

How the divine properties fit together: reply to Gwiazda

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Abstract: Jeremy Gwiazda has criticized my claim that God, understood as an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly free person is a person ‘of the simplest possible kind’ on the grounds that omnipotence etc. as spelled out by me are omnipotence etc. of restricted kinds, and so less simple forms of these properties than maximal forms would be. However the account which I gave of these properties in *The Christian God* (although not in *The Coherence of Theism*) shows that, when they are defined in certain ways, they all follow from one property of ‘pure, limitless, intentional power’. I argue here that a person who has these properties so defined is a person ‘of the simplest possible kind’.

I am grateful to Jeremy Gwiazda¹ for drawing my attention to the fact that I did not adequately justify in *The Existence of God* my claim that the three essential divine properties of omnipotence, omniscience, and perfect freedom (which, I claim, entail all the other traditional divine properties) understood in my way fit together in such a way that God is ‘the simplest kind of person there could be’.² I did however give what I regard as a satisfactory (although perhaps sometimes unclear) justification in *CG*, 151–158, when I claimed that these three properties understood in my way all follow from a very simple property of ‘having pure, limitless intentional power’. I acknowledge that I should have repeated that account in *The Existence of God*. So I will repeat it here in a clearer form.³

I assume that God is everlasting rather than timeless, for the reason that – as I have argued – the supposition of the existence of a timeless person is incoherent (*CT*, 228; *CG*, 139–140). God having ‘limitless power’ is simply being omnipotent. God’s power being ‘intentional’ entails that He is a person; an omnipotent person is one who has the maximum logically possible degree of power. The attempt to spell out what it is to have this maximum degree of power has proved difficult for philosophers. My own suggested definition [D] (*CT*, 136)

in terms of what an omnipotent person could bring about was surely on the right lines:

A person P is omnipotent at a time *t* if and only if he is able to bring about any logically contingent state of affairs after *t*, the description of which does not entail that P did not bring it about at *t*.

This definition may however need to be tightened up, in order to take account of the problem of McEar,⁴ by a clause (loosely) to the effect that P is omnipotent only if he can bring about more logically contingent states than can any other logically possible person.⁵ A person is powerful to the extent to which if he chooses (tries, forms the intention, or whatever) to achieve some goal, he succeeds; and so he is maximally powerful if any choice of his is efficacious (within logical limits such as I have just set out); and I so described God (*CG*, 129) as omnipotent ‘in that whatever he chooses to do, he succeeds in doing’. (The ‘anything’ was meant to cover, in the terminology of *CG*, anything which ‘makes ultimate sense’, that is within logical limits such as those stated by [D].)

Limits on what a person will choose to do are not however limits on his power. If I have an irresistible inclination always to tell the truth, that does not mean that I am less powerful than someone who may well sometimes tell a lie. Hence, I now realize (as I realized in *CG*) that I was mistaken in rejecting [D] in favour of a restricted account of omnipotence (*CT*, 163–166) which I called [E], which limited God’s omnipotence further to what He could choose to bring about. [E] is a more complicated property than [D] and does not elucidate omnipotence. So a better definition in terms of choice (equivalent, I suggest, to my [D]) would be that a person is omnipotent at *t* iff: if he chooses to bring about any logically contingent state of affairs after *t*, the description of which does not entail that he did not bring it about, then he succeeds. And then this (like [D]) needs to be tightened up to take account of the problem of McEar. It follows that being omnipotent does not entail an inability to do evil.

I understood in *CG* by God’s omnipotence being ‘pure’ that ‘everything which he brings about he means to bring about’ (*CG*, 151). So His actions have no unintended consequences. And since refraining from doing an action is also an action, it follows that everything which He refrains from bringing about, He means not to bring about. Hence, insofar as He has a free choice He must know what are all the possible alternatives between which He can choose. I suggest that a person whose omnipotence is pure in this sense is simpler than one whose omnipotence is not pure. The exercise of intentional power requires knowledge of alternatives between which the agent can choose. To suppose that an omnipotent person only has some knowledge of alternatives is less simple than to suppose that he has knowledge of all possible alternatives. An omnipotence limited by ignorance of what its possessor can do with it would be an omnipotence the exercise of which is restricted by something contingent. So

I argued, God's 'power is not limited in consequence of any ignorance of what he can do with it' (CG, 152). The choices of an omnipotent person being limited to the logically possible can only affect what is not already unalterable by anyone. So – given the logical impossibility of backward causation – an omnipotent person cannot affect the past,⁶ or the truth of logically necessary truths, including the fundamental moral truths. His choices can affect only contingent future states (CG, 152).

Now for any past state or any necessary truth, there are future states of affairs which can be defined by its relation to them, from which it follows that God needs to know all necessary truths and all truths about the past. For example, if God is to know that He can choose now to bring about a third world war or a prime number of planets greater than 7, He has to know that so far there have been only two world wars, and that there is a prime number greater than 7. And if He is to know that He can do an evil action or one less than the best, He has to know which actions are evil or not the best. Pure omnipotence however does not entail any knowledge of the future, except insofar as some future state is logically impossible given what has happened in the past, or for a reason to be given below. So it is simpler not to postulate any such knowledge; to postulate any knowledge in God other than what is required for His pure omnipotence would add an extra property.

To believe that some action is (morally) good, I claim, inevitably motivates a person to do it. To believe that some action is evil inevitably motivates the agent not to do it. 'Perfect freedom' in my sense (CT, 151–152) is simply the absence of any desires, other than those resulting from moral beliefs, which in a person omniscient to the extent analysed so far will amount to moral knowledge. These former desires arise from the mere possession of omnipotence; other desires would be 'causal influences' limiting its exercise. It is simpler not to postulate more desires than follow from pure omnipotence. 'His power is so pure and great that nothing exerts causal influence on him to act as he does' (CG, 152). So although (in virtue of his power) God can do evil, He cannot choose to do evil (because He is always motivated to do good and has no contrary desire) and so will not do evil. It follows also that when there is a unique best action available to him, God will do it. So He knows that if He has promised to do X, He will do X. Where there is no unique best action available to God (which, I suggest, is the normal situation), His omnipotence restricts His knowledge of what He will do. It follows that pure limitless intentional power entails perfect freedom and omniscience only in the senses which I defined.

Gwiazda is right to point out that the simplest kind of omniscience, taken on its own, is incompatible with omnipotence defined in a non-restricted way, and also with perfect freedom so defined. But a person who had that kind of omniscience and so foreknew everything which he would choose to do, would inevitably do it when the time for doing it arrived. This would involve him in each case where

there is no best action for him to do inevitably being subject to a particular 'causal' desire to do this rather than that action. This would make him a very complicated being, and would also, of course, be incompatible with perfect freedom in any sense. A person who had perfect freedom in the sense of being able equally to choose good or evil would also require particular 'causal' desires to do acts which were evil. (For no-one can have a desire to do evil as such, since an evil act is one which there is, on balance, reason not to do. A person who does an evil act does it because he desires some quality of it – e.g. that it will bring him fame or fortune – despite its being evil.) Having such particular desires would make a being a more complicated being than one who had perfect freedom in my sense – without him having any greater omnipotence or omniscience.

So the issue is: which way of understanding these properties leads to the simplest overall combination? And the answer is, I hope, now clear. Pure limitless intentional power entails omnipotence, omniscience, and 'perfect freedom' in my senses. These properties fit together in such a way that their possessor is a person of the simplest kind there could be.⁷

Notes

1. Jeremy Gwiazda 'Richard Swinburne's argument to the simplicity of God via the infinite', *Religious Studies*, 45 (2009), 487–493.
2. *CT* refers to *The Coherence of Theism*, revised edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); *CG* refers to *The Christian God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); *The Existence of God*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004).
3. *Contra* Gwiazda's claim, it is perfectly possible 'to understand pure, limitless, intentional power without understanding Swinburne's discussion of freedom, knowledge, and power in *The Coherence of Theism*'; Gwiazda 'Richard Swinburne's argument', 491. The discussion of pure, limitless, intentional power in *CG*, ch. 7 relies on the analysis of the individual properties in *CG*, ch. 6 without presupposing any result from *CT*. Thus the definition of omnipotence in *CG* is in effect the same as the D and not the E of *CT*.
4. McEar is a being of a kind postulated by Plantinga and known to Ockham, who is capable of scratching his left ear but essentially incapable of performing any other task. He would count as omnipotent on definition [D] since he can bring about all that is logically possible for him to bring about, viz. that his left ear is scratched. But other beings can bring that about, and much else besides and so they have a greater claim to omnipotence than does McEar. (I have some doubt about whether McEar or any other person who is essentially such as to be limited in power in certain ways of a kind that in any other person would be contingent ways is a logically possible being, but I pass over that.) For the history of attempts to define the concept of omnipotence, see Brian Leftow 'Omnipotence', in T. P. Flint and M. C. Rae (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009). Although attempts to spell out what is involved in omnipotence, in the sense of having the maximum logically possible degree of power, are complicated, the concept itself is simple.
5. Having this ability entails that P can bring about these states immediately and without feeling any exertion, and so can bring them about easily.
6. That is, he cannot affect 'hard facts' about the past, these being ones whose truth conditions are solely in the past.
7. I am most grateful to Brian Leftow for critical comments on an earlier version of this reply.