THE ALL-POWERFUL, PERFECTLY GOOD, AND FREE GOD

This paper develops a simple and attractive account of the traditional divine attribute of omnipotence which makes available equally attractive resolutions of two difficult puzzles in philosophical theology concerning the compatibility of traditional divine attributes. The first puzzle concerns the compatibility of the attributes of omnipotence and perfect goodness, while the second puzzle concerns the compatibility of perfect goodness and freedom. The account of omnipotence here developed is sufficiently plausible and sufficiently different from other competing contemporary accounts of this attribute to merit attention on its own; but, it is even more deserving of attention given the unique resolutions of the aforementioned puzzles it makes available.

In Section One, I briefly engage the recent history of philosophical treatments of omnipotence, arguing that the analysis of this attribute developed here accounts for the insights and demands of this literature quite well. As such, the account of omnipotence proposed here is attractive when this attribute is considered in isolation from other attributes. In Section Two, I explicate the puzzle of omnipotence and perfect goodness and the puzzle of perfect goodness and freedom, showing that someone who adopts the proposed account of omnipotence has the resources to dissolve these puzzles in an attractive manner unique in the current literature. Indeed, more than this, she is equipped to present novel positive arguments in favor of the compatibility of these attributes. Thus, the account of omnipotence proposed here is also attractive when this attribute is considered alongside other attributes.

I: OMNIPOTENCE TAKEN IN ISOLATION

This section briefly explores recent philosophical discussions of the nature of omnipotence where this attribute is considered in isolation from other divine attributes. Here we set aside concerns about what an account of omnipotence should say if omnipotence is to be consistent with perfect goodness and other divine attributes and simply ask what an account of omnipotence should be expected to say in its own right. After examining the literature on this topic (I.a), I will introduce my own account of omnipotence and show that it accommodates the key insights and demands of this literature (I.b). As a result, the account proves to be attractive as an account of omnipotence where this attribute is considered in isolation from other divine attributes.

I.a Recent Philosophical Treatments of Omnipotence

My approach here will be survey recent philosophical literature about omnipotence by briefly entertaining a number of proposals about how to understand omnipotence and explaining key difficulties faced by these proposals.

An initially tempting proposal is to define omnipotence as simply the ability to perform any action whatsoever.[[1]](#footnote-1) An omnipotent being is one that can do any action, period. Philosophers have almost universally rejected this account of omnipotence, since it implies that an omnipotent being must be able to do actions which are logically impossible—like make things entirely out of wood without those things being made of wood.

An easy revision to the first proposal suggests itself. What we should say is that an omnipotent being is one that is able to do any logically possible action.[[2]](#footnote-2) But, unfortunately, this view runs into several difficulties as well. One of these is the famous stone paradox.[[3]](#footnote-3) It would seem that the action type *making a stone so big one cannot lift it* is logically possible—nearly any one of us could token an action of this type. But, could an omnipotent being do this—make a stone so big *it* could not lift it? The foregoing account of omnipotence suggests a positive answer. But, if an omnipotent being is able to make a stone so big it cannot lift it, then there is after all something logically possible that it is unable to do—namely *lift the stone it has just made*.

Due to examples of this sort, one might be tempted to say that omnipotence has to do not with being able to do any logically possible action, but with being able to do any action logically possible for *oneself* to perform. That is, an omnipotent being is one that is able to do everything it is possible for it to do. Since it is not possible for omnipotent beings to make stones they cannot lift, omnipotent beings needn’t be able to do so.

Unfortunately, this sort of account of omnipotence runs into the problem of essentially limited beings exemplified by Mr. McEar.[[4]](#footnote-4) McEar is a curious fellow who is such that it is impossible for him to do anything other than scratch his ear. Fortunately, he is able to scratch his ear. So, he is able to do the one and only thing it is possible for him to do. On the proposed account of omnipotence, it follows that Mr. McEar is omnipotent. Since he obviously isn’t omnipotent, the proposed account fails.

Some have been tempted to respond to this kind of example by denying that beings like Mr. McEar are possible.[[5]](#footnote-5) But, this sort of response has not found wide favor. First, modified and more believable versions of the McEar scenario have been proposed.[[6]](#footnote-6) Second, philosophers who have discussed omnipotence, especially recently, have tended to accept that there are some non-trivially true counterpossible claims as well as some false counterpossible claims.[[7]](#footnote-7) The counterpossible claim <if a man were a donkey, he’d have four legs> is non-trivially true, while the counterpossible claim <if a man were a donkey, he’d have eight legs> is false.[[8]](#footnote-8) If these philosophers are correct in accepting a semantics for counterpossibles which allows for non-trivially true counterpossibles as well as false counterpossibles, then these counterpossible claims might be employed to test the metal of accounts of omnipotence. Defenders of the McEar example might use it in this way by proposing that the counterpossible <If McEar existed, he would not be omnipotent> is non-trivially true. Since the aforementioned account of omnipotence implies that this counterpossible claim would not be non-trivially true, it faces a significant difficulty even if the original McEar example isn’t modified.

So far, we have focused only on accounts of omnipotence which define omnipotence in terms of action types, saying that an omnipotent being can perform any action type or any possible action type. A different approach uses states of affairs instead of action types.[[9]](#footnote-9) One view in this vein proposes that an omnipotent being can bring about any possible state of affairs.[[10]](#footnote-10) One difficulty for this view, however, is that it implies that omnipotent beings are able to bring about *necessary* states of affairs, since these are possible states of affairs. But, it is highly controversial whether any being could bring about necessary states of affairs.[[11]](#footnote-11)

We might, then, modify the proposal by claiming that an omnipotent being can bring about any contingent state of affairs. Two difficulties with this proposal concern the past and human freedom. First, on the present analysis, an omnipotent being must be able to bring about past states of affairs, since many of these are contingent. But, arguably, no being can bring about past states of affairs. At least, there are *some* past states of affairs that cannot be brought about at times future to those states.[[12]](#footnote-12) So, the present analysis rules out all too easily the possibility of an omnipotent being. Second, the present analysis requires that an omnipotent being be able to bring about states of affairs involving exercises of freedom on the part of agents other than the omnipotent being. For instance, if God is omnipotent, then the present analysis requires that God be able to bring about Joe’s freely choosing to mow the lawn, since Joe’s freely choosing to mow his lawn is a contingent state of affairs. However, those philosophers who hold to libertarian views of free will—and many of them are the same philosophers interested in giving an account of omnipotence—will not accept this picture of free will. On their view, Joe’s freely choosing to mow the lawn is inconsistent with any other agent bringing this contingent state of affairs about. Thus, again, they will reject the present account of omnipotence because it makes omnipotence too hard to come by.

The failure of these initially attractive and fairly simple accounts of omnipotence led to some increasingly complex proposals concerning how to understand omnipotence in the early 1980s.[[13]](#footnote-13) Two of the focal areas of these accounts were on the most recently discussed questions concerning whether an omnipotent being must be able to bring about the past or to bring about human free actions. These accounts were constructed in such a way as to rule out these very requirements. As a result, they included in their analyses of omnipotence detailed information about world-segments, counterfactuals of freedom, and the like. By including these details, the accounts made non-trivial assumptions about these metaphysical details. In the eyes of recent writers, these non-trivial assumptions are demerits, rather than merits, of those proposals.[[14]](#footnote-14) A return toward simpler, more intuitive, more theoretically-neutral accounts of omnipotence is evident in the recent literature.

Though I haven’t the space here to investigate this contemporary literature thoroughly, I will very briefly mention two recent examples of this return to simplicity in accounts of omnipotence. Both accounts are motivated in part by a concern to explain how it could be that there are some states of affairs that even an omnipotent being is unable to bring about—a concern to which I will return later. Each account suggests that whether a being’s inability to bring about some state of affairs threatens that being’s omnipotence depends upon *why* that being is unable to bring about the state of affairs in question. On Wielenberg’s (2000) view, so long as the reason the being cannot bring about a state of affairs is not because of any absence of power on the part of the being, the being still qualifies as omnipotent. An omnipotent being is one which is such that there is no state of affairs it cannot bring about because of an absence of power. Pruss and Pearce (2012) instead opt to explain the idea that an omnipotent being might not be able to bring about a state of affairs by appealing to the notion of freedom. For them, an omnipotent being is simply one which is perfectly free and has an efficacious will. Perfectly free beings, however, might be such that there are some things they are unable to will, so long as their inability to will arises from their character and choices in the right way.

I have significant concerns about these accounts of omnipotence which I will not explore at length here. Interestingly, when one considers the details of each account, what one finds is that both views share a commitment to the idea that an absence of basic power to will something needn’t affect whether a being qualifies as omnipotent. What matters is unlimited conditional power—roughly, that anything the being were to will, it would intentionally bring about. Following (Morriston 2002), I remain unpersuaded of this idea, and I will say a bit more about this in section two. I bring up these accounts of omnipotence now, however, because despite significant disagreement with them in their details, I believe that each provides some insight about the nature of omnipotence. Indeed, momentarily, after introducing my own proposal and explaining how it accommodates the key insights and demands of the literature surveyed above, I will argue that this account also provides a deeper explanation for the key insights of these two recent proposals. Where they fail to reach rock-bottom in terms of what is explanatory fundamental in an account of omnipotence, my proposal reaches the bottom.

I.b Omnipotence as Possession of All the Powers

Let me, then, turn to my own proposal and to explaining how it accommodates the insights and demands of the literature above. I propose that we understand omnipotence in the following way:

(AP) x is omnipotent if and only if x has all the powers.

Like other recent accounts of omnipotence, AP is obviously a very simple account of this attribute. In my view, this is a positive feature in its favor. And, as we will now see, AP accounts for the key insights and demands evident in recent philosophical discussions of omnipotence. Exploring how AP accommodates these insights and demands will also offer us an opportunity to better understand the view.

First, AP does not imply the absurdity that an omnipotent being is able to perform logically impossible actions, like making something entirely out of wood without it being made out of wood. For, as long as there is no power to bring about these logical impossibilities, an omnipotent being needn’t be able to bring them about. And, plausibly, there is no such power.

Does AP require that an omnipotent being is able to make a stone so big it cannot lift it, though? One might think, at first glance, that it does. For, it would appear that *the power to make a stone one cannot lift* is a power that some human beings have. So, it is a power. And, AP requires that omnipotent beings have all powers. So, omnipotent beings must have this power. So, they must have the power to make stones they cannot lift. And this just shows that omnipotence is incoherent.

But, this line of reasoning is flawed. To see this, consider a human being who makes a stone so big she cannot lift it. Consider all the powers that she exercises in making this stone—welding powers and button-pushing powers and whatever other powers it takes to make large stones. AP implies that an omnipotent being has *these* powers. But, plausibly, an omnipotent being *would* have these powers. That is, whatever powers a human being might exercise in making a stone so big it could not lift it are powers an omnipotent being would have. But, this does not imply that an omnipotent being can make a stone so big it could not lift it. For, in addition to having the stone-making powers that the human has, an omnipotent being has stone lifting powers far greater than those the human possesses. The stone paradox, then, does not threaten AP.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The paradox does however teach us something helpful about the nature of powers. Just because a person S exercises a power P and her doing so results in some state of affairs A does not imply that we should conclude that S or anyone else has a power to bring about A. As the example we just considered illustrates, supposing otherwise multiplies powers beyond necessity. For, it is clear that there are such cases where someone S’ other than S can possess all of the powers exercised by S in bringing about A but S’ does not possess the power to bring about A. There is no difficulty, for instance, in imagining two humans S and S’ who are equal (and not very good) with respect to their abilities to make big stones, but unequal with respect to their abilities to lift them. Suppose, for instance, that S and S’ are both such that the maximum sized stone they can make is a 60 pound stone. But, imagine that S’ and not S can lift 60 pound stones. It would be absurd to conclude on this basis that S has powers S’ doesn’t—namely, the power to make stones so big one cannot lift them. No; if anything, S’ is the one with additional powers here.

Moving on, the example of Mr. McEar also clearly poses no difficulty for AP. Mr. McEar is clearly not omnipotent, given AP, because Mr. McEar lacks many, many powers.

What about the question concerning whether an omnipotent being must be able to bring about past states of affairs? The question concerning whether an omnipotent being must be able to bring about the free actions of creatures? Here I think that what we should hope for from an account of omnipotence is theory-neutrality. An attractive account of omnipotence should not, all by itself, settle the important questions involved here having to do with power over the past and the nature of free action. These are important metaphysical disputes that deserve focused attention of their own. What we want is a theory of omnipotence that neither clearly implies that an omnipotent being must have power over the past nor mustn’t, a theory which neither clearly implies that an omnipotent being must be able to bring about the free actions of others nor mustn’t.

Again, AP delivers. If there is a power over the past, AP implies that an omnipotent being must have it. If there is a power to bring it about that other agents freely perform certain actions, AP implies that an omnipotent being must have it. But, AP does not by itself settle the question of whether there are such powers. Instead, this question is left as a matter for further metaphysical debate, as it properly should be. AP, then, fares extremely well as an account of omnipotence taken in isolation from other divine attributes in terms of its ability to accommodate the key insights and demands of philosophical treatments of omnipotence up until the most recent proposals.

And AP accommodates the insights of these more recent proposals extremely well also. In fact, it is plausible that AP explains what is right about these proposals, providing an account of what it is these proposals get right about omnipotence in terms of something more basic. In other words, where these most recent proposals fail to reach rock-bottom in terms of explaining omnipotence, AP really reaches bottom.

Pruss and Pearce, we saw, defined omnipotence in terms of two properties—having an efficacious will and being perfectly free. I disagree with these authors about how we should understand possessing an efficacious will and being perfectly free;[[16]](#footnote-16) but, I agree that an omnipotent being will *have* an efficacious will and will *be* perfectly free. Indeed, I think there is a deeper, unified explanation for why an omnipotent being will have these two properties. It is because an omnipotent being has all the powers. A being with all the powers has as efficacious a will as possible. It has the powers necessary to overcome whatever obstacles there might be to its will. And, as I will argue in detail in the next section when discussing the puzzle of perfect goodness and freedom, a being that possesses all the powers is thereby perfectly free. AP, then, explains what is correct in Pruss’s and Pearce’s account of omnipotence.

A similar story goes for Wielenberg’s account. Though I disagree with Wielenberg that the following claim explains what it is to be omnipotent, I agree with him that it is true that an omnipotent being is one which is such that there is nothing it is unable to do *because* it lacks the power to do so. I agree with this because I think omnipotent beings lack *no* powers and *a fortiori* aren’t unable to do things because they lack powers. Again, AP explains what is correct in Wielenberg’s account.

As an account of the traditional divine attribute of omnipotence taken in isolation from other traditional divine attributes, AP is extraordinarily attractive. AP is simple. AP accommodates the key insights and demands of recent philosophical treatments of omnipotence. And, I should add, AP has a certain intuitive appeal about it. *Of course* being omnipotent just is being all-powerful! And being all-powerful just is having all the powers. One begins to wonder why on earth recent philosophical treatments of omnipotence have overlooked this idea.

II: OMNIPOTENCE, GOODNESS, AND FREEDOM

That omnipotence is possession of all powers is a simple, attractive, and intuitive proposal when omnipotence is taken in isolation from other traditional divine attributes. But, how does it fare when it is considered *alongside* other divine attributes? Alternative proposals about the nature of omnipotence get part of their appeal from the fact that they are supposedly able to make good sense of relationships among traditional divine attributes whose compatibility has been called into question. One might wonder whether AP, the account of omnipotence I have proposed, can achieve comparable results.

The purpose of this section is to show that one who adopts AP as her account of omnipotence is thereby afforded with attractive ways to defend traditional divine attributes in light of challenges to their compatibility. As I will show, AP affords one unique resolutions to two intractable puzzles about these attributes; and, AP moreover affords one novel positive arguments in favor of the compatibility of these attributes. The specific attribute-pairs on which I will focus here are, first, the attributes of omnipotence and perfect goodness and, second, the attributes of perfect goodness and freedom. For each pair of attributes, I will present an argument for their incompatibility resembling those which have been defended in the philosophical literature, explain how AP affords a response to this argument, and then show how AP provides the resources for defending a positive argument in favor of the compatibility of the attributes.

II.a. The Puzzle of Omnipotence and Perfect Goodness

By ascribing omnipotence to God, it is often thought that theists are ascribing to God necessary possession of the maximum possible degree of power; while, in ascribing perfect goodness to God, it is thought that theists are ascribing to God necessary possession of the maximum possible degree of goodness.[[17]](#footnote-17),[[18]](#footnote-18) But, reflection upon these attributes quickly leads to questions about their compatibility. Doesn’t God’s omnipotence require that it is possible for him to do moral wrongs? But, on the other hand, doesn’t God’s perfect goodness require that he never would—and indeed, never could—do moral wrongs?

We might work these questions up into an argument against the compatibility of omnipotence and perfect goodness as follows. Suppose, for *reductio*, that:

1. Possibly, God is omnipotent and perfectly good.

Given that God is omnipotent, it has seemed to many to follow that God must be able to bring about atrocities—events whose very serious wrong-making features are not counterbalanced by right-making features.[[19]](#footnote-19) An example of such an atrocity might be torturing innocent disabled persons. This is something human beings are able to do, and it is difficult to see how an omnipotent being wouldn’t also be able to do so. Thus, it has seemed to many that:

1. Necessarily, if God is omnipotent, then God is able to bring about atrocities.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Yet, given God’s goodness, many have thought that God *cannot* bring about such atrocities. God’s perfect goodness does not consist simply in the fact that God doesn’t ever in fact bring about such things, nor in the fact that he wouldn’t bring them about in a wide range of circumstances.[[21]](#footnote-21) Rather, it has been thought that God’s perfect goodness consists, at least in part, in his impeccability—his inability to sin. God is necessarily unable to do wrong. Thus, it has seemed to many that:

1. Necessarily, if God is perfectly good, then God is unable to bring about atrocities.

From 1, 2, and 3, it follows that:

1. Possibly, God is able to bring about atrocities and God is unable to bring about atrocities.

Since 4 is a contradiction, at least one of 1, 2, or 3 must be rejected. But, the one who presses our puzzle will insist, 2 and 3 are well-supported. So, we must reject our original assumption, 1. That is, we must reject the compatibility of omnipotence and perfect goodness. God cannot possess together each of these attributes which he is traditionally thought to possess essentially.

Arguments against the compatibility of omnipotence and perfect goodness like the foregoing have recently been defended with care by philosophers of religion.[[22]](#footnote-22) Others have attempted to provide responses to these arguments. By far, the more common response from philosophers not persuaded by these arguments is to deny premise 2 in the argument above.[[23]](#footnote-23) The general strategy has been to attempt to provide accounts of omnipotence which appear to match commonsense intuitions about what is required for omnipotence and which allow one to deny premise 2—to deny that God’s omnipotence entails his ability to bring about atrocities. That one’s account of omnipotence is able to deliver this result is taken as a positive feature in its favor.

The accounts of omnipotence we saw earlier from Pruss and Pearce and from Wielenberg are two good examples here. The defenders of each account attempt to show how their account can accommodate the idea that an omnipotent being might be unable to bring about atrocities. In each case, this is because such a being might lack the basic power to will to bring about such atrocities, even if it has sufficient power to bring about anything it wills. Wielenberg, for example, compares the God of classical theism with a color-impaired deity that has the power to make any colored objects it wills to make, but that cannot will to make red objects because it cannot imagine them. The God of classical theism is claimed to be omnipotent in much the same way such a color-impaired deity would be omnipotent. God has the power to bring about atrocities if he wills them; he just doesn’t have the power to will to bring them about. Pruss’s and Pearce’s approach is similar. They think having the power to will to bring about an atrocity is not required for being perfectly free, and so they conclude that a being might lack this power and still be omnipotent if it also has an efficacious will. Both views, then, accept claim 3 in the above puzzle and reject claim 2.

It is not my purpose here to argue against these proposals, though I do think they face significant obstacles.[[24]](#footnote-24) Instead, my interest is in articulating a very different approach to the present puzzle which could be advocated by a defender of AP, the account of omnipotence I have proposed. Since AP is so attractive when we consider omnipotence in isolation from other attributes, and since it plausibly explains the key insights of these alternative proposals, if it could be shown that AP can also make good sense of the relationship between traditional divine attributes whose compatibility has been called into question, then AP will gain the upper hand on these alternatives. For these accounts will lose whatever advantage they had over AP in terms of their ability to solve such puzzles, and at this point it appears this is all the advantage they have over AP.

How should an advocate of AP approach the puzzle of omnipotence and perfect goodness? Plausibly, she should not follow the lead of the majority of recent writers who have wished to resolve this puzzle by denying claim 2—the claim that if God is omnipotent, then God is able to bring about atrocities. For, plausibly, given AP, an omnipotent being *must* be able to bring about atrocities. For, as van Inwagen (1983) has argued, the abilities are naturally taken to be a subset of the powers. And, to deny that God is able to bring about atrocities is naturally taken to involve denying that God has some kind of ability. If God, per AP, has all of the powers and so all of the abilities, then denying claim 2 is simply not an option.

A further reason for the advocate of AP not to follow the majority of recent writers in denying claim 2 is that there is a plausible understanding of what it is to be “able” to bring about a state of affairs which, together with AP, implies that an omnipotent being must be able to bring about atrocities. The understanding of the ability to bring about a state of affairs I have in mind is the following:

(Ab) x is able to bring about y if and only if there is no obstacle to x’s bringing about y which x hasn’t the power to overcome.

I will say much more on behalf of Ab in the next subsection, where I argue that it provides an attractive account of the “ability” to do otherwise involved in the principle of alternative possibilities typically coveted by libertarians.[[25]](#footnote-25) My suggestion here is that we understand the “able to bring about” in premises 2 and 3 of the puzzle of omnipotence and perfect goodness in this same manner. And, if we do, it follows from AP that premise 2 must be true. An omnipotent being will be one that is able to bring about atrocities. For, an omnipotent being has all of the powers, given AP, and so there can be no obstacles to its bringing about atrocities which it hasn’t the power to overcome. To see this simply consider the sorts of obstacles there are to a being’s bringing about atrocities and the sorts of powers exercised in overcoming such obstacles. An omnipotent being with all the powers will have all of the powers necessary for overcoming these obstacles.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Instead of denying claim 2 and explaining how omnipotence can be understood without it, the approach an advocate of AP should take is to deny claim 3 and explain how perfect goodness can be understood without it. A defender of AP, that is, should explain why a perfectly good being needn’t be a being which is unable to bring about atrocities. To do so, she’ll need to offer a way of accounting for the intuition behind 3 without endorsing 3. She’ll need to offer a way of accounting for what it is that leads us to be inclined to accept 3 without thereby committing herself to 3.

What is it that leads us to be attracted to 3—the claim that a perfectly good being is unable to bring about atrocities? As explained above, it is the thought that a perfectly good being’s not bringing about atrocities is far from accidental. It is not that this being simply never does bring atrocities about or even that it wouldn’t do so in a wide range of circumstances. There is some kind of stronger necessity in its never doing so. One attempt to capture this necessity is encapsulated in 3. The explanation for why the being necessarily refrains from bringing about atrocities is to be found in an inability of that being—the being necessarily does not bring about atrocities because it is unable to bring them about.

But there is another approach to explaining the necessity involved in a perfect being’s not bringing about atrocities. It is to explain this necessity in the same way we explain the “volitional necessity” involved in so-called “Luther cases,” where we offer a diagnosis of this volitional necessity consistent with AP.[[27]](#footnote-27) The prime example of these Luther cases, unsurprisingly, involves Martin Luther. Luther had published the 95 theses highly critical of practices in the Roman Catholic Church. On April 18, 1521, he was called before the Diet of Worms. Johann Eck placed some of Luther’s writings before him and asked Luther whether he was the author and whether he stood by what was written in them. The hope was that Luther might recant. He is famously recorded as having said in response: “Here I stand. I can do no other.” The approach I am suggesting here is that the defender of AP explains the necessity involved in a perfectly good being’s refraining from bringing about atrocities in the same way she explains the necessity exhibited in these Luther cases.

Not every explanation of the necessity involved in these cases is consistent with AP, however. For example, Pruss and Pearce write that “Martin Luther was both free and morally responsible in his decision not to recant, and yet identified some sort of genuine limitation on his will when he uttered the words, ‘I can do no other’ (411).” In other words, Pruss and Pearce conclude that the correct way to diagnose these Luther cases is to say that the Lutherized subject lacks a certain basic power to will that which he says he cannot do. If this were the correct explanation of the necessity involved in such cases, then it could not be used by the advocate of AP to explain the necessity involved in God’s refraining from bringing about atrocities.

Thankfully, there are alternative diagnoses of these cases according to which the necessity is not due to an absence of power on the part of the subject. Frankfurt appears sympathetic with such a diagnosis, for example, when he writes:

If a person who is constrained by volitional necessity is for that reason unable to pursue a certain course of action, the explanation is not that he is in any straightforward way too weak to overcome the constraint. That sort of explanation can account for the experience of an addict, who dissociates himself from the addiction constraining him but who is unsuccessful in his attempt to oppose his own energies to the impetus of his habit. A person who is constrained by volitional necessity, however, is in a situation that differs significantly from that one. Unlike the addict, he does not accede to the constraining force because he lacks sufficient strength of will to defeat it. He accedes to it because he is *unwilling* to oppose it and because, furthermore, his unwillingness is *itself* something which he is unwilling to alter (1988: 87).

A plausible interpretation of Frankfurt here is that he thinks that in these Luther cases, the agent’s necessity of performing a certain course of action is not due to any absence of power on the agent’s part, but only due to a certain stable unwillingness to perform alternative courses of action, perhaps coupled with a higher-order unwillingness to alter this first-order unwillingness. Applied to the case of a perfect God, we would say that God has both the basic power to choose to bring about atrocities and the conditional power to bring them about if he so chooses. Whatever necessity there is in God’s not bringing these about is to be explained in another way, by citing God’s stable unwillingness to bring these atrocities about and perhaps a higher-order unwillingness to alter this first-order unwillingness. If we understand the necessity involved in God’s not bringing about atrocities in this way, it is perfectly consistent with AP. God may have all the powers—including the basic power to will atrocities and the power to bring them about if he wills them—but may still be such that he can’t bring them about where the fact that he can’t is explained along the lines of a Frankfurtian explanation of the volitional necessity exhibited in Luther cases.

Is this Frankfurtian explanation plausible, though? Is it plausible to think that the necessity involved in these cases is to be explained in terms of unwillingnesses rather than in terms of absences of basic powers? I think it is. Indeed, there is reason to *prefer* this Frankfurtian diagnosis of Luther cases, a diagnosis friendly toward AP, over the Pruss/Pearce interpretation above. Some thoughts from Wes Morriston 2002 on his example of the imaginary being Jill are helpful here. Morriston’s Jill is a being with unlimited conditional power who cannot bring herself to exercise that power in any significant way because she lacks basic power to choose. Tellingly, Morriston characterizes her case as follows:

“She would succeed at anything she tried. But she suffers from a kind of mental paralysis. She simply cannot bring herself to make the necessary choices. . . There is a certain power *over herself* that she lacks (361).”

I think Morriston is on to something here. To lack basic power of choice is to lack power over oneself. To have basic power is to gain power over oneself. The two go hand-in-hand. But this observation helps us to see why the Frankfurtian explanation of the Luther cases is preferable to the Pruss/Pearce interpretation. For, in Luther cases, it is clear that the subject’s being such that he can’t perform some alternative action is not due to his *lacking* power over himself. Indeed, if anything, he can’t perform alternative actions because he *has* such significant power over himself. Frankfurt simply offers us a way of understanding what this power over oneself involves—that one is unwilling to pursue the alternative course and unwilling to alter this unwillingness.

Understanding perfect goodness in this way also helps to explain a key difference between the God of classical theism and Wielenberg’s color-impaired deity discussed above. The latter plausibly is unable to make red objects precisely because it lacks a certain power over itself. It lacks the basic power to will to make red objects. It is genuinely disabled. But, not so for the God of classical theism. If this God can’t bring about atrocities, this is not because it lacks control over itself, not because it is disabled in any way, but because it has control over itself, because it is maximally enabled. This God is just as able to bring about atrocities as Luther was able to recant; so premise 2 of the puzzle above is true.[[28]](#footnote-28) It is premise 3 of that puzzle that is false, since the necessity involved in God’s performance, like the necessity involved in Luther’s performance, is not due to inability or lack of control but to presence and exercise of control.

So, we have seen a way for the advocate of AP to respond to the puzzle of omnipotence and perfect goodness in such a way as to retain the compatibility of omnipotence as she defines it with perfect goodness. She should deny 3—the claim that if God is perfectly good, God is unable to bring about atrocities. God is able to bring atrocities about, since God, being omnipotent and satisfying AP, has all the powers necessary for overcoming any obstacle to his doing so. But, this omnipotent God can still be perfectly good, since we can account for the necessity involved in God’s refraining from bringing about atrocities without accepting 3. We can account for this necessity by explaining it in the same way Frankfurt explains the “volitional necessity” involved in Luther cases. God can’t bring about atrocities because God wills not to do so, and wills not to change this willing. Indeed, God’s meta-willings here may go on infinitely.[[29]](#footnote-29)

The resources just tapped in order to develop a response to the puzzle of omnipotence and perfect goodness can in fact be used to offer a positive argument in favor of the compatibility of omnipotence and perfect goodness, where omnipotence is defined by AP. The argument is simple. An omnipotent being, given AP, has all the powers. A necessarily omnipotent being has all the powers in every possible world. But, a being that has all the powers, following Morriston, is in complete control of itself. So, a necessarily omnipotent being is in complete control of itself in every possible world. But a being that is in complete control of itself in every possible world can ensure that in no possible world does it bring about an atrocity. So, an omnipotent being can ensure that in no possible world does it bring about an atrocity. And this is just to say that an omnipotent being can be a perfectly good being.[[30]](#footnote-30),[[31]](#footnote-31)

Another way of looking at these issues is as follows. Some might argue that having the powers requisite for committing atrocities is a liability, rather than an ability.[[32]](#footnote-32) This is why a perfectly good God would not have these powers. Instead, I would suggest that having these powers is a liability only for a being not in complete control of itself. Yet, as we have seen, an omnipotent being *is* in complete control of itself. If this being is also morally good, then this complete control over itself will enable it to necessarily abstain from doing certain things—like bringing about atrocities—which it is nevertheless perfectly able to do.

Some philosophers will resist the account I am proposing here because they think there cannot be necessarily unexercised powers. In fact, this view has held great sway on contemporary writers addressing the topic of omnipotence.[[33]](#footnote-33)Given that there cannot be necessarily unexercised powers, it cannot be that a God that satisfies AP could necessarily refrain from bringing about atrocities. For, given AP, God has all the powers required to overcome any obstacle to his bringing these about. Since, in some world, these powers must be exercised, in some world, the obstacles to God’s refraining from committing atrocities are overcome. In my own view, however, the key reason for thinking that there cannot be necessarily unexercised powers is unconvincing. And, it is especially open to dispute in the present context, given considerations we have surveyed above.[[34]](#footnote-34)

The central reason for someone to deny that there could be a necessarily unexercised power is that one might be tempted to analyze powers in terms of subjunctive conditionals of some sort. For instance, I have the power to make a 3-pointer just in case, were I to shoot some, I’d intentionally make a good many of them. Or something along these lines.[[35]](#footnote-35) But, the arguer will continue, if there were necessarily unexercised powers, then this way of analyzing powers would have no hope. It would have no hope because necessarily unexercised powers would yield trivially true subjunctive conditionals. Supposing, for instance, that God’s power to will atrocities were necessarily unexercised, whatever subjunctive conditionals are supposed to be used to analyze God’s power to will atrocities will be trivially true. In fact, it will follow that everyone has all of the powers which are necessarily unexercised. But this is untenable. So, the subjunctive conditional analysis of powers will fail, if there are necessarily unexercised powers. But, this analysis cannot fail. So, there must not be any necessarily unexercised powers.

There are two significant replies to this objection I think are worth offering here. First, someone attracted to AP is highly unlikely to grant that powers should be analyzed in terms of subjunctive conditionals of some sort. In fact, she is highly unlikely to grant that powers are to be analyzed at all. A key part of the attraction of AP is that it is supposed to be explanatorily fundamental. It is an analysis of omnipotence which is supposed to explain what is correct in the requirements of other analyses. As such, it is supposed to be working with concepts which reach rock bottom in terms of explaining what it is to be omnipotent. Someone who advocates AP, then, like myself, is likely to think that powers are exactly this sort of basic, not-further-analyzable sort of thing. Someone who advocates AP has already given up on analyzing powers in terms of subjunctive conditionals, or in terms of anything else at all.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Second, in the present context, this objection to the proposed method for responding to the puzzle of omnipotence and perfect goodness is especially impotent. This is because the majority of the parties in this debate, as we have seen, are ready to accept that counterpossibles needn’t all be trivially true. Thus, the fact that some power is necessarily unexercised does not entail that it is had by everyone, since the relevant subjunctive conditionals may well not be true for everyone. They will be true for some and not true for others. Perhaps those for whom they are true possess the power in question while those for whom they are false do not.

AP, then, offers us a unique and attractive analysis of omnipotence which affords an equally unique and attractive resolution of the puzzle of omnipotence and perfect goodness. AP is simple, it accommodates key insights and demands of recent philosophical treatments of omnipotence, and it explains what is accurate in more recent accounts of omnipotence. Finally, AP affords its defender a unique response to the puzzle of omnipotence and perfect goodness which is defensible against key objections. In the next section, we will see how AP affords an equally unique and defensible response to a second difficult problem in philosophical theology—the puzzle of perfect goodness and freedom.

II.b The Puzzle of Perfect Goodness and Freedom

We now turn to a second puzzle in philosophical theology concerning the compatibility of traditional divine attributes, this one focused on the compatibility of perfect goodness and freedom, where freedom is understood along libertarian lines. The puzzle about perfect goodness and freedom can be put into the form of an argument very similar to the argument we discussed in the previous section concerning perfect goodness and omnipotence. First, we can suppose, for *reductio*, that:

1. Possibly, God is both perfectly good and free.

Because God is perfectly good, we conclude, as with the previous puzzle, that:

1. Necessarily, if God is perfectly good, then God is unable to bring about atrocities.

Yet, there is significant reason to think that:

1. Necessarily, if God is free, then God is able to bring about atrocities.

The support for 3 has to do with a libertarian conception of freedom, or of “significant freedom” or “moral freedom,” which endorses a strong version of the principle of alternate possibilities (or PAP). This strong version of PAP says roughly that one is free, or “significantly free,” or “morally free,” only if one is able to bring about both all-things-considered-right and all-things-considered-wrong states of affairs. Significant freedom rests in one’s freedom to do both good and evil—one’s power to choose and execute both genuine moral rights and genuine moral wrongs. Theists have often insisted that this sort of significant freedom is necessary for moral responsibility, at least in human beings. This has been especially important to advocates of the free-will defense against the problem of evil.[[37]](#footnote-37), [[38]](#footnote-38) The arguer who asserts 3 is just applying this version of PAP to God as well. God is significantly free only if God is able to bring about all-things-considered wrongs, like atrocities. In this dialectical context, it is probably best to take “free” in 3 (and 1) to mean whatever sort of freedom is required for moral responsibility.[[39]](#footnote-39) The defense of 3 then requires identifying this sort of freedom with moral freedom.

Unfortunately, 1, 2, and 3 together imply:

1. Possibly, God is able to bring about atrocities and unable to bring about atrocities.

Since 4 is a contradiction, we must reject at least one of 1, 2, or 3. But, the person who wishes to push our puzzle of perfect goodness and freedom as a challenge to the compatibility of these attributes will insist that 2 and 3 are well-supported. So, she will conclude that the correct response to our puzzle will be to reject our original supposition, 1. That is, she will conclude that we should reject the compatibility of perfect goodness and freedom.

Several prominent philosophers have recently advocated arguments very much like this one for the incompatibility of perfect goodness and freedom.[[40]](#footnote-40) And, as with our previous puzzle, others have responded. By far, the more common response is for opponents of this argument to deny premise 3. In doing so, they suggest reasons for thinking that the sort of freedom required for moral responsibility in God does not require the satisfaction of our strong version of PAP, while the sort of freedom required for moral responsibility in creatures does. Authors who defend this strategy, like Edward Wierenga (2002, 2007) and Thomas Senor (2008), typically argue that in the case of God it is only required for significant freedom and moral responsibility that God be the ultimate source of his actions, not that he be able to have performed morally significant alternative actions. I will not argue against these approaches here, though I do think they face significant obstacles.[[41]](#footnote-41) My primary goal in this section is instead to explore an alternative strategy available to someone who advocates AP. As in the case of the previous puzzle concerning the compatibility of omnipotence and perfect goodness, so with the present puzzle I will show, first, that AP affords its defender a response to the puzzle and, second, that that it offers its advocate a positive argument for the compatibility of perfect goodness and freedom of the sort that requires PAP.

The first part of the response may be presented very quickly. I have already, in the previous subsection of the paper, explained how someone who advocates AP might deny premise 2 of the puzzle of perfect goodness and freedom. She will do this by insisting that a perfectly good being may be perfectly able to bring about atrocities, though necessarily resist bringing any about because of her unwillingness. This is especially so if she is omnipotent in the sense required by AP. For, given that she satisfies the conditions of AP, she is in complete control of herself. She is able to bring about atrocities, but also necessarily able to resist bringing them about.

The second part requires a lengthier defense. My goal here is to show that, given that AP is the correct account of omnipotence, and given the results of the previous section of this paper, it follows that perfect goodness is compatible with libertarian-style significant freedom. The argument for this is as follows. Given that AP is the correct account of omnipotence and given that the results of the previous section of this paper are correct, omnipotence is compatible with perfect goodness. But, as I will argue momentarily, omnipotence, understood in terms of AP, entails libertarian freedom of the sort which requires PAP. So, perfect goodness is compatible with libertarian freedom of the sort that requires PAP (hereafter, I will sometimes just say “libertarian freedom” or “freedom”).

The key premise in this argument now in need of defense is the claim that omnipotence, understood in terms of AP, entails libertarian freedom. Libertarians typically identify two key conditions for freedom—a sourcehood condition and an alternative possibilities condition.[[42]](#footnote-42) According to the sourcehood condition, an agent must be the ultimate source of her actions if she is to be free. And, according to the alternative possibilities condition, for an agent to be free she must be able to do otherwise than she in fact does. On a strong version of PAP, like the one we discussed in presenting the puzzle of omnipotence and perfect goodness, an agent is free only if she is able to bring about both all-things-considered rights and all-things-considered wrongs (i.e., atrocities). If both the sourcehood condition and alternative possibilities condition are met, then, plausibly, the agent is free in the performance of her action. I want to argue here that, given that AP is the correct account of omnipotence, an omnipotent God satisfies both of these conditions and so has significant freedom.

First, an omnipotent God satisfies the sourcehood condition. This should not be very controversial, especially in this context. I am interested primarily in moving those who tend to respond to the puzzle of omnipotence and perfect goodness and the puzzle of perfect goodness and freedom in ways other than the one I am proposing to give a fuller hearing to my approach. But those who respond to these puzzles in ways other than the way I am proposing tend to emphasize already that God satisfies the sourcehood condition of free will, as we saw above in the cases of Wierenga and Senor. God should be accounted free, in their view, because he is the ultimate origin of his acts. Ultimate origination implies alternative possibilities for humans, but nor for God. For God, on their view, ultimate origination is alone sufficient for freedom. And God satisfies this condition of ultimate origination. I am simply agreeing with these authors’ point here that God satisfies this criterion of ultimate origination. There is nothing about AP which would imply otherwise.

What about the alternative possibilities condition—especially its strong version? In favor of the view that an omnipotent God satisfies this condition, I argue as follows. As we have seen previously, an omnipotent being satisfies Ab—my account of what it is to be “able” to bring something about—with respect to bringing about atrocities. But, I will argue momentarily, Ab provides the correct analysis of what it is to be “able” to do otherwise in the sense required by the strong alternative possibilities condition on freedom. Thus, an omnipotent being satisfies the strong alternative possibilities condition on freedom, as well as the sourcehood condition.

The key premise I must defend in this argument is the claim that Ab provides the correct analysis of what it is to be able to do otherwise in the sense required by the strong alternative possibilities condition on freedom. In favor of that judgment, I argue that, if the advocate of the alternative possibilities condition on freedom accepts Ab’s proposal concerning what it is to be able to do otherwise, then her alternative possibilities principle will do exactly what it is supposed to do—it will rule out freedom in just those cases it is supposed to, and for the right reason: namely, the ability to do otherwise is lacking in these cases. Thus, Ab is a very attractive account of what it is to be able to do otherwise in the sense required by the alternative possibilities condition on freedom. In arguing for Ab in this manner, I follow Senor’s approach to understanding the nature of the “ability to do otherwise” required by PAP. Senor, too, argues that we ought to understand the “ability to do otherwise” in PAP through considering the kinds of cases where PAP is supposed to rule out freedom due to the absence of this ability. I simply disagree slightly with Senor about in exactly which categories of cases PAP ought to rule out freedom and responsibility.

Senor recognizes three kinds of cases where PAP is supposed to rule out freedom. They are (a) cases where an action is determined by past causally sufficient conditions which pre-date the existence of the actor, (b) cases where actors are manipulated by other agents, and (c) cases where actors are compelled to act as a result of internal compulsions with which they do not identify.

Cases of type (a) would obtain if causal determinism were true. If events that occur billions of years before one is born, together with the laws of nature governing those events, conspire to ensure that one acts in a certain way, then PAP is supposed to rule out one’s behaving freely in such a case. It is supposed to do so because these past causally sufficient conditions for action preclude one’s ability to do otherwise than what these conditions determine one to do. I am somewhat skeptical of Senor’s use of this case to illuminate PAP, as I will explain further below.

Cases of type (b) would obtain if one were manipulated by another agent to act in a certain way. The classic examples here are ones which appeal to fanciful neurophysiologists who implant devices into one’s brain which cause one to behave in a certain way and prevent one from doing otherwise. Again, PAP is supposed to ensure that actors in these circumstances are not regarded as free or morally responsible.

Finally, cases of type (c) occur where agents are subject to what we might think of as a different kind of manipulation—a kind of manipulation internal to their own psyches. The classic examples here involve addictions or pathologies. Agents who, for instance, because of a pathological fear of being anywhere near red things are unable to draw red pictures are not to be regarded as free or responsible for failing to draw red pictures. PAP is supposed to rule out freedom in cases like this because, due to the redness-aversion pathology, the agent is unable to draw red pictures.

While I agree with Senor’s cases (b) and (c), I think he overlooks one more important category of cases where PAP is supposed to rule out freedom and moral responsibility. It is the category of cases where a person is unable to do other than she does because she lacks the power to do otherwise. She lacks the power not because of a pathology or because someone is manipulating her or even because she is causally determined to act as she does. Rather, she simply does not have the power in question. And because she doesn’t, she is unable to act accordingly.

Examples which illustrate this sort of absence of power abound. It is because I lack power in this sense that I am unable to make a three-quarter-length shot. I just don’t have the power to do this. There are a very few people in the world who have this power, at best. It isn’t because of manipulation or causal determinism or a pathology that I am unable to make this shot; I just don’t have the power to make it. In a similar way, it is because I lack power in this sense that I cannot fly a plane. I’ve never learned how. Some people have. They’ve acquired this power. But I haven’t. And so, I’m unable to fly. Again, it is because I lack power in this sense that I am unable to donate $1 million to charity. I don’t have $1 million, and because of this I lack the power to donate $1 million. And we could keep going.[[43]](#footnote-43)

Now, plausibly, PAP should rule out freedom in these kinds of cases just as well as it does in the kinds of cases which fit neatly into categories (b) and (c). I am not free, or morally responsible, for my failing to make a three-quarter-length shot. I am not free, or morally responsible, for failing to fly planes. And, I am not free or morally responsible for failing to give $1 million to charity. The reason I am not free or morally responsible in these cases is that I couldn’t have done otherwise than I did. This is just the sort of thing that PAP is designed to handle. PAP is designed to rule out freedom in those cases where an inability to do otherwise intuitively prevents freedom and moral responsibility. And cases like these fit the bill.

With this understanding of the kinds of cases where PAP is supposed to rule out freedom and responsibility, we can now complete our argument in defense of Ab as an analysis of the “ability” to bring about a morally significant alternative involved in PAP. Accepting Ab’s analysis of ability and conjoining this with the alternative possibilities condition on freedom will plausibly rule out freedom in each of these cases in which it should do so. Work backwards, beginning with the fourth kind of case involving the simple absence of power.

The reason the person who simply lacks the power to, say, make a half-court shot is unable to make this shot is that there is an obstacle to her making it which she lacks the power to overcome. We might locate this obstacle in the difficulty of the shot itself or in her lacking the strength or precision to throw the ball sufficiently far or sufficiently accurately. The agent does not have the powers necessary to overcome these obstacles. Ab implies that such a person lacks the ability to make the shot. Thus, if the defender of the alternative possibilities condition adopts Ab’s analysis of the ability to do otherwise, then her condition will rule out freedom in these kinds of cases, as it should.

A similar result obtains in cases involving psychological maladies. The reason the person with the pathological fear of red objects is unable to make red objects is that there is an obstacle to her making them which she lacks the power to overcome. This obstacle, of course, is her pathological fear. Ab implies that such a person lacks the ability to make red objects. Thus, if the defender of the alternative possibilities condition adopts Ab’s analysis of the ability to do otherwise, then her condition will rule out freedom in these kinds of cases, as it should.

The same result obtains in cases involving manipulation. The reason the manipulated agent is unable to bring about alternative possibilities is that there is an obstacle to her doing so which she lacks the power to overcome. This obstacle, of course, is her being manipulated by someone else. Ab implies that such a person lacks the ability to do otherwise. Thus, if the defender of the alternative possibilities condition adopts Ab’s analysis of the ability to do otherwise, then her condition will rule out freedom in these kinds of cases, as it should.

The first kind of case is, perhaps, the trickiest. It is a case where an agent’s actions are causally determined by events and laws that obtained long before one’s birth. A libertarian might argue that, in such cases, the agent lacks the ability to do otherwise and so is not free. Of course, it has been highly controversial whether this is correct. Compatibilists have, after all, offered understandings of what it is to be able to do otherwise which have the consequence that the causally determined agent *is* able to do otherwise.[[44]](#footnote-44) What we should want from an account of the ability to do otherwise, then, is for it to neither obviously rule out freedom in these cases nor obviously rule it in. We would like this account to leave room for substantive metaphysical debate over whether the causally determined agent is able to do otherwise and thus free in her actions.

Ab again delivers. For, if Ab is adopted as the correct understanding of what it is to be able to do otherwise in the sense required by the alternative possibilities condition of freedom, then there is room for substantive debate concerning whether the causally determined agent is able to do otherwise. Libertarians might argue that there are indeed obstacles to the causally determined agent’s acting otherwise which she lacks the power to overcome. For, the past and laws determine how she behaves, and she lacks the power to overcome this. Compatibilists, on the other hand, might argue that the causally determined agent *does* have the power to overcome these obstacles. For, she has the right kind of power over the past and/or laws.[[45]](#footnote-45) If Ab is adopted as the correct account of what it is to be “able” to bring something about as this notion appears in PAP, then PAP will play precisely the role it should in debates between compatibilists and incompatibilists about the precise requirements the alternative possibilities condition places on free action.

We have seen, then, that if Ab is accepted as the correct account of what it is to be able to do otherwise in the sense required by the alternative possibilities condition on free will, then this condition will perform its job admirably well. This gives us significant reason to accept Ab as the correct account of what it is to be able to do otherwise in the sense required by this condition. Someone who is able to do otherwise, according to Ab, satisfies the alternative possibilities condition on free will.

Given this result, we can now complete our argument concerning the freedom of an omnipotent, perfectly good God. I have been arguing that if this omnipotent, perfectly good God satisfies both the sourcehood condition and the alternative possibilities condition, then this God is free. What is more controversial here is whether this God satisfies the alternative possibilities condition. But, we are now in a position to defend the claim that he does. For, given that this God is omnipotent and given that omnipotence is to be understood in terms of AP, this God has all the powers. Thus, for anything which might serve as an obstacle to God’s performing some action, if there is a power that could be used to overcome that obstacle, God has that power. Of course, the specific case we want to know about is the case of bringing about atrocities. God will be able to bring about atrocities, according to Ab, so long as he has all the powers necessary to overcome whatever obstacles there might be to his bringing about atrocities. But, plausibly, God does have all of the requisite powers. For, God has, inter alia, the power to will to bring these atrocities about. And, though he necessarily refrains from willing to bring these atrocities about, it is non-trivially true that were he do to so, they would obtain. Thus, plausibly, God satisfies the conditions Ab requires for the ability to bring about atrocities. And so, as Ab is the correct analysis of what it is to be able to do otherwise in the sense required by the alternative possibilities condition on freedom, God satisfies the alternative possibilities condition on freedom.[[46]](#footnote-46)

That God is omnipotent entails that God is free—as free as one can be. For, God’s omnipotence is just his possession of all the powers. But, God’s possessing all the powers implies that, for any obstacle there might be to his actions, if there is a power to overcome that obstacle, then God has that power. In particular, God has the power to overcome obstacles to his bringing about atrocities. This is important because it gives God significant or moral freedom. Though God is morally perfect and necessarily refrains from performing morally wrong actions, he has the power to perform them. It is non-trivially true that, were God to exercise his power to perform these actions, he would perform them. In so doing, he would overcome any obstacle to their performance. Thus, he has all of the powers necessary to overcome whatever obstacles there might be to his performing these actions. And the power to do so is just what makes his necessarily refraining from ever performing these actions significantly free.

In this section, we have seen that the puzzle of perfect goodness and freedom dissolves, and that there is even a positive argument for the claim that perfect goodness and freedom are consistent. That argument hinges on the account of omnipotence defended in the previous section. Thus, this account of omnipotence is not only independently plausible, but it makes available unique resolutions to both the puzzle of omnipotence and perfect goodness as well as the puzzle of perfect goodness and freedom.

III: CONCLUSION

This paper has defended a novel account of omnipotence and argued that this account of omnipotence makes available unique responses to two intractable puzzles in philosophical theology. The goal of the paper has not been to provide a knock-down argument in favor of the account of omnipotence and the solutions to these puzzles here explored, however; the goal is more modest. The goal has been to convince philosophers of religion who would not otherwise have seriously considered the present views that they are at least viable alternatives deserving of serious attention—at least as serious attention as their leading contemporary rivals. We have seen that the present account of omnipotence is simple; we have seen that this account accommodates the key insights and demands of recent philosophical treatments of omnipotence; we have seen that what competing contemporary accounts of this attribute have going in their favor is arguably explained by the present account; and, finally, we have seen that the present account affords its advocate unique and defensible resolutions to two intractable puzzles in philosophical theology concerning the compatibility of traditional divine attributes. For all of these reasons, I recommend the present account of omnipotence and the solutions it affords to these puzzles in philosophical theology to the community of philosophers of religion.

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1. This view is traditionally attributed to Descartes 1984-1991 (see especially 2:294 and 3:23-26), and is called “voluntarism.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Geach 1973 and Sobel 2004 for defenses of this view. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For contemporary statements of the paradox, which itself goes back at least to the medieval period, see Mackie 1955 and Cowan 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The example derives from Plantinga 1967, and the name “McEar” from La Croix 1977. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This is the approach of Wierenga 1983. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Wielenberg 2000 and Pruss and Pearce 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See, e.g., Morriston 2000 and 2002, Pruss and Pearce 2012, Lembke 2012, and Funkhouser 2006. Merricks 2003 offers a defense of such a non-standard semantics for counterpossible claims in the context of metaphysical disputes. Berto 2009 surveys additional motivations for such a non-standard semantics. Vander Laan 2004 discusses proposed semantics for counterpossibles which will allow non-trivial truth and falsity using the apparatus of impossible worlds. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This example is taken from Pruss and Pearce 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This approach may help with some of the difficulties faced by act-based accounts. For instance, because the state of affairs *An omnipotent being makes a stone it cannot lift* is not a possible state of affairs, the stone paradox may not threaten states-of-affairs-based proposals. See, e.g., Swinburne 1973. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. By a possible state of affairs, I simply mean a state of affairs that possibly obtains. The account is similar for contingent states of affairs—states of affairs that contingently obtain. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Hoffman and Rozencrantz 2012 presses this objection. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. I say “some” here to allow that there might be some “soft” features of the past which might be brought about, though there are other “hard” features of the past which cannot be. On the hard/soft distinction, see Todd 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Flint and Fredosso 1983, Hoffman and Rosencrantz 1980, and Wierenga 1983 are classic examples. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See, in particular, Oppy 2005 and Morriston 2002. For critical interaction with the details of these accounts, see Oppy 2005 and Wielenberg 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. I ascribe to an omnipotent being some very earthly powers in this paragraph—powers to make stones and push buttons and so on. Some authors have resisted the idea that an omnipotent being must possess *these* kinds of powers—usually calling these powers “physical” powers (see Wielenberg 2000 and Hoffman and Rosencrantz 2012). I think there is significant reason to ascribe these powers to an omnipotent being, however. For, imagine a being O that has all the powers except some of these earthly ones. It seems that the possibility (or conceivability) of a being O2 which has all of O’s powers plus the earthly ones O lacks rules out the conclusion that O is omnipotent. For an argument along these lines (though not focused on physical powers, specifically), see Funkhouser 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. There are two primary disagreements I have with them. The first is with their analysis of what it is to have an efficacious will. They define an efficacious will using a subjunctive conditional as follows: x has perfect efficacy of will if and only if, for all contingent propositions p, if x were to will that p, then x would intentionally bring it about that p. I am worried that, given Pruss’s and Pearce’s own commitments to non-trivially true counterpossible claims (which I share), this analysis will require that a being with perfect efficacy is such that it is non-trivially true that were it to will that some other agent freely performs some action, then it would intentionally bring it about that this occurred. I don’t agree that an account of perfect efficacy should entail this.

    My second disagreement is with Pruss’s and Pearce’s idea that perfect freedom does not require that one have the power to will atrocities. I discuss this disagreement further in the second full section of the text below. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Notably, some theists have turned toward denying the essentiality of these attributes in order to respond to puzzles like the ones I will consider in the text. Pike 1969, for instance, is often interpreted as denying God’s essential perfect goodness. For a response, see Garcia 1987. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Hoffman and Rosencrantz 2011 says this about omnipotence. One difficulty with thinking of omnipotence in this way is that it makes omnipotence obviously coherent. But, one might think that there ought to be a substantial question to ask about whether omnipotence is coherent. The account of omnipotence I propose is not subject to this difficulty. See Lembke 2012 for a similar criticism of a closely related view in Nagasawa 2008.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. I define atrocities deontologically here in order to address a concern brought up by Tooley 2009. Tooley worries that, by using axiological terms in framing the argument from evil, defenders of this argument unnecessarily open themselves up to resistance on anti-consequentialist grounds. The related term, “horror,” is typically defined in the literature axiologically as an event whose bad-making features are not counterbalanced by good-making features. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. There is a question about the relationship between God and morality that the defender of this argument must take a stand on, and which I must take a stand on here in order for this paper to move forward. The issue has to do with divine will theories of moral rightness. If one adopts a strong divine will theory (like Quinn 1978) according to which an action is right if and only if and because God wills it, and if one also thinks that God is omnipotent, then one will deny 2. For, this theory implies that whatever God wills is morally right. Thus, it is impossible for an omnipotent God to bring about an atrocity (since, in doing so, he will be doing something he willed). Such a view must be rejected for purposes of investigating the issues of this paper. For a survey of criticisms of it and related views, see Quinn 1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Manis 2011 suggests that divine goodness be defined along Molinist lines as there being a wide range of circumstances in which God would not bring about atrocities. For criticism of this sort of Molinist view of perfect goodness (here focused more on the goodness of the redeemed in heaven), see Pawl and Timpe 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Three prominent examples are Morriston 2001, Funkhouser 2006, and Sobel 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. This fact is well-noted by Funkhouser (2006), who writes: “Theorists who react to this conflict almost invariably attempt to avoid the difficulty by doctoring the intuitive understanding of ‘omnipotence’ so that God’s omnipotence is compatible with his inability to perform certain deeds (410).” It is precisely this invariability that I wish to challenge here. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See brief discussion of these obstacles in the previous section of the text and in fn.16. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. I say *typically* coveted by libertarians, since there are some libertarians—the so-called “Frankfurt libertarians”—who do not advocate this principle. For discussion of this view, see Timpe 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. One salient obstacle to consider here is an obstacle arising from the being’s own unwillingness to bring about these atrocities. See below for further discussion of this kind of obstacle. My position is that an omnipotent and perfectly good being with such unwillingness to bring about atrocities has the power to overcome this unwillingness, but necessarily refrains from exercising this power. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See Watson 2004 for discussion of such cases, the interpretation of which remains highly controversial. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Though Frankfurt will agree that the Lutherized subject’s necessity is not due to any absence of power, the quote from Frankfurt cited in the text suggests that Frankfurt is still happy to talk of these subjects not being “able” to do otherwise. To see some reasons why I do not follow Frankfurt in speaking this way about abilities, see the text above where I argue that an advocate of AP should not follow the majority of recent authors in denying premise 2 of our puzzle. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. I owe this last comment to Jonathan Kvanvig. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Though he denies that God is able to bring about atrocities, Swinburne 1979 explains the necessity of God’s never bringing about atrocities in this way as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. This simple and intuitively powerful argument can be precisified if we focus on how to understand the kinds of necessity and possibility involved in the argument. One way to do this is as follows. The conclusion of the argument is that it is *logically* possible that it is *metaphysically* necessary that an omnipotent being refrains from bringing about atrocities. Below, when I talk of necessarily unexercised powers, I should be understood to be talking about *metaphysically* necessarily unexercised powers. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Mawson 2002 defends this view. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Hoffman and Rosencrantz 2012 note this trend. Rowe 2004 and 2007 appeal to this claim frequently in arguments for the conclusion that a perfectly good being cannot be able to bring about atrocities. Hopefully, the discussion in the text will make plain how an advocate of my solution to the puzzle of omnipotence and perfect goodness would reply to Rowe’s question about whether an omnipotent, perfectly good being could bring it about that he was not perfectly good. I would argue that, while an omnipotent perfectly good being has the power to make this the case, it does not follow (as Rowe supposes) that there is some possible world in which this perfectly good being is not perfectly good. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. For another author who denies that the power to bring about x entails the possibility that one brings about x, see Conee 1991. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. For some classic subjunctive conditional analyses of powers, dispositions or abilities, see Hume 1748, Davidson 1980, Peacocke 1999. For criticisms, see Martin 1996 and Johnston 1992. For an approach that analyzes abilities using subjunctive conditionals *and* basic dispositions, see Fara 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. In embracing powers as basic, I am following the neo-Aristotelians. For several helpful articles from leading defenders of taking Aristotelian powers to be part of the basic ontology of the world, see Greco and Gross 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Two classic sources are Plantinga 1974 and Swinburne 1979. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. A similar, though weaker formulation of PAP is advocated by Kevin Timpe 2008: “an agent is free with respect to an action A at a time t only if there are morally relevant alternative possibilities related to A at time t.” This principle might be employed in an argument very similar to the one presented here in the text. However, it would complicate the presentation significantly. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Alternatively, we might take “free” to indicate some kind of superior freedom which requires alternative possibilities, even if the sort of freedom necessary for moral responsibility does not. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Two conspicuous examples are Morriston 2000 and Rowe 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Ultimately, I think proposals of this sort must end up resting their case on an appeal to the doctrine of divine simplicity, as Morriston (2000, 2006) argues. Yet, it seems to me that resorting to this doctrine will result in dialectical stalemate, rather than a clear victory for advocates of this approach. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. For an excellent introduction to these two conditions and the role they play in libertarian reflection on freedom, see Timpe 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Someone may ask: isn’t it causal determinism that rules out the power here? After all, isn’t it the case that the past and laws of nature rule out your making the shot or successfully flying the plane? Though in many cases the answer to the second question here may be affirmative, I think there are imaginable cases where it is negative. Suppose we have an indeterministic universe in which sometimes flukes happen in one’s favor. That I might flukily get the shot to go down does not entail that I have the power to make that shot, just as the golfer’s ability to make puts is not negated by a fluky miss (see Austin 1956). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. See, e.g., Ayer 1954. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. See, e.g., Lewis 1981. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. As this passage suggests, I am friendly toward the following sort of analysis: S has the powers P necessary for overcoming an obstacle O to her bringing about X iff S has P and it is non-trivially true that, were S to exercise P in an attempt to bring about X, S would bring about X by exercising P. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)