

# An Annotated Bibliography of Omnipotence

Kenneth L. Pearce

November 12, 2011

This bibliography was prepared as part of the process of writing the article “Omnipotence” for the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Theories of omnipotence are distinguished into *act theories*, which suppose that an omnipotent being would be able to perform any action meeting certain conditions, to be specified by the theory, and *result theories*, which suppose that an omnipotent being would be able to bring about any result, again meeting certain conditions.

Anderson, C. Anthony. 1984. Divine omnipotence and impossible tasks: an intensional analysis. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 15 (3): 109–124.

Produces a rigorous formalization of the Stone Paradox, and defends a sophisticated act theory against it.

Aquinas, St. Thomas. 1921. *The summa theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*. 2nd ed. Trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province. London: Burns Oates & Washbourne. <http://newadvent.org/summa/>.

Part 1, Qu. 25, Art. 3 argues that omnipotence should be understood as the ability to do anything that is absolutely possible, i.e., that does not imply a contradiction.

Brown, Campbell, and Yujin Nagasawa. 2005. Anything you can do, God can do better. *American Philosophical Quarterly* 42 (3): 221–227.

Argues that the impossibility of an omnipotent being can be derived from the premise that *if a being cannot make a stone it cannot lift, it is not omnipotent*, plus a few principles widely accepted by theists. As a result, theists must reject this principle.

Cargile, James. 1967. On omnipotence. *Noûs* 1 (2): 201–205.

Points out that the paradox formulated in Cowan 1965 only tells against necessary omnipotence and advocates an account of omnipotence according to which, for any possible action, an omnipotent being possesses a power which could be exercised in the performance of that action.

- Cowan, J. L. 1965. The paradox of omnipotence. *Analysis* 25:102–108.
- Argues, against Mayo and Mavrodes, that the Stone Paradox cannot be solved by claiming that God can perform only logically possible tasks (Mayo 1961; Mavrodes 1963).
- . 1974. The paradox of omnipotence revisited. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 3 (3): 435–445.
- Further develops the account of the Stone Paradox from Cowan 1965.
- Descartes, Rene. 1984–1991. *The philosophical writings of Descartes*. Trans. John Cottingham et al. 3 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Defends *voluntarism*, the thesis that God can do literally anything, even draw a round square. See 2:294 (Sixth Replies) and 3:23–26 (letters to Mersenne).
- Farrell, P. M. 1958. Evil and omnipotence. *Mind* 67 (267): 399–403.
- Argues that Mackie has not adequately understood the classical responses to the problem of evil from Augustine and Aquinas (Mackie 1955).
- Flint, Thomas P., and Alfred J. Freddoso. 1983. Maximal power. In *The existence and nature of God*, ed. Alfred J. Freddoso. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Combines the apparatus of Plantinga 1974 with an Ockhamist account of foreknowledge to develop a result theory sensitive to issues about time and freedom.
- Frankfurt, Harry G. 1964. The logic of omnipotence. *Philosophical Review* 73 (2): 262–263.
- Points out that if, as Descartes supposed, God can do the logically impossible, then God can create a stone too heavy for him to lift *and still lift it*.
- Funkhouser, Eric. 2006. On privileging God’s moral goodness. *Faith and Philosophy* 23 (4): 409–422.
- Argues that omnipotence is incompatible with necessary moral perfection, and that omnipotence is not a perfection, and therefore should not be attributed to God.
- Geach, P. T. 1973. Omnipotence. *Philosophy* 48 (183): 7–20.
- Considers four act theories of omnipotence and argues that they are all unacceptable.
- Gellman, Jerome I. 1989. The limits of maximal power. *Philosophical Studies* 55 (3): 329–336.
- Criticism of Flint and Freddoso 1983.

Grave, S. A. 1956. On evil and omnipotence. *Mind* 65 (258): 259–262.

Argues that Mackie’s presentation of the Logical Problem of Evil presuppose compatibilism about free will (Mackie 1955).

Harrison, Jonathan. 1976. Geach on God’s alleged ability to do evil. *Philosophy* 51 (196): 208–215.

Criticizes Geach’s treatment of God’s ability to do evil, and offers an analysis similar to the one previously offered by Pike (Geach 1973; Pike 1969).

Hoffman, Joshua. 1979. Mavrodes on defining omnipotence. *Philosophical Studies* 35 (3): 311–313.

Argues that Mavrodes’ analysis of omnipotence (Mavrodes 1977) is too weak.

Keene, G. B. 1960. A simpler solution to the paradox of omnipotence. *Mind* 69 (273): 74–75.

Argues that inability to make things one cannot control is consistent with omnipotence, since ‘X cannot make things which X cannot control’ is logically equivalent to ‘everything X can make, X can control,’ and the latter would clearly be true of an omnipotent being.

La Croix, Richard R. 1977a. The hidden assumption in the paradox of omnipotence. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 38 (1): 125–127.

Argues that the Stone Paradox can be solved by restricting omnipotence to logically possible tasks.

———. 1977b. The impossibility of defining ‘omnipotence’. *Philosophical Studies* 32 (2): 181–190.

Argues that every possible definition of omnipotence either renders omnipotence inconsistent with traditional divine attributes or falls prey to McEar-style counterexamples. This article is responsible for introducing the name ‘McEar’.

———. 1978. Failing to define ‘omnipotence’. *Philosophical Studies* 34 (2): 219–222.

Responds to objections Mavrodes raised to La Croix’s earlier argument (La Croix 1977b; Mavrodes 1977).

Leftow, Brian. 2009. Omnipotence. In *The Oxford handbook of philosophical theology*, ed. Thomas P. Flint and Michael C. Rea. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

After a historical survey of accounts of omnipotence, argues for an account which conjoins the theory advocated by Wielenberg 2000 with a more standard result theory and a third conjunct which requires that an omnipotent being provide the truthmakers for all modal truths.

Leibniz, G. W. 1985. *Theodicy*. Ed. Austin Farrer. Trans. E. M. Huggard. La Salle, Ill.: Open Court.

First published in 1710. Further expounds and defends the understanding of divine creation Leibniz had advocated in Leibniz 1989.

———. 1989. On the ultimate origination of things. In *Philosophical essays*, ed. and trans. Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber, 149–155. Indianapolis: Hackett.

Composed around 1697. A short outline of Leibniz’s theory of creation. God’s omnipotence consists in his ability to actualize any possible world, but God is impelled by a ‘moral necessity’ to choose the best.

Macbeath, Murray. 1988. Geach on omnipotence and virginity. *Philosophy* 63 (245): 395–400.

Criticizes Geach’s treatment of an omnipotent being’s inability to change the past (Geach 1973).

Mackie, J. L. 1955. Evil and omnipotence. *Mind* 64 (254): 200–212.

Argues that it is incoherent to suppose that a world containing evil was created by an omnipotent and perfectly good being.

Manis, R. Zachary. 2011. Could God do something evil? a molinist solution to the problem of divine freedom. *Faith and Philosophy* 28 (2): 209–223.

Suggests that, in order to preserve divine freedom (and omnipotence), the claim that God is necessarily morally perfect should be replaced with the claim that there is no possible state of affairs such that if that state of affairs obtained, God would act immorally.

Mann, William E. 1977. Ross on omnipotence. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 8 (2): 142–147.

Shows that, given Ross’s theory of omnipotence (Ross 1969), no omnipotent being can have liberty of indifference and decision forbearance with respect to the same proposition – that is, such a being cannot freely decide to leave it up to others whether a certain proposition should obtain.

Mavrodes, George I. 1963. Some puzzles concerning omnipotence. *Philosophical Review* 72 (2): 221–223.

Argues that an omnipotent being could not create a stone so heavy he could not lift it, since the notion of a stone too heavy to be lifted by an omnipotent being is incoherent.

———. 1977. Defining omnipotence. *Philosophical Studies* 32 (2): 191–202.

Defends a result theory of omnipotence against La Croix’s objections (La Croix 1977b).

Mawson, T. J. 2002. Omnipotence and necessary moral perfection are compatible: a reply to morriston. *Religious Studies* 38 (2): 215–223.

Argues that a modified Thomistic theory of the will can be used to undermine Morrision's argument against the compatibility of omnipotence and necessary moral perfection (Morrision 2001), and, indeed, to show that omnipotence entails necessary moral perfection.

Mayo, Bernard. 1961. Mr. Keene on omnipotence. *Mind* 70 (278): 249–250.

Criticizes Keene 1960, and argues that the Paradox of Omnipotence is to be solved by recognizing that the notion of something that cannot be controlled by an omnipotent being is contradictory.

McLean, Murdith. 1975. The unmakeable-because-unliftable stone. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 4 (4): 717–721.

Criticizes the treatment of the Stone Paradox in Cowan 1974.

Meierding, Loren. 1980. The impossibility of necessary omnitemporal omnipotence. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 11 (1): 21–26.

Formalizes Swinburne's argument that only necessary omnitemporal omnipotence is incoherent (Swinburne 1973).

Morrison, Wes. 2001. Omnipotence and necessary moral perfection: are they compatible? *Religious Studies* 37 (2): 143–160.

Argues that no being could be both omnipotent and necessarily morally perfect.

———. 2003. Are omnipotence and necessary moral perfection compatible? reply to mawson. *Religious Studies* 39 (4): 441–449.

Replies to Mawson's criticisms of his previous arguments against the compatibility of omnipotence and necessary moral perfection (Mawson 2002; Morrison 2001).

Oppy, Graham. 2005. Omnipotence. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 71 (1): 58–84.

Criticizes several recent theories of omnipotence (Rosenkrantz and Hoffman 1980b; Flint and Freddoso 1983; Wierenga 1983) and argues that the God of 'orthodox monotheism' should not be regarded as omnipotent at all.

Pike, Nelson. 1969. Omnipotence and God's ability to sin. *American Philosophical Quarterly* 6 (3): 208–216.

Argues that although the individual who is in fact God is able to sin, it is, in two senses, impossible that God should sin: first, if the individual who is in fact God sinned, that individual would not be deserving of the title 'God.' Second, sin is contrary to the character of the individual who is in fact God.

Plantinga, Alvin. 1967. *God and other minds: a study of the rational justification of belief in God*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Ch. 7, sect. 2 is concerned with omnipotence and is notable primarily for introducing the 'McEar' counterexample to certain definitions of omnipotence (p. 170).

———. 1974. *The nature of necessity*. Clarendon Library of Logic and Philosophy. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Chapter 9, especially sections 4 and 6, argues that there are possible worlds which God, though omnipotent, cannot actualize.

Reichenbach, Bruce R. 1980. Mavrodes on omnipotence. *Philosophical Studies* 37 (2): 211–214.

Argues that Mavrodes' analysis of omnipotence (Mavrodes 1977) falls prey to McEar-style counterexamples.

Rosenkrantz, Gary, and Joshua Hoffman. 1980a. The omnipotence paradox, modality, and time. *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 18 (4): 473–479.

Criticizes the formalization of the Stone Paradox from Savage 1967 for its reliance on a particular act theory of omnipotence and argues that the paradox can be both presented and defused without relying on any particular theory.

———. 1980b. What an omnipotent agent can do. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 11 (1): 1–19.

Defends a result theory according to which an omnipotent agent can actualize any unrestrictedly repeatable state of affairs.

Ross, James F. 1969. *Philosophical theology*. Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill.

Omnipotence is the topic of chapter 5. After a survey of Scholastic theories of omnipotence, Ross argues that no act theory of omnipotence can succeed. Ross then presents his own theory according to which a being is omnipotent iff, for any contingent state of affairs  $p$ , it is up to that being to choose whether  $p$  obtains.

———. 1980. Creation. *Journal of Philosophy* 77 (10): 614–629.

Further develops, and defends from objections, the account of omnipotence given in Ross 1969. Section 2 answers the objection that Ross's theory leaves no room for human freedom.

Savage, C. Wade. 1967. The paradox of the stone. *Philosophical Review* 76 (1): 74–79.

Criticizes Mavrodes and proposes an alternative solution to the Stone Paradox similar to that earlier proposed by Keene (Mavrodes 1963; Keene 1960).

Schrader, David E. 1979. A solution to the Stone Paradox. *Synthese* 42 (2): 255–264.

Argues that a simple result theory can avoid the Stone Paradox.

Senor, Thomas D. 2006. God's goodness needs no privilege: a reply to Funkhouser. *Faith and Philosophy* 23 (4): 423–431.

Argues, against Funkhouser, that an account of omnipotence along the lines suggested by Wielenberg can remove the apparent conflict between omnipotence and necessary moral perfection (Funkhouser 2006; Wielenberg 2000).

Smart, Ninian. 1961. Omnipotence, evil and supermen. *Philosophy* 36 (137): 188–195.

Argues that the state of affairs *all men being wholly good* is logically incoherent and therefore cannot be brought about, even by an omnipotent being.

Sobel, Jordan Howard. 2004. *Logic and theism: arguments for and against beliefs in God*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Chapter 9 argues that, on an act theory of omnipotence, essential omnipotence is incoherent. As an alternative to omnipotence, Sobel introduces the notion of an ONSLIP – a being with Only Necessarily Self-Limited Power.

Swinburne, Richard. 1973. Omnipotence. *American Philosophical Quarterly* 10:231–237.

Argues that a result theory can, and an act theory cannot, defeat the Stone Paradox. However, it is conceded that the Paradox shows that no temporal being could be essentially omnipotent.

Walton, Douglas. 1975. The omnipotence paradox. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 4 (4): 705–715.

Applies formal work in the logic of action to the understanding of omnipotence, with focus on the possibility of self-limiting actions.

Wielenberg, Erik J. 2000. Omnipotence again. *Faith and Philosophy* 17 (1): 26–47.

Criticizes recent accounts of omnipotence (Wierenga 1983; Flint and Fredoso 1983) and argues for a result theory according to which there is no state of affairs such that lack of power prevents an omnipotent being from actualizing it. Denies that having the power to perform an action entails possibly performing it.

Wierenga, Edward R. 1983. Omnipotence defined. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 43 (3): 363–375.

Defends a result theory, and argues that a being like McEar is impossible.

Wolfe, Julian. 1971. Omnipotence. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 1 (2): 245–247.

This short dialogue suggests that the Stone Paradox can be solved by distinguishing between genuine *powers* and mere *capacities*.