection to the notion of omnipotence as this latter concept is explicated by St. Thomas.

The individual that is God cannot sin and bear the title “God.” The individual that is God cannot sin in that sinning would be contrary to a firm and stable feature of His nature. These claims are compatible with the idea that the individual that is God has the ability (i.e., the creative power necessary) to bring about states of affairs the production of which would be morally reprehensible. All we need add is that there is complete assurance that He will not exercise this ability and that if He did exercise this ability (which is logically possible but materially excluded), He would not bear the title “God.” Further, if God is to be omnipotent in St. Thomas’ sense of “omnipotent,” and if God is to be perfectly good in a sense of this phrase that expresses praise for the fact that He refrains from sinful actions, this appears to be the conclusion that must be drawn.

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