INTRODUCTION
THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

Within the Western theistic tradition God is conceived as the Supreme Being, the only being worthy of worship because he is uniquely perfect. The most famous articulation of ‘perfect-being theology’ is by St Anselm (1033-1109) in his definition of God as ‘something than which nothing greater can be conceived’: a definition which requires that whatever qualities are attributed to God, God must possess them to an absolute and ultimate degree. Hence it is not just that God is the greatest conceivable being but rather that, being this being, he must possess all conceivable qualities to the greatest conceivable extent. Among those qualities traditionally applied to God three stand out: God must be all-powerful (omnipotent), all-knowing (omniscient) and all-good (omnibenevolent). These, however, are not the only attributes that have been so ascribed. Amongst others, it has been claimed that God’s existence must be independent of any other existences – that God is accordingly a ‘necessary’ being, distinguishable from the ‘contingent’ beings of his creation; that God must be incapable of experiencing emotions or passions (and so impassible); that he must be independent both of matter (and so immaterial) and of time (and so eternal), and incapable of change (and so immutable). However, the application of these attributes raises serious philosophical difficulties, which may be broadly classified into three groups:

1. There are difficulties arising from alleged contradictions within one particular ascribed property. The most famous example here has to do with the attribute of omnipotence as illustrated in the paradox of the stone: ‘Can God create a rock so heavy that he cannot lift it?’ This question, it would appear, cannot be answered in a way that is consistent with God’s omnipotence. For if we say that God can create a rock so heavy that he cannot lift it, then it must be conceded that God lacks the power to lift that rock; and if we deny that God can create a rock so heavy that he cannot lift it, then it must be conceded that God lacks the power to create that rock. Either way there is something that God cannot do, which highlights the absurdity of the notion of omnipotence. A variant of the same dilemma is the ‘paradox of sovereignty’ (Mackie, 1955):* ‘Could a sovereign God create a law that binds himself?’1 Another alleged contradiction arises from the conception of God as a being ‘worthy of worship’ (Rachels, 1971). Since only a being with an ‘unqualified claim on our obedience’ is worthy of worship, the believer must be required to abdicate his autonomy or independent judgment. But since autonomy is an essential requirement of moral decision, no being who is worthy of worship can make this demand. Hence the contradiction within the ascribed property: either being a moral agent means that one cannot be a worshipper (i.e., subservient to God’s commands) or being a worshipper means that one cannot be a moral agent.

2. There are difficulties arising from alleged incompatibilities between one divine attribute and another. One such incompatibility appears to exist between

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God’s omnipotence and his moral perfection. For if God is morally flawless, then presumably there are a number of things he cannot do (for example, commit evil acts), which contradicts the claim that he should be able to do them, being omnipotent. Nor is it difficult to see where the incompatibility lies when God’s omniscience is contrasted with his own ability to act freely as the only being whose actions are unconstrained (being omnipotent). An omniscient God must know what actions he will or will not perform in the future; but if God is omnipotently free in action, having a unique and infinite variety of choice, then what he will do cannot be known in advance. Thus either God is omniscient and knows beforehand what he will do – it being impossible for him not to do what he knows will be done (and is thus not omnipotent) – or God is an omnipotently free agent and therefore cannot know or infallibly predict what he will do at some later date (and is thus not omniscient). A survey of further dual-property incompatibilities is provided by Drange (1998).*

3. There are difficulties arising from an alleged incompatibility between certain divine properties and our empirical knowledge of the world. Here undoubtedly the most famous example – and for some indeed the decisive argument against the existence of God – derives from the evident fact of evil or suffering. That God is omnibenevolent (and thus wishes to eliminate evil) and omnipotent (and so has the power to eliminate evil) is, so it is claimed, inconsistent with the existence of evil. This dilemma – the so-called problem of evil – will be discussed extensively in Chapter 3. It should be noted here, however, that the ‘free will defence’, which is generally held to be the major objection to this line of argument – that God can create human beings who may freely choose to do good or evil – raises further paradoxes: of whether God, as an omnipotent and omniscient being, can create beings whose actions he can neither control nor predict; of whether a benevolent God, although not the specific causal agent of evil, remains culpable on grounds of moral negligence: he created the mechanism which generates evil, foresaw its consequences, but took no precautions against the harm that would be done.

In order to resolve these difficulties various redefinitions of God’s attributes have been forthcoming. By way of example, consider two adjustments to the concept of omnipotence:

1. The argument of René Descartes (1596-1650) and William of Ockham (c.1287-1347) – that God’s omnipotence implies the possibility of his bringing about any state of affairs whatsoever, including therefore logically impossible states of affairs (for example, the creation of a round square) – is rejected because, to follow St Thomas Aquinas (1224/6-1274)* and the Jewish theologian Maimonides (1186-1237), the possibility of an impossibility is a contradiction in terms. Thus, if we construe omnipotence not as the ability to do anything at all but as the power to do only that which is intrinsically possible, it is consistent with God’s omnipotence that he cannot perform a self-contradictory task: God may be able to create the universe and restore the dead to life, but his omnipotence is not compromised if he cannot undo the past, know that which is false or indeed create a rock he cannot lift. The current debate on this issue is extensive. See particularly Kenny (1979), C. Wade Savage (1967), Mavrodes
2. A still more radical alternative is to define omnipotence in terms of maximal power. While it is agreed that an omnipotent being cannot bring about conditions that are logically impossible, it is a ‘fallacy of omnipotence’ to suppose that God must therefore be able to bring about any state of affairs that is logically possible. There are, in other words, logically possible states that God cannot bring about. For while the concept of maximal power requires that God’s power is unsurpassable and that accordingly no other being has more power than God, it does not mean that all power belongs to God or that all other agents are powerless. Thus there are others who can act as autonomous causal agents and bring about something that God cannot bring about. This is a central claim of the so-called ‘process theology’ associated with Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) and Charles Hartshorne (1897-2000). That God is dependent on, and relative to, actions he cannot control makes God’s own emotional state much closer to our own. Deprived of the unilateral power to impose his will on his creation, his power becomes persuasive rather than coercive, allowing for a wide range of sympathetic responses and enjoyments within the divine life. For discussions sympathetic to this position, see Cobb and Griffin (1976), Schubert Ogden (1967) and Rabbi Harold Kushner in his immensely popular *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (1981).

1. THOMAS AQUINAS:
THE OMNIPOTENCE OF GOD

Biographical Summary. Born in 1225 at Roccasecca in southern Italy, Aquinas joined the Dominican order in 1244, much to the disapproval of his aristocratic family, and rapidly established himself as a student of extraordinary intellectual talent. From 1245 to 1252 he studied at Cologne under Albert the Great, where he encountered the work of Aristotle, and subsequently taught at Paris and Rome, where he acted as advisor and lecturer to the papal court. He died on his way to the Council of Lyons in 1274. His enormous philosophical output culminated in his unfinished *Summa Theologiae* (also known as *Summa Theologicae*, 'The Sum of Theology'). Later editions and translations also use the title *Summa Theologica* or 'The Theological Sum'). Begun in 1256, the *Summa* presents the most complete statement of his philosophical system. Aquinas was canonized in 1323 and proclaimed Doctor of the Church (Angelicus Doctor) in 1567. His philosophy was recognized by Pope Leo XIII in the encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879) as the official theology of his church and so made mandatory in all Roman Catholic education.

Philosophical Summary. One would suppose that everything is possible for an omnipotent God. This Aquinas denies and, in line with other medieval theologians, points to some fairly obvious limitations on God’s power, from the fairly trivial fact that God cannot perform the creaturely acts of walking or sitting to the much more important restriction that God cannot sin. However, Aquinas is equally adamant that God cannot perform impossibilities (such as making round squares): ‘nothing’, he says, ‘which implies a contradiction falls under the omnipotence of God’. Aquinas’ example is the absolute impossibility of a man becoming a donkey: a man is rational and a donkey is not, and the two cannot therefore be conjoined. For the same reason God cannot change the past because for the past not to have been implies another contradiction. Such impossibilities, however, should not be taken as a defect in God’s power because such things have no real existence but are rather descriptions of what cannot be: ‘Hence it is better to say that such things cannot be done, than that God cannot do them.’ God’s power accordingly ranges only over the logically possible: if, therefore, something can be, God can bring it about. Thus his inability to construct a married bachelor does not detract from his omnipotence. Nor is Aquinas saying that God can only create the empirically possible, for this would be to deny miracles, which are violations of the laws of nature caused by God. These, then, could occur because to contradict a law of nature is not a logical contradiction.


**Thomas Aquinas**

**The Omnipotence of God**

**Objection 1.** It seems that God is not omnipotent. For movement and passiveness belong to everything. But this is impossible with God, for He is immovable, as was said above (2, 3). Therefore He is not omnipotent.

**Objection 2.** Further, sin is an act of some kind. But God cannot sin, nor “deny Himself” as it is said in 2 Tim. 2:13. Therefore He is not omnipotent.

**Objection 3.** Further, it is said of God that He manifests His omnipotence “especially by sparing and having mercy” [Collect, 10th Sunday after Pentecost]. Therefore the greatest act possible to the divine power is to spare and have mercy. There are things much greater, however, than sparing and having mercy; for example, to create another world, and the like. Therefore God is not omnipotent.

**Objection 4.** Further, upon the text, “God hath made foolish the wisdom of this world” (I Cor. 1:20) a gloss says: “God hath made the wisdom of this world foolish . . . by showing those things to be possible which it judges to be impossible.” Whence it would seem that nothing is to be judged possible or impossible in reference to inferior causes, as the wisdom of this world judges them; but in reference to the divine power. If God, then, were omnipotent, all things would be possible; nothing, therefore impossible. But if we take away the impossible, then we destroy also the necessary; for what necessarily exists is impossible not to exist. Therefore there would be nothing at all that is necessary in things if God were omnipotent. But this is an impossibility. Therefore God is not omnipotent.

On the contrary, It is said: “No word shall be impossible with God” (Luke 1:37).

I answer that, All confess that God is omnipotent; but it seems difficult to explain in what His omnipotence precisely consists: for there may be doubt as to the precise meaning of the word “all” when we say that God can do all things. If, however, we consider the matter aright, since power

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is said in reference to possible things, this phrase, “God can do all things,” is rightly understood to mean that God can do all things that are possible; and for this reason He is said to be omnipotent. Now according to the Philosopher (Metaph. v, 17), a thing is said to be possible in two ways. First in relation to some power, thus whatever is subject to human power is said to be possible to man. Secondly absolutely, on account of the relation in which the very terms stand to each other. Now God cannot be said to be omnipotent through being able to do all things that are possible to created nature; for the divine power extends farther than that. If, however, we were to say that God is omnipotent because He can do all things that are possible to His power, there would be a vicious circle in explaining the nature of His power. For this would be saying nothing else but that God is omnipotent, because He can do all that He is able to do.

It remains therefore, that God is called omnipotent because He can do all things that are possible absolutely; which is the second way of saying a thing is possible. For a thing is said to be possible or impossible absolutely, according to the relation in which the very terms stand to one another, possible if the predicate is not incompatible with the subject, as that Socrates sits; and absolutely impossible when the predicate is altogether incompatible with the subject, as, for instance, that a man is a donkey.

It must, however, be remembered that since every agent produces an effect like itself, to each active power there corresponds a thing possible as its proper object according to the nature of that act on which its active power is founded; for instance, the power of giving warmth is related as to its proper object to the being capable of being warmed. The divine existence, however, upon which the nature of power in God is founded, is infinite, and is not limited to any genus of being; but possesses within itself the perfection of all being. Whence, whatsoever has or can have the nature of being, is numbered among the absolutely possible things, in respect of which God is called omnipotent.

Now nothing is opposed to the idea of being except non-being. Therefore, that which implies being and non-being at the same time is repugnant to the idea of an absolutely possible thing, within the scope of the divine omnipotence. For such cannot come under the divine omnipotence, not because of any defect in the power of God, but because it has not the nature of a feasible or possible thing. Therefore, everything that does not imply a contradiction in terms, is numbered amongst those possible things, in respect of which God is called omnipotent: whereas whatever implies contradiction does not come within the scope of divine omnipotence, because it cannot have the aspect of possibility. Hence it is better to say that such things cannot be done, than that God cannot do them. Nor is this contrary to the word of the angel, saying: “No word shall be impossible with God.” For whatever implies a contradiction cannot be
a word, because no intellect can possibly conceive such a thing.

**Reply to Objection 1.** God is said to be omnipotent in respect to His active power, not to passive power, as was shown above (1). Whence the fact that He is immovable or impassible is not repugnant to His omnipotence.

**Reply to Objection 2.** To sin is to fall short of a perfect action; hence to be able to sin is to be able to fall short in action, which is repugnant to omnipotence. Therefore it is that God cannot sin, because of His omnipotence. Nevertheless, the Philosopher says (Topic. iv, 3) that God can deliberately do what is evil. But this must be understood either on a condition, the antecedent of which is impossible – as, for instance, if we were to say that God can do evil things if He will. For there is no reason why a conditional proposition should not be true, though both the antecedent and consequent are impossible: as if one were to say: “If man is a donkey, he has four feet.” Or he may be understood to mean that God can do some things which now seem to be evil: which, however, if He did them, would then be good. Or he is, perhaps, speaking after the common manner of the heathen, who thought that men became gods, like Jupiter or Mercury.

**Reply to Objection 3.** God’s omnipotence is particularly shown in sparing and having mercy, because in this is it made manifest that God has supreme power, that He freely forgives sins. For it is not for one who is bound by laws of a superior to forgive sins of his own free will. Or, because by sparing and having mercy upon men, He leads them on to the participation of an infinite good; which is the ultimate effect of the divine power. Or because, as was said above (21, 4), the effect of the divine mercy is the foundation of all the divine works. For nothing is due to anyone, except on account of something already given him gratuitously by God. In this way the divine omnipotence is particularly made manifest, because to it pertains the first foundation of all good things.

**Reply to Objection 4.** The absolute possible is not so called in reference either to higher causes, or to inferior causes, but in reference to itself. But the possible in reference to some power is named possible in reference to its proximate cause. Hence those things which it belongs to God alone to do immediately – as, for example, to create, to justify, and the like – are said to be possible in reference to a higher cause. Those things, however, which are of such kind as to be done by inferior causes are said to be possible in reference to those inferior causes. For it is according to the condition of the proximate cause that the effect has contingency or necessity, as was shown above (14, 1, ad 2). Thus is it that the wisdom of the world is deemed foolish, because what is impossible to nature, it judges to be impossible to God. So it is clear that the omnipotence of God does not take away from things their impossibility and necessity.
The doctrine of God’s omnipotence appears to claim that God can do anything. Consequently, there have been attempts to refute the doctrine by giving examples of things which God cannot do; for example, He cannot draw a square circle.

Responding to objections of this type, St. Thomas pointed out that “anything” should be here construed to refer only to objects, actions, or states of affairs whose descriptions are not self-contradictory. For it is only such things whose nonexistence might plausibly be attributed to a lack of power in some agent. My failure to draw a circle in the exam may indicate my lack of geometrical skill, but my failure to draw a square circle does not indicate any such lack. Therefore, the fact that it is false (or perhaps meaningless) to say that God could draw one does no damage to the doctrine of His omnipotence.

A more involved problem, however, is posed by this type of question: can God create a stone too heavy for Him to lift? This appears to be stronger than the first problem, for it poses a dilemma. If we say that God can create a stone, then it seems that there might be such a stone. And if there might be a stone too heavy for Him to lift, then He is evidently not omnipotent. But if we deny that God can create such a stone, we seem to have given up His omnipotence already. Both answers lead us to the same conclusion.

Further, this problem does not seem obviously open to St Thomas’ solution. The form “x is able to draw a square circle” seems plainly to involve a contradiction, while “x is able to make a thing too heavy for x to lift” does not. For it may easily be true that I am able to make a boat too heavy for me to lift. So why should it not be possible for God to make a stone too heavy for Him to lift?

Despite this apparent difference, this second puzzle is open to essentially the same answer as the first. The dilemma fails because it consists of asking whether God can do a self-contradictory thing. And the reply that He cannot does no damage to the doctrine of omnipotence.

The specious nature of the problem may be seen in this way. God is either omnipotent or not. Let us assume first that He is not. In that case the phrase “a stone too heavy for God to lift” may not be self-contradictory. And then, of course, if we assert either that God is able or that He is not able to create such a stone, we may conclude that He is not omnipotent. But this is no more than the assumption with which we began, meeting us again after our roundabout journey. If this were all that the dilemma could establish it would be trivial. To be significant it must derive this same conclusion from the assumption that God is omnipotent; that is, it must show that the assumption of the omnipotence of God leads to a reductio. But does it?

On the assumption that God is omnipotent, the phrase “a stone too heavy for God to lift” becomes self-contradictory. For it becomes “a stone which cannot be lifted by Him whose power is sufficient for lifting anything”. But the “thing” described by a self-contradictory phrase is absolutely impossible and hence has nothing to do with the doctrine of omnipotence. Not being an object of power at all, its failure to exist cannot be the result of some lack in the power of God. And, interestingly, it is the very omnipotence of God which makes the existence of such a stone absolutely impossible, while it is the fact that I am finite in power which makes it possible for me to make a boat too heavy for me to lift.

But suppose that some die-hard objector takes the bit in his teeth and denies that the phrase “a stone too heavy for God to lift” is self-contradictory, even on the assumption that God is omnipotent. In other words, he contends that the description “a stone too heavy for an omnipotent God to lift” is self-coherent and therefore describes an absolutely possible object. Must I then attempt to prove the contradiction which I assume above as intuitively obvious? Not necessarily. Let me reply simply that if the objector is right in this contention, then the answer to the original question is “Yes, God can create such a stone.” It may seem that this reply will force us into the original dilemma. But it does not. For now the objector can draw no damaging conclusion from this answer. And the reason is that he has just now contended that such a stone is compatible with the omnipotence of God. Therefore, from the possibility of God’s creating such a stone it cannot be concluded that God is not omnipotent. The objector cannot have it both ways. The conclusion which he himself wishes to draw from an affirmative answer to the original question is itself the required proof that the descriptive phrase which appears there is self-contradictory. And “it is more appropriate to say that such things cannot be done, than that God cannot do them”.

4. I assume, of course, the existence of God, since that is not being brought in question here.
5. St. Thomas, Summa Theologiae.
The specious nature of this problem may also be seen in a somewhat different way. Suppose that some theologian is convinced by this dilemma that he must give up the doctrine of omnipotence. But he resolves to give up as little as possible, just enough to meet the argument. One way he can do so is by retaining the infinite power of God with regard to lifting, while placing a restriction on the sort of stone He is able to create. The only restriction required here, however, is that God must not be able to create a stone too heavy for Him to lift. Beyond that the dilemma has not even suggested any necessary restriction. Our theologian has, in effect, answered the original question in the negative, and he now regretfully supposes that this has required him to give up the full doctrine of omnipotence. He is now retaining what he supposes to be the more modest remnants which he has salvaged from that doctrine.

We must ask, however, what it is which he has in fact given up. Is it the unlimited power of God to create stones? No doubt. But what stone is it which God is now precluded from creating? The stone too heavy for Him to lift, of course. But we must remember that nothing in the argument required the theologian to admit any limit on God’s power with regard to the lifting of stones. He still holds that to be unlimited. And if God’s power to lift is infinite, then His power to create may run to infinity also without outstripping that first power. The supposed limitation turns out to be no limitation at all, since it is specified only by reference to another power which is itself infinite. Our theologian need have no regrets, for he has given up nothing. The doctrine of the power of God remains just what it was before.

Nothing I have said above, of course, goes to prove that God is, in fact, omnipotent. All I have intended to show is that certain arguments intended to prove that He is not omnipotent fail. They fail because they propose, as tests of God’s power, putative tasks whose descriptions are self-contradictory. Such pseudo-tasks, not falling within the realm of possibility, are not objects of power at all. Hence the fact that they cannot be performed implies no limit on the power of God, and hence no defect in the doctrine of omnipotence.

6. But this method rests finally on the same logical relations as the preceding one.
Philosophical Summary. The article ‘Can God’s Existence be Disproved?’ (1948) by J.N. Findlay (1903-1987) is one of the classics of modern philosophy, Hartshorne ranking it alongside Kant’s criticisms of the classical arguments for God’s existence. Findlay here offers a formal disproof of divine existence by juxtaposing two essential attributes: (1) God to be God must be the proper object of religious worship, and (2) so that he can be this proper object, God’s non-existence must be impossible (i.e., his existence must be ‘necessary’) since it makes no sense to say that one could worship any being as God if that being could cease to be (i.e., a being whose existence is ‘contingent’). The turning-point in the argument comes, however, when Findlay, following Kant, maintains that ‘necessary existence’ is impossible: nothing can be conceived to exist that cannot also be conceived not to exist. We thus arrive at what Hartshorne has called ‘Findlay’s paradox’: (1) a contingent being would not deserve worship; (2) a necessary being is a logical absurdity; or to express it another way: (1) only necessary being can be the object of religious devotion; (2) necessary being cannot be attributed to an actually existing God. What religion requires is thus denied by logic. For if it is (a) logically possible that God does not exist (i.e., if we conceive God as contingent), then God’s existence is not merely doubtful but impossible, since by definition nothing capable of non-existence could be God at all. Bu if we say (b) that God is therefore not capable of non-existence (i.e., that his existence is necessary), we are repeating that his existence is not merely doubtful but actually impossible, since nothing incapable of non-existence can exist.

Bibliographical Summary. Findlay’s article initially appeared in the journal *Mind* (April 1948) but has subsequently been reprinted many times, most notably in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* ed. Flew and MacIntyre (1955). This collection also included criticisms of Findlay by G.E. Hughes and A.C.A. Rainer, together with Findlay’s response. Hartshorne’s assessment of Findlay’s argument was published in *Anselm’s Discovery*, (1965, pp. 255-261), to which Findlay responded in ‘Some Reflections on Necessary Existence’, in the Hartshorne Festschrift *Process and Divinity*, ed. Reese and Freeman (1964, pp. 515-527). Perhaps the most important criticism of Findlay is, however, provided by Norman Malcolm, who argues against the idea that ‘necessary being’ is a meaningless concept. See ‘Anselm’s Ontological Arguments’, *Philosophical Review* (1960, pp. 41-62). See also the collection of essays on Findlay edited by Martin and Westphal (1985).
The course of philosophical development has been full of attempted proofs of the existence of God. Some of these have sought a basis in the bare necessities of thought, while others have tried to found themselves on the facts of experience. And, of these latter, some have founded themselves on very general facts, as that something exists, or that something is in motion, while others have tried to build on highly special facts, as that living beings are put together in a purposive manner, or that human beings are subject to certain improbable urges and passions, such as the zeal for righteousness, the love for useless truths and unprofitable beauties, as well as the many specifically religious needs and feelings. The general philosophical verdict is that none of these ‘proofs’ is truly compelling. The proofs based on the necessities of thought are universally regarded as fallacious: it is not thought possible to build bridges between mere abstractions and concrete existence. The proofs based on the general facts of existence and motion are only felt to be valid by a minority of thinkers, who seem quite powerless to communicate this sense of validity to others. And while most thinkers would accord weight to arguments resting on the special facts we have mentioned, they wouldn’t think such arguments successful in ruling out a vast range of counter-possibilities. Religious people have, in fact, come to acquiesce in the total absence of any cogent proofs of the Being they believe in: they even find it positively satisfying that something so far surpassing clear conception should also surpass the possibility of demonstration. And non-religious people willingly mitigate their rejection with a tinge of agnosticism: they don’t so much deny the existence of a God, as the existence of good reasons for believing in him. We shall, however, maintain in this essay that there isn’t room, in the case we are examining, for all these attitudes of tentative surmise and doubt. For we shall try to show that the Divine Existence can only be conceived, in a religiously satisfactory manner, if we also conceive it as something inescapable and necessary, whether for thought or reality. From which it follows that our modern denial of necessity or rational evidence for such an existence amounts to a demonstration that there cannot be a God.

Before we develop this argument, we must, however, give greater precision to our use of the term ‘God’. For it is possible to say that there are nearly as many ‘Gods’ as there are speakers and worshippers, and while existence may be confidently asserted or denied of some of them, we should feel more hesitant in the case of others. It is one thing, plainly, to pronounce on God’s existence, if he be taken to be some

ancient, shapeless stone, or if we identify him with the bearded Father of
the Sistine ceiling, and quite another matter, if we make of him an ‘all-
pervasive, immaterial intelligence’, or characterize him in some yet more
negative and analogical manner. We shall, however, choose an indirect
approach, and pin God down for our purposes as the ‘adequate object of
religious attitudes’. Plainly we find it possible to gather together, under
the blanket term ‘religious’, a large range of cases of possible action,
linked together by so many overlapping\(^8\) affinities that we are ready to
treat them as the varying ‘expressions’ of a single ‘attitude’ or ‘policy’.
And plainly we find it possible to indicate the character of that attitude by
a number of descriptive phrases which, though they may err individually
by savouring too strongly of particular cases, nevertheless permit us, in
their totality, to draw a rough boundary round the attitude in question.
Thus we might say, for instance, that a religious attitude was one in which
we tended to abase ourselves before some object, to defer to it wholly, to
devote ourselves to it with unquestioning enthusiasm, to bend the knee
before it, whether literally or metaphorically. These phrases, and a large
number of similar ones, would make perfectly plain the sort of attitude we
were speaking of, and would suffice to mark it off from cognate attitudes
which are much less unconditional and extreme in their tone. And clearly
similar phrases would suffice to fix the boundaries of religious feeling. We
might describe religious frames of mind as ones in which we felt ready
to abase ourselves before some object, to bend the knee before it, and so
forth. Here, as elsewhere, we find ourselves indicating the felt character
of our attitudes, by treating their inward character as, in some sense, a
concentrated and condensed substitute for appropriate lines of action, a
way of speaking that accords curiously with the functional significance
of the inward.\(^9\) But not only do we incorporate, in the meanings of our
various names for attitudes, a reference to this readiness for appropriate
lines of action: we also incorporate in these meanings a reference to
the sorts of things or situations to which these attitudes are the normal
or appropriate responses. For, as a matter of fact, our attitudes are not
indifferently evoked in any setting: there is a range of situations in which
they normally and most readily occur. And though they may at times
arise in circumstances which are not in this range, they are also readily
dissipated by the consciousness that such circumstances are unsuitable
or unusual. Thus fear is an attitude very readily evoked in situations with
a character of menace or potential injury, and it is also an attitude very
readily allayed by the clear perception that a given situation isn’t really

\(^8\) This word is added to avoid the suggestion that there must be one pervasive
affinity linking together all the actions commonly called ‘religious’.

\(^9\) Whatever the philosophical ‘ground’ for it may be, this plainly is the way in
which we do describe the ‘inner quality’ of our felt attitudes.
dangerous. And anger, likewise, is an attitude provoked very readily by perverse resistance and obstructive difficulty in some object, and is also very readily dissipated, even in animals, by the consciousness that a given object is innocent of offence. All attitudes, we may say, presume characters in their objects, and are, in consequence, strengthened by the discovery that their objects have these characters, as they are weakened by the discovery that they really haven’t got them. And not only do we find this out empirically: we also incorporate it in the meanings of our names for attitudes. Thus attitudes are said to be ‘normal’, ‘fully justified’ and so forth, if we find them altered in a certain manner (called ‘appropriate’) by our knowledge of the actual state of things, whereas we speak of them as ‘queer’ or ‘senseless’ or ‘neurotic’, if they aren’t at all modified by this knowledge of reality. We call it abnormal, from this point of view, to feel a deep-seated fear of mice, to rage maniacally at strangers, to greet disasters with a hebephrenic giggle, whereas we think it altogether normal to deplore deep losses deeply, or to fear grave dangers gravely. And so an implicit reference to some standard object – which makes an attitude either normal or abnormal – is part of what we ordinarily mean by all our names for attitudes, and can be rendered explicit by a simple study of usage. We can consider the circumstances in which ordinary speakers would call an attitude ‘appropriate’ or ‘justified’. And all that philosophy achieves in this regard is merely to push further, and develop into more considered and consistent forms, the implications of such ordinary ways of speaking. It can inquire whether an attitude would still seem justified, and its object appropriate, after we had reflected long and carefully on a certain matter, and looked at it from every wonted and unwonted angle. And such consideration may lead philosophers to a different and more reasoned notion of the appropriate objects of a given attitude, than could be garnered from our unreflective ways of speaking. And these developments of ordinary usage will only seem unfeasible to victims of that strange modern confusion which thinks of attitudes exclusively as hidden processes ‘in our bosoms’, with nothing but an adventitious relation to appropriate outward acts and objects.

How then may we apply these notions to the case of our religious attitudes? Plainly we shall be following the natural trends of unreflective speech if we say that religious attitudes presume superiority in their objects, and such superiority, moreover, as reduces us, who feel the attitudes, to comparative nothingness. For having described a worshipful attitude as one in which we feel disposed to bend the knee before some object, to defer to it wholly, and the like, we find it natural to say that such an attitude can only be fitting where the object reverenced exceeds us very vastly, whether in power or wisdom or in other valued qualities. And while it is certainly possible to worship stocks and stones and articles
of common use, one does so usually on the assumption that they aren’t merely stocks and stones and ordinary articles, but the temporary seats of ‘indwelling presences’ or centres of extraordinary powers and virtues. And if one realizes clearly that such things are merely stocks and stones or articles of common use, one can’t help suffering a total vanishing or grave abatement of religious ardour. To feel religiously is therefore to presume surpassing greatness in some object: so much characterizes the attitudes in which we bow and bend the knee, and enters into the ordinary meaning of the word ‘religious’. But now we advance further – in company with a large number of theologians and philosophers, who have added new touches to the portrait of deity, pleading various theoretical necessities, but really concerned to make their object worthier of our worship – and ask whether it isn’t wholly anomalous to worship anything limited in any thinkable manner. For all limited superiorities are tainted with an obvious relativity, and can be dwarfed in thought by still mightier superiorities, in which process of being dwarfed they lose their claim upon our worshipful attitudes. And hence we are led on irresistibly to demand that our religious object should have an unsurpassable supremacy along all avenues, that it should tower infinitely above all other objects. And not only are we led to demand for it such merely quantitative superiority: we also ask that it shouldn’t stand surrounded by a world of alien objects, which owe it no allegiance, or set limits to its influence. The proper object of religious reverence must in some manner be all-comprehensive: there mustn’t be anything capable of existing, or of displaying any virtue, without owing all of these absolutely to this single source. All these, certainly, are difficult requirements, involving not only the obscurities and doubtful significance of the infinite, but also all the well-worn antagonisms of the immanent and transcendent, of finite sinfulness and divine perfection and preordination, which centuries of theological brooding have failed to dissipate. But we are also led on irresistibly to a yet more stringent demand, which raises difficulties which make the difficulties we have mentioned seem wholly inconsiderable: we can’t help feeling that the worthy object of our worship can never be a thing that merely happens to exist, nor one on which all other objects merely happen to depend. The true object of religious reverence must not be one, merely, to which no actual independent realities stand opposed: it must be one to which such opposition is totally inconceivable. God mustn’t merely cover the territory of the actual, but also, with equal comprehensiveness, the territory of the possible. And not only must the existence of other things be unthinkable without him, but his own non-existence must be wholly unthinkable in any circumstances. There must, in short, be no conceivable alternative to an existence properly termed ‘divine’: God must be wholly inescapable, as we remarked previously, whether for thought or reality. And so we are led on insensibly to the