

The paradox of omnipotence philosophy essay



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While tackling “ free will” as a solution to the problem of evil, Mackie who holds that the problem adequately makes the existence of an omnipotent, wholly good God irrational, argues that God in his omnipotence could have made man with a free will to always choose the right thing. God’s failure to intervene in the evil application of free will can only be justified thus: that God gave man the highest liberty that He cannot control man’s will.

However, herein arises the paradox of omnipotence. If God created men “ so free that he cannot control their wills,” then there is something he cannot do - he cannot control man’s will and would thus not be omnipotent, but if it be that God has the ability to have control over man’s will, then He has failed at something - creating a man whose will He has no control over and thus would not be omnipotent. When the query we are considering is phrased as a question: can God create a man who has such freedom that God cannot intervene in his actions, answering either yes or no leads to the implication that God fails at doing something and thus cannot be omnipotent.

This paper will focus on the paradox of Omnipotence which would in and of itself prove the irrationality of the existence of a God who has a primary component of omnipotence. The mention of the surrounding content of Mackie’s paper Evil and Omnipotence only serves as background information on how he comes to encounter the paradox to be debated. I will define omnipotence, present the paradox in the common place example of the stone, then recount the paradox of omnipotence as Mackie describes it. The second part of my paper will attempt to solve the paradox of omnipotence by considering a restructured definition of the trouble presented by the paradox of omnipotence where I will categorize degrees of failure in levels. After

observing that restrictions to omnipotence defeat the term itself, I will consider if the paradox can be solved rationally if the omnipotent being existed in timelessness.

I will use the term omnipotence to mean all powerful. The paradox of omnipotence is commonly exemplified by the riddlelike question that one was told naughty children asked their pastors: whether God can create a stone he cannot lift where he answers in the affirmative, he would be admitting God's inability to create a stone of certain characteristics, if he answered in the negative he would be admitting that there is something God cannot do - lift the stone after creating it, thus each either answer would contradict omnipotence, a central tenement for the God of Western tradition. Mackie defines the God in question as omnipotent, discredits the coherence of omnipotence and therefore discredits the existence of a God defined with a primary characteristic of omnipotence. Like those who ask about the creation of the unliftable stone, Mackie asks whether God can create a being that he cannot control in the case of the man with free will.

To the his objector's response (which he had anticipated earlier in the paper) that God creates casual laws or rules of logic which he chooses to follow, Mackie asks whether the omnipotent being can make rules which bind his power. This question plays out like that of creating of an omnipotent God creating man with free will: If God could create casual rules, despite choosing to follow them freely, His powers would be restricted by these rules and after their creation , He could do what these rules restrict Him from. Should the answer be negative, then there is something he cannot do - he fails at the ability to create the causal laws.

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Mackie then says that one cannot respond by saying that his questions are not “proper” because if the a question of a similar nature was asked about man and machines: whether man can create a machine over which he has no control over, the question would be considered sound. He thus points to the notion of omnipotence as the source of the problem. He appreciates that theological determinists would argue that man in his assembly predisposed the machine to act in certain ways as did God in his creation of man and that being omniscient God was already aware of the specific actions man would take. However, Mackie highlights that the question is not on God’s original influence at creation but His continuous influence.

Mackie compares the probability of God’s restriction by the laws of nature to a parliament that creates a law that liquidates its power. Can a parliament create a law that nullifies its power? If one answers yes, they would be considering a law as a law something set by a body that would no longer be valid as the item of governance. Yet if they say no, one would be denying the sovereignty of the body by saying there is a law it can’t make. Contrasting actions arrive to the same denial of omnipotence. This implies that omnipotence as a concept is logically incoherent. Mackie solves this paradox by distinguishing between laws that govern the land (which he names first order laws) and laws that govern the law making body(which he calls second order laws). He says we can consider a parliament to have absolute power over the first order laws or a present parliament which has both absolute power over creation of laws for the land and laws governing itself but that we cannot conceive of a parliament having control over laws that govern parliament yet guarantee that future parliaments will have absolute power

over first order laws because the present parliament may remove a parliaments ability to create laws of the land.

We can reconcile God and the laws of logic in the same way. If God's powers were considered in the categories of power over creation and power to create the rules which creation shall follow. Then we can conceive of God always having omnipotence but none of his creation can have free will or that at one instance God could have both first and second order omnipotence in which he creates laws for creation to follow independently thereafter creation would determine its future in accordance with the laws assigned but that God would have relinquished his first order omnipotence of directly determining the actions of all of creation. Mackie reaches the conclusion that God can have omnipotence if it is categorized as above: one eternally or to have one and two at one instant but to forever relinquish 1 but not both powers continuously unless God were to exist outside time.

I find Mackie's attempt to reconcile omnipotence over eternity by creating orders compelling. It feels more natural to have an omnipotent being who cannot create a stone that he can't lift than it does to have him lack the ability to lift a stone. There is something to be said about that. Perhaps because the latter, " yes, he can create a being that he cannot control" seems self defeating and would in itself express a limit to his power in a positive sense. I say positive sense because something would exist of which he would not wield power over. That object in that sense would have power over him so to speak. However, in the first case of answering, " no an omnipotent being cannot create something that he cannot control," it appears to be in accordance with his power that he does not create an object

embedded with a limit to his power. Because “no” indicates that this object cannot be brought into existence, in its consideration it is an abstract limit to his power, not as “real” as that being he cannot control when we answer yes because that being already exists. This view would lead to levels of failure where in the first level of failure would be failing to create a stone he cannot lift is considered a comparatively more powerful state than the second level of there existing the being that cannot be controlled. Though the analogy is not exact to Mackie’s this is to say that I cannot equate my first level to his first order and my second level to his second order, it borrows from Mackie that we would have to put a restriction to explain or have “omnipotence.” Nevertheless I ran into the same point of the paradox that Mackie runs into: that the existence of the restriction contradicts the concept of omnipotence.

Omnipotence is absolute and cannot have exception for this or the other ability. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines omnipotence as “maximal power” so that the being possessing it only need to have a total power that beats every other beings, not the ability to do everything. This suggests a distinction between power and ability. Such omnipotent being is conceivable but is this really omnipotence? There is the suggestion of an essentially omnipotent being who cannot will Himself out of omnipotent, here again we run into the paradox. How can an all powerful being fail at something – willing himself out of omnipotence. But if He could, He wouldn’t be omnipotent, thus we would lose the eternity. If the discussion were to halt here, I would agree with Mackie that omnipotence is incoherent.

However, there is the suggestion of God existing in timeless which Mackie

touches on but immediately dismisses that might yet solve our paradox without proven irrational.

Omnipotence as power in an absolute state would entail the ability to influence events which would appear to be beyond influence for being defined as past events. If God existed in time then, time would be his master and this would add to the unfeasibility of omnipotence. However, if we were to consider God to exist outside the frame of time, in timelessness, this would remove the confine of time. Suppose God could possess life "all at once," as the Stanford Encyclopedia of philosophy includes in the definition of timelessness. Imagine an instance that was eternal, so that events would not be a sequence within time but one unity as if they were simultaneous - this would be the scope of this God's life. Perhaps as all the time periods of the universe compressed as into one which He would experience as a whole. It is quite challenging to define timelessness without applying terms that refer to finite time because the words are all formed with reference to time and in defining timelessness would be negating ie. saying "not time." Even the encyclopedia's words "life" all at once" use the word once which is itself taken from time. But this does not mean that something like this supreme being cannot exist in timelessness. If one considers time as a frame, it suggests the possibility of factors outside time itself bringing this frame into existence.

If we consider defining time in terms of change: We can observe the age of a statue by observing it wear... Sometimes we define time in terms of the change of the frame so that if we created a statue that did not wear out, we can observe (through the sense of sight) that it has existed for such and

such a time by observing the change in its environment. Change around an object that isn't extended in space might be harder to quantify, but perhaps this would serve no purpose for if this being was experiencing all of life simultaneously, there would be no change and thus no time. If it was the case that God experienced life all at once and there was happiness and sadness on earth, He would experience them both simultaneously.

Perhaps contradiction is a term defined by the rules of our logic just the way there was a time when men laughed at the thought of flying but today we have planes. Ability and contradiction might be defined in terms of the realm of possibility perceived by that generation. Perhaps the contradiction is even a frame of the human mind operating in a universe subject to natural laws and logic but just as the universe exists there could exist something other forms (non-universe forms) that follow different laws, perhaps even laws of contradiction if one can envision such a world, God's form could be one such. The "God of contradiction could create a stone that he can't lift, yet as all of life is in an instant, he would (at what would appear to us to be a different time) lift it as well. We can thus not rule out an omnipotent being in timelessness where omnipotence is conceivable.

I agree with Mackie that a God who is eternally omnipotent, having absolute omnipotence to both influence events and create laws to govern how events are influenced is incoherent because he could at one instant create the rule that would restrict Himself from further influencing events. However, I disagree with Mackie's dismissal of the concept of God in timelessness: if it is conceivable that God can experience life all at once: what to us would appear to be a sequence of events at different times within the frame of time

would occur at one eternal instant so contradictions could occur. Perhaps if the definition of a thing is determined by the existence of its opposite, that we only notice red because other colors exist and perhaps if there were no other color we would just never conceive of any color altogether, if time exists, perhaps it is because we can imagine timelessness, or its possibility. Timelessness cannot be ruled out, consequently neither can an omnipotence that Mackie can grant if timelessness existed.