


ARTICLE

On Omnipotence

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Abstract

The doctrine that God is unlimited in power has been challenged recently by figures such as Thomas Oord and Philip Goff. This article responds to these challenges from the perspective of classical theism. It is argued that omnipotence follows from God's being the reason why there is something rather than nothing, and that understanding God in this way is the only coherent way of fleshing out the claim that God is the creator. The relationship of creator and creature is discussed, and the point is made that God and creatures are not in metaphysical competition, defusing Oord's worry that an omnipotent God would be controlling. The issue of evil in the world, and its claimed incompatibility with omnipotence is broached. In response to concerns about evil and omnipotence appeal is made to Brian Davies' work on classical theism and evil, before concluding that the Christian classical theist can acknowledge there being a mystery about the presence of evil in the world whilst, without prejudice to her intellectual integrity, resting trustfully in the mysterious love of God.

Keywords: apophaticism; classical theism; creation ex nihilo; omnipotence; problem of evil

'So it is willed where will and power are one'

Dante, Inferno, Canto iiiii

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* notes that 'of all the divine attributes, only God's omnipotence is named in the Creed: to confess this power has great bearing on our lives'.¹ This text captures succinctly the centrality of omnipotence to classical, creedal, conceptions of God, and the fact that profession of omnipotence isn't merely an abstract, academic, matter, but something with profound influence for Christian living and self-understanding.

This latter point, that what we say about God's power is salient for Christian life has been taken on board by recent Christian thinkers who want to reject the classical doctrine of omnipotence (what that doctrine *is*, I will discuss below). So, for instance, the theologian Thomas Oord rejects omnipotence in favour of what he terms

¹CCC 268.

amipotence, a limited divine power exercised consistently in the cause of love.² Oord makes this move because he thinks that the doctrine of omnipotence is unscriptural, but more than that because he thinks that the rejection of omnipotence is mandated by the reality³ of evil in the world, and because he thinks that profession of omnipotence underwrites oppressive moral and political frameworks. Similarly, philosopher Philip Goff has embraced a form of Christianity that rejects omnipotence, in his case citing the problem of evil as a reason for moving in a non-classical direction.⁴

These two thinkers, and others like them, deserve a great deal of praise. First, they have recognised the importance of discussions around God's power, and rightly hold that these discussions are not relevant to academic theologians alone. Second, their rejection of omnipotence issues in no small part from the rejection of harsh conceptions of God and of the authoritarian religion that so often goes hand-in-hand with these. Third, they wish to respond theologically to the problems many people raise about evil. On all these points I have profound sympathy with them. In spite of this, I think they are wrong to reject omnipotence, which I understand in terms of God being unlimited in power. My primary intention in arguing this is that of shoring up Christian classical theism in its own terms in the face of criticism of belief in omnipotence.

Before getting on to the argumentative details, however, I want to say a word about theological method. Oord rightly takes scripture as authoritative for Christian theology, before going on to argue that omnipotence is unscriptural. I am prepared to concede this in one sense of the word 'unscriptural' – I do not think that the author of any biblical book is concerned with presenting a doctrine of God's omnipotence. (Indeed I do not think most biblical authors are generally concerned with formulating a metaphysics of God at all; their concern is more with recounting what God has done for God's people and with praising God for this.) But it is one thing to say that claims about God's omnipotence are *not found* in scripture. It is another thing altogether to hold that such claims are *inconsistent* with scripture. I see no reason to think that the doctrine of omnipotence is incompatible with anything in scripture. In fact, the doctrine is an outworking of a profoundly scriptural doctrine,⁵ and moreover one that I believe can even be established by natural reason alone,⁶ namely that God is the creator of all things.

On that basis, let us proceed with the discussion of God's omnipotence.

²Thomas Jay Oord (2023). *The Death of omnipotence and the Birth of amipotence*. Grasmere: SacraSage. Thomas Jay Oord (2022). *Pluriform Love: an Open and Relational Theology of Well-Being*. Grasmere: SacraSage.

³Of course, there is only a certain sense in which, for the classical theist, evil is real. Evil is genuinely present, but as a privation, a lack of being that is properly present. See Anastasia Philipa Scrutton (2024), 'Evil as Privative: a McCabian Defence'. *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 85(1–2), pp. 23–40. I will not rely on this point in what follows.

⁴Philip Goff (2024). *My Leap Across the Chasm*. Available on-line at <https://aeon.co/essays/i-now-think-a-heretical-form-of-christianity-might-be-true> (Accessed 9 December 2024).

⁵I say 'outworking' because there are doubts about whether the entire doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* can be found in scripture. On debates around this, see Gary Anderson and Markus Bockmuehl, eds. (2017), *Creatio ex Nihilo: Origins, Development, Contemporary Challenges*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press. See also Joanna Leidenhag (2020), *Creation and Ecology: Why the Doctrine of Creatio ex Nihilo Matters Today*. Cambridge, Grove Books, Ch. 2.

⁶On this, see Denys Turner (2004), *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

1. The doctrine of omnipotence as negative theology

'We cannot know what God is', writes Thomas Aquinas, 'but only what he is not'.⁷ I take it that he means what he says and, therefore, that what follows in the *Summa Theologiae* ought to be read in the light of this denial. Quite apart from arguments from authority, though, there are good reasons to think that God escapes our conceptual abilities. One of these reasons consists in the doctrine of divine simplicity, which we will examine later. An implication of this stark position about the bounds of our possible knowledge of the divine reality is that whatever we say about omnipotence must be a piece of *negative theology*, a claim about what God is not, not a positive account of God's power, as though we could somehow say what it is for God to be powerful.

Rather than supplying a positive account of omnipotence, when we talk about God as omnipotent we are simply saying that there is no limit on God's power. Whatever there is, or whatever there could be, in no way limits God in the exercise of God's power (we will see in due course why we should hold that God is powerful in the first place). We are not offering a theory of God's power, in the sense that we could offer a mechanical theory of the nature of the power that the car has – the power to cause motion, certain noises and so on – nor are we even offering a theory of God's power in the sense that we maybe think that we can offer a theory of why persons such as ourselves possess the power that we do – perhaps focusing on the volition of an immaterial mind, on the firing of neurons, or whatever. To understand the power of God in this theoretical sense would be to understand the divine essence, and that we cannot do (in this life, at least).

Now care is needed here because of a point made by Oord,⁸ and more generally discussed by philosophers under the description 'the paradoxes of omnipotence'.⁹ There seem to be things that an omnipotent God cannot do: create a stone too heavy for God to lift, make it the case that $2 + 2 = 5$, bring about the limitation of God's own power, and so on. But then, a consideration of these things appears to show that the conception of God as omnipotent is incoherent, since even if we assume that God is omnipotent there appear to be things that God cannot do, contradicting our initial claim that God is omnipotent. Doesn't this, then, show that God is not omnipotent?

It does not. To get clear about these apparent limitations on God's power we should give some thought to what would be involved in God's power being limited. We might say that God's power is limited if there is something that God cannot do, following Thomas' articulation of the view that there is no limitation on God's power, 'God can do all things'.¹⁰ Note that this statement of omnipotence leaves us very much in the dark about the extent of God's power, since we are not able to imagine or comprehend most of the 'things' that lie within the possibility of an unlimited power. Nevertheless, we can rule out certain supposed 'things' from falling within the remit of omnipotence, namely, those that appear to be 'things' from the surface appearances of our language but are not genuine things at all. Thus there is no such state of affairs as two plus two

⁷STh Ia, q3, pr.

⁸'The Death of Omnipotence', Ch. 2.

⁹For a detailed exposition see Joshua Hoffman and Gary Rosenkratz (2022), 'Omnipotence' in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Available on-line at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/omnipotence/> (Accessed 9 December 2024).

¹⁰STh Ia, q25, a3.

equalling five; it is logically impossible. Similarly there is no such thing as a stone that is too heavy for an omnipotent being to lift. (I am being kind to the philosophers here: it is actually nonsensical to talk of God lifting anything in a literal sense – God has no body – I assume by ‘to lift’ they mean to cause to rise). That God cannot be said to be able to do these things represents no limitation on God. Rather it is a limitation on our language that we can talk about impossible things in a way that misleads us into thinking that they are possible.

2. Omnipotence and creation

So, *contra* Oord, the profession of God’s omnipotence cannot be shown to be false for the usual philosophical reasons. But to block one route to arguing against omnipotence is in no way to show that God is omnipotent. What reason might we have for believing that?

Whatever we mean by the word ‘God’, we mean ‘the reason why there is something rather than nothing at all’. That much is definitional; leaving aside natural theological arguments for God’s existence, many of which have the form of an argument to a reason for there being anything at all, the great statements of Christian faith begin with an affirmation that God is the creator. And, if God is the creator, if God is not one of the things we encounter and theorise about in the universe, there must be severe limits on what we can truthfully say about God.

Nevertheless, one thing we can do, coherently with this caution about God-talk, is deny those things of God that are incompatible with God being the creator. As we noted Thomas writing above, we can say not what God is, but only ‘what [God] is not’. Now, one of the things which must be denied of God if God is the creator is any limitation in power. Why is this?

First note that if God is the only adequate and ultimate reason for there being anything at all, God cannot exist contingently, otherwise God’s own existence would stand in need of explanation, contradicting the claim that God is the only adequate and ultimate reason for there being anything at all (there would be some entity – namely God – whose existence had a reason external to God). But then God is the reason not just why there is anything at all, but also the reason any possible entity might exist. Therefore, God is not limited in God’s power to bring about anything that is genuinely possible. Similarly God is not limited in God’s power to cause actually existing entities to cease to exist (God is the reason anything exists, over and against nothing, at each moment; God did not simply wind up the world at the beginning and leave it to run). Moreover, God is not limited in God’s power to bring it about that a given object possesses a given property, assuming only that it is genuinely possible for that object to possess that property. Socrates is only wise because for every moment that he is wise God creates his wisdom, after all.¹¹

This brief argument could usefully be fleshed out in another context. However, the key point is that God is omnipotent because God is intimately involved as creator with the universe, as God would be with any possible state of affairs. I use the word ‘intimately’ here deliberately. It is a mistake to conceptualise God’s unlimited power along the lines of that of a cosmic dictator. As we will see in a moment, God’s distinctiveness

¹¹I leave open here what kind of philosophical account should be offered of properties.

relative to creation makes any suggestion of God interfering with creation nonsensical. In spite of, or rather because of, this, God as classically conceived is more profoundly involved with every entity as its creator than God would be if (impossibly) God were not the creator who exercises unlimited creative power throughout God's creation.¹²

One implication of all this bears attention before we move on. Omnipotence follows from creation; it is because we believe that God is the creator that we are moved by argumentative force to profess God's omnipotence (this doesn't mean, of course, that everyone who believes in divine omnipotence has gone through such an argument, just that there is such an argument and that it is important that there is.). But now notice what this means: those who deny that God is omnipotent cannot coherently maintain that God is the creator. However few, if any, opponents of divine omnipotence want to deny divine creation. They would, though, appear to be faced with a choice: either abandon the idea that God is creator, and with it a foundational claim of Christianity, or else affirm omnipotence, contrary to their current position.

At this point, Oord, at least, bites the bullet and rejects the classical doctrine of creation, *creatio ex nihilo*, and does so precisely because he understands that doctrine to imply divine omnipotence.¹³ He wants, however, with an eye to scripture, to preserve there being some sense in which God can be said to create. This sense can be expounded in terms of a certain reading of Genesis 1:2, where an already existing earth might be thought to be 'without form and void'¹⁴ prior to the divine act of creation. According to the view under consideration, God creates from materials that in some sense pre-exist God. But this does not take seriously enough the radicality of the creation question, 'why is there something rather than nothing at all?' The pre-existing matter is going to be something of which we can ask this question, it is not going to be the kind of thing whose existence is simply given (that is, whose *esse* and essence cannot be distinguished). The materials out of which we are made, however precisely we understand that phrase, are simply not that kind of thing. So we can ask the creation question of those materials, and identify God – the true God – with whatever answers this ultimate question. The deity recognised by Oord as bringing things about other than *ex nihilo*, is either to be identified with the true God after all, in which case the argument to omnipotence above goes through, or else the deity is a distinct entity, a god, and this god cannot plausibly be identified with the creator God of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim faith.

If God is to be creator, God must create *ex nihilo*. And if God creates *ex nihilo*, God is omnipotent.

¹²On this see Herbert McCabe (1985), 'The Involvement of God'. *New Blackfriars* 66(785). pp. 464–76.

¹³'The death of omnipotence', pp. 110–3. In actual fact Oord seems to misunderstand what classical theists mean when we talk of God creating from nothing. *Creatio ex nihilo* is not a theory about the beginnings of the physical universe. It is a doctrine that claims that everything whatsoever depends on God to exist over and against nothing, and that is perfectly compatible with the universe having no temporal beginning whatsoever.

¹⁴Genesis 1:2 ESV.

3. The creature–creator distinction

Whatever the force of the preceding reasoning, I suspect that opponents of divine omnipotence will not be moved to abandon their position in the light of it. Whilst they may not be able to square the circle concerning creation, they are likely nonetheless to feel the pull of arguments concerning God and control and God and evil to such an extent that they feel unable to affirm omnipotence. It is important, then, that proponents of omnipotence be able to answer these further arguments.

To do this, we need to begin by marking the distinction between God, the creator, and God's creation. In much Christian (and other theistic) thought, this distinction is often acknowledged verbally without being genuinely appreciated, and this – to my mind – lies at the root of many difficulties around omnipotence. In this section, I will briefly lay out two denials that lie at the heart of an adequate marking of the creature–creator distinction: the denial that God is complex and the denial that God competes for agency with creatures.

The denial that God is complex is generally known as the doctrine of *divine simplicity*.¹⁵ By 'complex' here is meant *containing constituents*. These could be material parts, or properties distinct from the substance possessing them, or any number of other forms of complexity identified by philosophers and theologians over the years. God, by virtue of being the ultimate reason why there is something rather than nothing, cannot in Godself in any way stand in need of cause or explanation; there can be nothing *brought about* in God. Now, complexity stands in need of explanation: why did these constituents come together to make a whole? Therefore there can be no complexity in God.

In particular, then, God can have no properties that are distinct from Godself. It follows that God does not possess distinct properties. God's love just is God's power, which just is God's wisdom, and these are all identical to God in Godself in pure simplicity.¹⁶ In this, God is very unlike creatures, which we routinely categorise and distinguish by singling out distinct properties. Deprived of this capacity to describe and categorise our object, in the case of God, we are left in a stark position, forced to admit that we cannot know God in the sense that we can know complex creatures. Thus the need for a sober, negative, theology of the sort that was outlined above.

More positively, however, we gain something from recognising that God's attributes are not distinct from one another. We learn that, contrary to a lot of theological discourse, both academic and popular, divine attributes cannot be played off against one another. There is not, for instance, a tension between God's mercy and God's justice, perhaps resolved in Christ. Rather, God's justice and God's mercy are the very same reality; we might talk of a justice exercised in mercy, a justice which just is God. Below, I will say something about the implications of this for understanding God's power with respect to God's love.

¹⁵The classic exposition is STh Ia, q3.

¹⁶This does not mean that the words 'love', 'power', and 'wisdom' mean the same thing, even when applied to God, it is just that when applied to God they share a denotation, namely God in Godself.

Before that, there is the question of the relationship between God's agency and creaturely agency. This will prove crucial in arriving at a satisfactory understanding of God's power that escapes Oord's criticisms. There is a temptation to think that divine and creaturely agency exclude each other. On this view, to the extent that I am responsible for something God is not responsible for that thing. Similarly if God acts to do something, God excludes my agency with respect to that thing. God, so to speak, *interferes* (or, as is often said, *intervenes*) and in so interfering gets in my way, prevents the exercise of my freedom. However, believers in the creator God gestured towards above ought not to accept this tempting picture. God is not one more thing in the world, whose agency takes place against the backdrop of the universe and competes with other entities. God, rather, is the reason there is a world at all. God's agency, then, is not one more cause amongst others. It is, instead, a precondition for other causes. If God is the reason why there is something rather than nothing then it is because of God, rather than in spite of God, that gravitational phenomena cause an apple to fall from a tree. God's creative exercise of power does not compete with creaturely causation, instead it brings it about. Divine and creaturely agency are spoken about, as Kathryn Tanner puts it, in a non-contrastive fashion.¹⁷

Another temptation is to accept all this in the case of things like apples falling from trees, but to reject it in the case of human free actions. Surely if these are created by God, it might be thought, we are not genuinely free? So runs the line of thought that speaks of theological determinism.¹⁸ Yet again, however, we should insist that this does not take seriously enough the idea that God is the creator of all things. For if that is true then my free action, being a something and not a nothing, is created by God. But as we have already seen, God's action does not compete with creaturely agency. God creates me and in creating me does not prevent, but grounds, my freedom; it is because of God that my actions are free. Indeed were it not for God's creative power, my actions would not be free, because they wouldn't exist at all.

4. Control

The foregoing discussion matters because one of Oord's central objections to the kind of classical doctrine of God that I have been tracing up until now is that it commits us to a *controlling* God. An omnipotent God, a God upon whose power there is no limit, would not make room for creaturely freedom. Creatures would be entirely subject to divine power. Since such control is incompatible with love, Oord rejects divine omnipotence, preferring instead to profess amipotence, a limited and uncontrolling power exercised in love. The following passage is typical:

Let's call [the] common view 'love is by definition noncoercive'. This view arises from the deep intuition that love never controls others entirely. In relation to

¹⁷Kathryn Tanner (2004), *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny and Empowerment?* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press.

¹⁸E.g., Leigh C. Vicens and Simon Kittle (2019), *God and Human Freedom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Section 2.2.

the God whose nature is love, this view entails that God cannot control others entirely. If love is inherently uncontrolling and God loves necessarily, God is incapable of coercion.¹⁹

For Oord omnipotence means control, and control means the absence of love. Omnipotence, then, must be rejected in the cause of preserving a doctrine of divine love. What is the believer in omnipotence to say?

First, notice that the idea that there is a trade-off between divine power and divine love is not available to a proponent of divine simplicity. There is no distinction to be made between God's power and God's love. Hence if the classical theologian is to maintain that God's power is unlimited she cannot do so at the expense of a profession of God's love. In this respect, Oord is onto something from a classical perspective. Second, we can, and should, agree with Oord's argument as set out above. No controlling entity could fully love, at least in a fully adult fashion, those whom that entity controls. In fact, I would go further than Oord: it is not just being 'entirely' controlling which excludes love. It is, in the normal course of things at least, control in general that does this. To the extent that I control some person, I do not love them.

Why, then, is omnipotence not ruled out by Oord's line of argument? Simply because God, on my view, does not control creatures at all. To control some entity, one needs to compete for metaphysical space with that entity, such that my actions, to the extent to which they are controlling, exclude actions by that entity. This being so, my exercise of controlling action crowds out your freedom. But God does not stand in this kind of relationship to creatures. God does not compete for metaphysical space with us, since God is not a thing in the world, but rather the reason why there is a world at all. God, as we have seen above, does not interfere with creatures, and control is a form of interference. Similarly, since God is the ground of our freedom, rather than an entity in competition with it, nothing God does crowds out our freedom. God is simply not the kind of thing that can do this.

The pull towards thinking otherwise issues from conceiving of God as a kind of Top Person.²⁰ In particular, I think, it stems from thinking of God as a very powerful (whether all-powerful, of course, it remains to be seen) person with whom I stand in a particular kind of loving relationship. On the salient picture, God is a person in the same sense that I am, and since I can use my power to control others, so could God, to the detriment of that loving relationship. The pressure towards thinking in this way is not trivial and is not to be dismissed. It issues from deep convictions about things central to Christian faith: that God is love and that we hope to be with God participating in God's love. This conviction is often communicated in scripture metaphorically through language that pictures God as a person like us. However we can and should recognise this language as precisely that – metaphorical – since, on the basis of what has already been said about the creator–creature distinction, whatever God is (and that

¹⁹Thomas Jay Oord (2015), *The Uncontrolling Love of God: An Open and Relational Theology of Providence*. Downers Grove: Intervarsity.

²⁰The term is used by Brian Davies, e.g., (2023) 'Comment: Negative Theology'. *New Blackfriars* 104(1111). pp. 259–60.

we cannot know), God is not a member of a shared kind with us. In fact, taking this language as other than metaphorical is indicative of a certain kind of biblical literalism which often underwrites attempts to reform classical theism and one that to me seems in tension with the anti-fundamentalism that so often motivates the project of tracing a 'kinder' image of God.

Simply to say that the scriptural language of God's *personal* love should be understood metaphorically is not yet to say how convictions about divine love can be preserved in the absence of literalism about person-language. Here we can say a number of things, for example that whilst God *qua* God is not a person in the same sense as us, God *qua* human being is.²¹ We see in the human love of Jesus – this boundless, including and challenging love – what the love of God looks like when it is enfleshed and thereby have confidence of God's genuine love for us, even though that love is something that in itself we cannot understand. More fundamentally, though, we can say with Christian tradition that God invites us to participation in the divine life, to be united to the very mystery of God. This participation is not the same as the union we enjoy with human beings we love – it is far more intimate, because our creator is near to us, 'nearer than my inmost parts' as Augustine puts the matter,²² – but can be understood by analogy with that union. It involves a union with God, a will on our part to be united with God, and a will on God's part to unite us to Godself. And this kind of willed union surely points to one meaning of the word 'love'. For sure, we cannot grasp the reference of the word 'love' when it is used of God because we cannot understand what God is. Nevertheless, the classical, omnipotent, God can be seen to be a God of love, albeit that of course we say that God is loving in a way that is analogical relative to our talk of creaturely love. And this love can be thought about, if not understood, precisely without supposing that it would be 'crowded out' were God omnipotent.

5. Evil and power

What appears to be the most pressing argument against divine omnipotence appeals to the reality of evil in the world. This argument motivates Goff as well as Oord and can be stated in terms of an apparently inconsistent triad of claims, the statement of which is familiar from Hume:

1. God is all-powerful.
2. God is all-good.²³
3. Evil is real.

²¹I agree with Herbert McCabe that objections to this kind of language issue from 'debased scholasticism' ((1977)'Review of The Myth of God Incarnate', *New Blackfriars* 58(357), p. 352). More carefully: the word 'person' is not, indeed cannot be, used univocally of God and human persons, lest we be thought to be contained under a shared kind with God. It is only in virtue of the Incarnation that God is a person in the same sense as us. The person that Jesus is is the second hypostasis of the Trinity, but when we call that hypostasis a 'person' we do not mean that in a sense that implies that this hypostasis is a person in *our* sense independent of the Incarnation.

²²*Confessions* 3.vi.xi

²³This is the usual formulation. Oord writes in terms of divine love rather than divine goodness, but the something like reasoning here goes through nevertheless, substituting accordingly.

The privationist denial that evil is substantial, which sits very naturally with classical theism, does not involve a denial of (3.) in the relevant sense. The privationist doesn't think that evil is illusory, merely that it consists in a certain kind of lack in existent entities, rather than itself being an existent. So the classical theist would appear to have a problem. She cannot deny any one of the statements without abandoning her fundamental position. For Goff and Oord, the way out of this seeming impasse is to deny (1.), thereby rejecting classical theism, without abandoning theism altogether.

Can the classical theist say anything to maintain her commitment to all three claims? One common recourse at this point has been theodicy, the attempt to justify an omnipotent, omnibenevolent God in the face of evil. Yet objections have been raised to the project of theodicy, in particular that it is morally problematic in attempting to justify suffering and, therefore, implicitly at least, unworthy of the God it seeks to justify.²⁴

An alternative approach neither mitigates classical theism nor attempts to provide an account of why God permits evil. Brian Davies has been at the forefront of explaining how classical theism is not undermined by the problem of evil, precisely because of the radical creator-creature distinction we have been working with up until this point. Davies' work is well-known and I will be brief in summarising his position here. Claim (2.) only gets the problem of evil going if the sense in which God is said to be good is a *moral* sense. But God cannot be morally good, subject to obligations, duties and the like. God is not subject to anything. God certainly is good, in that God is ultimately desirable, and in that God produces (or can produce) entities which, insofar as they exist,²⁵ are good. But none of this equates to moral goodness. So it doesn't make sense to say that God, as good, *ought* to eliminate evil.

This point is perhaps better made by emphasising the privative theory of evil. For there to be evil, in any given instance is for there to fail to be some good. But God cannot reasonably be said to be under an obligation to create more good, which is just to say to create more,²⁶ than God in fact does. To suppose otherwise, apart from setting up puzzles – God could always create more, so does it follow that God could never create 'enough'? – this indulges in anthropomorphism, thinking of God as a moral agent just like us.

All this undermines a certain kind of *intellectual* problem of evil. But a discomfort still remains: how can we reconcile our Christian encounter with divine love in Christ with the world being as it is, beset by evil? This is not so much an intellectual from as an existential one. At this point I think the most faithful thing to do is to rest with the discontent, commending it to the divine love and goodness, trusting that God's love shall be victorious, even as one is puzzled in the face of evil. This might seem to fall victim to Oord's criticism of appeals to mystery:

...[T]ypically, out comes the mystery card: 'God's ways are not our ways'. 'Finite creatures cannot understand an infinite God... When faced with paradox, many

²⁴D.Z. Phillips (2004). *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God*. London: SCM. Kenneth Surin (1986). *Theology and the Problem of Evil*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

²⁵Recall here the privative theory of evil.

²⁶Classically being and goodness are interchangeable

people appeal to mystery rather than reconsider whatever beliefs create the inconsistency'.²⁷

We are not at this stage dealing exactly with inconsistency. Davies' argument sees that off. We are dealing rather with a puzzlement at evil. However, Oord's point still appears to hit home: isn't an appeal to divine mystery when confronted with this, an abandonment of intellectual responsibility? But, on the contrary, God simply is mysterious, beyond our power to comprehend, as has been insisted above. It is no irresponsible surrender of intellectual duty to treat what simply is mysterious as though it were mysterious! Instead, to remain faithfully puzzled in the face of evil is to dwell trustfully in the keeping of the God who is love.²⁸

6. Love and power

That God is love is the firmest conviction of the Christian classical theist and of Oord alike, and rightly so given its prominence at the heart of the Christian gospel. The most fundamental difference between them consists in whether they hold that divine love is compatible with omnipotence. The classical theist believes that not only is this the case, but that love can only be divine if it belongs to an entity who is unlimited in power, because only such an entity could be the answer to the question 'why is there something rather than nothing at all?' Precisely because God is the creator, and so is not on the same metaphysical level as ourselves, it is wrong to conceptualise God's power in terms of control. Moreover the classical theist, believing as she does in divine simplicity, holds that God's power is not distinct from God's love. We see this in the orders of creation and redemption, as we encounter God's power exercised in love: bringing things to exist out of nothing and bringing us to share in the mystery of God's ineffable life. For sure, we remain unsettled when we cannot identify that loving power being exercised, as when we encounter evil. We remain convinced, though, that God – who is our creator – is unlimited in power, and that this power is invariably instanced in love. We believe in a God for whom love and power are one.²⁹

²⁷'The Death of omnipotence', p. 92.

²⁸There are similarities with the view I'm presenting here and the one Karen Kilby develops in (2003), 'Evil and the Limits of Theodicy'. *New Blackfriars* 84 (983), pp. 13–29. I think that there are differences, however. Crucially, Kilby thinks that there is a problem of evil to which silence is an appropriate response, whereas I – following Davies – think that there is no such problem. What there is is the fact that there is evil, and in the face of that it is appropriate that we engage in a reverent failure to speak.

²⁹Thanks to Joanna Leidenhag and Tasia Scrutton for discussion of the material presented here.