

Omnipotence

Andrew Steane, January 2026 (but first draft was some years ago)

Omnipotence---a favourite word with the philosophers. What does it even mean? Wikipedia begins “Omnipotence is the quality of having unlimited power.” Oxford Languages has “the quality of having unlimited or very great power.” The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy begins “Omnipotence is maximal power. Maximal greatness (or perfection) includes omnipotence.”

Unfortunately the phrase “unlimited power” is for me somewhere between a joke and a horror. The scene in Star Wars when the evil Emperor Palpatine cries out “unlimited power!” as his crooked hands wield the lightning which will kill the innocent people coming to stop him (the actor Ian McDiarmid does a great job here as Emperor Palpatine, a.k.a. Darth Sidious).

“Maximal greatness/perfection includes omnipotence”??? Who says so?

The very idea of omnipotence is riven with ambiguity. Ambiguity of meaning, and moral ambiguity. Would unlimited power (whatever that means) be a good thing? Clearly not if Darth Sidious wields it.

There is ambiguity in the very meaning of the word. Would omnipotence include the ability to change the laws of physics? How about the theorems of mathematics? Can an omnipotent entity make it be the case that three added to four is no longer seven, but eight, or two, or a fried egg?

This is an example of the sort of thing that they think about in theology classes, and there is a reasonable answer. The answer is that “omnipotence” does not include the ability to bring about contradictions such as a mathematical contradiction. A mathematical contradiction (such as “three plus four equals five”) is not a “thing” but a nonsense. Omnipotence does not mean the ability bring about meaningless nonsense which cannot be. It means the ability to bring about that which is not innately self-contradictory and may be worth bringing about.

An omnipotent entity cannot create a circular triangle because the phrase is meaningless; it does not refer to anything that is nor that could be. An omnipotent entity could not create an inanimate living thing because the words are self-contradictory and refer to nothing at all. And an omnipotent entity cannot create love without freedom. Freedom includes allowing people to make bad choices or good choices, as they see fit. A fact painfully evident to any parent, but which we manage with what wisdom we can. No amount of power will ever enable the one possessing the power to force people to love one another. Love simply does not operate like that. It cannot be forced. It can only be chosen.

Nor could an omnipotent entity eliminate the pain of the world without thereby eliminating all life.

Why did anyone even suggest that omnipotence is a good, or a part of ‘greatness’ or ‘perfection’ as the Stanford Encyclopedia has it? Isn’t that some kind of morally infantile worship of power? Where did the notion that God is omnipotent come from?

It turns out that the association between God and omnipotence came mostly from attempts to clarify thinking in the western philosophical approach to theology. If instead we look back earlier than that, to the Biblical documents, then we find they do celebrate the notion of divine power but they use a different term. They use the term “almighty” (the usual translation from Hebrew to English) and “almighty” is a little more pragmatic than “omnipotent”. “Almighty” means “can do what needs to be done” and it means “cannot be overcome by force”.

A phrase which has been much misunderstood in this context is the one from early in Luke's gospel (in the Bible), widely translated into English as “Nothing is impossible with God.” A similar phrase is found in various places elsewhere in the gospel accounts. But the example from Luke chapter is also widely translated, “For no word from God will ever fail.” How can the same Greek words find two such different translations? This is an example of a central aspect of translation between languages and cultures: it does not function one phrase at a time. It functions in larger chunks. To understand these phrases we must see them in their context. On every

occasion it is not a philosophical discourse on the nature of power. It is a response to a specific issue or a comment on a specific set of events. It is a turn of phrase in first century Jewish culture which means, each time, "nothing of these things which we have just been talking about is impossible with God." But plenty of other things are not possible, even for God. For example, entering into human solidarity without suffering.

And now we come to a beautiful paradox which is the heart of this piece.

What is it that cannot be overcome by force?

The choice to love.

What is it that can do what needs to be done?

Love and forgiveness.

So the famous immovable object, or the irresistible force, is not omnipotence at all, if we are concerned with any divine sort of omnipotence. The divine sort is something much more subtle and more lovely.

I wrote a poem about this which has been published as part of a book (by me) called "Science and Humanity" (published OUP). I reprint it here with permission:

Omnipotence

My father in law, when young, was
eager for butterflies and moths.
It was jolly fun to sweep to and fro
and ping such fluttering space-invaders.
He'd catch and collect what he could.

The first row he fixed in a box
with a pin marked "omnipotent".
The skeletons held in black and white.

Later he would use a liquid glue
called "love" (®™).
It flowed at first, then its
volatile substances evaporated
and it set like enamel.

As an adult he had a box in the garden,
which helped him to continue his investigations.
The evening moths would gather round
and show themselves by his light.

But eventually he put that away.

When older he was caught by an
iridescent desire to sidle off.
He loved to find butterflies
amongst the wild flowers and in the summer lanes.
He would make expeditions;
his son would join him when he could.
They did not bring a net.

Commentary

Poems ought not be commented on or explained. They either work or they do not. It is like the attempt to turn a story into an allegory when that was not the author's intention. If you allegorize it you will kill it. You have to simply enter the world of the story and let it do its work in its own way. It is the same for a poem.

But I will tell you what I had in mind in writing this poem.

The poem is called "omnipotence" because it is all about the ambiguities of omnipotence and what the divine attribute really is. The setting of the poem is a true observation about my father-in-law, who did like butterflies all his life, and who did start by catching and collecting them, and finish by simply observing them in the field. And he also underwent the kind of transformation the poem hints at.

We begin with the boy who runs around with a butterfly net. He makes a collection. And he tries to organize and define his butterflies. He learns abstract terminology and gets the butterflies pinned down. But they are lifeless. The same goes for the attempt to capture the divine with a word like "omnipotent". It is a lifeless idea and a shallow one.

Next the boy grows to a young man and uses something less rigid than a pin; he employs a liquid. But the liquid soon sets hard. He also learns of the word "love", which is a good word and much to be welcomed, but the Christian church has often employed the term like a trademark, as if it was a private property, and it becomes ossified instead of lived by.

Next he becomes an adult. He makes a light-box and studies the moths in the evening as they come to the box. And he is also interested in the divine. But in this kind of investigation we can only find what we can see by our own light.

At last he reaches maturity and now he learns another way. Instead of trying to bring the divine to him in a net of definitions, he looks outward. He launches out into the divine, which is also to live fully in the pathways and byways of life. And you see, instead of his catching the butterflies, the butterflies have caught him! He is iridescent with their iridescence.

How have they done it? They have done it by employing the kind of omnipotence that love has. It is like the end of the beautiful and moving poem *The Victory* by Anne Stevenson on the birth of her son. "How have you won?" she asks. Her baby has won her over, in all his needy helplessness, and now they are bound together.