

Adapted from Georgia O'Keeffe's
"Lake George in the Woods"

The Omnipotence Fallacy and Beyond

God's power is limited. Therefore, it is questionable to indict God for the evils of life.

by David R. Larson

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways."

—1 Corinthians 13:11, R.S.V.

NOT LONG AGO I MET A JOGGING FRIEND AT A bank who told me about a teenage relative who, along with doctors and nurses, is waging a war against a life-threatening malignancy. "Sometimes it makes you wonder," my friend observed. "It certainly does!" I responded.

Why does God allow such things? Although I didn't mention it to my friend at the bank, part of an answer that increasingly makes sense to me is that God's power is limited. Contrary to our first impressions as children, divine power cannot do anything

and everything. Properly understood, omnipotence is not, as one of my dictionaries says, "unlimited power and ability." To misunderstand this point is wrongly to blame God for every evil that occurs by committing some version of the so-called "omnipotence fallacy." To grasp it is to take an important step on the long journey toward mature faith.

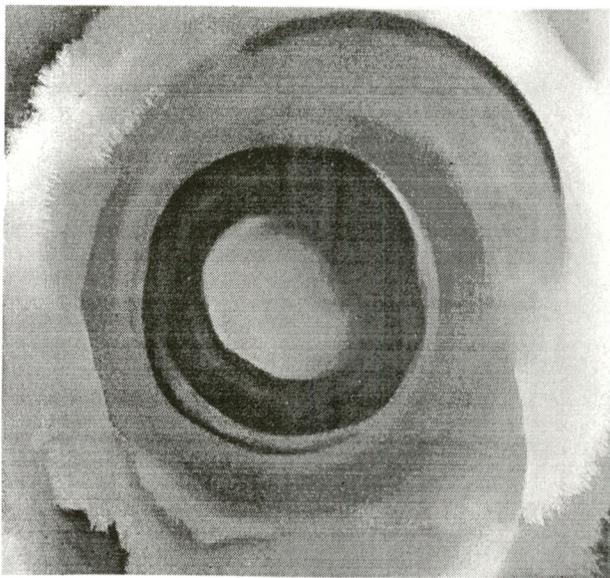
If I understand things correctly, God's power is limited by logical, ontological, and ethical restraints. The logical constraints are necessary. It is very difficult to conceive of a deity to whom they would not apply. The ethical constraints are contingent. They pertain to God only if—or only because—God is morally good. The ontological constraints are either necessary or contingent, depending upon how one understands the relationships between God and the universe. Whether necessary or contingent, however, they effectively curtail divine power. These various limits converge in ways that make it questionable to indict God for the evils of life.

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Logical Limits

Almost everyone agrees that God's power is limited by logical constraints. God cannot do that which is inherently self-contradictory. God cannot make a square circle, a triangle with four angles, a cube with five square sides, or a diamond with four straight but unequal lines. This limit constitutes no defect in God. Neither does it suggest that God must submit to some other actuality. Much less does it imply that God is less important or valuable than something else. To ask God to do that which is inherently self-contradictory is to fail to make an intelligible request. It is to make noise without making sense.

Keeping this limit in mind can prevent us from asking God to do that which is meaningless. Sometimes we wonder, for instance, why God does not create persons who would be "exactly like we are" except that they would be incapable of causing suffering by doing evil. But beings who are "exactly *like* us" are "exactly *unlike* us" at a crucial point of comparison if they cannot choose to do evil. Or to use another illustration, we sometimes pray that God will "make Jack love Jill" or vice



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versa. But this request also contradicts itself if, as most of us properly believe, true love must be freely given. God cannot *force* Jack *voluntarily* to offer his affection to Jill or to anyone else.

We sometimes pray that God will spare us and others from the consequences of decisions we have deliberately made. But God cannot do this without eviscerating the meaning of the choices we prize. To ask God to do such things is to fail, however innocently, to make meaningful requests of God. Such petitions are understandable when we are children. They are less so when we are adults.

Many persons hold that divine power is limited by logical constraints but by nothing else. This position is exceedingly persuasive if one is a pantheist, but less so otherwise. All true pantheists contend that God and the universe are identical. Many pantheists also believe that God is wholly capable of completely determining every detail of God's own life. From this point of view, it does make sense to suppose that God's power is limited by nothing but logical constraints because, quite literally, there is nothing other than God that could possibly hamper divine omnipotence. But for those of us who are not pantheists, for those of us who believe that the one Creator continuously coexists with innumerable creatures, it is difficult to resist the conclusion that divine omnipotence is limited by logical constraints, but that it is limited by the power of the countless others as well.

Ontological Limits

That God's power is limited by the power of all who are not God is explicit and obvious in some schools of thought. Plato thought, for instance, that God struggles to elicit order and beauty out of a somewhat

recalcitrant chaos. In our own time, the exponents of process theology often assert the primordial power of creatures to be something other than the Creator an eternal "given" that not even the Creator can alter. They frequently contend that the Creator does the best that can be done as a positive influence on the countless creatures. However, because these individuals are inherently capable of resisting the Supreme Being with their own embodiments of primordial power, God is by no means indictable for every evil that occurs throughout the universe. Hence, according to schemes of things such as Plato's philosophy and process theology, God's power is unquestionably limited by the primordial power that is embodied in all those who are not God.

Although it is less obvious, and often debated or even denied, the power of the Supreme Being is limited by the power of other beings, even in the more prevalent forms of ethical monotheism. Generally speaking, persons with this perspective, and I include myself among them, view the power of countless billions to be something other than God not as something that is a "given *for* God" but as something that is a "gift *from* God." From this point of view, all those who are not God live and move and have their being not in themselves but in the Creator, as the Apostle Paul reminded the philosophers of Athens by quoting one of their own poets (Acts 17:28). It might seem, at first glance, that the dependence of all creatures upon divine power for their very lives makes it impossible for them successfully to resist it. But this is not the case. God's power can be and often is resisted by those whose lives depend upon it.

Perhaps God's situation in this view of things can be compared to that of a human parent confronted by a dependent child who acts in independent ways. God could withdraw the gift of life from all those who resist. Or he could force all resisters to comply. But

either option would eliminate the creature's separate identity and life, which is God's basic intent. If God exercises the first option, the creature dies. If God selects the second, the creature becomes a mere extension and expression of the divine will with no separate existence. In both instances, this destroys the Creator's gift to the creature of a life of its own.

Power can accomplish only so much. It can compel. And it can crush. But it cannot preserve the continuing uniqueness of the other if it does either. Whether by necessity or by choice, divine power is constrained and God coexists with billions of other beings instead of destroying all resisters either by coercing them or by eliminating them. The only alternative would be for God to be "home alone." But God is not solitary. The divine realm includes many guests. God's power is limited by their presence and by their power, whether a "given for God" or a "gift from God."

Many Christians concede that divine power is limited by the power of those who, like normal and healthy human adults, can exercise moral freedom. This insight is valid as far as it goes, but it must be extended in a way that acknowledges the capacity of all individuals, not merely those who possess moral autonomy, to resist God's power to some extent, however slight.

Much of the evil we see throughout the universe is clearly caused by the misuse of moral freedom. Many other evils are caused by ethical violations that took place so long ago and so far away that we can no longer trace the connections. But there are other evils that seem related to abuses of moral freedom in only the very most remote ways, if at all. Whenever we encounter such destructive forces, we should bear in mind that all beings, and not merely those relatively few who enjoy moral freedom, have at least some ability, however slight, to pursue their own perceived goods to the detriment of the whole of which they are a part. Such resistance to God's will

is rarely sinful because it is not usually conscious, let alone deliberate. Nevertheless, it is destructive, sometimes devastatingly so. To this we can attribute much of the evil of the world that is not caused by human wrongdoing.

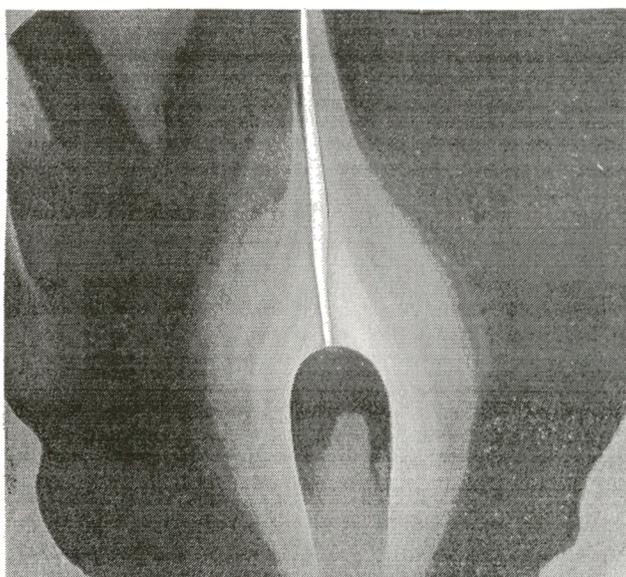
Ethical Limits

God's power is limited by logical and by ontological constraints. But it is curtailed by ethical boundaries as well. There are some things God cannot do because he is morally good. This is one of the ways in which a biblical view of God differs from many other portraits of the divine. So often these other religious perspectives, some of which are ostensibly Jewish, Christian, or Islamic, portray God as "beyond" good and evil or, worse yet, as "including" both. Such a deity would not be limited by ethical constraints. But the God of the Abrahamic faiths is morally good without qualification or equivocation. The power of this God is limited by moral considerations.

At the very least, because God is morally good, divine power must be exercised in a *morally consistent* manner. Similar cases must

be treated similarly. Equals in equal circumstances must be treated equally. To this fundamental ethical requirement there can be no exception whatsoever. If cases or individuals are treated dissimilarly, it must be because, and only because, they or their circumstances are different in some ethically relevant way. This means that as we mature in faith, we should be increasingly reluctant to ask God to do for us what it would be impossible or undesirable for God to do for any other individual or group in an ethically identical situation. We should not ask God to exercise divine power in an inconsistent, arbitrary, or capricious manner. And we should not be surprised if God declines to act in these ways if we so request. "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you," Jesus said, "so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matthew 5:44, 45).

To say that God's power is limited by ethical constraints is also to claim that, because God is morally good, divine power must be exercised in a *morally effective* manner. This involves at least two things. On the one hand, the means God uses must produce the ends he seeks. God cannot establish a loving community in hateful ways. He cannot foster nonviolence by prompting violence. He cannot nurture justice by indulging in injustice. He cannot encourage freedom by acting oppressively. He cannot nurture maturity by insisting upon immaturity. On the other hand, the ends God seeks must be morally commendable. A large river of religious thought contends today as it has for thousands of years that God could have enjoyed all eternity in self-satisfied solitariness but chose instead at a particular time to create free moral agents who can accept or reject divine grace. Another stream of religious thought contends that over the millennia God encouraged the evolution of free moral agents who could truly love one



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another and their Creator. These alternative readings of the human situation may differ in many ways but not about God's ultimate purposes. According to both schools of thought, God seeks to co-exist with those who can give and receive genuine, uncoerced, love. God can do many things. But because he is morally good, divine power cannot use any means that would frustrate, immediately or eventually, the flourishing of uncoerced love. And because God is morally good, divine power cannot do anything that would compromise, directly or indirectly, the overwhelming propriety and priority of this end.

Does this make prayer pointless? Not at all! Prayer is not the morally questionable practice of trying to cajole God into doing for us what it would be inappropriate for divine power to do for any other person or group whose circumstances are relevantly similar to our own. Among other things, prayer is the honorable attempt, however feeble and broken, to discern God's will more clearly and to do it more fully. Ellen White and her editors put it more clearly than I can: "Prayer is not to work any change in God; it is to bring us into harmony with God" (*Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 143).

From Coercion to Persuasion

When we consider the ways divine power is constrained, we may feel disappointed or sad, almost as if we wish it were possible for God to escape these limits so as to be able to do whatever we desire. Such feelings, though misplaced, are understandable, given the circumstances of our lives. Despite our many other differences, and regardless of where we

have spent our days, virtually all of us have been educated to prize coercive power. The capacity to compel, the ability to crush, the might to harm and kill: this is the kind of power we know best and prize most. And this is the kind of power we expect God to manifest.

And yet, as illustrated by the recent tragedies at Waco, Texas, the capacity to coerce is exceedingly weak in comparison with the ability to persuade. The officials who surrounded the Branch Davidians possessed much coercive power but little persuasive power. They planned to increase their use of coercive power incrementally until it persuaded those inside the compound to surrender. But their plan didn't work. This made them look and feel powerless.

God's approach functions the other way. Instead of increasing coercive power until it becomes persuasive, it increases persuasive power until it becomes coercive in a different sense. God's power is limited. But because it can convince without crushing, no force in the entire universe is more powerful than the divine ability to persuade. This is the power to notice. This is the power to worship. And this is the power to emulate. By comparison, all other power, no matter how great, is embarrassing weakness.

This essay is one of five presentations David Larson made at the Randall Visitors Center Sabbath school in Loma Linda, California, during the spring and summer of 1993 when the lessons focused on the book of Job. The titles of the other presentations are: (1) "Why Head-Tripping Can Be a Good Thing"; (2) "Amoral, Immoral, Transmoral: What Is God?"; (3) "Doubting the Evil of Evil"; and (4) "Can Evil Ever End?" Those who desire complimentary copies of the other presentations are invited to write to the author at the Faculty of Religion, Loma Linda University, Loma Linda, California 92350.