

# OMNIPOTENCE AND THE ANSELMIAN GOD

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**Abstract:** Can God be both omnipotent and essentially good? Working with the Anselmian conception of God as the greatest possible being, a number of philosophers have tried to show that omnipotence should be understood in such a way that these properties are compatible. In the present paper, I argue that we can, without inconsistency or other obvious absurdity, conceive of a being more powerful than the Anselmian God. I conclude that contemporary Anselmian philosophers have conflated two logically distinct questions: (1) How much power would be possessed by the best possible God? and (2) How much power is required for omnipotence? When these questions are distinguished, it can be seen that the Anselmian God does not have maximal power and is not omnipotent.

Analyses of omnipotence generally include a long list of things that even an omnipotent person can *not* do. Even an all-powerful person cannot make contradictions true, cannot alter the past, cannot make another person freely do an act, cannot create a stone that he or she cannot move, cannot determine which “counterfactuals of freedom” are true, and so on. The principal rationale for such “limitations” is that no one, no matter how powerful, could transgress them. Even an omnipotent being, according to this way of thinking, need not have greater than the maximum *possible* degree of power.

There is one frequently cited “limitation” of God’s power, however, that resists this pattern of explanation.<sup>1</sup> Many theists believe that God is perfectly and essentially good—good, that is, in all possible worlds in which he exists.<sup>2</sup> It seems to follow that God cannot do anything that he would not be morally justified in doing. Consider, for example, the following states of affairs:

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E1. An innocent child being maliciously tortured.

E2. Innocent persons being tortured forever.

It's hard to see how God could be justified in actualizing either E1 or E2. But on the face of it, there is nothing obviously impossible about these states of affairs. We can consistently conceive of a being having all of God's power plus the power to actualize them. How, then, can God have the maximum possible degree of power if he cannot actualize E1 and E2?

The purpose of this paper is to consider and refute some of the more popular proposed "solutions" to this problem that one finds in the literature on omnipotence. I shall be looking particularly at the views of contemporary "Anselmians" who have written on this topic—Thomas Morris, Thomas Flint, Alfred Freddoso, and others.<sup>3</sup>

To deal with states of affairs like E1, it has been suggested that God can at least "weakly" actualize such states of affairs. For the counterfactuals of freedom may be such that there is a person P and a situation S such that if P were in S, P would torture an innocent child. And God may—all things considered—be justified in creating P in situation S. Since the fault then lies with P, not with God, there is nothing here that is incompatible with God's essential goodness.

Even if this were an adequate solution to the problem posed by E1 (and in Part 2 I shall argue that it is not), there would still be a problem about E2, since it is hard to see how a perfectly good and all-powerful person could allow anyone to actualize a state of affairs in which innocent persons are tortured forever.

Some Anselmian philosophers have argued that states of affairs like E2 are not genuinely possible. If God exists and is perfectly good and all powerful in all possible worlds, then there is no possible world in which E2 obtains. But if there is no possible world in which E2 obtains, then, so it is claimed, E2 is not a genuinely possible state of affairs, and God's inability to actualize it does not count against his possessing the maximum possible degree of power.

On this view, God is a "delimiter of possibility."<sup>4</sup> The very structure of metaphysical possibility is shaped by his necessary existence. States of affairs that would otherwise seem perfectly possible may not be possible because they are incompatible with the necessary existence of a perfectly good God.

Attractive as this view is on first hearing, I believe that it does not succeed in solving the puzzle about E2. In Part 1, I shall try to show that the kind of possibility invoked by the Anselmian account is not the only one relevant to the analysis of omnipotence. In Part 2, I shall try to show that neither of the Anselmian solutions just mentioned succeed in solving the problem posed by E1.

## PART 1: GOD AS A "DELIMITER OF POSSIBILITY?"

The kind of possibility Anselmians have in mind when they say that God is a "delimiter of possibility" is the "broadly logical"<sup>5</sup> or "metaphysical" sense

of “possibility.” (I shall be using these expressions interchangeably.) In this sense of the word, some states of affairs may *be* impossible even though we are unable to see how, or even that, this is so. For example, Goldbach’s conjecture that every even number greater than 2 is the sum of two primes may (for all we know) be true, or it may be false. If true, its denial is impossible. If false, then Goldbach’s conjecture is itself impossible. Either way, one of the alternatives is impossible in the broadly logical sense, even though we have at present no way of knowing which.

It is in this sense, then, that the Anselmian suggests that E2 is impossible. If, in the broadly logical sense, God exists in every possible world, then no state of affairs logically incompatible with God’s existence obtains in any possible world. But E2 is logically incompatible with God’s existence, since God is essentially good. There is no possible world in which God allows E2 to obtain.

But is broadly logical possibility the only sort of possibility relevant to the analysis of omnipotence? After all, one can “conceive” of many different sorts of God and many different ways in which the “space” of possible worlds might (for all we know) be structured. Might not our intuitions about some of these conceptual possibilities have a bearing on the analysis of omnipotence?

Imagine, for example, a world in which creatures are ruled by a demon whose power parallels that of God in every respect save one: the demon has the power to actualize E2. Would not such a being be more powerful than God? If so, then must we not conclude that the Anselmian God lacks maximal power and is not omnipotent?

Alternatively, imagine a world in which the universe is created and ruled by a demon who is so evil that he cannot so much as allow goods like sunsets and symphonies and babies’ smiles. The demon has, let us suppose, an *essential* aversion to such things. There is no possible world in which the demon lacks the power to prevent them, and no possible world in which he allows them. Surely this restriction entails that the demon is less than all powerful?

My Anselmian opponents will doubtless reply that the “worlds” that figure in these thought experiments are not possible in the relevant sense of “possible.”<sup>6</sup> But why should we agree that they are not possible? As nearly as I can tell, there is nothing inconceivable about such worlds. I see no contradiction or inconsistency in them. They *may* not be possible in the broadly logical sense, but we have been given no reason to think that they are not.

It’s clear enough what is going on here. The Anselmian is operating on the assumption, not only that God exists, but that a God of the Anselmian sort exists—one who exists and possesses all the divine perfections, including moral goodness, in every possible world. Since I do not begin with that assumption, it naturally seems to me that the analysis of omnipotence should take into account our intuitions about a space of possibilities that is somewhat broader than that acknowledged by Anselmians—one that includes not only those possibilities that are consistent with the existence of the Anselmian God, but also many others that we can conceive without inconsistency of other obvious absurdity. That is why it seems to me that we can, without absurdity, conceive of a being more powerful than the

Anselmian God. But if, as I have suggested, the Anselmian God lacks the maximum conceivable degree of power, it is natural enough to conclude that a God of the Anselmian type could not be omnipotent.

I can think of three rather different ways for Anselmians to respond to this line of criticism. The first, and most straightforward, of the three, would be to offer a proof that the Anselmian God necessarily exists. Of course, St. Anselm had just such a proof. Alas, the best contemporary versions of the Ontological Argument establish only that, *if* it is possible in the broadly logical sense that a maximally great being exists, then it is necessary that it exists. Unfortunately, it is equally true that, *if* it is possible in the broadly logical sense that a maximally great being does *not* exist, then it is *impossible* that it exists. As in the case of Goldbach's conjecture, we have no way of deciding which is the correct premise prior to deciding which is the correct conclusion.<sup>7</sup>

A second, more likely, response would be appeal to something like Plantinga's well-known theory of epistemic warrant.<sup>8</sup> If belief in the Anselmian God could be shown to be basic to the noetic structure of the traditional theists—or at least to be derivable from other beliefs that are basic to that structure—then, on Plantinga's theory, it would follow that believers are warranted in asserting that the Anselmian God exists.<sup>9</sup> The "intuitions" of traditional theists about what is required for omnipotence may be different from those of nontheists, but they are answerable to *their* intuitions, and not to those of others.

This is not the place for a full-dress review of Plantinga's epistemology, but a couple of points can be made without going into all of that. The first thing to see is that, even if traditional theists are warranted in asserting that the Anselmian God exists, it does not follow that, *for purposes of analyzing the general concept of omnipotence*, they are warranted in narrowing the space of possibilities to just those that are compatible with the Anselmian theology. Indeed, when analyzing any shared concept, it seems wrong to limit ourselves to intuitions possessed only by some of those who possess the concept. If Anselmians refuse to play by these rules, they may not unfairly be accused of changing the subject. They may well have created an interesting new concept—one that fits in more easily with their own theology, but they have not succeeded in analyzing the concept of omnipotence that we started out with.<sup>10</sup>

Suppose, however, that we agree to play by Anselmian rules, giving weight only to the intuitions of traditional theists. It is still far from clear that we ought to limit the space of possibilities in the way proposed by Anselmians. Many traditional theists do, of course, share the core Anselmian intuition that God is the greatest of all possible beings. They may even agree that the greatest possible being must exist in all possible worlds. But even if God would be greater if he possessed some of his attributes (e.g. omniscience and omnipotence) in all possible worlds, it doesn't follow that he would be greater if he possessed all of them in all possible worlds.

The case of moral goodness is particularly problematic in this regard. Which is greater, anyway? A God who doesn't do evil because he is essentially good and can't? Or a God who can do evil but is so good that he doesn't

choose to? There are traditional theists on both sides of this issue.<sup>11</sup> My own “intuitions” about “greatness” are pretty unstable. But it is not at all obvious to me that Anselmians who believe that God is greater if essentially good get the better of the argument at this point.<sup>12</sup>

I have suggested that, for purposes of analyzing the concept of omnipotence, we shouldn't just assume that the Anselmian God exists. But perhaps the Anselmian can deny that any such thing *is* being assumed. Perhaps he can get by with saying that an omnipotent being must have the maximum possible degree of power (in the broadly logical sense) without assuming anything about what kind of God actually exists, and therefore without implying anything about whether states of affairs like E2 are possible. This brings us to the third of the responses promised above.

The Anselmian will, of course, continue to insist that *if* God exists and is essentially good, *then* states of affairs like E2 are not possible, and that in that case God's inability to actualize them does not count against his being omnipotent. But this is perfectly consistent with acknowledging that *if* some other sort of God exists, *then* there is a different space of possibilities, and that in that case an omnipotent being might (for all we know) have the power to actualize states of affairs like E2. Either way, the Anselmian may say, we are free to analyze omnipotence in terms of maximal power within the space of metaphysical possibility—wherever its boundaries happen to be. If a critic (like me) continues to claim that omnipotence entails the ability to actualize E2, then the Anselmian may reply that the burden of proof falls on the critic. In order to prove this point, the critic must show that the Anselmian God does *not* exist.

If the Anselmian does go down this path, he will have to admit that we can say little about what specific powers an omnipotent being must have until we have determined (a) whether God exists and (b) what kind of God exists. Why? Because the relevant space of possibilities cannot be fixed until we have decided what kind of God, if any, “delimits” it. If, for example, the space of possibilities is “delimited” by the necessary existence of a very powerful being having an “essential” aversion to chiliagons, then chiliagon-shaped objects are not possible, and even an omnipotent being cannot produce one. Even though *we* can see no contradiction or other absurdity in the concept of something, it may (for all we know) lie outside the boundaries of *metaphysical* possibility.

Thus we arrive at a kind of “modal skepticism”<sup>13</sup> in which all sorts of *apparently* possible states of affairs could, *for all we know*, lie outside the space of metaphysical possibility. Some philosophical theists cheerfully embrace modal skepticism, seeing in it a valuable apologetic tool to be deployed against various “atheological”<sup>14</sup> arguments. For example Peter Van Inwagen has suggested that it may, *for all we know*, be the case that “every possible world that contains higher-level sentient creatures either contains patterns of suffering morally equivalent to [the amount, kinds, and distribution of suffering in the actual world], or else is massively irregular.”<sup>15</sup> There is no particular reason to believe that any such thing is true—he claims only that

the limits of metaphysical possibility are so far beyond our grasp that it may, *for all we know*, be true; and that, he supposes, entitles him to include it in an *epistemically* possible “story” in which even an omnipotent deity would be morally justified in actualizing a world containing “the amount, kinds, and distribution of suffering” that we find in the actual world.

William P. Alston takes a similar line. “Consistent conceivability” or “conceptual possibility,” he writes, “is by no means sufficient for metaphysical possibility, for what is possible given the metaphysical structure of reality.”<sup>16</sup> Alston goes on to argue that we “haven’t a clue” as to the precise boundaries of metaphysical possibility. The reason is that:

We don’t have a clue as to what essential natures are within God’s creative repertoire, and still less do we have a clue as to which combinations of these into total lawful systems are doable. . . . [C]an there be life without hydrocarbon? Who knows? Can there be conscious, intelligent organisms with free will that are not susceptible to pain? . . . Who can say?

But plainly Alston assumes that omnipotence must be understood in terms of the ability to actualize only those states of affairs that are metaphysically possible. For he continues:

Since we don’t have even the beginnings of a canvass of the possibilities here, we are in no position to make a sufficiently informed judgment as to what God could or could not create by way of a natural order that contains the goods of this one (or equal goods of other sorts) without its disadvantages.

This approach to the analysis of omnipotence (and to the problem of evil) seems utterly wrong-headed to me. If we are as unclear as this about the boundaries of metaphysical possibility, what reason do we have for thinking that omnipotence is even a possible property? Why should we suppose that the “stories” Van Inwagen and others tell about why God might allow suffering feature a genuinely *omnipotent* deity? If, *for all we know*, the metaphysical structure of reality may be such as to exclude all sorts of obvious conceptual possibilities, then, *for all we know*, it may also be such as to exclude the possibility that the concept of omnipotence has any instances. Indeed, I would go further. If the space of broadly logical possibility is as narrow as is sometimes suggested, then I suspect that it *does* exclude the existence of anyone who could reasonably be called “all powerful.”

But the situation is even worse for the Anselmian who views God as a prime “delimiter” of metaphysical possibility. He must reckon with the (epistemic) possibility that any given state of affairs may be incompatible with the existence of whatever necessarily existent persons may (for all we know) exist. By way of illustration, consider the following (conceptually possible) state of affairs.

T1. A ten-ton rock levitating to a position one mile above the earth and then remaining stationary for one hour while the earth rotates beneath it.

Surely we do not have to wait for the outcome of philosophical inquiry into the existence of nature of God to know that an all-powerful being would be able to actualize states of affairs like T1. A person’s inability to make a rock

behave in the manner described by T1 should, all by itself, be sufficient to show that he lacks the maximum conceivable amount of power and is not omnipotent. (Any traditional theist who is tempted to say that omnipotence may be unable to actualize the likes of T1 on the ground that T1 is metaphysically impossible would do well to reflect on some of the more stupendous miracles reported in scripture.<sup>17</sup>) So, if the space of broadly logical possibility did turn out to exclude T1 for the sole reason that there is a necessarily existent person—call her Sally—who, due to an essential aversion to levitating rocks, cannot help preventing T1 from obtaining in every possible world, then I think we should say that this same space of possibilities also excludes omnipotence. For, no matter how powerful Sally is in other respects, we can conceive of a more powerful being—one just as powerful as Sally in other respects, but who, unlike Sally, can actualize T1.<sup>18</sup>

As far as I can see, the case of E2 is no different from that of T1 in this respect. In itself, E2 is consistently conceivable. There does not appear to anything logically absurd about E2. Apart from theological considerations, there is no reason to suppose that E2 has a modal status different from that of T1. So if maximal power and omnipotence entail the ability to actualize T1, I would say that they also entail the ability to actualize E2. And if we end up deciding, on the basis of theological considerations, that the space of metaphysical possibility excludes E2, then we should say precisely the same thing we would say if it turned out to exclude T1. We should acknowledge that this is a space of possibilities in which no one could be all powerful.

My Anselmian opponents may wish to challenge this last inference, on the ground that, no matter what the boundaries of the space of metaphysical possibility turn out to be, no others are possible.<sup>19</sup> It is absurd, they may say, to suggest that an omnipotent being should be able to do things that may, for all we know, lie outside the boundaries of possibility in the broadly logical sense. Even if we do not know precisely how to draw the boundaries of this kind of possibility, omnipotence can and should be defined in such a way that it requires maximal power within, and only within, the space of genuine metaphysical possibility.

I do not think this approach to the analysis of omnipotence has much chance of success. For one thing, it is far from clear that there must be a maximum metaphysically possible degree of power. Indeed, if our ignorance of the space of metaphysical possibility is as great as has been suggested, we have no reason whatever to suppose that power must have an intrinsic maximum. For any given degree of power, there may (for all we know) be a greater degree that is also metaphysically possible. For all we know, therefore, there may be no such thing as the maximum metaphysically possible degree of power.

But let that pass. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that, no matter what the space of metaphysical possibility looks like, there is a maximum possible degree of power. The Anselmian account of omnipotence is still in trouble. For if this is all there is to the property of having “maximal power,” there is little reason to think that maximal power is sufficient for omnipo-

tence. “Maximal power” certainly sounds grand and godlike. But if, when we inquire more closely into it, it turns out that this property is—as far as we can see—consistent with not being able to actualize E2 or T1 or a host of other perfectly conceivable states of affairs, then I think we have a reason of some weight for not saying that possessing maximal power is sufficient for being all powerful.

At the very least, I think it must be acknowledged that, whether or not he possesses the maximum metaphysically possible degree of power, the Anselmian God lacks the maximum *conceivable* degree of power. And that, I think, is all that is needed to show that the Anselmian analysis cannot be the correct analysis of the *concept* of omnipotence.

Some Anselmians may wish to respond by saying that what they are after is the analysis, *not* of anyone’s rough, pre-philosophical *concept* of omnipotence, but of the *property* we are referring to when we speak of omnipotence. Even if our intuitions about conceptual possibilities are relevant to the analysis of the concept of omnipotence (or of our “community stereotypes” for applying this concept), they do not refute the Anselmian analysis of the property picked out by that concept.

But why think that the property of having maximal power in the Anselmian space of possibilities is the one picked out by the concept of omnipotence? Why suppose that it is the property being referred to by ordinary believers when they say that their God is all powerful? If the Anselmian property fails to satisfy the intuitive requirements for instantiating our concept of omnipotence, why think it is the property behind that concept?

It might be thought that the Anselmian could appeal to a causal theory of meaning at this point. There is, after all, an experiential dimension to Anselm’s Ontological Argument, and it is perhaps not accidental that the key passages of the *Proslogium* take the form of a prayer. Might it not be the case that the causal history of the word “omnipotent” includes one or more experiential encounters with the power of God—encounters that led unknown persons to begin speaking of God as all powerful? *God’s* power—however that is best analyzed—might then be said to be all the power that is required for omnipotence. Just as scientific investigation has shown that H<sub>2</sub>O is the “natural kind” picked out by the predicate “water,” so, too, it might be thought, theological investigation has shown that maximal power in the Anselmian space of possibilities is the property picked out by the predicate “omnipotent.”

Obviously such a theory will have limited appeal, since it presupposes the existence of God. But let that pass. Even assuming the existence of a Greater Than Which None Can Be Conceived, I doubt that the Anselmian analysis of omnipotence can be rescued in this way. Omnipotence just isn’t the sort of property that could be said to produce characteristic “experiences.”<sup>20</sup> Displays of power take the form of actually *doing* things, and there is no experiential difference between a stupendous miracle produced by an omnipotent being and a similar miracle produced by a less than omnipotent supernatural being. It is quite implausible, therefore, to suggest that

omnipotence is a “natural kind” of the sort that is sometimes thought to lie behind our characteristic sensory experiences of water or gold.

Furthermore, it is perfectly obvious where our concept of omnipotence comes from. It is *derived* from the general concept of power in the following way. We *begin* with various human powers and with a keen awareness of what we can and cannot do. Believing that the Creator of all could not be subject to the limitations of his creatures, we remove from the concept of what God can and can't do as many of those limitations as we can without absurdity. In this way, we arrive at the concept of a degree of power that cannot be exceeded—a maximum *conceivable* degree of power—a degree of power that cannot be exceeded even in thought or imagination.<sup>21</sup>

What contemporary Anselmians have done is to substitute “metaphysical possibility” for Anselm’s “conceivability.” In so doing, they protect their accounts of omnipotence from refutation by merely “conceivable” counterexamples. But, as I have tried to show, a heavy price is paid for this advantage. For if Anselmians go down this road, it is no longer at all clear that the property being analyzed is the one picked out by the concept of omnipotence. Or that what Anselmians speak of as “maximal power” and “omnipotence” captures all that is meant by ordinary believers when they say that their God is all powerful.

There may be other, better, ways to defend the Anselmian claim that omnipotence does not entail the power to actualize the likes of E2. But I believe that any successful strategy will have to find a way to do justice to our intuitive judgments about various conceptual possibilities. If Anselmians persist in attending only to those possibilities that are consistent with their preferred theological position, they may not unfairly be accused of a subtle sleight of hand. Instead of analyzing the concept of omnipotence, they have substituted an analysis of “how much power it is possible for anyone to have if the Anselmian God exists.” That may, in some theological contexts, be a useful line of inquiry; but it does not tell us what it is for someone to be all powerful.

## Part 2: Is the Power to *Weakly* Actualize Sufficient for Maximal Power?

Even if the Anselmian argument for the impossibility of E2 were deemed a complete success, the problem posed by states of affairs like E1 would remain. For E1 is not only possible—it obtains in the actual world. All too often, innocent children are tortured—not by God, no doubt, but by his wicked creatures. If God is not able to actualize E1, then he has, in that respect at least, less power than might (for all we know) have been possessed by an otherwise comparable deity who lacked essential goodness.

In their well-known treatment of omnipotence,<sup>22</sup> Flint and Freddoso appeal to some of the concepts involved in Plantinga’s free will defense to solve this problem. God’s essential goodness may prevent him from *causing* E1 to obtain. But he may nevertheless have morally sufficient reasons for *allowing* some of his free creatures to do so. In allowing them to do this,

there is a “weak” sense in which God himself also actualizes E1.

“Weak actualization” works like this. Suppose that a certain “counterfactual of freedom” is true of you. If I offer you a drink, you will freely take it. I don’t *make* you take it by offering it to you. In that sense I do not *strongly* actualize the state of affairs consisting in your taking a drink. But I do *weakly* actualize it by putting you in a situation in which, your counterfactuals of freedom being what they are, you *would* take a drink.

Flint and Freddoso suppose that there is a complete set of facts about what any possible free creature would freely do in any possible situation. In virtue of his “middle knowledge” of these counterfactuals, God weakly actualizes whatever his creatures freely choose to do. Since they have used their freedom in such a way as to actualize E1, it follows that God has weakly actualized E1. And since God has in fact weakly actualized E1, it also follows that he has the power to do so.

Where does this leave us with regard to omnipotence? Well, on the Flint/Freddoso proposal, omnipotence entails the power weakly to actualize E1, but not the power strongly to actualize such states of affairs. In that way, they say, our problem is solved.

The analysis of omnipotence we have proposed does not require an omnipotent being to have the power *strongly* to actualize states of affairs like [E1]; the ability *weakly* to actualize them is sufficient to satisfy the conditions laid down by D [our definition of omnipotence]. Once this is recognized, it is no longer strange to contend that God, while remaining impeccable, might well have the power to actualize a state of affairs such as [E1]. For [E1] could be part of some world W which is itself such that God’s actualizing it might be morally justifiable.<sup>23</sup>

At this point, it is natural to wonder whether the proposed “cure” is not worse than the “disease.” For weak actualization presupposes a complete set of counterfactuals of freedom for every possible person. And on the view under consideration, these counterfactuals limit what God can do. How can that be compatible with omnipotence?

Note too that the counterfactuals of freedom are only contingently true. For example, where S is a situation containing the corrupt Mayor of Boston, the following counterfactual might be true in the actual world.

B1. If, in situation S, Curley were offered a bribe, he would take it.

But if B1 is a genuine counterfactual of *freedom*, there must then be another world W, in which it is true that:

B2. If, in situation S, Curley were offered a bribe, he would *not* take it.

It follows that, if God’s power is limited by a complete set of counterfactuals of freedom like B1 and B2, then it is limited by a host of *contingent* facts. “[H]ow,” asks J.L. Mackie, “could there be logically contingent states of affairs, *prior to the creation and existence of any created beings with free will*, which an omnipotent god would have to accept and put up with?” And Mackie quickly answers: “The suggestion is simply incoherent.”<sup>24</sup>

I think Mackie is probably mistaken about this. For while the philosophers whose views he is criticizing do hold that the counterfactuals of freedom are contingently true or false, they do *not* believe that it is contingent whether or not there is a complete set of true counterfactuals of freedom. In the case of counterfactual conditions like B1 and B2, they accept a “conditional law of excluded middle.” As a matter of logical necessity, where  $A \rightarrow C$  is a counterfactual of freedom, either  $A \rightarrow C$  or  $A \rightarrow \neg C$  must be true. If they are right about this, it follows that it is inconceivable that anyone, however powerful, could fail to be limited by whatever counterfactuals of freedom happen to be true of persons other than herself. Even if a person had some control over her own counterfactuals of freedom, she could not control those of other persons, since if she did, they would cease to be counterfactuals of *freedom*.<sup>25</sup>

So I think Flint and Freddoso make a good point when they say that “it is a necessary truth that every being is in a sense simply presented with a set of counterfactuals whose truth-values he is powerless to control.”<sup>26</sup> If this is right, then, by the standard for maximal power that I have been applying in this paper, the contingency of the counterfactuals of freedom is not a problem for the claim that God possesses maximal power.

Other questions remain. Are there really any true counterfactuals of freedom? What could make the counterfactuals of freedom of a merely possible person true? Does a person control her own counterfactuals of freedom? If they were true “prior” to God’s decision to create the world, it’s hard to see how she can. But if they aren’t under control, it’s hard to see how they can be genuine counterfactuals of *freedom* (in an incompatibilist, libertarian sense).<sup>27</sup>

These are important interesting questions, but they lie well beyond the scope of the present paper. What matters for present purposes is that even if all of these questions could be resolved in favor of the counterfactuals of freedom, the Flint/Freddoso proposal still fails. Its requirements for omnipotence are far too weak.

How can God be all powerful, we asked, if he cannot actualize evil states of affairs like E1? “Oh, but he can actualize them,” we are told. How so? “Because he can *weakly* actualize them,” is the reply. There are two decisive objections to this response.

In the first place, the analysis offered by Flint and Freddoso leaves it open that the counterfactuals of freedom might (for all we know) be such that there is some obviously possible evil state of affairs that no possible person *would* actualize. Suppose, for example, that there is some ingenious method of torture—call it TR—that no one in the actual world has thought of. Now consider the state of affairs that consists in:

E3. Some innocent person’s being subjected to the TR method of torture.

Can God actualize E3? The answer suggested by Flint and Freddoso is that God can *weakly* actualize it. That is, God can create some free person, whose counterfactuals of freedom are such that she would (if created) freely apply

the TR method of torture of some innocent person.

But is this really so? For all we know, the counterfactuals of freedom may be such that no possible persons *would* choose to apply the TR method of torture. It might be, to coin a phrase, that every possible person suffers from “transworld aversion to the TR method of torture.” (The reader will recognize the reference to Plantinga’s “transworld depravity” here.<sup>28</sup>) If this were so, God would be unable even *weakly* to actualize E3. So, on the Flint/Freddoso account, God cannot in any sense (either weakly or strongly) actualize this apparently possible state of affairs.

This is not the most fundamental problem with their account, however. A second and more important objection is that, no matter what the counterfactuals of freedom are like, the power *weakly* to actualize a state of affairs is simply not sufficient for maximal power. The following example should make this clear.

Suppose that I can build a house, but you can’t. However, if you were to ask me to build one, I would do so. Now consider the following state of affairs.

H. A house being built.

In terms of the strong/weak actualization distinction, it follows that I can strongly actualize H, but you can’t. Would it not be absurd to suggest that you have as much power as I do with respect to states of affairs involving house-building, on the ground that, although you cannot strongly actualize H, you can weakly actualize it by asking me to strongly actualize it for you?

All other things being equal, a person who can strongly actualize a state of affairs has more power than a person who can only weakly actualize it. That is why I do not think that the power weakly to actualize E1 can be all that is required (with respect to E1) for omnipotence. It is simply too easy to conceive of a being who is just as powerful as the Anselmian God in other respects, but who has in addition the power strongly to actualize E1.

If the boundaries of metaphysical possibility are as obscure as Anselmians sometimes suggest, then I suppose that (for all we know) the maximum metaphysically possible degree of power might not include the power strongly to actualize E1. But for the reasons presented in Part 1, I do not believe that “maximal power” in this contrived sense is sufficient for omnipotence. The problem posed for the Anselmian by E1 remains unsolved.

## SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

Anselmians believe that anyone deserving the name “God” must be the greatest possible being. With that criterion in mind, they ask themselves which great-making characteristics belong to the greatest possible combination of great-making characteristics. Necessary existence, omniscience, omnipotence, and essential goodness are generally thought to belong to this special set of properties.

When critics complain that two or more of the characteristics in this set

are incompatible, Anselmians sometimes respond by reinterpreting one of the questionable characteristics in light of the others. In the present case, the limitations entailed by essential goodness are simply built into the analysis of maximal power and omnipotence. In that way, the Anselmian preserves the consistency of his concept of God.

This way of doing things seems to me to put the cart before the horse. We should first decide what we think omnipotence is, and only then decide whether it belongs to the best possible combination of great-making characteristics. As I see it, Anselmians have conflated two logically distinct questions. "How much power is required for being all powerful?" is one question. "How much power would the best kind of God have?" is another. As far as I can see, the answer to the second question throws no real light on the first. Even if the best kind of God would be unable to actualize E1 and E2, I see no reason to think this tells us anything about the proper analysis of omnipotence. It is just too easy to conceive of a person having all the power God has, plus the power to actualize E1 and E2.

An omnipotent person, I have suggested, must have the maximum *conceivable* degree of power. If we can, without absurdity, conceive of a person having more power than would be possessed by the best possible God, then the best possible God is not all powerful. Such a God might still be very powerful of course. But simple "truth in advertising" forbids describing a God who cannot actualize E1 and E2 as omnipotent.

## NOTES

1. See Nelson Pike, "Omnipotence and God's Ability to Sin," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 6 (1969): 208–16.

2. Many theists, including those whose views are discussed in this paper, believe that God is a necessary being, who exists in all possible worlds.

3. See Flint and Freddoso, "Maximal Power," in Alfred Freddoso, *The Existence and Nature of God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 81–114. See also Thomas Morris, *Anselmian Explorations* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1987).

4. Morris, *Anselmian Explorations*, 47ff.

5. See Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974).

6. Morris, *Anselmian Explorations*, 48–53. Morris here gives an extended reply to Theodore Guleserian, who had defended the possibility of "worlds" in which the only sentient creatures are rabbits who suffer all the time. See Theodore Guleserian, "God and Possible Worlds: The Modal Problem of Evil," *Nous* 17 (1983), 221–38.

7. See Peter Van Inwagen, *Metaphysics* (Boulder and San Francisco: Westview Press, 1993), chapter five. See also J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 55–63.

8. Although he does not put it in quite these terms, this is very close to the line taken by Thomas Morris. Morris argues that the Anselmian is perfectly entitled to his own "intuitions" about these matters—intuitions that may not be shared by non-believers. Morris's notion of an "intuition" is very close to Plantinga's notion of a "properly basic" belief. See *Anselmian Explorations*, 64–69.

9. I here presuppose familiarity with the broad outlines of Plantinga's epistemology. I would not want anyone to think that I regard this as an adequate sum-

mary of his views on “proper basicity,” “proper functioning,” and “warrant.”

10. On an externalist theory of meaning, Anselmians might claim that nontheist with non-Anselmian intuitions about what is required for omnipotence are nevertheless *referring* to the Anselmian property of maximal power when they think or speak about “omnipotence.” For reasons that will emerge below, I do not find this to be a very plausible view of what it is to have a concept of omnipotence.

11. Some traditional theists do in fact deny that God is *essentially* good. See, for example, Bruce Reichenbach, *Evil and a Good God* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), chapter seven, and Stephen Davis, *Logic and the Nature of God* (London: MacMillan Press, 1983), chapter six. See also Theodore Guleserian, “Can Moral Perfection Be an Essential Attribute,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 45 (1985): 219–41.

12. Some support for this judgment can be found in Wesley Morriston, “What Is So Good About Moral Freedom?” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 50, 3 (2000): 344–58.

13. I have borrowed this expression from Peter Van Inwagen, “The Problem of Evil, Air, and Silence,” in ed. James E. Tomberlin, *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (Atascadero, Calif.: Ridgeview Publishing Co., 1991), 137.

14. This is Plantinga’s helpful designation for those philosophers who try to show that the God of traditional theism does not exist.

15. Van Inwagen, See *Metaphysics*, 143.

16. William P. Alston, “The Inductive Argument from Evil,” in ed. James E. Tomberlin, *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (Atascadero, Calif.: Ridgeview Publishing Co., 1991), 56.

17. An especially good example might be the day the “sun stood still” while Joshua and his army finished mopping up the enemy (Joshua 10:12–14).

18. Morris, *Anselmian Explorations*, 50, complains that wild speculations like these are completely unfounded and arbitrary. But my point here is not that it is possible for there to be a necessary existent person with an essential aversion to levitating rocks—the point is rather that we don’t need to establish that this is not possible in order for it to be reasonable to operate on the assumption that TI is possible in the relevant sense. It is in this way that I intend my speculations about such conceptual possibilities to bear on the analysis of omnipotence.

19. The characteristics axiom of Lewis’s system S5, “If possibly P, then necessarily possible P,” is generally thought to hold for alethic modality.

20. Whatever the merits of causal theories of meaning, it is not plausible to claim that they work for *all* predicates. For the reason I give below, omnipotence seems to me to be a particularly bad candidate.

21. Whatever Descartes and his successors may have thought, this is a perfectly sensible account of the origin of the concept of omnipotence—one that makes no appeal whatever to the idea that God has somehow “impressed” an idea of his (infinite) power on anyone’s mind.

22. Flint and Freddoso, *The Existence and Nature of God*, 102.

23. *Ibid.*, 102. I have renumbered the examples as (E2). It is (13) in the original text.

24. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, 174.

25. If God makes my counterfactuals of freedom true, then he effectively makes me act as I do in whatever situation he places me in—and that, so say the advocates of the free will defense, is incompatible with my doing it freely.

26. Flint and Freddoso, *The Existence and Nature of God*, 97.

27. For an argument along these lines, see Robert M. Adams, “An Anti-Molinist Argument,” in ed. James E. Tomberlin, *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (Atascadero, Calif.: Ridgeview Publishing Co., 1991), 343–54. For a Molinist reply, see Thomas Flint, *Divine Providence* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998), chapter seven.

28. See Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, 184ff.