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OMNIPOTENCE'S PSEUDOCIDE BY A SINGLE QUALIFICATION: A Reflection on Omnipotence's 'Death by a Thousand Qualifications' in the Work of Thomas Oord

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Christian scripture does not . . . teach that God has all power. . . . As described in the Bible, God is strong and weak; God sometimes does mighty acts and other times fails. . . . God simply can't do countless actions, including thousands that you and I can. . . . Omnipotence also supports the false claim that the Bible is inerrant. . . . God is hidden. . . . God can't control creatures or creation. . . . God cannot heal alone. . . . God cannot stop pain and suffering by fiat. God can't. . . . God needs us. . . . God everlastingly and necessarily creates. . . . Our creator does not create from nothing. . . . God co-creates [and] never sends anyone to hell. . . . God, too, has material and mental facets. . . . God cannot singlehandedly bring about results. We can't point to something and say, "God alone did that." . . . God can't rescue singlehandedly. . . . God without a localized body cannot stop evils that you, others, and I sometimes can stop with our bodies. . . . Every event—from the creation of our universe to every miracle to the resurrection of Jesus and more—includes some creaturely influence, actor, factor, or force. All of them. . . . Omnipotence is dead.¹ —Thomas Jay Oord

Thomas Jay Oord is a Nazarene theologian and philosopher who "directs the Center for Open and Relational Theology and doctoral students at Northwind Theological Seminary."² I recently had the pleasure of hearing him present at the Wesleyan Theological Society's gathering in 2023, which was hosted by Asbury Theological Seminary in Kentucky. He presented a paper that served as a sample for his then-forthcoming book *The Death of Omnipotence and the Birth of Amipotence* (2023).³ This response is not meant to be a comprehensive analysis of, or response to, the whole book (which could be a volume of its own). Instead, the following are merely my reflections on his chapter in the book which serves as the finished version of his paper presented at Asbury.⁴ I will add in the final paragraph some impressions that I had from the remainder of the book but will not seek to defend them here.⁵

At the start of his book attacking the doctrine of omnipotence, Oord admitted that "omnipotence" is creedally established in both the Nicene and Apostle's creeds.⁶ He then understandably asked what is meant by "omnipotence," which is a legitimate theological endeavour. Even though theologians may generally speak of God analogically when they make cataphatic statements about him, it is still important to take stock of what is meant by a term before it is applied to God. Oord concluded that theists typically have one of three meanings in mind when they refer to God as "omnipotent."

First, they could be affirming a kind of theological determinism, "God exerts all power." Second, he proposed what seems to be something like Rene Descartes's view that "God can do absolutely anything," including the illogical (i.e., universal possibilism). Third, he ambiguously described an additional category

of views as “God can control others or circumstances.” Perhaps by this third, he had in mind the many Christian theologians who would not say that God can do the illogical (because they are not things to be done but are mere word games like “square circle”) but would say that he could have actualised a world that denied creatures anything akin to libertarian freedom. Unfortunately, he is not entirely clear where he would place the various major views on offer in the Church for how to understand God’s omnipotence, but he at least noted that there are several views, which he takes to be a vice of the doctrine.⁷

A Closer Look at Omnipotence

Some readers may get the sense that Oord enjoys making provocative statements. Just like his controversial book titled *God Can’t* (2019), he presents several inflammatory propositions throughout his book that are clearly meant to, as John Wesley once wrote, “make the ears of a Christian to tingle.”⁸ He introduces his second chapter with statements like, “qualified omnipotence is lifeless,” “qualified omnipotence is oxymoronic,” and “omnipotence dies the death of a thousand qualifications.”⁹ While admitting that most theologians, including most conservatives, qualify what is meant when God is called “omnipotent,” he cites his conjecture that most people take “omnipotent” to mean “without qualification” as evidence against the idea that the term

“omnipotent” can be faithfully attributed to God if it is qualified. Yet, he confessed that superlatives “are especially prone to qualification.”¹⁰

It seems only natural that a theological or philosophical scholar would consider the nature of God, his essential attributes, and what it would mean to be omnipotent.¹¹ Thomas Flint and Alfred Freddoso impressively advanced the discussion of what “omnipotence” or “maximal power” refers to, especially when attributed to God.¹² This has resulted in sophisticated con-

temporary philosophical enunciations of the term:

*S is omnipotent at a time t if and only if S can at t actualize any state of affairs that is not described by counterfactuals about the [libertarian] free acts of others and that is broadly logically possible for someone to actualize, given the same hard past at t and the same true counterfactuals about free acts of others. Such an analysis successfully sets the parameters of God’s omnipotence without imposing any nonlogical limits on his power.*¹³

These philosophical theologians provided their processes of moving from the laws of logic to their somewhat complex descriptions of omnipotence.¹⁴ The last line in the quote above is critical—their definition of “omnipotence” does not impose “any nonlogical limits” on God’s power—which means that the various things that one might deny that God can do reduce somehow to a matter of logical constraint. The aforementioned is even the case when one attempts to set God’s will against his nature.¹⁵ So, while not as precisely articulated, the lay view of omnipotence is not strictly speaking false because, when expanded upon, it would look more like J. P. Moreland and William Craig’s description above: God can do anything that is logically possible and not incompatible with his essential attributes.¹⁶

Dictiocide or Pseudocide by Qualification

Oord claimed that “omnipotence” suffered dictiocide because it has died “the death of a thousand qualifications.”¹⁷ Yet, it seems to me that his laundry list of things God can’t do reduce to a few categories that further reduce to matters of logical constraint. So, perhaps the term does not suffer dictiocide at the hands of a thousand qualifications. Oord has instead presented us with a pseudocide of the term at the hands of a singular qualification that almost no theologian would be surprised by, namely that God cannot actualise the logically impossible because

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such alleged states are not states of affairs to be actualised but are essentially mere word games.

The first category that Oord pointed to was the notion that God cannot defy the law of non-contradiction.¹⁸ The great medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas popularised this notion in Christian theology.¹⁹ Peter Kreeft rightly noted that, for Thomas, “God is not *subject* to the laws of logic, but the laws of logic and metaphysics are the laws of being, based on God’s own absolute and unchangeable nature, and God cannot contradict His own nature.”²⁰ In Thomas’s view, therefore, the one qualification to God’s omnipotence is that he cannot defy himself and his nature is expressed, in part, by the laws of logic. Theologians who affirm the doctrine of omnipotence would agree with Oord that unqualified omnipotence (i.e., universal possibilism) is absurd, as Moreland and Craig explained:

For on this view an omnipotent deity could have brought it about that even logical contradictions be true and tautologies be false, as inconceivable as this may seem to us. But such a doctrine seems incoherent: is the proposition “there are no necessary truths” itself necessarily true or not? If so, then the position is self-refuting. If not, then that proposition is possibly false, that is to say, God could have brought it about that there are necessary truths We may say there is, therefore, a possible world in which God brings it about that there

are propositions that are true in every possible world. But if there are such propositions, then

there is no world in which it is the case that there are no propositions true in every possible world; that is, it is not possible that there are no necessary truths, which contradicts universal possibilism.²¹

It should not be counted as a vice to have a thoughtfully qualified doctrine of omnipotence.

Yet, this admission implicitly reveals why it is that theologians go to such lengths to detail what they mean when

they say that God is omnipotent. It should not be counted as a vice to have a thoughtfully qualified doctrine of omnipotence. Furthermore, contrary to what some might initially think, it is not necessarily more glorifying to say that God can do the logically impossible. Would anyone truly desire a god that could lie and tell the truth, exist and not exist, and be fully good and fully evil, at the same time and in the same way? Under this same category in his book, Oord explained that God cannot do the mathematically impossible nor can he break the “laws of geometry.”²²

Coincidentally, I recently heard Craig discussing the relationship between mathematics and logic. Speaking to Kevin Harris, he explained:

In the first place, there aren’t any such things as laws of mathematics. That’s just a category mistake. In mathematics what you have are axioms and then you have theorems that are derived logically from the axioms. For example, the axioms of Peano arithmetic or the axioms of Zermelo–Fraenkel set theory. If those axioms are regarded as logically necessary then the theorems derived from them will also share in that same logical necessity.²³

He added that philosophers have good reason to think that these mathematical axioms are logically necessary because mathematics is an *a priori* discipline.²⁴ As far as geometry is concerned, it is not difficult to conceive of how God’s making a square triangle would run into logical hiccups. If four sides are a necessary condition of the sufficient condition that constitutes a square, then that logically precludes a square having more or less than four sides. If three sides are a necessary condition of the sufficient condition that constitutes a triangle, then it cannot have three sides and not three sides at the same time and in the same way. So, a square triangle turns out to be a logical absurdity and, therefore, another manifestation of the singular qualification of omnipotence. Concerning God’s inability to actualise logical absurdities, Moreland and Craig conclude, “If we understand omnipotence in terms of abil-

ity to actualize states of affairs, then it is no attenuation of God's omnipotence that he cannot make a stone too heavy for him to lift," for assuming God to be essentially omnipotent, such a stone describes a logically impossible "state of affairs as does 'a square triangle,' and thus it describes nothing at all."²⁵

For the sake of space, I cannot address each of the divine attributes and how they place logical limitations upon God's power. One example should suffice, however, because similar arguments could be made concerning the other divine attributes. The important point to bear in mind is that Oord was not discussing omnipotence in a vacuum; he was discussing omnipotence as it relates to the Christian God, which entails (at least traditionally) other additional essential attributes. Given the essential and immutable nature of the divine attributes, certain logical limitations are bound to be entailed. Flint and Freddoso rightly noted that if we "adopt the Anselmian claim that Yahweh is a necessary being as well as an essentially divine being, it follows" that it is logically impossible for God to defy his nature and sin.²⁶ Ronald Nash rightly explained concerning the impeccability of an immutably omnibenevolent God:

The compatibility of God's omnipotence and his inability to sin may be viewed as an extension of the claim that the law of noncontradiction is a necessary constraint on divine power. The word God has descriptive significance. Among other things, it includes perfect goodness. There-

fore, while no logical contradiction results from ascribing a certain action like sinning

to a human being, the action does become self-contradictory when it is attributed to God.²⁷

The important point to bear in mind is that Oord was not discussing omnipotence in a vacuum . . .

Again, similar claims could be made for the other attributes of God. When one asks if God could act contrary to his unchanging essential nature, it is like asking if God can do what is contrary to

godliness, and the implicit contradiction should be evident. Others have likewise considered God's essential attribute of goodness and noted that there is nothing in the definition of "omnipotence" above that would require any voluntaristic notion that God could sin.²⁸

There is no problem with asserting that God cannot change the "hard past." The logical problem of God actualising a state of affairs where it is both true that A happened yesterday and did not happen yesterday at the same time and in the same way is easy to see. Again, however, this clearly reduces to a logical constraint. Yet, the Ockhamist line that some things in the past are logically or causally conditioned upon future truths may hold, and some "soft past" facts may be impacted, by present or future decisions.²⁹ According to Flint and Freddoso, even Thomas Aquinas recognised logical limitations upon God's ability to change certain aspects of the past even if he exists outside of time.³⁰ Oord's assertion that "God cannot create a universe billions of years old and the same universe not billions of years old [at the same time and in the same way]," is just another application of the singular qualification upon God's omnipotence that God cannot defy his own (logical) nature or actualise the illogical.³¹

Oord's next category that "God cannot control free creatures and chance events" also comes down to matters of logic.³² Flint and Freddoso noted that if a libertarian free choice "must involve the occurrence of an event for which there is no antecedent sufficient causal condition—an event, that is, which has only an agent and no other event as its [sufficient] cause," then God cannot logically strongly "actualize another agent's free actions."³³ They added, "Since an agent's . . . freely endeavoring to perform a given action cannot have a sufficient causal condition, it follows straightforwardly that no such state of affairs can be strongly actualized by anyone other than the agent in question."³⁴ In other words, it is a "logically necessary truth that one being cannot causally determine how another will freely act" if that agent possesses a libertarian sense of free will.³⁵ Of course, logic also dictates that something cannot be both random and controlled at the same time

and in the same way. Yet, God can decide whether some event will be permitted to be random or whether he will have it controlled in some sense. Again, this section of Oord's chapter turns out to be more examples of the same qualification.

Finally, Oord contended that God cannot perform certain actions because he is incorporeal.³⁶ While it is true that God cannot do things that require embodiment while he remains unembodied, that is tautological. It seems that the real question is whether he can do certain actions at all. Can God sleep in a bed or lift a pebble? Substance dualists have noted that our souls (minds) evidently interact with our physical bodies even though we cannot understand how this occurs.³⁷ So, there is no indisputable reason to think that a disembodied spirit, which possesses the immense power that God is posited to have, could not interact with a pebble to lift it while remaining disembodied. Yet, Oord's contention may be that because God is disembodied, he cannot lift a pebble with his own body. Such an argument, however, beyond being another clear logical constraint, seems to ignore the doctrines of the truly divine Christ who was incarnated in human form and was, therefore, able to do as humans do and so much more. This last argument from Oord seems to divorce the conversation from his Christian context.

I have already addressed the issue of how God acting contrary to his own essential and immutable nature is an implicit contradiction, so his rehashing it at the end of his chapter need not be read-

dressed.³⁸ His last note that theologians should stop referring to God as omnipotent because of its many qual-

ifications turns out to be less than fully persuasive in my estimation. One cannot help but wonder, for consistency's sake, if Oord should abandon the use of the term "Christian God" given the many ways that he has qualified his understanding of the term away from the maximally great being of historic Christianity.

Some Concluding Thoughts

Oord built a great deal of his argument on the notion that power is always social and that to exist is always to exert power. For the sake of space, I leave the reader to decide whether they think that the aforementioned sweeping assertions are persuasive or always true. Often it seemed that Oord merely paid lip service to the notion that there are various historic conceptions of what is meant by omnipotence when it is applied to a being that has the other essential attributes that God is thought to have. He often reduced the affirmation of the doctrine of omnipotence to an assertion of theological determinism, then he would attack determinism and claim to have toppled the doctrine of omnipotence.³⁹ Such a tactic is a sort of equivocation that is both overly reductive and a kind of straw man fallacy. Yet, I agree with him on the simple point that exhaustive theological determinism is not biblical.⁴⁰

Oord presented God as a material and spiritual being that is causally interdependent with matter, "God cannot singlehandedly bring about results."⁴¹ He claimed that "every event—from the creation of our universe to every miracle . . . includes some creaturely influence."⁴² Such a statement seems to move beyond conventional panentheism because it would require that something besides God eternally coexisted with him to exert influence at the creative moment.⁴³ If it has not already been clear up to this point, then one thing should be clarified: this is not the consensual view of historic Christianity. He claimed that God if amipotent is "maximally powerful," but his interdependent conception of God sounds far from maximally powerful in the logical sense and, if it were, then it would be "omnipotent."⁴⁴ Oord's stipulative definition of love is unconvincing as a mere *ad hoc* construction for the purpose of being able to contend that it stands in contradiction with being omnipotent. He sets love against omnipotence as though love is a quantity or degree of power, which is poetic or perhaps romantic, but the rationale behind it is difficult to infer.⁴⁵

Oord occasionally made arguments that seemingly assumed a pragmatic theory of truth. He argued that belief in

God can decide whether some event will be permitted to be random or whether he will have it controlled in some sense.

divine omnipotence can or has had bad results, therefore, we should not think that God is omnipotent.⁴⁶ To be fair, he could have simply meant that not only is it wrong to think that God is omnipotent but also it can be harmful to think

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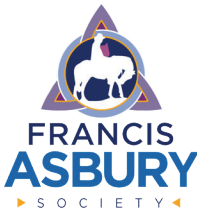
so. Yet, the way that he weaved such statements into his chapters implied that they were additional arguments against the veracity of the claim that God is omnipotent. If he only meant the latter, then he should have been clear about his

pragmatic case as a kind of digression. If he meant the former, then it is not difficult to see how this is false. It is a *non sequitur* to conclude that something is false just because it can or has produced a bad result. Not to mention the pragmatic theory of truth is self-refuting because people who assert it do so not on the grounds that it is useful but on the basis that it corresponds to some reality.⁴⁷ To his credit, Oord wrote this work to be accessible to lay people. As a result, however, he is overly reductive in some places, overly expansive in others, and, to be a bit reductive, this book is just dead process theology lovingly revisited.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Thomas Jay Oord, *The Death of Omnipotence and Birth of Amipotence* (SacraSage Press, 2023), 4, 40, 70, 93–94, 98, 103, 106, 109, 112–113, 128, 133, 141, 143–144, 150.
- 2 Ibid., 151.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid., “Chapter 2: Death by a Thousand Qualifications,” 43–78.
- 5 Also see Oord, 79–116. Oord’s third chapter dealt with the problem of evil and omnipotence. Readers should see him in written debate concerning the problem of evil in Phillip Cary, William Lane Craig, William Hasker, Thomas Jay Oord, and Stephen Wykstra, *God and the Problem of Evil: Five Views*, ed. Chad Meister and James K. Dew Jr. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017).
- 6 Oord, 2.
- 7 Ibid., 1–4; for more on universal possibilism, see J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 533.
- 8 John Wesley, “Free Grace,” in *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed., vol. 7 (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872), 382; also see Thomas Jay Oord, *God Can’t: How to Believe in God and Love after Tragedy, Abuse, or Other Evils* (SacraSage Press, 2019).
- 9 Oord, 5, 44.
- 10 Oord, 44–46, 45n3. He even admitted that Descartes’ unqualified view of omnipotence has always been a rare view among theologians.
- 11 For classic examples of this, see Thomas Aquinas, “God Is Omnipotent,” in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, 5th ed., ed. Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, and David Basinger (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 244–246; Thomas Aquinas, “Chapter 40: Why Think of God as Omnipotent,” in *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide and Anthology*, ed. Brian Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 415–21.
- 12 Thomas P. Flint and Alfred J. Freddoso, “Maximal Power,” in *The Existence and Nature of God* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 81–113.
- 13 Moreland and Craig, 535.
- 14 Flint and Freddoso, 81–113; Moreland and Craig, 533–35. Both books work from Ockhamist and Molinist frameworks but admit that their definitions could be slightly altered for other views.
- 15 Intellectualism versus voluntarism is an old theological discussion that asks what has logical priority in God, his will or understanding; see Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), s.v. “intellectus,” “voluntas.”
- 16 See Ronald H. Nash, *An Introduction to Philosophy: Life’s Ultimate Questions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 314.
- 17 Oord, 44.
- 18 Ibid., 45–48.
- 19 Thomas Aquinas, *A Summa of the Summa: The Essential Philosophical Passages of St. Thomas Aquinas’ Summa Theologica Edited and Explained for Beginners*, ed. Peter Kreeft (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1990), 181–82.
- 20 Peter Kreeft, ed., *A Summa of the Summa*, 181n176.
- 21 Moreland and Criag, 533.
- 22 Oord, 46–47.
- 23 William Lane Craig, “Evaluating the Ehrman vs. Bass Debate,” *Reasonable Faith*, last modified 01 May 2023, <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/media/reasonable-faith-podcast/evaluating-the-ehрман-vs-bass-debate>.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Moreland and Criag, 534.
- 26 Flint and Freddoso, 103.
- 27 Nash, 314.
- 28 See Flint and Freddoso, 101–108; Moreland and Craig, 535–37.

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- 29 For more on the discussion of the hard versus soft past and God's power over backtracking counterfactuals, see Moreland and Craig, 534–35.
- 30 Flint and Freddoso, 88.
- 31 Oord, 61. The same evidently follows for his evolutionary example.
- 32 See *Ibid.*, 61–64.
- 33 Flint and Freddoso, 85.
- 34 *Ibid.*
- 35 *Ibid.*, 95; also see Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (1974; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 34–54.
- 36 Oord, 65–66.
- 37 Richard Swinburne, *Are We Bodies or Souls?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 115–40.
- 38 Oord, 67–68.
- 39 See *Ibid.*, 1–7, 19–20, 144.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 26–29.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 141.
- 42 *Ibid.*, 144.
- 43 *Ibid.*, 34–36, 56, 144.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 140.
- 45 *Ibid.*, 120–28, 140.
- 46 See *Ibid.*, 6, 91–94, 113–15.
- 47 Moreland and Craig, 132.



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