

## CAN GOD CREATE A BEING HE CANNOT CONTROL?

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ANTHONY Kenny has given an analysis of God's powers on the basis of which he concludes that God cannot create a being he cannot control (*The God of the Philosophers*, p. 98). What I shall do is show that this conclusion does not follow from his analysis.

Kenny distinguishes between a power (ability, capacity) and an opportunity (occasion, circumstance, condition) necessary to the exercise of that power (*Will, Freedom and Power*, pp. 132–134). For example, a person in rural England may have the power to converse in French but not the opportunity, whereas a person in Paris may have the opportunity but not the power. Again, the parents who are dining out may have the power to control the children they have left at home but not the opportunity, whereas the baby-sitter may have the opportunity but not the power. When we say that someone *can* do something, we may mean one of three things:

He has the power to do that thing;

He has the opportunity to do that thing;

He has both the power and opportunity to do that thing.

According to Kenny, God's omnipotence consists in 'the possession of all logically possible powers which it is logically possible for a being with the attributes of God to possess' (*The God of the Philosophers*, p. 98). This does not mean, however, that God always has the opportunity to exercise these powers. Kenny says:

It is logically possible to possess a power, I suggest, if the exercise of the power does not as such involve any logical impossibility. When I say that the exercise of the power does not *as such* involve any logical [im]-possibility I mean that there is no logical incoherence in the description of what it is to exercise the power. For a power to be a logically possible power it is not necessary that every exercise of it should be coherently conceivable, but only that some exercise of it should be (p. 96).

For example, God

has the power to do what I am thinking of. It is true that if I am thinking of something which it is impossible to do, then an omnipotent God cannot, on that occasion, exercise the power he has of doing what I am thinking about. But powers are not tied to particular occasions, and it is not necessary, for a power to be genuinely possessed, that it can be coherently exercised on all occasions and in all circumstances. Though God has the power to do what I am thinking of, he cannot exercise this power if I am thinking a nonsensical thought (p. 97).

Similarly, God has the power to preserve Marilyn's virginity even though he has no opportunity to exercise this power if Marilyn has already lost her virginity. He has the power to teach a person French even though he can exercise this power only on the condition that that person does not already have a perfect knowledge of French. Finally, God has the power to permit a flood 'to destroy all things of flesh' even though he has no opportunity to exercise this power if he has already promised not to.

According to Kenny, it follows from the fact that God is immutable that he does not have the power to give up one of his powers, thereby ceasing to be omnipotent (p. 98). In particular he does not have the power to give up his power of controlling all existing beings. Thus, Kenny concludes, God cannot create a being he cannot control. To quote Kenny's argument in full:

The power to create a being that one cannot control and thereby give up one's omnipotence is not a power that could logically be possessed by a being who had the attributes of God including immutability (p. 98).

We shall try to answer four questions in connection with this argument. What exactly is the power which Kenny thinks God would give up if he created a being he could not control? Would God have to give up this power in order to create a being he could not control or would it suffice if God merely gave up the opportunity to exercise this power? Would the loss of this power be incompatible with God's immutability? Would the loss of this power be incompatible with God's omnipotence?

What exactly is the power which Kenny thinks God would give up if he created a being he could not control? There are, I think, three possibilities:

1. The power to create a universe such that everything in it is controlled by God
2. The power to control everything which God might possibly create
3. The power to control every currently existing thing.

God has the first power because he has the power to create a deterministic universe. However, God would retain this power even if he created a being he could not control. Thus, presumably, this is not the power Kenny has in mind. God has the second power if and only if he does not have the power to create a being he does not have the power to control. Whether or not God has this power is what is at issue and hence Kenny can hardly be taking it as a premiss that God has this power. Thus it seems it is the third power which is involved in Kenny's argument. Kenny assumes that there was some time at which there was no being which God did not have the power to control. Given this initial

situation, the creating of such a being would entail the abrogation of the third power.

Would God have to give up this power in order to create a being he could not control or would it suffice if God merely gave up the opportunity to exercise this power? If one takes the phrase 'God can create a being he cannot control' to mean 'God can create a being he lacks the power to control' then Kenny is right that God relinquishes a power if he creates such a being. However, one might equally well take the phrase 'God can create a being he cannot control' to mean 'God can create a being which he lacks the power or the opportunity to control'. This latter statement is implied by the statement 'God can create a being which he has the power but not the opportunity to control'. Thus if one understands the phrase 'God can create a being he cannot control' in this second way then Kenny is wrong to conclude that God relinquishes a power if he creates such a being. However, granted that God has the power to control every currently existing thing, how might it come about that God not have the opportunity to exercise this power? One way would be for God to create a rational being and say to it 'I promise to maintain you in existence forever and let you make choices independently of my will'. Since it is logically impossible that he who is in some sense truth should break a promise, the promise precludes the exercise of God's power to control every currently existing thing. Thus, for example, the creature might rob a bank in spite of the fact that God wills that it not rob a bank. When we saw the being robbing the bank we might ask whether God could control it. There is an obvious sense in which the correct answer is *no*. If we take the phrase 'God can create a being he cannot control' to mean 'God can create a being which he lacks the power or opportunity to control' then Kenny's argument does not work.

Would the loss of the power to control every currently existing thing be incompatible with God's immutability? We may distinguish two sorts of powers, proper powers and relative powers. A proper power is one which is proper to the person possessing it in the sense that it does not cease to exist unless there is some change in its possessor. The power to play an errorless game of noughts and crosses and the power to spell the word 'cacography' are two examples of proper powers. A relative power is one which presupposes a relation between the possessor of the power and his environment such that the power may cease to exist if there is a change not in the possessor but merely in his environment. The power to beat anyone at Sleepy Wool Manor at noughts and crosses and the power to spell 'cacography' better than Smith are two examples of relative powers. If I teach someone at Sleepy Wool Manor how to play an errorless game of noughts and crosses I thereby abrogate my power to beat anyone at Sleepy Wool Manor at noughts

and crosses. However, this involves a change not in me but in my student. In particular I do not relinquish my proper power to play an errorless game of noughts and crosses.

Is the power to control every currently existing thing a proper power, a relative power or neither? The creation of a being which God does not have the power to control does not involve any change in God himself. He does not thereby become less strong. Thus it is not a proper power. On the other hand, this power does presuppose a relation between God and the contents of the present universe such that the power may cease to exist if there is a change not in God but only in the universe. Thus it is a relative power. However, the loss of relative powers is not incompatible with the immutability of their possessor. Hence the loss of the power to control every currently existing thing is not incompatible with God's immutability.

Would the loss of the power to control every currently existing thing be incompatible with God's omnipotence? When Kenny defines God's omnipotence as 'the possession of all logically possible powers which it is logically possible for a being with the attributes of God to possess', he surely does not have in mind the logically possible power to beat everyone at Sleepy Wool Manor at noughts and crosses nor the logically possible power to spell 'cacography' better than Smith. God's omnipotence was not jeopardised by the fact that once he was able to beat everyone at Sleepy Wool Manor at noughts and crosses but now he is not. Nor did God cease to be omnipotent when Smith finally learned how to spell 'cacography' and thereby brought it about that God could no longer spell 'cacography' better than Smith. Thus we should understand Kenny as meaning that God's omnipotence consists in 'the possession of all logically possible *nonrelative* powers which it is logically possible for a being with the attributes of God to possess'. But if that is correct then Kenny is wrong to say that in giving up his power to control every currently existing thing, God is thereby giving up his omnipotence. Even if we agree with Kenny that in creating a being he cannot control, God is relinquishing a power, it does not follow that God is thereby relinquishing his omnipotence and hence is not immutable.