

drulogion

thursday theological thoughts

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 15, 2006

Attributes of God (VII): Omnipotence

Our ongoing series on the attributes of God is approaching a turning point. We began with the NOTs -- the negative approach to God's attributes. We then turned to the OMNIs -- the positive approach. Both of these approaches are "metaphysical," in the sense that they begin with our knowledge of the world and try to think how God relates to us. Next we will turn to the attributes of character (love, mercy, etc.), which will consume us for the remainder of this series.



But first, we must add one last OMNI: **omnipotence**.

This may be the most well-known and most obvious divine attribute. Whatever God is, he must be the most powerful being imaginable, right?

In light of its familiarity - and also out of a desire to avoid a stylistic rut with this series - I think I will just raise a classic question about divine omnipotence and sketch some possible answers. You may have heard it before, but here goes:

Can God create an object too large to move?

Here are some classic answers to this classic question:

1) **No**. God's power extends to that which is logically possible. Omnipotence properly defined means that God is able to do anything that is not logically impossible. God cannot do something and also not do it. That's just logically impossible. God's power is not diminished by limiting it in this way.

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2) **Yes.** God's power is exhibited precisely in his ability to limit himself in relationship to other creatures. God is able to create not only powerful forces but also free agents whom he cannot control. God's power is not limited but rather displayed by his free engagement with a free world. God need not coerce to be powerful.

3) **Yes and No.** The question reveals an absolute paradox that cannot be solved. If God is genuinely omnipotent, then he must be able *both* to create an object too heavy for him *and* to lift every possible object. This paradox may lead to three different conclusions: (a) God is not omnipotent because it would introduce contradiction into God's perfect being, (b) there is no God because the concept "God" requires omnipotence by definition, or (c) the contemplation of this paradox draws us into the mystery of the unknowable God, teaching us to affirm both his power and his weakness.

4) **No comment.** The question begins with a false premise and therefore should not be dignified with an answer. This false assumption is that God's power can be thought of in quantitative terms based on the analogy of created power dynamics. God is not human power multiplied to the nth degree. God's power is utterly unlike created power, as is shown by the Cross of Christ as the power of God. If we begin from the correct starting point (the revelation of God), we will avoid such speculative questions.

Any thoughts?

What answer would you give to this question?

Do you agree with any of the above answers?

How might you tweak them to fit more nearly your thoughts on God's power?

Is there an alternative answer that is not listed above?

Labels: [Attributes of God](#)

posted by JohnLDrury @ 6:46 PM

[4 comments](#)

4 Comments:

At [2:02 PM, November 17, 2006](#), [David Drury](#) said...

No comment.

At [9:56 AM, November 22, 2006](#), Anonymous said...

The question does not make sense if one thinks about it. The Question "Can God create something so big he can't move?" is exactly the same as asking "Can God defeat Himself?" Is there any logic in asking such a question!

At [2:17 PM, November 24, 2006](#), Anonymous said...

Do we make the mistake of looking at omnipotence as "all-powerful"

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which is how we define it from a human viewpoint. Or should we define it as "total control", that is, God has absolute total control over all creation. For God to create something that He cannot move would mean that something exists outside of His control which is impossible.

At [10:53 PM, November 26, 2006](#), [Ken Schenck](#) said...

I've always gone with "no." The wording makes us think that in order for God to be all powerful we need to answer yes. But in fact the answer has to be no for God to be omnipotent. So to reword the question: Is there any rock so big that God cannot move it? No. Therefore it is not possible for God to make a rock so big that He cannot move it--after all, He's omnipotent. Of course He can choose not to move anything He wants.

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