Divine Omnipotence: Aquinas and Swinburne

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______________________________
Michael Patrick O’Gorman
Abstract

The goal of this thesis is to establish whether Thomas Aquinas’s conception of God’s omnipotence can survive critical interaction with the views of Richard Swinburne. It first defines in detail what Aquinas thinks omnipotence consists in, and how it relates to God’s other attributes. It then moves to considers Swinburne’s account of omnipotence, and from this extrapolates three key divergences between the two thinker’s accounts, concerning time, the possibility of ceasing to be omnipotent, and divine necessity. The thesis will conclude that, by the standards of Swinburne’s own criteria, Aquinas’s account of omnipotence in light of these three divergences is the more successful of the two.
Abbreviations

S. T. = Summa Theologicae

S.C.G. = Summa Contra Gentiles
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Figure 1. Saint Thomas of Aquino, page 9.

Figure 2. Richard Granville Swinburne, page 9.
Acknowledgements

I am delighted to have been offered the opportunity to contribute to a field as exciting and significant as the philosophy of God, and all the more so to be able to contribute by comparing two philosophers of great esteem and significance: St. Thomas Aquinas, and Richard Swinburne.

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Illustrations

Figure 1. Saint Thomas of Aquino (c. 1225 – 7 March 1274)
An Italian Dominican friar and priest, an influential philosopher and theologian.

Figure 2. Richard Granville Swinburne
Emeritus Professor of Philosophy
University of Oxford
Born 26 December 1934
Smethwick, England
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Introduction:

The Aim

The goal of this thesis is to explicate and analyse the conception of omnipotence argued for by St Thomas Aquinas (1224/5-1274), one of the most significant philosophers in the western canon. To that end, it takes Aquinas’s definition of omnipotence as it is presented in one of Aquinas’s mature works (his celebrated *Summa Theologiae*), and subjects it to a battery of tests, critiques, and comparisons. The most notable challenger to Aquinas’s account as it is presented in this work is the conception of omnipotence argued for by Richard Swinburne (1934 – present). Swinburne is a contemporary specialist in philosophical studies of religion and has over the course of a long and esteemed career argued for a new and distinct understanding of various concepts like God’s existence, relation to time, and nature.

Distinctions and Similarities

Swinburne’s account is of particular interest for Aquinas not only because of the distinctions between them (though there are many, as will be made clear shortly); but primarily because of the similarities, which serve to allow the two accounts of omnipotence to ‘speak with’ one another (much as translators afford statesmen that same ability during ‘vital’ diplomatic meetings). For Swinburne and Aquinas both, God is omnipotent with respect to logically possible things; each thinks God able, for example, to create universes *ex nihilo*, imbue substances with rationality, and bring about states of affairs instantly which are otherwise impossible for created beings (say, because they require an excess of power or resources or commitments or knowledge which created beings with lack now, or will always lack). Both men think God exists in a relationship with creation that sees God take an active part in its running. Both think that God’s omnipotence has much to do with God’s status as utterly unlike created beings in many important ways. Both think that God’s omnipotence is guided by divine reason and God’s overwhelming divine goodness, such that God seeks good and sensible things with his infinite power.

Yet, for all these similarities, the differences in Aquinas and Swinburne’s understanding of omnipotence are many. These differences are also of such magnitude that, despite the similarities undergirding them, the two accounts of omnipotence being considered in this
thesis are ultimately incompatible. What do these differences consist in? This thesis will argue that these can be categorised into individual ‘divergences’. Three such divergences are identified and explored.

**The Three Divergences**

The first concerns how each thinker conceives of omnipotence as relating to *time*. For Aquinas, God is an atemporal metaphysical singularity, who experiences all of time simultaneously as a never-ending ‘present’. This relationship with time is often expressed by metaphor; consider, for instance, a watchman standing atop a mountain peak, and gazing down into a valley, through which a winding path meanders. For those on the path, all that is visible to them is what is immediately before them on the trail, and, by means of craning their necks, what is just behind them. The parts of the trail in front of them they have yet to reach; these, rather obviously, represent the future. What is behind them they have already trodden through, and this is, of course, the past. Where they are currently walking constitutes the present, and is the most evident to them. No matter where on the trail they are, these travellers are bounded by parts of the trail they have yet to reach, and parts of the trail which they have already gone through. Uniting these is the act of walking between them, which constitutes the ‘now’. In contrast, the watchman, far above, in contrast, does *not* experience the trail in this way. He does not see only parts of the trail at a time – a little ahead around the bend, and as he walks, the trail climbing a few hundred yards behind him and rising into the distance. Instead, the watchman takes in the *entire* trail at once. All parts are simultaneously present to him in a single act of sight. *This* is how Aquinas thinks the omnipotent God relates to time. There is no past or future; all points of time are equally present to God in one single act. So too is God present to each point of time. This model posits something of a static, eternal God, who does not experience the passing of time.

In contrast, Swinburne is of the view that omnipotence and divinity are *no* guards against temporality. For Swinburne, God is a person *in* time just as the weary travellers on the path are. God moves, changes, and learns; he scrambles up hills and around bends just as every other being does. This has implications for his understanding of omnipotence; that God is *in* time, rather than distantly above it leads Swinburne to conclude that the actions of a divine agent have a *duration* – they take place *in time*, and so are subject to its flow. This is a striking claim by Aquinas’s standards, and so leads Swinburne to some
interesting conclusions about what constitutes time which do not cohere with Aquinas’s views.

At the heart of this first divergence is what these two differing conceptions of time mean for omnipotent actions like ‘God creating the universe’. Swinburne holds that the actions of divine agents have a duration, just as they have for any other agent. What, then, occurs when God acts outside time – say, when he creates the universe ex nihilo? Aquinas, in contrast, has God’s atemporality to fall back on, and so does not have the same problems. His conception of God is equally present to all points in time, and so can exercise his omnipotence whenever he chooses. This, too, raises some issues, concerning Aquinas’s account of time more generally. For Swinburne, God experiences time in a manner not entirely dissimilar from that of any other being. Aquinas, meanwhile, has to argue how an atemporal God can interact with something as alien as time in the first place.

Divergence two is orientated around each philosopher’s conception of omnipotence as a distinct power, or attribute, which God is said to possess. The central issue here arises from Swinburne’s arguments for God’s being possibly able to divest himself of his omnipotence through some means – say, by ridding himself of his power, causing himself to cease to exist, or empowering some being to bring about either of these states of affairs independently. Again, this is a striking notion, and again, Aquinas disagrees – he thinks that God’s omnipotence is of a special character that it cannot be divested of. Consideration of this divergence will entail careful exploration of how each thinker conceives of omnipotence as relating to God as a whole. Many interesting questions will arise in light of this. Some of these include: is omnipotence something which can be taken from God? Is it part of God’s power, or some distinct attribute? Does it refer to an infinite reserve of power? Without his omnipotence, can God rightly be called divine? These, and a whole host of other questions, will be addressed here.

The final divergence consists in how each philosopher views divine necessity. This divergence, in truth, arises from the second divergence; the fact that Swinburne thinks God can either divest himself of his omnipotence or cause himself to cease to exist raises serious questions about God’s overall necessity in Swinburne’s account. After all, if God need not be omnipotent, or even not exist, how can God’s existence be necessary? This is all further complicated by Swinburne’s epistemic humility towards arguments for God’s necessity, such that he thinks no ‘direct or semi-direct’ argument for God’s
necessity can be mounted. Aquinas, in contrast, holds that God’s necessity is of such obvious character that one can reason from generalised notions of necessity in the world to God’s own necessity – and thus his existence. Unfortunately for Aquinas, the arguments he deploys in service of proving God’s necessity are open to serious challenges, which entail serious discussion in this thesis about one of the most famous aspects of his philosophical output: his Five Ways to prove God’s existence.

The Criteria for Evaluation

It is worth pointing out now the means by which these three divergences will be evaluated. In short, the thesis suggests two distinct criteria by which to judge each philosopher’s arguments relating to a divergence to be more or less likely to be true.

The first of these two criteria consists in ‘conceptual simplicity’. This criterion is based on the notion that an argument is more likely to be true insofar as it needs to postulate the existence of fewer complex notions. ‘Complex notions’ in this regard refers to the existence of certain properties, certain substances, or relations between these properties and substances. The more of these which exist, the more complex a given theory is - and concomitantly, the less of these which exist, the conceptually leaner it is. The argument for God’s omnipotence in light of a given divergence which is ‘conceptually leaner’ is more likely to be true and less likely to be false.

The second criterion, meanwhile, judges an argument as more or less true depending on its relationship to ‘background evidence’. This matter is more straightforward. In essence, the more a theory or results of an argument coheres with those found in other fields, or within the same field which are distinct but reliably held to be true, the more likely it is that argument is true (and thus the less likely it is false).

Each of these criteria is established and embraced wholeheartedly by Swinburne himself.¹ He formulates them with reference to arguments which cannot be proven a priori (or at least cannot be so by human intellects) and thus must instead be proven through other means. That truth-value consists in a theory’s being more probably true than false.² Probability, then, is the measure of a theory’s truth for Swinburne. If a theory is, say, simpler than it is complex (that is, with reference to the existence of substances,

¹ Swinburne, R. (2016), The Coherence of Theism (Oxford University Press), p. 44
properties, and relations between these) the more likely it is that this theory is true. The very same is true of a theory which is judged by way of accordance with ‘background evidence’- the more a theory is in line with background evidence, the greater the probability that it is true.

Swinburne’s whole-hearted embracing of these criteria provides this thesis with ample precedent to evaluate Swinburne’s own arguments surrounding the three divergences in their light. As will be argued later, Swinburne offers that the arguments he supplies ably meet the standards of both conceptual simplicity and coherence with background knowledge, and so are more probably true than other, competing accounts like Aquinas’s (whose arguments Swinburne judges not to). Notably, this thesis will offer a conclusion which disagrees with Swinburne’s assessment of both his own arguments concerning the three divergences, and Aquinas’s also.

Two novel things follow from this. First, Aquinas’s account is proven to be coherent and sensible, and thus still worthy of consideration in the present day. Second, counter arguments explicitly drafted to replace Aquinas’s arguments are proven to be less effective than Aquinas’s own with reference to the precise standards those counter arguments were drafted by. This entails a sort of ‘double-failure’ for Swinburne’s account, which he offers was drafted in explicit reference to a set of rigorous standards which prior arguments seemed to lack. Such a result as this will not reflect well on Swinburne’s account of omnipotence, nor his overall conception of God. All of this confirms this thesis as supplying an essentially new perspective on matters concerning the general understanding of the works of Aquinas and Swinburne, as well as omnipotence doctrine more generally.

Finally, a note on the deployment of Swinburne’s criteria with reference to the three divergences; the two criteria are not deployed evenly across the three divergences identified in the text. Divergences one and two are each considered in terms of conceptual simplicity; the less the arguments undergirding these divergences need to postulate the existence of certain substances, properties, and/or relations between these, the more likely these arguments are to be true. In contrast, divergence three is evaluated in terms of the other criterion (that is, coherence with background evidence).

Why this lack of even distribution? In essence this is because the third divergence, which concerns divine necessity, can be argued not to deal with relations between substances
and properties like the first and second divergences. These two deal with God and time, and God and God’s active capacities to make and change things. Conceptual simplicity is a helpful marker of truth in these matters because there exists the possibility of a theory being more or less simple in terms of properties, substances, and relationships. God and time, after all, can be argued to be distinct from one another, as can God and the results of God’s powers. Thus, one can argue that relations between these can be more or less complex.

However, ‘conceptual simplicity’ is not a helpful judge when dealing with divine necessity, because this deals entirely with internal distinctions within the divine essence. Such distinctions are either difficult to parse for created intellects or are entirely non-existent (as is the case in Aquinas’s courageous commitment to the doctrine of divine simplicity). To judge one account of divine necessity as more or less ‘conceptually simple’ is either difficult – because God so exceeds the human capacity to know, either greatly or entirely – or it is impossible, because divine necessity is already perfectly conceptually simple as part of God’s divinely simple essence. In either case, the findings relating to divergence three would be either impossibly humble, so as to account for the divine transcendence, or impossibly arrogant (in that it exalts human understanding to such a level as ‘comprehending the divine essence’.)

This thesis will avoid these issues with regard to divergence three by virtue of using another of Swinburne’s favoured criteria: coherence with background evidence. In this instance, the background evidence which a theory concerning divine necessity must cohere with are notions of logic, such as the law of non-contradiction. Thus, divergence three is judged to be more or less probably true on the basis of the laws of logic commonly held by philosophers, rather than of conceptual simplicity. The more divergence three coheres with these notions, the more probably true it is, then.

**Aquinas and Swinburne’s Criteria**

It is worth noting that the set of criteria used here in this thesis is one which Swinburne himself has designed and implemented in his own work *only*, and that thus it is not necessarily the case that it is suitable for use to establish the merits inherent in *Aquinas’s* account *also*. In essence, one is asking whether ‘conceptual simplicity’ and ‘coherence with background evidence’ are suitable standards for Aquinas’s views on issues concerning the three divergences.
This thesis argues that this set of criteria is indeed suitable for use in evaluating Aquinas’s account. This is because they closely cohere with Aquinas’s own views concerning the suitability of arguments (and the nature of claims about being more generally). Consider, for instance, the criterion of simplicity, used in divergences one and two. Swinburne, who has drafted this criterion, is of course in favour of it. So too is Aquinas – if one looks to what he writes in Question 70 of the Summa Contra Gentiles. There, Aquinas considers how God and natural agents might interact causally with regard to the ‘same effect’. Aquinas notes the following:

   Again, when a thing can be done adequately by one agent, it is superfluous for it to be done by many; in fact, we see that nature does not do with two instruments what it can do with one. So, since the divine power is sufficient to produce natural effects, it is superfluous to use natural powers, too, for the production of the same effects. Or, if the natural power adequately produces the proper effect, it is superfluous for the divine power to act for the same effect.\(^3\)

For Aquinas, then, simplicity is a valuable criterion with which one can evaluate arguments and knowledge claims which relate to instances of being in the world. A casual chain, for example, which postulates two causes for an effect is likely to be conceived of incorrectly, for by Aquinas’s reckoning causal chains avoid ‘doubling up’, so to speak. If one cause is sufficient to bring about an effect, then only one cause should be present, and this we can see in nature. This rule even seems to extend to the divine power, also – if a natural power can bring about an effect, then God’s divine power need not bring about this same effect also, on grounds that complexity of this kind would result in superfluity. It can be argued, then, that Aquinas agrees with Swinburne that simplicity is a marker of truth, in that simplicity with regard to causality and explanation is indicative of truth on the basis that nature (and being more generally) seems to favour simplicity over complexity.

As regards the criterion of coherence with background knowledge, this, too, Aquinas can be said to agree with. First, Aquinas himself frequently cites the opinions of other thinkers in his work – everyone from Augustine to Aristotle to Moses Maimonides.\(^4\) This is to say nothing about his deference to revelation as explicated in scripture. For Aquinas, then,

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\(^3\) Summa Contra Gentiles, Book 3, Question 77.

\(^4\) Consider, for instance, Aquinas’s deference to the views of Augustine in Article 5 of Question 61 of the second part of his famous Summa Theologiae, or his deference to Avicenna in Chapter 69 of the third book of his Summa Contra Gentiles.
general coherence with ‘background knowledge’ - be it the opinions of expert theologians and brilliant philosophers, or the revealed word of God – is a good thing. An argument is more likely to be true should it agree with these sorts of sources.

Secondly, it is worth considering the particular ‘background evidence’ which divergence three is considered in light of. These are the general rules of logic embraced by the vast majority of the philosophers of the western canon – most notably, the essential rules by which an argument is held to be logically sound (or not). While there is some debate concerning the general soundness of several individual arguments which Aquinas makes (notably, some of his famous ‘Five Ways’), the notion that he would be opposed to coherence with background evidence or standards like ‘being logically sound’ does not seem to hold much weight. Aquinas, like many western philosophers, pays close, even obsessive, attention to the structures of his arguments, so as to ensure they are not guilty of well-known logical issues like quantifier shifts or contradictions. Certainly, some think his efforts falter here and there – but it cannot be argued that Aquinas himself ignored these standards. Thus, we can conclude that Aquinas would have little objection to subjecting his arguments to judgement on the basis of coherence with background evidence like the laws of logic and the general standards by which an argument is held to be logically sound.

Given these two points, it seems we are justified in arguing that, given Aquinas’s deference to experts and the particular ‘background evidence’ which forms the core of this criterion of truth, that Aquinas would not object to his arguments being considered in light of Swinburne’s criterion of ‘coherence with background evidence’.

On the basis of all of the above, then, this thesis holds that Aquinas would be more than agreeable with the notion of applying the standards of truth which Swinburne sets out to evaluate his own arguments by – be that conceptual simplicity or coherence with background evidence. Thus, this thesis argues that the criteria can be applied effectively and meaningfully to the arguments of each philosopher, and so will produce a conclusion which is both original and worthwhile.

**Structure**

Structurally, the thesis is divided into two sets of chapters, followed by a single chapter and conclusion which offers some final arguments. The first set of chapters concerns Aquinas’s understanding of omnipotence. The first chapter within this set makes clear
how Aquinas’s views on the subject fit into the broader trends of thought which have informed classical and modern understandings of God as omnipotent. Other emergent issues are explored here also, like how God’s omnipotence relates to possible things, what omnipotence might have to do with failure, and how omnipotence relates to God’s other attributes, like his omniscience and omnipresence. The second chapter, meanwhile, broadens this and hardens Aquinas’s understanding of omnipotence by adding additional context and subjecting it to a serious criticism at the hands of Geach. What results is a detailed overview of Aquinas’s understanding of omnipotence which has been subjected to a number of challenges.

The second set of chapters, meanwhile, makes clear how Swinburne views omnipotence, and states in detail the nature of each of the three divergences. The first chapter within this set contains an overview of Swinburne’s time-based understanding of omnipotence, and from this explicates the nature of the first three divergences. The second chapter shows how the next two divergences emerge from the account of omnipotence in the chapter preceding it and establish some ground upon which Aquinas might challenge them.

The final chapter takes these many elements and offers a final analysis. This analysis is then used to establish a hierarchy such that one understanding of omnipotence is held, in some manner, to be ‘better’ than the other. The criteria this hierarchy depends upon is sourced from Swinburne’s writings, and consists of two main ideas. The first is that conceptual simplicity is a good marker of the truth of an argument, and the second is that an account of something is more likely to be true than not when it coheres with the findings of other works in other fields.

Ultimately, this thesis will find that Aquinas’s conception of omnipotence is, in light of the three divergences mentioned above, the more robust and successful of the two. Concomitantly, it will find that Swinburne’s account of omnipotence falters both on its own and particularly in light of the criteria Swinburne himself drafted to ensure their quality.
Chapter One: Aquinas On Omnipotence

Omnipotence is a philosophical issue with no small share of division and disagreement. Even a cursory scan of history will provide a wealth of differing and sometimes opposing conceptions. Interestingly, this is a debate not confined to any one era. While it is true that much progress was made by the Medieval Schoolmen (and several entirely distinct understandings of omnipotence were hammered out by them), precisely what constitutes omnipotence has remained a relatively popular issue all throughout the history of Western thought. Along with the Medieval Schoolmen, there are the writings on omnipotence by the ancient Greeks, the words of scripture (Jewish, Christian, and Muslim), the musings of Enlightenment figures like Leibniz and Descartes, and finally a myriad number of perspectives which emerged during the last century. More contemporary commentators on the subject include Geach, Plantinga, Clarke, and Swinburne, who stand alongside much older ones in a grand tradition of thought and debate. Among these, of course, is Aquinas. For our the purposes of this research, a long and storied summary of the history of omnipotence is only necessary insofar as it makes Aquinas’s own position clear.

To that end, it must be pointed out that there are roughly two general categories into which many of these historical and contemporary forms of omnipotence fall. The first category of omnipotence encompasses an understanding of God’s omnipotence as something which is beyond limitation, whether logical, moral, or whatever else, such that a God can do whatever God might like to do, consequences be damned. Correlatively, the second account of omnipotence is more modest; into it holds that there are relatively strict limitations on what sorts of things the omnipotent being like God can and cannot do.5

Many of the philosophers from the eras just discussed, I will argue, fall into one category or the other. Some will hold either that God’s omnipotence is boundless. Others will hold that God’s omnipotence is not at all boundless. Interestingly, it is the second category that enjoys greater popularity.6 Most of the philosophers discussed will hold that there are certain things an omnipotent being cannot do – Aquinas among them.7

Still, that these great majority of philosophers can be broadly categorised as holding a more ‘modest’ conception of omnipotence should not suggest that there is widespread agreement among the as regards what limitations there are on God’s omnipotence. Some thinkers will clearly endorse systems in which there are more limitations on God’s power than in others, and vice versa. Disagreements regarding the nature of these limitations are major factors in the contemporary debate surrounding the omnipotence. All of these will be presented in such a way that Aquinas’s account becomes properly evident. We begin with the first category of omnipotence doctrine, which holds that omnipotence is the capacity for a divine agent to do anything at all. The second category, which argues that omnipotence is necessarily bounded by certain limitations, will be discussed just after it.

“Do Anything” Omnipotence

Relatively few philosophers have held that omnipotence consists in the ability to do whatever. This may seem an odd point; religious scriptures of the Abrahamic religions seem to suggest a God who is beyond limitation of any sort, for instance (though as Kenny notes this isn’t actually the case for Christianity, the popular consensus of believers aside). The intuitive (and therefore popular) conception of God’s omnipotence runs as follows: if God is omnipotent, God is surely not bound by rules and regulations, for surely these rules and regulations are just as subject to God’s omnipotence as everything else is. Thus, God should be able to bend, break, or otherwise circumvent these rules whenever God might like to when exercising his omnipotent power. That this is intuitive is not in doubt. Omnipotence seems to mean ‘power of an infinite sort’, and power is hardly infinite if it is bound by rules like ‘X cannot be done’. Omnipotence seems to give God the ability to accomplish X whatever X may be.

Despite the apparent sense in it, this has never been a popular conception of omnipotence, however. Geach summarises why this is the case rather well:

> When people have tried to read into ‘God can do everything’ a signification not of Pious Intention but of Philosophical Truth, they have only landed themselves in intractable problems and hopeless confusions; no graspable sense has ever been given to this sentence that did not lead to self-contradiction or at least conclusions manifestly untenable from a Christian point of view.

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What does Geach mean here? Simply that, in supposing that God can bring about X no matter *what*, one is left with a God who can do contradictory things like ‘make a ham sandwich which contains no ham’, or ‘a man who is taller than himself’. These are impossible things, and while God *may* be able to bring them about, precisely *what* these things would look like is difficult – indeed, impossible – to imagine. One of the most basic tenets of philosophical discourse is that contradictions are *impossible*, in the sense that they postulate things which are contrary, and thus which can’t obtain together. A man who is somehow taller than himself is a contradiction, for a man is both his own height while at the *same time* a *different* height which is *greater* than the height he already is. Which height, then, is the man?

The other issue that Geach hints at in the quote above are issues concerning God’s ability to do things which are incompatible with the precepts of Christian faith. Among the most fundamental truths of Christian doctrine, regardless of denomination, that God is *good*, in the sense of being morally perfect. God does not, therefore, commit evil.\(^\text{11}\) Yet, on the understanding that omnipotence can override any rule or regulation, it seems that God *can* commit evil actions like ‘encouraging injustice’, ‘spreading falsehoods’, and even ‘making murder a morally good action’.

Obviously none of these things are in line with Christian doctrine, and Aquinas, a devout Christian, would clearly never want his arguments to lead to conclusions that run contrary to his Christian convictions. Neither will he admit the possibility of self-contradictory things being possible at the same time and in the same respect (as would occur with man who is taller than himself *now*). In fact, it seems odd that *any* philosopher, theist or not, would hold to this understanding of omnipotence. It seems more trouble than it is worth. Yet, some have – and of these, one is among the most significant figures in Western thought: Descartes. Descartes is frequently cited as the most significant example of a philosopher to hold to a ‘Do Anything’ conception of omnipotence (though there is some debate regarding Descartes; some, like Kenny, are only willing to consider him a

\(^{11}\) At least, not intentionally; permissive evil still seems possible, in the sense that in creating things like ‘oceans’ and ‘humans’, God permits the latter to interact with the former in ways which may *lead* to evils like ‘destruction’ and ‘death’. These latter are not willed by God, however – they merely emerge *from* the fact he has willed into existence things which can do evil to one another. Thus, God’s relationship to evil in this sort of context is held to be permissive.
‘possible exception’ to the long canon of philosophers who have denied that omnipotence is to be understood as entailing the ability ‘do anything at all’).  

How does Descartes come to argue for this notion of omnipotence? It seems to stem from his views concerning how God relates to the ‘eternal truths’ of the universe. These ‘eternal truths’ include concepts as basic as the precepts of logic and of mathematical truths – notions that ‘contradictories cannot be true together’, and ‘$3 + 5 = 8$’. By Descartes’ reckoning, even things as basic and foundational as these are open to God’s omnipotence. As Descartes puts it in a letter to Mersenne (emphasis mine): “the mathematical truths, which you call eternal, are in fact established by God and depend on him entirely like the rest of the creatures”. This also goes for logical truths, like those relating to contradictories. This is the basis for Descartes’ radical position: that these eternal truths which undergird all of creation are just as amenable to God’s will as any other thing might be.

Putting this more concretely, Descartes thinks that God may bring it about that ‘$3 + 5 = 947$’, and that ‘contradictories can be true together’. The enormous scale of action Descartes ascribes to God’s omnipotence with this ‘do anything omnipotence’ is fairly staggering. If God can make it so two contradictions can obtain together, then it seems to follow that God can do anything at all no matter what. The question of ‘possibility’ does not seem to come into it; anything God might like to do, no matter how impossible, God can simply do, because the laws of logic governing this possibility – these eternal truths – are just as subject to God’s omnipotence as everything else.

What does Aquinas make of this sort of view? In De Potentia, Aquinas gives something of an answer as regards why omnipotence cannot be of the ‘Do Anything’ category. He quotes Augustine’s remark that God is called ‘almighty’ for no reason other than the fact that God can ‘do whatsoever he wills’. Aquinas counters this, on the grounds that the

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12 Kenny, The God of the Philosophers, p. 91.
16 Descartes, Philosophical Letters, pp. 150-151.
blessed in heaven are empowered to do exactly this also.\textsuperscript{19} If they were not, Aquinas argues, something would be lacking in their happiness. Yet: we do not call the blessed in heaven \textit{omnipotent} in light of their being able to ‘do anything’ they might will. That God can do whatever God wills is therefore not a sufficient basis to claim that this is all omnipotence consists in. Thus, on this basis, a ‘Do Anything’ omnipotence is not applicable to God – quite apart from the many issues such an account of omnipotence heralds in terms of the \textit{output} of God’s omnipotent power, like making logically contradictory things.

**Omnipotence As Doing Some Things And Not Other Things**

This leaves only the second category for Aquinas’s conception of omnipotence to fall into: the sort of omnipotence in which only certain things are possible, even for God. Aquinas wholeheartedly embraces this view, as we will see. Before that, however, it is notable that Aquinas’s advocating of this sort of view has several interesting historical consequences. First, it means that Aquinas agrees at least in part with a great swathe of Western thinkers, from Abelard to Leibniz to Plantinga. The precise ways in which each of these figures will think the divine omnipotence is limited will of course vary – but there is still some ultimate agreement that some limitation exists. Secondly, as Leftow points out, Aquinas’s particular arguments for an omnipotent God that cannot do \textit{all} things have had a pronounced effect on the development of Christian omnipotence doctrines since.\textsuperscript{20}

Before Aquinas’s time most Christian accounts of God’s omnipotence were concerned with the amount of power God had. After Aquinas’s time, Christian accounts generally shifted to consider omnipotence not in terms of power, but in terms of the ‘range of action’ that God could perform.\textsuperscript{21} Aquinas’s definition is indeed one concerned with range, and not with power (though commentators like Kenny have partly challenged this sort of characterisation over the last few decades).\textsuperscript{22} So it is in this way that Aquinas’s understanding of omnipotence is particularly significant, at least historically. Aquinas does not just \textit{agree} with the greater swathe of Western thinkers on the subject. He was in fact a major influence in that general agreement forming, his account being known to

\textsuperscript{19} Aquinas \textit{De Potentia}, Q. I. A. 7, Section 4.
\textsuperscript{20} Leftow, \textit{The Oxford Handbook of Thomas Aquinas}, p. 187.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid, p. 187.
\textsuperscript{22} Kenny, \textit{The God of the Philosophers}, p. 93.
many, if not all, of the prolific thinkers on omnipotence since (whether they agreed with Aquinas or disagreed with him).

Yet Aquinas is not the first to hold such a view. The notion that an omnipotent God cannot do all things was a school of thought held to by certain figures in antiquity. Among these was the writer Pliny the Elder, who identified a number of things that would be impossible for an omnipotent deity to do:

And indeed this constitutes the great comfort in this imperfect state of man, that even the Deity cannot do everything. For he cannot procure death for himself, even if he wished it, which, so numerous are the evils of life, has been granted to man as our chief good. Nor can he make mortals immortal, or recall to life those who are dead; nor can he effect, that he who has once lived shall not have lived, or that he who has enjoyed honours shall not have enjoyed them; nor has he any influence over past events but to cause them to be forgotten. And, if we illustrate the nature of our connexion with God by a less serious argument, he cannot make twice ten not to be twenty, and many other things of this kind.23

Things Pliny thinks God cannot do include being able to commit suicide, make mortals immortal, alter the past, or alter basic mathematical and logical truths such that ten multiplied by two is something other than twenty.24 Interestingly, some of these are precisely the sorts of things Descartes thinks God could do, as we saw above – amend the basic eternal truths such that all sorts of mathematical and logical contradictories could obtain together for instance.

Many of the Schoolmen, Aquinas among them, would express agreement with Pliny’s views on omnipotence at least after a fashion. Still however certain nuances prevailed, and a line of thinkers emerged who added to Pliny’s list other sorts of things even an omnipotent God could not do. Among these was Peter Abelard, himself a major influence on Aquinas, for instance, argued (and was condemned) for a necessitarian view of God’s actions on the basis of the divine goodness.25 Abelard argued that God’s divine goodness would preclude God from doing anything other than the very best. In this sense, God’s omnipotence is therefore limited not by logic or possibility, but by morality. On this view, it does not matter that God is omnipotent; God necessarily must do what is the maximally Good Thing in every case.

Since then, other thinkers embraced the same general view of God as bound by necessity to do what is maximally good. Leibniz, for instance, adopted a view very similar to Abelard’s, such that God could do nothing but the very best thing possible. This in fact served as a primary influence in Leibniz’s controversial ‘best of all possible worlds’ arguments.\textsuperscript{26} Other figures like Spinoza held somewhat similar views – that God was in a sense confined to certain courses of action rather than others, and that things happen according to the necessity of the divine nature such that not even God could make things other than they are.\textsuperscript{27}

Finally, it is also worth noting that the ‘two category’ system embraced so far is not exhaustive; there are certain thinkers straddle the boundaries in certain respects, in that they hold that God is in certain contexts able to ‘Do Anything’, and in others that God can only do certain things. Wycliffe is one such example, embracing a conception of God that is in many ways almost as liberal as Descartes’ while in many others as strict as Abelard’s.\textsuperscript{28} On the one hand, Wycliffe held that God could do things like will human beings to sin, and indeed will the very acts of will by which a human being sins in a given case.\textsuperscript{29} On the other, Wycliffe also held a view rather like Spinoza’s – that all things that have happened have done so because of divine necessity. He also held the same view as Leibniz that God could not create a better world than the one which exists.

These points aside, a single uniting principle should be evident in the views of all these figures – omnipotence is held by the greater majority of philosophers to not be a licence to ‘do anything’. The things which actually serve to limit God’s omnipotence is where some of these figures will disagree; some, for instance, will stress that omnipotence as limited by things like the divine goodness, and the divine necessity. Others will embrace only the view that God is prohibited from doing what is logically impossible. God is certainly omnipotent, they will all argue, but in this omnipotence there is no absolute freedom to do as God might will. Some things remain beyond the kernel of the omnipotent being.

\textsuperscript{26} Leibniz, \textit{Theodicy}, Part I, p. 8.
\textsuperscript{27} Spinoza, \textit{The Ethics}, translated by R. H. M. Elwes, Mockingbird Classics Publishing (2014), Part I, Proposition XXXIII.
\textsuperscript{28} Kenny, \textit{The God of the Philosophers}, p. 9.
Aquinas’s Views in Detail

The previous two sections have made clear that there are two broad conceptual options when one looks at omnipotence: a ‘do anything’ omnipotence, and a ‘do some things and not others’ omnipotence. Aquinas’s insistence on being as the criteria by which God is judged omnipotent puts him firmly into the ‘Do Some Things and Not Other Things’ kind of omnipotence. However, in a very careful sort of way, it could be argued that Aquinas’s account actually straddles the two categories of omnipotence. This is because, like Descartes, Aquinas does indeed hold that God can do everything. The difference, however, is what this ‘everything’ consists in; for Aquinas it depends on a complex structure of being, goodness, power, and omnipotence. Thus, Aquinas is in the position that omnipotence is both of the ‘do anything’ sort, and one in which omnipotence is explicitly limited in performing certain actions or bringing about some states of affairs. This is because, whatever about language, Aquinas thinks these actions and states of affairs are only seemingly possible – this is to say, they are linguistically possible, but not ontologically possible.

Thus, if we were to describe Aquinas’s account of omnipotence very briefly, we might say that Aquinas’s God is omnipotent, and that omnipotence consists in doing whatever is possible. What is possible God is free to do as God might like – but what is possible follows from the inherent structure of being. Aquinas expresses this point in terms of ontological possibility. He thinks God can do everything that is ‘absolutely possible’ – this is what omnipotence consists in. Aquinas makes this point clear in two places. The first is in Article 3 of Question 25 of the Summa Theologiae. There, Aquinas argues against ‘Do Anything’ omnipotence (as argued for by Descartes). There, Aquinas explicitly denies that God is omnipotent in this way, instead making it clear that God’s omnipotence is properly thought of in terms of possibility and is not above possibility. Possibility of course concerns being – what things can be and what things cannot be. And that possibility Aquinas is speaking about relative to God’s omnipotence is ‘absolute possibility.’

A number of commentators have dissected this notion of ‘absolute possibility’, and how and why it differs from possibility more generally. Both Kenny and Leftow, for instance, have demonstrated this relationship by proposing various formulations of Aquinas’s

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31 Ibid.
omnipotence doctrine, some in which God can do ‘all that is possible’ and others in which God can do ‘all that is absolutely possible’.\(^{32}\) For Aquinas, absolute possibility is explainable for human beings in terms of subject-predicate relations – in language, in other words.\(^{33}\) Something is ‘absolutely possible’ if the predicate is compatible with a subject (as in “Socrates sits”, Aquinas notes) and correlatively absolutely \textit{impossible} if that subject and predicate are incompatible, as in “Socrates is a donkey”.

Crucially, it must be remembered that this is simply how human beings \textit{express} absolute possibility as an idea. Subject and predicate compatibility is merely an expression of the being of something in the world.\(^{34}\) The subject and predicate compatibility in ‘Socrates sits’ exists \textit{only because} the being Socrates \textit{really can} sit – and the subject-predicate incompatibility of ‘Socrates is a helicopter’ is \textit{really} incompatible because ‘Socrates’ and ‘helicopter’ cannot be the same things. Language \textit{follows} from being; necessity in terms of subject and predicate relations only follows from the \textit{real} necessity of beings in the world. Aquinas uses various means to explain this. In \textit{De Potentia}, for instance, he speaks not of ‘subject-predicate compatibility’ but of ‘affirmation and negation’.\(^{35}\)

Fundamentally, language serves to communicate truths about \textit{being} – about the existence and essences of really existing things in the world. For Aquinas, logic and language \textit{mirror} ontology, as Hughes puts it.\(^{36}\) So, whatever is \textit{absolutely possible} follows from the essences and existence of the things which actually exist. By that same token, contradictions express in language things which cannot exist – beings in which there is an affirmation and negation in the same respect.\(^{37}\) Given that Aquinas thinks non-being opposes being, a contradiction cannot be numbered among absolutely possible things. Therefore, contradictory things explicitly do \textit{not} fall under the purview of God’s omnipotence, and are to be considered impossible, even for God.

This is why Aquinas’s conception of God cannot create square circles, for these posit being and non-being at the same time and in the same respect (a thing is either a circle \textit{or} a square; it cannot be both). Hence, a square circle is a contradictory thing, rather than an absolutely possible thing and is thus beyond even God’s omnipotent power to bring into

\(^{32}\) Kenny, \textit{The God of the Philosophers}, pp. 95-96; Leftow, Brian, Chapter 14, “God’s Omnipotence”, p. 189.

\(^{33}\) ST. I. Q. 25. A. 3.


\(^{35}\) Aquinas, \textit{De Potentia}, Q. 1 A. 3, main body.


being. In case the reader is perturbed by this, Aquinas offers a clarification that contradictions like these are better thought of as being impossible in themselves, rather than impossible for God.

**God’s Changing the Past**

One of the most interesting things Aquinas thinks of as impossible precisely because it posits a contradictory state of affairs is God’s changing a past event so that the outcome of that event is different.\(^{38}\) This example features in many contemporary analyses of Aquinas’s account of omnipotence – Kenny, Hughes, and Leftow all take the time to consider it in detail. Following their lead, this chapter will also examine Aquinas’s stance on God’s changing the past, as it provides a striking and intuitive example of an absolutely impossible thing which God cannot do, even with God’s omnipotence.

Briefly put, Aquinas’s position is this: if it is true that at time \(t\) that Noel walked into a lamppost, even the omnipotent God cannot make that proposition false. In a sense, once Noel has walked into the lamppost, he has always done so. The reasons for this are many; several aspects of Aquinas’s account of God arise to make God’s changing time impossible. These can be sorted into one of two general categories. The first of these concerns *contradiction*. As above, if something results in a contradiction, a simultaneous state of being and non-being in the same respect, that thing cannot be done by God. The second category concerns *deficiency*. If performing some action would lead to God being less than God – being something other than the fully actually, perfect, omnipotent God – that action cannot be performed. The example of ‘changing the past’ is interesting because it fits into both categories. If God were to change the past, contradictions would follow, and God would be de-powered, so to speak. We consider each of these two categories in turn.

**Category One: Contradiction**

Article 4 of Question 25 is quite clear on the issue of logical contradiction following from God’s changing the past:

…there does not fall under the scope of God's omnipotence anything that implies a contradiction. Now that the past should not have been implies a contradiction. For as it implies a contradiction to say that Socrates is sitting, and is not sitting, so does it to say that he sat, and did not sit. But to say that he did sit is to say that

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\(^{38}\) ST. I. Q. 25, A. 4.
it happened in the past. To say that he did not sit, is to say that it did not happen. Whence, that the past should not have been, does not come under the scope of divine power.\(^3\)

Here Aquinas reiterates many of the points we have just considered. First, he clarifies that omnipotence is concerned with what is \textit{absolutely possible}, and that absolute possibility is opposed to contradiction. What does this mean for changing the past? Aquinas argues that if the past were to be changed in some way – say that God reaches into the past and makes it so that Noel didn’t walk into the lamppost at time \(t\) – Aquinas thinks a contradiction would follow. This is because at time \(t\), two contradictory events would now be taking place. First, Noel would be walking into the lamppost. This is an essential part of the equation; to \textit{change the past} entails there is a determinate past \textit{to change}. Second, thanks to the actions of God at some future point in time, at that very same time \(t\) Noel would now \textit{not} be walking into the lamppost. That Noel is and isn’t walking into the lamppost at time \(t\) is a contradiction, for Noel’s walking into the lamppost would \textit{now} be \textit{both} true and false. This constitutes a logically impossible state of affairs.

For Aquinas it is a contradiction for something to be both true and false, or for something to be affirmed or negated at the same time in the same respect.\(^4\) Again, all of this revolves around Aquinas’s understanding of being. Being and non-being cannot exist in the same respect. From this it follows that Noel’s walking into the lamppost and \textit{not} walking into that lamppost at time \(t\) constitutes being and non-being existing simultaneously. Of note here is the precise nature of the contradiction. By saying that being and non-being exist at the same time and in the same respect, Aquinas does not mean that \textit{only non-being obtains}. This is only the \textit{result} of the contradiction. The nature of that contradiction instead consists in the mutual incompatibility of being and non-being.\(^5\) If there is being, there can be no non-being, and if there is non-being, there can be no being. Non-being seems to \textit{follow} from this incompatibility.

In either case, if God changes the past at time \(t\), being and non-being (or affirmation and negation) exist at the same time and so non-being can only follow. Aquinas makes it clear that such a contradiction can \textit{never} be the result of a being’s power, because powers

\(^3\) ST. I. Q. 25, A. 4.

\(^4\) De Potentia, Q. 1. A. 3, main body.

\(^5\) Ibid. Aquinas quotes Aristotle in Metaph. X. 4.
follow from the ‘actuality and entity’ of that to which that active power belongs. Aquinas makes a distinction in the results of power between principal results and secondary results in Article 3 of De Potentia. A contradiction in being can never be either – the principal, or the secondary result of the action of some active power. Given that God is fully actual and being itself, it seems to follow doubly that God’s active powers can never result in the non-being that follows a contradiction, again either principally or secondarily. So, God cannot change the past for risk of contradiction following.

**Category Two: Deficiency**

Contradictions are not the only things which follow from God’s being able to change the past, as we have noted. Changing the past is also impossible for Aquinas’s understanding of omnipotence because it entails that God be deficient in some way or other. Now, it must be made clear that for Aquinas, these deficiencies are also technically contradictions in a certain sense. For God to be God and yet less than God could be argued to be the same kind of simultaneous affirmation and negation as changing the past would be, or making a square circle.

There is some immediate sense behind this sort of argument; Aquinas’s account proceeds from the existence of God as infinite, eternal, omnipotent, and so on, and thus these things cannot be denied of God. For the purposes of this thesis, however, the distinction between ‘contradiction’ and ‘deficiency’ will be maintained for the sake of clarity. When we speak of ‘contradiction’, we are considering contradictions in terms of being; actions and results which proceed from God. When we speak of deficiencies, it may be taken that these refer to contradictions as they might arise within God’s own nature, such as between God’s attributes.

That God might change the past involves more than a couple of these deficiencies. First, there is the question of God’s immutability – that is, God’s inability to change. This immutability follows on from God’s being pure actuality, with no admixture of potency and act at all. For something to be able to change, it must have some sort of potentiality to be changed. Potentiality is opposed to actuality, and while in the scope of time potentiality precedes actuality, in terms of being, actuality precedes potentiality. A fully actual God is the source of all of the potentiality that follows from God’s act of creation.

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Importantly, this fully actual God would not be fully actual if it had any sort of potentiality. So, God must be fully actual, and thus Aquinas finishes that God cannot be changed in any way.

The reason this is a concern is because changing the past would involve exactly this sort of change. God would have to let things run their course (or else there would be nothing at time $t$ to be changed). Yet God would then have to decide to change what happens at time $t$. This is problematic, because it entails lapses in the divine knowledge as well as changes in God’s actuality and eternity. Why, for instance, would God not simply stop Noel hitting the lamppost at time $t$ the first time around? If he does not, it seems to follow that God has acquired new knowledge which God did not have before – say, that Noel’s hitting the lamppost causes humanity to destroy all lampposts, and this then causes humanity to lose the war with a race of lamppost-adoring aliens. God realises this is the case, and, in the interest of preserving humanity, decides that Noel must now not hit that lamppost. Thus, God causes it that Noel instead walks into a signpost.

This is all impossible, however, for in changing the past like this, God’s omniscience, God’s infallible foreknowledge, and God’s being fully actual have all been violated. First, God does not seem to know about how humanity will fare in the war with the lamppost-adoring aliens; thus, he is not omniscient. Moreover, in gaining new knowledge, there is some potency in God to gain that new knowledge, and so God is no longer fully actual. Finally, in gaining this new knowledge, God’s immutability is compromised, for now he has changed. All of these concerns seem to work to make God’s potentially changing the past thoroughly impossible, given what Aquinas says concerning God’s actuality, omniscience, and immutability.

There is also another potential issue, which comes from Aquinas’s belief that God listens to intercessory prayers. If God were to know that at time $y$ someone was to pray that Noel did not walk into the lamppost at time $t$, why could God not simply prevent Noel from walking into the lamppost before Noel does so, thereby avoiding the ‘changing the past’ issue altogether? This latter point leads into an objection that Aquinas himself offers which holds that God should be able to change the past.

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44 ST. I, Q. 10, A. 2.
45 ST. II, 2, Q. 83, A. 2.
Deficiency from Not Changing the Past

The question ‘can God change the past’ is interesting not just because it entails that God might be deficient from having changed the past. It is interesting because it also seems to work the other way – that in now not being able to prevent Noel from walking into a lamppost, God’s infinite power is affected. Aquinas makes this clear in ST I. Q.25 A.4:

Objection 2. Further, what God could do, He can do now, since His power is not lessened. But God could have effected, before Socrates ran, that he should not run. Therefore, when he has run, God could effect that he did not run.\(^\text{46}\)

The idea behind this objection is that if God can do something like prevent Noel from walking into that lamppost before time \(t\) rolls around, \(a\ fortiori\) God can also prevent Noel from walking into that lamp post after time \(t\) has happened. In effect, God’s infinite power does not change with the passing of time; what God can do at time \(t\), God can do at all other times. Otherwise, a deficiency in God has come about, because God’s power seems to be able to ebb and flow with the passing of time.

Aquinas replies with that subtle distinction already noted: that things become possible and impossible \(in\) themselves, rather than God becoming more or less powerful as time moves on.\(^\text{47}\) For Aquinas, God is immutable, and this goes also for God’s power. What does change, however, are the number of possibilities which are open to God’s power.\(^\text{48}\)

Certain commentators like Hughes advance views that hold something similar – that God has access to time in a linear fashion, and has just the one chance to amend something – stopping it before or during a thing’s happening, but not afterwards.\(^\text{49}\)

In any case, God’s being able to change the past is a tricky, multi-faceted issue that reaches far into other aspects of Aquinas’s conception of God. Yet Aquinas holds above all that it ranks as one of these absolutely impossible things which not even God can do. One can see here how wide-ranging and impactful Aquinas’s conception of omnipotence is for his overall account of God.

Aquinas’s Omnipotence and Divine Goodness

Another interesting issue for Aquinas’s account of omnipotence springs from the relationship between the divine goodness and the divine power. For some thinkers, as we

\(^{46}\) ST. I. Q. 25 A. 4.
\(^{47}\) ST. I. Q. 25. A. 3, main body.
\(^{49}\) Hughes, The Nature of God, p. 96.
noted above, God’s omnipotence is firmly confined by the divine goodness to produce the greatest possible good that it can – like Leibniz’s argument that God is duty bound to create the best of all possible worlds.  

How does Aquinas deal with issues like this, where God’s overwhelming goodness seems to warrant God’s using his omnipotence in certain ways? To understand his view, we must bear in mind that for Aquinas, there can be no external moral requirement which sits atop God’s omnipotent actions. Instead, because of the relationship of being and goodness, all of the things which God can do as omnipotent are, by their very nature, good. Moreover, God is not necessitated to bring about some ‘greatest good’ in all cases.

What of the view that God must create a best of all possible world with his omnipotence? Surely it would seem a failing for the divine goodness if he did not. Aquinas has an interesting answer. At first it would seem he very much agrees that God could indeed make a world better than the one which exists. However, as we will see, he does not think it possible to make a better version of the world as it already actually is without replacing it with an entirely new, other, world. Moreover, Aquinas does not even believe that some best of all possible worlds is something which God can produce. As he puts it:

The goodness of anything is twofold; one, which is of the essence of it—thus, for instance, to be rational pertains to the essence of man. As regards this good, God cannot make a thing better than it is itself; although He can make another thing better than it; even as He cannot make the number four greater than it is; because if it were greater it would no longer be four, but another number. For the addition of a substantial difference in definitions is after the manner of the addition of unity of numbers (Metaph. viii, 10)… … Absolutely speaking, however, God can make something else better than each thing made by Him.

Here, Aquinas distinguishes between two sorts of goodness, the first of which is relevant here. The first sort refers to a thing’s essence. Aquinas notes that God cannot make a thing better than its own essence; he cannot make a rational animal more of a rational animal than it is, much as one cannot make the number four greater than it is by adding to it. All one gets in that case is another number, greater than but entirely distinct from the number four. In line with this, however, Aquinas thinks that God is perfectly able to make a number which is greater than four, and which exceeds it in every respect. So, God cannot make the number four greater than it is, but God can create the number five, which is greater than four (and so on to infinity, it seems). Obviously, this doesn’t apply only to

numbers, or even only mathematical or purely logical constructs. Anything which God has made, God can make an improved version of – so the notion that God is in some way necessitated by the divine goodness to create the greatest world possible is not something Aquinas will accept. God can make a better world – but he cannot make a best world. There is always the possibility of a world with more goodness in it than in the last one.

The important thing is this: whatever omnipotence is for Aquinas, it is not something that is confined by some external divine necessity imposed on it. Given that so many of the thinkers in the ‘Do Some Things and Not Other Things’ camp just mentioned seem to hold that God is limited in certain important actions (like the creation of the universe), Aquinas’s position is comparatively radical. The relationship between the divine goodness and God’s actions is something Aquinas is aware of, of course. Yet for him the divine goodness does not serve to limit the divine omnipotence. This is because of Aquinas’s understanding of being and goodness as co-extensive with one another.⁵² God is not restricted to one set of actions over another because of their moral content. Being and goodness are in some sense identical; thus, if something has being it has goodness. God can do anything which can be, and everything which can be is good.⁵³ Crucially for Aquinas is that there is no ‘supreme’ goodness that God is necessitated to bring about, as is the case for Wycliffe and Abelard and the others.

In terms of the distinction between contradiction and deficiency, the issue of divine goodness fits into the former category. If God were to make a world that truly was a best of all possible worlds, a world fully informed by the divine goodness, then it seems to follow that there would be some created thing that could exhaust the divine goodness. The contradiction follows from the fact that the divine goodness is infinite, just as all of God’s attributes are. For Aquinas it does not follow that any created thing could serve to be the best thing made by an infinite goodness, because that would entail exhausting an infinity. In creating a best of all possible worlds, an infinity of goodness would be necessitated to create some single, finite thing better than all other possible things. This seems a contradiction, for surely an infinity of goodness will always allow for more goodness to follow – it cannot be spent.

⁵² O’Grady, Paul, Aquinas’ Philosophy of Religion, Palgrave and MacMillan (2014), p. 188.
⁵³ Ibid.
Challenges to Aquinas’s Omnipotence

So far, we have established a number of things about Aquinas’s account. First, that God is omnipotent in being able to do all that is absolutely possible; second that God cannot do things owing either to contradiction or deficiency, and third that God’s goodness does not serve to force God to create a best of all possible worlds. We also found that contradiction was the main reason that God was not able to create a ‘best of all possible worlds’, and indeed the main criteria by which omnipotence is cognised.

Given all we have said about the relationship between contradiction and deficiency, as well as the primacy of contradictions in God’s being unable to change the past or create the best of all possible worlds, it seems that contradictions are more important by Aquinas’s reckoning than the deficiencies are when considering omnipotence.

Yet Aquinas’s focus on absolute possibility has not gone unnoticed. In the 20th century, figures like Swinburne, Plantinga and Kenny offered a condemnation of absolute possibility as a reasonable criterion to define omnipotence as a coherent doctrine.54 In fairness, a broader issue exists here; some commentators, like Geach and Plantinga, think no satisfactory account of omnipotence can be formulated.55

With regard to Aquinas’s account specifically, however, some explicit critiques have been made. Several commentators have pointed out that the ‘absolute possibility’ criteria fails Aquinas’s account, because there are many things which are absolutely possible which God cannot do.56 Given that Aquinas’ account depends on absolute possibility, this seems a damning indictment of Aquinas’s conception of omnipotence.

Aquinas’s Defence

As Leftow points out, however, Aquinas himself was fully aware of this issue.57 In fact, Aquinas himself lists a number of absolutely possible things which God cannot do in Article 6 of Question 1 of his De Potentia, many of which agree with Pliny the Elders’ writings. Here Aquinas asks whether God can do things which are possible for many created beings – things like sinning, failing, or walking.58

54 Kenny, The God of the Philosophers, pp. 95-96.
58 Aquinas, De Potentia, Question 1, Article 6, main body.
In truth, Aquinas’ defence of his account of omnipotence follows two general lines. Each serves to dispel the argument that there are seemingly possible things which God cannot do. First, Aquinas will argue that many of these absolutely possible things are not truly possible in themselves. Second, he will argue that even those things that are absolutely possible in themselves are not suitable for God to perform. By arguing on both of these lines, Aquinas successfully defends his account of omnipotence as ‘doing all that is absolutely possible’.

**God, Failure, and Evil**

It seems that ‘evil’ and ‘failing’ number among the possible actions which God should perform, given Aquinas’s definition of omnipotence. Surely, then, God too can fail, make mistakes, and sin. Aquinas notes, however, that this is not the case – because things like ‘evil’ and ‘failure’ are not positive things in themselves. We will now explain this in more detail.

What is failure for Aquinas? Consider a goal someone might have, like ‘throwing a brick through the windscreen of a speeding car’. Goals are ends; they are things aimed for, and the criterion by which I judge if I have met that end or not. In the case of the brick and the speeding car, I judge myself to have accomplished my aim (or end) by throwing the brick in such a way that it lashes through the windscreen of the speeding car. If the brick does not make it through the windscreen, then I have failed in my aim (or intended end).

Why can I fail? The answer has to do with my power, and the defects which may lie in it. A defect in this instance might be something like ‘failing to aim the brick correctly’, or ‘standing in a place that does not allow me to throw it at the car’, or even ‘failing to locate the brick I brought specifically to throw through the windscreen of the speeding car’. Some of these may be due to defect in me, or the presence of some causal force that prevents me from achieving my stated end. In either case, I fail, because I have not achieved my final end.

We have not yet exhausted Aquinas’s account of failure, however. There is another aspect: the character of the failure. A failing is actually an evil, insofar as evil is to be identified with things like ‘loss’, ‘shortcoming’, or ‘not bringing about a certain state of affairs’. Aquinas actually associates all of these things with evil, and expresses them by
reference to the term ‘malum’, which can be translated into words like ‘damage’, ‘harm’, ‘injury’, and so on as well as more general things like ‘failing’.  

To explain this, we need to bear in mind the fact that Aquinas associates final causes – ends, or goals – with goodness. My throwing a brick through the windscreen of a speeding car is a final cause (though admittedly one final cause in a long chain of them), and so is a kind of good. Aquinas makes this clear in his *Summa Contra Gentiles* (emphasis mine):

> The final cause **is a good** which satisfies a tendency springing immediately from the nature of every being. "By the form which gives it its specific perfection, everything in nature has an inclination to its own operations and to its own end, which it reaches through these operations. Just as everything is, such also are its operations and its tendency to what is suitable to itself." 

So, in failing to achieve my aim – the final cause of ‘throwing a brick through the windscreen of a speeding car’ equates to a kind of evil, insofar as I have not brought about some good. Davies clarifies that for Aquinas, we are ‘we are dealing with evil whenever we are faced by whatever can be thought of as a case of falling short. For him, there is evil wherever goodness is lacking’.

Can God fail, then? Can God ‘come up short’ in some way by not bringing about a desired final cause (and so, concomitantly, bring about evil?). For Aquinas, the answer to this is a resounding ‘no’. This arises not only from God’s having infinite power, but also Aquinas’s understanding of causality and the aforementioned relationship between failure and evil, where evil refers to any lack of good, no matter how trivial.

God’s infinite power is such that God can never cease to have some power for an end. God cannot, therefore, fail to aim the brick correctly, or misplace the brick, or stand in the wrong place. God’s infinite power has no defects. Neither is it subject to environmental conditions like when a sudden ray of sunshine distracts a well-meaning brick-thrower. Infinite power is infinite capacity, and so God cannot lack for power in any respect. Thus, God’s power can’t fail to achieve some end.

Moreover, on moral grounds, God cannot fail because of God’s perfect moral goodness. Evil is nothing but a privation of goodness, and goodness is simply being considered

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59 Aquinas, *De Malo*, Question 2, Article 2.
60 Aquinas, *Contra Gentiles*, IV, xis.
62 Ibid.
under a different aspect. For Aquinas, God’s very essence is existence itself. Existence and being are one in the same. Existence and goodness are thus one in the same. It follows from this that God cannot possess any evils (that is, absences of goodness) of any kind. Goodness itself cannot lack goodness. Goodness itself is just that, and every kind of goodness is contained within it. So God cannot fail, for to fail would be to endure a lack of goodness, and goodness cannot be not-good. Thus, God cannot fail.

The important take away, here, then, is that the objection that there are things which God cannot do – things like ‘evil’ or ‘failing’ or ‘sinning’. This is because for Aquinas, these are not possible things in themselves. They are rather absences – they result from the non-achievement of a final cause. They simply have the signification of being positive things in themselves. God cannot sin, fail, or do evil because of God’s infinite power (which can admit no error), and because God’s infinite goodness (which can admit no evil)

This second notion would benefit from further explanation. For Aquinas, the will of anything – God or creature – has a necessary object, which it cannot will the contrary of. For human beings, that end is happiness; for God that end is the divine goodness. Just as human beings cannot will true unhappiness as their ultimate end, God cannot will something contrary to the divine goodness, which is God’s own ultimate end. Whatever it is that God wills, that thing must be in concert with the divine goodness, and if such a thing isn’t, God cannot do it. This is obviously why God cannot do things like sin – a thing human beings are quite able to do. To sin is to fall away from the divine goodness, and so is a betrayal of the end of the divine will. Thus, God cannot sin, do evil, or fail.

Dismissing things like ‘failing’ and ‘making a mistake’ as absolutely possible things doesn’t seem to go far enough, however. There are indeed many other examples of absolutely possible things we can think of that God cannot do. Can God dance, for instance? Or get a job in the film industry? Can God fly, or climb, or chase Noel with a harpoon? For these are all absolutely possible for created beings.

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63 ST I. Q. 5, Article 1.
64 This Aquinas makes clear in places like ST. I. Q. 4, A. 2, - that the perfections (or the goodness) of all created things pre-exists in God in a more perfect way.
65 Aquinas, De Potentia, Question 1, Article 5, main body.
Possible Actions Which Are Not Concerned With Evil

So, we have established that for Aquinas’s conception of God, there is no possibility of God doing things like ‘sinning’ of ‘failing’ for a multiplicity of reasons. What, however, of examples of actions which are neutral, in the sense that performing them doesn’t entail a failure to achieve some final cause (and thus the bringing about of evil by way of the absence of some good which is aimed at)?

What sort of ‘neutral’ acts are there? Obvious examples include ‘walking’, or ‘reaching’, or ‘scratching’. These are not things associated with failure or evil, and in performing them God’s infinite goodness and power are not impugned. So: can God do actions of this sort? The answer, of course, is no. These things are possible, but only for certain particular instances of being, and thus are not absolutely possible for God.

Consider again that example above: while it is true that walking for Aquinas is a neutral act and one which therefore could not interfere with God’s moral status, walking still falls into a category of things which Aquinas will steadfastly deny that God can do. This because acts like ‘walking’ and ‘scratching’ entail two things which are not possible for God. These are having a body, and being able to move. The notions that God can move or have a body are absolutely incompatible with Aquinas’s conception of God, however. This because of the many divine attributes and qualities these violate is that God is incorporeal.66 God has no body to move from place to place for Aquinas – so it doesn’t seem fair to hold these as examples of ‘absolutely possible’ things for God, even if they are absolutely possible for created beings. God’s having a body or being able to move also contravene other key aspects of Aquinas’s God. It flies in the face of God’s omnipresence, for instance. This is one of the key omni-attributes that many philosophers of religion afford to God, with Aquinas among them. He holds that

God fills every place; not, indeed, like a body, for a body is said to fill place inasmuch as it excludes the co-presence of another body; whereas by God being in a place, others are not thereby excluded from it; indeed, by the very fact that He gives being to the things that fill every place, He Himself fills every place.67

Aquinas’s argument here is that God is not a body which fills a place and thereby excludes other bodies from filling that place. Instead, God is incorporeal. Moreover, God is in all places by virtue of giving being to all of the things which exist – and it is these things

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66 ST. I. Q. 3. A. 1, main body.
which occupy all places. Obviously if God is in all places by virtue of giving and sustaining all things in being, it does not seem reasonable for God to move from place to place. After all, this would imply that God was in one place, and thereby not in some other place – which given what Aquinas argues above, would mean there would be nothing to sustain the things in that place with being once God had vacated it. Thus, God cannot move.

This movement from place to place also contravenes the divine infinity and actuality; if there is some place in creation that God is not, there is something which God can achieve which God has not yet achieved. Given that God is perfect, boundless being, and so possesses all the perfections of being, that God could lack for something like ‘being at location x’ means that God is less than perfect. This would also imply some potency in a fully actual God – the potency to be in some place that God was not yet.\(^{68}\) Given that God is fully actual as the first efficient cause of all things, that God could have potency of any kind is simply impossible in Aquinas’s system – and it seems to follow that movement is, too.

In all of this, there is a broader issue again of contradiction versus deficiency. In short: many of the absolutely possible things which God seems unable to do invoke both (at least insofar as these are connected). This is the defence which Aquinas offers. If God were to do all absolutely possible things, contradictions and deficiencies would follow for God, such that God would no longer be God.

**An Effective Defence?**

We have seen that Aquinas offers a robust defence of his absolute possibility based omnipotence. Many of those absolutely possible things that an omnipotent God can’t do are either disguised negations and thus not truly possible, or are simply impossible for a transcendent, perfect, immaterial God to perform. As can be seen, Aquinas’s replies to these don’t so much depend on these things being absolutely impossible in themselves – they’re simply absolutely impossible for God. Crucially, this doesn’t affect their being absolutely possible. They remain so.

Yet something must be conceded to modern critics like Kenny. It really does seem from the wording that Aquinas’s understanding of omnipotence seems to consist solely in the

\(^{68}\) ST. Q. 3. A. 1, main body.
notion that God can do all that is absolutely possible, without admitting of these exceptions. All that seems to need doing to combat this however is to insist that Aquinas take the same line that Kenny does: that omnipotence consists in doing all that is absolutely possible for God. Yet this may be a significant addition to what Aquinas has actually said. It is worth asking if this sort of extrapolation is a fair one to make on the part of a thinker who cannot currently defend or reformulate his own views.

So ends chapter one. At this stage, we have in place Aquinas’s definition of omnipotence, and we have made clear why certain critiques (such as the existence of ‘absolutely possible actions’ which God cannot do) do not impact that definition. In the next chapter, we will build out the definition of omnipotence in more detail, and consider it again in light of another critique – this time Geach’s one.

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Chapter Two: Power, Omnipotence, and the Subject/Predicate Relationship

In order to fill out Aquinas’s definition of omnipotence explored in the last chapter, this chapter contains a detailed reflection on ST. I. Q. 25. A. 3, as well as interesting critique of Aquinas’s views from Geach. All of this is in the service of context, so that when Aquinas’s views are considered in light of Swinburne’s, no vital aspect of the former’s views are excluded. The chapter will ultimately argue that Aquinas’s definition of omnipotence is at least safe from the charge that Aquinas has failed to hold consistently to his subject-predicate criteria for determining what is and what isn’t possible for God.

Part One: Power and Omnipotence

As was established in the first chapter, God, for Aquinas has power. However we cannot say that God is merely powerful, like an angel or a super-man. The God Aquinas writes of is far more than that – he is omnipotent. It is the relationship of these two terms – power, and omnipotence – which needs to be clarified. What is omnipotence? Does God’s being omnipotent follow from the amount of power that God has? Or is omnipotence a sort of attribute that God has irrespective of the ‘amount’ of power he wields? To put the question more bluntly: what is connection between omnipotence and power?

One might wonder why the word ‘omnipotence’ has had to be mentioned at all in discourse about God’s abilities. Isn’t it reasonable to hold that describing God as being infinitely powerful serves to explain the scope of God’s potential actions? In Question 25 of his Summa, Aquinas explicitly considers omnipotence and power both. If we look at the order of the articles in Question 25, the notion that omnipotence be considered in terms of the amount of power God has - seems to be the most likely. For Aquinas first asks whether God has power; he then asks whether God’s power is infinite. It is only in Article 3 after having dealt with these issues that he asks if God is omnipotent. If one looks only to the order of the articles, then it seems certain that Aquinas wants to establish a link between power and omnipotence. Thus on a very mechanical, structural level, Question 25 provides some clues as regards how power and omnipotence relate to each other.
Power and Possibility

Power is first mentioned in Article 3 in terms of possibility. This is appropriate, given that Article 3 will go on to explicitly link God’s omnipotence with possible things. It may seem that the only reason that power arises at all in Article 3 is because Aquinas quotes Aristotle on the point that something is said to be ‘possible’ when that thing is accomplish-able by the exercise of (or ‘subject to’) a thing’s power. This claim is somewhat unintuitive; surely saying that something is accomplish-able by some power (say the power of a human being named Mr Example) doesn’t tell us a great deal about what is and isn’t possible overall. Indeed, that we consider something possible because it falls under the remit of something in the world with power seems a touch obvious. Aquinas’s point however, is that something is said to be possible with reference to some power of something. It is an issue of language, then – all Aquinas means is that when one speaks of possibility, it is generally with reference to the power of something in the world – a person, a wave, a tornado, and so on.

Power next arises when Aquinas points out that God cannot be called omnipotent simply because he can accomplish all things possible to ‘created nature’. By this Aquinas simply means that God is not all-powerful simply by exhausting, or even exceeding in magnitude and quality, all of the things that created beings do. Why does he hold this? Two reasons suggest themselves. The first concerns the relationship between Aquinas’s inquiries here, and Christian revelation. On this point, Aquinas has a scriptural basis to conclude that God can do more than creatures; the creation of the world in Genesis, the Raising of Lazarus and the Resurrection of Christ – miraculous effects like these are clearly things one would accept as beyond the power of created things. Creation ex-nihilo is certainly impossible for human beings, as are the resurrection of deceased human beings (particularly when sufficiently capable medical equipment is lacking).

The second reason that God’s being all-powerful is not sufficiently explained in God’s doing what is possible for created beings follows from how God relates to creation. Aquinas has already spent a considerable portion of the Summa Theologica defining God as the first, most actual, most perfect, and infinitely powerful cause of all other things; this at the very least serves to make it clear God’s power must exceed the limits of all

70 ST. I, Q. 25, A. 3.
71 Davies and Leftow, Aquinas: Summa Theologiae: Questions on God, p.274
created things, which are contingent, tempered by potentiality, imperfect, and ultimately only finite causes of some other things.

After having dismissed creaturely power as a measure of God’s omnipotence, Aquinas moves to what he considers another ‘improper’ understanding of omnipotence. This consists in the notion that one might attempt to explain God’s omnipotence in terms of the fact that God can ‘do all things that are possible to His power’. Aquinas offers that this will lead one only to a ‘vicious circularity’ – one would ultimately suggest that God is omnipotent because God can do all that God is able to do. This is hardly a satisfactory analysis of God’s omnipotence; it is not truly explanatory, because it simply regurgitates the conclusion it is attempting to reach.

It is interesting that this is the case even after Aquinas has made clear that God has infinite power. Power on its own – even infinite power - does not seem properly explanatory when the issue of omnipotence comes up. We cannot call God infinite because God can do all that is in God’s infinite power to do, either. Here we see a concrete presentation of the relationship between power and omnipotence, at least in terms of offering a satisfactory definition of the latter. I would argue that it follows that one cannot use Article 2 to answer the question posed in Article 3 – to say that God is omnipotent is not the same as saying that God has infinite power. What follows from this is the conclusion that power and omnipotence as terms each serve different explanatory roles – at least insofar as Aquinas has used them in Article 25.

Yet we might notice the following: the notion that God is omnipotent because God can do all that is within the reach of the infinite divine power to do isn’t an incorrect statement, either. Indeed, it might even seem to suffice as something of a definition in other contexts. That God is omnipotent because God can do all that is in God’s infinite power to do even seems to work alongside our common-sense understanding of omnipotence – the power to do ‘all’. And surely we should be allowed to take ‘all’ to be synonymous with ‘all that is in God’s infinite power to do’. This isn’t the most descriptive explication of God’s omnipotence, but it is technically correct. Thus, it might be tentatively offered that Articles 1 and 2 of Q.25 constitute something of an explanation of God’s omnipotence solely in terms of power. Infinite power, naturally.

As has been said however, Aquinas himself does not think that this constitutes a sufficient answer to the question dealt with in Article 3. For Aquinas, the above definition seems
more a statement of the *scale* of God’s power (what it can extend to) and *not its scope* (what it can concretely accomplish). To say that God has infinite power is only to say that the scale of God’s power – whatever that power might *be* - is infinite. It does not account for the actual, positive ways in which that power might be used - those things which fall under its purview. In this sense, then, ‘infinite power’ seems too empty a term to explain God’s omnipotence.

This is at least important for the order of articles in Question 25. In Article 3, Aquinas is clearly aiming to be definitive in his analysis of omnipotence. He wants to put into concrete terms what an omnipotent being can and cannot do. That an omnipotent being can do something in accordance with its infinite power does not tell us what sorts of things are possible for an omnipotent being, and what sorts of things are impossible, and so Article 3 cannot simply end with a restating of Article 2’s conclusion.

Yet power remains a key feature of the definition of omnipotence that Aquinas will eventually provide in Article 3. For instance, power is only the first of two ways in which a thing is said to be possible for Aquinas. Consideration of this point constitutes the bulk of Article 3’s main section, and exists within a fairly intuitive structure. Aquinas follows Aristotle in making clear that the second way a thing is said to be possible is the relationship of terms in a given proposition. Something for Aquinas is possible if the given predicate is compatible with the given subject. Thus, the proposition that man is on the moon is a possible thing – the predicate of *being on the moon* is perfectly compatible with the subject ‘man’ (space travel aside). Moreover, if the subject and predicate in some given thing are compatible, that thing is said to be ‘absolutely possible’ (and correlative absolutely *impossible* if the subject and predicate contradict one another). Incompatibility, meanwhile, results when a subject and some predicate cannot obtain with reference to one another. An example of this might be a man who is a moon, rather than a man who is on a moon. The subject ‘man’ here does not interact sensibly with the predicate ‘is a moon’ – being a moon entails being something entirely distinct from being a man (key among these the fact that moons are not rational, and men are).

Aquinas concludes that the meaning of omnipotence is best expressed in this framework; whatever is *absolutely possible* is within the scope of God’s omnipotence. But this is not quite the end of Aquinas’s answer. Article 3 continues past this account of the nature

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72 ST. I, Q. 25, A. 3.
of omnipotence to speak once more about power. And it is important to see that here, Aquinas touches upon God’s having not only power, but infinite power.

**Power and Infinite Power**

Aquinas notes that every agent produces some effect that bears some resemblance to it. Thus, human parents produce human children, fires produce more fire, and so on. Importantly for our present purposes, here in this section of Article 3, power is mentioned once more, this time in terms of object. Aquinas clarifies that because agents produce effects like themselves, power has a corresponding thing possible for it according to the nature of the activity that active power is used for. To put this more reasonably, Aquinas means that for each power a being may have, there is something possible for that power to accomplish. This possible thing is the ‘proper object’ of that power because it corresponds to the nature of the act that power is itself founded upon. Thus, Aquinas says the proper object of the active power of giving heat is the being which can be heated – and this object corresponds to the nature of the actuality that the power of giving heat is based upon.73

This is significant for Aquinas for a number of reasons; most pressing is that at this stage of the *Summa Theologiae*, he has already proved the divine existence is infinite, belongs to no genus, and contains the perfections of all being. It is on this divine, infinite, all-perfect being that God’s power is based; and because powers have proper objects which follow from the nature of that power, it follows that the proper object of God’s power is anything which has being. Putting it another way, for Aquinas anything that has being is numbered among these absolutely possible things. These absolutely possible things fall under the purview of the power of some being to accomplish. Powers are proportionate to that power’s proper object. The proper object of God’s power is everything which has being (that is, those things which are possible, given the nature of their essence).

What can be drawn from this, concerning the relationship of power and omnipotence? Most obviously, that power and omnipotence have a great deal to do with each other. God is called omnipotent with respect to things which are absolutely possible; a proposition is absolutely possible if the subject and predicate of that thing align correctly. Just as agents produce effects which resemble those agents, so powers have ‘objects’ which are proper

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73 ST. I. Q. 25, A. 3.
to them. God has power; this power is infinite, and arises from a God who is infinite and who has all created perfections. The proper object of the power of such a being is anything which has the nature of being at all — in other words, anything which is absolutely possible. Thus, it is in terms of power and object that we can call God omnipotent.74

Aquinas finishes Article 3 with a note on non-being; if some proposition implies being and non-being in the same respect, that thing is impossible because it cannot be counted among the absolutely possible things (and thus falls outside even God’s omnipotence to bring about, given all that we have said). Interestingly, Aquinas notes that one should not charge God’s power with being defective or limited for being unable to bring about impossible things like these. Rather the defect is in the thing being considered if it implies being and non-being in the same sense. This follows reasonably from what has been said; if something implies being and non-being in the same sense, it cannot be numbered among the absolutely possible things which are the proper object of an agent’s power. And as Aquinas has pointed out this applies even to omnipotent things.

So! God is omnipotent. The definition that Aquinas has provided in Article 3 satisfies the criteria established earlier — to provide a definition of omnipotence that is not simply a restating of the conclusion of Article 2, but a clear and thorough definition that positively makes clear the sorts of things an omnipotent being can do. Such a definition cannot come from simply making clear that God’s power is infinite; it needs the positive claims that Article 3 marshals. And this Article 3 does, linking omnipotence with the absolutely possible, the absolutely possible with God’s infinite power as its proper object, and God’s infinite power with the many prior claims made about God in Questions 1 – 24. As of now, we have clarified, among other things, how omnipotence relates to power, and, relatedly, infinite power. The rest of this chapter concerns an object to Aquinas’s understanding of omnipotence in light of something mentioned in this section: the subject-predicate relationship.

**Part Two: Omnipotence and the Subject Predicate Relationship**

That Aquinas’s definition of omnipotence is expansive and substantial has not saved it from being critiqued. A considerable amount of literature has published over the last few decades which engages critically with the account of omnipotence Question 25 presents.

74 Ibid.
One of the most interesting has been Geach’s article ‘Omnipotence’, on the grounds that it charges Aquinas with logical misdemeanours. Geach argues that Aquinas’s account of omnipotence is not ‘maintainable’, and that Aquinas himself fails to keep to it consistently.\textsuperscript{75} Considering the potential ramifications of such a charge, this section of the chapter will explore Geach’s criticisms.

**Geach On Subjects and Predicates**

For Geach, the centre of Aquinas’s definition of omnipotence (at least as it is argued for in Question 25) is the subject-predicate relationship.\textsuperscript{76} This Geach situates within a broader analysis of the ‘doctrines’ according to which God is commonly said to omnipotent. The first holds that God can do anything at all, the laws of logic be damned. The second and third each hold that God can only do X when X is something which is ‘logically consistent’. The third is stricter than the second in the sense that it admits only to God being able to do things which involve no contradiction for God to do. Finally, the fourth doctrine holds that whenever it is that God will do X, and this is logically possible, then God can do X is itself true.

Geach offers that Aquinas’s treatment of the divine omnipotence in Question 25 belongs to the second doctrine of these. In other words, Geach believes that Aquinas’s omnipotence is of the sort wherein God can do ‘so and so’ provided this ‘so and so’ is itself ‘a logically consistent description of a feat’.\textsuperscript{77} Here, Geach places Aquinas’s understanding of being and non-being in terms of logic. Logic, as we have noted earlier, is downstream of being for Aquinas; it follows and explicates it. For Aquinas something is impossible if that thing implies being and non-being in the same sense, much as a square circle does. The square circle contradicts itself, with the predicate and subject being incompatible with one other. The subject/predicate distinction is simply a means of rendering Aquinas’s understanding of logical possibility in a consistent and concise manner.

Geach summarises Aquinas’s position much as has been done above. He commends Aquinas for noting that one cannot explain God’s omnipotence in terms of what is in the power of some created agent to do, because this definition is not comprehensive enough.


\textsuperscript{76} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{77} Geach, “Omnipotence”, p. 12.
He also agrees with Aquinas’s dismissal of the claim that ‘God can do all that God can do’ as irrelevant and as trapped within a vicious circularity. Aquinas’s subsequent argument that the scope of God’s omnipotence is best explainable in terms of the subject-predicate relationship Geach seems to approve of, at least initially. As we have seen, however, Geach does think that Aquinas himself fails to adhere to the conclusions of that argument consistently. Ultimately, Geach suggests offers that these lapses on Aquinas’s part are explicable in terms of the confusion around which statements are self-contradictory, and what statements are gibberish. Thus, Geach thinks Aquinas does not accommodate this distinction sufficiently.

Gibberish and Self-Contradictory Statements

How do ‘gibberish’ and self-contradictory statements relate to one another? Geach clarifies that gibberish – which he defines as ‘syntactically incoherent combination of words’ - is radically different from a self-contradictory sentence. A sentence that is merely self-contradictory is at least intelligible in a given language. Gibberish is precisely the opposite – meaningless and utterly unintelligible. Geach argues further that if some formula is gibberish, it cannot be refused on grounds of it being reductio ad absurdum – indeed, a reductio ad absurdum of nonsensical gibberish would itself be nonsensical.

Geach’s argument is that for Aquinas’s account of omnipotence, it follows that if any description of a feat – like God can do X – is self-contradictory, then it is only self-contradictory. Thus it is not gibberish; it is only false. Geach offers that the view of omnipotence Aquinas presents in Question 25 is attractive because it does not admit to this distinction between the self-contradictory and the nonsensical. In other words, for Aquinas the statement ‘God can do X’ can never turn out to be false, that is, syntactically correct but still wrong. For Aquinas, any statement ‘God can do X’, where X is contradictory, can only be gibberish. Geach suggests that Aquinas’s point that ‘What implies a contradiction cannot be a word, for no understanding can conceive it’ provides evidence of this. Thus he argues that Aquinas does not admit to the possibility in

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78 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
81 Ibid., 13.
82 Ibid.
83 ST. I, Q. 25, A. 3.
Question 25 that there are ‘counterexamples’ (i.e. false examples) to the statement ‘God can do X’ – either one says accurately that God can do X, or one is speaking nonsensical gibberish. Geach disagrees.

Geach’s point is perhaps better rendered in terms of some considered example. He points out that there is a class of statements one can make about God’s power to do things which are neither gibberish nor true. Instead, they are merely false, in that they, like a true statement do make sense, but like random gibberish, also aren’t genuine explications of the sorts of things an omnipotent God can do. Geach suggests an example of such a sentence: he writes “a God can bring it about that in Alcalá there lives a barber who shaves all those and only those living in Alcalá who do not shave themselves”. This sentence Geach informs us, is ‘perfectly well formed’ but is still self-contradictory; thus, it is false and not simply gibberish. For our purposes, this seems something of a condemnation of all Aquinas has said in Article 3 concerning the subject-predicate relationship, and that relationship’s use in determining positively the scope of God’s omnipotence. The problem is that Aquinas’s account can admit things which are not true – for there are false statements which it renders as sensible as these. Thus, Aquinas is not entitled to say that God can do all that is ‘absolutely possible’ when that consists in a proposition’s subject and predicate aligning.

Geach claims that there is in fact ‘nothing easier’ than drafting feats which are not nonsensical, but which are logically possible and yet not things God can do. Lying and promise-breaking he suggests, but we can add some more: murdering, stealing – all of those things condemned by the moral laws of Christianity. Any of these Geach, rightly notes, impugns God’s being supremely moral and good, and therefore contravenes the Christian faith – and we might imagine Aquinas not wishing to allow for these. Yet according to Geach’s argument, Aquinas seems to have little choice.

A Potential Reply to These Charges
Now there does seem a particular avenue of reply open for Aquinas here. The examples of things we have suggested are all evil acts – it could be argued that as God for Aquinas is goodness itself, it follows that the statement ‘God can steal Mars bars’ is technically gibberish. This is because an omnipotent good God who lacks for nothing would never need to steal, and could never be so immoral as to steal, given Aquinas’s views of evil as
a privation of goodness.\textsuperscript{84} We might offer, then, that Geach is perhaps incorrect in pointing out that this sort of sentence \textit{false}, rather than gibberish. It is gibberish precisely because it posits something absolutely impossible, and not merely \textit{false}. That God, being itself, could do something evil like stealing is not simply a contradiction - is senseless.

One other natural response to Geach on this point is to simply make clear that no question of the \textit{Summa Theologica} – let alone some individual article of that question – can ever be taken in \textit{insolation}. We can say the subject-predicate relationship \textit{can} admit to false statements concerning God’s omnipotence but these false statements are made inapplicable to God by virtue of \textit{other conclusions} Aquinas offers before and after Question 25.

It is the case however that in Question 25 Aquinas does not refer to these other arguments.\textsuperscript{85} He does not say, refer to God’s being \textit{fully actual} in order to dispense with the false-but-technically-not-gibberish statement ‘God can change into a better version of God’ but surely this is implied. We are not to take Question 25 in isolation from what has come before, even though the definition of omnipotence it offers in terms of the subject-predicate relationship (and therefore what things are \textit{absolutely possible}) seems all-encompassing.

As Geach points out, it is possible that this definition \textit{isn’t} all-encompassing. There are things we can say which are false but still satisfy Aquinas’s criteria as absolutely possible things. Aquinas was aware of this – but it is entirely possible this was not an issue which would arise, given that he thought this issue addressed by all he had said before Question 25.

To summarise we can conclude that ‘God steals ceramic statues of small turtles’ is not simply false, but gibberish because God’s power and omnipotence exist in relationship with God’s goodness. In this sense God’s goodness is a bulwark against this wrong-headed interpretation of the positive scope of God’s omnipotence. Admittedly, this response \textit{only works for things Aquinas has already stipulated are contrary to God’s nature}. What happens if we suggest something that is only false and which does not impugn what Aquinas has already said? Geach offers exactly this in his article. He points out that there are ‘well known’ purely \textit{logical} arguments which satisfy the subject-

\textsuperscript{84} ST. Q. 48. A. 1.

\textsuperscript{85} ST. Q. 25. A. 3.
predicate relationship, but which are still clearly false. And these cannot be answered by some reference to some other part of the *Summa*; God’s being fully actual, God’s omnipresence, God’s lack of an essence/existence distinction – these cannot save Aquinas’s remarks in Question 25 as they did earlier.

**Geach On the Maker Who Is Incapable Of Destroying What He Has Made**

The sorts of logically consistent things Geach suggests should be well known to anyone with even a passing engagement with questions concerning God’s omnipotence. One might refer, for instance, to that famous dilemma ‘can God create a stone too heavy for Him to lift?’ Geach chooses instead the example of a maker creating something that the maker cannot afterwards destroy. He maintains that this is something which is absolutely possible (indeed, Geach claims, some human beings have accomplished it), and so we are entitled to ask if it is something God can do. If God cannot perform this feat, Geach continues, it follows that there is a logically possible feat which God cannot do, even though it satisfies Aquinas’s subject-predicate compatibility clause. If God can make something he cannot afterwards destroy, Geach continues, we are no better off. For it still follows that there is something logically possible which God cannot do – destroy what God has made. This is because the destruction of a created thing cannot reasonably be thought of as logically impossible; thus the destruction of that thing is itself logically possible.

If we are to take Geach’s argument as given, it seems we can only conclude that Aquinas’s definition of omnipotence is flawed, at least on this vector; it entails that God cannot do logically possible things even as those things satisfy the subject-predicate relationship and are not dismissible as mere gibberish.

Geach does mention that there are responses available to his characterisation – he suggests the proposition ‘God cannot make a thing that he cannot destroy’ can be turned round to ‘anything that God can make he can destroy’ as the most ‘interesting’ of these responses. Yet Geach dismisses this response on the basis that it entails a ‘bracketing fallacy’ which he has earlier attributed to Spinoza. This runs along the following line:

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there are *two* ways of interpreting the proposition ‘God cannot make a thing that he cannot
destroy’:

A: Anything that its maker cannot destroy, God cannot make

B: God cannot bring about the following feat: to make something its maker cannot
destroy.\(^89\)

‘A’, Geach notes, is opposed to the proposition ‘Anything that God can make, its maker
can destroy. He notes, however that this ‘says nothing’ against Aquinas’s characterisation
of God as able to do *anything* logically possible. ‘B’, Geach claims, describes a single,
logically possible feat (again, because men seem to have accomplished it). Geach offers
that it can then be asked of God – and as before, whether the answer is yes or no, it follows
that *there is something logically possible which God cannot do*. Thus Aquinas’s subject-
predicate criteria fails to properly encompass the output of God’s omnipotence.

After having made these arguments, Geach moves on to the third of his four doctrines of
omnipotence, having considered the second – the one he ascribes to Aquinas – as
untenable and as ‘obviously incompatible’ with both logic and the Christian faith.\(^90\) The
third doctrine he considers seems only a more restrictive formulation of the second; he
words it as “‘God *can* do so and so’ is true just if ‘God is doing so-and-so’ is logically
consistent.”\(^91\) The wording here is subtly different; all Geach means is that God’s
omnipotence can only consist in doing things which satisfy a new criterion. This new
criteria is that this thing that God does, is *logically consistent* with God doing it and not
simply some other agent.

Obviously this skirts rather closely to the defence of Aquinas offered above – that other
conclusions preceding Question 25 about what God is and what God can do serve to limit
the potential ‘excesses’ of Aquinas’s subject-predicate criteria for omnipotence. While it
may be that some things are admitted by the subject-predicate relationship as logically
possible, like stealing or hitting postmen with shovels, it isn’t logically possible for the
divine to do these things. Geach notes that this new, more restrictive scope of God’s
omnipotence ‘might well’ be sufficient to defend it from his earlier charges. He even

\(^{89}\) Ibid.
\(^{90}\) Ibid, p. 15.
\(^{91}\) Ibid, p. 9.
suggests that the claim that God has made something which God cannot destroy may well contain some ‘buried inconsistency’ which renders it false and logically incoherent.

Yet Geach does not think this is ultimately the case, and in fact rejects the third doctrine just as he does the second. To do this, Geach uses an example he describes as obviously logically possible: that ‘Miss X never loses her virginity’. He notes that another, distinct proposition – one which holds that ‘God brings it about that Miss X never loses her virginity’ – is just as obvious. Geach claims, however, that if it is the case that Miss X has already lost her virginity, the second proposition mentioned above becomes false.92 God cannot bring about that something never be lost if that thing has already been lost. Here Geach is very obviously drawing from conclusions Aquinas offers in Article 4 of Question 25 – that God cannot ‘make the past not to have been’.

Given that the change is in Miss X and certainly not in God, Geach claims it follows that God can do different things at different times.93 This, Geach claims is significant: because if Aquinas defends this (and Geach thinks he does), then Aquinas is committed to saying that God ‘can do everything that it is not a-priori impossible for God to do’. Geach takes this as sufficient to prove the third doctrine as defeated – for once again there are logically possible things which God cannot do. And so, it follows that the subject-predicate criteria Aquinas offers cannot suffice – either to ensure that only God does logically appropriate things with his omnipotence (as in the second doctrine), or for God to do logically appropriate things for God to do (as in the third doctrine). Finally Geach goes on to dismiss even his fourth doctrine, in pursuit of the conclusion that to call God ‘omnipotent’ when that term means ‘able to do everything’ - even when under the governance of certain restrictions - is inappropriate while to call God ‘almighty’ is perfectly legitimate.

Some Challenges For Geach

Perhaps the most obvious response to Geach on these points in particular is to challenge his association of Aquinas with the second of his three doctrines, and not the third. For it seems that Aquinas would never intend that only logically possible things be considered as things which God could do. I would argue that to take such a view is to deny Aquinas’s detailed views of the relationship between God, being, goodness, and perfection. Each of these keeps what is ‘logically possible’ for God in line, in a way that Geach does not

92 Geach, “Omnipotence”, p. 15.
93 Ibid.
seem to account for by lumping Aquinas into the second doctrine rather than the third. Admittedly, the notion that Aquinas belongs to the third doctrine rather than the second is perhaps no great comfort; for Geach dismisses the third doctrine just as resolutely he dismisses the second.94

Yet Geach has not gone unchallenged in his dismissal of either the second or third doctrines. A number of pieces offer good and considered responses to Geach’s charges. These shall be considered in turn.

The first response to be considered is Macbeath’s, who argues that in dismissing the third doctrine with his Miss X example that Geach has ‘not played fair’.95 Macbeath offers that Geach is perfectly legitimate in supposing that the proposition ‘God brings it about that Miss X never loses her virginity’ is not logically inconsistent. He offers however, that Geach’s subsequent move – to cite information ‘extraneous’ to this proposition – is not legitimate. This information consists in the claim that ‘Miss X has already lost her virginity’.96 In order that Geach ‘play fair’, Macbeath suggests that he ought to include this new, additional information in the original proposition given – which would serve to make that proposition logically inconsistent in itself.97 Thus, Geach’s counterexample to his third doctrine should have read as follows: ‘God brings it about that Miss X (who has already lost her virginity) never loses her virginity’. Clearly, this is not a reasonable thing to say – not for human beings, or for God. Macbeath accuses Geach of ‘suppressing information’ in order to discredit the third doctrine.

This all seems quite fair. In his Miss X example, Geach has introduced new information after the fact, and it is this information, and only this information, which works to discredit the third doctrine. Added to this is the claim of this chapter - that Aquinas more properly belongs within the third doctrine in Geach’s system. Given this, it might be offered that Geach’s critique might be dismissed. If not, there are other counter-arguments to draw from.

McInerny also has a reply to Geach’s in his article Aquinas on Divine Omnipotence considered successful by several other commentators like Brock (whose own response is

94 Geach, “Omnipotence”, p. 15.
96 Ibid. p. 396.
97 Ibid.
McInerny focuses on Geach’s dismissal of his third doctrine (that God can do whatever is logically possible for God to do, as we have said), just as Macbeath does. McInerny takes a somewhat different angle, however – he does not accuse Geach of ‘withholding information’, but claims that his critique of the third doctrine is more a ‘misunderstanding’ than a true objection.\footnote{McInerny, R., “Aquinas on Divine Omnipotence”, Philosophes Medievaux Tome XXVI (1982), p. 444.}

This misunderstanding consists in Geach’s analysis of his ‘Miss X’ example – in it he characterises Aquinas’s position as failing because it leads to their being logically possible things, which God cannot do. McInerny claims this is not a fair characterisation – and that Geach is mistakenly interpreting Aquinas as holding that ‘once a possibility, always a possibility.’ By this, McInerny means that the possibility of God preserving Miss X’s virginity remains a possibility \textit{even after Miss X has lost her virginity}. McInerny disputes this as reasonable, and thus argues that Geach’s critique fails.\footnote{Ibid.}

McInerny also takes issue with Geach’s response to his own second doctrine of omnipotence.\footnote{Ibid.} He notes that the proposition ‘God cannot bring it about that a maker makes something the maker cannot destroy’ contains ambiguities.\footnote{Ibid.} The most pressing of these according to McInerny, is the lack of clarity as regards what sort of ‘maker’ Geach is referring to in that proposition. If Geach is referring to a created maker, then the above proposition is false. Then, it isn’t true that God cannot bring it about that a maker makes something that maker cannot destroy afterwards when that maker is a \textit{created maker}. McInerny makes clear that in saying this, he is following Geach’s lead - God is the first and primary cause of all things, and it is the case that there are men who have created things they have not been able to subsequently destroy.

Correlatively, if the maker in this proposition is \textit{God}, and we are to word the proposition as ‘God cannot make something that God cannot destroy’, then McInerny claims this proposition is true.\footnote{Ibid.} However McInerny does point out that this \textit{doesn’t count as a restriction on the divine omnipotence}. This is because a creature which \textit{doesn’t} depend on its existence for God is simply a contradiction in terms – and thus cannot be spoken about as ‘being able to be created or not’.

\footnote{McInerny, “Aquinas on Divine Omnipotence”, p. 444.}
Along with McInerny and Macbeath, Brock offers his own considered response to Geach. Unlike the other two critiques, Brock focuses on Geach’s interpretation of Aquinas concerning false, self-contradictory sentences, and how these relate to gibberish. The heart of Geach’s rejection of the second doctrine revolves around this very point, as we have seen. Brock makes clear that Aquinas cannot be held to equate self-contradicting statements with gibberish; in actuality, Aquinas thinks that self-contradicting statements have a truth-value – just as Geach thinks they do.¹⁰⁴ Indeed as Brock points out, if they had no truth-value – if they were merely gibberish, as Geach posits – Aquinas could have no ground to dismiss these self-contradicting propositions as impossible.

Brock clarifies Aquinas’s ‘real’ position as hinging on Aquinas’s understanding of what might be properly called a ‘word’ or not.¹⁰⁵ As Brock puts it, Aquinas thinks that not everything intelligible counts as a word – only logically possible things can. This point is backed up by Aquinas’s explicit claims in Article 3 – that ‘whatever implies a contradiction cannot be a word, because no intellect can conceive of such a thing’.¹⁰⁶ For Aquinas, Brock continues, words serve as expressions of concepts or as concepts themselves – and these concepts are always ‘one’, in that they must be ‘gathered under a single form’.¹⁰⁷ Self-contradictions cannot be gathered under some single form, however – because if something is self-contradictory, it is contradictory in a formal sense. In other words, if something is self-contradictory for Aquinas, it contains within it formally incompatible elements – and the unity of these cannot be conceived or affirmed by anyone, which makes them necessarily false.¹⁰⁸

Brock finishes with the clarification that for Aquinas, it is reasonable to say that these necessarily false things cannot come about in themselves, and not because of some defect in God. He makes it clear however, that Aquinas does not want deny that ‘God can make these necessarily false things’ is itself false – instead all Aquinas wants to make clear, is that that falsehood is not on account of some weakness of God’s. He continues with a restatement of Aquinas’s own words in Article 3 – that self-contradictory things do not fall into the range of things power, even omnipotent power, can accomplish.¹⁰⁹ In light

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.
¹⁰⁶ ST. I. Q. 25, A. 3.
¹⁰⁸ Ibid.
¹⁰⁹ Ibid.
of this, he offers that Geach’s question as regards whether someone might have the power to do these things or not is ‘badly posed’. 110

An Analysis of the Above

To conclude, it seems reasonable to argue then that Geach’s famous rejection of Aquinas’s account of omnipotence falters on a number of vectors. First, Geach’s dismissal of the second doctrine of omnipotence – omnipotence of the sort that ‘God can do x’ is true only when ‘x’ represents a logically consistent conclusion – is repelled by the critiques of McInerny and Brock. These former shows that Geach’s maker example is a flawed one, and that if Geach is speaking about God as that maker, then God’s being unable to make a being he cannot then destroy is true, but this doesn’t serve to restrict the scope of God’s omnipotence. Thus, it is not an example of a logically possible feat that God cannot perform – for it concerns the creation of something which is itself a contradiction. The latter critique takes issue with Geach’s characterisation of Aquinas as holding that self-contradictory sentences are simply gibberish. As Brock points out, Aquinas, like Geach, thinks that self-contradictions aren’t just nonsensical – they have a truth value, and that truth value allows Aquinas to dismiss these self-contradictions as impossible.

If Geach’s rejection of his second doctrine is not effective, all that is left is his dismissal of his third doctrine and this chapter has already argued that Aquinas more properly belongs in the third doctrine than the second. This is because Aquinas does not want to give the impression that logically possible things of all kinds are the domain of his subject-predicate criteria. The only logically possible things the subject-predicate criteria is concerned with are logically possible things that are logically possible for God. Thus, Geach should include Aquinas in his third doctrine – which Macbeath responds to by way of his argument that Geach ‘withholds information’ concerning his ‘Miss X’ example. Macbeath points out, and compellingly so, that it is an additional claim that Geach makes which serves to dismiss the third doctrine – and that if this information were not included, the proposition Geach marshals could never serve as an example of some logically possible thing that God cannot do.

110 Ibid.
Finally, McInerny accuses Geach of ‘misunderstanding’ Aquinas’s views of possibility in order to dismiss the Miss X example – Aquinas does not think that something is always a possibility for God, and so one cannot hold the Miss X example the Geach drafts again as something logically possible that God cannot do. Considering that this is the heart of Geach’s critique it seems we can dispense with it. Aquinas’s account of omnipotence with its subject-predicate criteria is sensible, it only admits of things that are logically possible for God to do, and even if not, the examples Geach offers are not logically possible in themselves anyway.

I would argue, then, that Geach’s conclusion is ultimately without merit – that he is answered by McInerny, Brock, and Macbeath, and that at least on the vector of consistency, Aquinas’s subject-predicate criteria for God’s omnipotence is safe and coherent. It is worth pointing out that this does not guarantee that Aquinas’s overall account is reasonable, however; Geach is one notable commentator among many, and the dispute over omnipotence in Aquinas continues to the present day.

This concludes this thesis’s initial engagement with Aquinas’s understanding of omnipotence. We have clarified what omnipotence is, what it can and cannot extend to, how it relates to infinite power, and subjected it to a fairly thorough critique. Aquinas’s account, then, seems solid. It is time now to consider Swinburne’s own conception of God’s omnipotence, so as to see if it poses more of a challenge than the objections to Aquinas’s account considered thus far.
Chapter Three

In the last few chapters we have in detail explored Aquinas’s views on omnipotence. It is time now to turn Swinburne’s own conception of these. With that in mind, the following chapter is divided into three sections, and outlines in detail Swinburne’s conception of omnipotence, how it relates to the famous ‘Paradox of the Stone’, and finally, what it has to do with time and the creation of the universe. Part one concerns the definition of omnipotence which Swinburne explicitly presents in his text *The Coherence of Theism*; Part two then considers that definition in light of Paradox of the Stone. Part three, meanwhile, is a detailed analysis of the definition offered in part one – the questions it raises, as well as the answers to those questions which Swinburne manages to provide.

Part one: Swinburne’s Time- Based Definition of Omnipotence

Swinburne’s conception of God’s omnipotence recognises many of the same things which Aquinas’s does, starting with the fundamental point that God’s omnipotence consists in doing things which are *possible*, and not in doings things which are *impossible*.\(^{111}\) For both philosophers, then, God is omnipotent with regard to things which really *can* be, and limited in power with regard to things which *cannot* be, no matter how much divine power is put behind them. This agreement is sensible and warranted. Aside from the possible exception of Descartes, virtually no philosopher expects an omnipotent God to be able to do *anything at all whatsoever*, like create things like square circles or ham sandwiches made entirely with chicken.\(^{112}\) God is, however, able to heal the sick, multiply pre-existent supplies of food, and create a material universe full of free, rational agents.

There is one key area in which Swinburne’s understanding of omnipotence contrasts with Aquinas’s. Crucial for Swinburne’s conception of omnipotence is his notion of omnipotence as *time-based*. Of the five iterative definitions of omnipotence which

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\(^{111}\) Aquinas notes in ST I. I. Q.25, A.3 that if God’s omnipotence is considered ‘aright’ we realise it extends only to those things which are themselves possible; Swinburne concedes this point immediately in his *The Coherence of Theism* on p. 151.

\(^{112}\) Kenny, A. (1979) *The God of the Philosophers*, p. 91; the wording outlining Descartes’ views on omnipotence as encompassing the ability to bring about contradictory things is noticeably non-comital, on Kenny’s part.
Swinburne offers throughout chapter nine, omnipotence ‘at a time t…’ is always specified. Why so? The answer: the issue of time is so key it can make or break a definition of omnipotence for Swinburne.\textsuperscript{113} Moreover, he notes that in order to properly define omnipotence, one must take a stance on two distinct time-related issues.

The first of these issues concerns how omnipotent acts take place in relation to some given stretch of time – a duration, in other words. Swinburne articulates this by way of introducing smaller, discrete units of time which he claims are inherent in any good definition of omnipotence. Essentially, one must cognise God’s omnipotent activities (and indeed all events which have ever occurred) as taking place either at an instant of time, or over a period of time. Of these, Swinburne claims that periods are more fundamental, and so he holds to the ‘P-theory’ rather than the ‘I-theory’ when discussing things like the actions of an omnipotent God. Why this focus on ‘periods’ rather than upon ‘instants’? Swinburne claims it is because when one ascribes a property to something, that ascription is always contextualised within some time period – even if we consider them instant. As he writes:

> In general our ascription of properties to objects is ascription to them over periods of time – things are green or wet or weigh 10lb for periods of time. And normally, when we do ascribe properties to objects at an instant (e.g. 2.p.m.), this is analysable as ascribing to them to objects as a period dive into two smaller periods, one bounded terminally and the other bounded initially by that instant (2.p.m.). It is difficult to see what would be meant by an object being green at 2.p.m although it was not green either before or after 2.p.m. It would be green for a period of zero duration, and how could that differ from its not being green at all?\textsuperscript{114}

Duration then, is key in distinguishing ‘events’ from ‘non-events’ for Swinburne. An event must have a period greater than zero, or it has not happened – even when one is speaking about events involving the divine, omnipotent, God. It is not immediately clear what this entails for a God who chooses to create the universe. Surely that choice precedes time itself, and cannot have a duration – so how then can it occur? What about when God directs actions towards beings which are themselves not in time – when, say, he issues orders to the angels or communes with the souls of the faithfully departed? Are we to understand these interactions as also having a particular duration?

\textsuperscript{113} Swinburne, \textit{The Coherence of Theism}, p. 153.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., p. 154.
Swinburne does approach this topic in a roundabout way when he considers ‘talk in a scientific context of instantaneous possession by an object, when the object does not possess that property before or after the instant in question’. This approximates this sense of ‘duration-less’ activities that God, or other supernatural beings might undertake. Yet he ultimately decides that this sort of ‘talk’ is to be relegated to specific scientific inquiries only. ‘No mundane phenomenon’, he finishes, ‘requires us to postulate that there is a sense of ‘instant’ in which an event can happen at an instant, which is not more fundamentally analysable in terms of what happens over periods’. It does not seem that we can say that the above examples – God giving orders to angels or deciding to create the universe – are ‘mundane’, so it seems the question of the necessity of duration for these sorts of events lurks unanswered. This is something of a problem for Swinburne’s account – particularly given that he links the issue of duration with ‘God talk’ so explicitly.

Regardless, this is only the first time-related issue one must ‘take a stance on’ when considering omnipotence by Swinburne’s reckoning. Though there are some issues with it, Swinburne does not deem it particularly important – especially when compared to this second time-related issue. This latter one concerns the ‘direction of causality’. Swinburne notes that whether one thinks backwards or simultaneous causation are possible will significantly inform one’s definitions of omnipotence. He defines each one in terms of his ‘P-theory’ understanding of time:

Given the P-theory, simultaneous causation is to be understood as a substance exercising its causal influence over exactly the same period of time as the effect that it causes, and backwards causation is to be understood as a substance beginning to exercise its causal influence after the event that it causes.

Interestingly, Swinburne dismisses the possibility of both backwards and simultaneous causation – and this forms for him the core of a coherent definition of omnipotence. There are two reasons for these dismissals. First, the direction of causation which Swinburne subscribes to would be violated by both backwards and simultaneous

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115 Ibid. He speaks of particles possessing instantaneous velocities.
116 Ibid., p. 154.
117 Ibid., p. 155.
118 Ibid.
119 Ibid.
120 Ibid., p. 158.
121 Ibid., p. 163.
causation; causes must always precede effects in time.\textsuperscript{122} Causality and the direction of temporal succession are for him inextricably linked – and he thinks this link is obvious to everyone.

Second, Swinburne claims that events of any kind – no matter who brings them about, whether God or man, infinite or finite – are temporally \textit{fixed}:

By an event occurring at a (period of) time \textit{T} being \textit{fixed} at time \textit{T}, I mean that it is such that of logical necessity no agent, however powerful and however hard he tried at \textit{T}, could cause any part of that (whole) event not to occur at \textit{T}. As I noted earlier, one may cause an event \textit{E} by causing another event that in turn causes \textit{E}. A cause that is the most immediate (or direct) cause of an event, and actually brings it (the whole event) into existence, may be said to ‘fix’ it. By an event being ‘\textit{fixable}’ at a time \textit{T} I shall mean that the event is such that it is logically possible that a strong enough agent at \textit{T} could have fixed either it or its non-occurrence, whichever he chose, whatever else logically possible might be the case at any other time or timeless moment. Hence every event is fixed at the time at which it occurs.\textsuperscript{123}

So, to temporally fix an event is to ensure that this event occurs at some time \textit{T}, or that it does \textit{not} occur at time \textit{T}. Events are temporally fixed by their most immediate and complete causes. And to fix an event’s occurrence (or, indeed, its non-occurrence) at some time \textit{T} is to ensure that that occurrence (or non-occurrence) cannot \textit{not} happen at time \textit{T} – no matter how powerful the agent attempting to modify proceedings might itself be. Swinburne’s grand conclusion from all of this is that events are \textit{temporally fixed} at the times at which they occur by their causes, and that this fixing is beyond even an omnipotent agent’s abilities to prevent (or bring about, should the \textit{non}-occurrence of the event be fixed instead).

Naturally, there is more to say. Swinburne introduces two other clauses. The first clause holds that following from the nature of the relationship between cause and effect, one can bring some event into existence \textit{only} by beginning to bring that event about at a time \textit{before} that event has occurred. This makes an intuitive sense, given our experiential perception of time and causality; causes always seem to precede effects in time.\textsuperscript{124} The second clause, meanwhile, holds that the direct cause of some event does not only exert

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., pp. 156-158.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., p. 158.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., p. 157.
that causational influence before an event has happened, but also during all the time that event is occurring.\textsuperscript{125}

Each of these clauses have significant consequences in light of the fact that events are temporally fixed. They ensure events cannot be fixed by causes which act at exactly the same time as that event occurs, and that these causes must continue to act for the duration of the event they cause. In a nutshell? Another reason that simultaneous causation is not possible. Swinburne illustrates all of this with reference to ‘mundane’ examples which he nevertheless considers paradigmatic, like billiard balls striking one another or ‘brain events’ causing bodily movements. As he puts it himself:

> When a moving billiard ball A hits a stationary billiard ball B and causes B to move, A must be moving as it touches B, and so – given P-theory – for some period ending with the instant at which it touches B in order to transmit its motion, and it will be the direct cause of B’s subsequent motion only for the period while it is still in contact with B. After contact is broken, the direct cause of B’s subsequent motion is B itself.\textsuperscript{126}

So simultaneous causation is not possible. Neither is backwards causation. This Swinburne explains with reference to different variations of time $T$, whereby no event which takes place at $T_2$ is fixable at $T_0$ and ending before the end of $T_2$. This is because no matter how powerful and capable an agent might be at $T_0$, an agent might well change their mind at some later time (like $T_1$) which begins at the end of $T_0$ and which then ends at the end of $T_2$, and in so doing stops the event in question from taking place. (Of course, an agent at some earlier time like $T_0$ can cause what happens at $T_1$, and thus what subsequently happens at $T_2$ (unless they are prevented from doing so; again, they might change their mind, or be prevented by some stronger agent before the end of $T_1$).\textsuperscript{127}

So, neither backwards nor simultaneous causation are possible, and all events are temporally fixed, even if performed or brought about by an omnipotent God. We will illustrate this, along with the two clauses, by way of example. Let us suppose the existence of an agent, like the Fat Controller, who wishes to dispatch a Brake-Van Special to Tidmouth Sheds at one o’clock in the afternoon. It is possible that before this time, the Fat Controller might well change his mind about doing so at eleven o’clock that morning – and so the Brake-Van Special to Tidmouth Sheds will take place at some other time.

\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., p. 158.
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., p. 159.
\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., p. 159-160.
than one o’clock. It does not matter if the Fat Controller is the Supreme and Omnipotent Ruler of the Railway; every event is *unfixed* at all times *before* the event itself ends (and by this we mean only that the Fat Controller cannot decide to *not* send the Brake-Van Special at eleven o’clock *after* eleven o’clock has passed (and the Brake-Van Special itself has long departed). The fact that events are fixed only at the time they are fixed, and unfixed before then (and afterwards), leads Swinburne to conclude that backwards causation is just as impossible as simultaneous causation.\(^{128}\) Swinburne summarises this by noting that “So backwards causation is not logically possible; every event is fixed at all times after it has occurred. In summary, and very loosely, since forward causation is always logically possible, backwards causation is never logically possible”.\(^{129}\)

**Swinburne’s Definition of Omnipotence and Temporally Fixed Events**

So, both backwards and simultaneous causation are impossible, and all events are temporally fixed. What does this mean for Swinburne’s definition of omnipotence? Swinburne’s answer is that these three clauses taken together form ‘the core’ of a coherent definition of omnipotence. In so doing, this core does not only make clear which logically possible things an omnipotent being can do, but also which *actions of causing* logically possible things are *themselves* logically possible.\(^{130}\) He offers the following definition of omnipotence to explicate these points:

\[
S \text{ is omnipotent throughout some period of time } T \iff S \text{ is able to cause by an act beginning at any instant } t \text{ during that period any logically contingent [hard] event } M \text{ beginning at any instant } t_1 \text{ later than } t.
\]

To put this into language a human being might use (as opposed to an English philosopher of logic): God is omnipotent throughout some period of time if, and only if, God is able to cause some event *M* with an act of his omnipotence which begins at some instant of time (like one o’clock in the afternoon). This event, *M*, must be logically contingent (that is, not logically necessary) and it *must* begin at some instant later than one o’clock, so it could begin at one nano second past one o’clock, or what have you, so long as that instant is in some way *past* one o’clock itself).

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\(^{128}\) Ibid., p. 160.

\(^{129}\) Ibid.

\(^{130}\) Ibid., p. 163.

\(^{131}\) Ibid., p. 164; note that the change in notion from time as T to t is a change from periods to instants of time, as he notes on pg. 155. Again, we must recall that Swinburne considers the former the more ‘basic’ of the two.
There are two new wrinkles in this definition which we need to explicate. First, that an omnipotent agent only be able to perform logically contingent events, rather than logically necessary ones. Swinburne justifies this on the grounds that logically necessary events cannot but occur, no matter what an omnipotent agent does. This is an interesting view, and one not necessarily borne out by Swinburne’s writings so far. Does he mean to imply that logically necessary events are beyond the control of an omnipotent agent? This is a significant point.

The second wrinkle that must be clarified is that these logically contingent events which an omnipotent agent causes must be ‘hard’, rather than ‘soft’. By ‘hard’ or ‘soft’ Swinburne simply means to make clear how logically necessary or logically sufficient the occurrence of times before or after some time $T$ might be.\(^{132}\) He defines an event as ‘hard’ if and only if the occurrence (or the non-occurrence) of times before or after the time when that event occurs are neither logically necessary nor logically sufficient for the occurrence of that event.\(^ {133}\) An example will make this digestible. Again we return to The Fat Controller. Suppose The Fat Controller has a stomach-ache at mid-day. This for Swinburne is a hard event, because whether it occurred is ‘logically independent of the occurrence or non-occurrence of any time before or after mid-day’.\(^ {134}\) So too is the event ‘The Fat Controller fell helplessly down a hill in 2024’ a hard event at 2024; its occurrence is again entirely independent of there existing any time before or after that event in 2024. In contrast, ‘The Fat Controller turning 826 years young in 2025’ is a soft event, for it is logically necessary that there were 826 years before 2025.\(^ {135}\)

There is something of a third wrinkle, here – we can modify events which are soft so as to make them hard, or vice-versa. Consider the above event ‘the Fat Controller fell helplessly down a hill in 2024’; this hard event could be made a soft event by including some proviso like ‘the Fat Controller fell helplessly down a hill in 2025 after three and a half months of careful hill exploration in 2017’. Here, it is a logical necessity that there is some time before the hill-falling-down in 2024, and so this event is now soft rather than hard.\(^ {136}\)

\(^{133}\) Ibid, p. 161.
\(^{134}\) Ibid, p. 162.
\(^{135}\) Ibid.
\(^{136}\) Ibid. Swinburne also notes on page 163 that an event which is hard at one point can become soft at another, provided certain factors are present.
Omnipotence Defined

So, with all of this machinery in place, we are left with what Swinburne considers the ‘core’ of a definition of omnipotence which makes clear ‘which actions of causing logically possible events are themselves logically possible’.\footnote{Ibid., p. 163.} Given the fact that simultaneous and backwards causation are impossible, Swinburne can conclude that omnipotent beings cannot just cause any events, but only those which are time-locked into periods. Moreover, these events must be hard events (as opposed to soft events, where the occurrence of times before or after the time of that event are logically necessary).\footnote{Ibid., p. 164.} Swinburne claims that this provision that omnipotent beings can only cause hard events actually solves a problem that plagues some other definitions of omnipotence: that certain logically possible actions are only possible for certain beings.\footnote{Ibid.}

The example Swinburne uses to illustrate this is a married man Richard Nixon; only a being like Richard Nixon, who is married, can get a divorce, and only a formerly married man like Richard Nixon can become remarried afterwards.\footnote{Ibid., p. 164.} These are of course logically possible actions which no-one would think God need suffer through; logically possible actions which are not logically possible for God.

Yet, given the definition of omnipotence which philosophers like Aquinas offer, no allowance for these sorts of actions is made, and it seems one could argue that an omnipotent God must be able to do logically possible things like ‘get married’ or ‘get married again after a divorce’. Consider, for instance, what Aquinas notes in in places like ST. I Q.25. A.3: that to consider the matter of God’s omnipotence ‘aright’ all one must do is realise that omnipotence extends to possible things only. Becoming divorced and remarried (in that order) are possible things, so it might seem that on the basis of ST. I Q.25. A.3 alone that God must also be able to be married, divorced, and remarried.

In contrast, Swinburne’s definition of omnipotence rules these out on the grounds that these are soft events, rather than hard ones, and so God cannot be expected to perform them.\footnote{Ibid., p. 165; again, these events are soft insofar as they involve the necessary existence of times and events prior to the one being discussed. One can only be divorced if one has been married, after all.} If one is to be fair, then, because Swinburne’s definition of omnipotence manages to rule out certain classes of action which, while logically possible, God should
not be able to perform, it is in this one way superior to Aquinas’s own definitions of omnipotence.

**Omnipotence and Future Events**

So, we have from Swinburne a relatively robust definition of omnipotence, which, while depending on things like chronological progression, does at least seem to have one advantage over Aquinas’s own. Yet, Swinburne is not content with the definition as we have described it here. In fact, the above constitutes his second-to-last definition, because he identifies with it an issue he thinks worth dealing with. This issue concerns future events. Swinburne thinks that it follows from the definition immediately above that an omnipotent person at some time $T$ ‘could cause any event later than $T$, and so – if he chose – determine the whole future of the universe thereafter’.  

Why is this an issue? Swinburne claims it runs against what he has already made clear concerning the nature of causality. It will be helpful to quickly run through his conclusions once more. First, he thinks that that backwards and simultaneous causation are impossible. Second, an agent must exercise its causal activity *before* an event is fixed to occur; and third and finally, an agent must then *continue* to exercise its power until the end of the event.  

In short, Swinburne claims, if an omnipotent being continues to live and act after causing some event $E$ at time $T$, he can control all future events. Swinburne replies that he must therefore modify his definition of omnipotence once more. This time, the definition will limit the power of an omnipotent person to being able to control those events *during the periods in which the omnipotent agent actually exercises his power*.

Here, then, we find Swinburne’s next definition of omnipotence:

$$S \text{ is omnipotent throughout some period of time } T \text{ iff } S \text{ is able to cause by an act beginning at any instant } t \text{ and ending at any instant } t_2, \text{ both during that period, any logically contingent event } M \text{ beginning at any instant } t_1, \text{ later than } t \text{ and ending at } t_2.$$  

It is in explaining this iteration of his definition of omnipotence that Swinburne reveals how thoroughly, completely, distinct his conception of omnipotence is from figures like Aquinas. In light of his insistence on putting omnipotent actions into chronological terms

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142 Ibid., p. 165.
143 Ibid., p. 165.
144 Ibid.
145 Ibid.
(which already makes his definition radically alien from Aquinas’s own), Swinburne goes on to argue for an omnipotent being who is able, after a certain period of time has elapsed, to cease being omnipotent. Swinburne even manages to do this in light of the fact that for philosophers like Aquinas, God’s constant, omnipotent presence and activity is necessary for the existence of creation. As Swinburne puts it:

Given [the above definition], if S exists during T, any universe with its ‘laws of nature’ exists only because S sustains it, or permits other substances, to do so: and so everything that happens during that period happens because he causes it or permits someone or something else to do so. This entails nothing about what must be the case at any other period. The definition allows a person who is omnipotent until a time T thereafter cease to be omnipotent.\textsuperscript{146}

Swinburne does make clear that this ‘ceasing to be omnipotent’ business is more complex than is hinted at above. He clarifies, for instance, that an omnipotent being can only cease to be omnipotent if they have ‘explicitly permitted’ that cessation to occur.\textsuperscript{147} Indeed, there is seemingly no impetus on the omnipotent being to do so – they could always simply cause their own continued existence and thereafter remain omnipotent for as much time as they might like.

Swinburne’s insistence on the possibility that an omnipotent being might cease to be omnipotent seems to spring from his overall conception of what sorts of things can be omnipotent. He continually refers to an ‘omnipotent person’, and thinks that this sort of omnipotence must include what he terms ‘perfect freedom’. This provides an interesting contrast to Aquinas’s own views on God, being, and freedom. For Aquinas, God’s freedom does not extend so far as to being able to make God’s own self less powerful.

Against Swinburne one might ask why an omnipotent person should need to be able to cease to be omnipotent (or, indeed, why omnipotence is bound up with personhood in the first place. More on this will follow later in Chapter Four.) Swinburne’s justification for the former is interesting, but again wholly incompatible with Aquinas’s views on being and goodness.\textsuperscript{148} He claims that one can potentially justify an omnipotent person’s casting aside their omnipotence on the grounds that ‘a perfectly free person must do what he

\textsuperscript{146} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{147} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{148} For Aquinas, these are the same thing simply viewed under different aspects. God is both being itself and goodness itself. Omnipotence consists in infinite power, and infinite power is related to an agent’s form. ‘The more perfectly an agent possesses the form by which it acts’, Aquinas notes in ST I. Q.25. A.2, ‘the greater its power to act’. The divine essence is infinite, and essence in God’s case consists of form. Thus, God’s power is infinite.
believes to be the best action (if there is one).'\textsuperscript{149} Strikingly, Swinburne offers that ‘ceasing to be omnipotent’ is potentially some best course of action an omnipotent person might choose. The means through which this omnipotent person might cease to be omnipotent are varied. Two possibilities seem to exist. First, Swinburne thinks they might put aside the power themselves, or allow some other being to deprive them of that omnipotence instead.\textsuperscript{150}

Secondly, an omnipotent person might instead simply deprive themselves (or again, allow some other being to do the depriving for them) of their existence. For Swinburne this again results in a loss of omnipotence.\textsuperscript{151} Again, Swinburne is careful to make clear that actually ceasing to be omnipotent is only something which might be done provided it is the best course of action in some scenario. It might well remain the case that it is always the best possible thing for an omnipotent person to remain omnipotent, and so they will always possess that omnipotence and existence as omnipotent.\textsuperscript{152}

The implications of this ‘ceasing to be omnipotent’ Swinburne again lets unfold in terms of chronological progression.\textsuperscript{153} Once more he suggests two possibilities, and explains them in terms of ‘forward’ and ‘backwards’ existence. Say an omnipotent person found that remaining omnipotent was the best course of action, and, given the moral obligation to what is best, that omnipotent person remains omnipotent. Swinburne claims that it follows then that ‘of logical necessity’ that this person would be ‘omnipotent and forwardly (but not necessarily backwardly) everlasting’.\textsuperscript{154} What does it mean for something to be ‘forwardly everlasting’? Swinburne explains: ‘Something is forwardly everlasting iff it will exist for all future time, backwardly everlasting iff it has existed for all past time.’\textsuperscript{155} Swinburne clarifies that in the event that some omnipotent person were to find the best possible course of action to be ‘ceasing to be omnipotent’ through some means, then that omnipotent person would be obligated either to cease to exist or cease to be omnipotent.

\textsuperscript{149} Ibid., p. 166; note here that Swinburne thinks that freedom entails one must choose the best course of action; not simply be able to choose the best course of action amongst alternatives. Perhaps he and Aquinas have more in common than we had shown.
\textsuperscript{150} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{151} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., p.166.
\textsuperscript{154} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{155} Ibid.
On this issue, we can safely conclude that Aquinas and Swinburne are opposed, and there is little hope of reconciliation. This will be explored in more detail in chapter four. For now, we turn to consider the merits of Swinburne’s definition of omnipotence as he does: with reference to that famous paradigmatic paradox concerning divine agents and large, blocks of granite.

**Part two: Swinburne and the Paradox of the Stone**

With his definition of omnipotence now in place, Swinburne turns to tackle that famous (and perhaps quite infamous) ‘stone paradox’. Interestingly, he places a great deal of emphasis on this particular paradox, claiming that *any* analysis of omnipotence must be formulated so as to be immune to it.\(^{156}\) Certainly as an objection it is widely known and quite damning for any account of omnipotence. How does the paradox itself run? Savage presents it as follows:

Either God can create a stone which He cannot lift, or He cannot create a stone which He cannot lift.

1. If God can create a stone which He cannot lift, then He is not omnipotent (since he cannot lift the stone in question).
2. If God cannot create a stone which He cannot lift, then He is not omnipotent (since He cannot create the stone in question).
3. Therefore, God is not omnipotent.\(^ {157}\)

This problem has dominated omnipotence literature since the last century, and while a variety of solutions (and rebuttals) have been proposed, it is still something of a touchstone. No small wonder, then, that Swinburne considers responding to it sensible. Swinburne does first have some constructive criticisms as regards its formulation, however.\(^ {158}\) He cites the difficulty inherent in some omnipotent being \textit{lifting} something, given that when one thinks of omnipotent agents like God, one generally thinks of non-

\(^{156}\) Ibid.


\(^{158}\) Swinburne, \textit{The Coherence of Theism}, p. 166.
embodied beings. A fair point, but one easily rectified, as Swinburne does; he simply replaces ‘lift’ with ‘cause to rise’.159:

Ultimately, Swinburne conspires to show that his final definition of omnipotence, discussed in part one of this chapter, is immune to the stone paradox. For convenience, we will present that definition of omnipotence once more:

\[
S \text{ is omnipotent throughout some period of time } T \text{ iff } S \text{ is able to cause by an act beginning at any instant } t \text{ and ending at any instant } t' \text{, both during that period, any logically contingent event } M \text{ beginning at any instant } t_1 \text{, later than } t \text{ and ending at } t'.
\]

Swinburne then presents the paradox of the stone in light of this definition (notably choosing to omit ‘the qualifications necessary to ensure that any event begins later than its cause’ for fear those qualifications might harm the force of the argument):

(1) Either S can in any sub-period during T cause the existence during T of a stone of which S cannot subsequently cause the rising during T, or S cannot during T cause the existence during T of a stone which S cannot subsequently cause the rising during T.

(2) Necessarily if, in any sub-period during T, S can cause the existence of a stone during T of which S cannot subsequently cause the rising during T, then there is at least one logically contingent event during T that S is unable during T to cause (namely, the rising of that stone).

(3) Necessarily if, in any sub-period during T, S cannot cause the existence of a stone during T of which S cannot subsequently cause the rising during T, then there is one logically contingent event during T that S is unable during T to cause (namely, the existence of such a stone).

(4) Hence there is one logically contingent event during T that S is unable during T to cause.

(5) If S is omnipotent throughout T, then S is able to cause the existence of any logically contingent event during T.161

(6) Therefore, S is not omnipotent during T.

159 Ibid., pp. 166-167; he also considers other potential examples that could replace any mention of the stone outright, like whether God could ‘make a universe too independent to annihilate’. He ultimately decides, in the name of historical continuity, to continue with the stone example, however.

160 Ibid., p. 165.

161 Swinburne notes here that this is essentially a ‘rough version’ of one of his earlier definitions of omnipotence above.
Crucially, Swinburne immediately dismisses premise (2), and leaves open the option to similarly dismiss premise (3).\footnote{Ibid., p. 167.} This he does on the basis that if \( S \) is omnipotent throughout \( T \), then \( S \) may in fact still be able to cause the existence of the stone. In doing so, \( S \) would cease to be omnipotent as soon as the stone begins to exist – but still, \( S \) could create the stone. Things play out slightly differently if this omnipotent person is ‘essentially omnipotent’ but \textit{not} ‘essentially everlasting’. In that case, if the omnipotent person created the stone, they would not cease to be omnipotent – instead, they’d simply cease to exist.\footnote{Ibid.}

Again, Swinburne clarifies that the creation of the stone and subsequent ceasing-to-exist/being-omnipotent need \textit{not} occur; the omnipotent person in question can remain omnipotent for the whole of the period \( T \) by simply \textit{not} causing the existence of the stone.\footnote{Ibid., p. 168.} What does this solve? Swinburne claims that in \textit{not} causing the existence of the stone, the omnipotent being will simply never suffer the existence of some logically contingent event which it cannot cause.\footnote{Ibid.} Swinburne reasons to this by way of clarification of the nature of substances: “for events involve substances, and there will be no such substance as the problematic stone, and so no contingent event in which it is involved”.\footnote{Ibid.} Thus, Swinburne claims premise (2) above is false.

What about premise (3)? This one is trickier. Swinburne notes that one must keep in mind all he has already established concerning two sets of distinctions. First, there is the distinction between omnipotent beings which are essentially omnipotent and essentially everlasting and those which are merely the former. Second, there is the distinction between hard and soft events; that any event which occurs during a period is a ‘hard’ one, in that it does not require the existence of any other time, either before or after, to make it true.\footnote{Ibid.}

He then notes the following:

\begin{quote}
Yet the very existence of such a stone during some sub-period within \( T \) beginning later than the initial instant of \( T \) entails the non-existence at any earlier period
\end{quote}
within $T$ of an essentially (forwardly) everlasting omnipotent being, and hence it will not be a hard event whose truth conditions lie solely in that sub-period.\textsuperscript{168} What follows from this? Swinburne clarifies that the rules concerning sub-periods within some period $T$ applies to \textit{any} time $T$ one might consider.\textsuperscript{169} This being the case, he continues, any being who is essentially (forwardly) everlasting and omnipotent is not required to make this ‘stone too heavy to make rise’. Thus, in the event that S is such a being, i.e. essentially forwardly everlasting and omnipotent, then S is not required to make such a stone. Hence, Swinburne finishes, premise (3) is also false.\textsuperscript{170} Given that two premises of the argument above are now false, it follows that the argument – and hence, the stone paradox- have failed to dent Swinburne’s conception of omnipotence.

\textbf{Part three: Swinburne on Time and the Creation of the Universe}

From all of the above concerning time, omnipotence, and being, it is not immediately clear what Swinburne wishes to say about God’s choosing to create the universe. Swinburne concludes that all events – divine or not – require a duration which is greater than zero. A question about this forms quite naturally when we apply it to God’s creation of the universe. God’s \textit{choosing} to create the universe – is this choice subject to time? Has it a duration more than zero? It is not clear how it can, given that the choice itself \textit{precedes being}. At stake here is the relationship between being and time. If all events must have a duration greater than zero, and duration (and time) are contingent on being, as they are for philosophers like Aristotle and Aquinas, how can God choose to create the universe \textit{before} the universe comes to exist?\textsuperscript{171} Such an event – choosing to create the universe – precedes the existence of time, and so cannot have a duration. Thus it cannot be properly called an ‘event’ – and so cannot happen.

The same is true for the act of creation itself. Remember, Swinburne claims that, following from what he has already said about cause and effect, an event can only be brought into existence \textit{only by beginning to bring that event about at some time T before that event has occurred}.\textsuperscript{172} Again, though: how can there be time \textit{before} the universe? If there is no time before the universe, then the events we’re speaking about – choosing to

\textsuperscript{168} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{169} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{170} Ibid., p. 168.
\textsuperscript{171} In ST I. Q. 10. A.1, Aquinas, following Aristotle, defines time as the numbering of states of being into the before and the after.
\textsuperscript{172} Ibid., p. 158.
create the universe, and then creating it –cannot happen, for there is no time before them in which an omnipotent being could bring them about.

**Swinburne on Time and Being**

First, Swinburne begins with some key definitions. By universe, Swinburne understands ‘a system of substances temporally connected to each other’.\(^{173}\) Substances he thinks are things which possess the ability to causally act upon other substances, and to be acted upon by other substances. (Thus, substances here include not only material objects like people, trees, and cows, as well as those objects of the quantum and atomic sciences – they also include *immaterial* objects, like souls, should these exist).\(^{174}\) Next, Swinburne explains that for two substances to be temporally connected is for them to exist for periods of time which relate to one another. In other words, one substance might exist for some period of time which is *earlier* than the period of time another exists; or that substance might exist for some period of time which is *later* than the existence of the other; or, finally, the existence of these substances might simply *overlap*. In all three cases, the substances are temporally connected.\(^{175}\) Finally, Swinburne claims that no substance can fail to be temporally connected to the universe. This, he finishes, means the universe has but one ‘Time’.\(^{176}\) With all of this in place, Swinburne now turns to consider what it might mean for this universe to have had a ‘beginning’.

Here, as above, Swinburne takes as important the distinction between periods of time (that is, some temporal interval of time) and instants of time (which are *not* temporally extended; Swinburne likens them to ‘points in space’ – in that they are ‘dimensionless’).\(^{177}\) Periods are bounded by instants; thus, the period from three o’clock in the afternoon to four o’clock in the afternoon is bounded by two instants ‘three o’clock’ and ‘four o’clock’. Again, Swinburne insists on the primacy of periods over instants; something must exist for longer than an instant to ‘be’, for instants are not temporally

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\(^{174}\) Ibid., p. 169.

\(^{175}\) Ibid.

\(^{176}\) Ibid.

\(^{177}\) Ibid., p. 170.
extended, and so everything which exists does so for some *period* of time instead (because periods are temporally extended).\footnote{Swinburne, ‘The Beginning of the Universe and of Time’, p. 170; it is clear that Swinburne imported whole tracts of text from this piece on time to later editions of his *Coherence of Theism*, for his writings in each on the subject of periods and instants are virtually identical.}

Thus to ask whether the universe has had a beginning is to first set out whether this beginning is instantaneous (and thus takes place in an ‘instant’) or whether this beginning is temporally extended (and thus takes place over a period of time).\footnote{Ibid.} Swinburne obviously concludes that the former is not a sensible conception of events, given the relationship he has already established as existing between periods and instants; instants can be more fundamentally considered in terms of periods.

It is here we must introduce a set of four verificationist theses that Swinburne drafts which cover the relationship between periods and instants. He calls them ‘modest’, which is… interesting:

The first modest thesis is that all talk about events occurring at instants is reducible to talk about events occurring over periods. The second is that instants are the instants they are in virtue of the periods which they bound. The third is that periods are the periods they are in virtue of the actual or possible events which end when they begin, and begin when they end. The fourth is that the length of a temporal interval is the length which would be measured by a perfect clock.\footnote{Ibid.}

Obviously we have already seen a great deal about thesis one, both in this section and above. The second thesis holds that all periods are temporally bounded at both ends. This follows easily enough. Two o’clock to three o’clock in the afternoon is a period of one hour, and this one hour is bounded at both ends by either instants (say, ‘two o’clock’ and ‘three o’clock’) or by periods (say, the period of one hour between one o’clock and two o’clock, or the subsequent period of one hour between three o’clock and four o’clock). This is the case, Swinburne opines, because periods must have both endings and *beginnings*. This obviously includes the very first period of the universe’s existence – its beginning, in other words.

Thesis two is necessary because Swinburne thinks that while periods seem to make sense on their own, instants do not. In fact instants are only ever sensible in terms of periods;

\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}}
or periods function as the boundaries between two instants. This, Swinburne notes, is actually how we can cognise one instant as separate from another. As he notes:

Since everything that happens, happens fundamentally over a period, there follows my second thesis that the only way in which we can get a grip on the notion of an instant is as the boundary of a period. The only way in which there is sense to the distinction between one instant and another is in terms of their being the boundaries of different periods. Without this means of access to the notion it cannot have a clear location in the conceptual scheme. 181

So the above period – the period of one hour between one and two o’clock – is bounded by two instants. These instants can only be made sense of, and thereby distinguished from one another, in terms of their relationship to this period which they bracket.

Thesis three, meanwhile, makes clear that for Swinburne, periods are extrinsically governed by other periods; a period is a period because of the actual, possible events which either end when this new period begins, or which begin when this new period ends. 182 These possible and actual events Swinburne defines as events which are ‘picked out by a uniquely identifying description’. 183 These uniquely identifying descriptions can be of two kinds. First, they might be uniquely identifying descriptions which

… would be brought about in virtue of the laws of nature if some earlier event picked out by a uniquely identifying description, had happened at some earlier period of time – as dated by an actual event. 184

And secondly, these uniquely identifying descriptions might instead be brought about by some later event, again subject to the same criteria (the laws of nature, for instance, and as dated by some ‘actual event’.)

Mercifully, Swinburne deigns to give us some examples. He first suggests we consider the explosion which would result if we were to light a fuse. The ‘possible event’ in this case is the first explosion to occur which would have happened had he lit a certain fuse with a certain set-up at the same time ‘as a certain man had walked out of the door’. 185 He next cites as a possible event that which occurs when ‘the minute hand of this clock pointing to ‘twelve’ for the second time if one had started the clock going when some person named John started to run a race’. 186 Swinburne concludes that these two examples

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181 Ibid. p. 171.
182 Ibid. p. 173.
183 Ibid.
184 Ibid.
185 Ibid.
186 Ibid.
make clear that the distinction between one period and another is ‘finally given an empirical grounding’ in terms of different events which can and do occur. These events occur in relation to these periods; some events occur during a period, while others follow them or precede them. Swinburne argues that this empirical grounding cannot be gotten at through the notions of ‘instants’, and finishes with one final point: that if these periods are not seen to be empirically grounded in the relation of events to these periods, then the distinction between two periods is not something one can grasp.

Now that we know what these ‘possible and actual’ events might be, we can now illustrate it. Putting this in terms of our clock example above, we would simply say that the period of one hour between two and three o’clock is this period because of the end of the actual, possible event which took place prior to it. This actual, possible event is of course the period of one hour between one and two o’clock. This is not all; the period in question (one hour between two and three o’clock, as we have said) is not only made the period it is by the end of the period immediately prior; it is also defined by the actual, possible event which takes place after that period (which is, of course, the period of one hour between three and four o’clock). Thus, our given period of the one hour between two and three o’clock is made so by both the period before it, and the period after it; the former ends, and so our given period occurs, and the latter begins only when our given period ends.

Finally, we have thesis four, which requires some explanation. This one holds that ‘the length of a temporal interval is the length which would be measured by a perfect clock’. Swinburne opens in light of thesis three. He asks what it means, if the precepts of thesis three are to be observed, for one to say that this period possesses the same length as another period. Swinburne’s answer is to question how one normally – that is, in non-philosophically rigorous methods – establishes two lengths of time to be equal.

For this, we need an example. Let us imagine a small blue tank engine, travelling from Tidmouth Sheds to Ffarquhar Station on two separate days. This involves the engine moving over the same stretch of line with no significant obstacles or significantly efficacious environmental factors on either day; the engine itself is also reasonably

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187 Ibid.
188 Ibid., p. 170.
mechanically sound, and so there is no discernible difference in its performance on either occasion.

Given our example, how do we establish the two intervals – the journey from shed to station on Day One, and the identical, subsequent journey on Day Two – as identical? Swinburne writes:

We then observe and construct periodic mechanisms, mechanisms in which a qualitatively identical state is repeated again and again – such as the daily apparent rotation of the sun about the Earth or the annual apparent revolution of the sun among the ‘fixed stars’ or the motion of a pendulum. We regard such a mechanism as an accurate clock (i.e. one in which the identical state is repeated after equal intervals of time) in so far as (a) paradigm cases of intervals of approximately equal lengths of time come out as such; and (b) it coincides in the periods it measures with those of many other mechanisms (both of similar and of different construction) which are or could be constructed (i.e. their periods are linearly related); and (c) when the durations of events are measured by those mechanisms, laws of nature which predict their occurrence take simplest forms. 189

Swinburne claims that the periodic mechanisms just discussed (the rotation of the sun about the moon and the yearly revolution of the sun) each manage to satisfy these three conditions. Hence, each one is taken as an ‘approximately’ accurate clock. Luckily, Swinburne notes, the human race has managed to make periodic mechanisms which satisfy the three criteria above more successfully than even these perennial examples, such as with the invention of the atomic clock. 190

What does all of this mean for our initial question? Simply, that two intervals of time are of equal length provided they are measured so by the best clocks we can construct (i.e. the clocks which best satisfy (a), (b), and (c) above). 191 Admittedly, this is not the most striking conclusion. What is important in it, though, is the provisional nature of such a judgement – a period is equal in length to another according to the measurements of the best clocks we can construct at the time we are doing the measuring. We can always imagine better, more accurate clocks, Swinburne notes. 192 As he writes:

We have as an ideal a perfect clock such that when intervals are measured by it, laws predicting as accurately as can be predicted take unique simplest forms. We would then judge intervals to have the lengths they would have if measured by a perfect clock, if we had had one at the place and time in question; and we would judge some event to have happened a year ago if a perfect clock at the place of

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189 Ibid., p. 174.
190 Ibid.
191 Ibid.
192 Ibid., p. 175.
the event would have ticked away showing the passage of a year from then until now.\textsuperscript{193}

This ideal, perfect clock, Swinburne finishes, is the only possible source for some justified belief about the interval between two events being the length that this interval is. No other source – say, a lesser clock, which offers a subtly different measurement of length – is to be admitted. For Swinburne, then, there is a ‘universal metric of time’ which can be measured in terms of ‘universal perfect clocks’.\textsuperscript{194} It seems he can say with some confidence, then, that two periods of time are equal in length.

\textbf{The Beginning of the Universe in light of Swinburne’s Four Theses}

With these four verificationist theses, and what each means for the relationship between periods and instants in mind, we can finally see what it is to say that the universe had a beginning, and how God might be said to have decided to make it. Swinburne offers a succinct summary of his views on the beginning of the universe in light of his four theses on page 180 of this same article.\textsuperscript{195} This summary boils down to two possibilities which are mutually exclusive, and which Swinburne feels are the only ones which can result from embracing his four theses:

1. “The Universe has existed only for a finite number of (non-overlapping) periods of time of equal length (= has only existed for a finite time).

or

2. There was a period of time before the Universe existed.”

Which of these two does Swinburne end up swearing by? Mercifully, Swinburne dismisses 1 (and an equivalent view not explored here, 1’) on a number of grounds.\textsuperscript{196} 2, and its own equivalent 2’, emerge as Swinburne’s preferred answers to the two competing hypothesis: that the universe either has a beginning, or it lacks one.

Why the rejection of possibility 1? Swinburne cites a number of reasons, as noted. We will consider two of the most pressing. Swinburne first claims that it leads to 1’, its potential contrary. 1’ reads as follows:

\textsuperscript{193} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{194} Ibid., p. 178.
\textsuperscript{195} Ibid., p. 180.
\textsuperscript{196} Ibid., pp. 180–185.
1’. The Universe has not existed only for a finite number of (non-overlapping) periods of time of equal length.

He is quick to note that 1’ is not the same as another view, 1’’:

1’’. The Universe has existed for an infinite number of (non-overlapping) periods of time of equal length.

(1’’) entails (1’), Swinburne notes, but the opposite is not true.197 (1’) and (1’’) would indeed be equivalent if it were the case that ‘every interval in the Universe’s history consisted of a finite or infinite number of unit intervals of the same finite length’. Thus it is the case that (1’) and (1’’) would be equivalent if there existed a universal metric of time which was true. In such a case, the universe’s existence would total with some number of periods which were both finite and equal in length (or an infinite number, if the number of periods were infinite). Yet: Swinburne does not think the possibility of there being a true and universal metric of time as necessarily true, for some periods of time are not actually commensurable in length.

What follows from this? That (1’) and (1’’) are equivalent ‘if the Universe is always governed by a system of laws which take the simplest forms on the assumption that a whole range of periodic mechanisms which keep time with each other measure constant equal intervals’.198 This, of course, is not necessarily the case, as Swinburne admits. It is of course possible that over the universe’s lifespan, the laws of nature which obtained at one point in time did not obtain at another. One could possibly construct a perfect clock for one period governed by one set of laws, and then another when another set of laws obtained.

Of course, in so doing, one could not then trust this pre-change perfect clock if it declared that the period in which it existed was infinite. Why so? There would not be a ‘measurable relation’ between that perfect clock and the one of our own era, for they may be on different scales. Moreover, there might have been periods during the universe’s existence when no such laws existed; just ‘substances behaving chaotically’, Swinburne notes. What does this mean? A clock, even a perfect one, created in such a period, could not make clear that these periods were not themselves finite or infinite in duration.

197 Ibid., p. 181.
198 Ibid.
What does all of this lead to? Simply this: if one were to take the claim ‘the Universe has no beginning’, and interpreted that claim in terms of (1’), and if anything had ever happened in the universe before such time as it was governed by the laws which it now operates by, the universe would not have a beginning. This, Swinburne notes, is ‘hardly’ welcome, and will lead one to rival accounts of the universe in which of course it had a beginning instead.¹⁹⁹

This is only problem one with (1). There is another: Swinburne thinks that even if a perfect metric of time did indeed exist, this would only be a sufficient condition and not a necessary one for the equivalence of (1’) and (1’’). No such universal metric for the measurement of time might exist, and this would lead to the emergence of a problem which caused us to doubt that (1’) was satisfactory in its account of the universe (i.e. that it had no beginning) even if (1’’) was true (i.e. even if the universe had existed for an infinite number of (non-overlapping) periods of time of equal length).

Possibility (2) Triumphant

In contrast to these two, damning arguments which put possibility (1) into great peril, Swinburne is quick to label (2) as ‘coherent’, on the grounds that one can seemingly conceive of there being simply nothing, which is then succeeded by a universe, which comes into existence.²⁰⁰ This ‘pre-universe’ time Swinburne designates as ‘empty time’, which exists before the existence of substances of any kind.

Possibility (2) thus goes some ways towards addressing the issue we have identified above: how, given Swinburne’s understanding of time and omnipotence, God could have chosen to create the universe at some point. As we have established, for Swinburne, all events – even those involving the divine – must have a duration greater than zero. This seemingly includes events which precede the universe, like God’s choosing to create it, and God’s actual act of creating it. If there is no time before the universe, then these acts cannot have occurred (i.e. they would consist of a period of zero duration). Given possibility (2) above, however, this potential issue disappears, and even events which precede the creation of the universe can now have periods of greater than zero duration.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., pp. 181-182.
²⁰⁰ Ibid., p.185.
A consequence follows this view, of course: time now no longer has a beginning. Empty time existing before time entails the constant existence of time both during that period of empty time before the universe, and afterwards. Thus, time can have no beginning. Swinburne clarifies:

Our concept of time is the concept of a background against which things come into being, change, and cease to be. We need it to elucidate the notion of the Universe having a beginning. We would be depriving it of its role in our conceptual scheme which would be the poorer thereby, if we allowed it to be the sort of thing which could itself have a beginning.

Time, then, for Swinburne, is a background item, which necessarily pre-exists the universe on account of its lacking a beginning of its own. On this ground at least, then, Swinburne has a means of answering how events like God’s omnipotent creation of the universe, and God’s deciding to create the universe, can have a duration longer than zero. God simply chooses to create, and then creates, the universe during this period of empty time.

In this way, then, Swinburne has managed to argue against that God’s decision to create the universe can somehow pre-exist the universe and yet still have a duration greater than zero.

In the next chapter, we will place the issues discussed here in their proper context; they serve as the basis for the first of three divergences between Swinburne and Aquinas’s respective accounts of omnipotence. The next two divergences, like the issues explored here, also emerge from Swinburne’s definition of omnipotence. As we will see, the three, taken together, offer interesting alternative views to Aquinas’s own.

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201 Ibid.
202 Ibid., pp. 185-186.
203 Ibid.
Chapter Four: Swinburne and Aquinas on Ceasing to Be Omnipotent

In this chapter we consider three issues concerning Swinburne’s understanding of omnipotence, and what these issues mean for Aquinas’s own account. Swinburne opposes him on three key vectors; these are, in order:

- How the omnipotent operations and actions of God relate to time and duration
- God’s ability to cease to be omnipotent
- The nature of God’s necessity

Each of these three issues is brought to light by virtue of the final definition of omnipotence Swinburne arrives at in Chapter Three. Swinburne includes as a clause in that final definition that God can cease to be omnipotent, should he wish to. This, in turn, raises questions about God’s necessity. If God can cease to be omnipotent, then it surely seems that God’s existence as an omnipotent agent is not itself necessary. Concomitantly, if God is not a necessary being – or least not firmly demonstrable as one – there are markedly lower stakes for arguing that he can divest himself of his omnipotence. Finally, the notion that the actions of omnipotent agents must have some duration also emerges from Swinburne’s final definition of omnipotence. This is because of Swinburne’s views concerning the relationship between time and action emerge in his account in terms of his various iterative definitions of omnipotence.

Of these three issues, Aquinas and Swinburne are opposed diametrically with regard to two of them. Swinburne thinks that God can cease to be omnipotent; Aquinas does not. Swinburne also thinks that the actions of divine agents like God require a duration, which leads Swinburne to notions of ‘empty time’. His conception of God is steadfastly temporal. Aquinas, meanwhile, links time with motion, and explicitly argues that God is atemporal. The issue of necessity, meanwhile, is not so much a matter of conceptual opposition as it is a difference in certainty. For Swinburne, that God is a necessary being is not something which can be demonstrated overtly, such that God is both logically and metaphysically necessary. For Aquinas, however, God’s necessity is so certain and dependable that Aquinas reasons to God’s existence via necessity in his Third Way. Each thinker maintains that God is necessary, however.

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Structurally, this chapter is divided into three parts which are labelled as ‘divergences’. In essence, the chapter is considering the specific ways that Swinburne’s account differs from Aquinas’s (hence, this chapter refers to Swinburne’s views as divergences).

The first of these three divergences concerns duration, as this applies to omnipotent actions. We noted above and in the last chapter that duration is the marker of events for Swinburne, and this apparently includes the actions of agents like God. Problems with this were introduced in the last chapter, and in light of that fact, this divergence is not reintroduced here in detail.

The second divergence, concerns God’s having the ability to cease to be omnipotent in Swinburne’s account. This entails a number of sections concerning how Swinburne conceives of omnipotent beings – specifically, he considers them as persons. Persons in Swinburne’s account have a particular relationship with the ‘good’, such that they will seek out the best possible state of affairs in any case (should one exist). Thus, this section also considers what Swinburne understands the ‘good’ to be. Ultimately, this is the ground upon which Swinburne claims that God might cease to be omnipotent: God, as person, might judge it to be sensible and necessary to divest himself of his omnipotence in order to bring about the greatest possible good in some situation.

Finally, the third divergence concerns necessity. It is Swinburne’s view that God’s necessity (as an omnipotent person) is not something which can be demonstrated in what he terms ‘a direct or semi-direct’ manner; thus he advances a position which is largely epistemically humble. This position he contrasts with what he calls ‘weak’ arguments for God’s necessity (such as Aquinas’s), and ‘strong’ arguments for the same (here Swinburne points to explicitly ontological arguments for God’s existence, like Augustine). This section shows how Swinburne attempts to argue for an intermediate position between these two extremes.

All of this is in service of the final chapter, in which Aquinas will respond to each one of these three divergences. As noted elsewhere in this thesis, Aquinas and Swinburne’s views serve as foils for each other; whichever comes out on top (in the sense of being more coherent, and which leads to less metaphysical issues) will be put forward in the conclusion as the preferred model of theism.
Divergence One – Swinburne on Duration

The notion that the actions of omnipotent agents must have a duration – in that they must take place over some period of time – is something we have explored in some detail in Chapter Three. It emerged from the context of Swinburne’s iterative definitions of omnipotence. This is because of Swinburne’s views concerning the relationship between time and action. Indeed, for Swinburne time plays an important role in omnipotent action to the point that in each of his five iterative definitions of omnipotence includes the qualifier ‘at a time $t$.’\textsuperscript{204} As we noted, Swinburne thinks that duration is the marker by which something is either an event, or a non-event – and non-events are, by definition, ones which have not occurred. Thus, even events like ‘the omnipotent God created the stars, planets, and galaxies’ has a duration (which is, as we noted, fundamentally analysable in terms of instants and periods).\textsuperscript{205}

The problem is what Swinburne has to say about situations wherein events concerning God (like ‘God creating the universe’) seem to take place outside time. Consider, for instance, the example of creation. It is a commonly held view, both in theistic and non-theistic circles, that the universe began in a ferocious ‘Big Bang’.\textsuperscript{206} The standard understanding following from this is that there was nothing prior to this Big Bang. For Swinburne, this presents a problem: for if there is nothing prior to the Big Bang, there is no time before the Big Bang. This leads him to postulate the existence of ‘empty time’, which necessarily precedes the existence of the universe.\textsuperscript{207} As we noted in the last chapter, this allows Swinburne to address a number of problems concerning how the actions of omnipotent agents (or, events involving omnipotent agents) can have a duration before the existence of the universe via some event like the Big Bang. Now, his conception of God has ample (albeit empty) time in which to choose to create the universe, and then go about bringing it into existence.

In contrast, Aquinas does not seem to think that the actions of omnipotent agents require duration. This is because Aquinas holds that God is \textit{atemporal}, that is, not involved in

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\textsuperscript{204} Swinburne, \textit{The Coherence of Theism}, p. 153.
\textsuperscript{205} Ibid., pp. 153-154.
\end{flushright}
the flow of time. Which of these two accounts is the more sensible? We will come to consider this in the next chapter.

Notably, this first divergence was considered in some detail in the last chapter. In light of this fact, further discussion of it will be put aside in favour of making clear the next two divergences, which, though also emergent from Swinburne’s understanding of omnipotence, were not developed adequately before now. Thus, we must now consider the other two great divergences between Aquinas and Swinburne’s accounts: their thoughts on divine agents ceasing to be omnipotent, and their necessity.

Notably, this first divergence was considered in some detail in the last chapter. In light of this fact, further discussion of it will be put aside in favour of making clear the next two divergences, which, though also emergent from Swinburne’s understanding of omnipotence, were not developed adequately before now. Thus, we must now consider the other two great divergences between Aquinas and Swinburne’s accounts: their thoughts on divine agents ceasing to be omnipotent, and their necessity.

**Divergence Two - Ceasing to Be Omnipotent**

One of the most striking elements of Swinburne’s conception of omnipotence is his view that omnipotent agents can, when properly motivated, divest themselves of that omnipotence. Swinburne thinks they can accomplish this in a number of ways – they might, for instance, cause themselves to cease to exist. Alternatively, they might simply deprive themselves of their power. They might even farm ‘ceasing’ or ‘depriving’ actions to another being, whom God might appoint to either cause him to cease to exist, or simply to take away his omnipotence.

Why, however, would an omnipotent agent possibly wish to do something that? Surely their omnipotent power is of great benefit for them. Additionally, it might be noted that the aims and goals of omnipotent beings often tend to be universal in nature – whether they are creating whole universes, judging nations, or guiding all rational beings towards moral excellence. The aims, then, of omnipotent agents are very, very great in scale – and

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208 As Richard La Croix points out in his article ‘Aquinas On God’s Omnipresence and Timelessness’, found in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 42, No. 3. (Mar. 1982), p. 391, Aquinas’s understanding of God as atemporal – or timeless – follows from God’s eternity. Moreover, there are two ways to understand that eternity, only one of which is that God is atemporal. The other understanding posits that God’s duration is ‘temporally infinite’.


210 Ibid., p. 248.
in so being, surely their omnipotent power is only a boon to them. After all, without that power, how might they go about accomplishing those aims? A being without omnipotent power could not create universes, or judge them, or guide all rational beings in those universes to moral excellence, after all. That combination of ‘great, universal aim’ and ‘inability to bring about that aim’ will surely result only in a disappointed, frustrated being, much as a human being who broke both his legs and then realised he needs to be able to walk to save an orphanage is likely to be disappointed and frustrated.\(^{211}\)

Additionally, and following from this, we can argue that the omnipotence of a divine being isn’t simply good for the omnipotent being themselves – it’s also good for anything which is not a metaphysically necessary substance. If the existence of something is not necessary, it is generally held to be contingent – and so requires something to make it exist.\(^{212}\) This is a truth common to many theistic accounts of creation; God alone is held to be necessary, and everything else which exists is contingent. For some philosophers (and some religions), God is actively involved in willing the universe, and by virtue of that everything in it, into existence. For many of these same philosophers (and again some religions) this act of willing of the existence of the universe is a constant thing; were God to cease willing the universe into existence, that universe would cease to be. Surely the act of willing entire universes into being can be accomplished by omnipotent power alone (for humans cannot do so, and neither, it would seem, can angels). Thus, that a divine being has omnipotent power also seems to be quite a boon for everything other than God, too.

With all of this in mind, we can ask again: why does Swinburne feel his account of omnipotence must admit the possibility that an omnipotent being can divest itself of its omnipotent power? Swinburne identifies two inter-connected issues: the first concerns human liberty, and the second, moral goodness. With regard to the first reason, Swinburne thinks there is a problem if an omnipotent being is empowered to remain omnipotent at any time after it has ceased to exercise its omnipotent power.\(^{213}\) This could lead, he seems to think, to the possibility of nothing less than the absolute demolition of

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211 Insofar as we can admit of likeness between human and divine experience, of course. The notion that analogical predication is necessary when speaking about God is something which Swinburne and Aquinas actually seem to have in common, as Swinburne makes clear throughout Section III of his *Coherence of Theism*.

212 See, for instance, Aquinas’s Third Way, as found in ST I. Q.2, A.3.

the freedom of persons throughout creation (be they human, alien, or angelic (this lattermost we are assuming)). This loss of freedom is very possibly not in the moral interest of every being in the universe – including this omnipotent God.\textsuperscript{214} Thus, Swinburne thinks it prudent that omnipotence be something which a being can cease to have (or lose by virtue of ceasing to be).\textsuperscript{215} It is here that the second reason becomes relevant – for Swinburne thinks moral goodness is a very important concern for omnipotent agents, such that they will always seek out the best moral action in any given case.\textsuperscript{216} He believes this to the point that he thinks an omnipotent agent ceasing to be omnipotent on moral grounds, whatever those may be (likely having to do with that omnipotent being’s overwhelming the freedom of rational creatures if it remains omnipotent), is a sensible and warranted move.\textsuperscript{217}

These are the reasons why Swinburne will want to allow for an omnipotent being’s ceasing to be omnipotent (either by depriving themselves of that power or ceasing to exist – Swinburne thinks an omnipotent being can do either).\textsuperscript{218} Yet, ‘why’ is not ‘how’ – why Swinburne might wish to have an omnipotent agent deprive themselves of their omnipotence does nothing to demonstrate if his account of omnipotence can sensibly admit this possibility. Swinburne’s argues that his conception of omnipotence (and divine personhood) does indeed allow for an omnipotent being to deprive themselves of their own omnipotence, whether that be by ridding themselves of their omnipotent power, or causing themselves to cease to exist (by ‘committing suicide’ Swinburne notes at one point).\textsuperscript{219}

There are in essence two ideas underlying his thought which allow for Swinburne’s account to admit the possibility of God to ceasing to be omnipotent. The first idea is that omnipotent agents, like the persons whose freedoms they can overwhelm, are also themselves persons. The second is that all persons have a particular relationship with the good in Swinburne’s account. We will explore both of these now.

\textsuperscript{214} Ibid., p. 148.
\textsuperscript{215} Ibid., p. 165.
\textsuperscript{216} Ibid., p. 148.
\textsuperscript{217} Ibid, pp. 147-148.
\textsuperscript{218} Ibid., p. 248.
\textsuperscript{219} Ibid.
Swinburne On Personhood

To make clear how Swinburne’s account of God allows for that God to cease to be an omnipotent agent, we must consider what kind of being Swinburne thinks can be an omnipotent agent. As Wynn points out, Swinburne is very much an adherent of the model of theism which is in vogue in contemporary philosophy of religion. This model holds that God is not some immutable, timeless, divinely simple sort of entity; instead, God is seen to be ‘an individual person, who exists in time, and is related to things in the world not only as their cause, but also in various respects as their effect’. Thus, we must look at what Swinburne thinks a ‘person’ is; then we can see why he argues for omnipotent persons. Simply put, Swinburne thinks that persons are ‘mental substances’, which makes them substances of the sort which possess some mental property essentially. By ‘essentially’ Swinburne refers to logical necessity, such that if a substance lacked the property ‘mental’, it could never be a mental substance. Mental properties include properties like ‘perceiving an object’, and ‘intentionally performing bodily actions’. Some substances are not only mental substances, but pure mental substances, in that they only require mental properties to exist (in contrast to physical substances, which are the opposite, only requiring physical properties to exist). In addition, there are pure mental properties, which a substance can possess only without reference to some physical substance.

Consider the event ‘smelling a delicious pie on the windowsill’, a pie of the sort which would cause cartoon cats to glide toward it, eyes clamped shut, smiling dreamily. This property, ‘smelling a delicious pie on the windowsill’ is a mental one, not simply because it relies on sense perception being received by some mind, but because the entity smelling the pie on the windowsill has what Swinburne terms ‘privileged access’ to that property. However, this property is not a ‘pure’ mental one for it requires the existence of some physical object or other (in this case, the delicious pie, the windowsill, the house, the smell of the piecrust, and so on). The existence of these physical objects necessitates

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221 Ibid.
222 Swinburne, The Coherence of Theism, p. 105.
223 Ibid. p. 105.
224 Ibid; privileged access follows from a substance necessarily having some property like a mental one, and essentially refers to a substance being able to experience that event. Swinburne considers a mental property to be the sort which entails that if a substance has that mental property, that substance necessarily has privileged access to the event of its having the property (i.e. the substance can experience that event).
some substance having the property of being a delicious pie, and another being a windowsill, and so on. Yet, located within the mental property of seeing a delicious pie on the windowsill there in fact is a ‘pure’ mental property as a component part of this first mental property.\textsuperscript{225} Smelling the pie, after all, leads to a purely mental experience of the pie’s smell (much as “seeing Richard Nixon dance the ‘Macarena’” leads to a purely mental experience of that event – namely, an image of Richard Nixon dancing the ‘Macarena’). Thus one can find within mental properties, pure mental properties as component parts of these ‘impure’ mental properties.

S\textsuperscript{226} These are sensations (feeling hot or cold, for instance), thoughts (of the ‘occurrent’ variety – in other words, thoughts which might occur to someone, like ‘that is a large hat’, or ‘that English philosopher of religion has a terribly complex style of writing’), intentions (which one intends to realise through some means or other), beliefs, and finally, desires (which Swinburne calls ‘inclinations to do some action’).\textsuperscript{227} Of these, thoughts, intentions, beliefs, and desires are all propositional events which entail an attitude of some sort towards some proposition (specifically, thinking about that proposition, intending to cause that proposition to be true, desiring that it be true, and believing it to be true). Sensations, thoughts, and intentions are also conscious events, for one is conscious of having them while one has them. Beliefs and desires are not precisely conscious, in contrast, for they may linger in the mind unnoticed and thus unconsciously. Yet, beliefs and desires are still mental events all the same, because ‘we can become conscious of them if we choose, and so have privileged access to them’, Swinburne argues.\textsuperscript{228} Finally, the capacity to have conscious events is also a pure mental event, on the grounds that if one has that capacity, they can then have privileged access to ‘whether’ they have that capacity.

Swinburne concludes his account of personhood with the argument that mental lives consist in a succession of pure mental events, like thoughts, beliefs, desires, and so on.\textsuperscript{229} If one ceases to have any pure mental events, or indeed the capacity to have those mental events, then one would cease to exist.\textsuperscript{230}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{225} Ibid., p. 106.
\item \textsuperscript{226} Ibid., p. 107.
\item \textsuperscript{227} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{228} Ibid., p. 107.
\item \textsuperscript{229} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{230} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
**What Sorts of Things Can Be Persons?**

Swinburne’s criteria for personhood seems, then, that one be a mental substance (which means they necessarily possess mental properties like intending bodily action or perceiving substances like delicious pies and Richard Nixon). Swinburne notes that it follows that human beings are thus mental substances, and from this it is evident that human beings are persons.\(^{231}\) Other substances in the world are also mental substances, however. Certain sorts of animals, Swinburne admits, are mental substances in many of the same ways that humans are, having desires and intentions and the like, as well as only existing so long as they either have these mental properties or at least the capacity for them.\(^{232}\) Swinburne clarifies, however, that though these animals might well be mental substances, this does not warrant their being called ‘persons’. This is because he now offers an additional criterion by which something be called a person: persons do not only have mental properties like sensations, but also ‘propositional events of all the above kinds of some sophistication’.\(^{233}\)

Persons, Swinburne continues, can have beliefs which are complex, in that their beliefs can concern things like ‘dateable events in the distant past or future’, or the ‘invisible constitutions of visible objects’ (such as the notion that physical things consist of many small particles and atoms and the like which are imperceptible without specialised means).\(^{234}\) Persons can also have beliefs of other types – the belief that some proposition makes another distinct proposition more or less likely. Persons can also have thoughts about being, such that a person can contemplate the existence of some being without necessarily believing that such a being exists.\(^{235}\) Still other things distinguish persons from non-persons – forming intentions to communicate beliefs and thoughts to other persons, acquiring new true beliefs about the mental events of other persons, and finally, and most importantly, possessing moral beliefs by which certain actions are judged to be morally good or bad.\(^{236}\) In summary, then, a person is a mental substance which can have

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\(^{231}\) Ibid.

\(^{232}\) Ibid.

\(^{233}\) Ibid.


\(^{235}\) Ibid.

\(^{236}\) Ibid., p. 108; Swinburne does not explain in detail here why moral beliefs are of particular importance for persons; we can imagine, however, that at least in terms of demarcation between persons and non-persons that moral beliefs are important, for many animals do not seem to have beliefs like ‘this action is ‘good’ or ‘bad’, and so should be encouraged or avoided, respectively, when I am in the presence of my animal friends so that I can make myself a good moral example for them’. 

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sophisticated propositional events concerning things like thoughts, beliefs, morality, and so on.

**God as Person**

Humans then certainly make the grade as persons. So too, Swinburne adds, might the inhabitants of some distant planet who also possess sophisticated propositional mental events (though such beings would not technically be *human* persons, Swinburne adds). To this list we can apparently add angels (not that Swinburne confirms this in his *Coherence of Theism*), and most importantly of all, the omnipotent, omniscient God. For in Swinburne’s view, in describing a person, he has described God — for God too is a being who possess sophisticated propositional mental events like beliefs, moral notions, and so on. Moreover, just as a human would cease to be a person if these mental events were to abate, so too would God.

However, there is a wrinkle to calling God a ‘person’ as one might call a human being or some rational alien (say, a Wookiee from the planet Kashyyyk, or a Vulcan from the planet Vulcan, fictional though these latter two are) a person. Humans, Wookiees, and Vulcans are all *embodied* persons — they have physical properties like height, weight, and extension in space alongside their sophisticated mental events. God, however, is generally held *not* to be embodied (outside of certain, specific contexts, like God’s Incarnation as Christ in the Christian faith, which is beyond the scope of this present work to properly analyse). Swinburne offers that the notion that God is a person, albeit one who lacks a body, is ‘the most elementary claim of theism’.237 If God is a person, but a person who is not embodied, then Swinburne opines God must be named something else — not a person, but a ‘spirit’ — a person who *lacks* a body.238

What is it for a person to lack a body? Swinburne offers that this question is best answered with another — what is it like for a person to *have* a body, instead?239 He subscribes to the views of Harrison, who suggests there are approximately five things involved in a person’s having a body (and more specifically, a body which is *that specific person’s body*, rather than a body in general). Harrison describes these five things as relating to disturbances, awareness, movement, vantage point, and the impact on mental events by

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237 Ibid., p. 104.
238 At least in *The Coherence of Theism*, Swinburne does not make explicit if the moniker ‘spirit’ can apply to angels, also. It would seem probable that the term might, however.
239 Ibid., p. 112.
bodily ones. Each of these things are relatively intuitive. Disturbances in my body result in my feeling a certain way, whereas disturbances in the wardrobe next to me, or even those in my brother, another person, do not. I am aware of what goes on in my body, and not in those bodies which are not mine – say, a full or empty stomach – and I can feel these things without any inference from anything else at all. I can move parts of my body as ‘instrumentally basic’ actions – but to move the parts of other bodies, I must make use of my body. I see the world from my body; it is the perspective, or even vantage point, from which I look out on the world. It is also from my body that I learn things about the world (insofar as these things affect my body). Outside equipment is necessary for me to see from other vantage points (the Go-Pro camera strapped to the head of the frighteningly vapid skydiver, for instance). Finally, my thoughts and feelings are affected ‘non-rationally’ by events within my body – were a person to pour alcohol down my gullet, I might become overly aggressive, or confident, or friendly, and even start to experience different sensory stimuli not present in the world (dancing pink elephants, to suggest one example). Swinburne concludes that it follows that a person has a body if ‘there is a physical object to which [that person] is related in any of the above five ways’. Concomitantly, if a person is related to different physical objects in each of these five ways, or is related to a physical object in only some of these ways, then that person is only embodied to some degree.

Can God relate to a physical body in any of these five ways? Swinburne notes that God certainly can’t relate to some physical object in the first (disturbances) and fifth (thoughts and feelings affected by events within a body) ways. This makes sense; after all, what physical object could possibly cause God discomfiture, and what physical object could be affected so as to colour God’s thinking about the world? Swinburne finishes that to understand God as ‘spirit’ is to understand him as relating to the physical universe in some of the ways in which humans are related to their bodies (in this he seems to point...
Thus, Swinburne concludes, to call God a ‘spirit’ is to say that God is ‘not tied down to acquiring knowledge or causing affects by acting through any particular chunk of matter’.246

God as Person: Logically Possible?

With his definition of God as spirit in place, Swinburne turns to consider whether this sort of being is ‘logically possible’. He thinks it is, and sets about explaining this with reference to a thought experiment:

Conceive of some person gradually ceasing to be affected by alcohol or drugs, and their thinking remaining fully rational, however scientists interfere with her brain. Conceive too that she ceases to feel any pains, aches, or thrills, although she remains aware of what is happening in what was her body. She gradually finds herself aware of what is happening in bodies other than her own and other physical objects at any place in space – at any rate to the extent of being able to give invariably true answers to questions about these things, an ability that proves unaffected by other people interfering with lines of communication – for example, turning off lights so that no light is reflected by the objects of which she is aware. She sees both the insides and outsides of all things. She remains able to talk and wave her hands about, but finds herself also able to move, as an instrumentally basic action, anything else that she chooses, including the hands of other people, and to utter words that can only be heard anywhere. She can do these things without needing to act through brain events or other physical events in order to do so. However, although she finds herself gaining these strange powers, she remains otherwise the same – capable of thinking, reasoning, wanting, hoping, and fearing. The existence of such a person would entail, indeed would constitute, the existence of an omnipresent spirit. Surely this is conceivable; we can make sense of what it would be like for this to happen. So it is logically possible.247

Swinburne asks rather a lot of his readers here, as noted by a number of commentators like Peter Van Inwagen and Brian Davies.248 This is because Swinburne is essentially asking that one imagine something entirely beyond the realm of human experience of the world, and hoping that this imagining will lead to the notion presented being conceivable;

245 Swinburne, The Coherence of Theism, p. 113.
246 Ibid.; this has some interesting consequences for Swinburne’s views on omnipresence, another of the divine attributes God is traditionally held to possess. Swinburne, for his part, claims that his understanding of God as spirit actually allows him an understanding of omnipresence which is explicitly similar to Aquinas’s (in that Swinburne thinks omnipresence equates to God being able to cause effects at every place directly (as an instrumentally basic action) and knows what is happening at every place without the information coming to him through some causal chain. Here Swinburne explicitly references what Aquinas says at ST. I. Q.8. A.3, where Aquinas articulates what Swinburne terms a ‘fuller’ version of the doctrine he himself has just offered.
247 Ibid., p. 114.
and thus, by his logic, possible. The experiences of this hypothetical woman are bizarre and even unpleasant, however. Moreover, they seem not to point necessarily to some divine being, but simply something more than human – a demon, an angel, a cosmic being from another dimension, or perhaps a particularly powerful superhero. Beings with the power-set this woman is described as possessing abound in popular fiction – though often with long treatise on how these powers often interfere with, or over-power, that being’s humanity. That they trample over the humanity of these characters is, admittedly, not to say that these characters aren’t treated as persons. It is hard to argue that in the vast majority of stories he features in that Superman’s powers are conceived of as leading to the conclusion that he is not a person who thinks, wants, feels, and so on, even if they don’t contrive to make him seem human.

It is interesting to look back at reviews of Swinburne’s Coherence of Theism which were circulated just after the text was first published. A number of reviewers (again, Peter Van Inwagen and Brian Davies) were particularly unhappy with Swinburne’s thought experiment, concluding that it was both unreasonable, and unhelpful – mainly because the things which Swinburne asks us to imagine about a person like the above are simply things which seem impossible to imagine. In recognition of this, the most up-to-date version of this text (and thus the one made use of in this thesis) does not ask the reader to imagine these things happening to them, but instead, as above, to imagine them happening to someone else. Is this a sufficient change, however? In changing the act of imagination so that it concerns someone else, Swinburne no longer has to ask the reader to imagine subjectively difficult things like ‘gradually finding oneself becoming aware of what is happening in other bodies’. Instead, one need only imagine that happening to another person – but this still entails an act of imagination which postulates vastly unintuitive notions about other persons. What sort of person could we imagine could possibly be aware of, and able to affect the actions of, other bodies than their own? A person who can ‘see both the insides and the outsides of all things’? A person who is able to do these sorts of things without needing to act through ‘brain events’ or physical means – yet who remains entirely person-like otherwise? A person who can still want, fear, reason, and hope? How would such a person relate to us? That is also what Swinburne is asking us to consider, in lieu of imagining these things happening to ourselves – and this point is not given even attention.
In truth, this sort of person does not seem possible to imagine, unless one heads to explicitly challenging science fiction as a source of reference – and stories of this sort are meant to challenge and mystify. Swinburne does seem to recognise this, when he notes that human imagination would struggle to depict such a person ‘in the sense of having a full mental image of someone doing and having happen to him all of these things’ – but he attempts to deflect this with an argument he advances elsewhere in this same text which holds that ‘conceivability does not require imaginability’. This is a striking notion, and one which requires more justification than Swinburne offers it here.249

Regardless of all these issues, Swinburne concludes that he thinks the existence of a person of the sort described above would entail, and indeed even constitute, the existence of an omnipresent spirit – like God. We know, then, that for Swinburne, this is the sort of person that God is – not embodied, but still able to relate to the universe in ways humans relate to their bodies. Moreover, this God seems able to fear, want, hope, and so on – for these are all pure, sufficiently sophisticated mental events which makes some substance a person rather than a non-person. Already we have clear divergences from the doctrines of classical theism.

Omnipotent Person and Form

There is one more aspect of God’s personhood which demands our attention before we can consider what it is for an omnipotent person, as Swinburne has defined one, to cease to be omnipotent (through whatever means it might choose – depowering itself, allowing another being to deprive it of is existence, ‘committing suicide’, and so on).250 Swinburne notes during his discussion of God’s necessary properties that something many theists ascribe to God is ‘eternity’. Swinburne is willing to grant this, but describes it in terms of being either ‘backwardly’ or ‘forwardly’ everlasting.251

Up until this point, this thesis has borne in mind the manner in which Swinburne approaches ‘God talk’. Thus, everything we have said of Swinburne’s account thus far (concerning things like God’s omnipotence, temporality, and personhood) has explicitly

249 On page 12 of The Coherence Of Theism Swinburne notes that his understanding of conceivability as related to logical possibility is similar to that expressed by David Chalmers in his article ‘Does Conceivability Entail Possibility?’, in T. S. Gendler and J. Hawthorne (eds.), Conceivability and Possibility, Oxford University Press (2002).
251 Ibid., p. 228.
made use of words in a common-sensical manner.\footnote{Ibid., p. 247.} ‘Person’ means the same for God as it does for humans and aliens, and so refers to a substance who experiences sophisticated, propositional mental events. We were content with this, and prospered under it. Swinburne, however, notes that if one is to ascribe to God properties like ‘everlasting’, one hits a difficulty with certain words like ‘person’ – they simply don’t stretch far enough to admit this sort of property when the word is applied to God. The specific issue, Swinburne claims, is with regard to God’s being ‘backwardly’ everlasting. Thus, Swinburne concludes, if one is to ascribe to God the property of being ‘backwardly’ everlasting, the standard, mundane, common-sense usage of the word ‘person’ which he – and by extension this thesis – have made use of no longer suffices on its own.

Why is this an issue? What about being ‘backwardly’ everlasting makes the use of this term problematic? Swinburne explains that in his account, a person has a ‘this-ness’ which persists through time. This notion of ‘this-ness’ is broadly similar to Aquinas’s understanding of essence – it refers to a quiddity, or a ‘what-ness’ that applies to each person, and therefore distinguishes one person from another person. This ‘this-ness’ is also what makes a person the same person at earlier and later times.\footnote{Ibid., p. 249.} Given that God is also a person, Swinburne notes that it would seem to follow that God has some ‘this-ness’ also. This would allow God’s identity to be preserved over the flow over time.

The problem, as Swinburne conceives of it, is that if God has the essential property of ‘being backwardly everlasting’, then it follows that God is also ‘backwardly everlastingly omnipotent’.\footnote{Ibid.} This means that God must be omnipotent for all the times that God exists – both forwards and backwards. This means that on Swinburne’s account, God cannot begin to exist, or become omnipotent at some point after he has begun to exist. If either of these things were the case, God would be less powerful at some time in the past, and so could not be backwardly everlastingly omnipotent.\footnote{Ibid.}

However, Swinburne argues that God’s being ‘backwardly everlastingly omnipotent’ is important (and indeed common in many theistic accounts, like Augustine and Aquinas).\footnote{Ibid.} Thus, he thinks there is only one solution: to dispense with the notion ‘this-
ness’ introduced in the last paragraph. This leads him to liken God to a Platonic form— or rather, a ‘supreme form’. This is an interesting move, and Swinburne claims it is workable, because forms lack ‘this-ness’ (which prevented God’s being backwardly everlastingly omnipotent). He explains this with reference to the fact that forms do not need ‘this-ness’ to be distinct. All tables, he notes, participate in the very same form of ‘being a table’; there is not a separate form of ‘being a table’ for each individual table. In a way, then, forms do not have ‘this-ness’ because they are what constitutes a ‘this-ness’ – a table is a table because it participates in the form of (or has the property of) ‘being a table’.

What does this mean for God? Swinburne notes if one is to think of God as a supreme form, then one is, in essence, thinking of God as ‘nothing but a changeless impersonal principle’. This, in effect, solves the ‘identity’ problem; God is now able to be ‘backwardly everlastingly omnipotent’ all the while maintaining a consistent identity.

However, in order to make this notion of God as ‘supreme form’ (in that he lacks ‘this-ness’ but nevertheless maintains an identity and is both ‘forwardly’ and ‘backwardly’ omnipotent) work alongside the notion that God is ‘person’, Swinburne must appeal to analogy. In reality, what Swinburne wishes to say is that God is a person who lacks ‘this-ness’, and so can be both backwardly and forwardly everlastingly omnipotent, and this leads him to the conclusion that the word ‘person’, used so far in this thesis, no longer suffices. Thus, he sets about modifying ‘the semantic and syntactic rules’ which govern the word. This he accomplishes in the following fashion (emphasis mine):

To do this, we retain the same paradigm examples of ‘persons’, but insist that, in order to be a ‘person’, some being needs only to resemble the paradigm examples more than it resembles objects that are clear cases of ‘non-persons’, but [this person] does not need to resemble the paradigm examples as much as they resemble each other. The paradigm examples of ‘non-persons’ are those ordinary things that we unhesitatingly and naturally say are not persons – for example, houses or trees or tables. With two exceptions, we retain all the syntactic rules linking ‘person’ with other expressions; as before, a ‘person’ is (of logical

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257 Ibid.
258 Ibid. Swinburne references Plato’s Republic 508e – 509b to explain the nature of the supreme form; this is the form of the good, which is apparently ‘the cause of knowledge and truth’.
259 Swinburne, The Coherence of Theism, p. 250.
260 Ibid.
261 Ibid.
necessity) a mental substance who is capable of having mental events of some sophistication.  

What are these two exceptions? Swinburne explains the first as follows: “We abandon any syntactic rules that allow us to deduce from ‘S is a person’ propositions of the form ‘S could have less power or knowledge than he has’”. The second exception, meanwhile, runs like this:

…”we abandon any syntactic rules that allow us to infer from ‘S is a person’ propositions of the form ‘there could be a different person instead of S who has all the same properties as S’.

This accomplishes, Swinburne notes, a new analogical sense of ‘person’ in which it will be a contingent (that is to say, not necessary) truth about certain kinds of ‘person’ that these persons could exist with less power, or less knowledge, than they have at some other time. It also makes ‘this-ness’ a contingent property of ‘person’. Thus, this is the sense that one can call God a person in Swinburne’s account – utterly normally, save these two exceptions.

There is, however, some more modification to be done; what Swinburne has done for ‘person’ he now does for ‘form’, so as to make that term analogically predicatable of God also. First, he reiterates the ‘normal’ understanding of that term as referring to unchanging, underlying essences which would exist whether or not there were any substances which are governed by them. Swinburne illustrates this with some examples: the essence (or form) of an electron does not cause that electron to annihilate a positron, should it collide with one, for instance. Nor does the law of gravity cause material bodies to exist; rather, it simply ‘determines what effects already existing substances will have on other substances’. This being the case, Swinburne reasons, we must therefore give the word form an ‘analogical sense’ which will allow it to be applied to God.

The modifications he makes to ‘form’ are broadly similar to the ones he makes to the word ‘person’:

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262 Ibid., p. 251.
263 Ibid.
264 Ibid.
265 Ibid.
266 Ibid., p. 252.
267 Ibid.
268 Ibid.
So, if we are to think of God as a ‘form’ who causes the existence of substances [rather than merely governing them, like the law of gravity], we must give the word an analogical sense. This again involves retaining the same paradigm examples of ‘forms’ (that is, properties), but insisting that, in order to be a ‘form’, some being needs only to resemble the paradigm examples more than it resembles objects that are clear cases of ‘non-forms’, but does not need to resemble the paradigm examples as much as they resemble each other.269

What are these paradigm examples of non-forms? Again, the examples that Swinburne points to are fairly intuitive, and what he thinks most would ‘unhesitatingly and naturally’ say are substances rather than properties: houses, trees, tables, and the like.270 There is one more thing which must be done, however: we must abandon ‘any syntactic rules’ of the following sort: those which allow us to infer from ‘S is a form’ that ‘S exists or causes effects iff it is instantiated in substance’, or that ‘S is immutable and timeless’.271 Otherwise, all other rules governing the term ‘forms’ are free game – such as the rule which states that ‘S is a form’ entails ‘S does not have this-ness’, or the rule that holds that ‘if S exists at one time, S exists at all times’.272

The upshot of all this is that Swinburne’s conception of the word ‘person’, along the word ‘form’, when these are properly analogised, are, in his view, now suitable for his conception of God. This is so because they now allow for a ‘backwardly everlastingly omnipotent’ God, who maintains an identity but lacks a ‘this-ness’. Swinburne credits this development of ‘person’ and ‘form’ as applied to God as solving some serious conceptual issues surrounding arguments for God’s existence (by virtue of allowing for a ‘very simple hypothesis’ which is, in his mind, more likely to be true by virtue of that simplicity). That God is now both ‘form’ and ‘person’ is the last major step in understanding God as the latter. We move on now to consider what a person ceasing to be omnipotent entails.

**Omnipotent Persons Ceasing to Be Omnipotent**

Here, now, is the crucial point for this first divergence: why is it that omnipotent persons can cease be omnipotent in Swinburne’s account? He cites one key reason: a person might be able to divest themselves of omnipotent power on moral grounds. This is because

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269 Ibid., p. 252.
270 Ibid.
271 Ibid.
272 Ibid.
Swinburne thinks that persons, whether God, human, alien, or angelic, have a particular relationship with morality, which greatly affects their relationship with freedom.\textsuperscript{273}

This point will require some explanation. Swinburne holds the view that all persons are free, in the sense of freely making choices between various states of affairs – but to varying degrees. Human persons are limited in their freedom by virtue of their place in the world and the bodies they possess, which can bring to bear ‘non-rational’ influence on their minds which might either outright prevent certain choices, or make others inordinately enticing. Consider, for instance, the human person who craves alcohol. Such a person may desire to bring about a state of affairs like ‘never drinking alcohol again’, but might be prevented from doing so because that freely-willed choice runs into conflict with a non-rational addiction to alcohol which can overwhelm rational decision making.\textsuperscript{274}

In contrast, Swinburne holds that omnipotent persons are free to a great degree than human persons precisely because they are never accosted by ‘non-rational influences’, as these.\textsuperscript{275} This notion – that God is not impacted from without, and so is never influenced to act in one way rather than another – is essentially how Swinburne understands divine freedom, for it entails acting by ‘reason alone’.\textsuperscript{276} As he puts it:

\begin{quote}
But it seems to me clear that what is normally meant by the claim that God acts ‘freely’ is that nothing causes, or even causally influences, God to do what he does. He does what he does because he chooses to do it, and nothing causes God to make the choices he does … … Nothing apart from any reasons there might be for doing it influences him to create the world, or to keep the laws of nature operative, or to do anything else that he does.\textsuperscript{277}
\end{quote}

Of course, God does not act randomly, or for no reason; God only acts, Swinburne thinks, when he has a purpose in so doing, or some sensible reason to do so.\textsuperscript{278} Such purposes and reasons, Swinburne offers, are always in pursuit of some state of affairs which God sees as ‘a good thing’, which are pointed out by divine reason.\textsuperscript{279} In Thomistic terms, then, Swinburne holds that a person, divine or created, only ever acts in pursuit of some good as a final cause. Goodness is associated with desirability, and that desire is the basis

\textsuperscript{273} Ibid., p. 148.
\textsuperscript{274} Ibid., p. 183.
\textsuperscript{275} Ibid., p. 142.
\textsuperscript{276} Ibid., p. 146.
\textsuperscript{277} Ibid., p. 146.
\textsuperscript{278} Ibid., p. 142.
\textsuperscript{279} Ibid., p. 144.

The same of course applies for all persons; Swinburne thinks having a reason amounts to some person, God, man, angel, or alien, viewing some state of affairs as ‘good’ and thus worth bringing about.
for human decision making.\textsuperscript{280} The fact that this idea is one he has in common with both Aristotle and Aquinas is not lost on Swinburne; he credits the former with identifying it, and the latter with ‘emphasising it’.\textsuperscript{281}

Thus, Swinburne thinks that there is a relationship between freedom and goodness, such that a person must seek out and accomplish the best possible action in some situation.\textsuperscript{282} This goes further for perfectly free persons, like the omnipotent God. The debate will turn, then, on the following point: can there be a state of affairs in which an omnipotent agent’s best act might be to cease to exist, or cease to be omnipotent? Swinburne is not so forceful as to suggest that this \textit{will} be the case in any set of affairs. Instead, he claims that it is necessary for this to remain as a distinct possibility.\textsuperscript{283} In fact, Swinburne notes, it may well be the case that in some situation there \textit{is} no best possible action for an omnipotent being to carry out.\textsuperscript{284} Moreover, even if such a possibility did come to pass, Swinburne urges that the onus to cease to be omnipotent is entirely on the omnipotent being itself. Thus, that being might not \textit{wish} to cease to be omnipotent, and then may remain so for all time (and thus not ridding itself of its omnipotence either by divesting itself of that power, or by making itself cease to be, as we have noted above).

This latter point is odd, however – for as we have seen, Swinburne thinks there is a particular relationship between free persons and moral goodness. A free person \textit{must}, in Swinburne’s view, ‘do what he believes to be the best action (if there is one).\textsuperscript{285} Oddly, then, it seems an omnipotent being might \textit{not} have the choice; if a best action in some situation is to cease to be omnipotent, then such an agent, as a free person, \textit{must} cease to be omnipotent. In one sense, then, the omnipotent person is bound \textit{by} their freedom, which is, at the least, oxymoronic.

\textbf{Aquinas Responds}

So, Swinburne thinks one must keep in mind there is a possibility that the best, most moral action for an omnipotent being might be to cease to be omnipotent through some means. Moreover, this omnipotent being, as a perfectly free person, will be bound to undertake this ‘ceasing to be omnipotent’ action. This is an interesting contrast to

\textsuperscript{280} ST I. Q.83. A.1 Reply to Objection Five.
\textsuperscript{281} Swinburne, \textit{The Coherence of Theism}, p. 144.
\textsuperscript{282} Ibid., pp. 165-166.
\textsuperscript{283} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{284} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{285} Ibid.
Aquinas’s account, for while he will agree that God is a person (after a fashion) his conception of omnipotence as it relates to God, and God to being more generally, will not permit God to cease to be omnipotent.

How Swinburne’s arguments concerning God ceasing to be omnipotent fare in comparison with Aquinas’s account will be established in the next chapter. Before that, however, we have one more divergence to consider: that one which concerns necessity.

**Divergence Three: Necessity and Omnipotent Persons**

The notion that an omnipotent being can conceivably cease to be omnipotent raises questions about the *necessity* of that omnipotent being. Given that Swinburne explicitly includes ‘ceasing to be omnipotent’ as an action an omnipotent agent can carry out (and indeed considers it of such central importance as to make space for it in his final definition of omnipotence, as we saw previously), it follows that Swinburne must answer questions concerning God’s necessity.

For many Christian thinkers, God is necessary in the sense that without God’s existence, the universe would itself not exist. Aquinas, notably, is an example. Is this the case for Swinburne, however? Before we can establish this, we need to consider his views on necessity. Broadly speaking, Swinburne thinks the issue of necessity of *any* sort is explicable primarily in *language*. As he notes:

> … in chapter five [of *The Christian God*], I argued in favour of a modified nominalist account – that the necessity of the ‘broadly logical kind’ that is attributed to statements and propositions is ultimately a matter of human sentences and thoughts, the context in which they are had, and which other sentences and thoughts humans see them as involving.

To justify this view, Swinburne appeals to an assumption of ‘common language’, which he thinks allows different interlocutors to examine and discuss things like logical possibility, necessity, and contradiction. He cites as an example, the sentence ‘I am ill’. Though this is a sentence which can be rendered in entirely distinct languages, and uttered disparate peoples separated by time, convention, and culture, the sentence

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286 See Aquinas’s Third Way, found in ST. I. Q.2 A.3.
288 Ibid.
fundamentally expresses the very same statement in each context. In the very same sense, a sentence which elucidates something about necessity or logical possibility can be understood by disparate peoples at disparate times. An assumption of common language is not the only criteria by which different peoples can analyse and determine logical necessity; the sentences used by these different peoples must be of a specific type: they must be declarative in nature, in that they make some claim about the world (as when I say that ‘I am hungry’, or ‘that English philosopher of religion is incomprehensible’ and so on).

If a sentence is both declarative and makes use of component words which have a sense both in their own language (and more generally in multiple languages) they can be used to consider things like necessity, logical possibility, and logical impossibility. Such a sentence can take any number of forms; everything from “existential generalisations” to “subject-predicate sentences”. Thus, if any logical (or metaphysical) necessities exist, Swinburne notes, these are then explicable in sentences uttered by interlocutors united not only in language but in the general meanings of the words they use.

Finally, it is important to note that Swinburne distinguishes between metaphysical and logical necessities. Metaphysical necessities come in one of two varieties: they are either discoverable a priori, or a posteriori. It is only the former sort – those which are discoverable entirely a priori, which Swinburne labels ‘logical necessities’. Logical necessities for Swinburne can encompass anything from ‘narrowly’ necessary things, like those which emerge from the findings of calculus or the systems used by logicians, to conceptual necessities which arise from definitions. An example of the latter is the sentence ‘all triangles have angles which, when added together, equal 180 degrees’. How are these sorts of necessities discoverable a priori? Swinburne’s answer is curt: they can be discovered simply by reflection on all that is involved in a claim made by some sentence or other.

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290 Swinburne, The Christian God, p. 97; technically, the sentence ‘I am ill’ is what Swinburne terms a ‘type sentence’, which is the sort of sentence which can be said by any number of people on any number of occasions. This Swinburne contrasts with ‘token sentences’, which are one, particular utterance of a ‘type sentence’ by some specific person at some specific time and place.


292 Ibid.
God as Necessary: Weak Arguments

So, with this all in mind, we can come to see whether God is necessary or not. The answer is, naturally, complicated. Swinburne claims that there are (broadly speaking) three ways to conceive of God’s necessity: there is the strong model, the weak model, and his own ‘intermediate position’ between these two excesses.\(^{293}\) He fixes the ‘weak’ account as the sort belonging to philosophers like Aquinas, who held, in Swinburne’s words, that God is ‘uncaused’.\(^{294}\) This is a reference to Aquinas’s Third Way, which is fitting, given that the Third Way concerns Aquinas’s arguments from necessity.

Very quickly put, Aquinas’s argument here is that something can only come into existence by virtue of being brought into existence by something already existent. Yet, if at one stage nothing had existence, there would now not be anything – which is ‘absurd’, Aquinas claims, because things do exist. Thus, he reasons, not all beings are possible; something must exist necessarily. Now, this presents a problem of its own, for Aquinas thinks necessity is caused. Something is only necessary if that necessity is caused by some other thing – but if the one necessary thing has its necessity caused by another necessary thing, and that thing has its necessity caused by another necessary thing, and so on and so forth, one reaches what Aquinas thinks is another absurdity: an infinite regress.\(^{295}\) Thus, Aquinas concludes, there must exist something which does not receive its necessity from without, but is essentially necessary, and thereby can cause necessity in all other things. This, Aquinas declares, ‘all men speak of as God’.\(^{296}\)

Swinburne’s take on Aquinas’s understanding of necessity is that it is the ‘weaker’ of the two excesses those arguments can be sorted into in the sense that God’s necessity is not contingent on necessity imported from somewhere else.\(^{297}\) The problem, Swinburne argues, is that it is still conceivable that this God is contingent – or at least, the existence of God in Aquinas’s sort of account is possibly the result of some lucky outcome. Moreover, Swinburne claims that not only is the existence of God in this sort of weak account logically contingent, it also seems to assume that God’s existence is a brute fact.

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\(^{293}\) Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, p. 261.

\(^{294}\) *ST I. Q. 2, A.3.*

\(^{295}\) A number of commentators have pointed out that this notion of infinite regress might not be quite as problematic as Aquinas makes it seem, like Bertrand Russell in his text *History of Western Philosophy* (1969), p. 453. It is worth considering why Aquinas does not think two individual necessary objects, each in turn causing the other’s necessity, is not possible – would this not suffice instead of infinite regress, or a single being whose necessity is in-built?

\(^{296}\) *ST I. Q. 2, A.3.*

\(^{297}\) Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, p. 262.
Thus, Swinburne declares that weak arguments ultimately seem to leave God at the ‘mercy’ of something apparently greater than him: the laws of chance. This, he notes, is likely a problem for theists who insist God is necessary and self-sufficient and the cause of all that exists. Thus, Swinburne rejects the weak account of necessity.

**God as Necessary: Strong Arguments**

In any case, this weak sort of necessity just described above contrasts with the aforementioned *strong* sort, which Swinburne claims are the sorts of necessity wherein God is *both* metaphysically *and* logically necessary. In considering the weaker sort of necessity, Swinburne pointed to the arguments of Aquinas and his Third Way; when he looks for examples of the strong sort, he presents examples of ontological arguments. These sorts of arguments, Swinburne tells us, are those in which an argument proceeds *entirely* a priori; they start with mere concepts, like ‘God’, and can reason from that concept to a conclusion like ‘the existence of this God is logically necessary’. The conclusion proceeds sensibly and reasonably from the concepts themselves, then.

Swinburne suggests that Anselm’s ontological argument in his *Proslogion* might well be the earliest ontological argument in on historical record. Anselm’s argument for the existence of God is pleasantly brief and clear-cut, such that it is entertaining to startle philosophy undergraduates with. The argument runs along this line: the definition of God is that which nothing greater than can be thought of, and this everyone can agree upon. Now, something can exist both as mental construct *and* in the world, or *only* as mental construct (by which Anselm means these would ‘exist only in the understanding’). Something which exists both as mental construct *and* in the world is greater than something which only exists mentally. This can be demonstrated by reference to horses and unicorns; the latter is inferior to the former because unicorns only exist as mental constructs, while horses trample through both the understanding *and* the concrete world outside the confines of the mind.

Now, God, Anselm argues, is that which nothing greater than can be thought of, and it does not befit that which is so great that nothing greater than it can be thought of it to exist

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298 Ibid.
299 Ibid.
300 Ibid., p. 263; Swinburne points out that Anselm actually presents two formulations of his famous Ontological Argument; one in *Proslogion* 2, and another, more nuanced version in *Proslogion* 3.
only in the imagination. If God did only exist in the mind (or as Anselm puts it, ‘within the understanding’) one could conceive of something greater than God – something which exists both as a mental construct and as something in the world. Thus, Anselm concludes, if God is to be that which nothing greater than can be thought of, God must exist in the world and in the imagination both, and not only in the imagination as some mental construct with the definition ‘that which nothing greater than can be thought of’.302 In this case, the argument for God’s existence is entirely a priori, and proceeds from start to finish solely on the basis of the definition which Anselm ascribes to God.303 Despite this, Swinburne claims that ‘the vast majority of philosophers’ hold that ontological arguments like Anselm’s are ‘unsound’.304 In any case, ontological arguments of this sort are what Swinburne considers strong arguments concerning God’s necessity, because if a sound ontological argument could be found then the proposition ‘God exists’ would be both logically and metaphysically necessary.305

Why does Swinburne reject both the weak and strong arguments concerning necessity? We noted above that Swinburne seems to think that weak arguments for God’s necessity are still open to charges of God being subject to forces like ‘chance’ – for weak arguments only seem to provide that God’s existence is ultimately only logically contingent. Strong arguments, meanwhile, Swinburne thinks are irrelevant because he doesn’t think it logically possible that ‘it is metaphysically necessary – either logically necessary or a posteriori metaphysically necessary – for any substance (that is, a thing capable of causing or being caused) that that substance exists’.306 Thus, he continues, it is not logically possible that it is metaphysically necessary that God exists – and so no strong arguments for God’s necessity are successful.307

302 Ibid.
303 Many difficulties have been identified with Anselm’s Ontological Argument. One, indeed, was promulgated by Guanilo, a contemporary of Anselm’s, who asked that one instead consider ‘an island which nothing greater than can be thought of’. Given what Anselm has said concerning God, it would seem quite reasonable that such an island like this, too, must exist. Others, like Aquinas, dismiss Anselm’s argument on the basis that it presupposes knowing the divine essence (by virtue of defining it as something like ‘that which nothing greater than can be thought’). See ST I. Q.2 A. 1, and particularly Objection Two and Aquinas’s subsequent reply to it.
304 Swinburne, The Coherence of Theism, p. 263.
305 Ibid.
306 Swinburne, The Coherence of Theism., p. 265.
307 Ibid.
Why These Arguments Fail

To explain why both the strong and weak sorts of arguments fail, we must refer back to what Swinburne explains necessity as consisting in. In short, he thinks propositions – statements about the world and things in it – are expressed by sentences. Propositions (and thus the sentences which express them) can have a modal status, like ‘possible’, or ‘necessary’. A sentence is logically necessary iff its negation entails a contradiction. Swinburne provides an example: consider an existential sentence like ‘there is G’, and then negate it: ‘there is no x such that x is ‘G’’. This sentence is designed to say that ‘a certain property (or conjunction of properties) G is not instantiated. Next, Swinburne points to an argument advanced by Hume, who held that the ‘mere non-existence’ of any being (understood here as including things like substances) of some kind cannot entail a contradiction. What follows from this? Swinburne argues that it seems, therefore, that no positive existential sentence can be ‘logically necessary’; and more so, that no sentence of this kind can actually express a ‘logically necessary proposition’. This applies to propositions of all kinds – even the sort which are supposed to constitute the essence of God. Additionally, if it is not logically necessary that ‘there be any substance having a certain conjunction of properties’, it apparently follows that ‘it cannot be logically necessary that there be a particular substance having (emphasis mine) that conjunction of properties’. The conclusion, then? Swinburne is blunt: “[thus], God cannot be a logically necessary being’. A very strong claim indeed, for one advocating a middle path.

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308 Ibid., p. 266.
309 Ibid.
311 Swinburne, The Coherence of Theism, p. 266.
312 Ibid.
313 Ibid.
314 Ibid., pp. 266-267; Swinburne goes on to clarify what might occur if ‘G’ in the sentence was swapped out for other definitions, including those which are ‘uninformative designators’ (so as to accommodate the notion that humans do not fully understand what God actually is). Swinburne claims, however, that the result is still the same: Hume’s views on the non-existence of any being cannot entail a contradiction. Additionally, in cases where ‘G’ is an uninformative designator about God, Swinburne claims there exists another problem: one now has no reason to assume anything about God’s essential properties – and so theists, in postulating a strong argument for God’s necessity on this basis of divine incomprehensibility, would need to ‘abandon totally the traditional concept of God’. Such a move is not helpful for them, Swinburne claims, for this kind of God is likely not one worthy of religious devotion and worship.
Swinburne’s Middle Path between Strong and Weak Arguments for Necessity

So, Swinburne has claimed that both the strong and weak arguments for God’s necessity have failed. This leaves us, he thinks, with his own intermediate account.315 This argument holds, simply put, that ‘if a divine being exists, there is a true account of the necessity of that being, stronger than the weak account but weaker than the strong account’.316 Interestingly, Swinburne claims his median view can be traced back to a view of Aquinas’s, despite the latter apparently holding to the weak sort of argument. Swinburne clarifies, however, that his development of this view of Aquinas’s argument is one which Aquinas himself may or may not have approved of.317 As we will recall, for Aquinas, God was necessary in the sense that God’s necessity was not received from elsewhere; i.e. that God’s necessity was not caused by some other entity. Instead, God’s necessity is derived from God himself.318

In order to argue for this middle account, Swinburne must first put some foundations in place. He begins with reference to a modified version of Leibniz’s ‘Principle of Sufficient Reason’. Leibniz’s original formulation of that principle held that ‘no fact can be real or existing and no proposition can be true unless there is a sufficient reason why it should be thus and not otherwise, even though in most cases these reasons cannot be known to us’.319 Swinburne rejects this version of the principle as ‘less than compelling’, claiming it is ‘not obviously’ logically necessary. Moreover, he feels that it does not account for intentional agents exercising their free will to choose ‘between alternatives without their choices being caused’, or, indeed, the movement of ‘fundamental particles’ according to Quantum Theory (wherein the behaviour of these particles is not fully determined by their causes).320

To address these issues, Swinburne therefore sets about modifying the Principle of Sufficient Reason, and this modified version (from here on termed the ‘MPSR’) holds that ‘every event has some substance as its total or partial cause’.321 In other words, Swinburne explains, no event can occur unless some substance somewhere exercises its

315 Swinburne, The Coherence of Theism, p. 271.
316 Ibid., pp. 271-272.
317 Ibid., p. 272.
318 ST I, Q.2, A.3. Again we are referring here to Aquinas’s Third Way.
319 G.W. Leibniz, Monadology, Section 32, in The Philosophical Writings of Leibniz, translated by M. Morris (J.M. Dent and Sons, 1934).
320 Swinburne, The Coherence of Theism, p. 272.
321 Ibid.
causal influence to bring about the occurrence of that event (or ‘of some member of a set of alternative events’, Swinburne adds). Though he concedes that this MPSR is also not ‘obviously’ logically necessary, Swinburne does not think there exist any examples of events in the universe which one can reasonably believe have occurred without some cause, whether partial or total, to generate them. Indeed, all causeless events, Swinburne offers, are frequently found to have causes once a sufficiently detailed investigation is carried out upon them.

**Swinburne’s MPSR and God**

Notably, Swinburne claims that (in line with his ‘stronger than the weak, but weaker than the strong’ argument for God’s necessity) there is one possible exception to MPSR. This possible exception is ‘the ultimate cause of things’. For a theist, this ultimate cause of all things is, of course, God – and thus in Swinburne’s view, a ‘person’ (at least in an analogical sense) and therefore a substance. Swinburne claims that if one is to avoid having to postulate either the existence of God (as one does in the weak sort of argument for necessity) or the universe as ‘an enormous brute fact’, one must instead suppose that some kind of causal necessity exists in whatever substance is the ultimate cause of things. This causal necessity is of the kind which allows this substance – God – to exist without being the result of the causal activity of some other substance. This necessity is thus of God’s nature.

Swinburne now refers to a thesis he holds: that ‘if there are good inductive arguments for the existence of a divine being if the supposition of the existence of such a being is logically possible, then probably the supposition that there is such a being is logically possible’. This is quite a lot to take in. Essentially, Swinburne notes that if there are good inductive arguments for the existence of a divine being, and the supposition of the existence of that being is logically possible, then it is probable that this supposition is true – that such a being like this exists.

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322 Ibid.
322 Ibid.
324 Ibid., p. 273.
325 Ibid.
326 Ibid., p. 273.
327 Ibid.
328 Ibid.
329 Ibid. pp. 273-274; Swinburne develops this in some detail in chapter 13 of his text *The Coherence of Theism*. 
Swinburne claims his understanding of God can accommodate this, for his God is conceived of as both a person and a ‘form’ in an analogical sense.\textsuperscript{330} This we examined in the last section; there we found that Swinburne introduced the notion of ‘God as supreme form’ and ‘God as person’ in order to solve a conceptual difficulty involving God’s necessarily being ‘backwardly everlastingly omnipotent’.\textsuperscript{331}

On the understanding that forms exist as Swinburne conceives of them (namely, unchanging ‘essences’ analogous to the laws of nature), and that there is some supreme form upon which all of these other forms depend (which is God, and who is only analogously called a ‘supreme form’), Swinburne argues that this supreme form could neither come into being, nor cease to exist. Thus, if one is to explain this supreme form, this explanation must come in terms of the supreme form’s own features.\textsuperscript{332} The supreme form must then be the cause of its own existence. Crucially, however, this ‘causing to exist’ cannot be accomplished by the supreme form exercising some causal activity – for in Swinburne’s view, a thing must already exist if it is to exercise its causal powers (as we saw in chapter three).\textsuperscript{333} Additionally, this supreme form would always exist anyway, so there would never be a time in which it didn’t exist during which it (or something else) could exercise its’ causal power to make this supreme form exist. For both these reasons, then, Swinburne argues that this supreme form can only be the cause of its own existence ‘if it has an intrinsic causal necessity causing it to exist’.\textsuperscript{334} Thus the existence of this person/form/substance would not be a result of this person/form/substance’s activities – instead it would be a ‘necessary property’ of its own make-up which contrives to make its existence inevitable.\textsuperscript{335}

**Ontological Necessity**

Swinburne admits that this is a strange and unwieldy notion – even potentially paradoxical. Yet, he cautions that this sort of understanding of causality is necessary in order to ensure that the existence of God isn’t some sort of ‘total accident’ (as Swinburne argued it was in weak arguments for God’s necessity, like Aquinas’s.)\textsuperscript{336} To suggest that

\textsuperscript{330} Ibid. p. 274; Swinburne suggests that ‘law’ might be substituted for ‘form’.
\textsuperscript{331} Ibid. p. 250-253.
\textsuperscript{332} Ibid. p. 274.
\textsuperscript{333} Ibid. p. 155.
\textsuperscript{334} Ibid. p. 274.
\textsuperscript{335} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{336} Ibid.
God’s existence is an accident of this kind is unacceptable for Swinburne, on the grounds that it would require admitting that both God and all of God’s actions (including the creation of the universe) has no explanation – again, that it would be a brute fact, as it seems to be in the weak sort of argument for God’s necessity.\footnote{Ibid.}

Therefore the only sensible alternative to this view, Swinburne claims, is to ‘suppose that all events have at least a partial explanation in terms of the action of some substance or of some substance having an intrinsic causal necessity to exist’.\footnote{Ibid.} Swinburne dubs this intrinsic causal necessity as ‘ontological necessity’, and formulates another modified version of Leibniz’s principle of sufficient reason to accommodate it:

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\text{MPSR now takes the form that there is at least a partial causal explanation of every event, in the sense that for every event there is a substance, the action of which or the possession of a property by which, explains why [this event] occurred.} \footnote{Swinburne, \textit{The Coherence of Theism}, p. 274.}
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Ontological necessity, Swinburne clarifies, is distinct from metaphysical necessity. This is because it is, in his account, metaphysically possible that no divine being exists (for the sentence expressing this proposition does not lead to a contradiction, and the word ‘God’ may not refer to anything).\footnote{Ibid.} In contrast, ontological necessity is what Swinburne calls ‘real de re necessity’, for it apparently refers to ‘causal necessity in the actual world’ which is of the sort that could not be other than it is.\footnote{Ibid.}

Swinburne explains:

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\text{For all substances } P \text{ apart from an ontologically necessary substance, (of logical necessity) either } P \text{ is not caused to exist or } P \text{ is caused to exist by } P \text{ or something other than } P \text{ acting at an earlier time.} \footnote{Ibid., p. 275.}
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Putting this in terms of an example, Swinburne is saying here that any substance, like the planet Earth, which is not ontologically necessary, either is not caused to exist, or is either caused to exist by itself or by some other substance which begins to act before the planet Earth exists. Swinburne puts the matter like this:

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\text{Either the existence of the earth or any other constituent of the universe is caused by itself or some other mundane substance acting at an earlier time, in my view themselves caused (totally or partially) by an act of God, or there is no cause of their existence. But if there is an ontologically necessary being, God, he is caused to exist by himself in virtue of his essence for the whole time that he exists and}
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so for ever, and all other substances are either caused or permitted to exist by God. Although only existing substances can have properties, and so having the essential property of ontological necessity cannot in a literal sense force God into existence, it can explain why, if he exists, he does exist.\textsuperscript{343}  

This is really where all of this leads, for Swinburne: the notion that ontological necessity does not \textit{force} God into existence. Instead, it merely explains his existence \textit{if} God exists. In essence, this is where Swinburne stresses the ‘less than the strong’ aspect of his middle path between the excesses of the weak and strong arguments for God’s necessity. He concludes, somewhat anti-climactically, that he ‘cannot give a direct or semi-direct argument for the logical possibility that there is a divine being who is ontologically necessary’.\textsuperscript{344}  
Why so? Swinburne declares that any argument which purports to show that the existence of an ontologically necessary being is \textit{logically} possible will involve a new sense of the word ‘cause’ in its deployment. What would this ‘new sense’ entail of that word entail? Swinburne explains (emphasis mine):

\begin{quotation}
We must abandon the syntactic rule that if A causes B, then A is a substance whose action causes B. For what I am suggesting is that the possession by a substance of a property (a constituent property of the ‘form’ that is that substance) \textit{causes the simultaneous existence of that substance}. We must, therefore, also abandon the principle of the direction of causation that is entailed… …by the rules governing ‘cause’, that a cause precedes its effect.\textsuperscript{345}
\end{quotation}

Why must one abandon these principles? Swinburne claims that until now, the arguments supporting these principles depended upon a common-sensical assumption that no longer seems properly applicable. This assumption was that causes are always substances which are exercising causal power – in other words, they’re \textit{acting} in order to cause their effects. In this case, however, Swinburne notes that this is superfluous, for it cannot apply in cases where the cause of the event of the substance existing \textit{is} the substance existing (even when the substance has ontological necessity).\textsuperscript{346} Two rules concerning causality are maintained, however. The first concerns the direction of causality; Swinburne always advocates that effects must \textit{never} precede their causes (something made clear in Chapter Three of this thesis). This rule is kept because God’s ontological necessity must always exist \textit{at the same time that God does}.\textsuperscript{347} Concomitantly, one can also keep the ‘normal’ understandings of words like ‘intentional action’, as well as terms like ‘past’ and ‘future’

\begin{footnotes}
\item[343] Ibid.
\item[344] Ibid., pp. 275-276.
\item[345] Ibid., p. 275.
\item[346] Ibid.
\item[347] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
– for these make sense of effects never preceding their causes. The second rule regarding causality which is maintained is that if a cause of some event were \textit{not} to have occurred, and this event has no other alternate cause, then this event could not have occurred.\textsuperscript{348}

If this new sense of the word ‘cause’ was applied to God, however, Swinburne still doesn’t think one is able to give a ‘direct or semi-direct’ argument for God’s being ontologically necessary (or even that this ontological necessity is itself logically possible).\textsuperscript{349} This is because if one applies this new understanding of causality to God’s essence (as supreme form) an ‘impossible’ conclusion results: that if God lacked this \textit{particular} essence, including this ontological necessity, then God ‘would not have existed’.

Once more, then, Swinburne claims we must understand the semantic rules governing the word ‘cause’ so that the event of ‘God being ontologically necessary causes his own (simultaneous) existence’ resembles other paradigmatic examples like ‘parents cause the existence of their children’ \textit{more} than it resembles ‘obvious’ examples of things which do \textit{not} cause things – like children causing the existence of their parents.\textsuperscript{350} A significant consequence follows this, however: for now Swinburne thinks that, in light of these many changes to the word ‘cause’, when that term is used in a sense like ‘God being ontologically necessary causes his own (simultaneous) existence’, it is ‘initially unobvious’ whether it is conceivable that a divine being (or \textit{any} being \textit{at all}) has a property like ‘ontological necessity’.\textsuperscript{351}

All this being said, then, Swinburne thinks he cannot give a direct or ‘semi-direct’ argument for the logical possibility that there is a divine being who is ontologically necessary. Yet, he notes, an \textit{inductive} argument for this conclusion is possible, and so formulates one:

\begin{quote}
I now argue that, if it would be somewhat more probable than not that the true explanation of the existence of all substances is that they are caused to exist by a substance that is ontologically necessary, if that supposition is logically possible, then probably that explanation is true and so logically possible.\textsuperscript{352}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{348} Ibid. pp. 275-276.
\textsuperscript{349} Ibid. p. 276.
\textsuperscript{350} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{351} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{352} Ibid.
Why might this entity’s ‘essential ontologically necessity’ make the hypothesis that the existence of a divine being is more probable than not? Swinburne answers that this is because it is ‘simpler’ to postulate that the cause of each and every event (apart from those events entailed by their own existence) is a cause which is very much like the events it explains.\(^{353}\) Such a cause would be similar to these events on the grounds that this cause would also have a cause, and dissimilar in lacking one. Moreover, Swinburne notes, similarity is grounds for simplicity, and ‘simpler’ explanations are, in his view, more likely to be true.\(^{354}\) If such a cause as this is logically possible, Swinburne finishes, then there would be a causal explanation of what would otherwise seem to be ‘an improbable enormous brute fact’ – that there is a divine being.\(^{355}\) However, in giving arguments in favour of this logical possibility of this cause, and that there is such a divine being, it is ultimately the case, in Swinburne’s view, that humans cannot conceive of what it might be for this cause to be true.\(^{356}\) Yet, humans might well have a reason for it to be true all the same – and though humans might fail to make sense of what it is for a being to be ‘essentially ontologically necessary’, they might well still understand the rationality undergirding that notion. This is all to say what Swinburne has already said about his understanding of arguments for God’s necessity: stronger than the weak, but weaker than the strong. The necessity is rational to suppose, but not something understandable in itself.

**Aquinas Responds**

There is much for Aquinas to say here about the supposed inability humans have to positively understand arguments for God’s necessity. As we have noted, Aquinas credits necessity in his Third Way as a pathway to arguing for God’s existence, in stark contrast to Swinburne’s more reserved approach towards arguments for necessity. We shall consider what Aquinas might make of Swinburne’s account, and how he might respond to it, in the next chapter, much as we will the other two divergences.

\(^{353}\) Ibid.
\(^{354}\) Ibid.
\(^{355}\) Ibid., pp. 276-277.
\(^{356}\) Ibid., p. 278.
Chapter Five: Comparison and Relative Merit

In order to make the best possible comparison of Swinburne and Aquinas’s respective understandings of omnipotence, we must now introduce a framework by which one understanding can be said to more coherent than the other. Helpfully, Swinburne himself offers exactly this sort of framework. Thus, we will take it, and consider both his and Aquinas’s arguments for omnipotence in light of it; the one which satisfies it will be judged to be the better account of omnipotence.

Are we justified in using Swinburne’s framework? Given that we are considering Aquinas in light of Swinburne’s views, it makes sense to consider the former in light of the latter. If Aquinas’s arguments meet with approval from Swinburne’s framework, that means they are at least on par with Swinburne’s own arguments for the same. There is also something attractive in the idea of establishing Aquinas’s account as sound thoroughly – and how much more thorough can his account be reckoned to be if subjected to the same standards that Swinburne – his critic – has developed his own, explicitly counter-arguments, in light of?

Finally, there is of course the fact that Aquinas himself can be reasonably argued to have held the two criteria Swinburne uses as valuable in their own right, as we noted in the introduction. There, it was pointed out that Aquinas sees arguments which reflect nature’s causal simplicity as more likely to be true than arguments which postulate more complex ones. This was because causal complexity for Aquinas seems to entail superfluity, and this he believed was not congruent with nature as it generally functions. Thus, it seems reasonable to suggest that Aquinas would consider Swinburne’s criterion of conceptual simplicity a valuable one.

It was also offered that Aquinas would likely be quite willing to have his work judged by the criterion of coherence with background evidence. This was for two reasons. First, there is Aquinas’s generous and frequent deference to sources of information he deemed expert, be they non-Christian philosophers or the revealed word of God. Second, the particular ‘background evidence’ used in this thesis, coherence with which will determine an argument’s truth value, are those which Aquinas himself would have considered sensible and warranted.
Given all of this, it can be argued convincingly that we are justified in judging Aquinas’s work in light of Swinburne’s framework.

**Swinburne’s Criteria**

So: by what measure does Swinburne consider some account of a thing (which is to say, an explanation and definition of that thing) to be good, sensible, and reliable? Swinburne sets out his theory of explanation early on in his text *The Coherence Of Theism*. He is careful to call the criteria he presents here by which something is explained only ‘roughly’ correct – but correct all the same, it would seem, to the point that Swinburne refers back to this set of criteria at several points in in the text.357

First, however, some qualifications. Swinburne thinks that this criteria is only useful with regard to arguments of a certain kind – inductive ones, which he takes to be probabilistic.358 As we have noted, Swinburne does think that to establish a sentence as correct or logically necessary or true, one can work solely in terms of a priori reasoning concerning the ‘correct use of words [and] sentences’.359 Yet, he admits that sometimes this is not the case, as when two interlocutors fail to reach some agreed conclusion about the status of some sentence (owing, say, to difficulties with regard to the meanings of certain words, or the choice of one word over another, and so on – we must remember that Swinburne stresses always the ‘common-sensical’ meaning of a word to be the one used in philosophical discourse).360

In instances where two interlocutors fail to agree on a meaning or the status of some sentence by means solely a priori, Swinburne allows recourse to these aforementioned inductive, probabilistic arguments. Such arguments as these can help to show that some sentence is logically necessary, or accurate, or true, and so on.361 (Yet, the a priori means is still Swinburne’s preferred method – though he admits that sometimes this sort of reasoning is beyond the scope of human beings (consider, for instance, his views on the demonstration of God’s necessity in the last chapter). In cases like this, Swinburne thinks

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358 Ibid., p. 43; Swinburne also allows for sentences to be proved by reference to some argument by means of testimony, when an expert in some field lends credence to an argument being true (at least by virtue of making it more probable than not) – though concerning God’s omnipotence, Swinburne seems not to rely on *this* sort of a posteriori argumentation. Interesting, considering the role of *revelation* in many theistic accounts – like Aquinas’s.
359 Ibid., pp. 43-44.
360 Ibid., p. 250.
361 Ibid., pp. 43-44.
that a priori reasoning concerning some sentence is still an option – if only for beings who possess ‘superior powers’ to those available to human persons.)

So, by what means is some sentence, or set of sentences, concerning a subject (like, say omnipotence) more likely to be true than not true, when that truth cannot be demonstrated solely by means of a priori reflection? Swinburne offers the following:

An explanatory theory T is rendered (epistemically) probably true by evidence (data) in so far as (1) if the theory is true, it is probable that that evidence would occur, (2) if the theory is false, it is improbable that that evidence would occur, (3) the theory ‘fits in’ with any ‘background evidence’ (that is, it meshes with theories outside the field it purports to explain, which are themselves rendered probable by their evidence in virtue of these criteria), and (4) the theory is simple (in the number of substances and properties, and number of kinds of numbers and properties, and the kinds of interactions between them that it postulates).

This is fairly straightforward – though it would seem that in the case of matters like God and his omnipotence, criteria number three (concerning background evidence) and number four (which judges things by virtue of their simplicity) are more appropriate markers of quality for sentences like ‘God’s omnipotence consists in ‘X’ rather than ‘Y’’. Data of the sort asked for in criterion one and two is of an evidential nature, and, unless one has access to some special sort of knowledge (like revelation), it does not seem a reasonable thing to go out seeking evidence for claims like ‘God’s omnipotence consists in ‘X’ rather than ‘Y’. The sort of evidence one is most likely to find are arguments in favour of one interpretation of omnipotence over another – and the accruing of arguments seems the province of criteria three only insofar as that criteria can admit evidence from other fields in the name of ‘background evidence’.

**Simplicity Above All**

Of the four pieces of criteria that Swinburne postulates to determine the truth, or logically possibility, or whatever, of some sentence, the fourth, concerning simplicity, seems uniquely valuable. Swinburne himself claims his in his 2004 essay *Simplicity As Evidence of Truth*; there he writes:

…the simplest hypothesis proposed as an explanation of a phenomena is more likely to be a true one than is any other available hypothesis, that its predictions

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362 Ibid., p. 43.
363 Ibid., pp. 44-45.
are more likely to be true that are those of any other available hypothesis, and that it is an ultimate a priori epistemic principle that simplicity is evidence of truth.\textsuperscript{364} Given that the topics which we are dealing with – all of which revolve around God’s omnipotence, and the consequences which follow from two disparate accounts of that omnipotence – are not empirically verifiable, and do not support the accumulation of ‘evidence’ or ‘data’ of any kind (beyond the possible exception of revelation), it seems that in judging which account of omnipotence on trial here the more coherent one will entail consideration of its relative simplicity. Thus, of Swinburne’s four pieces of criteria, it is (4) that is of real consequence here. This is not to say that criteria (1) – (3) won’t make something of an appearance – certainly it could be argued that one conception of omnipotence better fits with ‘background evidence’ by virtue of its agreeing with argumentation in other fields of philosophy, like studies of omniscience, omnipresence, and the like. Even more pointedly, one of the divergences concerns time and duration as these relate to being; it would be remiss in this instance not to judge an argument for God’s omnipotence in light of criterion (3), given that there are many fields of study and many detailed arguments concerning how time relates to being. Yet, (4) is more accommodating of the sorts of arguments we have examined up until this point in this thesis, and applies for all three divergences. Thus, a focus on (4) seems prudent (with the possible admittance of (3) concerning matters like logical necessity, where many other fields consider that topic in detail).

We have, then, a set of standards by which to judge some account of something more or less true, and among these standards, a particular focus on simplicity seems warranted, given the topics at hand. The goal of this chapter, then, is to apply these standards to the arguments for Swinburne and Aquinas, with a focus on criterion (4). Thus, if some account of omnipotence admits less complexity than the other, this one will be judged as more likely to be true – exactly as Swinburne would like it.\textsuperscript{365}

\textbf{Swinburne’s Criteria in Action}

As we noted in the previous chapter, there are three points of divergence between Aquinas and Swinburne, all of which emerge from Swinburne’s radically different definition of omnipotence. The first divergence was that concerning \textit{time} and \textit{duration} as


\textsuperscript{365} Swinburne, \textit{The Coherence of Theism}, p. 45.
these apply to the actions of omnipotent beings; Swinburne argues that omnipotent agents must act in time. The second divergence consisted in Swinburne’s notion that an omnipotent being can cease to be omnipotent. The third finally, was Swinburne’s argument that God’s necessity cannot be made clear in a substantive way (i.e. as an ontological argument for God’s existence might), but can be made to the extent that the argument is not ‘weak’ (like Swinburne holds Aquinas’s as being).

Concomitantly, with regard to divergence one, Aquinas holds that God is atemporal, and so is not located within the time-stream; thus, God’s actions may not need to be in time in order to occur. Aquinas’s views in respect of divergence two are that God cannot cease to be omnipotent. Finally, with respect to divergence three, Aquinas holds that God’s necessity can be demonstrated substantially (despite Swinburne’s claim that the necessity which Aquinas communicates is of the ‘weak’ sort).

In order to evaluate each thinker’s views with respect to these divergences, focus will rest firmly on criteria three and four, given that ‘evidence’ for claims like ‘God can cease to be omnipotent’ is somewhat difficult to identify outside of the remit of things like revelation and a priori reflection. Thus, the conception of omnipotence which, with respect to these three divergences, contains arguments which are more in line with ‘background evidence’ (as in criterion (3)) or which are simpler (as in criterion (4)), will be judged the better one. With this in mind, we turn to the three divergences.

Divergence One – Duration

Swinburne On Time and Duration

As has been made clear, Swinburne holds that the actions of omnipotent beings, like God, must have a duration, which is to say, they must take place over some period of time. If an event, like the action of an omnipotent agent, does not take place over some period of time, then Swinburne thinks it has not occurred.366 This was dealt with in some detail in the chapter concerning Swinburne’s understanding of omnipotence and the first divergence. There, it was made clear that Swinburne’s account runs into something of a problem when one considers events involving an omnipotent agent like ‘God created the universe’. A common-sense view of time these days is that it is emergent from being; that time is something which happens to things, and so seems to need those things in order to

pass. Consider, for instance, a void, or some other ‘non-space’ in which nothing exists. Would time pass in such a zone? An obvious extrapolation from this view might be that before an event like ‘the Big Bang’, there was nothing, and so, no time, either. Given this, it remains to be seen how God can then come to create the universe (or even do something like ‘decide to create the universe’ prior to that act of creation) if there is no time, and thus, no period during which the event consisting of the omnipotent agent’s act of creation can take place.

We also noted in an earlier chapter, however, that Swinburne attempts to provide an answer to this by postulating an understanding of time that is not of the sort that requires the existence of being to pass. This led to a detailed exploration of Swinburne’s ‘empty time’, which was established as a necessary postulation to explain how the universe might have come to exist. What is ‘empty time’? Simply put, it refers to time passing before the universe comes to exist (and thus, it would seem, before the existence of some substance which time could be an emergent property of). ‘Empty’ time allows for Swinburne to explain the universe as having had a beginning, for it provides time for an omnipotent agent (or whatever else) to create it. As a consequence, however, Swinburne is committed to the view that time itself is beginningless – it does not begin with the universe, and there doesn’t seem to be any sense, then, in presuming that it ends when the universe ceases to be, either.

Swinburne acknowledges this, and asserts that fundamentally, time is ‘unbounded’ by any sort of terminus, like a ‘beginning’ or an ‘end’. He justifies this means of a priori argument:

> Time, like space, is of logical necessity, unbounded. After every period of time which has at some instant an end, there must be another period of time, and so after every instant another instant. For either there will be swans somewhere subsequent to a period $T$, or there will not. In either case there must be a period subsequent to $T$, during which there will or will not be swans. By an analogous argument any period which has a beginning must have been preceded by an end, and hence time is necessarily unbounded.

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368 Ibid.
369 Ibid.
Unbounded time allows for Swinburne to postulate the existence of ‘empty’ time, and so provide a period during which an omnipotent agent (or some other cause) to bring the universe into being. In summary, then, we have in Swinburne’s definition of omnipotence a number of views concerning the nature of time. Omnipotent agents require time in which to act, and their actions constitute for Swinburne ‘events’ which necessarily play out over periods.\textsuperscript{371} As a consequence, there need to be periods of time \textit{before} the universe itself can exist, in order for it to be created.\textsuperscript{372} Thus, Swinburne argues for time being unbound at either end. All of this, then, proceeds from Swinburne’s argument that all actions, even those of an omnipotent agent, \textit{must} have a duration greater than ‘zero’ in order to have actually happened.\textsuperscript{373} We must see now what Aquinas might make of such a suggestion.

\textbf{Aquinas on God’s Actions and Temporal Duration}

In contrast to Swinburne’s insistence on divine agents existing within time (and the concomitant set of arguments for things like ‘empty time’), Aquinas is of the opinion that God is atemporal. To explain this will require some background concerning what Aquinas actually thinks time \textit{is}, and how, then, God is not subject to it. As is so frequently the case, to understand Aquinas is to understand Aristotle, whose account of time can be found in his Physics, Book IV. There, Aristotle writes that time is simply ‘the number of before and after in motion’.\textsuperscript{374} That time has to with motion means that, more fundamentally, it is concerned with change, for all movement results in some sort of change for a substance; sometimes these are small, accidental changes, like in a person’s hair-colour, the temperature of a laptop, or simply in spatial position. Other changes are of a more substantial sort, as when an animal is killed, and cease to be alive.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item there are no swans in periods subsequent to \(T\), and second, because there aren’t any \textit{periods} subsequent to \(T\). The same is apparently also true of periods \textit{before} \(T\), also, Newton-Smith points out. Swinburne responds in \textit{Space and Time} that his ‘swan argument’ contains a ‘covert assumption’ that there is no sense to a claim which consists of a sentence like ‘something began to exist but before that there were no periods of time’. Thus, Swinburne claims his ‘swan argument’ is still sound – time still seems to be unbounded in both directions.
\item Swinburne, \textit{The Coherence of Theism}, pp. 153-154.
\item \textsuperscript{372} Swinburne, ‘The Beginning of the Universe and of Time’, p. 185.
\item \textsuperscript{373} Swinburne, \textit{The Coherence of Theism}, pp. 153-154.
\item \textsuperscript{374} Commentators like Rory Fox, in his text \textit{Time and Eternity in Mid-Thirteenth Century Thought}, Oxford University Press (2006), seize upon this definition as entirely too brief. On page 11 of that text, Fox lists some of these. They include whether the ‘before’ and ‘after’ mentioned by Aristotle are ‘to be thought of as thing[s], or as relation[s]?; whether Aristotle’s reference to motion is a reference to a specific sort, or motion in general; and what things Aristotle thinks can be in time, and how what criteria can be established to prove that.
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For Aristotle then, time is to do with motion, and in so being it is related to change. This relationship is a key one, for it is by means of movement, Aristotle thinks, that we know time has passed. As he writes:

But neither does time exist without change; for when the state of our own minds does not change at all, or we have not noticed its changing, we do not realize that time has elapsed, any more than those who are fabled to sleep among the heroes in Sardinia do when they are awakened; for they connect the earlier 'now' with the later and make them one, cutting out the interval because of their failure to notice it. So, just as, if the 'now' were not different but one and the same, there would not have been time, so too when its difference escapes our notice the interval does not seem to be time. If, then, the non-realization of the existence of time happens to us when we do not distinguish any change, but the soul seems to stay in one indivisible state, and when we perceive and distinguish we say time has elapsed, evidently time is not independent of movement and change. It is evident, then, that time is neither movement nor independent of movement.\footnote{Aristotle’s Physics, Book IV, Part 11.}

Time is neither reducible to movement, nor independent of it. One only knows that time has passed by virtue of observation of being; time concerns substances, then. All seems clear – so how does Aquinas’s own explicitly set out account of time compare to Aristotle’s? One place in which Aquinas discusses time is in ST. I Q. 10. A. 1, where he sets about explaining eternity. In this he of course follows Aristotle in designating time as ‘nothing but the numbering of movement by “before” and “after”.’ Just as Aristotle did, Aquinas aligns time with ‘motion’, and makes clear that the majority of philosophical opinion thinks it ‘uncreated’, and thus, constant. As he writes:

As we attain to the knowledge of simple things by way of compound things, so must we reach to the knowledge of eternity by means of time, which is nothing but the numbering of movement by "before" and "after." For since succession occurs in every movement, and one part comes after another, the fact that we reckon before and after in movement, makes us apprehend time, which is nothing else but the measure of before and after in movement. Now in a thing bereft of movement, which is always the same, there is no before or after. As therefore the idea of time consists in the numbering of before and after in movement; so likewise in the apprehension of the uniformity of what is outside of movement, consists the idea of eternity.\footnote{ST. I Q. 10, A. 1.}

As is only fitting, Aquinas’s words here echo Aristotle’s above: time is the number of movement (or change) according to the \textit{before} and the \textit{after}. This is because succession is a part of every movement; that is, some change between state A and state B, occurs.
Time is simply the measurement of these ‘befores’ and ‘afters’.\textsuperscript{377} That time is the measurement of these ‘befores’ and ‘afters’ contrives to make it an emergent property of being for Aquinas – for without being of some kind to undergo some sort of motion or change, there would not be any time. Moreover, this being seems to need to undergo change or motion in order for time to pass, much as it did for Aristotle.

**Aquinas on God as Atemporal**

We can see now that Aquinas conceives of time in terms of motion, change, and being. What is still not clear is how God, and most importantly for this thesis, how omnipotence, each interact with time in Aquinas’s account. Of fundamental importance to unravelling this issue is realise that time for Aquinas (after Aristotle) necessitates movement (say, from before to after) – and movement for Aquinas involves potentiality.\textsuperscript{378} This inherently prohibits God from ever moving, or changing – for in Aquinas’s view, God is fully actual. He demonstrates this in a number of ways, such as in ST. I. Q. 3. A. 1. There, Aquinas notes that potentiality precedes actuality in time (in that, something is potentially the colour blue before it is actually the colour blue); however, potentiality must be preceded in a more fundamental sense by actuality. This makes sense, for after all, the only reason something is potentially the colour blue is because there is something actual which possesses that potentiality in the first place. Moreover, something can only be brought from potentiality to actuality by way of something which is already actual; by this Aquinas means that something has to already exist in order for it to actualise some potentiality, become the colour blue. Thus, Aquinas notes, actuality is prior to potentiality in the sense of being, if not in the sense of time. Creation requires something actual to impart into all other things potentialities like ‘coming to exist’ or ‘turning the colour blue’, and this something is God, who is ‘first being’. Given that all potentiality follows on from actuality, Aquinas concludes that there can be no potentiality in God – only pure actuality.

That God possesses no potentiality, and thus cannot move or change, means that God for Aquinas is immutable. Immutability is then what prohibits God from being in time according to Aquinas’s understanding of it (again, as movement and change, of the

\textsuperscript{377} Aquinas again follows Aristotle in claiming that time fails to pass in things which are bereft of movement. We might notice, however, that Aquinas here does not explicitly name ‘sleeping’ as such a thing.

\textsuperscript{378} O’Grady, P., *Aquinas’ Philosophy of Religion*. pp. 174-175.
numbering of things into ‘befores’ and ‘afters’). One fairly reasonable conclusion from all of this is that, rather than being a temporal being, God is, by virtue of his actuality (and concomitant immutability), atemporal instead. Aquinas certainly seems to embrace this view. In fact, his conception of eternity, which is another attribute he applies to the divine essence via analogical predication, is the very same as Boethius’s own, in that it lacks any reference to time at all.379

To be eternal for Aquinas is to inherently preclude God’s being in time in any sense, then. It also includes God’s being causally present at each and every moment of time, such that for God there is no past or future – simply an eternal present. Aquinas approves of Boethius’s explanation of this via the image of a man atop a tall mountain, looking down at a trail running through the countryside. For those walking the trail, only the immediate path is visible to them; the path to come, which looms in front, the path behind, which falls away, and the bit they’re currently walking on. Each part of the path is experienced in sequence; first what has come before, then what is current, and finally, what is yet to come. However, the man looking down does not see the trail like this; he sees it all at once in a single act of vision, and each part of it is present to him all at once. This, Aquinas maintains, is what it is like for God to interact with time, despite God’s being entirely atemporal.380

So, God is atemporal for Aquinas. What does this mean for God’s actions, when those actions concern creation – say, by working a miracle, or creating a solar system, or absolving one of sin? Do actions like these have a duration? It might seem difficult to suggest that this wouldn’t be the case, for much the same reason that Swinburne argues. Any action, even one performed by an omnipotent, atemporal God, seems to require a duration more than zero. Consider, for instance, God’s causing the walls of the Red Sea to rise up and leave a dry path for the Israelites. In such an instance, though God is atemporal, surely it follows that God’s action in this case – the rising of sea walls – has a duration longer than zero. Else, how could the sea have rolled back? Swinburne argues that even talk of ‘instants’ here does not work, for even if God was able to perform this feat instantly, this would still entail that God’s action has a duration longer than zero.381

379 ST. I. Q. 10, A. 1.
381 Swinburne, The Coherence of Theism, p. 154.
However, there seems to be one edge-case where this isn’t necessarily true; thus, perhaps Aquinas can admit only that divine actions have a duration when those divine actions entail some interaction with the temporal world in some way. Consider, for instance, what might happen if God were not to create a universe like he did, full of changeable substances? What if, instead, God willed into existence a universe which consisted entirely of immutable substances, all of which were eternal and static?

Time would not pass here, according to Aquinas’s understanding of it. Would God’s initial act of creation in such a universe also have a duration greater than zero? On the one hand, it still seems the case that God’s initial act of creating this world would necessarily have some sort of duration. If not, how could one say it had occurred? Yet, duration for Aquinas is always in terms of substances moving and changing, and in a universe with substances that do neither of these, seemingly the only event – or movement of any sort – would be God’s act of creating this universe of static, immutable things. So, is it the case that time and duration would exist only so long as God’s creative act took to create the universe from nothing?

Additionally, there seems to be a difficulty with even calling God’s creation of such a universe a ‘change’ or ‘movement’. In fact, it would seem doubtful that ex nihilo creation can be considered ‘change’ at all. This is because the change which occurs is that suddenly, there is being, when before there wasn’t. Before there was being, there was an absence of being. Can an absence undergo change? It seems not – for any act of change would involve the introduction of being, and thus the obliteration of that total absence of being. It may not, then, be change, to create being ex nihilo. If one holds to Aquinas’s views, change can only come after being has come to exist, and even then, only when that sort of being is changeable and mutable and moveable.

It would seem, then, that one could conceivably argue that there is no duration to God’s initial act of creation ex nihilo, for nothing is being changed or moved. All that happens is that being comes into existence. This isn’t a change for being (for it did not exist prior to this point), and it certainly isn’t a change for the ‘non-space’ that we might imagine precedes creation, for that is distinctly the absence of something. It would follow, then, that with regard to the creation of the universe alone, that Aquinas does not need to admit that God’s action has a duration. In other cases, however, when God is exercising his omnipotent power with regard to changeable substances, duration necessarily follows.
A Comparison of these Views in light of Swinburne’s Criteria

It would seem that even Aquinas’s atemporal God requires something of Swinburne’s conception of time and duration, then, in an attenuated sense. This might seem a mark in Swinburne’s favour – but if we are to consider each philosopher’s account of omnipotence with reference to duration in light of Swinburne’s criteria, and most particularly simplicity, it seems that Swinburne’s account runs into an issue that Aquinas’s doesn’t.

Again, we return to that particularly important edge-case that does not play nicely with Swinburne’s views (as we noted in an earlier chapter). This edge-case is, of course, the creation of the universe. We have dealt in detail with Swinburne’s solution to this problem; he argues that time is unbounded, both with regard to beginnings and endings, and so is infinite. This allows him to postulate the existence of ‘empty time’ during which God can choose to create, and then subsequently go about creating, the universe.\textsuperscript{382}

Aquinas, however, holds that God is inherently atemporal. Moreover, he holds that God is causally present at all stages of time simultaneously, such that there is no ‘past’ and ‘future’ for God – simply a boundless present, as Boethius described it. Crucially, however, because Aquinas thinks that time is movement, it can only start \textit{when} there is some being to move and change. It can be argued, then, that Aquinas thinks that time is \textit{emergent} from being; its existence is predicated on the notion that there is some existent being which can change and move, after all. We have argued this in the section just above. So, Aquinas does \textit{not} have to postulate that time is infinite, or that preceding the universe there was some period of ‘empty time’ in which God could come to create the universe. All Aquinas needs is that God create the universe, and time comes into being (so to speak) alongside it.

In light of criterion (4), which holds that the simpler a theory is with regard to the number of substances, properties, and numbers of kinds of substances and properties, and the interactions between these it postulates, the more likely it is true. Surely, then, Aquinas’s account of the relationship between omnipotence and time is the ‘victor’ here, so to speak. For Aquinas’s omnipotence, there is no notion of time pre-existing being, nor, indeed, the idea that time is \textit{distinct} from being. Instead, time is an emergent property of creation, and follows it into existence. Swinburne, in contrast, must postulate that time is infinite,

\textsuperscript{382} Swinburne, ‘The Beginning of the Universe and of Time’, p. 185.
and that before the universe there is empty time. Time exists *separately* from being; it is *wholly* distinct from being, such that time would pass *without* being.

Thus, when considering Swinburne’s account of time, one is not speaking about being which changes, leading to time; one is speaking about being *and* time, which is a distinct entity which is unbounded by beginnings or endings. In this sense, Swinburne must give time an ontological status that Aquinas does not need to provide it with. Given criterion (4), which stresses simplicity as a marker of truth, it really seems Aquinas’s account is the conceptually leaner, and thus, simpler. In this way, it would appear that according to Swinburne’s own criteria, Aquinas’s account of time, omnipotence, and duration is more likely to be true than Swinburne’s own. Simply put, for omnipotence to work, Swinburne needs time to pre-exist the universe, and Aquinas does not, for time follows on from being. The latter seems less complex. Thus, Divergence One concludes in Aquinas’s favour. We move on, now, to the other two divergences.

**Divergence Two: Ceasing to be Omnipotent**

**Swinburne’s Views**

For Divergence Two, the issue at stake is that concerning *omnipotence*, and an omnipotent agent’s ability to cease to *be* omnipotent. In the last chapter, we dealt in some detail with Swinburne’s arguments in favour of this. Briefly put, Swinburne thinks that omnipotent agents are *persons* – spirits, specifically, in that they lack bodies. As a person, Swinburne’s God thus possesses pure mental events of a sophisticated sort – his God has thoughts, beliefs, intentions, desires, and the like. God is also free, in the sense that God can make choices purely governed by reason (that is, without reference to non-rational influences, as occur in human persons by virtue of their having bodies). Finally, and most importantly for our purposes, Swinburne’s God-as-person has the same relationship to moral goods that human, and indeed, *all*, persons have: to seek out the best possible state of affairs in every case, should one exist.\(^{383}\) Freedom for Swinburne is really the ability to do this *without* the influence of ‘non-rational’ desires and intentions being foisted upon the person as they go about seeking that good. God, as spirit, lacks a body, and so lacks

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the capacity for non-rational desires and intentions; thus, God is perfectly free to seek out the good purely on the grounds of reason.\(^{384}\)

In so doing, Swinburne maintains there is a distinct possibility that the best state of affairs with regard to the universe might be for God to cease to be omnipotent – say, because God wishes to preserve human freedom by not being in a position to determine the whole future course of events in the universe (which his omnipotence seems to allow him to do).\(^{385}\) Thus, Swinburne thinks that God can cease to be omnipotent, either by ceasing to exist, or by de-powering himself through some means. Anything for the good – even the loss of God, then. What does Aquinas have to say about this, in light of the definition of omnipotence he gives in places like ST. I. Q. 25. A.3.?

**Aquinas on Ceasing to Be Omnipotent**

Aquinas’s views on omnipotence, as that relates to God, are such that it does not seem that God *can* divest God’s own self of his omnipotence no matter what God desires. However, this is not a problem for Aquinas’s account, because such a possibility could never occur in it. We shall explain this shortly; first, some preliminaries. Aquinas’s God is like Swinburne’s in certain respects, even to the extent that Aquinas thinks one can call God ‘person’.\(^{386}\) Thus, on this point they are agreed; neither thinks that omnipotent agents are blind, unthinking, impersonal cosmic *forces* – they are living, contemplating persons. There, are, however, differences in what each thinker posits ‘personhood’ to consist in (and an ultimate broad similarity, as we shall see).

We have seen how Swinburne argues for God’s personhood; how does Aquinas do the same? Aquinas works to establish God in his *Summa Theologiae* iteratively; first, in ST I. Q. 18, A. 3. he argues that God is alive in the ‘highest degree’, on the grounds that life is found in things insofar as a thing ‘operates of itself and not as moved by another’. God, as first mover, as immutable, and fully actual, is perfect, and so cannot be moved by anything, for all movement is in service of the ultimate final cause. Thus, God is not

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\(^{384}\) Ibid., p. 143.

\(^{385}\) Ibid., pp. 165-166.

\(^{386}\) ST. I. Q. 29, A. 3.; of course, as we will see, Aquinas thinks person is predicated of God *analogically*, as all terms are of God. God is instead sought out via negating things which the created world has – but even in that, there is space for some terms applied to creation to be applied to God in a certain, very specific, very careful, sense.
moved by anything else, and indeed, is the source of all movement. Thus God is most excellently alive, in that nothing can move God at all.

So for Aquinas God is alive. Is God a person? Aquinas addresses this in quite a straightforward manner, literally asking (and then answering) a series of questions which starts with ‘what is the definition of “person”?’ in ST. I. Q. 29, A. 1. and ending with ‘Is the name of person becoming to God?’ in ST. I. Q. 29, A. 3. What does Aquinas say in these articles? First, he defines ‘person’ as a term which calls out in the world a certain kind of individuals in the genus of substance. These individuals are distinct from all others because they possess a special nature – rationality – which gives them the ability to act not only from what they are made to do by external forces, but also of their own volition. In other words, Aquinas notes, persons are substances which have ‘dominion over their own actions’. So, persons are subsistent individuals of a rational nature. This is important, for in so being, Aquinas thinks ‘person’ is a kind of perfection. This perfection seems to proceed from the fact that personhood has a relationship with ‘high dignity’, such that being a person is to have dignity. Thus: for Aquinas, personhood refers to subsistence in a rational nature, and this necessarily includes qualities like ‘dignity’.

**God as Person**

So, personhood is associated necessarily with both rationality and dignity. Is it, then, a fitting ‘name’ for God? By this we really mean ‘is person a term befitting the divine essence?’ Aquinas addresses this issue head on in ST. I. Q. 39, A. 1., though as commentators like Legenhausen have pointed out, the answer he gives there is ‘highly qualified’. Question 39 is entitled ‘Whether in God the essence is the same as the person?’, and Aquinas claims the answer to it is ‘quite clear’ if one considers God as divinely simple.

What does the doctrine of divine simplicity hold? Briefly put, this doctrine holds that God is metaphysically ‘simple’, in the sense that God lacks composition of any sort. Thus, there are not parts of God, be they matter and form, potency and actuality, subject and accident, and so on. This is because composites, Aquinas thinks, always result from

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some combination of parts, and this makes them posterior to that combination. God, however, is first being – and cannot be preceded by anything. Moreover, composites of things must be caused – and nothing can cause God, who is first among causes as their ultimate uncaused source. In lacking component parts brought together, Aquinas concludes that God is even lacking in an essence/existence distinction, such that God’s essence is his existence. This is, as thinkers like Plantinga have observed, a highly unintuitive and even ‘mysterious’ doctrine, which is thus rather controversial.

Given this doctrine of divine simplicity, Aquinas concludes that God must be a person, in the sense that God’s essence is necessarily identical to his suppositum, and this, in intellectual substances, refers to rationality, and therefore personhood. Thus, Aquinas claims that God’s essence is not distinct from what ‘personhood’ consists in, and so, he thinks, God is a person. This is strengthened by the fact Aquinas thinks personhood a ‘perfection’, as we noted above. In so being, it follows for Aquinas that it must be attributed to God’s essence, for God’s essence contains all perfections found in the created world (though in ‘a more excellent way’).

Thus, Aquinas thinks that God in a sense must be called a person. The standard Aquinas disclaimer follows this, of course; names ascribed to God which are positive are never done so equivocally or univocally. Instead, they are done so analogously (emphasis mine):

…that these names signify the divine substance, and are predicated substantially of God, although they fall short of a full representation of Him. Which is proved thus. For these names express God, so far as our intellects know Him. Now since our intellect knows God from creatures, it knows Him as far as creatures represent Him. Now it is shown above (I:4:2) that God prepossesses in Himself all the perfections of creatures, being Himself simply and universally perfect. Hence every creature represents Him, and is like Him so far as it possesses some perfection; yet it represents Him not as something of the same species or genus, but as the excelling principle of whose form the effects fall short, although they derive some kind of likeness thereto, even as the forms of inferior bodies represent the power of the sun… … Therefore the aforesaid names signify the divine substance, but in an imperfect manner, even as creatures represent it imperfectly. So when we say, “God is good,” the meaning is not, “God is the cause of goodness,” or “God is not evil”; but the meaning is, “Whatever good we

attribute to creatures, pre-exists in God," and in a more excellent and higher way.\textsuperscript{395}

For Aquinas, then, to call God a ‘person’ is \textit{technically} correct, but not entirely so. Something of the meaning of the word is lost when applied to God, certainly, but still there is some overlap with personhood as that term is applied to created things like human beings.\textsuperscript{396} God, then, is said to be a person as human beings are, but in analogous sense only – for though we can call \textit{humans} ‘subsistent individuals of a rational nature’ and this suffices, for God it is a sort of vague gesture in the direction of the truth of God’s essence – albeit a gesture in the right direction, and which is therefore helpful in speaking, theologising, worshipping, and philosophising. It is not, however, a proper elucidation of God’s essence by any means.\textsuperscript{397}

\textbf{Persons and Final Causality}

Finally, and importantly, Aquinas thinks that persons seek the good as their final cause. This is not true just of persons, but indeed of \textit{all} substances of \textit{any} kind – from unthinking molecules to Alsatians to gargantuan super-galaxies, all act in pursuit of some final cause.\textsuperscript{398} It is, however, most befitting of beings with intelligence to act in pursuit of some final cause; while most substances \textit{tend} towards that final cause, rational substances, like humans, can actively choose the manner in which they aim to achieve their final cause.

This gives rise to things like evil, when a final cause is sought through less than ideal means, in that the chain of causality bringing someone \textit{to} their final cause is warped so as include the wrong sorts of efficient causes (for Aquinas thinks efficient causes always \textit{tend} \textit{towards} some considered final cause).\textsuperscript{399}

What does this final cause consist in? Why is it so desired? Why do efficient causes tend towards it? First, we must realise that for Aquinas, final causes are in part of the teleological structure of being. Things tend towards final causes, and final causes are

\textsuperscript{395} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{396} Aquinas develops this further in ST. I. Q. 13, A. 6.: “Thus all names applied metaphorically to God, are applied to creatures primarily rather than to God, because when said of God they mean only similitudes to such creatures. For as “smiling” applied to a field means only that the field in the beauty of its flowering is like the beauty of the human smile by proportionate likeness, so the name of “lion” applied to God means only that God manifests strength in His works, as a lion in his.”

\textsuperscript{397} ST. I. Q. 29, A. 4.

\textsuperscript{398} Aquinas, \textit{Summa Contra Gentiles}, III, 2.

\textsuperscript{399} A thief for instance, may desire the final cause of happiness, or goodness, or whatever, but think that stealing expensive paintings is a way to achieve that final cause. ‘Stealing’ in this instance is an efficient cause of some end like ‘getting money from a fence’, which, ideally, points towards the final cause (goodness, happiness, God – it can depend on the outlook of the rational substance).
concerned with the good. The final cause of a falcon, for instance, is its ‘flourishing’ as an organism. There exists in Aquinas’s conceptual scheme an ultimate final cause, which all things seek at, and which all other forms of causality are ‘shaped’ by, in the sense the results of these causes are in service of a series of final causes, ending with the ultimate one. What is this ultimate final cause, which all other substances seek? Which all causal activity is, in some fashion or another, directed towards? For Aquinas, this ultimate final cause of creation is God himself. This is so because God is the ultimate ‘good’; the ultimate paradigm, the most perfect anything that exists. Things are good only insofar as they are identifiable with God’s goodness – say, by participating it as best they can (which is to say, imitating it). Persons, who are rational substances, also aim at God’s goodness as their final cause. God is a person; thus it follows that God, too, aims at God’s own goodness as God’s own final cause.

This is the heart of the distinction between Swinburne and Aquinas’s respective views on matters like ‘ceasing to be omnipotent’. For Swinburne, a good state of affairs can be postulated which doesn’t involve God’s existence, or God’s omnipotence, being existent. In contrast, for Aquinas, the good, ultimate, final cause is God – who is, by virtue of divine simplicity, identical with his own goodness. God’s omnipotence refers to God’s active power to act; it too is part of God. How, then, can some good state of affairs not include some part of God?

It must be admitted that this argument depends greatly on divine simplicity, which is a very controversial aspect of Aquinas’s overall conception of God, as we noted above. Yet, it gives omnipotence, as that relates to the rest of God, a sort of unimpugnable standard. Divine simplicity denies that God has composition; thus, everything in God is a simple, indivisible whole. This includes his omnipotence, which is his active potentiality to act. If God is a simple, indivisible whole, and omnipotence is part of that whole, it does not seem to can be ‘gotten rid of’ – for that would pick it out as its own unique part of God, and thereby make him a composite.

More importantly, though, to cite some part of God as in the way of the ultimate goodness which all creation tends to is impossible for Aquinas. God is goodness, and is thus the basis for all ‘best states of affairs’ – for how could some state of affairs be better than another if not for one having more goodness than the other? This goodness could take

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400 O’Grady, P., Aquinas’ Philosophy of Religion, p. 188.
any number of forms – it might refer to ‘more liberty’, or ‘better health’, or ‘having more attractive features’. In each case, the better state of affairs involves more of something already good – more liberty, more health, more attractive features. Good has quite a lot to do with being for Aquinas – in fact, that term is often considered to refer to being itself, albeit under a new aspect.\textsuperscript{401} Goodness involves more being, then. A better state of affairs will entail more goodness. This entails more being. And God is the source of all being and goodness, such that anything else which exists only has being and goodness by participation in God’s paradigmatic goodness and being.

The point here is that for Aquinas, some ‘good state of affairs’ cannot fail to include the divinely simple God in his entirety. For there to be good, there must be God – and in light of divine simplicity, there is no composition in God such that his omnipotence differs from, say, his goodness. Thus, any ‘best’ state of affairs presupposes God’s existence – and this presupposes God’s being omnipotent.

A Comparison of these Views in light of Swinburne’s Criteria

We come again, then, to evaluate both Aquinas and Swinburne’s respective views in light of his criteria, and among these, primarily simplicity. Which of these two understandings of omnipotence, with particular reference to this ceasing to be omnipotent, or not being able to cease to be omnipotent, is the conceptually cleaner?

In order that Swinburne can argue for God’s being able to divest himself of his omnipotence, Swinburne most conceive of omnipotence as something which can be divested of. This makes it distinct from God, in the sense that God can lose it (though Swinburne does argue that this loss results in a loss of God, too. Functionally, if God simply depowers himself, and entirely, if God causes himself (or causes other some being with the ability) to cease to exist). Moreover, Swinburne conceives of ‘the best state of affairs’ as something which can possibly exist without either God or his omnipotence. This, too, ensures that there is a distinction between God and this best possible state of affairs.

\textsuperscript{401} O’Grady, P., *Aquinas’ Philosophy of Religion*, p. 126; goodness is thought to possess the aspect of ‘attractiveness’, which being, more generally speaking, seems to lack. Something is attractive for Aquinas insofar as it is good, and something is only attractive to a thing if it affects positively a thing’s state.
Aquinas, in contrast, does not identify omnipotence as anything distinct from God. Divine simplicity works to ensure that God is inherently not divisible into discrete parts like ‘God’s omnipotence’ and ‘God’s justice’, and ‘God’s goodness’. Controversial though this doctrine is, it is conceptually lean – positing the existence of no other substances, properties, numbers of kinds of substances and properties, interactions between these, and so on. Given that this chapter is devoted to analysing these divergences concerning Aquinas and Swinburne’s respective conceptions of omnipotence by reference to Swinburne’s simplicity criteria, it seems we must consider one of them simpler than the other, and thus, more likely to be true.

Arguably, in this case also, Aquinas is the ‘victor’, such that his conception of divine simplicity does not mean there is a difference between things like God’s goodness, God’s omnipotence, and so on. Given that God is the source of all goodness, it seems that any ‘best state of affairs’ will involve God’s existence, which entails God’s being omnipotent. Swinburne, in contrast, most postulate omnipotence and a best possible state of affairs as conceptually distinct from God. This, according to his own criteria of simplicity, makes his account of God’s omnipotence less conceptually lean. The simpler, the more likely it is to be true – and in this sense, concerning an omnipotent being’s ability to cease to be omnipotent (or not), Aquinas’s account is the simpler. Divergence Two, like Divergence One, goes in Aquinas’s favour.

**Divergence Three: Divine Necessity**

Two divergences have already gone Aquinas’s way, according to this standard of simplicity which Swinburne advocates for. We consider the final divergence now, which concerns divine necessity. How does this arise from Swinburne’s definition of omnipotence? The answer is simple, and builds on Divergence Two: if God is such that he can, in pursuit of some best possible state of affairs, either cease to be omnipotent (and so become powerless with respect to the sort of actions gods are known for, like creating universes and judging peoples), or end his own existence, how necessary is God’s existence? Notably, Swinburne and Aquinas disagree not with the notion that God is necessary, but in the manner in which this necessity can be demonstrated. A brief summary of each thinker’s account will follow, and after that, the final analysis.
Swinburne’s Conception of Divine Necessity

For Swinburne, a consideration of necessity arises from any treatment of God’s omnipotence, as we noted in the previous chapter. A God who can cease to exist or cease to be omnipotent is conceivably not necessary. As we noted previously, Swinburne treads a middle path between what he deems two excessive positions. The weak position, Swinburne claims, is the sort which does not prove God’s necessity beyond a doubt, and so admits some possibility of God’s being contingent. (Notably, Swinburne counted Aquinas’s own argument as precisely this – in that God’s existence seems to rely on chance, luck, or simple brute fact, rather than the necessity which Aquinas was arguing for). In contrast, Swinburne also disavows the strong position. He suggests ontological arguments, like Anselm’s, as examples of these, where God’s necessity is proven entirely by a priori argumentation. Swinburne’s problem with these sorts of arguments is that he does not think it possible that the existence of some substance is metaphysically necessary. This is because Swinburne follows Hume’s argument that the ‘mere non-existence’ of any being of some kind cannot entail a contradiction. This is important, for it gets to the heart of what Swinburne thinks necessity is: a sentence (the fundamental unit of Swinburne’s logic) is logically necessary iff its negation entails a contradiction. Given that Swinburne follows Hume in believing that the non-existence of a being cannot entail a contradiction. Thus, he concludes that strong arguments also fail.

We are left, then, with Swinburne’s careful middle path, which, we saw, was such that Swinburne called it ‘stronger than the weak’ sort of argument, but simultaneously ‘weaker than the strong’. Swinburne’s argument depends on a modified version of Leibniz’s Principle of Sufficient Reason, which Swinburne reworks to hold that ‘every event has some substance as its total or partial cause’. However, Swinburne claims that one can admit one exception to this: a creator God who is the ultimate cause of all things. This God, Swinburne notes, can be assumed to have a causal necessity borne of God’s own nature; this move, he thinks, addresses the flaws in both the weak and strong arguments for God’s necessity. Unlike weak necessity, it does not leave God’s

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403 Ibid., p. 263; Swinburne points to both of Anselm’s formulations of his ontological argument, each of which can be found in Anselm’s *Proslogion*; the first is in *Proslogion* 2, and the second is in *Proslogion* 3.
404 Ibid., p. 266.
405 Ibid., pp. 271-272.
406 Ibid., p. 272.
407 Ibid.
existence as the subject of some sort of chance or good fortune, with the consequence that it is weaker than strong arguments for God’s necessity (for Swinburne’s arguments here are probabilistic, as we noted earlier). Notably, Swinburne considers his argument for God as ontologically necessary, rather than metaphysically necessary.\textsuperscript{408} Metaphysical possibility differs from ontological necessity in the sense that it is concerned with ‘sentences’ and ‘propositions’, while ontological necessity is concerned with what Swinburne terms ‘real de re necessity’, which is the sort which cannot be other than it is.\textsuperscript{409}

God, then, is ontologically necessary. Importantly, however, Swinburne clarifies that even though ontological necessity is of the ‘real’ sort, it does not guarantee that God’s existence is necessary. Instead, it merely explains the nature of God’s existence should God exist. The reasons for this consist in issues of language; Swinburne argues that an entirely new understanding of the word ‘cause’ must be developed, and that even in having done so, there are still problems. The greatest of these is that Swinburne thinks that this new understanding of the word ‘cause’ makes it difficult to ascertain whether it is conceivable or not that a divine agent can even have a property like ‘being ontologically necessary’.\textsuperscript{410} The difficulties with the meaning of this word, among other issues, are so strong that Swinburne ultimately declares that no ‘direct or semi-direct’ argument for God’s being ontologically necessary can actually be formulated. Yet, he claims that human beings can understand some of the notions surrounding God’s possible ontological necessity.

Here, then, we find why Swinburne’s argument for divine necessity is weaker than the strong sort, just as it is stronger than the weaker. Strong arguments do not admit the possibility that God is not necessary, and moreover, are substantive in nature. Swinburne’s argument, in contrast, merely purports to explain God’s necessity should God exist because of issues with language. All told, then, if God should exist, Swinburne’s argument is stronger than the weak sort, for God can be understood something of God’s necessity, and yet, still weaker than the strong sort, because God’s ontologically necessity runs against problems in language.

\textsuperscript{408} Ibid., p. 274.
\textsuperscript{409} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{410} Ibid., p. 276.
Aquinas’s Conception of Divine Necessity

In contrast, Aquinas thinks that God’s necessity is absolutely demonstrable. In fact, necessity itself is one of the ways in which Aquinas argues for God’s existence, and forms the core of his ‘Third Way’. The argument runs as follows:

The third way is taken from possibility and necessity, and runs thus. We find in nature things that are possible to be and not to be, since they are found to be generated, and to corrupt, and consequently, they are possible to be and not to be. But it is impossible for these always to exist, for that which is possible not to be at some time is not. Therefore, if everything is possible not to be, then at one time there could have been nothing in existence. Now if this were true, even now there would be nothing in existence, because that which does not exist only begins to exist by something already existing. Therefore, if at one time nothing was in existence, it would have been impossible for anything to have begun to exist; and thus even now nothing would be in existence — which is absurd. Therefore, not all beings are merely possible, but there must exist something the existence of which is necessary. But every necessary thing either has its necessity caused by another, or not. Now it is impossible to go on to infinity in necessary things which have their necessity caused by another, as has been already proved in regard to efficient causes. Therefore we cannot but postulate the existence of some being having of itself its own necessity, and not receiving it from another, but rather causing in others their necessity. This all men speak of as God.411

What Aquinas is arguing here, is, essentially, that much as there must be one first unmoved mover (as he argued in his First Way), there must be something which is necessary of itself, so as to allow for the existence of non-necessary things (which are generated and then corrupted, as Aquinas notes above). That there cannot be an infinite series of agents imparting necessity to each other Aquinas dismisses on the grounds of infinite regress, which, as noted previously, is a controversial move. Regardless, Aquinas concludes that there must be a being which is necessary by virtue of its own self, and this is God. In one fell swoop, then, Aquinas has proven the existence of God and God’s necessity.

A Comparison of these Views in light of Swinburne’s Criteria

Unlike the first two divergences, Divergence Three is of the character such that ‘simplicity’ is a difficult criterion to judge it by. It is better instead, given the fact each argument draws greatly from other fields (specifically, logic), to judge the arguments by criterion (3), which holds that

411 ST. I. Q. 2, A. 3.
...the theory ‘fits in’ with any ‘background evidence’ (that is, it meshes with theories outside the field it purports to explain, which are themselves rendered probable by their evidence in virtue of these criteria).412

Which argument, then, is more in line with the standards of logic? Aquinas’s argument for God’s necessity contra infinite regress, or Swinburne’s humble argument that God’s necessity is possible, but cannot be demonstrated (but insofar as it is possible, is likely to be true)? Unlike the other two divergences, which went in Aquinas’s favour, it seems Swinburne is to be commended here instead. This is because Aquinas’s argument fails the criterion of ‘fitting in’ with background evidence, like ‘being a logically sound argument’.

Wippel argues that Aquinas is guilty of the fallacy of ‘composition’ or a ‘quantifier shift’ because of two problematic sentences in the Third Way.413 Above, Aquinas comments that it is ‘impossible’ for all of the things which exist to be merely possible things. This is because what has the possibility of not existing at some time ‘does not exist’. This sentence, Wippel observes, admits of several interpretations; one holds that Aquinas intends the non-existence of merely possible things to have been read as taking place in the past, while others hold he intends it to refer to some point of time in the future. Wippel comments that the next sentence implies the former interpretation to be the correct one. In this sentence, Aquinas makes clear that if all things have the possibility of not existing, then at some time in the past, nothing existed.414 From that, Aquinas reasons that nothing would exist now, and since things do exist now, one must assume that not all of the things which exist are possible (rather than necessary).

Wippel clarifies that the fallacy occurs when Aquinas moves from the first sentence to the second; the mistake Aquinas makes is in assuming that, if all things are possible, and thereby capable of not existing, nothing now would exist. The problem is that this does not necessarily mean that the totality created things didn’t exist at the same point in the past, rather than just some possible things and not others.415 By the fallacy of composition, Aquinas is essentially predicating of the whole what in reality he can only reasonably say of a part of that whole.416 This issue is clear cut; in making a mistake of this magnitude,

414 ST. I. Q. 2, A. 3.
Aquinas’s conception of God as necessary being fails to satisfy Swinburne’s criterion, in that it does not cohere with the expected rules of logic (which intentionally rule out fallacies of the sort Aquinas has committed). Thus, in this one instance, Swinburne’s less overt argument concerning God’s necessity is to be judged the victor on the basis that it does not contain logical fallacies of any sort, and so satisfies criterion (3).

There is, however, a number of points one could in response to these failings in Aquinas’s account. First, it must be remembered that Aquinas actually postulates various kinds of necessity; some sorts of necessity apply to creatures, and others only to God. With regard to the Third Way, this sort of distinction is of considerable importance. What does this distinction consist in? Simply put, there are necessary beings like angels and souls, and necessary beings like God. The former are distinguished from the latter on the basis that they possess an internal division between their essence and existence. For beings like angels, and the rational souls which constitute people, the essence (which refers to their quiddity – literally, what they are) is distinct from the actual existence they enjoy. This existence is something they receive from without. In contrast, in Aquinas’s conceptual scheme, God’s essence is identifiable with his existence. The necessity of souls and angels consists in there being some necessary being like God to provide that necessity, whereas God’s necessity is of God’s own self. To salvage the Third Way, one must conceive of it with reference to latter sort of necessity, rather than the former. Divine necessity (that is, the necessity of God) is the basis for all other necessity.

What of the fallacy which Aquinas is accused of specifically? O’Grady argues that there is no quantifier shift because Aquinas actually postulates a ‘hidden assumption’ in the Third Way, knowledge of which helps it to withstand criticisms like Wippel’s. What is this ‘hidden assumption’? Simply, that the way in which Aquinas thinks things are related to one another depends on a distinction between different sorts of things. Some things do have a ‘common nature’, upon which an assumption like the one Aquinas makes (and is consequently accused of a quantifier shift because of). Common to all possible beings (and hence not God) is precisely their being possible. If all beings are possible, and none are necessary, then only non-being would obtain. This is because the common nature just discussed requires an antecedent, at least conceptually.

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O’Grady., p.108.
O’Grady. Ibid.
sharing in this common nature moves from non-existence to existence, and thereby exists after a period of non-being, so too would all beings sharing in this ‘being possible’. On this ground, Aquinas cannot be accused of a quantifier shift.

Given this critique of Wippel’s own critical analysis of Aquinas’s Third Way, it is conceivable that Aquinas is not in fact guilty of the fallacy Wippel and others have accused him of. Given this, it could be argued that both Aquinas and Swinburne’s arguments concerning God’s necessity each satisfy criterion (3). In that sense, the result of this analysis indicates a draw – if Aquinas’s ‘common to all possible beings’ feature is justifiable and sufficient to dispel the charges of quantifier shift.

So, of the three divergences above, two seem to work in Aquinas’s favour. Aquinas’s understanding of omnipotence in light of Divergences One and Two each satisfy Swinburne’s criterion (4) in ways that Swinburne’s own arguments fail to. Yet, Swinburne’s understanding of omnipotence in light of Divergence Three satisfies his own (3) criterion in a manner that Aquinas may fail to – unless one can adequately account for the ‘hidden assumption’ Aquinas apparently brings into the Third Way concerning the unity of all possible beings as precisely that – as possible.

Ultimately, given that more of Aquinas’s arguments concerning God’s omnipotence satisfy Swinburne’s criteria, we can conclude that Aquinas’s conception of omnipotence (at least with respect to these three divergences in opinion) is the stronger of the two. This may well seem a limited basis upon which to credit an argument as more or less correct. However, Swinburne himself explicitly cites these criteria as good, sensible judges of the truth of things like logical necessity and truth. It is, then, to be taken seriously, at least because Swinburne himself drafted them.
Conclusion

The stated goal of this thesis was to evaluate, insofar as was possible, how St Thomas Aquinas’s conception of God’s omnipotence interacts with Richard Swinburne’s own conception of the same. It has found, ultimately, from the criteria Swinburne himself uses to mark an argument as more or less likely to be true, that Aquinas’s understanding of omnipotence is the stronger of the two accounts on offer. Certainly, this is not a conclusion without space for challenge; there is, for instance, a great deal to be said about how useful conceptual simplicity is with reference to argumentation and truth. Yet, as noted elsewhere in the thesis, Swinburne, a respected and esteemed figure in contemporary philosophical discourse, drafted and endorsed these criteria as sufficient to judge one argument as either better or worse than other. With this in mind, this thesis can reasonably conclude that, according to the standards that Swinburne imposes on his own arguments, that Aquinas’s account of omnipotence is the more likely to be true.

The two criteria used to judge an account as either better or worse throughout this thesis were those concerning simplicity and coherence. Simplicity, for Swinburne, consists in conceptual simplicity; the less an account, definition, or argument must appeal to the existence of substances, properties, relations between these, and so on, the more likely it is to be true. Coherence, meanwhile, is evidential in character, in that it postulates that an argument, account, or definition is more likely to be true than not when it coheres with the conclusions of other fields, both related and not. In the course of this thesis, this ‘other field’ by which Swinburne and Aquinas’s arguments were judged was a contemporary but generally historically relevant understanding of logic, which held that if an argument commits a fallacy, that argument is greatly reduced in efficacy.

In what manner did Aquinas’s conception of omnipotence satisfy these criteria better than Swinburne’s own? Three divergences were identified, each emerging from Swinburne’s conception of omnipotence. These divergences were so named because it was in these ways precisely that Aquinas and Swinburne’s accounts of omnipotence differ. The first divergence concerned omnipotence as it relates to time; the second, whether God can cease to be omnipotent, and finally, the third, whether or not God’s necessity can be demonstrated.
The first divergence concluded on Aquinas’s side. It was found that among the actions an omnipotent agent might perform, one was particularly important and had serious ramifications for each thinker’s understanding of omnipotence as it relates to time. This action was the creation of the universe. If the common-sense notion that time is an emergent property of being is true, then time cannot come to exist until being does. Swinburne, however, held that every omnipotent action needs a duration greater than zero – and thus was left with a problem. How can there be a duration before the existence of being, if time is emergent from that being? Swinburne’s solution was to suggest that time is ‘unbounded’ by any kind of terminus, like ‘beginnings’ or ‘ endings’. From this he argued that it follows that time is necessarily infinite (in the sense of being ‘forwardly’ and ‘backwardly’ everlasting). That time is infinite allows Swinburne to ascribe duration to the actions of omnipotent beings like ‘creating the universe’; time pre-exists the universe, and so God’s act of creating the universe can have a duration.

In contrast, it was found that Aquinas’s conception of God was staunchly atemporal, in the sense that God is not in time. This was because Aquinas, following Aristotle, identifies time with movement (and therefore change). God for Aquinas is fully actual, and so immutable. As a consequence, God cannot experience time, for time is something that can pass only with respect to changeable substances like planets, mountains, and human beings. From this follows an important aspect of Aquinas’s account of time: because time is associated with movement, and only substances with being can ‘move’, time can only exist alongside the existence of changeable substances. This means that God’s act of creating the universe creates not only the contents of that universe, but also time (in the sense that time is something of an emergent property of the changeable substances making up the universe).

Applying the criterion of simplicity to both of these arguments, it was judged that Aquinas’s was the more conceptually lean. This was because Aquinas does not need to suppose some of the relations between substances, properties, and concepts which Swinburne must. For instance, while Swinburne must allow for time to be something distinct from the universe, and so requiring a different act of creation, Aquinas need only posit that God’s creating the universe also creates time.

The second divergence, which concerned whether God can cease to be omnipotent, also concluded in Aquinas’s favour. Again, the criterion this divergence was judged on was
relative conceptual simplicity. Swinburne argued that God can, by virtue of his being a person (and specifically, a person without a body), pursue the best possible state of affairs in any circumstance, should one exist. It was found that Swinburne counted among these best possible states of affairs circumstances in which God either divests himself of his omnipotence, or his existence entirely (mainly on the grounds that God’s continued omnipotence might adversely impact human freedom).

Aquinas, in contrast, was found to hold that omnipotence relates to God in such a way that God cannot divest himself of it. Divine simplicity was the basis for this view; on it, God is a being of pure actuality who possesses no composition. In light of this, Aquinas argued that God cannot be ‘carved up’ into discrete pieces, like ‘God’s goodness’ or ‘God’s intellect’ or ‘God’s wisdom’. Everything in the divine essence exists in a radical state of simplicity, such that all are identical with each other. This includes omnipotence. Thus, Aquinas thinks that God cannot cease to be omnipotent. Moreover, Aquinas was able to argue that because God’s omnipotence is part of God’s divinely simple essence, it is identical with the greatest possible goodness. Thus, the notion that a ‘best state of affairs’ might not include omnipotence does not arise for him, for any best possible state of affairs will involve the infinitely good God (and thus, the infinitely good God’s omnipotence).

Much like the first divergence, this one was judged by Swinburne’s ‘simplicity’ criteria. In light of that, the divergence ultimately ended in Aquinas’s favour precisely because his conception of divine omnipotence is related to God by divine simplicity. Thus, Aquinas does not need to posit omnipotence as some ‘aspect’ of God, distinct from the rest of him. There is just God. In contrast, Swinburne must hold that omnipotence is something distinct from God because God can, in some cases, divest himself of it. By virtue of these findings, it was judged that Aquinas’s account was the conceptually leaner, and so was more likely to be true.

Finally, the third divergence emerged from Swinburne’s views concerning the second divergence. This was because there, Swinburne conceives of God as being able to cease to exist, or at least cease to be omnipotent. Both of these raise issues concerning God’s necessity; after all, if God can cease to exist or be omnipotent, then God’s existence does not seem necessary for (say) the continued existence of the universe. In spite of this, Swinburne was found to have developed an argument for divine necessity which he
thought a suitable median between other, more excessive views. Swinburne ultimately concluded that though no ‘direct or semi-direct’ argument for God’s necessity could be presented, it was, nevertheless, something humans could conceive of.

Aquinas, in contrast, was found to have considered God’s necessity as so primary or fundamental that one could reason from the necessity of created things to God’s own necessity (and thereby prove that God exists). This was found to constitute Aquinas’s famous Third Way. Unfortunately, it was also found that Aquinas’s arguments for God’s necessity in the Third Way leave him open to charges of logical fallacy. It was shown that the fallacy he was accused of in this instance by commentators like Wippel was of executing a ‘quantifier shift’ when reasoning from the possible non-existence of created entities to the totality of all created entities which might ever exist.

Given the difficulty in applying Swinburne’s criterion of simplicity to a matter of logic, a different criterion of Swinburne’s was used to judge the relative merits of each philosopher’s understanding of necessity. The criterion chosen was of coherence with respect to the findings and arguments of other fields separate from the one being considered. In this instance, that field was logic. On the basis that Aquinas’s arguments concerning God’s necessity run into a logical problem that Swinburne’s does not, it was judged that this divergence fell in Swinburne’s favour. It was noted, however, that the accusations levelled at Aquinas’s efforts to argue for God’s necessity can be answered in a fashion, if one bears in mind the facts that Aquinas distinguishes between different sorts of necessity, and that there exists a ‘common nature’ between beings which unites them in such a way as to dispel the quantifier fallacy. Thus, this divergence ended in such a way that either Aquinas or Swinburne could be deemed the ‘victor’.

In light of this simple fact that in two of the three divergences above, Aquinas’s account emerges as the superior, his account of omnipotence must be judged the stronger of the two accounts on offer. Additionally, that the criteria used to determine the relative merits of the views expressed were in fact formulated and endorsed by Swinburne himself would seem to open Swinburne to charges of failing on two counts, rather than one. Not only have Swinburne’s arguments paled in comparison to Aquinas’s, they have failed by the standards he himself drafted. This raises some possible doubts about the coherence of Swinburne’s account of omnipotence.
Ultimately, this thesis finds in favour of Aquinas’s account of omnipotence, on the grounds that in light of the three divergences discussed above, Aquinas’s understanding of omnipotence satisfies the stated criteria of quality better than Swinburne’s own arguments do.
Bibliography


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