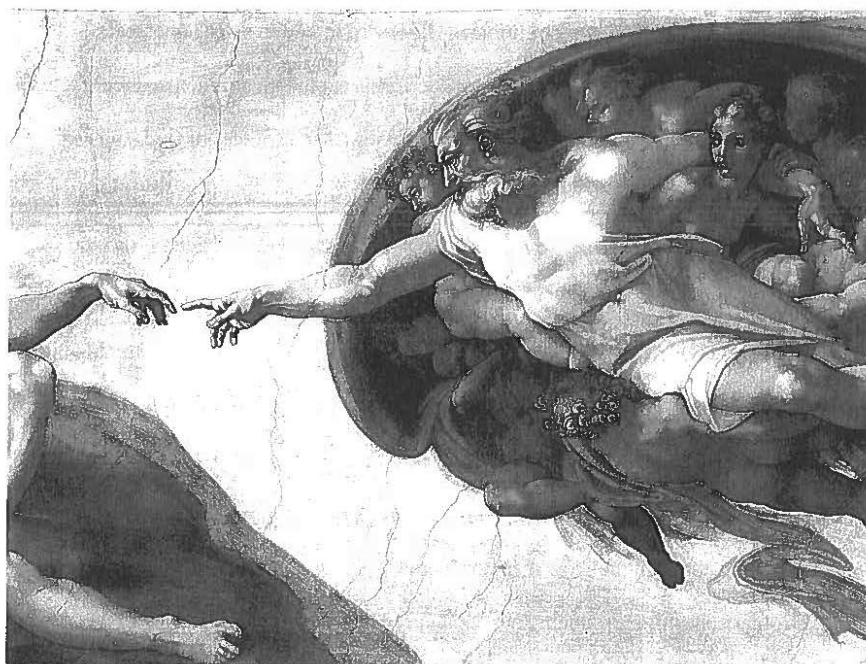


Candidate 4 evidence

ADVANCED HIGHER RELIGIOUS MORAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL STUDIES DISSERTATION

To what extent is the concept of the God of Classical Theism Incoherent?



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¹ <https://www.worldhistory.org/image/12580/the-creation-of-adam-by-michelangelo/>

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Introduction

The God of classical theism has been accredited with a number of necessary divine attributes, including omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence, the three of which I will focus on in this dissertation. The incoherence of God can be specified as the potential inconsistent, illogical, and unclear nature of these attributes. In order for God to be coherent, each attribute should have no internal contradiction, be consistent in its definition and remain true to its ordinary conception, as well as be compatible with other attributes of God, and the religious doctrine it is held within. As such, the aim of this dissertation is to examine the issues and arguments which arise from conceptions of these, and to evaluate the theistic responses and biblical perspectives, using a variety of sources to ascertain the extent of God's coherence. Firstly I will discuss the Problem of Evil - arguably the most famous problem in relation to the incoherence of God, and argue that the nature of suffering is indeed incompatible with an omnibenevolent, omnipotent, and omniscient God. I will then scrutinise in more detail omnipotence, and reach the conclusion that it is impossible for an omnipotent being to exist, as although the Stone Paradox, which I will discuss first, has its limitations, it, alongside other concerns surrounding omnipotence, demonstrate the illogicality of an omnipotent being existing. As well as omniscience, which, through the Free Will Paradox, and relating concerns about God's relation to time, show that omniscience is also an incompatible and incoherent aspect of God's nature. And whilst the issues presented will vary in how and to what extent the incoherence of God is shown, I will ultimately conclude that to a significantly large extent, the concept of the God of classical theism is incoherent.

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The Problem of Evil

The first issue with regards to the incoherence of God that I will examine is the Problem of Evil. The Problem of Evil is found in its earliest form as the Epicurean Paradox which highlights the paradox between omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence, and has since been discussed by philosophers and theists alike as a significant problem to the coherence of God. It is best summed up by Hume:

“Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?”².

For the purposes of this dissertation, I will outline the Problem of Evil as

- 1) God is omnipotent (therefore he should have the power to prevent evil)
- 2) God is omniscient (therefore he should be aware of all evil)
- 3) God is omnibenevolent (therefore he should prevent evil)
- 4) Yet evil exists

In order for this to be sound, one of the propositions would have to be false or there would have to be added propositions to validate the argument. For one, there are arguments put forward that suggest evil does not exist, for example that evil is only the privation of good³. However, whilst good and evil are seen opposites, suggesting that good is simply the absence of evil and vice versa is nonsensical. For example, if I plan to murder someone, and then suddenly decide not to, this obviously does not make my actions good, it is not as black and white as this argument puts forth. Ultimately, it seems evident that evil does in fact exist, and as Millar highlights - all other criticisms aside there is an existential incompatibility with

²Miller, ED.L. (1972) *God and Reason: A Historical Approach to Philosophical Theology*. Pearson

³Everitt, N. (2003) *The Non Existence of God*. London ; New York: Routledge

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arguments of this nature due to our confrontation with such a '*variety and profusion of evil*'⁴, and as such this argument fails to prove God's coherence.

Another criticism is to instead suggest that evil does exist, but it exists for a purpose. Subsequently allowing God to be coherent, as it would follow that there are certain situations where it is morally justifiable for God to permit evil. One example of this could be pain, which serves to warn us that our body is damaged. However, whilst this may make sense in this example, in other situations it appears otherwise. As D.Z Phillips argues

*"what then are we to say of the child dying from cancer?" "If this has been done to anyone, it is bad enough, but to be done for a purpose, to be planned from eternity - that is the deepest evil"*⁵.

I think this alone provides a compelling enough response to refute this, as it would be irrational to suggest this had any purpose for the greater good that could be ascribed to a wholly good God. Even to suggest that it could be to develop our 'souls', as argued by Irenaeanus' theodicy, seems implausible - Would any reasonable person seriously suggest that an omnibenevolent God would let so many humans, including children, suffer so devastatingly and die, for the sole purpose of developing our souls, or the souls of others? I would argue not. Moreover, there would seem to be very real cases of pointless evil, as Rowe points out, for example, if lightning striking a dead tree, resulting in a forest fire where a fawn is trapped and it burns and lies in agony before death⁶. This situation obviously serves no greater good, nor impacts anyone else. Therefore, the God of classical theism cannot be coherent, as God should be willing and able to prevent such pointless and extreme suffering. Although the theist may respond by arguing that as humans, we are unable to see the bigger picture God has planned, these examples suggest that this is an illogical response, and such

⁴Miller, ED.L. (1972) *God and Reason : A Historical Approach to Philosophical Theology*. Pearson

⁵Davies, B. (1992) *The Problem of Evil*. New Blackfriars, Vol. 73 (No.862) pp. 357-375

⁶Ibid (4)

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the concept of the God is incoherent as evil fails to have a logical purpose, either for the greater good or for the development of humans.

The Free Will Defence, however, developed from Augustine's theodicy by Plantinga, claims that evil exists because God has granted humans free will, and thus have a choice of good or evil. Plantinga maintains that free will is morally significant as it is of greater significance if a person is able to choose good over evil - it is better for the human race to have free will and to misuse it than to not have it at all⁷. Whilst I agree that free will is important, as otherwise we would be mindless automata, this does not necessarily mean that evil is justified. For this to be valid, as Everitt suggests, free will would have to be of absolute value, or at the very least, be sufficient enough in creating good to justify the evil in the world⁸. However in certain situations, for example the Holocaust, it seems that the importance of free will is undermined by the sheer magnitude of suffering. If God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent, surely he could prevent situations such as the Holocaust from occurring, without revealing himself or jeopardising the free will of others. The fact that these events have occurred suggests in my opinion a limit on God's omnipotence, as regardless of whether or not God granted humans free will, he should be able to prevent the most cruel and horrific human actions if considered to be the God of classical theism.

Furthermore, it should also be considered that God should seek to create a world where the conditions were such that there was less evil, and should be able to do this without compromising free will, just that, for example, as Mackie points out

"Why could he not have made men such that they always freely choose the good?"⁹

⁷Miller, ED.L. (1972) *God and Reason : A Historical Approach to Philosophical Theology*. Pearson

⁸Everitt, N. (2003) *The Non Existence of God*. London ; New York: Routledge

⁹Mackie, J.L. (1955) *Evil and Omnipotence*. *Mind*, Vol. 64 (No.254) pp. 200-212.

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The implication being that God would create humans with good natures so that they still have free will and the option of evil is open, but they would never choose it. This is logically possible, as Mackie highlights, it is logical that a human would choose the good on several occasions, so it would be logical to choose the good on every occasion¹⁰. I think that this is possible, however in regards to Plantinga's statement, this could potentially diminish the moral significance of the action, although this is dependent on how much weight is put on this proposition. It could be suggested however that God could have instead created a world with less potential for evil, therefore making it more likely that humans freely choose the good regardless. This could include for example removing the potential for fossil fuel utilisation or natural evils such as famine. It is obvious, in my opinion, that this world is not the best possible, and as such the Free Will Defence does not adequately justify evil, as God could have permitted free will without enabling evil to exist on the extent and scale which it clearly does. Thus the concept of God continues to be incoherent to a large extent.

Regardless, the fallacy not only with the Free Will Defence but also with all other critics, is that they focus almost entirely on moral evils, i.e. the actions of humans such as murder and abuse, and mostly ignore natural evils, e.g. natural disasters and disease. Humans have only existed for a minute amount of time in relation to the existence of natural evils, which have existed longer and are far greater in scale. Even as it regards us, oftentimes it can seem that natural evils, particularly disease, have a greater impact than moral evils. And so, as the theist disregards this, so too do they disregard the strength or even the validity of their argument as a huge proportion of evil, which can be attributed to God as God created the universe, is unexplained. Ultimately, even if moral evils could be explained by the Free Will Defence, natural evils are not explained. Even arguments which have the potential to touch on natural

¹⁰ Ibid

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evils, such as arguments surrounding purpose, fail, as purpose assumes a massively egocentric position on natural evil, assuming that it caters to human development. Therefore the concept of God is incoherent as it is incompatible with natural evil.

Overall the arguments laid out in critic of the Problem of Evil fail to provide sufficient justification for the existence and extent of Evil. As originally proposed, one or more of the propositions outlined must be given up, as the God of classical theisms necessary attributes are undoubtedly incoherent due to evil.

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Omnipotence

Omnipotence refers to the idea that God is all powerful, and it is the second problem in regards to God's coherence that I will discuss. This is largely concerning the contradictory nature of omnipotence inherently, rather than its incompatibility with other attributes of God, as opposed to the Problem of Evil. In this I will consider the Stone Paradox, and other issues which arise from God's omnipotence and argue that responses to these fail to disprove the incoherence of God.

The Stone Paradox has been dated to at least the 10th century, and it asks the question: Is God able to create a stone that would subsequently be too heavy for God to lift? If god does not have the ability to create a stone then it is clear that there is something he cannot do, however if God can create the stone, then there would still be something he cannot do¹¹ - both answers suggesting that therefore God's omnipotence is incoherent.

There have, however, been many responses and attempts to disprove the paradox. For one, the theist may claim that God is able to survive the paradox by choosing not to create the stone¹². The implication being that God has the ability to create it, however chooses not to, as when he does and only when he does there will be something he cannot do, and as a result would have to cease his omnipotence. This however, in my opinion, is an incredibly unconvincing argument riddled with issues. Yes, God has the potential to create the stone, however he also has the potential to fail to lift it, simply because an action has not happened yet in my opinion does not negate a potential limit on God's omnipotence. The argument is essentially based on the fact that it 'hasn't happened', which seems absurd as the problem still exists, and therefore failing to prevent the stone paradox from undermining the coherence of God's omnipotence. Furthermore, omnipotence is regarded as a necessary characteristic of

¹¹Everitt, N. (2003) *The Non Existence of God*. London ; New York: Routledge

¹²Ibid

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God, and as such it would be illogical to suggest that God can cease his omnipotence, which would in turn result in the cessation of God's existence - an incredibly problematic assertion for the theologians position. As it is generally assumed that God, as an eternal creator, cannot be destroyed. This would therefore suggest that the Stone Paradox does not fail in showing how God is incoherent, at least in this respect.

However, I think that rather than trying to work around the Stone Paradox, a stronger argument to make would be to question the definition of omnipotence. Omnipotence is often regarded as the ability of a being to do anything, as the bible states

"With man, this is impossible, but with God, all things are possible" Matthew 19:26¹³.

however later formulations of omnipotence typically argue that it is the ability of a being to do anything which it is logically possible to do, as championed by Aquinas and Mavrodes for example, and thus as Mavrodes himself argues, the stone paradox fails as it is not logically possible for God to create a stone which he cannot lift, it is a self contradictory thing¹⁴. This is more convincing as, I think that it is spurious to suggest that for example, God can create a round square, as Thomas V Morris states

"to say that god is so powerful that he can do the logically impossible is not pious or reverential; it is just confused"¹⁵,

However there are still some weaknesses. For instance, it can be questioned whether the issue of the Stone Paradox is in fact illogical. This is because it is logically possible for a being to make something which it cannot lift afterwards, humans do it all the time - and so it appears as though God cannot do everything logically possible. In my opinion, Mavrodes statement suggests not that God is confined by the bounds of logic as a whole, but rather logic in relation to his being, and as I will show this is an untenable position to uphold.

¹³The Bible <https://biblehub.com/matthew/19-26.htm>

¹⁴Mavrodes, G.I. (1963) *Some Puzzles Concerning Omnipotence*. The Philosophical Review, Vol. 72 (No.2) pp. 221-223.

¹⁵Basinger, D. and Basinger, R. (1994) *The Problem with the 'Problem of Evil'* Religious Studies, Vol. 30 (No.1) pp. 89-97.

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This is because, in relation to lifting the stone, arguments against omnipotence also often refer to the idea that since God is a non physical being, he cannot do things such as walking. The implication is that generally beings are restricted by their nature, certain actions are such that they can only be performed by certain kinds of beings¹⁶, for instance, an example put forth by Swinburne is that only married people can get divorced.¹⁷ It follows from this that God is not omnipotent, as he is unable to perform any physical actions with which physical beings are able to perform. So similarly to the position the stone paradox puts the theist in - the theist must also revise the definition of omnipotence, to a being which has the ability to do anything which it is logically possible for that being to do. However upon analysis this is shown to be an extremely problematic definition of omnipotence, as it implies that technically, even a nullipotent being (a being which has no power) can be considered omnipotent as it is logically impossible for this being to do anything¹⁸, a clear logical absurdity. So ultimately, whilst to some extent the stone paradox has its limitations, including its poor choice of analogy, as God does not 'lift things' per se, from it stems compelling arguments proving God's incoherence, as the theist response is insufficient in showcasing a logically consistent conception of omnipotence which is even remotely close to its original definition.

Similarly, there is also the question of sinning. This is because if God is omnibenevolent or perfectly good, then it follows from this that God would not be able to sin, or be able to inflict purposeless suffering, as this would mean that God is acting against his own nature. Possible solutions to this follow the same lines as problems already outlined, showcasing that

¹⁶Swinburne, R (1973) *Omnipotence*. American Philosophical Quarterly, Vol. 10 (No.3) pp. 231-237.

¹⁷Ibid

¹⁸Everitt, N. (2003) *The Non Existence of God*. London ; New York: Routledge

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God is limited by his being. However this further magnifies the problematic nature of omnipotence, showing that there are distinct things which God is unable to do, as it is incoherent to suggest that God can be both omnipotent and omnibenevolent if God cannot sin.

Overall, the arguments presented largely successfully demonstrate the impossibility, or rather the illogical nature of omnipotence. This is because, whilst the Stone Paradox is not the strongest of analogies, the counterarguments fails to counteract the claims made with any persuasive argument- instead largely revising the definition of omnipotence, resulting in no clear or coherent definition as Aquinas outlines

"All confess that God is omnipotent; but it seems difficult to explain in what his omnipotence precisely consists of"¹⁹.

Whilst Aquinas is obviously not arguing in favour of the incoherence of God, I think it highlights the core issue of the incoherence of omnipotence. That the theist fails to provide a coherent explanation of omnipotence due to the fact that there are clear limitations on God's power, such as sinning and any definition has to attempt to get around this is simply keeping the word omnipotence, whilst failing to retain its meaning. Even if, as Everitt suggests, the definition could be revised to be where a being can do everything logically possible for that being to do, and in which a being with no greater power can be conceived. This is vague, ambiguous and lacks explanatory power. And as such, God can be considered incoherent to a large extent in this regard.

¹⁹ Philosopher Kings, *Whether God is Omnipotent: Thomas Aquinas*.
http://www.philosopherkings.co.uk/Aquinas_WhetherGodIsOmnipotent.html *Quoted from Summa Theologica

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Omniscience

The last issue in regards to the incoherence of God which will be examined is God's omniscience. Omniscience is classically defined as the idea that God knows everything, however this raises certain issues, namely the problem of divine foreknowledge and free will, and how that relates to the nature of God's existence (being temporal or atemporal). And these problems, as I will show, successfully highlight the incoherence of God's omniscience.

God's omniscience suggests that God has divine foreknowledge, that is, God knows everything that will happen. The implication of this however, is that humans do not have free will. There are of course those who would reject that humans have free will, for example determinists such as G.E Moore, however the free will defence put forward by theists, as highlighted previously, establishes both the existence and importance of free will within humans. Moreover, Christian doctrine teaches that God granted humans free will -

"Unique among all of God's creation is man, given the ability to freely choose how he will behave and thus endowed with the greatest responsibility". Gen. 1:26-31²⁰

And so on the assumption that free will does in fact exist, the problem as stated arises. If God is truly omniscient, then how can our actions as humans be of our own volition, if they are already supposedly predetermined, for example, if a person tomorrow decided to drink orange juice in the morning instead of coffee, then surely God has always known that that person will choose to drink orange juice over any other drink at that moment in time. The implication of this being that the person therefore did not have any real choice, as God being a perfect being, it is impossible for God to hold false beliefs - there is no possible way to change the outcome of the choice if God already knows what it is. I think this is accurate, as for an action to be free a person has to have the ability to either do it or refrain from doing it,

²⁰The Bible, <https://biblehub.com/>

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and therefore the Free Will Paradox poses a significant problem for the coherence of God as omniscience is seemingly incompatible with human free will.

One attempt to reconcile this issue however comes from Boethius, writing in the 5th Century, he argues that God does not perceive time, or exist within time in the same way that Humans do, rather God witnesses the universe in a single glance, a divine gaze in an eternal now²¹. Consequently, God does not witness events successively but simultaneously, suggesting that it is not the case that God is predetermining events and having divine foreknowledge, as God is not seeing the events before they happen, at least as God perceives it. However, although Boethius somewhat gets around the free will paradox, as this would mean that omniscience and free will are compatible, the argument hinges on whether or not God is timeless, and this presents significant issues for the coherence of God. For instance, the idea that God is outside of time, whilst appearing plausible, implies that God is essentially in a state of 'passive knowing'²², simply an observer to the world, which would ultimately make him incapable of intervening with the world. This obviously would be contradictory to God's omnipotence, and contradictory to the idea of divine intervention as highlighted in the Bible.

I think therefore that ultimately, Boethius' argument, instead of successfully solving the issue of divine foreknowledge and free will, only allows for new lines of criticism to be made in regards to the coherence of God, and therefore the coherence of God can still be called into question to a large extent.

It is also important to recognise that whilst classical conceptions of God generally perceive God as timeless (such as Aquinas and Boethius), modern day theologians and philosophers of religion, such as Swinburne for example, generally tend to argue that God is not timeless, but

²¹Kimel, A (2023) *Aquinas: Divine Omniscience, Future Contingents, Free Will Theodicy*.
<https://akimel.wordpress.com/2023/10/12/aquinas-divine-omniscience-future-contingents-free-will-theodicy/>

²²Ibid

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rather temporal and everlasting²³. Which would mean that God would experience time successively, existing in the present rather than seeing future past and present outside of time. Those who argue for this conception of God also suggest that God does not have divine foreknowledge, clarifying that God's omniscience does not mean the ability to know everything, but the ability to know everything which is logically possible. And subsequently, As swinburne purports, omniscience does not include foreknowledge of future free actions, as it is illogical to know a future free action or rather future contingents²⁴.

I think to a certain extent it is valid to assume that God's omniscience extends only to what it is logical to know, as God, being a perfect being, is unable to hold false beliefs, however it is questionable whether or not this extends to future free actions. This is because, whilst many philosophers and theists hold that the future is something that cannot be known, for example Geach, who argues that apart from trends and tendencies, it is impossible to know the future²⁵, I do not think that it is necessarily or inherently illogical for an omniscient being to know a future free action. Surely the resultant effect of God being unable to know the future would be that he is not omniscient? This is because future free actions are extremely important and often have wider impact than the inherent choice of action, and so by essentially a significant part of the future is unknown to God and therefore potentially God is unable to properly act, or intervene, or has the potential to make a mistake, which would be in contradiction of his perfection and omniscience. In my opinion it is not enough to simply say that God can predict future contingents, as this is not omniscience.

Swinburne would hold that God is still an omniscient being, but that God limited God's own omniscience by giving humans free will, and that this doesn't mean he is not omniscient, and to a large extent God can still predict very precisely future events²⁶. However this is not a very persuasive argument, as it is ultimately using the bible to argue that God is both

²³Robinson, M. (2000) *Why Divine Foreknowledge?*. Religious Studies, Vol. 36 (No.3) pp. 251-275.

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2010, 2021) *Omniscience* <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/omniscience/#ForeHumaFreeAct>

²⁶ Ibid

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omniscient and also not omniscient - if anything it only further showcases the absurdity and impossibility of God's omniscience.

The idea that God cannot know the future also raises further concern surrounding the immutability of God. Considered as another of God's divine attributes, immutability is the state or condition of being unchangeable²⁷ - as the Bible states

"For I the Lord do not Change"- Malachi 3:6²⁸.

And this poses a problem for the everlasting and temporal conception of God, as if God does not know future free actions of Humans, when they occur it is reasonable to assume that God is learning something new, or rather changing the state of his knowledge. I think this can also extend to truths which are in relation to time, such as it is Monday, and therefore questions, regardless of the free will paradox, whether the concept of omniscience is in fact possible or a coherent concept, if God is temporal and everlasting.

Overall, I think that the theist response to the Free Will Paradox,, fails to provide a cogent explanation that successfully showcases the compatibility of free will and omniscience. Instead these responses only further highlight not only the incoherence of omniscience in regards to free will, but also the problematic nature of omniscience in relation to God's existence. It is clear therefore that the God of classical theism is incoherent to a significantly large extent.

²⁷ <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/immutability>

²⁸ The Bible, <https://biblehub.com/malachi/3-6.htm>

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Conclusion

In conclusion, it is transparent that if God does in fact exist, he would not resemble the God of classical theism to any substantial extent as it has been made clear that to a significantly large extent, the God of classical theism is incoherent. This is because the arguments as described successfully establish the fundamental incoherence of omnipotence; as if the concept of God were to be coherent, then God should be willing and able to prevent evil and suffering. Furthermore, both omnipotence and omniscience are shown to be inherently illogical attributes for God to possess, as undoubtedly there are things God is unable to do, and free will and omniscience are shown to be incompatible. I accept that there can be debate as to the definitions of God's attributes, however only to an extent, and the solutions put forth to counter both problems fail to validate God's coherence, as ultimately it is explicit that the concept of the God of classical theism could only be possible if, as asserted, one or more of God's attributes were given up. Therefore, as stated, the God of classical theism is incoherent.

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