religions

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The Virtue of Understanding God as Almighty

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Abstract: God's power is usually discussed in terms of omnipotence. However, the problems associated with omnipotence are complex, and even if some think that the problems are resolvable, many find the purported resolutions unsatisfactory. I turn away from the notion of God as omnipotent, with its emphasis on omnicausality (roughly, the ability to cause anything logically possible), to that of God as almighty (the ability to do what one wills and as being the source of and controlling power over all things). I contend that in speaking about God's power from a Christian perspective, all that is necessary is that God be almighty. Further, I argue that understanding God's power in terms of being almighty more readily resolves the persistent paradoxes of omnipotence, of God's impeccability, and of God self-limiting his power.

Keywords: God; almighty; omnipotence; power; paradox of omnipotence; divine goodness; divine self-limitation; divine sovereignty; providence; Peter Geach

1. Introduction

God's power is usually discussed in terms of omnipotence.[1] Indeed, a considerable philosophical cottage industry has developed around the attempt to define "omnipotence".[2] The problems associated with omnipotence are complex, and though some think that the problems are resolvable (Wierenga 1989; Taliaferro 1993), others find the proposed resolutions unsatisfactory, and the debate continues (Morriston 2001a, 2001b). Peter Geach renders a verdict: "That 'God is omnipotent' or 'God can do everything' is not to be treated as a proposition that can figure as premise or conclusion in a serious theological argument. . . When people have tried to read into 'God can do everything' a signification not of Pious Intention but of Philosophical Truth, they have only landed themselves in intractable problems and hopeless confusions" (Geach 1973b, p. 7).

In what follows, I take Geach's suggestion and turn away from the notion of God as omnipotent to that of God as almighty.[3] Omnipotence exhibits all the proper trappings of a philosophically-derived property. For example, Anselm logically derived it by reason from the concept of the greatest possible being.[4] Aquinas derived it from the contention that God as pure actuality must possess his properties to the highest or infinite degree and thus has infinite causal power consistent with his nature (Aquinas 1945, I q25, arts 1 & 2). The property of being almighty, however, roots firmly in the biblical tradition, a point Geach asserts without defense and that I will substantiate below. In agreement with Geach (Geach 1973a, p. 327), I will contend that in speaking about God's power from a Christian perspective, all that is necessary and sufficient is that God be almighty. That is, to have an adequate concept of God, one need not hold that God can do anything logically possible (or one of the many permutations of this view) or maximize actions, which is omnicausality, where the emphasis is on either performing specific acts or bringing about particular or maximal states of affairs. Rather, I affirm that God as almighty can bring about what

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Academic Editor: David Basinger

Received: 31 March 2025
Revised: 6 May 2025
Accepted: 7 May 2025
Published: 11 May 2025

Citation: Reichenbach, Bruce R. 2025. The Virtue of Understanding God as Almighty. *Religions* 16: 607. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16050607

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he chooses or wills. "What God cannot be said to do, he likewise cannot be said to will to do; we cannot drive a logical wedge between his power and his will" (Geach 1973b, p. 8). To date, the powerful implications of Geach's view have not been applied to the problems facing God's power understood as omnipotence. In what follows I will build on and apply Geach's insight and distinction to problems traditionally associated with omnipotence: the paradox of omnipotence, God's unactualized ability to do evil, and God's self-limitation. I will argue that whereas understanding God's power in terms of omnipotence has cast the theological–philosophical presentation of God's power into endless controversy, understanding God's power in terms of being almighty provides meaningful and satisfactory resolutions to those very controversies. My treatment will be both theological and philosophical.

2. Being Almighty

On an interpretation of God as almighty, God's actions follow from God's will. God is limited in what he can will only by who God is in terms of both God's character and God's nature, by what God purposes and intends (e.g., leaving sovereign space for agents engaging in morally significant acts), and by logic and necessary truths (God cannot will the illogical, the logically necessary, or the metaphysically impossible). But these limits are consistent with God being almighty. The implications of these limits will become clear later when I look at the relationship of God's power to the possibility of God choosing or doing evil.

Being almighty as being able to do what one wills needs qualification. It is possible that something exists that can do everything it wills but whose wants or will are extremely limited. For example, a being that can will to do only three things and is successful in doing all three would satisfy a simple characterization of being almighty.[5] To address this objection to our characterization of being almighty as being able to do what one wills, it must be added that there can be no being who has or exercises power unless it comes from or is permitted by the Almighty.[6] Hence, not only can there be no being with greater power than the Almighty (since all power derives from the Almighty), but no being approaches the power of an almighty being unless its powers are bestowed by the Almighty on that being. Thus, identifying the Almighty as God, "God is not just more powerful than any creature; no creature can compete with God in power, even unsuccessfully, for God is also the source of all power; any power a creature has comes from God and is maintained only for such time as God wills."[7] In short, whereas "omnipotence" classically is treated as the "ability to *do* everything doable", "almighty" suggests not only that God has power *over* all things (Geach 1973b, p. 7), but ultimately is the source or controller of all power. In sum, there are two features of being almighty: (1) such a being can do what it wills, and (2) as the source of all power, it has power over everything, whether actual or potential.

3. God's Power

Since the concept of power is ambiguous at best, it is necessary to inquire as to what is meant by "power" when describing God as being almighty. As Daniel Kodaj points out, "Nothing about Almightiness suggests that an almighty being should be able to bring about anything (even if 'anything' is qualified to avoid contradiction)" (Kodaj 2021, p. 327). The kind of power under consideration for being almighty concerns not the amount or quantity of states of affairs brought about or activities engaged in, the number of results one is potentially able to bring about, the potential activities to engage in, or even the diversity of its acts. These are properties ascribed to an omnipotent being.[8] Rather, it concerns being the source of and in control of other powers, that is, in the exercise of its power in relation to other beings.

There is, Kodaj notes, a difference between a person who has the power to do many things and a person who as the source of all power has power over people and things. The former can paint, sing, dance, excel at sports, and in doing so change the world in multiple, diverse ways. The latter, if the person wills, can control others, making them do or not do what he wants, bringing them into being, allowing them freedom of choice by sharing or bestowing power, or causing them to cease to exist. As applied to God, Kodaj notes, being almighty concerns the latter understanding of power. "God can grant and revoke powers and categorical properties at will, having absolute control of the fate of humans. . . Religious thought and behavior, to the extent that they are motivated by concerns about divine power, are motivated by concerns about God's ability to influence our lives, not by concerns about God's relative versatility."[9]

It is not only power with respect to controlling or influencing humans, but with respect to all of creation, potential or actual. Kodaj adds, "Almightiness is the power to determine what concrete beings are like and what powers they have [to bring about changes]. It is a 'second-order power' that allows one to grant and revoke contingent powers and categorical properties. . . The definition entails that an almighty being can create and destroy contingent entities at will. It also entails that he can do all the things that God is traditionally assumed to be able to do, such as causing miracles."[10] The power identified in being almighty does not address maximal quantities or qualities of possible acts or events produced. Rather, it identifies the relationship between the will and power of the almighty being and the powers and opportunities of what would depend or actually depends upon that being if the being creates.

Errin Clark identifies this notion of power (though unfortunately discussed in terms of omnipotence) in Thomas Aquinas. For Aquinas, God is the source of all being; "A created being is an effect of God's creative action and a limited imitation of God's being (ST Ia q4 aa2–3). Consequently, all real creaturely powers—inasmuch as powers are beings—are limited imitations of God's being. So here is an important sense in which God is said to be omnipotent [almighty] or to have all power: any possibly created power pre-exists in God" (Clark 2017, p. 254). The power God possesses thus infuses and delimits the power of all things. They have no power not granted by God. "For there to exist a created being that cannot be controlled in some way by God means that there is some possible power that God does not have. . . To control an object, then, God need not exercise a power, but simply cease to supply a power to a created being" (Clark 2017, p. 259).

In a tangential way, Graham Oppy reinforces this conclusion that God delimits the power of all things. He creates the case of a very powerful [omnipotent] being who before creating the universe creates another very powerful being with all the powers of the first. Further, suppose the created being were not only not perfectly good, but capable of dominating the original being in that it can do everything the first being can do and more. As being less than good, the created being would be able to do things that the original being who was perfectly good could not do (because of its perfect goodness). The original being thus would have constraints about what it can do and given those constraints of being dominated would not be omnipotent (Oppy 2005, p. 82).

But again, Oppy describes a very powerful being in terms of quantities and qualities of states of affairs and actions that it and other compared beings can bring about, which, as already noted, characterizes descriptions of omnipotence. Being almighty has to do with the source of the power, so that whatever is created by the Almighty depends on the Almighty and its will for its power, such that beings in dependency cannot possess power exceeding that of the Almighty (although the created may have powers or abilities in virtue of other powers created by the Almighty). That is, they cannot do what the Almighty can do, namely, be the source of their own power. The will of the Almighty determines what

powers are granted and permitted, so for any being it willed, what the Almighty created would not have more power than what the Almighty allotted to it, for the created has no other source of its power. The issue is not what actions are possible. It is not: could the Almighty relinquish its power to an equally or more powerful but less than good being, but rather, given its properties, would the Almighty will to cede its power?

What Oppy concludes might fit our thesis, namely, "that, if the (secular) idea of omnipotence is capable of coherent explanation, then it will turn out to be quite distinct from the (religious) idea of divine power," depending on how he understands that religious idea (Oppy 2005, pp. 82–83).

In short, the power that creaturely beings have originates in, is sustained by, and can be controlled by an almighty being. Being almighty is having creating, sustaining, controlling power over all things. Hence, in effect, there cannot be a being greater in power than an almighty being or having power other than bestowed by it, since ultimately, as almighty, it is the source or sustaining cause and controller of all power.[11]

4. Biblical Conception of Divine Power

To substantiate Kodaj's and Geach's[12] undeveloped point that being almighty is the appropriate understanding for Christian religion, I turn to Christian scripture, where God's power is understood in terms of God's influence or sovereignty over all things and being able to do what God wills. Scripture predicates three names of God that traditionally have indicated God's power. The two Hebrew divine names often translated as "almighty" are *Sabaoth* and *Shaddai*.

"*Sabaoth*" frequently refers to God from a military perspective. God is the Lord of Hosts (*Yahweh Sabaoth*), who comes with his own or coopted armies against Israel or the surrounding nations (Isa. 13:4–6). Yahweh is the supreme commander of national (1 Sam. 17:45), foreign (Isa. 13:4–5), and divine (1 Kgs. 22:19) armies whom no one can withstand. It reflects Yahweh's power to control the fates of individuals and nations, whose power and authority, as derived from Yahweh, cannot stand against Yahweh's power and authority. God is splendidly victorious. The Old Testament also uses "*Sabaoth*" in numerous contexts as an exalted title to portray Yahweh's authority and kingship. In short, both as the victorious commander of his hosts, heavenly and human, and as the sovereign king over all, God is almighty. In exercising his power God both does what he wills, so that none can withstand him, and is the source of all power and authority.

The other word that is translated as almighty is *Shaddai* (*šaddāy*). The most frequent appearance of *Shaddai* occurs in Job (31 times), where the name emphasizes the personal relation between the individual and God in terms of God's providential control. The Almighty gives Job life (33:4), is present to him (29:5), disciplines (5:17; 21:20), is aware of his pain (6:4), and can be petitioned (8:5; 13:3). The military image of Shaddai emerges in Psa. 68:14, where the Almighty gives his word and the enemy kings are scattered; Psa. 91:1–2, Isa. 13:6, Joel 1:15, and Ezek. 1:24; 10:5 continue the military motif where God does what God wills and exercises power over all other powers.

The New Testament generally translates "almighty," following the Septuagint, as *pantokrator* (παντόκράτωρ)—ruler over all.[13] In Revelation, the name emphasizes God's political position by focusing on God's complete sovereignty (Rev. 19:6), dominion (11:15–17), and power to judge (16:7), as well as God's military role (16:14). "Hence [*pantokrator*] has only a loose connection with the dogmatic concept of the divine omnipotence, which is usually linked with the omnicausality of God" (Michaelis 2006, p. 915).

None of these sounds like a God of omnicausality, who can do anything possible or produce any unqualified results. Rather, they indicate a God whose might or power is clearly understood in God's relation to the world. God relates to us, personally, as the

source of our being, an awesome provider, one who can bring armies, whether his own or those of others, to accomplish his will and purposes. He is the ruler of all people and ultimately will be acknowledged as such in the eschaton. Being almighty connects God's power with his will. God can do what he wills, the will being primary. This emerges clearly in relation to Christ. In Philippians 3:23, Paul writes that Christ has the power to bring everything under his control. Christ's will determines the control; his power serves his will. All powers derive from him. This theme carries over from the Old Testament. "The difference between the OT and the surrounding world is grounded in the distinctive relationship of the Godhead to history. . . [T]he important and predominant feature is not force or power but the will which this power must execute and therefore serve. This is everywhere the decisive feature" (Grundmann 2006, p. 291).

In retelling Jesus's request that the cup of agony and death facing him be removed, Mark records that Jesus justifies his request on the grounds that "everything is possible for you" (Mk. 14:36). But the "possible" in the text has little to do with God's causal capability. Rather, the possible connects with what accords with God's will. Jesus wants the Father's will, not his own, to be done. What other causal options are possible are not the focus or concern.

This view of divine power has historical precedent in Augustine. In his *Enchiridion*, Augustine emphasized this connection between power and will, contending that what God performs comes and only comes from God's will.[14] God's power is God's ability to carry out whatever God pleases. Power or ability is connected to willing. And God's power is manifested in that all power comes from God. "He is not truly called Almighty if He cannot do whatsoever He pleases, or if the power of His almighty will is hindered by the will of any creature whatsoever."[15] Those who cannot do what they want are impotent; those who can do what they want are powerful.

In sum, in being almighty two things follow: (1) God can do what he wills to do; (2) all power comes from God and is exercised by his permitting will. Whereas other beings can be thwarted in carrying out what they will, it is not so with God unless he permits or wills it. The Christian view is that God's instrumental power implements God's providential will.

5. The Omnipotence Paradox

One might wonder whether, if God's power is understood in terms of being almighty rather than as being omnipotent, this enables us to better resolve problems traditionally posed for omnipotence. To answer this, let us turn to three issues, beginning with the omnipotence paradox. I will, in general, focus on the first of the two conditions for being almighty, namely, being able to do what one wills.

When philosophers speak about God as being omnipotent, they encounter the traditional paradox of omnipotence. According to this paradox, if one understands God to be omnipotent, which emphasizes God's causal ability, there is something God cannot do in a causal sense. In one version, either God cannot lift an object that he can make, or he is unable to make an object he cannot lift. The alleged impalement on the horns of a dilemma occurs because as omnipotent God must be able to *do* (causally) or bring about anything logically possible. But the posed description indicates two conflicting tasks, both of which are logically and physically possible in themselves for human beings, whereas for God at least one of them purportedly is impossible. Though some present what they consider to be reasonable solutions to the problem, such as by qualifying the doer (Mavrodes 1963), the dispute over this paradox continues unabated, continually invoking more and more sophisticated analyses of omnipotence (Hoffman and Rosenkrantz 2022).

But if one understands God as almighty, God's power to bring something about is conditional upon his will. And God's will is not necessitated with respect to what

contingent states of affairs God might or can bring about. God wills freely. Hence, God is under no necessity to will to bring about the contentious state of affairs of making something he cannot lift or destroy. That God wills it would be a contingency, and as such God need not ever will or be required to will it. Consequently, the omnipotence paradox disappears when God is considered as almighty. What matters is not what God *can* do but what God *wills* to do. As almighty, God can do what he wills to do. If God does not will to do something, or if God cannot will something because it is logically or metaphysically impossible, that he does not or cannot do that thing is irrelevant to God being almighty. On the view of God as almighty, then, the omnipotence paradox does not arise.

But, someone might reply, what if God wanted to create an object bigger than he could lift? But why should one think God would want to do this? If God did not want to do this, then there is no reason to think that God's power is affected by failure to bring about any such state of affairs. If God does not will it, then nothing follows about how his doing or not doing it affects his power.

6. God and the Power to Do Evil

Considering God as almighty helps us to address the classical problem concerning the relation of God to doing evil. If God can do anything that is logically possible, and if doing evil is logically possible, then how can one consistently say that God cannot do evil, lie, or break his promises? (Pike 1969). Morriston puts the omnipotence–complexity argument, where *E* stands for any morally unjustifiable evil, in terms of what God can actualize.

1. If God is necessarily morally perfect, then there is no possible world in which He actualizes *E*.
2. If God is omnipotent, He has the power to actualize *E*.
3. If God has the power to actualize *E*, then there is a possible world in which God actualizes *E* (Morriston 2001a, p. 144).

Here, 1 to 3 presents an inconsistent set. Again, using the concept of omnipotence, there are multiple possible but controversial responses to this problem (Wierenga 1989; Mawson 2005; Lembke 2012, pp. 435–37), including that doing evil is a privation that shows a lack of power rather than a perfection (Clark 2017, p. 255; Aquinas 1945, I, q25, a3) and not ascribing moral properties to God (Morris 1987, pp. 36–40; Davies 2006). But understanding God as almighty rather than as omnipotent, where God does what God wills, and where what God wills follows freely from his nature, provides a less controversial and more satisfactory resolution.

If one considers God as almighty rather than as omnipotent, one gets two responses to the question regarding the nature of God's goodness and the possibility of God's doing evil. From the logical point of view, the answer is that it is logically possible that the being who is God (for example, Yahweh) can will to do evil. This follows from the application of the criterion for ascribing moral goodness to a being that requires that the being be able to act in a morally significant way. Alvin Plantinga puts it this way: "A person is *significantly free*, on a given occasion, if he is then free with respect to an action that is morally significant for him," and "an action is *morally significant* for a given person at a given time, if it would be wrong for him to perform the action then but right to refrain, or vice versa" (Plantinga 1974, p. 166; see also Bergmann and Cover 2006, pp. 386–89). When one affirms that the being that is God is good, this being is understood as being significantly free at all times. And by always willing and then doing good or the right it is morally perfect, only not necessarily so. Thus, one cannot affirm that this being is good as a logical necessity.[16]

However, from the moral point of view, the being who is God (Yahweh) will not will to do evil.[17] The "will not" here is not a logical "cannot". The impossibility stems from the character of the being who is God; given the character or virtue of that being, God cannot

will to do evil.[18] As Hebrews 6:18 says, God cannot break his word. This is not because promises cannot be broken; breaking one's promise is a logical and factual possibility, even for Yahweh, but the moral impossibility is because of Yahweh's character, what one might term a moral necessity.[19] Not being able to will to do evil because of character provides no limitation on the being who is God. As Anselm and Aquinas pointed out, to will to do evil would constitute an imperfection of God's power, indicating a serious defect in it, since one is willing the not-good (Anselm 1962b, chap. 7; Aquinas 1945, Q 25, art. 3. Rep. Obj. 2). But the virtuous character of the being who is God is not an essential trait, although it is essential for it to be God. In short, the question of the ability and inability to do evil by the being who is God has nothing to do with the causal power of omnipotence, but with character and will.

Of course, should the being who is God (for example, Yahweh) do evil, that being would no longer merit (and never would have merited) the title of God, for to be God the being must be morally perfect and not will or do evil. [This hinges on the very important distinction between being God and being the being that is God.[20]] But the being that is God is perfectly good because its goodness, manifest in its intentions, choices, and acts, derives from its virtue and will.[21] It is true that we cannot "really conceive of [an essentially sinless] entity sinning" (Baggett and Walls 2011, p. 62); that proposition is self-contradictory. But the issue is whether it is possible that a non-essentially sinless or good being will choose or do evil. That it is logically possible is not to lose any moral properties[22] but rather gives meaning to the notion of the moral goodness of the being that is God.[23]

Morally good persons choose and act freely. The freedom must be not only with respect to the choice and the doing or not doing of the action, but also with respect to the choice in terms of the moral quality of the action. The argument for Plantinga's principles is based on the contention that only if a person is significantly free, that is, free qua the rightness of the action, can that person can be properly termed good in a moral sense. If it is logically or causally impossible for the individual to will to perform a wrong action, so that the person can freely perform only acts each of which accords with ethical standards for right actions, then even though the person acts freely in choosing between right options, moral commendation of that person for performing right actions would be inappropriate. The person might be commendable in terms of intellectual virtue in the sense that the person has prudently chosen the best path presented by the respective goods, or has chosen the greater good, but since in this case performing any of the actions accords with the moral norm, doing any of them would manifest moral virtue per se. Although the person is free with respect to performing or not performing any given action, no *moral* significance attaches to the person choosing or doing the right, for the person could not have willed to choose or done otherwise than the right or best.

One might object that a perfectly good being would not have any inclinations to will to do wrong or evil, and without such inclinations it would not have *moral* choice since, for example, it would not be tempted to do evil. Hence, doing evil is impossible for a perfectly good being.[24] It is reasonable to think that the first premise is true: such a being would not have such an inclination, given its wisdom and character. Having inclinations to evil might itself be an evil and hence incompatible with being perfectly good. But one might question the truth of the second premise: inclinations might not be necessary for the possibility of moral choice. One might have reasons for choices without being inclined one way or the other. This does not mean that the choice is inexplicable. It still could be a rational choice, but what is chosen is based on rationality, not inclination, or if based on inclination, an inclination to choose rationally. To choose the good is rational.

But suppose that the second premise is true, that inclinations are necessary for moral choice and that therefore it must be possible that the being who is God have an inclination

if it is to make meaningful moral choices. Otherwise, it might be argued, temptation would constitute no challenge; it would not really be temptation. First, to avoid a contradiction with the first premise, one would have to hold that having an inclination to bring about evil is not an evil. What is evil is acting on the inclination. Whether this view can be accepted depends on what moral value, if any, one assigns to inclinations.

Second, a libertarian on freedom could reply that inclinations are not determinative. If there were such inclinations, the agent by its wisdom and moral fortitude could override any that are contrary to acting from a good character. That is, the being that is God would have sufficient willpower to resist inclinations so that it does not choose to or act wrongly.[25]

It might also be objected that, "since the future extends forever, then it will never be determinate whether Yahweh merits the title God,. . . which is an awkward conclusion."[26] "Perhaps," as the reviewer suggests, "one could still worship Yahweh *as* God in trust that Yahweh will never do evil and thus never determinately *fail* to be God." If character develops over time, and if the being that is God in an infinite past has always manifested the virtues, there is what might be termed a moral necessity that it do so in the future. It is trustworthy. The assurance is not a logical certainty but a moral certainty that derives from an infinite history of choosing and doing good.

7. Self-Limitation

Treating God as almighty also has implications for the question whether God's power is compatible with human freedom. Some argue that, in terms of omnipotence, the idea of God's self-limitation is problematic (Mackie 1955, p. 210; Lebens 2023), and again others believe that there are reasoned responses (Reichenbach 2016, pp. 165–68). It is problematic, Earl Conee argues, because self-limitation limits abilities. "The fact that the reduction was self-imposed does not alter this. It would not be a loss of power simply to refrain from taking an alternative. But to be deprived of an alternative, whether inadvertently or by one's own choice, is to lose an ability" (Conee 1991, p. 459). But if we abandon omnipotence talk about ability to do anything and treat God as almighty, the concept of self-limitation makes even more sense. As almighty, God can carry out whatever he wills. God's actions follow upon his will. If by being almighty God can bring about what he chooses, then it makes sense to say that God can choose to limit his power if God so desires so that humans can exercise freedom of choice and action. Self-limitation poses no limit on God, for God himself wills limitation by allowing individuals to choose or do as they please, even where what they do does not please God. But then, if God wills not to take an action or to limit his involvement in human or cosmic affairs, there is no problem. For as free, God can choose to will whatever lies in accord with his nature, character, or purposes. Suppose that God wills humans to be morally and spiritually responsive to him, to his gracious invitation to participate meaningfully in the covenant, to be part of God's expansive kingdom. As such, he chooses not to determine human choices and actions but generally leaves choices and actions to humans. Our free responsiveness cannot be coerced from us; if divinely coerced it would lack any saving moral value. Rather, God would will self-limitation as part of his loving invitation to humans to give a morally significant, personal, and willing response to God. That is, given the nature of what God desires and the requirements for attaining it, self-limitation of God's power is not self-contradictory but desirable; it can be part of the total divine plan.

This means that what was said above that God can do whatever he wills, that God's will cannot be thwarted, must be clarified. It seems clear that God has chosen to create or allow beings in his universe that can in fact thwart or frustrate God's intentions. Humans can and do frequently resist God's will. God wills that all be saved, but not all will be, not because of God's weakness or lack of love, but because of what is necessary to achieve what

he desires. God desires that people freely love and serve him, but in granting humans this freedom, God makes it possible that his persuading will be resisted. The possibility of such thwarting, then, stems from God's desire that we willingly and freely return God's love and seek a meaningful, responsive relation with him. This requires that we have morally significant freedom, which allows human decision-making and divine risk.

This possibility does not annul God being almighty. Rather, since all power comes from God, which is the second condition of being almighty, "even here that [rational creatures] can undertake such acts is itself possible only by virtue of God's first granting and then enabling their own characteristic ways of being and acting (namely, as free and responsible agents" (MacFarland 2016, p. 270). Self-limiting power is not abandoning power, but rather enabling the power of others.

8. Will, Power, and Knowledge

A final set of important objections deserves to be considered. The first, raised by an anonymous reviewer, introduces two senses or interpretations of being almighty. The strong sense has a modal antecedent: if it is possible that God will x, then God can bring it about that x. The weak sense lacks the modal antecedent: if in fact God wills x, then God can bring it about that x. Clearly, Geach and I hold at least to the weak sense. But holding only to the weak sense, the reviewer argues, leaves indeterminate whether there are things that God could will to bring about but cannot. To eliminate this indeterminacy, one should also endorse the strong sense. And the strong sense is necessary because otherwise God's will could be greater than God's power. But the troublesome implication, the reviewer concludes, is that the strong interpretation invokes "philosophical considerations that point to something a lot like omnipotence."

The reviewer suggests a reasonable response to this. "God necessarily does not will what is beyond God's power… And God as omniscient knows what God can do. It is irrational to will to do something that one knows one cannot do. So God only wills what God can do." That is, God's will matches God's power via God's knowledge.

The reviewer suggests that this is an inadequate response because it "leads to a modest view of God's will." But it does not require a modest view. As omniscient, the being who is God would know his character, nature, purposes, and what is metaphysically and logically possible. And one would expect that being's robust willing to be in line with these.

But perhaps, following Geach, we do not need to make a commitment to the strong view at all. We might argue that not only is it impossible to determine the truth of counterfactuals about what God could have but did not will (Adams 1977), it is not relevant to the discussion of God's power. The parameters and proper understanding of God's power address God's ability to carry out what God has willed. What God can do regarding what God wills is what is relevant to the power God has and how to understand that power. It need not extend to what has not in fact been willed by God. In short, since God is the source of all power, God's will, stemming from his purposes and character, is sufficient to determine what God can do.

But this raises another issue. Since God's providential actions follow upon his will, God must know what he can will. Thus, God's actual willing depends upon God knowing what he can bring about. Hence, God's epistemic determination of what is possible for God to do precedes willing, and we return to modal considerations about what God can know.

One possible response is to suggest that God can will without knowing what other possibilities could be willed. The problem with this approach is that it removes the concepts of divine choice and hence of freedom of choice from God's actions, a price a libertarian (though perhaps not a compatibilist) might be unwilling to pay. But, perhaps, God's decision-making radically differs from that of humans, so that the conditions for the latter

are inapplicable for the former. Another option is to return to the suggestion of the reviewer noted above, that is, to introduce omniscience. But this too is problematic, for omniscience involves knowledge not only of what happens but also of what might happen. But maybe the appeal to omniscience is not problematic, given lack of truth conditions to establish counterfactuals of free will. Perhaps, with our limited knowledge of divine properties, we might admit that there is no simple solution to this conundrum, but contend that, overall, the appeal to understanding God's power in terms of being almighty provides the best but still imperfect way of understanding this divine property.

9. Conclusions

I have argued that there is good reason to consider God's power in terms of being almighty rather than being omnipotent. First, it is closer to the biblical concept of God as personally providential in individual lives and of God being powerful both militarily and in authority in a larger national context in being able to do what God wills. Second, it accords well with an understanding of providence in terms of what God makes available to us by his power according to his will. Third, understanding God's power in terms of will enables us to circumvent the omnipotence paradox. The issue is not what is or is not possible for God to do, cause, or make, but what God wills to do. Fourth, it makes better provision for reconciling God's goodness with his power. The goodness of the being who is God cannot be necessary in a logical sense, though it is morally certain in virtue of God's character. Thus, the matter of not doing evil is not a matter of logic but of virtue, that is, a matter of disposition and will. Finally, being almighty better fits a god who, concerned for human moral and spiritual transformation and development, limits the exercise of what he wills. It is not that humans infringe on God's power, in the sense that God wants to control everything but cannot. Rather, since God wills human moral and spiritual change and growth, what God wills requires the possibility that what he creates can thwart aspects of what God wants. The Bible records a determined struggle within God's will: to abandon and pursue. It represents the conflict between justice and mercy. In short, being almighty is tempered with the reality of God's creation of free beings with whom God desires a covenantal relationship.

Funding: The research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

1 Hoffman and Rosenkrantz (2022); interestingly, the Stanford Encyclopedia contains no entry on "Almighty". Among many others, see Swinburne (1993, chap. 9); Oppy (2005). Millard Erickson writes, "God's infinity may also be considered in relationship to what is traditionally referred to as the omnipotence of God. By this we mean that God is able to do all things which are proper objects of his power" (Erickson 2013, p. 250).

2 See most notably, Zimmerman (2015). Also, Rosenkrantz and Hoffman (1980); Flint and Freddoso (1983); Oppy (2005); Lembke (2012); Wreen (2018). "In recent years definitions of omnipotence have become more and more complicated. Indeed, they frequently employ so much technical apparatus and contain so many subordinate clauses and qualifications, that it is natural to wonder whether they have much to do with what an ordinary person might mean by saying that God is all-powerful" (Morriston 2002, p. 358).

3 What follows is adapted and revised from my book (Reichenbach 2016).

4 Anselm (1962b, chap. 7. "It is, indeed, reached as a necessary conclusion from reasoning which seems right to me" (Anselm 1962a, chap. 1).

5 Some time ago Richard La Croix raised this as the McEar objection (La Croix 1977).

6 "A God who was not a Creator would be acting within a universe containing other agents whose power did not depend on him, and so would not be almighty" (Geach 1973a, p. 330).

7 Geach (1973b, p. 8). Kodaj (2021) argues that Geach's presentation needs to be more carefully formulated, which he proceeds to do. Since the properties Geach identifies for being almighty can be derived from Kodaj's analysis, this rough account will suffice for our purposes.

8 See the discussion of this approach to bringing about an infinite number of states of affairs in Hoffman and Rosenkrantz (2022): "Even if there is some sort of infinite power such that, necessarily, an agent, *A*, is omnipotent if and only if *A* has that sort of infinite power, the definitional claim that omnipotence *is* such power is far *too general* to provide a *granular* analysis of omnipotence—the kind of analysis of omnipotence which we are seeking," and, incidentally, it is an analysis that is subject to counterexamples.

9 Kodaj (2021, p. 328). The libertarian would emphasize that God willed humans to have freedom and thus limits his power in doing so. See (Reichenbach 1986).

10 Kodaj (2021, pp. 322–23). "That the Father is 'almighty' does not mean that all might is *reserved* to God alone, but rather that all might *derives* from God alone. Because the almighty God is the Father who eternally gives all to the Son in the power of the Spirit, might (power) is emphatically not a quality that God begrudges to others" (MacFarland 2016, p. 269).

11 It is important to reiterate that we are talking about powers and their source, not abilities. That is, we are not comparing the abilities of the almighty with the finite abilities of the created.

12 Geach (1973b, p. 7). Geach believes that this view is scriptural but does not document it (p. 8).

13 In Romans 9:29 the term Σαβαὼθ transliterates "*Sabaoth*" from Isaiah 1:9. James 5:4 uses *Κυρίου Σαβαὼθ*, which is the Greek rendering of the Old Testament name, to refer to God.

14 Augustine's view here differs from that of Origen. Whereas Origen builds on God's nature as necessitating what God can and cannot do, Augustine builds on God's will.

15 Augustine (1980, chap. 96). It is interesting that here the translator renders "*omnipotentis*" and its cognates as "almighty" (as found in the Apostles' Creed to which Augustine refers) rather than "omnipotent".

16 Plantinga, however, does not apply this analysis of morally significant freedom to God when speaking about God's freedom.

17 "Evil" here refers to that which reflects negatively on moral character, whether due to intentions, choices, or actions. This is to be distinguished from doing evil (e.g., causing suffering) so that good may result (e.g., surgery to remove a tumor; disciplining a child to bring about correct behavior).

18 "A Christian must not believe that God can do everything: for he may not believe that God could possibly break his own word. Nor can a Christian even believe that God can do everything that is logically possible; for breaking one's word is certainly a logically possible feat." Geach (1973b, p. 9).

19 Hence, scripture affirms that God is consistently faithful in his (covenant) promises. Psa. 86:15; 145:13; 1 Cor. 1:9.

20 It is important to distinguish between "God" as a name and "God" as a title. (Yandell 1988, pp. 313–42). When we speak about "God" being used as a title, we affirm that God is perfectly good. When we affirm that the being that is God must be good, we mean that being perfectly good is a necessary condition for any being to merit the title God, not that the being that is God is necessarily good in a modal sense. This distinction between name and title has significant biblical precedent. Yahweh affirms that other gods, though thought by some to be God, are not really God because they fail to have the requisite credentials. They sanction abominable practices (Dt. 12:3) and are incapable of knowing the future (Isa. 41:21–29; 44:6–8). People are misled into treating beings as gods when on closer inspection they are not. Only Yahweh has legitimate claim to being God.

21 Kodaj (2021, p. 323) suggests that God's inability to sin poses no problem for God being almighty, since "sinning has nothing to do with the ability to grant or revoke contingent powers and categorical features".

22 Morris (1987, chap. 5) replies to our claim of contingency of divine goodness by contending that given God's other necessary and stable properties of omnipotence and omniscience, God's goodness would have to be a stable property. For him, a property is stable if it can neither be acquired nor lost. Without space to develop his extended argument here, his conclusion is that God, in virtue of God's stability or immutability, cannot do or intend to do evil, and as omnipotent and omniscient would know about this and have the power to prevent doing evil. Hence, if God could do evil (if his goodness were contingent), this being would not have been God in the first place. This, of course, is true, but it does not affect the contingency argument if we distinguish between God as a title and the being holding that title. To merit the title of God, a being must be omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good. So, to modify Morris's conclusion, if a being actually is God, then by virtue of God's stability or immutability the being will not do evil—but not necessarily. And if it did, then it was not God in the first place, although one might have mistakenly thought so. Impeccability still stands. That the being who is God is not necessarily good does not imply or make it likely that it will do evil, given its moral character.

[23] Loke (2010) makes similar moves, but in the context of omnipotence, not of being almighty. Geach refuses to address this possibility (Geach 1973b, p. 16).

[24] "If the ability to make evil choices is a bona fide active power, then an omnipotent being would necessarily have this power (even if it chooses never to exercise it). This is . . . inconsistent with the supposed necessity of God's moral perfection" (Morriston 2006, p. 441).

[25] Morriston argues that having the inclination to do what it knows to be wrong would not in itself be incompatible with maximal power. But Morriston does not consider the whole package of superlative powers that a good, almighty being should have, e.g., being almighty and being perfectly good. (Morriston 2006, p. 445).

[26] This objection was raised by an anonymous reviewer.

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