

Model Exam Answer Undergraduate Philosophy

Is Omnipotence possible?

In order to illustrate the direction analysis should head in answering this question we first need to define 'possible' and 'omnipotence'. I interpret 'possible' here as logically coherent i.e. if a conception of omnipotence that is not logically incoherent can be developed then I propose to conclude that omnipotence is a possible attribute of a thing. The answer to this issue hinges critically on how we define omnipotence; how we interpret what it is to say 'X is omnipotent'. My proposed method of analysis then is to begin with a broad definition of omnipotence, analyse problems with such a concept, and investigate whether a coherent definition can be salvaged.

Comment [Support1]: It is always vital to define the question, so it is a) clear what exactly it is you are answering and b) provides a framework within which analysis can take place.

A broad ranging definition of omnipotence – in line with its literal translation as 'all able' – could be: 'X is omnipotent if, for all P, X can bring it about that P'. But this is clearly a non-starter. We can simply substitute a logical impossibility for P, such as a square circle or 'P and not P' and thus require our omnipotent X to be able to do the logically impossible. Though this is a view of an omnipotent being (namely the Christian God) that Descartes, amongst others, held, it has been widely rejected since by both philosophers and theologians. Perhaps the main reason for maintaining that an omnipotent being could not do the logically impossible is that it seems right to argue that such beings should be constrained by logic on the grounds that if we permit such beings to routinely violate logic, we cannot have any further coherent discussion about their properties. Human thought is constrained by logic, and thus if we allow an omnipotent being to violate the parameters of our understanding, our strongest deductive arguments concerning such a being could always be trumped by the claim that X is omnipotent and thus could avoid any logical constraint we deduce.

Comment [Support2]: This makes it clear to the examiner how the student is going to address the question. Often an examiner will read the introduction and the conclusion first, before tackling the bulk of the essay, so it is vital that from those two paragraphs he can immediately see how the student has tackled the question.

We can amend then the definition to 'X is omnipotent if, for all logically possible P, X can bring it about that P'. Such a definition has been the focus of a series of paradoxes (of stones, immovable lampposts and irresistible cannonballs) that all centre on the issue of whether an omnipotent being has the power of self limitation. The arguments proceed, either X can limit his omnipotence in some respect, and thus make it so there is a P he cannot bring about, or X cannot limit his

own omnipotence. But then there is a P that X cannot bring about, namely self-limitation. The most famous example is the paradox of the stone, where the self-limiting act is creating a stone an omnipotent being could not move.

Comment [Support3]: The student shows here the ability to think independently. Rather than re-hash one of the paradoxes, they have shown that they understand the core abstract principle that each particular paradox is trying to illustrate.

Savage has argued that the above paradox is not a limit on omnipotence, as it does not specify a particular act an omnipotent being cannot do. He denies that the inability to make an unmoveable stone is really an action, that it is just the equivalent to 'X can move all stones'. But if we rephrase the paradox such that the P in question is 'X cannot make a stone X cannot subsequently lift', it does seem to express a particular future action – the subsequent lifting of the stone – that is not within X's power to bring about, so the paradox remains.

Richard Swinburne has argued that the Paradox is not in fact a paradox unless it is actually instantiated. Once X attempts to make a stone he cannot move, his omnipotence is violated whether he succeeds or fails. But if X never attempts to instantiate such a stone, he retains the potential ability to both make an unmoveable stone and limit his omnipotence. This seems acceptable, as long as neither is instantiated both 'P's' are still things that X can bring about, but it shows that we must insert a key proviso into any definition of omnipotence; namely that it can only be a contingent property, contingent on actions of the being itself. There can be no necessarily omnipotent being.

Comment [Support4]: In the above two paragraphs the student demonstrates the ability both to criticise other academics' arguments and use them to draw their own, further conclusions. The ability to criticise and use others arguments, rather than merely learn and present them, is often what distinguishes a 1st class answer from a decent 2:1.

But difficulties remain for the current definition, in particular the problem of nested impossibilities. For instance, P = do what I am thinking, is not as such logically impossible, and thus under the current definition X can bring about whatever I am thinking. But what if what I'm thinking about is squaring a circle? Accepting the argument above, this is something an omnipotent being cannot do. Anthony Kenny resolves this difficulty by proposing that omnipotence is the possession of all logically possible powers to P, but conditional on the particular instances of P being logically possible. Therefore omnipotent X can do what I'm thinking, except when I'm thinking of a logically impossible thing.

So far then we can construct a coherent definition of omnipotence, and thus it is possible, though we have had to go to some length to limit its scope to avoid impossibilities. Further consideration of the possibility of omnipotence occurs when we consider what other characteristics X may have. Virtually all proposals of

Comment [Support5]: Refers the conclusions drawn above back to the question. It is vitally important to ensure the essay answers the exam question, rather than being just unfocused scholarly musings.

candidates for X have been deities of some kind. Given a modern conception of a deity as outside of space and time, there are then further limitations on the abilities of an omnipotent being. Such beings cannot perform acts requiring spatial existence, such as walk, lift etc. However these are not inherent issues for the coherency of omnipotence, as, positing such a deity, these are just P's it is not logically possible for the omnipotent being. Similarly it is often argued that there are moral limitations placed on such deities by other facets of their persona, for instance a strong tradition of Christian belief posits that God cannot (not just will not) sin. There is a logical clash between omnipotence and omnibenevolence in which omnibenevolence overrides omnipotence. The purpose of the above examples is to illustrate, not that all X's who are omnipotent cannot do these things, but that the omnipotence of any particular X will be further contingent on other characteristics of that X. Not only is omnipotence in general contingent on X refraining from violating his own omnipotence, it is further contingent on the nature of each specific X, to the extent that we cannot determine what the content of the set of P's is for any omnipotent being a priori. This does not make omnipotence impossible in the broad sense of possible proposed above, but does make giving specific meaning to omnipotence impossible without knowledge of the particulars of each and any proposed omnipotent X.

With a number of proviso's to avoid the logically impossible, we can produce a concept of omnipotence such that it is a possible predicate to ascribe to a being. However the analysis has shown that the context of the concept is irreparably situation contingent and its persistence as a possible predicate is further contingent on the specific X.

Comment [Support6]: This paragraph expands the arguments of the essay from a narrow, logical analysis of the concept of omnipotence by drawing in concerns stemming from other aspects associated with the concept of a deity. Thus the student has demonstrated both the ability to conduct rigorous philosophical analysis of a particular issue, and draw in a wider range of knowledge from other topic areas within the paper (The Philosophy of Religion).