

# Infinite Power and Finite Powers\*

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The etymological meaning of ‘omnipotent’ is ‘all-powerful.’ Being all-powerful is usually understood as having all of the powers. The problem of analyzing omnipotence is then seen as the problem of determining over what class the quantifier ‘all’ in this assertion ranges. An omnipotent being would be one that has all of the powers; all of *what* powers?

Attempts to answer this question have run into serious difficulties. Responding to these difficulties, Alexander Pruss and I recently proposed a way of analyzing omnipotence which makes no reference to the notion of power at all (Pearce and Pruss 2012). However, this raises an obvious worry: if our analysis is not related to the notion of power, then how can it count as an analysis of *omnipotence*, the property of being *all-powerful*, at all?

In this paper, I propose to answer this question by appeal to a particular (non-mathematical) notion of infinity found in the tradition of philosophical theology. On the view I have in mind, the relation of the infinite to the finite is the relation of the *universal* or *general* to the *particular*. Thus to be infinitely powerful would be to have power in general, rather than having particular powers. Proponents of this understanding of infinity see the infinite as conceptually simpler than the finite: infinite concepts differ from finite concepts in that the latter have conceptual ingredients the former lack, namely, *limitations*.

My aim here is to use this notion of the infinite as a model to understand the conceptual relationship between the Infinite Power of God and the finite powers of creatures. I begin by reviewing some of the difficulties involved in analyzing omnipotence. After this, I explain in more detail the notion of infinity with which I am working and the understanding of Infinite Power I wish to defend. The bulk of the paper is then taken up by a discussion of the various ways in which finite powers are limited, as compared to the Infinite Power of God.

My hope is that this investigation will be of use to theologians and philosophers of religion by clarifying some of the puzzles about divine omnipotence as well as the nature of the infinite gulf between creature and creator. I also hope that it will be of interest to metaphysicians and philosophers of action, even those who are not theists, by showing how an idealized notion of Infinite Power, or of power *simpliciter*, can have considerable theoretical utility, regardless of whether one believes in an infinitely powerful being.

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## 1 Having All of the Powers

According to Thomas Aquinas, “[a]ll confess that God is omnipotent; but it seems difficult to explain in what His omnipotence precisely consists: for there may be doubt as to the precise meaning of the word ‘all’ when we say God can do all things” (Aquinas *Summa Theologica*, Iq25a3). Aquinas himself holds that God has the power to perform any consistently describable action. This, however, cannot be correct. *Making a stone one cannot lift, coming to know that one has never been omnipotent, and failing* are all self-consistent descriptions of actions, yet it is impossible that any of these actions should be performed by an omnipotent being (Pearce and Pruss 2012, 403-404).<sup>1</sup>

Most recent treatments of omnipotence in analytic philosophy have rejected *act theories* like Aquinas’s, which say that God has the power to perform any action, in favor of *result theories*, which say that God has the power to bring about any state of affairs (Pearce 2011). Again, the quantifier must be restricted. Thus most recent analyses of omnipotence have the following form:

$x$  is omnipotent =df. for any state of affairs  $s$ , if  $s$  satisfies condition  $C$ , then  $x$  has the power to bring about  $s$

Different analyses differ in what condition they substitute for ‘ $C$ ’ in this schema.

The very first thing to consider in judging the success of a proposed analysis is extensional adequacy: does it rule in everything that ought to be ruled in, and rule out everything that ought to be ruled out? In the case of omnipotence, this means, at a minimum, that a successful analysis must rule *in* the Anselmian God, and rule *out* any being who is not impressive with respect to power. Richard La Croix has argued that no consistent analysis of this general form can satisfy even this minimal condition (La Croix 1977): some definitions are too strong, requiring, for instance, that an omnipotent being have the power to do evil. This is problematic insofar as it is traditionally thought to be impossible that God should do evil.<sup>2</sup> Others are too weak, and count unimpressive beings as omnipotent.

It is often thought that the problem of the impossibility of God’s doing evil can be solved by saying that for God to be omnipotent requires only that he have the power to do anything which is consistent with his nature (see, e.g., Wierenga 1983). However, if omnipotence does not require the power to act contrary to one’s own nature, then it seems that McEar, whose ‘nature’ will not

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1. These sorts of problems were not unknown to the Medieval philosopher-theologians, and, of course, the Medievals were deeply concerned with the problem of God’s inability to sin (see Aquinas *Summa Theologica*, Iq25a3, obj. 2). However, the solutions proposed by them are now widely regarded as unsuccessful. See Ross 1969, 196-210.

2. It is sometimes thought that God might have the power to do evil even if it is impossible that he should do evil (Talbot 1988; Wielenberg 2000). In Pearce 2012, I defend the attribution of this view to Thomas Reid. However, divorcing power from possibility in this way renders the already puzzling notion of power all the more obscure. See Hasker 1989, 89-90n18; Rowe 2004, 147-149. On the view defended in this paper, necessarily unexercised powers are possible if, but only if, it is possible to be free to choose an alternative which it is impossible that one should choose. See below, p. 8.

permit him to do anything other than scratch his ear, is omnipotent provided he can scratch his ear (La Croix 1977, 183, 187).<sup>3</sup> Other weakenings run into similar problems.

There have been a variety of ingenious attempts to escape La Croix’s argument. Since my aims in this paper are primarily constructive rather than destructive, I will not pause to criticize these attempts individually; this has already been done by others (Wielenberg 2000; Oppy 2005). Suffice it to say that every attempt so far to analyze omnipotence by saying *which powers an omnipotent being must have* has either required of an omnipotent being that it have the power to do things which it is impossible that God should do, or else has classified unimpressive beings as omnipotent. Furthermore, even supposing this problem could be solved, a theory of this sort would have an important limitation: it would depend on a prior notion of power or ability, a notion whose analysis has proven quite difficult.

## 2 Omnipotence as Infinite Power

In light of these difficulties, I propose that we understand powers in terms of omnipotence, rather than attempting to understand omnipotence in terms of powers. I begin with two ingredients: a notion of divine infinity which I borrow from Nicolas Malebranche, and an analysis of omnipotence recently proposed by Alexander Pruss and myself.

According to Malebranche, God is an ‘infinite being’ in the sense that “God is all being, since He is infinite and comprehends everything; but He is no being in particular” (Malebranche [1674–1675] 1997, 231).<sup>4</sup> The idea of God is, for Malebranche, the idea of infinite being, or being in general, and the ideas of particular beings are got by adding *restrictions* or *determinations* to this idea (232).

I will be defending a thesis about the *power* of God which is analogous to Malebranche’s view about the *being* of God. Thus in claiming that God is all-powerful (omnipotent) I shall mean, that God possesses Infinite Power which ‘comprehends everything,’ but God, strictly speaking, has no particular powers.<sup>5</sup> It is misleading (if not outright false) either to affirm or to deny that God has the power to perform a particular action or bring about a particular state of affairs; strictly speaking, God simply has *power*, full stop.

If we wish to understand what finite, particular powers are, I will argue, we should *begin* with this notion of Infinite Power and place various restrictions or limitations on it. These include restrictions of scope and efficacy, among others.

3. Wierenga objects, with considerable plausibility, that McEar is impossible (Wierenga 1983, 374-375). However, more plausible examples can easily be constructed (Wielenberg 2000, 29-31; Pearce and Pruss 2012, 405-406).

4. For the historical antecedents of this view, see the essays by Krainer and Carroll in this volume.

5. The terminology here is being drawn from the contrast, in metaphysics, between universals and particulars. It is unrelated to the distinction between general and particular powers introduced by Honoré 1964.

It is because these limitations do not apply to God that God does not, strictly speaking, possess any particular powers. On the other hand, it should not be thought that God therefore *lacks* these powers, if by his lacking these powers one means that he is less powerful than he might otherwise be.

Instead of analyzing omnipotence in terms of our ordinary notion of power, omnipotence should be analyzed as follows (Pearce and Pruss 2012, 405):

- (1)  $x$  is omnipotent =df.  $x$  has perfect freedom of will and  $x$  has perfect efficacy of will

This is to be combined with the following definition of perfect efficacy of will (407):

- (2)  $x$  has perfect efficacy of will =df.  $(\forall p)\Box((x \text{ wills that } p) \Box \rightarrow (x \text{ intentionally brings about } p))$

In this definition ‘ $\Box \rightarrow$ ’ is a subjunctive conditional, and it is stipulated that, in order for a being to be omnipotent, all substitutions for  $p$ , including those that result in counterpossible conditionals, must be non-trivially true.<sup>6</sup> Thus, in order for God to be omnipotent, it must be non-trivially true that:

- (3) (God wills that  $2 + 2 = 3$ )  $\Box \rightarrow$  (God intentionally brings it about that  $2 + 2 = 3$ )

It might be thought that this suggestion implies that it is possible that God does the impossible, and is therefore incoherent. However, this is incorrect. On standard logics for subjunctives,<sup>7</sup>  $p \Box \rightarrow q$  can be true even if  $q$  is impossible, provided that  $p$  is also impossible. Thus the correct conclusion to draw is that it is impossible that God should will the impossible (410).

To complete the analysis, an account of perfect freedom of will should be provided. However, we can make a good deal of progress without completing this difficult task. It is now widely recognized by both libertarians and compatibilists that there are cases in which the impossibility of willing in a certain way, or making a certain choice, does not count against an agent’s freedom. Philosophers have arrived at this position by consideration of so-called ‘Luther cases’ (Frankfurt 1982, 263-266; Williams 1993, 61; Kane 1996, 39-40, 77-78). It is believed that Martin Luther may have identified some genuine limitation on his willing when he said ‘I can do no other,’ and may nonetheless have been free and responsible in his refusal to recant because of the way in which this limitation on his willing arose from his character and/or choices. The conclusion, then, is that a being can be omnipotent only if the laws of logic are deeply embedded in that being’s character, or perhaps freely endorsed by that being,<sup>8</sup>

6. On the non-trivial truth of counterpossibles, see Pearce and Pruss 2012, 406-408.

7. Introducing non-trivial counterpossibles involves rejecting the standard (Lewis-Stalnaker) *semantics* for subjunctives, but this does not affect this logical point.

8. Since perfect efficacy of will can only be an essential property (405), it must be *de re* impossible, of any being with perfect efficacy of will, that that being should will contrary to the laws of logic. As a result, anyone who wishes to say that God’s inability to will contrary to the laws of logic is due to God’s freely endorsing those laws must hold that freedom is compatible with necessity, at least in certain cases. See Rowe 2004, 70-71, 142-150.

in such a way that the impossibility of willing illogically is not prejudicial to that being's perfect freedom. A similar line of thought can be used in defense of God's necessary moral perfection (Pearce and Pruss 2012, 411-412).

Now that we have our two basic ingredients – the Malebranchian notion of infinity, and the Pearce-Pruss theory of omnipotence – I proceed to make some observations about how these two ingredients fit together.

First, I am proposing that the notion of Infinite Power be taken as prior to the notions of particular, finite powers. Thus by making the analysis of omnipotence do the work I want it to do here, I am taking a controversial stand regarding the analysis of free will: since particular finite powers are to be understood in terms of Infinite Power, and Infinite Power is in turn analyzed in terms of perfect freedom of will, I am committed to the claim that perfect freedom of will is *not* to be analyzed in terms of either Infinite Power, or finite powers. In particular, this means that it is no part of the *analysis* of perfect freedom of will that a perfectly free being should have the power to will or do otherwise. This might be thought to be a significant cost of my view. However, I think the following considerations show that the price is not so high as it might at first appear. First, this approach does not preclude freedom (either perfect or imperfect) from *entailing* the power to will or do otherwise. Indeed, I do not even need to challenge the claim that one has free will *if and only if* one has the ability to will or do otherwise. Furthermore, my approach is consistent with analyzing freedom of *action* in terms of the power or ability to do otherwise. Finally, this approach does not preclude a completed analysis of perfect freedom from somehow involving the *possibility* of willing or doing otherwise, although we should note that there are, on this account, some actions which it is impossible that God should will or do; thus perfect freedom must not require the possibility of willing or doing just anything.

Understood thus weakly, I find this restriction unproblematic. Power is about reality's conforming to an agent's choices. Freedom of will is about how those choices come about. Thus it is perfectly natural that freedom of will should be conceptually prior to power: genuine, robust power involves being free to choose how reality will be.

In this paper I will not provide an analysis of freedom of will, either perfect or imperfect. I will work instead with our intuitions about what sorts of things *impair* freedom.<sup>9</sup> We will find the following intuitive gloss helpful: when I choose (will) freely, I *own* the choice (volition) and any action that follows from it. That is, it is genuinely *my* choice and *my* action. This sort of ownership clearly comes in degrees. This is recognized, for instance, in discussions of mitigating factors in law. Suppose Smith kills Jones in a fit of rage. The choice to murder Jones is Smith's choice, and Smith is the one who commits the murder, so in this sense Smith owns both the choice and the action. However, at least in the case where Smith's possession of a violent temper is due to his genetics or environment rather than his choices, we can say that Smith would have owned the choice

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9. On impaired freedom, see Watson 2004, but note that my notion of unimpaired freedom is far more demanding than Watson's, since Watson is drawing a contrast among human choices, while I am drawing a contrast between human and divine choices.

and the action *to a greater degree* if his decision to kill Jones had been preceded by calm deliberation. Because Smith still owns the choice and the action, he is still a murderer and is to be punished, but because he owns it to a lesser degree, he receives a lesser punishment. In saying that God has perfect freedom of will, I mean that he always owns his choices and actions in the strongest possible sense.

A second thing to note about my approach is that, rather than answering the question posed by the Stone Paradox, this approach rejects that question as ill-posed. The Stone Paradox asks whether an omnipotent being would have a particular power: the power to create a stone one lacks the power to lift. This question, however hinges on the way of thinking about omnipotence which I rejected above: it is a question about which of the many finite powers God has. As a result, any straightforward answer to it is bound to mislead.<sup>10</sup> Avoiding use of ‘can,’ ‘ability,’ ‘power,’ and related vocabulary, let  $p_1$  be the proposition that there is a stone such that it is impossible that God should lift that stone. To say that God could not create the stone would suggest that he would fail to create such a stone if he tried, and this is false, for if God willed  $p_1$  he would intentionally bring about  $p_1$ . On the other hand, to say that God could create the stone would suggest that  $p_1$  is possible. However, since God is essentially omnipotent,  $p_1$  is not possible. Similar remarks apply to tasks which are impossible *simpliciter*, or impossible for an omnipotent being, or impossible for God due, e.g., to his necessary moral perfection. Thus it is better to refrain from attributing particular powers to God at all.

### 3 Absolute Power Over a Proposition

My thesis is that omnipotence (Infinite Power) is a relatively simple, unified property, whereas particular finite powers are complex properties which can be analyzed by specifying the ways in which they fall short of omnipotence. This approach is offered as an alternative to the more conventional approach which analyzes omnipotence as ‘having all of the powers.’ However, it might be thought that, even on the analysis of omnipotence I favor, omnipotence really *does* amount to ‘having all of the powers’ of a certain sort, namely, *having power over every proposition*.

For someone to have power over a proposition is for it to be *up to* that person whether that proposition is true.<sup>11</sup> Now, we humans sometimes have powers of this sort. For instance, it is up to me whether I eat breakfast on a particular day. But these powers are not *absolute*. The fact that it is possible that I should be hindered in the exercise of my choice does not mean that it is not up to me, but

10. Aquinas may be expressing a similar idea when he says, of contradictory tasks, “it is better to say that such things cannot be done, than that God cannot do them” (Aquinas *Summa Theologica*, Iq25a3): despite the fact that it is impossible that God should draw a round square, there is something misleading about saying ‘God cannot draw a round square.’

11. Van Inwagen 1983 makes extensive use of the notion of its being ‘up to’ a person whether a proposition is true. ‘Relative possibility’ analyses of ‘can,’ such as those found in Lewis 1976 and Kratzer 1977, are also naturally interpreted by means of this idiom.

it does mean that it is not *absolutely* up to me. If someone had *absolute* power over a proposition, that person would not require any external cooperation in order effectively to choose whether that proposition would be true.

The suggestion, then, is that God's omnipotence consists in his having absolute power over every proposition; that is, in its being absolutely 'up to God' whether any proposition is true. We might define 'absolute power over a proposition' as follows:

- (4)  $x$  has absolute power over  $p$  =df.  $x$  is perfectly free with respect to willing  $p$  and with respect to willing  $\neg p$  and  $x$  has perfect efficacy of will with respect to  $p$  and with respect to  $\neg p$

It would then be claimed that omnipotence, on the analysis given, is just the possession of all of these powers.

The claim I am defending is that one needs to *start* with omnipotence and work from there to an account of finite powers by applying various restrictions or limitations. This commits me to the denial of the claim that omnipotence should be *analyzed* as having all of the powers, but it does not commit me to the claim that omnipotence does not *entail* having all of the powers. I have denied that our ordinary notions of powers are strictly applicable to God, but (as we will see below) the notion we are dealing with here is far removed from the notions we use in attributing powers to humans. Thus I need not deny that an omnipotent being has absolute power over every proposition, in the sense defined. Instead, I need only argue that it is more fruitful to begin with omnipotence, as the simpler concept, and regard the possession of absolute power over particular propositions as the possession of, as it were, *pieces* of omnipotence.

This is the case with both the freedom condition and the efficacy condition. In both instances, the infinite case is the simpler one, and the difficulty involved in understanding or analyzing the finite case is precisely the difficulty of applying bounds or limits to the infinite concept.

Take freedom first. It is widely agreed that there are such things as psychological impairments to freedom. These include actual psychological disorders, such as phobias, compulsions, or delusions, as well as more ordinary forms of impairment such as *akrasia*, emotional disturbances,<sup>12</sup> being under the influence of a drug, being unaware of (or having false beliefs about) the consequences of one's actions, or being unaware of (or having false beliefs about) the alternatives available to one. Libertarians hold that, in addition to these psychological impairments, there can be *metaphysical* impairments to freedom. That is, according to libertarianism, even if none of these psychological factors is present, if the agent's choice is deterministically caused by something outside the agent, then the agent is not free in that choice. Indeed, the libertarian may wish to claim that the psychological impairments are impairments of freedom precisely because they stem from external causes. Given that psychological impairment

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12. By an emotional *disturbance* I mean an instance in which emotions disrupt proper deliberation. I do not mean to claim that all emotion is inimical to proper deliberation.



comes in degrees, the libertarian might also want to admit degrees of metaphysical impairment of freedom. These might take the form of problematic external *influences* which do not actually *necessitate* the particular action in question.

Some degree of impairment is certainly compatible with the sort of freedom we ordinarily attribute to ourselves and other human beings, and the sort of freedom which is necessary for moral responsibility. However, *no* degree of impairment is consistent with perfect freedom. A perfectly free being would know all of the alternatives available to it, and the outcomes of any of these actions.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, a perfectly free being would suffer no emotional disturbances,<sup>14</sup> and could not be phobic, or even akratic, *in any degree*. If libertarianism is true, then a perfectly free being must also be ‘a prime mover unmoved’ (cf. Chisholm 1966, 23); that is, none of its choices or actions can have a source outside itself.

The absence of impairments is clearly only a necessary, and not a sufficient, condition for perfect freedom. Before one’s freedom can be impaired, one must *have* freedom, and I have not said what this involves. However, from what we have seen so far, it should be apparent that perfect freedom involves a holistic property of an agent’s psychology: nothing can interfere with the perfectly free agent’s deliberation. This is among the reasons that the perfectly free agent (God) owns his choices and actions in the strongest possible sense: these choices are made without any interference, whether from inside or outside the agent.

If (4) is the correct analysis of absolute power over a proposition, and omnipotence is absolute power over every proposition, then the perfect freedom of will required for omnipotence must be freedom with respect to willing any proposition. Adopting this approach would commit us to the claim that God is free with respect to willing propositions which it is impossible that he should will. It is far from clear that this is the best approach; it might be better to say that one can be perfectly free without being free with respect to willing (e.g.) that  $2 + 2 = 3$ . Let us, however, waive this objection and instead focus on trying to understand what it would mean for a being who was not perfectly free to be perfectly free with respect to a particular choice.

It seems that this would mean, at least, that the agent experienced no impairments *in the course of making that choice*. But what does this amount to? When one makes a choice by rational deliberation, one employs all sorts of relevant beliefs, some of which have usually been arrived at by deliberation. In order to meet the freedom condition of (4), the agent needs to *know* what alternatives she has. These are: willing  $p$ , willing  $\neg p$ , and willing neither. She also needs knowledge of the outcomes of any of these choices, which will include all the contingent propositions entailed by  $p$  and all the contingent propositions entailed by  $\neg p$ . It will also include the causal consequences of  $p$  and of  $\neg p$ . Many of the things that impair freedom can also impair theoretical deliberation in such a way as to prevent knowledge, so we will need to assume that the beliefs at issue here were formed in a way that did not involve, for instance, irrational

13. This appears to imply that a perfectly free being would have comprehensive counterfactual knowledge, including knowledge of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, but this is not the place to wade into that thorny issue.

14. But this does not necessarily mean that it would have no emotions. See above, note 12.



responses to emotion.

This, however, is still not enough. Suppose that the agent knows that  $q$  will be a consequence of her willing  $p$ , and she has previously decided to attempt to bring about  $q$ . This will quite properly figure into her deliberations about whether to will  $p$ . However, if she was not perfectly free in deciding to attempt to bring about  $q$ , then it appears that the influence of this prior decision on her deliberation about whether to will  $p$  will render her less than perfectly free. For an extreme instance, imagine that the agent has an overwhelming psychological compulsion to bring about  $q$  by any means necessary. Surely the fact that she is deliberating quite properly in noticing that  $p$  is a means to one of her ends, and considering this as a reason in favor of bringing about  $p$ , does not guarantee that her choice to bring about  $p$  is perfectly free if the end in question was chosen by a radically unfree process.

Being perfectly free with respect to a particular choice is thus a far more complicated matter than being perfectly free *simpliciter*. In order to understand what it is for an agent to be perfectly free with respect to a proposition, we have to manage somehow to cordon off from the rest of her deliberations that part of her deliberation which is to be utterly unimpaired. However, because of the close relation between one course of deliberation and another, it is not clear that this is even possible. If it is possible, it is surely far more complicated than perfect freedom *simpliciter*.

We turn now to efficacy. It is possible to possess perfect efficacy over only one individual proposition or some narrow class of propositions. To see this, suppose the proposition that  $x$  wills  $p$  is logically independent of the proposition that  $x$  wills  $q$ , and that it is possible that  $x$  should will either of these things. Then there is a possible world,  $w$ , at which  $x$  does not will  $p$ , but  $x$  does will  $q$ . The claim that  $x$  has perfect efficacy with respect to  $p$  has no consequences whatsoever for what happens at  $w$ , but the claim that  $x$  has perfect efficacy with respect to  $q$  entails that, at  $w$ ,  $x$  intentionally brings about  $q$ . Therefore, the claim that  $x$  has perfect efficacy with respect to  $q$  entails something which is not entailed by the claim that  $x$  has perfect efficacy with respect to  $p$ , and so (by the transitivity of entailment) the claim that  $x$  has perfect efficacy with respect to  $p$  cannot entail that  $x$  has perfect efficacy with respect to  $q$ .<sup>15</sup> Thus, quite generally, unless there is a logical connection between the agent's *willing* one proposition and the agent's *willing* another, there will be no logical connection between the agent's having perfect efficacy with respect to one proposition and perfect efficacy with respect to another. Now, although there may be possible agents, or kinds of agents, who have these sorts of logical connections between their *willings*, it does not seem that there are any propositions such that, necessarily, *any agent at all* who wills one must will the other, nor do there seem to be any propositions such that, necessarily, no agent, no matter how confused or irrational, can will both of them. An agent who wills two contradictory propositions must be to some

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15. In this argument, I rely on a notion of entailment on which necessary truths (and falsehoods) may differ in what they entail. Giving an account of such a notion is a difficult task, but I think we have an intuitive grasp of it. Thus, for instance, it seems intuitively correct to say: 'that water is  $H_2O$  has no consequences for (entails nothing about) mathematics.'

degree confused and/or irrational, and if the contradiction is *obvious*, then the agent must be *very* confused and/or irrational, but this is perfectly possible.

Note, however, that the argument here for the independence of efficacy with respect to one proposition and efficacy with respect to another depends on the possibility of the agent's willing irrationally. As a result, this does not tend to show that absolute power over one proposition is independent of absolute power over another, since absolute power requires perfect freedom, and hence rationality. Thus, for instance, since being perfectly free with respect to willing a proposition requires being able to deliberate properly about it, and knowing all of its consequences, having absolute power over a proposition will entail having absolute power over every proposition logically equivalent to it.

Things will become rather more complicated if we consider propositions which it is impossible that the agent will. In the absence of an adequate logic for counterpossibles, we cannot come to any firm conclusions on whether there might be entailment relations between perfect efficacy with respect to one un-willable proposition and another.

Although it is not difficult to see what it would amount to for an agent to have perfect efficacy with respect to some propositions and not others, there is nonetheless something about this situation that cries out for explanation in a way that the notion of an omnipotent being does not. The world, in its entirety, necessarily conforms to the will of an omnipotent being, but the being we are imagining is one to whose will the world necessarily conforms *in part*, but not in its entirety. What accounts for this distinction, between those aspects of the world that necessarily conform and those that do not? If nothing accounts for this distinction, then we have a puzzling brute necessity on our hands. If something does account for this distinction, then we are likely to run into demarcation problems. Hence it seems that, with respect to the efficacy condition as well, omnipotence is the simpler concept.

If we want to say that a particular agent has absolute power over certain propositions, the thing to do is to start with the concept of omnipotence, and then *limit* that concept to certain propositions. This limiting is a messy business, and it gives rise to the messier, more difficult concept of a finite, particular power. However, as we shall see, despite the messiness involved here, this is the simplest sort of finite, particular power. The powers possessed by more limited agents, such as ourselves, are much more complicated than this.

## 4 Absolute Power to Perform an Action

So far we have been speaking of power over propositions, that is, of its being 'up to one' whether a proposition is true. It seems likely that God's power is, fundamentally, of this sort: he has merely to utter (will) 'let there be light,' and light is. Human powers are, however, not like this. Although it is often up to us whether a particular proposition is true, we never have this kind of direct, or

fundamental, control over the truth values of propositions.<sup>16</sup> Rather, we have the power to perform actions. In particular, our most fundamental powers are powers to perform certain *basic actions*. Whatever other powers we may have can be exercised only by exercising these basic powers (Danto 1963, 1965).

Power to perform actions cannot be straightforwardly reduced to power over propositions. My power to raise my arm is not power over the proposition that my arm goes up, nor even power over the proposition that I raise my arm. This can be seen from the fact that it is possible for someone to have power over the proposition that my arm goes up without that person having the power to raise my arm. For instance, someone might have planted a post-hypnotic suggestion whereby I raise my arm every time I hear a certain word. Any person who knows the word has power over the proposition that my arm goes up, and indeed over the proposition that I raise my arm, but only I have the power to raise my arm. This is because the person who says the word is not the one who raises my arm; I am the one who raises my arm, although I do so unfreely.

What this suggests is that, to get closer to the human case, we need to replace our original efficacy condition with a new one:

(5)  $x$  has perfect efficacy with respect to action  $A$  =df.  $\Box((x$  wills to do  $A) \Box \rightarrow (x$  intentionally does  $A))$

The freedom condition does not need any revision to handle this case, although it inherits all of the complexities and difficulties, discussed above, about having perfect freedom with respect to some things and not others. Thus:

(6)  $x$  has absolute power to perform  $A$  =df.  $x$  has perfect efficacy with respect to  $A$  and  $x$  has perfect freedom with respect to  $A$

Again, the fact that the power is supposed to be *absolute*, that it requires no cooperation from the external world, greatly simplifies matters. The fact that we require this sort of cooperation from the external world in the exercise of our powers is one of the reasons for the failure of simple conditional analyses of the ordinary attribution of powers (abilities) to humans.

Note that, even if performing one action necessarily involves performing another, it does not follow that having perfect efficacy with respect to the first implies having perfect efficacy with respect to the second. To claim that one has perfect efficacy with respect to an action is to claim that reality would respond in a certain way to one's willing a certain action. Nothing follows from this about what would happen if one willed a different action. In other words, it may be that if you willed  $A$  you would do  $A$  and this would necessarily *involve* doing  $B$  but, nevertheless, nothing would happen if you willed  $B$ .

Again, however, as in the case of absolute power over propositions, once we put efficacy and freedom together, it does seem that one power may entail another. Recall that the perfect freedom condition requires that one have full

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16. As Gary Watson pointed out to me, there may be a few counterexamples to this claim, such as my power over the proposition *that I am willing something*. These cases can safely be set to one side.

knowledge of the consequences of one's action, and that nothing disrupts one's deliberation with respect to that action. Now this consequence relation is transitive, so if one has full knowledge of the consequences of an action, then one has full knowledge of the consequences of its consequences, and so on. Furthermore, since deliberating with perfect freedom about an action involves deliberating about its consequences, it seems that the latter deliberation must be perfectly free if the former is to be. So it would seem that, although perfect efficacy with respect to an action does not, on its own, imply perfect efficacy with respect to other actions which one could perform *by* performing that action, absolute power to perform an action does imply absolute power to perform any action that can be performed *by* performing the first one.

A concrete example will make this clearer. Suppose Alice has absolute power to remove Bob's tumor, and, necessarily, if she *does* remove Bob's tumor she will thereby save Bob's life. Now, Alice's absolute power to remove Bob's tumor implies knowledge of the consequences of this action, one of which is that Bob's life will be saved. Alice's deliberation about whether to remove the tumor will involve deliberation about whether the consequences of removal are desirable. Hence part of her deliberation about whether to remove the tumor will be deliberation about whether to save Bob's life, and the latter deliberation must be perfectly free if the former is to be. Furthermore (we are imagining), if Alice removes the tumor she will necessarily thereby save Bob's life, thus she cannot fail to save Bob's life if she tries to. So it seems that Alice has both perfect freedom and perfect efficacy with respect to saving Bob's life.

This argument has a hidden assumption: namely, that removing the tumor is the only means available to Alice whereby Bob's life might be saved. If Alice is to be perfectly free in her decision to remove the tumor, it seems that she must know about any other possible means to the end of saving Bob's life, and their chances of success, etc. However, if there are, in addition to the *certain* means of saving Bob's life, also *chancy* means available to Alice, then there will be possible worlds in which she wills to save Bob's life but fails to do so, namely, worlds in which (for some reason) she chooses the chancy means instead of the certain means. We can say, at least, then, that if the *only* way for an agent to perform some action *A* is by performing some action *B*, then absolute power to perform *B* entails absolute power to perform *A*, and hence that powers of this sort are not neatly separable from one another.

## 5 Resistible Power

So far we have been speaking of absolute powers, but, as I have mentioned several times, none of *our* powers are absolute, and it is this feature of our powers which adds the greatest difficulty to their analysis. The first way in which our powers are non-absolute is that they are *resistible*. For instance, I have the power to open doors, but if someone stronger than me is holding the door from the other side, my attempt to exercise this power will fail. This does not speak against my having the power to open doors, although we might be inclined to say that I

lack the power to open *this* door, under *these* circumstances (see Honoré 1964; Vihvelin 2013, 11-13).

This limitation stems from the finitude, or particularity, of our powers in a direct way: the finite powers are distributed among us in such a way that, in exercising our powers we sometimes come into conflict. Furthermore, we are limited not only in that our power can be overcome by resistance from other agents, but also in that our exercise of power may fail simply due to an uncooperative world. This may be the case with Austin’s golfer (Austin 1961, 166n1), who *can* make a putt from this distance, but nevertheless fails to do so when he tries. Austin says that the golfer could have made the putt given “conditions as they precisely were,” but presumably he means precisely as they were *immediately before the putt*. Suppose, then, that a sudden gust of wind, immediately after the ball is struck, causes the ball to miss the hole. The golfer had the power to make the putt, but the fact that he isn’t the only causal factor present means that his power may be *resisted* by an uncooperative world.

What this suggests is that we need to add a *ceteris paribus* clause to our efficacy condition:

- (7)  $x$  has (at least) *resistible efficacy* with respect to  $A$  =df.  $\Box((x$  wills to  $A$  and no unusual interfering conditions occur and no unusual helping conditions occur)  $\Box \rightarrow (x$  intentionally does  $A))$

The *ceteris paribus* clause needs to exclude unusual helping conditions as well as unusual interfering conditions to deal with cases like the following.<sup>17</sup> Suppose that, due to local weather conditions and geography, it is true that *if the wind hadn’t blown the ball away from the hole, it would have blown the ball into the hole*. Then it will be true that if the golfer had willed to make the putt and the interfering condition had been absent, he would have made the putt. However, if it would, in this case, have been only due to assistance from the wind that the putt went in, then the golfer will not count as having the power to make the putt.

This formulation inherits all of the well-known difficulties with *ceteris paribus* clauses and their inherent vagueness (Cartwright 1980; Hempel 1988; Pruss 2006, 107-112). Thus when dealing with resistible powers we must, in addition to specifying their *scope*, specify their *failure conditions*.<sup>18</sup> This is not to say that we need to know exactly what the failure conditions are in order to ascribe resistible power to an agent, any more than we need to know exactly what conditions must be satisfied to avoid exceptions to a *ceteris paribus* law in science before we can know it to be a law. But, whether the details are known to us or not, these failure conditions exist ‘in the background’ of all of our power ascriptions to human beings. This is one of the reasons for the great difficulty in analyzing such power ascriptions, and the ready availability of counterexamples

17. I thank Alexander Pruss for this point. The example is my own.

18. The clause about ‘helping conditions’ does not require additional specification; it should be seen, instead, as saying that the failure conditions must not include those conditions we consider ‘normal.’

to proposed analyses: we do not know, with sufficient precision, exactly what powers the people in question have, for we are not in a position to specify the failure conditions. This is also a reason why our ordinary talk about powers is not suitable for talk about God: the powers that you and I have, which we ordinarily designate by phrases like ‘power (ability) to open doors,’ are all powers with built-in failure conditions.

It is unclear whether powers to perform basic actions can be resistible. According to some philosophers (e.g. McCann 1974), the only basic actions are acts of the will (volitions). It is not even clear whether it is coherent to speak of efficacy here, since this would presumably involve talk of willing to will (cf. Locke [1690] 1975, §2.21.25). Indeed, if there is such a thing as power to will, it seems that ‘power’ must be used here equivocally (cf. Reid [1788] 2010, 201). Thus it may well be that only the freedom condition is relevant to basic actions.

If, on the other hand, there are no such things as acts of will (or if acts of will are not genuine actions),<sup>19</sup> then actions of more familiar sorts, such as bodily movements, may be taken as basic (Danto 1963, 1965). In this case, it seems that our basic actions *are* resistible, both by unexpected external impediments, and by nervous system malfunctions.

Resistibility is a limitation on one’s efficacy. It does not affect freedom of will (though of course it diminishes freedom of *action*). Thus it is possible to have perfect freedom of will with respect to an action although one’s efficacy with respect to that action is limited. An agent like this would have to have perfect knowledge of the failure conditions for exercises of her power, in order to deliberate in full freedom about whether to try to exercise it.

## 6 Manipulable Power

In addition to *resisting* our power foreign agents may *manipulate* our exercise of power. This comes in more and less subtle forms. Thus, for instance, one advises regarding a mischievous child, ‘don’t give him any ideas.’ One can prevent the child from acting in a certain way just by preventing it from occurring to him to act that way. Or consider Gary Watson’s case of ‘Cozy Clara’ (Watson 2004, 90-93). Making Clara *very* comfortable in her bed, Watson suggests, may be just as effective a means of preventing her from getting to work as chaining her to the bedpost. Humans can also be manipulated by providing them with false, or misleadingly incomplete, information. Finally, there are extremely un-subtle forms of manipulation such as drugs, hypnosis, physical manipulation of the brain, threats, or torture. All of these are ways, not of preventing people from carrying out their will, but of preventing them from willing in the first place.

As Cozy Clara makes clear, not every case of manipulation eliminates ordinary (imperfect) freedom or responsibility. Even if a malicious agent is trying to prevent Clara from getting to work, if all he does is make her comfortable, or

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19. Although I have been assuming that it makes sense to talk of ‘willing *p*’ and ‘willing to *A*,’ this need not involve the assumption that ‘willing to *A*’ involves a mental action of a special sort.

supply her with a DVD collection of her favorite television series, she is culpable for failing to come to work. Nevertheless, the fact that a foreign agent can manipulate her in this way shows that she is not *perfectly* free.<sup>20</sup>

Like resistibility, manipulability is not merely a matter of susceptibility to the actions of other agents. Sometimes we are ‘manipulated’ not intentionally by others, but by our environment. In some cases, we even seem to be ‘manipulated,’ so to speak, by our own genetics. In fact, there are forms of ‘manipulation’ that seem to be universal among humans, such as the disruptive effects that our bodily appetites can have on our deliberations, which prevent us from deliberating with perfect freedom. Similarly, our incomplete knowledge can be just as great an impairment to our freedom of will as if some malicious agent had intentionally provided us with misinformation.

What this shows is that we humans always operate with impaired freedom of will. Nevertheless, we succeed in drawing a contrast between free and unfree choices. What has not always been adequately recognized is that this contrast is something that comes in degrees. Our choices can be more or less free, more or less our own.

What degree of freedom, in one’s deliberations about an action, is necessary for one to have the power to perform that action? How strong must a compulsion or phobia be before it takes away that power? These questions have not been adequately answered, and they may have no answers, for it may be that the very notion of finite power is vague. Perhaps the best we can do is:

- (8)  $x$  has the power to  $A$  =df.  $x$  has (at least) resistible efficacy with respect to  $A$  and  $x$  is (at least) somewhat free with respect to  $A$

## 7 Contingent Power

An especially tricky problem for conditional analyses of dispositions and abilities is that it is possible to gain and lose dispositions and abilities (Martin 1994). This wreaks havoc with simple conditional analyses because it raises the possibility that an ability or disposition may be ‘finkish’ (Lewis 1997). Suppose, for instance, that God has resolved that if I should ever attempt to read a Sanskrit text he would perform a miracle whereby I would instantaneously learn Sanskrit. God’s resolution is sufficient to make the conditional – if I tried to read Sanskrit, I would succeed – true, but since God has not performed any such miracle (and I have not learned Sanskrit the old fashioned way), I do not have the power to read Sanskrit. One can also construct cases going in the other

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20. Perhaps, as Strawson 1994 argues, we sometimes confusedly employ an extremely robust notion of responsibility which does require perfect freedom. My view, according to which our notions of freedom and power are notions of approximation to an ideal, and hence admit of degrees and of vagueness, neatly explains how this mistake might be made: we simply slide, unnoticed, up the scale. However, it seems clear that the rejection of this confusion should have little influence on our ordinary practice of holding people accountable. Whether (as Strawson suggests) the rejection of this confusion causes problems for belief in eternal reward and punishment in an afterlife is a more difficult question, and cannot be addressed here.



direction, where one *lacks* a power, but if one chose to exercise it one would have it.

We have been implicitly assuming that the agents we are discussing have their powers *essentially*. Once this assumption is dropped, the problem of these ‘finkish’ powers arises. However, we can easily adapt the solution suggested by David Lewis and others (with respect to dispositions), that of positing a *categorical basis* for the power in question (see Vihvelin 2004; 2013, §6.3). That is, we suppose that there is some intrinsic, categorical (i.e., non-dispositional) property possessed by the agent which is a nomologically sufficient condition for the agent to have (resistible) efficacy with respect to the action in question. Only the efficacy condition involves a conditional, so it is the one we need to worry about. This gives us the following:

- (9)  $x$  has (at least) *contingent, resistible efficacy* with respect to  $A$  =df.  
 $(\exists B)(x \text{ has } B \text{ and } \Box_n((x \text{ wills to } A \text{ and } x \text{ retains } B \text{ and no unusual interfering conditions occur and no unusual helping conditions occur}) \Box \rightarrow (x \text{ intentionally does } A))$

Another issue that arises at this point is the interpretation of the necessity operator. So far, we have been supposing that the connection between the agent’s will and the effect is a matter of logical or metaphysical necessity (this, at least, would seem to be the case with God). Here, however, the connection is a matter only of nomological necessity. I indicate this with the subscript ‘n.’

It seems that we are prepared to ascribe power (of some kind, in some degree) to an agent, provided that the agent has contingent, resistible efficacy, and is somewhat free. However, the more easily the agent could lose the categorical basis  $B$ , and thereby lose the power, the less inclined we are to ascribe the power to the agent in the first place. This is especially so if the agent’s tendency to lose  $B$  is somehow connected to the agent’s willing the action. The stability of the categorical basis of the agent’s efficacy, as well as the question of what the categorical basis *is*, is another source of complexity and vagueness in the notions of finite powers.

## 8 Chancy Power

One final complexity remains. I assumed above that Austin’s golfer missed the putt because of a gust of wind, that is, an unusual interfering condition. But it seems there might also be powers that are intrinsically chancy, quite independently of cooperation from the environment. In fact, all of our physical powers are probably like this, for there is a tiny, but non-zero, probability that a quantum fluctuation could prevent the signal from my brain from reaching the muscle that needs to contract for the action to be performed. In this case, different environmental conditions might not increase my success rate, and certainly there are no conditions so ideal as to bring my success rate to one. Thus:

- (10)  $x$  has (at least) *chancy, contingent, resistible efficacy* with respect to  $A$  =df.  $(\exists B)(x \text{ has } B \text{ and } \Box_n((x \text{ wills to } A \text{ and } x \text{ retains } B \text{ and no$

unusual interfering conditions occur and no unusual helping conditions occur)  $\square \rightarrow$  (probably,  $x$  intentionally does  $A$ ))

The ‘probably’ in the consequent refers to the objective probability immediately after the agent’s willing (see Lewis 1987, 176-177). This of course introduces a new dimension of vagueness. How probable is success? How probable does it have to be before we are prepared to ascribe the power to the agent? This is another factor that must be described if we are to identify a particular, finite power fully.

## 9 Conclusion

God possesses Infinite Power. That is, God possesses general or universal power, of which finite powers are *particularizations*, or *determinations*.

Our finite powers can be understood by adding a series of limitations to God’s Infinite Power. Each limitation introduces complexity and vagueness. In particular, if we wish to identify a finite, particular power fully, we must answer the following questions:

1. What is the *scope* of the power?
2. What *unusual interfering conditions* would prevent the successful exercise of the power?
3. What *impairments of freedom* might prevent the agent from attempting to exercise the power?
4. What is the *categorical basis* of the agent’s efficacy within the scope of the power?
5. How easily could the categorical basis be lost? Are the conditions for the loss of the categorical basis connected with the conditions in which the agent would try to exercise the power?
6. If no unusual interfering conditions occur, and the categorical basis is retained, how likely is it that the agent’s attempt to exercise the power *might fail anyway*?

The narrower the scope, the more likely the interfering conditions, the more impaired the agent’s freedom, the less stable the categorical basis, and the more likelihood of failure under ideal conditions there is, the further removed the particular finite power is from the Infinite Power of God. As we get further and further removed, we become more and more hesitant to ascribe the power to the agent at all.

Plain English locutions like ‘the power to lift stones’ carry with them implicit answers to the above questions. Because these answers are vague, no precise answer can be given to the question of what it is to possess such a power. It is because ‘power to lift stones’ implies some (vague) degree of limitation

that this phrase is not (univocally) applicable to God. God does not possess such particular powers; rather, he possesses that ideal of power to which every particular power is a mere, limited approximation.<sup>21</sup>

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