

Omnipotence and necessary moral perfection are compatible: a reply to Morrision

T. J. MAWSON

St Peter's College, University of Oxford, OX1 2DL

Abstract: In this paper, which is a reply to Wes Morrision's 'Omnipotence and necessary moral perfection: are they compatible?', I argue that, contrary to what Morrision suggests, a classical theist need not admit that omnipotence and necessary moral perfection are incompatible. Indeed, I shall argue that a classical theist can show that an omnipotent being is of necessity morally perfect.

*We know that in everything God works for good.
With God all things are possible.*
Romans 8.38 and Matthew 19.26

Morrision's argument

In a recent paper in this journal,¹ Wes Morrision argues that 'if God is necessarily good ... , then He does not have the maximum conceivable amount of power and so is not all-powerful'.² His argument is developed with a care and sophistication which no summary can adequately reflect; however, we may capture its flavour by characterizing it thus. To be necessarily good is for one to fail to do evil in all possible worlds and yet to be all powerful is – roughly – for one to have the power to actualize any consistently describable state of affairs;³ in other words is for it to be the case that for any consistently describable state of affairs there is some possible world in which that state of affairs is actualized by one. Given that some consistently describable states of affairs are evil – the example Morrision gives is that of 'an innocent child's being maliciously tortured'⁴ – it follows that no omnipotent being can be necessarily perfectly good. Either there is no world in which the being in question actualizes the state of affairs that is an innocent child's being maliciously tortured, in which case he/she/it is not omnipotent, or there is, in which case he/she/it is not necessarily perfectly good.

Having presented this argument, various ways in which an Anselmian – i.e. one who rejects Morrision's conclusion – might try to wriggle free from it are critically

discussed and, towards the end of his paper, whilst considering an objection that relies on a distinction between basic and conditional powers, Morrision forcefully restates what is his main concern:

Let's imagine a being *D* who is much like the Anselmian God with regard to its non-moral attributes. *D* has, let us suppose, as much conditional power as it is possible to have, and *D* has great basic power too. But *D*'s basic power is limited in the following way: *D* cannot choose to actualize any state of affairs that is not either evil in itself or else necessary for some other evil state of affairs. Unlike the Anselmian God, *D* has no difficulty whatever 'bringing himself' to torture children. What *D* cannot bring himself to do is to cause goods like sunsets and symphonies and babies' smiles unless he knows that they are required for some outweighing evil.

Does *D* have maximal power? I don't think so

Here, then, is the problem. Why should we not make a parallel judgement about Anselm's God? As I have imagined *D*, he has as much conditional power as God. The restriction on *D*'s basic power is severe, but no more so that the restriction on God's basic power. So if the limitation on basic power is sufficient to render *D* non-omnipotent, why doesn't it do the same for God?⁵

The fact – and I shall be assuming with Morrision that it is one – that we would not wish to describe *D* as omnipotent and the *prima facie* parallel between *D* and the Anselmian God put Morrision in a position to conclude that a being identical to the Anselmian God save that (a) although He is morally perfect, He is not necessarily so; and (b) His basic power extends to both good and evil choices, would be more powerful – 'in some very intuitive sense of "powerful"'⁶ – than the Anselmian God. He thus finishes by presenting the theist with a choice: either maintain God's omnipotence but deny that He is necessarily morally perfect or maintain God's necessary moral perfection and claim that He is only as powerful as is logically consistent with that.

Just before he concludes, Morrision mentions *en passant* what he describes as an 'important qualification'⁷.

The argument ... presupposes that it makes sense to speak of a power to choose evil. This [by which he means the presupposition, not the claim that his argument makes the presupposition] will be denied by some philosophers. Those who, like ... Aquinas ... , believe that one *necessarily* chooses what one conceives of as good, may insist that the ability to choose evil is not an active power, but a liability – a liability that is due either to ignorance or weakness.⁸

Despite its importance, Morrision is able to move quickly over this qualification by suggesting that most contemporary Anselmians are not in a position to avail themselves of Aquinas's view in order to avoid his conclusion, the reason being that 'they are libertarians who believe that human persons are free, in an incompatible sense, to choose between good and evil. Such freedom entails both the power to choose what one knows to be good and the power to choose what one knows to be evil'.⁹ Morrision's suggestion seems to be that one might in principle

escape his conclusion by buying Aquinas's view, but one would have to buy one's escape at a price which one would most probably regard as prohibitive: one would have to sell the chance of using a free-will defence in one's theodicy. 'Anselmians who believe in this sort of freedom – and who tout the free will defence as a solution [to] the logical problem of evil – are hardly in a position to deny that there is a genuine, active power knowingly to choose evil.'¹⁰ It is this 'important qualification' to his argument that will form the focus of our attention. We shall see that what we shall call an 'Adapted Anselmian Thomist' view allows us to escape 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.

A reply to Morriston's argument

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. Now it is true that the philosopher says that God *can deliberately do what is evil*. But this must be understood either on condition, the antecedent of which is impossible – as, for instance, if we were to say that God can do evil things if He will. For there is no reason why a conditional proposition should not be true, though both the antecedent and the consequent are impossible; as if one were to say: *If a man is an ass, he has four feet*. Or, he may be understood to mean that God can do some things which now seem to be evil: which, however, if He did them, would then be good. Or he is, perhaps, speaking after the common manner of the pagans, who thought that men became gods, like Jupiter or Mercury.¹¹

This is a famous passage from the *Summa* to which Morriston himself refers and his interpretation of it is surely correct: in the first sentence, Aquinas clearly presents the ability to 'fall short' of what morality requires of one as not being a genuine power and as such as not being an ability required by omnipotence – in fact, it is a liability which is repugnant to omnipotence. The 'power' to choose evil is the liability to be ignorant or weak willed. On Aquinas's view, Morriston observes, 'since choosing evil is a way of 'falling short' of what (at the deepest level) one is trying for, it follows that the inability to choose evil is not a weakness, but a strength. Since it provides security against failure, this unique inability entails *more* power, not less.'¹² Aquinas's view clearly blocks Morriston's conclusion that an omnipotent being could not be necessarily morally perfect. Indeed, Aquinas's view does even better than that: on it, not only are the properties which Morriston suggests are incompatible in fact compatible, but also one – necessary moral perfection – can be shown to follow from the other – omnipotence. This 'linking' of the divine properties is obviously going to be an attractive feature of Aquinas's view for the Anselmian. The only difficulty which Morriston places as a stumbling block in the way of what we might thus call an Anselmian Thomist reply to his

argument is the issue of 'libertarian free will' and 'the free-will defence to the logical problem of evil' for the Anselmian Thomist seems committed to denying the existence of 'a genuine, active power knowingly to choose evil'.

Anselmian Thomism requires that agents necessarily choose what they believe to be good and thus requires that one see any deviation by an agent from what morality requires as being explicable either in terms of that agent's ignorance of what is in reality good or in terms of that agent's suffering from weakness of will. The major concern that one might have in accepting that there were only these two ways of explaining moral lapses seems likely to be that it does not seem to do justice to the facts of our psychology as revealed by one's observation of oneself and others. Observation reveals that it is possible for one freely to choose to do something which one knows to be wrong whilst not suffering in any sense from weakness of will. Consider the following example:

Mr A wishes to leave his wife, Mrs A, and start a new life with Ms B. Unfortunately, from his point of view, in any divorce settlement Mrs A would gain half of their assets. This problem – as it strikes Mr A – would not arise were she to die as a result of an apparent accident; furthermore, were she to die in this way, her life insurance policy would provide for Mr A and Ms B to live in luxury for the rest of their lives. Mr and Mrs A often take their yacht out to sea, away from any observers, and it would be quite easy for Mr A to push Mrs A, who cannot swim, overboard. If he were to do so, it is extremely likely that she would drown. After some consideration of the relative probabilities of various outcomes and the relative strengths of his various desires, Mr A decides to murder his wife in this fashion and claim that her death was an accident. He thus invites his wife on a yachting trip and, once they are out to sea, pushes her over the side. Having seen her drown, he sails back to land and reports a 'terrible accident'. In due course, he claims the life insurance money and lives happily with Ms B for the rest of his life.

Even though Mr A's considerations led him to decide to murder his wife, it seems quite possible that during them he knew that murdering his wife would be wrong and weighed this fact against his reasons for killing her. It also seems quite possible that – whilst his strong preference was to live with Ms B and have a lot of money – he was not in any sense 'overcome' by his desire for Ms B or money when making his choice. Mr A might simply have coldly calculated that by the way his desires and the various probabilities stacked up, he maximized probable desire satisfaction by murdering his wife and making her death look like an accident and, having come to this conclusion, then freely chosen to maximize probable desire satisfaction rather than do what he knew he ought. From our own cases, I hazard, we know that we have made choices in this way. We have freely chosen to do what

we know we ought not to do whilst not being in any way weak-willed: we have simply had a desire for a particular state of affairs, one which we realized that we would not be able to achieve without doing something which was to a greater or lesser extent wrong, and we have chosen to satisfy that desire rather than behave as we ought. The desire did not in any way overwhelm us so that choice became impossible; rather, we chose to indulge that desire at the expense of doing our duty. It is this sort of power – knowingly and perfectly freely to choose to do wrong – that candid introspection leaves us in no doubt that we have and yet that seems to be ruled out a priori by Aquinas's view. It seems then that, regardless of our theodicy, as Morrison puts it, we 'are hardly in a position to deny that there is a genuine, active power knowingly to choose evil'.

In light of the above, we should therefore adapt Aquinas's view by saying that a failure to act morally may be explained in terms of *three* factors: ignorance of moral truth; weakness of will; and what one believes to be a reasonable desire for a state of affairs which one believes one cannot achieve without deviating from what morality requires, a desire which one judges outweighs one's reasons to be moral in that particular respect. (If one believed the desire to be unreasonable, then one's giving into it would be a case of weakness of will.) This, what we might call 'Adapted Anselmian Thomist' view, does not require one to maintain that one necessarily chooses what one believes to be morally good (and hence that deviations from moral requirements must be explained in terms of ignorance or weakness of will); it allows that one might choose to do what one knows to be evil as a result of thinking that the reasons for choosing to perform that evil action (that it will bring about some state of affairs that will be good for one) outweigh the reasons for not performing it (that it is an evil action). Even if it were erroneous to think that non-moral reasons might outweigh moral ones in this way, the sort of ignorance operative in the third mode of explanation for moral lapses on the Adapted Anselmian Thomist view could not be identified with that operative in the first, for when the third of these modes of explanation is correct, the agent in question is ignorant about the overriding nature of moral reasons either as such or as a result of some further meta-ethically significant fact, not necessarily ignorant of any particular moral reason. (Were it not always most reasonable to be moral, then there would not need to be any ignorance at all on the part of the agent where his or her deviation from what morality required was explicable in the third of these ways.)

Let us return to consider the case of Mr A. Mr A's failure to act morally was to be explained by his perceived inability to achieve a certain states of affairs, specifically the maximization of his happiness over the rest of his life, without deviating from what morality required of him. Even if we were to assume that Mr A was correct in thinking that he would be happier living the rest of his life with Ms B and the money from his wife's life insurance policy than he would be pursuing any other course of action, this would not be to suggest that overall it was

most rational for Mr A to murder his wife (and not just because he should consider the consequences of his choice in an afterlife). It is perfectly compatible with thinking that moral reasons are overriding reasons, either in this particular case as a matter of fact or generally as such, to suggest that Mr A has reasons to murder his wife that are in fact overridden, reasons which he has not realized are overridden. It seems plausible to suggest that the fact that a certain state of affairs would make one happiest over the rest of one's earthly life is in itself a good reason to try to bring about that state of affairs. If that is right and if one was of the opinion that it was always more reasonable to be moral than not, then one should say that whilst Mr A might thus have good reasons to murder his wife, he has better reasons not to murder her. But Mr A would presumably have a different assessment: as we presented him, he was not ignorant of the wrongness of murdering his wife and indeed regarded its wrongness as a reason not to do so; however, in his mind, this reason was outweighed by his reasonable desire to maximize his own happiness over the rest of his earthly life. Mr A then is committed to the position that it is not always most reasonable to be moral.

If there are such things as moral reasons for action – as all parties to the debate on the issue of the compatibility of omnipotence and necessary moral perfection may be taken to be in agreement in holding that there are – then either they are not always overriding reasons for finite agents or they are: either Mr A might be right in thinking that overall he has most reason to murder his wife or he must be wrong. Whether or not moral reasons are overriding per se, on classical theism, it is always overall most reasonable for finite agents to be moral because finite agents cannot actually ultimately achieve those 'other' ends that it is reasonable for them to desire – for example, their long-term happiness – without a relationship with God, a relationship which in turn they cannot but harm by failing to be moral. If classical theism is true, then for finite agents even the 'genuine, active power knowingly to choose evil' is thus more properly thought of as a liability: the power to choose evil is the liability to be ignorant, weak willed or unreasonable. If classical theism is true, this 'power' is itself 'a way of 'falling short' of what one has most reason to try for, for one's ultimate good is communion with God, an end which of necessity one cannot pursue by immoral means. For the infinite agent that is God, such a 'power' would also be a liability.

As we have already seen Aquinas pointing out, the claim that God can deliberately do what is evil,

... must be understood either on condition, the antecedent of which is impossible – as, for instance, if we were to say that God can do evil things if He will. For there is no reason why a conditional proposition should not be true, though both the antecedent and the consequent are impossible; as if one were to say: *If a man is an ass, he has four feet*. Or, he may be understood to mean that God can do some things which now seem to be evil: which, however, if He did them, would then be good. Or he is, perhaps, speaking after the common manner of the pagans, who thought that men became gods, like Jupiter or Mercury.

Only the first two of these conceptions are adequate ways of thinking when conceiving of the true God – the God of classical theism. The second way of thinking concerns actions which are not essentially evil and thus is beside our current concern; it is the first that should occupy us.

To ask the question whether God has the ‘power’ to perform an essentially evil action – for example, torture a child without its engendering any higher order and compensating good – is to ask whether He has the ‘power’ to perform an action which of necessity there is good reason not to perform and which – being omnipotent – He need not perform in order to effect any other state of affairs He might have good reason to want to effect. In other words, it is to ask whether He has the ‘power’ to perform an overall unreasonable action (an action He has more reason not to perform than to perform), which in turn we may admit – with Morrision – is the same as asking whether there is any possible world in which He performs an overall unreasonable action.¹³ To answer this question with ‘no’ is then obviously not in any way to retreat from a claim that God is all-powerful. The fact that there is no possible world in which God performs an overall unreasonable action is obviously not an expression of weakness.

Pertinent in this context is Morrision’s argument against Wierenga’s analysis of omnipotence.¹⁴ As Morrision puts his point against Wierenga, ‘in the case of some powers, we don’t need to decide whether they are compatible with a person’s essence in order to know that he is not omnipotent if he does not possess them’.¹⁵ This is surely true: we may consider the power to scratch one’s foot. Morrision’s argument against a Wierenga-style response to his dilemma – as is brought out powerfully in his discussion of *D* – is that we do not need to decide whether or not a power to do evil is compatible with a person’s essence in order to know that he or she is not omnipotent if he or she does not possess it, because – in some ‘very intuitive sense of “powerful”’ – we realize immediately that a being who cannot do evil cannot be all-powerful whether or not this inability is essential or accidental. This, however, is *not* true. If moral reasons for action are genuine reasons for action (as all sides in this debate are assuming that they are), then – in a very intuitive sense of ‘powerful’ – we may realize that saying of a person that he or she lacks the ‘power’ to do an essentially evil action, i.e. an action which there are necessarily reasons not to do, does not entail that he or she is not all-powerful. Lacking this ‘power’ may seem a weakness only because we consider occasions where, as finite agents, doing an evil action is the only means by which we might achieve something which it is reasonable for us to want to achieve, but in such situations we would in fact – if classical theism is true – always be acting contrary to our ultimate good if we pursued this evil means to our ends and thus we would be better off were (as we shall shortly see, *per impossible*) we not to have this power. God could never be in such a situation anyway because an omnipotent being as well as never finding Himself in a position where He was ignorant of moral truths or subject to weakness of will, could also never find Himself rationally desiring

some end that He could not achieve without deviating from what morality required. Being omnipotent, He would be able to achieve the end without deviating from what morality required and, being perfectly reasonable, He would do so. Without needing to accept with Aquinas 'that one necessarily chooses what one conceives of as good',¹⁶ we may thus say that *God* necessarily chooses what He conceives of as good and, His being omniscient, this obviously amounts to Him necessarily choosing what is good, i.e. His being morally perfect in all possible worlds. We may thus resist Morrision's conclusion, saying instead with Aquinas that not only are omnipotence and necessary moral perfection compatible, but that the latter flows from the former.

Our only remaining concern might be over whether in thus rebutting Morrision's argument, an Adapted Anselmian Thomist has limited his or her room for manoeuvre in response to the problem of evil. On Adapted Anselmian Thomism, 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. For created beings, it is a liability they necessarily suffer under; for the Creator, it is one which His divine nature frees Him from. Even when the power knowingly to choose evil is seen as a liability which created beings but not their creator suffer under, perhaps surprisingly, one's theodicy need not take a different a shape from that of the traditional free-will defence. Why do created beings necessarily suffer under the liability of being able knowingly to choose to perform evil actions? Because it is logically impossible that there be two omnipotent beings.¹⁷ 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. 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 as no creature's life is overall so bad as to make it better for them had they never existed, but, in doing this, one would parallel the proponent of the higher-order good view in arguing that it is not worse for every individual creature that he or she exists with this sort of freedom rather than not exist at all. Rather than saying 'free will is so good its worth the evils necessary for it', one would say 'free will is a liability that is necessary for any created being and its not so bad, either in itself or given the 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.

Classical theists – be they libertarians and proponents of the free-will defence or not – have no reason to think that omnipotence and necessary moral perfection

are incompatible. Indeed they may conclude that whilst power may corrupt, absolute power perfects, necessarily.

Notes

1. Wes Morriston 'Omnipotence and necessary moral perfection: are they compatible?', *Religious Studies*, 37 (2001), 143–160. His argument finds parallels in Nelson Pike's 'Omnipotence and God's ability to sin', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 6 (1969), 208–216, and Peter Geach's *Providence and Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), ch. 1.
2. Morriston 'Omnipotence', 143.
3. Morriston does not actually commit himself to such an implausibly 'strong' reading of omnipotence, but this detail does not affect his overall argument according to which some of the consistently describable states of affairs which reflection reveals our concept of omnipotence requires an omnipotent being to actualize in some possible worlds are evil states of affairs.
4. Morriston 'Omnipotence', 144.
5. *Ibid.*, 155–156.
6. *Ibid.*, 156–157.
7. *Ibid.*, 157.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, pt 1, reply to objection 2, article 3, question 25.
12. Morriston, 'Omnipotence', 157.
13. If we do not admit this, then there is obviously another way of blocking Morriston's conclusion.
14. E. Wierenga *The Nature of God* (Ithaca NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1989), 16–17.
15. Morriston, 'Omnipotence', 147.
16. *Ibid.*, 157.
17. To argue this important point would take us beyond the scope of this paper.