Why Can't God Do Everything?

by Lawrence Moonan

It is the contention of Professor Geach in 'Omnipotence', Philosophy 48 (1973) 7-20, called GP in what follows, that 'no graspable sense has ever been given to this sentence ['God can do everything'] that did not lead to self-contradiction or at least to conclusions manifestly untenable from a Christian point of view' (GP 7-8). In the still more recent 'An irrelevance of omnipotence', Philosophy 48 (1973) 327-33, called GIOP in what follows, he continues to maintain a thesis of that kind: 'any thesis that gives a plausible interpretation of the sentence 'God can do everything' is a thesis involving both inherent logical difficulties and conclusions hard to reconcile with traditional Christian belief' (GIOP 327), and 'sense is not to be made of "God can do everything" (GIOP 332). His contention, as the present paper will show, will not in fact survive straightforwardly logical criticism owing nothing essential to any arcane points of detail peculiar to philosophical theology.

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Reasonably dismissing some other possible ways of understanding 'God can do everything'—which should rather be put as 'There is nothing that God cannot do'—Professor Geach brings his main batteries against a position held by many catholic theologians, St Thomas Aquinas among them. According to that position '"God can do so-and-so" is true just if "God does so-and-so" is logically consistent—there may be consistently describable feats which it would involve contradiction to suppose done by God' (G P 9's italics). In view of that restriction which G P rightly emphasises, Aquinas advanced the thesis:

1. It cannot be said of God that he can grow weary.

G P is correct in ascribing 1. to Aquinas who, speaking of divine power, pointed out that it was by definition active, potentia activa, and totally so, with no possible admixture of potentiality, potentia

¹This is the third of GP's 'four main theories of omnipotence'. 'The first holds that God can do everything absolutely, everything that can be expressed in a string of words that makes sense; even if that sense can be shown to be self-contradictory, God is not bound in action, as we are in thought, by the laws of logic. . . The second . . . is that a proposition "God can do so-and-so" is true only when "so-and-so" represents a logically consistent description. . . The last [i.e. the fourth] and weakest view is that the realm of what can be done or brought about includes all future possibilities, and that whenever "God will bring so-and-so about" is logically possible, "God can bring so-and-so about" is true'. (GP 9.)

passiva; that in the divine nature—with which God's power, like all his other attributes, was held to be really identical—there was no room for any potentiality; and that growing tired is possible only where, among other conditions, there is some potentiality. G P also ascribes to Aquinas a second thesis, and once more I do not doubt that the ascription is correct:

2. God (the Son) did in fact grow weary; which, for stylistic simplicity, I shall consider in its weaker form, asserting '. . . can grow weary'.

Where G P is altogether mistaken is in asserting that 1. and 2. have to be understood in such a way that they are saying contradictory things.

The first step in showing this is to make quite explicit a point which Professor Geach has left insidiously tacit, though which Aquinas expressly allows for in the passage G P appears to refer to. As so often the advice of Hume is worth taking: spell out your propositions, you will the more readily see their falsehood. The point which must be made is the elementary one that it is divine absolute power which is in question—for it is not only God but any choice-making agent who can be said to have an 'absolute power', as will be seen. It is unimportant, for the present, that G P is in addition mistaken on the historico-exegetical point it makes about potentia absoluta dei, though a correct understanding of the expression can put one on one's guard against an insufficient analysis, of the kind allowed in G P. What is to the point is that it is divine power, and that alone, that is in question in thesis 1. Let us therefore rewrite 1, making that explicit:

1a. It cannot be said of God that in virtue of his divine power, he can grow weary.

The next step involves the logical trick of reduplication (qua F as against qua G), as Professor Geach himself suggested, though perhaps more has to be said about that trick than was said in G P. At least two ways of using reduplication can be distinguished, one of them badly misleading in English and hardly less so in Latin. Using G P's example of Jones who wears two hats, let us see how this might be put:

- 3. Jones, qua Mayor of Middletown, is Director of Gnome Works. That suggests something that could be paraphrased thus:
 - 3a. Jones, precisely in virtue of being Mayor of Middletown, is Director of Gnome.

It must be noted that for 3a to be true it is not enough that Jones has in fact been elected to the board of Gnome precisely because he is, as it happens, Mayor of Middletown, where Gnome proposes to expand, or engage in reclamation. That would suffice for the truth of the different statement:

3aa. Jones, precisely because he was known to be Mayor, was elected to the board of Gnome.

3a will be true only where there is some logical link between being mayor and being director, otherwise it will be false. 'Precisely in vir-

tue of the form of mayorness inhering in him, Jones ...' is what has to be brought out. '. . . is entitled to sign documents on behalf of the town' is the sort of thing that could properly go in the slot: '. . . is entitled to sign documents on behalf of Gnome' is not. It is because of this formal link that is required, that that first form of reduplication is sometimes called formal reduplication.

But 3 could also be understood as suggesting something rather different from formal reduplication, something to the effect that:

3b. Jones, while being Mayor, is also Director of Gnome, which could be put less misleadingly still as the conjunction:

Jones is Mayor and Jones is Director

It is not hard to envisage cases in which 3, understood on the pattern of 3b, would be saying something true whereas, understood on the pattern of 3a, it would be saying something false.² The 3b form of reduplication is sometimes called 'merely specifying reduplication' since what goes in the *qua* phrase merely specifies that Jones, for instance, is mayor as well as director, without requiring any formal link between being mayor and being director. Reduplication can safely be used where convention-tied performances are in question, and also in (any other) cases where the same agent is capable of exercising definitionally exclusive capacities or sets of capacities.

Let us turn to GP's problem about God growing weary. By 'God can grow weary' one could mean to assert:

- 2a. The one and one only x which is God, can grow weary. which would doubtless be the belief of a Unitarian who also held a suitable doctrine of Incarnation. Since it is not a belief which either Aquinas or Professor Geach, I imagine, would wish to put forward, I shall not discuss it here, for other analyses are more to the point at issue. One is:
- 2b. If any x is God, it can grow weary, which will be discussed below, at a more suitable place. For the moment it is the third possibility which should be considered:
- 2c. At least one x is God and can grow weary.

 That is doubtless the kind of thing Professor Geach has in mind, with Jesus wearied by Jacob's Well, asking the woman for water. But it is not the reduplication move alone that permits 2c to be consistent with 1. A crucial part of the story has yet to be written.

This concerns the word 'can' in 'can grow weary', which requires attention much as it does when we ask what Jones, who is both mayor and a company director, can do. In that example it is irrelevant that there is one set of physical capacities used by Jones whether it is as mayor or as director that he is signing a document, or doing any other

²Reduplication may lurk in more cunning disguise still. The lovesick swain who sings 'These foolish things Remind me of you' no doubt means 'These things are foolish and they remind me of you': not, one trusts, 'These things, precisely in virtue of being foolish, remind me . . .'.

mayoral or directorial act. What is important is that there are two distinct senses of 'can' involved: can-legitimately-as-mayor, which may be tagged can(M), and can-legitimately-as-director, which may be tagged can(D). GP is interested in the case where 'Jones can as mayor attend this committee meeting' (GP 20) or, as it may be put,

Jones, qua director can(M) attend this committee meeting, which, if we understand merely specifying reduplication to be involved, would be a mildly misleading way of asserting the conjunction:

Jones is a company director and can(M) attend this (mayoral) committee meeting.

What should not be ignored, however, is that even if we were careful to use merely specifying reduplication, but failed to get the sense of 'can' right, we could still fail to say something true, as in:

Jones is a director and can(D) attend this (mayoral) committee meeting.

There could of course be meetings for which 'Jones can(D) attend this meeting' could be true, but I was supposing a purely mayoral meeting, which could be attended by mayors as such (not excluding mayors who were also company directors) but not by directors as such. In such a case we need ask no more, but may know that 'can(D) attend a meeting which can(M) be attended only by mayors' involves a contradiction.

And that is the kind of point Aquinas seems to have had in mind by saying that it cannot be said that God can grow weary. Let us use can(G) for 'can by divine power' and can(H) for 'can by some non-divine, e.g. human, power'. We may then look again at 2c, 'At least one x is God and can grow weary'. If what is meant is '. . . can(H) grow weary' (or '. . . has in fact grown(H) weary') then 2c could be true. Aquinas would doubtless have maintained that it was precisely this that the fatigue of Jesus at the well could have shown. But if what is meant is '. . .can(G) grow weary' or '. . . has in fact grown(G) weary', then we may know without further inquiry that something is badly wrong, for 'grow(G) weary' or 'can(G) grow weary' is excluded, as involving a contradiction much as 'can(D) attend this meeting which can(M) be attended only by mayors' was seen to be excluded. It is now easy to see how propositions 1 and 2, mistakenly believed by Professor Geach to be contradictory, need not be so. Let them be tagged:

- 1. It cannot be said of God that he can(G) grow weary.
- 2. God (the Son) did in fact grow(H) weary (or, can(H) grow weary).

For once more an important and highly germane point has been neglected in G P. In the doctrine with which GP was concerned there were supposed to be in Christ two sets of active powers (because of the two 'natures'), one divine, one human. In asking, therefore, what God can do, and permitting oneself the (widely current) theological in-

felicity of using 'God' sans phrase to refer to Christ, one has to be quite clear whether can(G) or can(H) is in question.

It is not of course excluded that there should be some cases where either of two distinct 'cans' could serve. There might be a document, such as an application for a passport, where either a mayoral or a directorial signature but not one related to any other role, would serve indifferently. In such a case both 'Jones can(M) sign the application' and 'Jones can(D) sign the application' would be true. But it would still be false that 'Jones can(M)qua director sign the application', assuming formal reduplication, for the obvious reason that 'can(M)qua director sign' still involves contradiction. We may now see that the reduplication move alone, without the distinction of the two 'cans' would not get us far enough. Using formal reduplication on 2c we obtain:

At least one x, precisely in virtue of being God, can grow weary. We may not tag this 'can(G) grow weary', for the obvious reason. Nor may we tag it 'can(H) grow weary', for it is not precisely in virtue of being God that one can(H) do anything. So we turn to merely specifying reduplication, and see G P's 'God can grow weary' as no more than an infelicitous and misleading way of saying

At least one x is God and can(H) grow weary, which is in no way a counter-example to the claim that 'God can(G) grow weary' cannot properly be said. If, however, we had used the merely specifying move without getting the right 'can', we would still be in difficulties; for

At least one x is God and can(G) grow weary would still fail, as one of its conjuncts would be pretending a predication that was no true predication. Thus it may be seen that it is not the admittedly convenient move of reduplication which is crucial in dissolving G P's puzzle, but the careful distinction of divine and non-divine sets of active powers when questions are being asked in which 'God' is to be allowed to refer to Christ. While it may well be true that 'what we say God can(G) do is always in respect of his changeless supreme power (G P 17, my tagging), what we may say 'God' can do, allowing ourselves the loose use of 'God' for Christ, is not necessarily so. In such a use we can, pace G P 'illicitly slip from one sort of "can" to another' (G P 17).

Here endeth the first lesson, wherein it hath been shown that Aquinas's 'theory of omnipotence' is not too cautious, and does not (as G P's example of Christ growing weary, tried to show) say that 'God cannot do some things which according to Christian faith God can do and has in fact done' (G P 19). Before taking matters further, it will be useful to clarify some historical or exegetical points, though without going into great detail.

At least one such point, raised and badly misunderstood in G P, is important enough to warrant comment and useful enough, rightly understood, to permit some analyses to be carried further.

This is 'the Scholastic distinction between God's potentia absoluta and potentia ordinata', quite mistakenly explained as follows: 'The former is God's power considered in abstraction from his wisdom and goodness, the latter is God's power considered as controlled in its exercise by his wisdom and goodness' (G P 16). This is simply not true of the distinction which was widely used between the time of Aquinas and that of Ockham (and beyond).

God's potentia ordinata was his (unique) divine power as exercised within the limits, chosen by God, of the present economy or disposition of things (oikonomia, ordinatio). God's potentia absoluta was that same divine power considered in abstraction from the limitations of the present disposition of things, absoluta ab ordine actuali. Since all the divine attributes were held on the classical medieval view to be identical in reality with the divine nature, it is obvious on reflection that no philosopher holding such a view would be likely to suggest that in any possible disposition of things God could act malevolently or without wisdom. As soon as the question 'Can(c) God . . .' was put, then whether the question was 'Can(G) he, de potentia sua absoluta . . .' or 'Can(G) he, de potentia sua ordinata, it was a question asked not about an imaginary naked power, but about a power working by wisdom and benevolence, whether working within the limits of the present disposition or not. No one of course need deny that God's power could be considered absolute, or in abstraction from any connection with his wisdom or goodness: but what could not (logically could not) be said was that God's power could ever be exercised save with wisdom and benevolence. Asking what God can do de potentia sua absoluta as against what he can do de potentia sua ordinate is like asking what Wilson the great athlete can do in hammer throwing with the instrument and in the conditions that permit all the power in him to be used to the utmost, as against what he can do with this particular instrument, roughly fashioned perhaps, and in these conditions, uphill and against the wind, which do not favour great hammer throwing.

It is also worth noting that not only God has a potentia absoluta, and that it need not as such be infinite. Anything that is held to be a free agent is implicitly credited with one. Suppose that I am a free agent reduced in the scope of my activities to the level of a choice-making oyster. I am free, let us suppose, to close my shell or to open it. Only if I have my shell open can I take nourishment, only if I have it shut can I be safe from my enemies. Once I have (freely) closed my shell, having so ordered my power, I can de potentia mea ordinata be safe from my enemies but cannot de potentia mea ordinata take

nourishment, though it remains true that I can de potentia mea absoluta take nourishment. (This I could do in the other ordinatio which is open to me, in which . . . but it is clear how the moves proceed.) In God's case he cannot (logically cannot) act save in some or other ordinatio. This logical point arises from the classical attribution to him of infinite divine wisdom, held, like divine power, to be identical with God's nature: sapientis est ordinare.

We are now in a position to take further some matters already touched on. We may see, for instance, that the option-tied, option-neutral distinction bypasses the difficulty treated in part I, about God growing weary. (To curtail italics, I shall usually call potentia absoluta option-neutral power and potentia ordinata option-tied power.) As I remarked in part I, the historical mistake about the option-tied, option neutral distinction with regard to divine power, is unimportant in connection with the thesis

1. It cannot be said of God that in virtue of his divine power, he can grow weary.

For the same truth-value is appropriate, or at least the same answer is obtained, whether one raises the question generally about God's option-neutral power, or attends to the special case of what God can do within the limits of the present option, the present disposition of things.

But the distinction is useful in other ways. For example it enables us to consider the analysis of 'God can grow weary' that was held possible (for orthodox trinitarian christians) yet was neglected above:

2b. If any x is God, it can(H) grow weary.

To obviate merely verbal difficulties, let the question be put 'Can(G) God bring about a state of affairs for which "If any x is God, it can(H) grow weary" is true?'. If we then ask 'Can he, in option-tied power?' the answer will be No, for in the present disposition of things 'God can(H) grow weary' is true only of the Son, not of the other two divine persons. If on the other hand we ask 'Can he, in option-neutral power?' the answer will be Yes, for there is no more radically inherent difficulty in the incarnation of other divine persons, or any combination of them, than there is in that of the Son. Aguinas noted this, adding drily that from the logical possibility of the incarnation of the Father, it did not follow that it was to be expected. It should be added that it is not in every condition of things that can be described without self-contradiction that even 'At least one x is God and can grow weary' is true; nor even in all possible worlds in which 'At least one x is God' would be true. For the created nature (and consequent set of powers) assumed, need not be one which, like human nature or any other nature subject to entropy, would be liable to fatigue. A possibility which a medieval might have considered would have been the hypostatic union of one (or more) of the immortal spheres to one (or more) of the divine persons. In which case it would be false that, in

that particular ordinatio, even one x who was God could(H) grow weary: for in such a case 'can(H) grow weary', being said of the capacities of an immortal sphere, would be open to precisely the same kind of objection as 'can(G) grow weary', save that the objectionability of the latter expression holds equally for any conceivable condition of things.

The distinction between God's option-tied and option-neutral power will next serve to dissolve G P's second plausible difficulty about 'God can do everything', the one that is supposed to show that the 'theory of omnipotence' implies that 'God can do certain things which Christian belief requires one to say God cannot do' (G P 19). (G P offers this difficulty to a 'fourth theory of omnipotence', which however is merely a weakened form of the historically more interesting third one we are considering.)

The difficulty stands on the assumption (which he maintains, christians must hold) that there are at least some promises made by God to men and that in consequence there have to be at least those future events which will fulfil the promises at present outstanding. He says: 'If God can promulgate promises to men, then as regards any promises that are not yet fulfilled we know that they certainly will be fulfilled: and in that case God clearly has not a potentia ad utrumque—a two-way power of either actualising the event that will fulfil the promise or not actualising it. God can then only do what will fulfil his promise'. (G P 16.) Professor Geach then offers to remove a fallacy, and comes up with a stronger claim still: 'So if God has promised that Israel shall be saved, the future salvation of Israel is not only certain but inevitable, God must save Israel, because he cannot not save Israel without breaking his word given in the past and he cannot alter the past nor [sic] break his word'. (G P 17.)

Equo ne credite, Teucri. Too many sources of error are latent in the passages quoted. For one thing, no attention is given to one very important feature of promising. Just as a threat is still a threat even if it is not carried out, so a promise unfulfilled is still a promise. Hence it does not follow that, if the event which would fulfil the promise does not take place, no promise was made in the first place. But the difficulty remains, some might wish to say, in that non-fulfilment would then imply God's breaking his word, and that 'God has broken his word' would be (necessarily) false, hence fulfilment. . . .

That however remains a difficulty, or seems to, only as long as another important point is overlooked. If God makes-any-promise-which-a-creature-can-understand, it is only by acting, whether by a seer's dream or by flashes, rumblings or voices in the heavens . . . , within some particular ordinatio, within some particular disposition of things. The promise as understandable, like the (eventual) fulfilment, is itself an element of that particular creation, that ordinatio or disposition of things. The promise—any such 'promise' made to a

creature—is itself therefore tacitly conditioned stante ordinatione. Since the whole disposition within which are both the promise and its fulfilment is contingent, so (absolutely) are they. The fulfilment can of course, be ex suppositione necessary, on the supposition that the promise has been made, that the ordinatio will in fact stand, etc.; but that is not the same thing. If Peter is standing, then necessarily (ex suppositione) he is standing. But that Peter is standing is not necessary simpliciter or absolute, for he could be sitting. We can now see what is to be said about the armoured guiles hidden in the passages quoted from G P 17.

- 1) 'We know that promises promulgated to men certainly will be fulfiled'. This is acceptable only so long as 'know' is being used in some other way than that beloved of epistemologists, in which knowing that P implies (the truth of) P; for example, if 'know' is being used as it is in 'I know that Pinkerton loves me and will return' or in 'I know that my redeemer liveth'. 'Knowing' that the promises will be fulfiled will not then imply that it is logically impossible for the promises not to be fulfiled.
- 2) It will then not necessarily follow that 'God... has not a potentia ad utrumque' in the sense required by G.P. The whole order is contingent, it can be abandoned and all its elements with it. There is no logical contradiction necessarily involved in saying that. Of the promise it will then remain true that it was made, yet there will be no fulfilment. For the reason noted above, there is no logical difficulty there either.
- 3) 'God can then only do what will fulfil his promise'. 'Can do only that, de potentia sua ordinata, yes', we may say. He cannot not fulfil his promise, provided that he continues the present disposition of things. But we must add quickly 'Can do only that, de potentia sua absoluta, certainly not'. It is not logically impossible for things to have been otherwise. Once again, incidentally, it may be seen that the option-tied, option-neutral distinction is far from being 'wholly frivolous' (G P 16). For it is permitting Professor Geach to be saying something that may be both true and important. For what is important (to christian believers, for instance) is what God can do de potentia sua ordinata and will in fact do, not what it is logically possible for him to do in some other disposition of things. What is important to the believer is that 'God has sworn and will not repent', not that it is or is not logically possible for him to do so. I am fully disposed to believe that if pigs had wings, etc., they could fly: yet I do not in consequence walk in fear and trembling, scanning the heavens for flying pigs.
- 4) 'If God has promised that Israel shall be saved, the future salvation... is inevitable'. Make clear that 'and provided that the present disposition of things is not abandoned' is to be added to the antecedent, or else make it clear that it is only ex suppositione necessity that

is in question in the 'inevitable' of the consequent, i.e. that it is necessary on the supposition that the present disposition of things will be maintained. So understood, the sentence quoted is unobjectionable enough, though hardly worth making. If on the other hand one were to use it to claim that 'the future salvation of Israel is necessary, absolute or simpliciter', and regardless of whether the heavens fall, one would be making a false claim.

5) 'Cannot . . . break his word'. This would be true, on strictly logical or definitional grounds, of any unconditioned 'word'. But not only Professor Geach's example but any giving-of-a-word-to-a-creature would be within some or other (created) disposition of things—and so conditioned. In passing, it might be observed that a medieval inquisitor might have begun to rattle his thumbscrews at the suggestion that God could commit himself unconditionally to a creature. (Assuming that it is ever possible for anyone, or any non-irrational being, to commit himself unconditionally to anyone or anything; and that attempts to do so, as in some tribal marriage customs, e.g. those of western Europe, are not to be understood as pious motions merely.)

Hence the dissolution of the example which is supposed to show that 'God can do everything' has no graspable sense which does not imply that 'God can do certain things which Christian belief requires me to say God cannot do' (G P 19). What christian belief may very well require is that God will not in fact do something which could be called breaking-a-promise-made-to-men. But no creed or orthodox confession requires that the alternative should be incapable of being described without implying a contradiction.

III

Those taken by the arguments of GP about the impossibility of the non-salvation of Israel may be a little impatient by now, and even a little suspicious that the real bite of those arguments has not been appreciated. So let it be confessed that if part II told the truth, it did not tell the whole truth. For there is a sense in which the impossibility of 'God cannot but save Israel' is absolute, logical impossibility.

'God will save Israel', taken in isolation, is contingently true, or so we may assume. But provided that God has decreed an order in which Israel will be saved, and provided that all and only (the elements of) that order will occur, then we have to say that the impossibility in 'God cannot but save Israel' is absolute, logical impossibility, not just ex suppositione 'impossibility'. The reason for this is that God cannot (logically cannot) frustrate his own decree or falsify his own foreknowledge. To say that he could would be to imply that he is not infinitely wise. Is not this precisely what Professor Geach had in mind in GP? Quite possibly. Then to accept this is surely to concede his point? It is not.

The point of the objection from GP which is under discussion was that the 'third view of omnipotence' implies that 'God can do certain things which Christian belief requires one to say God cannot do'. But precisely what the 'third view of omnipotence' implies with regard to Israel is that God can in option-neutral power bring about the non-salvation of Israel. Now what is implied or conveyed in that claim are the following things:

- 1) The substantive claim that God can bring about the non-salvation of Israel.
- 2) The commentary that that substantive claim is to be understood as a (logically necessary) quasi-definitional truth, i.e. that God has it in him to. . . .
- 3) The commentary that 'the non-salvation of Israel' is to be understood not *composite* but *divisim*. If no sufficiently comprehensive intrinsic description of the non-salvation of Israel involves of itself any contradiction, then God can in option-neutral power bring about the non-salvation of Israel.
- 4) Information as to what the quasi-definitional truth in the substantive claim is *about*: the divine nature, i.e. God. For present purposes it is not necessary to justify by exegesis that explanation of the work done by 'in option-neutral power'.³ It is enough to know that that is the work done by the qualification, and to recall that it is precisely an option-neutral claim that the 'third view of omnipotence' is making when it says that God can bring about the non-salvation of Israel.

What 'Christian belief requires one to say God cannot do' (GP 19) is thus manifestly not what the 'third view of omnipotence' requires one to say that God can do. What that view requires one to say that God has it in him to do with respect to the non-salvation of Israel requires 'the non-salvation of Israel' to be taken divisim, not composite. What christian belief, according to GP, requires one to say that God cannot do (logically cannot do) with respect to the non-salvation of Israel requires 'the non-salvation of Israel' to be understood composite, not divisim. So on straightforwardly logical grounds GP's case dissolves.

³Such justification, and further explanatory material, will be found in L. Moonan, 'St Thomas Aquinas on Divine Power', forthcoming in the *Acta* of the 1974 international congress *Tommaso d'Aquino nel suo VII centenario* (Rome-Naples, April 1974).