The paradox of the stone

Suppose that you asked me whether I believe in God, and I replied that I do and that, furthermore, I believe that this lectern is God. This would no doubt be surprising; but would my claim that this lectern is God be coherent?

It seems that it would depend on what I believed about this lectern — i.e., it would depend on what properties I took this lectern to have.

If, for example, I believed that this lectern were omniscient, and all-powerful, and created the universe, then it looks like my view that the lectern is God would be, even if false, coherent. But if I believed that the lectern was pretty much like every other lectern in its powers, that I would be mis-using the term “God” to express my beliefs.

What, exactly, would I have to believe about the lectern in order to genuinely believe that it is God?

We could try to answer this question by a list: by simply starting to name off the properties that we take God to have. But we should ask: what unifies the list? Why are some properties, but not others, on the list?

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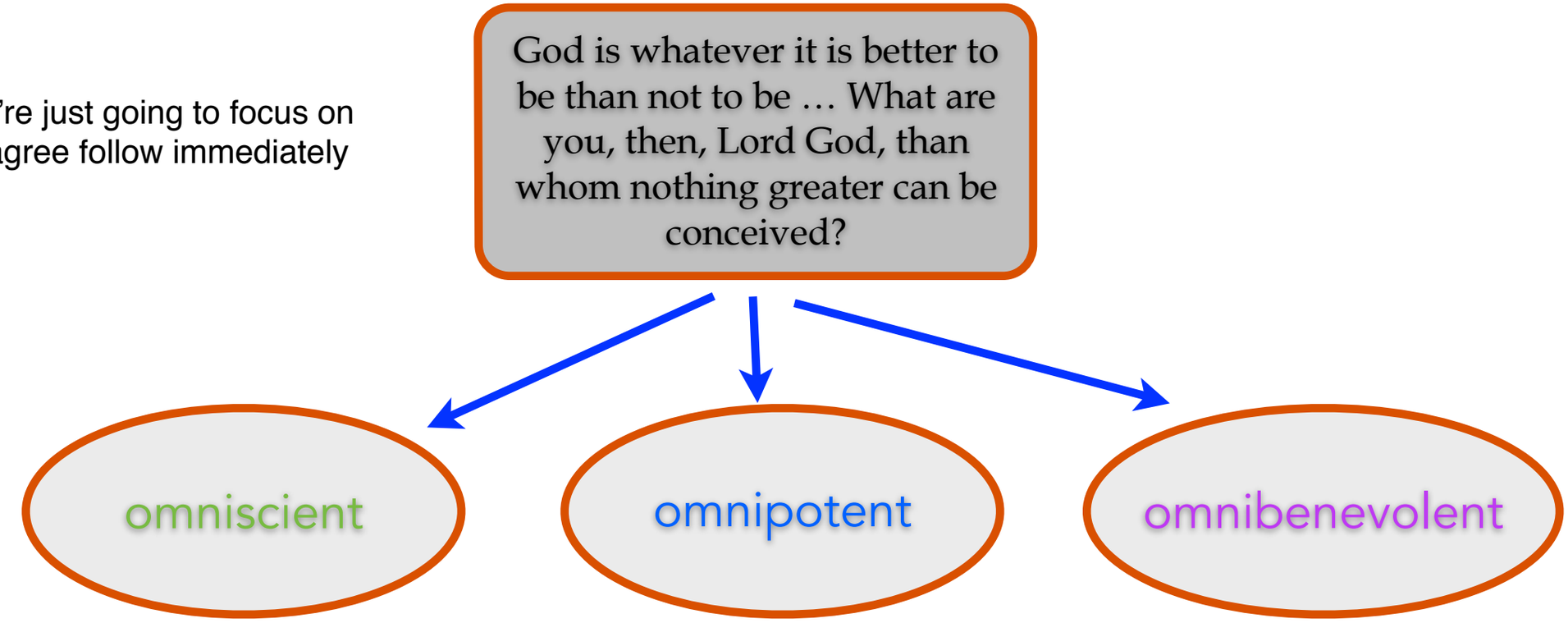
This is a question which St. Anselm — an 11th century English monk — tried to answer. In his *Proslogion* he wrote:

> God is whatever it is better to be than not to be … What are you, then, Lord God, than whom nothing greater can be conceived?

This gives us a sort of recipe for at least partially determining the properties we take God to have — or, as they’re more commonly called, the ‘divine attributes.’

Suppose that a certain property is proposed as a divine attribute. Anselm would have us ask: is it better to have that property than not to have it?

In the next few classes we're just going to focus on three attributes that most agree follow immediately from Anselm's criterion.



Many take this to be the core of our conception of God: that God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good. But, as we'll see, even this beginning of a list of the divine attributes leads to immediate problems. Today, we'll focus on the problems to which omnipotence gives rise.

omniscient

omnipotent

omnibenevolent

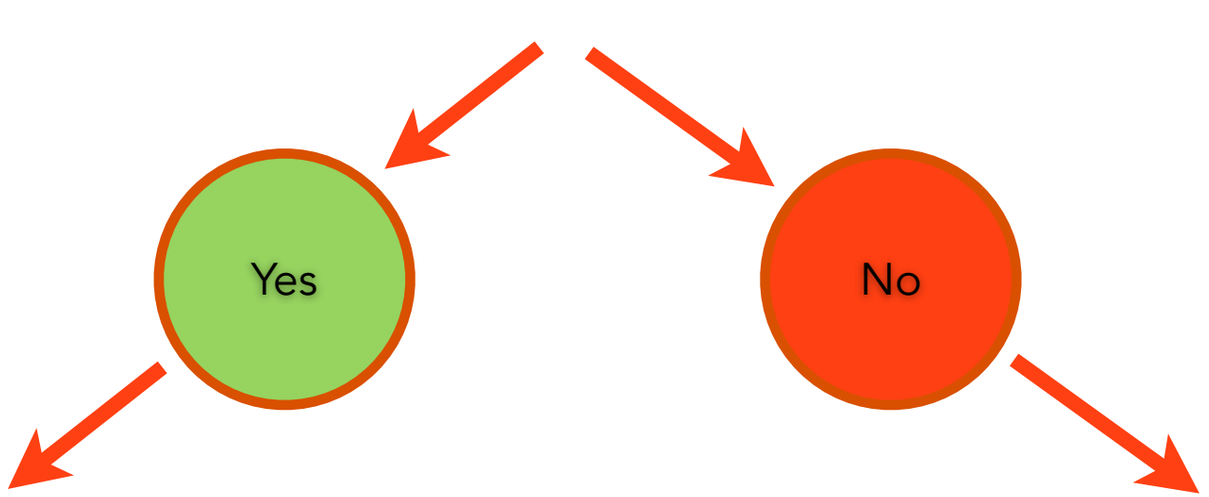
What, exactly, does it mean for a being to be omnipotent?

A natural answer to this question is:

(1) A being is omnipotent if and only if that being can do anything.

But now consider the following question:

Could God create a stone so large that even God could not lift it?



Then there's something God cannot do: namely, lift the stone.

Then there's something God cannot do: namely, make the stone.

Either way, given definition (1) of omnipotence, God is not omnipotent.

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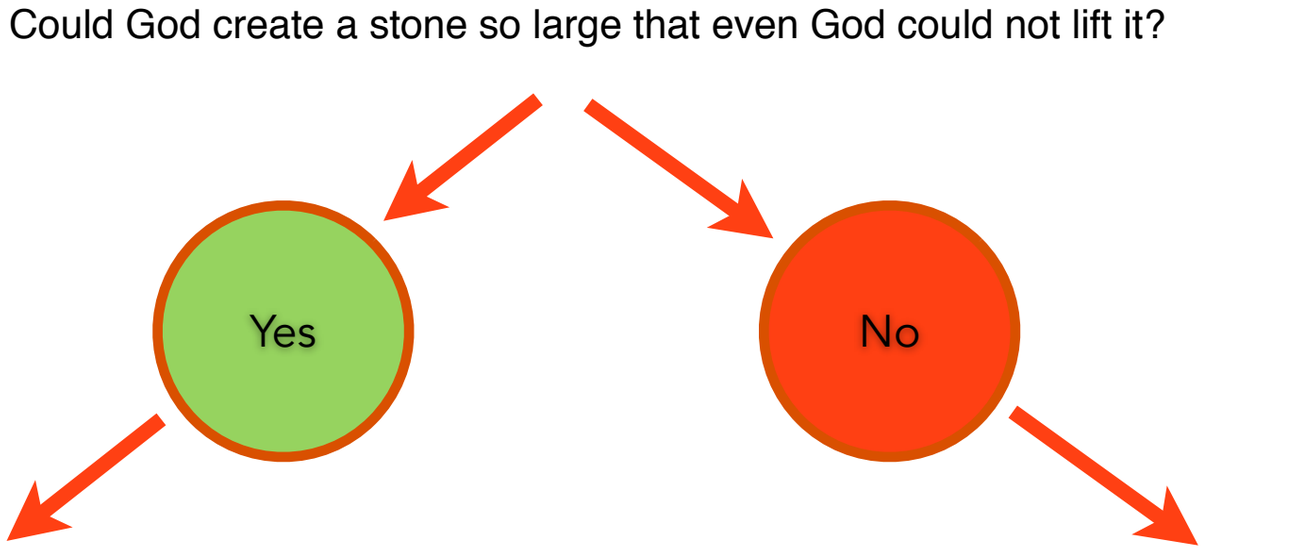

Let's try to list the premises of our argument. One way to do it is as follows:

1. Either (a) God can create a stone so large that God cannot lift it, or (b) God cannot create a stone so large that God cannot lift it.

2. If (a), then there is something God cannot do.

3. If (b), then there is something God cannot do.

C. God is not omnipotent.

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So it looks like 4 follows from 1, 2, and 3 together. But how can we get from 4 to our conclusion?

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But does the believer in God really have to reject the conclusion? Could we just accept the result that God is not omnipotent?

Not, it seems, if we accept the conception of God as the greatest conceivable being, and hence Anselm's claim that God has every property which it is better to have than to lack.

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Aquinas agreed with Anselm that God is the greatest being conceivable, and hence had to find a response to this argument. We can see how he would respond to this argument by looking at his account of omnipotence.

First, he considers definition 1 of omnipotence above, and gives the following objection:

> If God were omnipotent, then all things would be possible; nothing, therefore, impossible. But if we take away the impossible, then we destroy also the necessary. … Therefore there would be nothing at all that is necessary in things if God were omnipotent.

Here's what I think Aquinas has in mind here. There seems to be a distinction between truths which are **necessary** — which could not have been otherwise — and truths which are **contingent** — which could have been otherwise.

But consider some necessary truth — like the claim that triangles have three sides. If definition 1 of omnipotence were true, then God could make a triangle which does not have three sides. After all, definition 1 of omnipotence says that God can do **anything**.

But if God could make a triangle without three sides, there could have been a triangle without three sides; and in that case the claim that triangles have three sides is not necessary, but contingent.

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The conclusion is that if there is a distinction between necessary and contingent truths, as there seems to be, then omnipotence can't be understood according to definition 1. Hence, Aquinas concludes, this definition of omnipotence is incorrect.

This gives us a response to our argument because, if that definition is incorrect, then premise 5 of our argument is false.

But we can't stop there; one wonders what omnipotence is, if it is not the ability to do anything.

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The first alternative account Aquinas considers is:

(2) A being is omnipotent if and only if that being can do anything that it is possible for that being to do.

The problem with this, Aquinas says, is that it leads to a 'vicious circle'. According to definition 2, if we want to understand what God's omnipotence is, we have to first know what it is possible for God to do — but that's exactly what we wanted to find out!

This leads Aquinas to say:

God is called omnipotent because he can do all things that are possible absolutely.

Which we can formulate as:

(3) A being is omnipotent if and only if that being can bring about anything which is possible.

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Suppose that Aquinas is right about this, and that omnipotence should be understood according to definition 3. Then we have a way out of the argument, because this falsifies premise 5.

But one might wonder: could we revise the argument so as to avoid this objection?

And it might seem that we could: we could just replace premise 5 with:

5*. A being is omnipotent if and only if that being can bring about anything which is possible. (Def. 3 of omnipotence)

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Aquinas has no objection to premise 5*. Is this new, revised argument convincing? Is it valid?

It is not. For suppose that (b) is true. Then what we get from premises 1-3 is that God cannot create a stone so large that God cannot lift it. But, plausibly, it is impossible that there be a stone so large that God cannot lift it. Hence we cannot conclude from the truth of premises 1-3 that there is something possible which God cannot bring about — and that, given Aquinas' view of omnipotence, is what we need to derive the conclusion.

To derive the conclusion using Aquinas' restricted view of omnipotence, we would need to find some state of affairs which is such that (i) it is possible and (ii) God cannot bring it about. Are there any?

Here's one possibility:

> The state of affairs of there being a rock so large that the creator of that rock cannot lift it.

Is this a possible state of affairs? Can God bring it about? If so, how?

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Is this a possible state of affairs? Can God bring it about? If so, how?

Here's another try:

> The state of affairs of there being a rock so large that the creator of that rock cannot lift it and the creator of that rock was not caused to create it by God.

Is this state of affairs possible? Can God bring it about?

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That sort of example is related to an important difference between definitions 1 and 3 of omnipotence. Whereas definition #1 defines omnipotence in terms of the range of **actions** that God can perform, definition #3 defines omnipotence in terms of the range of **states of affairs** that God can bring about.

Definitions of omnipotence in terms of actions run into various problems. Here are two sorts of actions which certainly seem possible to perform, but which, arguably, God cannot perform:

Telling a lie.

Causing Jeff Speaks to freely end lecture early.

The problem for definition #3 we just discussed was a problem precisely because it described a state of affairs partly in terms of the type of action used to bring it about. Next time, we'll discuss parallel problems for definition #3 which have to do with the existence of evil in the world.

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Let's return to our original argument. Suppose that we do not find Aquinas' definition of omnipotence plausible, perhaps on the grounds that it unduly restricts God's power.

This might lead us to stick with definition 1 of omnipotence. If we do this, we can hardly reject premise 5 of the argument. Is there any other plausible objection we can make to the argument?

Somewhat surprisingly, the answer is 'Yes.' Let's look more closely at premise 2 of the argument. Why is this supposed to be plausible?

The idea, presumably, is something like this: if (a) is true, then God can make a stone — call it X — so large that God cannot lift it. But then God cannot lift X, and so there is something that God cannot do.

But how do we know that, having made X, God cannot lift it? One wants to say: because the definition of X is 'a stone so large that God cannot lift it.' It would be a contradiction for God to lift it!

To which the defender of definition 1 of omnipotence can say: 'So what? According to my definition of omnipotence God **can** bring about impossible states of affairs. So God can make a stone too large for God to lift, and also lift it.'

Summing up: the paradox of the stone can be turned into an argument against God's omnipotence which has a great deal of initial plausibility. But once we clearly lay out the premises, we can see that the argument does not succeed.

We can think of our reply to this argument as a dilemma: either definition 1 of omnipotence is true, or definition 3 is. In the first case, premise 2 is false; in the second case, premise 5 is false. So whatever view of omnipotence we accept, the argument has a false premise.

As we've seen, though, even our weaker definition 3 of omnipotence leads to problems. Next time we will turn to a new paradox about God's existence: one which asks whether it is possible for God to exist in a world in which there is evil.