



Divine Power

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The title of tonight's lecture is, 'Divine Power'. Did you expect that the lecture was going to be about God? What if the lecture had been on a different unlimited attribute that believers of many different faiths ascribe to God? What if it had been called - 'Infinite Justice'? (The name originally given to the US war on Afghanistan as a consequence of the events of 11 September 2001.)

What were they thinking of, giving a military operation the name 'Infinite Justice'? Did they mean to say that God Himself was undertaking this war? Or did they actually believe that the United States is capable of discerning and dispensing infinite justice?

The reason that the name was changed to the more modest (but still highly aspirational) 'Enduring Freedom' was because it was pointed out to them that this name would be 'offensive to Muslims'. What was astonishing is that they didn't see, as Christians, that it was no less an offence to their own faith. Christians, no less than Muslims, believe that Infinite Justice can only be predicated of God. Jews would be offended by the title, as would Hindus and Sikhs. Buddhists, even if not theistic, would find the attribution of 'justice' to such war making highly immoral. In fact, atheists should find its implications most ridiculous of all.

But this theological slip is very revealing. What the phrase 'Infinite Justice' unconsciously indicated is the sometimes inextricable connection between the view of a people's God and their view of themselves.

In many cases, our view of God seems to be taken from our view of humanity. One of my favourite examples comes from the Dominican philosopher of religion, Brian Davies. Here he is, writing against the idea that God can be affected by anything: 'We may be in the soup, so to speak; but we can recognize this as a mark of our impotence. Would it, then, be a mark of God's strength if he were in the soup as well? The reverse would actually seem to be the case. ... God would seem to be something vulnerable and defective.' [1]He is disturbed by the idea that something can act upon God and interfere with him. 'If that were true, then God could be out of control and something could have its way with him and be capable of acting independently of him.' [2]Whatever the merits of the case he argues for; these anxieties over God's vulnerability look like the deification of a fantasy of human invulnerability.

Our understanding of divine power, perhaps more than any other divine attribute, shows us who we are. What does power consist in? What is it about power that we admire?

Gareth Moore shows scepticism about what is involved: 'To worship one who is powerful in this way can seem a very dubious thing to do; it comes close to power-worship.' [3]The process theologian David Pailin goes so far as to say that omnipotence should be given up 'as an inappropriate quality of the proper object of worship. It implies that God is capable of being a despot and that we may believe that the divine does not act despotically at present either because we are ignorant of the strings that are pulling us like puppets or because God is at present not sufficiently bothered to take control.' 'Such views of divine power probably owe more to human limitations than to insight into the divine nature. When we find ourselves frustrated we are tempted to react like children and think that "if only" we had the power then we would not put up with such nonsenses.' [4]

Before we return to these ideas, let us look at some ideas from the past, from three different religious traditions.

The first is Thomas Aquinas, who lived and thought in the 13th century. Thomas, unlike Pailin, was a believer in God's Infinite Power. Because God's existence is infinite, 'it is necessary that the active power in God should be infinite.' The difficulty is in explaining precisely what God's omnipotence precisely consists in; 'for there may be doubt as to the precise meaning of the word "all" when we say that God can do all things.' For Aquinas there are two areas which 'all' does not include: what is evil, and what is logically impossible. Doing evil or sinning is not within the scope of God's power, because in Thomas' reckoning it is not so much an accomplishment as a failure, and that would be a sign of weakness or ignorance. 'To sin is to fall short of a perfect action; hence to be able to sin is to be able to fall short in action, which is repugnant to omnipotence. Therefore it is that God cannot sin, because of His omnipotence.'

Secondly, what is impossible absolutely, as he describes logical impossibility, is not just a very difficult task or a mere miracle. It is just non-sense and is incoherent. It is a square circle, which we cannot even imagine; not the Philosopher's Stone, which we can. 'For such cannot come under the divine omnipotence, not because of any defect in the power of God, but because it has not the nature of a feasible or possible thing. Therefore, everything that does not imply a contradiction in terms, is numbered amongst those possible things, in respect of which God is called omnipotent: whereas whatever implies contradiction does not come within the scope of divine omnipotence, because it cannot have the aspect of possibility. Hence it is better to say that such things cannot be done, than that God cannot do them... For whatever implies a contradiction cannot be a word, because no intellect can possibly conceive such a thing.'

Thomas had his view of what omnipotence principally is shown in, but we will save that for later.

Our second stop on this worldwide tour is in the Muslim world, with one of its most famous thinkers, al-Ghazali. He has an intriguing profile as a contributor to these discussions, and to his faith; he combined a first-rate philosophical mind with a mystical drive. A kind of philosophical breakdown led to him abandoning philosophy and later turning against it in a closely, and logically argued deconstruction of the whole point of philosophy. On this question, and in that very book - *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* - Ghazali independently produces a similar account to Aquinas, the arch-philosopher. Ghazali's fundamental affirmation is: 'What must be taken for granted is that God is eternal and omnipotent, and that if he wills, no action is impossible for Him.'^[5] But the logically impossible is not within God's power, for the same reason that Aquinas gives. Ghazali writes: 'The impossible is not within the power. The impossible consists in affirming a thing together with denying it, affirming the more specific while denying the more general, or affirming two things while negating one [of them]. What does not reduce to this is not impossible, and what is not impossible is within [divine] power.'^[6] What on strict logical grounds is impossible, what is incoherent and has no meaning - that God does not do. But what is impossible for us, God could do if God chose - like making a dead man sit up and write.^[7] Ghazali's reasoning: God is the agent of all. And once it is understood that He is the agent of what normally happens, it is seen that He can also choose not to create the normal, expected event. He also creates our knowledge of those events, as well as our perception of the norm and of natural laws. 'We did not claim that these things are necessary. On the contrary, they are possibilities that may or may not occur. But the continuous habit of their occurrence repeatedly, one time after another, fixes unshakably in our minds the belief in their occurrence according to past habit.'^[8] There is nothing to stop God altering the habitual course of nature and altering our perceptions and memories accordingly. 'There is, therefore, nothing to prevent a thing being possible, within the capabilities of God, [but] that by His prior knowledge He know that He would not do it at certain times, despite its possibility, and that He creates for us the knowledge that He will not create it at that time.'^[9]

Muslim thinkers also dealt with the other question Aquinas addressed-can God do evil? 400 years before Aquinas, Abu Ishaq an-Nazzam (d. 836), a Mutazilite theologian, maintained that God was actually unable to do evil. His argument runs: God performs His actions purely for their own sake; that is, He does them because of their own intrinsic value. But clearly this can only be thought of with respect to good and just actions; it could not possibly apply to evil or unjust deeds. Deeds that are intrinsically evil form a separate class of actions, which cannot be chosen by God.

But what does it mean 'to be able to'? Modern English-speaking writers on this question (unconsciously following the patterns laid out centuries earlier in the Muslim debate) have often focused on this question as a way of untangling the problem. ^[10]

This city of Basra in Iraq is in the news again, for all the wrong reasons; it was a centre of learning and scholarship in earlier times. The discussion of the Iraqi Basrian philosophers' views on moral action is an illuminating way to examine this question. The view from Basra was that an agent's ability has as its object not individual actions but classes of actions. The power to do something refers to an indefinite number of

actions, not a single unique action. If one has the power to use a knife to slice, one can use a knife to slice cabbages or throats. One cannot have 'the ability to cut cabbages but not throats', or 'to slice tomatoes but not my finger'. All the moral attributes an action may have come from its performance by a certain agent with certain intentions, how it is done, why, when, in what context—but not from the mere kind of activity it is. My ability to slice is neither good nor bad. A slicing-event which I enact derives its goodness or badness from my intentions, what I slice, the context, and so on. But the ability to perform such acts is not restricted to its performance under certain conditions. One who is able to do something can do it both in a way that is ethically good and in a way that is ethically bad. An agent possesses the power to speak; whether she uses it to tell the truth or lie, do good or harm with her words; and the morality of the business lies not in the ability to speak, is not indeed a question of power but of intention and cognition.

In God's case, the Basrians argued, the categories of His ability to act are unrestricted. Therefore, He possesses the ability to perform an action absolutely, whatever His intentions or the context. However, God's absolute possibility to do something does not entail the concrete possibility of His doing it in a certain manner or context. For we do what is wrong either in error of the facts, or in error of the rightness or wrongness of the act, or in hopes to achieve some benefit or avoid some harm by doing it. None of these things is possible in God's case; so it becomes concretely impossible for God to do evil. This, however, does not mean there is a class of actions God cannot perform; and that means, they said, there is no restriction on God's omnipotence.

Our last stop is in India. In Indian thought the word for God is Isvara. The root of the word, is, means 'the power to will' - not, significantly, the will to power as in Nietzsche! When you find references to divine power in the texts of Indian thinkers, you often find it in a particular context: the creation, maintenance, and dissolution of worlds by the will of the Lord (Isvara).

In the thought of the Dvaita Vedantin Madhva, the understanding of God's power is approached through the description of what God actually does, rather than considering whether or not God could do this or that. God is the instrumental cause of all. God is the creator, sustainer, and destroyer of worlds. God's omnipotence is shown in number and variety of worlds created: without limit. It is also shown in God's governance of the world; for which the word 'control' is often used. The principal vector of God's power, God's control, God's action is in natural laws and the workings of nature. ('The inviolable laws of nature with their unerring control on all that is in time and space indicate the workings of an inscrutable power...in whose absence such a complex accomplishment would have been impossible.' [11]) So where Western monotheisms tacitly suggest a God who acts, in specific activities, tasks, or intervention; the tacit picture here is of divinity's continual, subtle and mediated power, not isolated events.

God's power is also shown in relation to human beings, 'directly concerned with the trials and tribulations, with the joys and sorrows of the individual souls.' [12] God is the source of the ignorance (maya) which veils us; in this Madhva departs from Sankara, who does not attribute maya to nirguna Brahman. But God is also the cause of knowledge and of deliverance, the way out of suffering. In conscious repudiation of the schools of Indian philosophy that speak of self-realisation as the route to knowledge and liberation, Madhva insists that God himself implants knowledge in the hearts of those who love him; redemption is part of God's power and not part of the potentiality or potency of the human being.

The Nyaya tradition, like Madhva, sees Isvara's creation and dissolution of endless worlds as the vehicle of omnipotence. Isvara brings about the destruction of the world not out of cruelty but in order to give creatures some rest and respite from the sufferings of existence. Then the constructive process of world-creation from the integration and unification of atoms begins again, by the action of Isvara's will. But in Nyaya, the most important power of God is the power to impart saving knowledge. For that reason, there can be no sharp division between God's omnipotence and omniscience. (Islam would agree, and perhaps refine the point this way: given the unity and simplicity of God, God's omnipotence is not different from his wisdom. That alone could send packing silly questions about whether or not God can do something pointless, if God never will do anything so manifestly lacking in wisdom.)

Interestingly, the word for power in Sanskrit is sakti. Sakti is a word with many interesting uses. It refers, in particular, to the feminine, generative, creative aspect of Isvara. It refers to the God Siva's feminine aspect, or the Divine Mother. So as Arindam Chakrabarti comments, 'Isn't it interesting that while in Semitic religion God's masculinity is constituted by his power, the Sakti-power of God is constituted in Indic Theism by his/her femininity!' [13]

What comes to the fore in these manifold discussions in Indian philosophy is that divine power is seen in what God actually does, according to the believer. If the aim is to understand God or one's faith, how else

would you go about it? Why waste time on situations that philosophers call ‘counterfactual’; ‘God wouldn’t want to create a square circle but could He if He wanted to?’ ³/₄ what spiritual use is that and how does it contribute to knowledge?

But what if the aim is different - not to understand faith or God as God is? What if the aim is to show that the concept of God is incoherent? Then a whole new philosophical activity can be created: trying to create impossible situations and logical dilemmas to explode the concept of ‘omnipotence’ as internally incoherent. So in an age where English-speaking philosophy of religion has become an ideological battleground, perhaps it is no wonder that there is increasing interest not in what God does, but in what God can or can’t do; in the interests of arguing that there can be no omnipotent God.

One of the questions to attract the greatest number of English-language articles in recent decades is the paradox of the stone. As formulated by C. Wade Savage, it goes like this:

1. Either God can create a stone which he cannot lift, or God cannot create a stone which he cannot lift.
2. If God can create a stone which he cannot lift, then he is not omnipotent.
3. If God cannot create a stone which he cannot lift, then he is not omnipotent.
4. Therefore God is not omnipotent.[14]

If you are a believer, you might stop and reflect on whether the making or lifting of stones counts among the important abilities your God has. If you are not a believer, you might like to consider whether you think, in fairness, that religious believers are obliged to think that God engages in such hands-on geological activity.

If, as I am assuming will be the case for the majority, you cannot see that there is any profound religious significance or problem in this issue, you might now be wondering why a number of articles and chapters have been written on such an ostensibly silly question. But as Savage explains: ‘what the argument really tries to establish is that the existence of an omnipotent being is logically impossible.’ [15]

There are ways of tackling the stone paradox head-on. You can, as Mavrodes does, dismiss it by suggesting that the notion is self-contradictory. ‘For it becomes “a stone which cannot be lifted by Him whose power is sufficient for lifting anything.” But the “thing” described by a self-contradictory phrase is absolutely impossible and hence has nothing to do with the doctrine of omnipotence.’[16] Of course this rests on the acceptance that God cannot do the logically impossible, which may not be granted. But if it isn’t, you can say, as Frankfurt does: if God can do something self-contradictory, then God can do two self-contradictory things. ‘After all, is there any greater trick in performing two logically impossible tasks than there is in performing one? If an omnipotent being can do what is logically impossible, then he can not only create situations which he cannot handle but also, since he is not bound by the limits of consistency, he can handle situations which he cannot handle.’[17] - If this is not enough to do down the sceptic (and rightly it isn’t), you can say that God possesses infinite lifting power, which means that He can also possess infinite stone-making power without outstripping his infinite lifting power. So there is no real limitation to his omnipotence. Or you can say (as Savage does) ‘For if God is omnipotent, then He can create stones of any poundage and lift stones of any poundage. And “God can create stones of any poundage, and God can lift stones of any poundage” entails “God cannot create a stone which He cannot lift.”’

One of the interesting things we observe here is that philosophy has become obsessed with God’s capabilities rather than with understanding the relationship of God to creation and ourselves. Aquinas or Ibn Rushd or the Naiyayikas would have thrown up their hands at the idea that God is the sort of being that has capabilities, as if he were a military force or a very hi-tech weapon. For such thinkers, God doesn’t engage in activities, and the point of this kind of philosophical reflection is to understand our relationship to what is real and important - not to nail down what is admitted to be counterfactual and is undeniably trivial.

So does this obsession with divine capabilities indicate that the anthropological link is showing again? The process that constructs divine power from its fantasy of human power, and then reclaims it?

From the Bhagavad-Gita: ‘This human person is made of faith, you are what you have faith in.’ What is it that we have faith in?

One could as well ask, what have some of us lost faith in? Here we could reflect on some insights offered

by Arindam Chakrabarti. Touching on the activities of Hindu extremists, he observes that violence on behalf of faith is a loss of faith in religious obligation [dharma] or in God; it is loss of faith that makes a religious community turn violent. 'If Hindus really believed that Rama or Siva is omnipotent and omnipresent then they would not have taken up arms to protect Rama'. [18] We can extend his point to say, if religious terrorists really believed in the rule of God, and the reach of God's justice beyond the grave, they would not commit the acts they do. Indeed, if the White House, vigorously Christian as some of its members are said to be, really believed that infinite justice belonged to an omnipotent God who acts in the world, how would they act now, and what would they name it?

The less overtly religious British look with cynicism, or even alarm, at the alleged Bible Study mornings and religious convictions of the White House. Is this the unfortunate consequences of faith influencing politics? Or is what we are seeing in fact a loss of faith in divine power? Has their God tacitly become like the UN $\frac{3}{4}$ not living up to his responsibilities to omnipotently control the world, so obliging the greatest human superpower to go it alone, if necessary? If so, this follows the familiar cycle of projection and appropriation of a concept of God. A certain view of infinite divinity, based on fantasies of human perfection, is projected outwards. When that deity fails to react in an expected action, overt loss of faith does not occur; but a re-appropriation of that now deified image takes place. Not Isvara /God's, but our desires to create, sustain, control and destroy the world are named as 'Infinite Justice'.

What happens when there is a human appropriation of the power that for the conventional believer should properly be God's $\frac{3}{4}$ the taking of life? Chakrabarti derives this lesson from the Mahabharata: when religious obligation is violated, it itself becomes a killer. [19]

Manipulating a 'civilization's values' then can be a dangerous thing. We heard much after 11 September 2001 about the need to defend our values. But do our values need defending, or do they need putting into practice?

If our values, shown in concepts of divine and human power, are:

- to be vulnerable is to be defective and out of control, and then something can have its way with you
- power is measured in capabilities-the more unrestricted your capabilities, the greater your power
- and power must be demonstrated in acting out these capabilities whenever challenged

Then perhaps we are seeing people putting their values and beliefs into practice. But what if your values are different?

They could be shown in a different conception of divine power; perhaps one in which omnipotence is shown in infinite generosity and giving. It may sound radical, New Age, feminist or leftie. But listen to the three traditional sources investigated earlier:

In the Qur'an, 'majesty' and 'generosity' are conceptually united in a single Divine Name. Al-Ghazali explains, 'For majesty is His by nature while generosity emanates from Him to His creation.' [20]

'In the Indian bhakti tradition, the greatest power ascribed to Isvara is the power to shower grace, reasonlessly and often undeserved.' [Arindam Chakrabarti]

And the last word from Thomas Aquinas: 'God's omnipotence is particularly shown in sparing and having mercy, because in this is it made manifest that God has supreme power.'

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[1] Brian Davies, *Thinking about God*, Geoffrey Chapman, 156.

[2] *Ibid.*, 157-8.

[3] Gareth Moore, *Believing in God: A Philosophical Essay*, T&T Clark 248- 249.

[4] David Pailin, *God and the Processes of Reality*, 95.

[5] Al-Ghazali, *Tahafut al Falasifah (The Incoherence of the Philosophers)*, 45.

[6] *Ibid.*, 170.

[7] In the discussion of miracles, he first engages in a Hume-like refutation of the necessity of causation. The connection is 'not necessary', 'the existence of one is not necessitated by the existence of the other, nor its non-existence by the non-existence of the other', 'the connection in itself is [not] necessary and indissoluble.' *Ibid.*

[8]Al-Ghazali, *op. cit.*, 170.

[9] *Ibid.*, 171.

[10]See, for example, Nelson Pike, 'Omnipotence and God's Ability to Sin', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 6 (1969) 208-16.

[11]K. Narain, *An Outline of Madhva Philosophy*, 112.

[12]*Ibid.*, 113.

[13]In a private communication.

[14]C. Wade Savage, 'The Paradox of the Stone', *The Philosophical Review* 76 (1967): 74-79.

[15]*Ibid.*, p. 74.

[16]George I. Mavrodes, 'Some Puzzles Concerning Omnipotence', *The Philosophical Review* 72 (1963), pp. 221-23.

[17]Harry Frankfurt, 'The Logic of Omnipotence' in *The Philosophical Review* 73 (1964).

[18]Arindam Chakrabarti, 'The Cloud of Pretending' *India International*

[19]Centre Quarterly, Spring 2000, 97 *et passim*.

[20]Dharma eva hato hanti. Chakrabarti, *Ibid.*, 95.

[21]al-Ghazali, *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God*, 140.

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