Religious Studies **39**, 441–449 © 2003 Cambridge University Press
DOI: 10.1017/S003441250300670X Printed in the United Kingdom

Are omnipotence and necessary moral perfection compatible? Reply to Mawson

WES MORRISTON

Department of Philosophy, University of Colorado at Boulder, Campus Box 232, Boulder, CO 80309

Abstract: **In response to an earlier paper of mine, T. J. Mawson has argued that omnipotence is logically incompatible with wrong-doing, 'whilst accepting that there is ''a genuine, active power knowingly to choose evil'' and thus leaving room for a free-will defence to the problem of evil'. Here, I attempt to show that Mawson is mistaken on both counts – that his argument for the incompatibility of omnipotence and wrong-doing is defective, and that the free-will defence cannot be sustained on the ground marked out by him. Given Mawson's understanding of power and freedom, I argue that it would be possible for God to create persons who are both free and unable to make evil choices.**

Is choosing to do what one knows to be evil a genuine exercise of power? Or is the ability to make evil choices better characterized as a 'liability' to 'fall short' of one's proper good? In a recent paper in this journal, I argued that both alternatives have implications that are unpalatable to most contemporary 'Anselmians'.[1] 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).[2] This is unacceptable to Anselmians, since it is inconsistent with the supposed necessity of God's moral perfection. But if, on the other hand, the 'ability' to choose evil is a mere 'liability' to fail in what one is trying for, then moral freedom – i.e. the freedom choose between good and evil alternatives – is quite a bad thing. Since the contemporary Anselmians who were the principal target of my paper endorse Plantinga's free-will defence, they should also be reluctant to accept this alternative.

In 'Omnipotence and necessary moral perfection are compatible: a reply to Morriston',[3] T. J. Mawson attempts to remove the sting from both horns of this dilemma. He develops a modified version of the Anselmian position – 'Adapted Anselmian Thomism', as he calls it – on which he believes it is possible to 'escape from Morriston's conclusion whilst accepting that there is ''a genuine, active

power knowingly to choose evil'' and thus leaving room for a free-will defence to the problem of evil'.[4]

I am grateful to Mawson for an insightful commentary that frames the issue in a helpful way. In the final analysis, however, I do not think that Adapted Anselmian Thomism succeeds in blunting the force of the dilemma faced by free-will defenders who hold that God is both omnipotent and necessarily morally perfect. Let us consider each 'horn' in turn, and see how Mawson tries to deal with it.

Does omnipotence entail the power to make evil choices?

Is there an 'active power' to make evil choices? Mawson acknowledges that finite moral agents have such a power, since they sometimes choose what they know to be evil without being in any way 'weak-willed'. For example, a certain man – 'Mr A' – might coldly calculate that it is in his best interest to do something he knows to be wrong, viz. murder his wife, make it look like an accident, and collect her insurance policy. If Mr A then acts in what he takes to be his own best interests, he is neither ignorant of the immorality of his action, nor is he overwhelmed by unruly passions. Mr A has chosen to murder his wife simply because he believes that this will help him maximize 'overall desire satisfaction'.

Most of us are not cold-blooded murders like Mr A, but Mawson believes that 'candid reflection' will force us to admit that we have sometimes 'freely chosen to do what we know we ought not to do whilst not being in any way weak-willed'.[5] To this extent, he is prepared to concede that Anselm and Aquinas are mistaken. When Mr A chooses to murder his wife, he is exercising 'a genuine, active power' to choose what he knows to be morally wrong.[6]

But Mawson qualifies this concession in a way that he believes undercuts my argument for saying that omnipotence must include the power to choose evil. If (as theists generally suppose) the ultimate good for human beings consists in a relationship to God that they 'cannot but harm by failing to be moral', then Mr A is damaging his own ultimate interests. He is not weak-willed, and he is not ignorant of the fact that murdering his wife is wrong. But, Mawson supposes, he is ignorant of the fact that his ultimate interests will be severely damaged by what he proposes to do, and that is what makes it possible for him to choose an evil course of action.

Now ignorance of the true nature of happiness is pretty clearly a *defect* in the agent. This leads Mawson back to the characteristic Anselmian claim that the ability to choose evil is (also) a defect – one that cannot reasonably be said to enhance a person's *power*. 'If classical theism is true, then for finite agents even the ''genuine, active power knowingly to choose evil'' is … more properly thought of as a liability: the power to choose evil is the liability to be ignorant, weak willed or unreasonable.'[7] From this Mawson draws the conclusion that an omnipotent being would be unable to choose evil. As he cleverly puts it in the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003441250300670X Published online by Cambridge University Press

last sentence of his essay, 'whilst power may corrupt, absolute power perfects, necessarily'.[8]

Strictly speaking, of course, it does not follow that omnipotence does not *also* entail a 'power' to make evil choices. In order to derive this further conclusion, we need to know that omnipotence is a *possible* property – one that *could* be instantiated in reality. This may be controversial, but in what follows, I shall assume that omnipotence does not have incompatible entailments in order to concentrate on more important difficulties in Mawson's argument.

Does Mawson's argument show that omnipotence entails necessary moral perfection? I am not at all sure that it does. For one thing, we need to know quite a bit more about the relation between 'the power to choose' evil and the imperfections that supposedly make it possible. Sometimes Mawson seems to see this as a relation of *identity*, 'for both finite agents and God, the ''genuine, active power knowingly to choose evil'' is or would be a genuine active liability to be less than omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly reasonable'.[9] But Mawson's argument falls far short of establishing any such identity claim. Even if one could have the power 'knowingly to choose evil' only if one suffered from one or the other of these liabilities, it doesn't follow that the power so to choose is *identical* to 'the liability to be ignorant, weak willed or unreasonable'. What follows, at most, is that, all things considered, it is not *good* to possess such a power, since one can have it only at the price of being defective in other respects.

As I see it, several different questions should be carefully distinguished:

(1) What kinds and degrees of power is it good for someone to have?
(2) What kinds and degrees of power are compatible with the best possible combination of attributes?
(3) What kinds and degrees of power are required for maximal power?

The answer to question (1) does not necessarily dictate the answers to questions (2) and (3). We may agree with Mawson that it is better not even to be *able* to choose evil (since such an ability springs from ignorance and/or irrational passions), in which case we must draw the conclusion that this ability does not belong to *the best possible combination of attributes*. But the question remains open as to whether the ability to choose evil is a genuine power or whether it must be included in *the maximum possible degree of power*. For all we have been shown so far, the proper conclusion might simply be that omnipotence does not belong to the best possible combination of attributes.

To decide what to say here, we need to know whether an omnipotent being could satisfy either of the conditions under which, according to Mawson, a person can choose what he knows to be wrong. If omnipotence were logically compatible with *not knowing* that immoral behaviour is contrary to one's deepest interests, or if omnipotence were compatible with *having an inclination* to do what is contrary to those interests, then (on Mawson's Adapted Anselmian

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003441250300670X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Thomism) omnipotence would not after all be incompatible with the ability to make evil choices.

With regard to the first of these possibilities, I shall assume, at least for the sake of argument, that omnipotence entails omniscience, and that an omnipotent being would know that moral reasons are necessarily overriding.[10] But what about the other possible source of the ability to choose evil? Could an omnipotent being be influenced by inclinations to do what it knows it ought (morally) not to do?

Well, why not? As long as it is not a *compelling* influence – as long, that is, as the being retains the ability to choose either way, why would the mere presence of such inclinations be incompatible with maximal power? It's true, no doubt, that an omnipotent being would have the power to rid itself of all such inclinations. In so doing, an omnipotent being would perhaps deprive itself of the ability to choose evil. But why suppose that it *must* have exercised its power in this way?

'But if it acts on such irrational inclinations, it will be weak-willed', you may say. 'How can that be compatible with maximal power?' I answer: It isn't necessarily a case of being weak-willed. Is Milton's Satan weak-willed when he cries, 'Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven?' Satan may be very imperfect, but is he *weak*? Satan has, we may suppose, chosen a course of action that he knows will cut him off from true happiness. But he does not want that kind of happiness – he would rather be his own master, even at the cost of being eternally miserable.

It is true, of course, that Satan is not omnipotent. But that is not to the point. The fact that he is able to rebel against God does not *show* that his power is limited. His desire for mastery may be unreasonable, but as long as he is not *overcome* by it – as long as he is able *both* to submit *and* to rebel – his rebellion does not spring from a lack of power.[11]

It will help clarify matters if we return briefly to the case of 'Mr A'. Mr A is not drawn off course by passions he cannot control. Although he knows it is morally wrong to murder his wife, he chooses to do so because this is what *he* regards as the most reasonable course of action. Mawson, of course, supposes that he is able to make this choice *only because* he is ignorant of the fact that the moral alternative is always and necessarily the more reasonable one. If he had known that by choosing to murder he would be sacrificing his own ultimate interests, he would not have done so.

This raises the following question, however. *Does Mr A have libertarian free will with respect to this choice?* Under the circumstances – including his (mistaken) view of his own ultimate interests – does Mr A have the power to *refrain* from choosing to murder his wife? To say that he does *not* have the power to refrain would seem to align the Adapted Anselmian Thomist with those who hold that one's choices are wholly determined by one's preferences and beliefs.[12] This can hardly be what Mawson wants to say, however, since – as we shall see shortly – he argues that creaturely persons necessarily have moral freedom of the libertarian kind.[13]

How is it, then, that Mr A has the power both to choose rightly and to choose what he knows to be wrong? I don't know what Mawson would say, but many libertarians would accept something like the following picture. Mr A knows that the proposed course of action is wrong, and he has at least some inclination to avoid doing what he knows to be wrong. He has the power to act on this inclination to do the morally correct thing, but he also has the power to resist it because he (mistakenly) believes that his own interests are best served by murdering his wife, and because he also has some inclination to do what is best for Mr A. In each case, the inclination is necessary but not sufficient for choice. Mr A has the power to act on either inclination – and thereby to make either of them the motive of what he actually ends up choosing.[14]

If this is the right way to think about moral freedom, then I don't see why an omnipotent being could not be in a somewhat analogous situation – having some inclination to do what it knows to be right, some inclination to do what it knows to be wrong, and the power to act on either of them. As long as it has this two-way power, I don't see why the mere presence of an inclination to do what it knows to be wrong should be thought incompatible with maximal power.

Adapted Anselmian Thomism and the free-will defence

So much for the first horn of the dilemma. Let us turn next to the consequences for theodicy of Mawson's Adapted Anselmian Thomism. My claim was that if the ability to choose evil is a mere 'liability' that we 'suffer' from, then the freedom to choose between good and evil is a defect in creatures, and the free-will defence is no defence at all.

Mawson's reply is not what one would expect from a free-will defender. He holds that the ability to choose evil is a grave defect, but argues that in created persons it is an unavoidable defect. Unlike their Creator, they are necessarily subject to this liability. Consequently, the problem for theodicy is not whether God should have allowed created persons to choose evil – but whether persons capable of choosing evil should have been created at all. Mawson hints at a solution to this puzzle in the following passage.

> When the freedom knowingly to choose evil is seen as a liability that we created beings necessarily suffer under, then – in 'solving' the problem of evil – rather than stressing that it is a higher-order good that justifies the lower-order evils necessary for its instantiation, one would be more likely to concentrate on arguments to the effect that no existent creature has been harmed by being brought into existence … . Rather than saying 'free will is so good it's worth the evils necessary for it', one would say 'free will is a liability that is necessary for any created being and [is] not so bad, either in itself or given evils to which it gives rise, that any creature's life is made overall not worthwhile', but the considerations one employed in support of this contention would be the same.[15]

According to Mawson, then, the freedom to choose between good and evil – entailing, as it does, the freedom to choose evil – is a very bad thing. If, *per*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003441250300670X Published online by Cambridge University Press

impossible, finite persons could have been created without it, they would have been much better. But God did not have the option of creating them without the ability to choose evil, since created persons necessarily suffer from this liability. And as long as their lives are good enough to be worth living (so that it is better for them to exist with this liability than not to exist at all), then it was not wrong for God to create them.

Clearly, Mawson is not proposing a free-will defence of the sort that is supported by the contemporary Anselmians who were the principal targets of my original argument. They subscribe to Plantinga's thesis that the freedom to choose between good and evil is required for genuine moral responsibility and moral goodness. So, unlike Mawson, they must take this sort of freedom to be a very great good. Also, unlike Mawson, they don't deny that God could have given us natures that made it impossible for us to choose evil. They claim merely that this would not have produced a morally superior world. A world of creatures who always choose good over evil because they are pre-programmed to do so is possible, but it would be vastly inferior to the world God has chosen to actualize.[16]

The obvious worry about Mawson's version of the free-will defence concerns his claim that it is impossible for God to create persons who are free from the liability knowingly to choose evil. Why should we believe this is true? Why couldn't an omnipotent Creator produce persons whose knowledge of the good, and whose inclination to pursue it is sufficiently strong to prevent them from knowingly choosing evil? Here is what Mawson says in defence of his position.

> Why do created beings necessarily suffer under the liability of being able knowingly to choose to perform evil actions? Because it is logically impossible for there to be two omnipotent beings. Given that God is Himself omnipotent, He could not create another omnipotent being and thus He could not create creatures who lacked the liability knowingly to choose evil, that is creatures who were themselves less than omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly reasonable.[17]

Surely this is much too quick? Let it be granted that there cannot be more than one omnipotent being, and that God could not therefore make creatures omnipotent. How, exactly, is it supposed to follow that He could not produce creatures who are free of the 'liability knowingly to choose evil?'

Suppose (contrary to what I have argued) that being omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly reasonable would make it impossible for one to choose evil. It does not follow that one could be free of this liability *only if* one were omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly reasonable. On the ground marked out by Mawson, all that would be required, surely, is a firm grasp of one's own true good, together with a will strong enough to resist any temptation that might arise.

To see this, imagine a world populated by rational creatures, each of whom knows that communion with God is its highest good, that immoral behaviour makes such communion impossible, and that it has therefore an overriding reason not to do anything it knows to be morally wrong. Suppose, further, that

these creatures are not disturbed by irrational passions – or if they are, that their love of God is so strong that they cannot bring themselves to yield to them. Such creatures would be 'perfectly reasonable' in the sense that they could never be weak-willed in their pursuit of the good. But we need not suppose that they would be omniscient (knowing all the truths of mathematics, for instance) or that they would be omnipotent (able, for example, to bend the laws of nature to accommodate their will).

More simply, imagine a world populated by rational creatures who strongly believe that moral reasons are always overriding reasons, and whose irrational passions (if any) are never strong enough to counterbalance that conviction. On the ground marked out by Mawson, such creatures would be completely free of the 'liability to make evil choices' that afflicts us and makes possible so much moral evil. But it would not follow that they are omniscient even with respect to morality, and they certainly would not need to omnipotent.

I see no reason to suppose that an omnipotent creator would be unable to produce creatures like these. Consequently, I do not think we should accept Mawson's claim that the liability to choose evil is an *unavoidable* defect in created persons.

Anselm on impotence, sin, and free will

St Anselm's own treatment of these matters illustrates the perils of trying to combine the claim that creatures are free to do evil with the doctrine that God lacks the power to choose evil. Anselm thinks the ability to do evil is a very bad thing, and this leads him to the view that a person is actually more powerful to the degree that he cannot choose evil.

> … when someone is said to have the 'power' of doing or suffering something which is not to his advantage or which he ought not to do, then by 'power' here we mean 'impotence', for the more he has this 'power', the more adversity and perversity have power over him and the more is he powerless against them.[18]

Anselm thinks this enables us so see how God can be omnipotent even though He lacks the 'power' to do evil.

Anselm also insists that God and the blessed angels are perfectly free. Free will, he says, is 'the power of preserving the rectitude of will for its own sake'.[19] Given that understanding of free will, necessary moral perfection makes a person as free as it is possible to be.

When it comes to finding someone to blame for the mess we are in, however, Anselm seems conveniently to forget his claim that the evil choices are not a genuine exercise of power and that one can make such choices only to the degree that one is 'powerless' against 'adversity and perversity'. He repeatedly insists that the 'apostate angel' (the devil) and the first man (Adam) were wholly to blame for going wrong. God gave them everything they needed to 'persevere in

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003441250300670X Published online by Cambridge University Press

rectitude' but they *freely* refused to 'receive' what God offered. 'The apostate angel and the first man sinned through free will, because they sinned through a judgement that is so free that it cannot be coerced to sin by anything else. That is why they are justly reprehended'. Surely this entails that sin is a genuine exercise of power? It's hard to sort out what Anselm wants to say about this. In the same paragraph as the passage quote above, he explains:

> They sinned through their own free will, though not insofar as it was free, that is, not through that thanks to which it was free and had the power not to sin or to serve sin, but rather by the power it had of sinning, unaided by its freedom not to sin or to be coerced into the servitude of sin.[20]

Anselm appears to be trying to walk a very narrow line between saying that Satan and Adam sinned through an exercise of power and saying that sin was merely something that happened to them – something they couldn't help. But what is this narrow line? What is this 'power it had of sinning' if it is not a genuine power to *act*? How does one sin 'through' free will though 'not insofar as it is free'?

No doubt Anselm thinks that sin is a failure *of* free will – i.e. a failure to *exercise* one's power to 'persevere in rectitude'. But how is this failure to be explained? Given his definition of free will, it is hard to see what Anselm thinks the *freedom* of the will contributes to the explanation of sin. How does the power to 'persevere in rectitude' explain one's failure to persevere? Clearly some other factor must be involved in the explanation of sin.

Is it that we yield to perverse desires and inclinations? Then why do we yield to them? Is it that 'perversity and adversity' have 'power over us'? Then how can we be responsible for sin? Is it that we freely choose to yield to temptation? Then surely we have *done* something that we had the *power* to do. In spite of the considerable attention he gives to this issue, it is very hard to see how Anselm can explain our responsibility for sin without presupposing an active power to do what we know we ought not to do.

But there is more. Even if Anselm had shown how creatures can be held morally responsible for failing to exercise their God-given power to 'persevere in rectitude', he would still need to establish that God is not *also* blameworthy. Why did God not give His creatures the power to persevere in 'rectitude' without the dread liability to fail? Why, for example, didn't He give Satan and Adam stronger (and 'freer') wills? Why didn't He give them the power to persevere while preserving them from failure? On Anselm's stated view, that could only have made them more powerful and more free.

Mawson, to his credit, supplies a clear answer to this question. God didn't, because God couldn't. No finite creature could be protected by nature from choosing evil. Unfortunately, as we saw earlier, Mawson's argument for this bold claim is quite unsatisfactory. Even if God could not create another omnipotent person, it does not follow that He could not create persons whose wills resembles His in that they cannot fail to 'persevere in rectitude'.

So in spite of Mawson's (and Anselm's) efforts, the second horn of my dilemma remains undefeated. If the 'ability' to chose evil is a mere liability to fail in what one is trying for, then moral freedom – i.e. the freedom choose between good and evil alternatives – is quite a bad thing. Since God could have created persons who were free of this defect, nothing remains of the free-will defence.

Notes

1. Wes Morriston 'Omnipotence and necessary moral perfection: are they compatible?', *Religious Studies*, **37** (2001), 143–160. By an 'Anselmian', I mean a philosopher who shares Anselm's conception of God as 'that than which none greater can be conceived'. Anselmians typically believe that the greatest possible being would have to be omnipotent, omniscient, and *necessarily* good.
2. My reasons for making this claim are detailed in the article cited in n. 1 above. T. J. Mawson offers a succinct and quite accurate summary of my argument in the article cited below.
3. T. J. Mawson 'Omnipotence and necessary moral perfection are compatible: a reply to Morriston', *Religious Studies*, **38** (2002), 215–223.
4. *Ibid.*, 217.
5. *Ibid.*, 218–219.
6. Mawson sums it up this way: 'It seems then that, … as Morriston puts it, we ''are hardly in a position to deny that there is a genuine, active power knowingly to choose evil'' '; *Ibid.*, 219.
7. *Ibid.*, 220.
8. *Ibid.*, 222.
9. I am not entirely certain what Mawson means by an 'active liability'. In terms of the traditional distinction, a mere liability is passive.
10. Whether omnipotence entails omniscience is a complicated question. Obviously, an omnipotent being could make itself omniscient if it wished to do so. But it is not obvious that an omnipotent being would necessarily want to be omniscient. Sometimes there are things I would rather not know. Why couldn't there be some things that God would rather not know?
11. If you think that Satan is compelled to go wrong by irrational inclinations that he cannot control, then consistency requires you to say that Satan does not have libertarian freedom with regard to this choice. He is able to rebel, but he does not (under the circumstances) have the power to overcome his dark passions and submit to God's rule.
12. This may well be what Aquinas thought. See Robert Pasnau *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature: A Philosophical Study of Summa Theologiae 1a 75–89* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 221. If Pasnau is right, Aquinas is a compatibilist.
13. If Mr A *does* have libertarian freedom with respect to this choice, it is a freedom to choose what *he* regards as the *less* reasonable course of action. Does Mawson then regard Mr A's ability to choose what he knows to be morally right as a mere 'defect' or a 'liability'? Presumably not. Why, then, should we regard Mr A's ability to do what *he* regards as the *more* reasonable course of action as a mere 'defect' or 'liability'?
14. For a particularly helpful discussion of the process by which a free agent endorses a motive and make it *his* motive, see Robert Kane 'Responsibility, luck, and chance: reflections on free will and indeterminism', *Journal of Philosophy*, **96**: 5 (1999), 217–240.
15. *Ibid.*, 222.
16. Strictly speaking, Plantinga's free-will defence claims only that these things are *possible*.
17. Kane 'Responsibility, luck, and chance', 222.
18. Anselm *Proslogium*, §7; see Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (eds) *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 90.
19. Anselm *On Free Will*, §13; Davies and Evans *Anselm of Canterbury*, 191.
20. *Ibid.*, §2, 177.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003441250300670X Published online by Cambridge University Press