

## Candidate 4

*To what extent is the concept of God incoherent?*

The concept of God varies among different religions; however, many religions conceive that God is omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent. Omnipotence means that God is all-powerful; omniscience means that God is all-knowing, and omnibenevolence means God is all-loving. The debate as to whether or not God is coherent has been ongoing for centuries, and it is an important issue to explore as many religions have differing viewpoints and interpretations of the God of Classical Theism. In this essay I will discuss the various concepts of God – omnipotence, omniscience and omnibenevolence – and exploring the extent to which they are incoherent. In order to explore this issue in detail, I will be exploring different sources with detailed arguments for the coherence or incoherence of God, namely Irenaeus, Aquinas, Mill, Mackie and Vardy. Moreover, I will be discussing the Biblical perspectives on the concepts of God. Furthermore, I aim to outline various counter-arguments to the named sources, to further develop the arguments of coherence towards the concepts of God. It will be established that some of these concepts have areas of coherence, and it is evident as to why they are coherent. However, some are incoherent and the reasons why they are incoherent will be explored. Overall, it will be argued that most concepts of God are incoherent.

The first concept of God which will be discussed is the concept of omnipotence. The concept of omnipotence means that God is all-powerful, and He can create anything and do anything. Nothing is beyond God's power and wisdom. From as early as Genesis 1, the Bible states examples of God being omnipotent. Genesis 1 states:

*"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth...And God said 'Let there be light', and there was light..."<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Bible Gateway (2017) Genesis 1 <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=genesis+1&version=NIV>

*To what extent is the concept of God incoherent?*

This suggests that God was evidently extremely powerful if He was able to create the universe in six days, with the seventh day to rest. Only the most powerful of entities have the capability to create such a thing like the universe and everything in it. This is coherent with the definition of omnipotence because it makes more sense to create the universe in smaller stages rather than all at once like other theories such as the Big Bang, and further emphasises His all-powerfulness. It is evident that the Bible would make God sound perfect and above and beyond every other entity in the universe. However, this is also incoherent because if God was truly omnipotent, He would be capable of creating the universe in one go. This implies that He is in fact not as powerful as He may seem, and therefore, the concept of omnipotence is incoherent. However, we must take into consideration that the Bible is written through a belief system of omnipotence, so therefore the concept of omnipotence would have a strong focus throughout it, as God needs to be portrayed as being great and almighty.

Genesis 1:26 describes how God managed to create mankind on the sixth day of creating the universe:

*"And God said 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.'"<sup>2</sup>*

This further emphasises God's almighty power, as He is the only being who, not only can create human life, but can do it in a day or so. This is incoherent because if God created human beings, why did He create us with the ability to sin? Surely if He was all powerful, He would ensure that his creations were perfect and like a 'mirror image' of Him. This is

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<sup>2</sup> Bible Gateway – Genesis 1:26

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=genesis+1%3B26&version=NIV>

*To what extent is the concept of God incoherent?*

often referred to as 'imago dei', which means that humans are in the image of God in their "moral, spiritual and intellectual" nature.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, this is incoherent because most of humanity is immoral, which shows that we either weren't made in God's image, or God is imperfect. However, if His creations are imperfect but created in 'God's image', does that make God imperfect? Perhaps this means that God has the ability to sin, and is in fact not as perfect as initially thought. If God is all-powerful, then it would make sense for Him to be able to sin. St Thomas Aquinas in 'Summa Theologica' said that God cannot sin because He is omnipotent.<sup>4</sup> This means that sin is falling short from perfection and since God is 'perfect' and almighty, He could never dream of sinning or doing something that is 'ungodly' or immoral. Aquinas also argues that God cannot be omnipotent as He is "immovable", which suggests that He cannot be changed and His attributes are set in stone. Aquinas' overall opinion on whether or not God is omnipotent is, as stated in 'Summa Theologica':

*"All confess that God is omnipotent; but it seems difficult to explain in what His omnipotence precisely consists of."<sup>5</sup>*

This implies that Aquinas believes that God is all-powerful, however it is difficult to fully understand the extent to which His power stretches and in what ways He is omnipotent. Therefore, Aquinas argues that the concept of omnipotence is coherent to an extent, but as it is uncertain how much power God has, then it can be established that it could also be incoherent.

In 'The Puzzle of God', Vardy highlights two main definitions of omnipotence:

1. God can do absolutely anything, including the logically impossible.

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<sup>3</sup> [www.pbs.org https://www.pbs.org/faithandreason/theogloss/imago-body.html](https://www.pbs.org/faithandreason/theogloss/imago-body.html)

<sup>4</sup> St Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologica* Ia.25.3

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid* I, Q.25, Art.3

To what extent is the concept of God incoherent?

2. God can do anything that is logically possible.<sup>6</sup>

In relation to the first definition, Descartes in 'Meditations' argued that,

*"...the real nature of God makes true such propositions as that God is omniscient, all-powerful, eternal, and so on...the nature of God is unique in guaranteeing the existence of something that has that nature."<sup>7</sup>*<sup>8</sup>

This suggests that if God had to remain within nature and the laws of logic, this would be a contradiction on God's absolute power and would limit his ability. While God created the world and its laws of logic, He was probably also capable of creating multiple universes within various laws of logic.<sup>9</sup> Descartes claims that as God is defined as being omniscient, all-powerful and eternal, then therefore God is these things. This suggests that God's power goes beyond any laws, and his power is unthinkable and unimaginable to us, as we cannot compare his power to anything we know or have experienced. This is incoherent because God has the power to erase evil and suffering, and there is evil and suffering in the universe, so either He can erase evil and just chooses not to or He is unable. If He is unable then God cannot be omnipotent, and therefore this concept is incoherent.

One major criticism of the concept of omnipotence is the Paradox of Omnipotence. It was put forward by J.L Mackie, and the most common telling of it presents a theist with the question "*can God create a rock so heavy he cannot lift it?*"<sup>10</sup> This suggests that if God exists, He would either be capable or incapable of performing the tasks mentioned above.

The paradox states that:

1. God either can or cannot create a rock that is so heavy that he cannot lift it.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Vardy *Puzzle of God* (Harper Collins, 1999) p.159

<sup>7</sup> Rene Descartes *Meditations* (1644) 7.65-6

<sup>8</sup> Tom Sorell *Descartes: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2000) p.70

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Philosophy of Religion <http://www.philosophyofreligion.info/arguments-for-atheism/problems-with-divine-omnipotence/dissolving-the-paradox-of-omnipotence/>

*To what extent is the concept of God incoherent?*

2. If God can create a rock that is so heavy that he cannot lift it, then God is not omnipotent.
3. If God cannot create a rock that is so heavy that he cannot lift it, then God is not omnipotent.
4. Therefore...God is not omnipotent.
5. If God exists then he is omnipotent.
6. Therefore, God does not exist.<sup>11</sup>

This suggests that if God was truly all powerful and able to do anything out with the realms of the universe, He would showcase his omnipotence, but because He doesn't, He mustn't exist. This can arguably be coherent because even if God can create a rock so heavy He cannot lift it, He still had the ability to create it in the first place. What being can create something like this? On the other hand, this is also incoherent because if God's power was infinite and mighty then He should be able to lift any kind of rock, regardless of its weight. Therefore, the concept of omnipotence is incoherent. One criticism of the Paradox of Omnipotence is that the existence of a rock so heavy is known as a logically impossible state of affairs.<sup>12</sup> This means that an omnipotent being is one who can bring about any logically possible state of affairs, but if He cannot lift the heavy rock He created, therefore He doesn't count as being omnipotent.

The second definition from Vardy's 'Puzzle of God' is that God can do everything that is logically possible.<sup>13</sup> This means that God is able to do things that are within His morality and all-loving nature, and would emphasise his goodness. An example of this is that it is extremely possible that a six-year-old can swim, but if God is out-with time and space,

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

To what extent is the concept of God incoherent?

swimming is most likely impossible for God. Therefore, if omnipotence is defined as *“the power to do everything logically possible”*, then this definition is flawed as God cannot sin or commit evil. John Jr. MacArthur, in his book ‘God: Coming Face to Face with His Majesty’ says that,

*“although such power might seem frightful, remember that God is good. He can do anything according to His infinite ability, but will only do those things that are consistent within Himself.”*<sup>14</sup>

This means that God is technically able to do everything, but He doesn’t lie or commit sin as it is against His nature and is contradictory to Him. This is incoherent because by leaving the evil and suffering to happen in the universe, God is arguably committing a sin of omission as He has acknowledged the problem but has chosen to do nothing about it.

Overall, the concept of omnipotence is fundamentally incoherent because the world is full of evil and suffering. If God was truly omnipotent, He would have the power to erase this and make the world perfect like He intended. However, the world lacks perfection, so therefore the concept of omnipotence is incoherent. In addition, if God was divinely omnipotent, I would argue that He would consistently showcase His endless power to us, but because He doesn’t, He mustn’t be omnipotent.

The second concept of God which will be discussed is the concept of omniscience. The concept of omniscience means that God is all-knowing, He is always present and His knowledge is unlimited. God is timeless and knows everything – past, present and future.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> John Jr. MacArthur ‘God: Coming Face to Face with His Majesty’ (1993, Victor Books) p.77

<sup>15</sup> Peter Vardy *Puzzle of God* (HarperCollins 1999) p.159

*To what extent is the concept of God incoherent?*

Because He is outwith time, all of His knowledge occurs in His eternal presence. God has no future; God has no past.<sup>16</sup> Nash argues in 'The Concept of God' that,

*"Everything that belongs to the human past and everything that will happen in the human future is, on this view of God, eternally present to God's consciousness."<sup>17</sup>*

This suggests that God technically doesn't have foreknowledge, even though we understand it in this way, He supposedly knows everything that is due to happen to us in the future. This is coherent because it supports a concept of freewill, meaning that humans can make their own decisions and have their own freedom to do what they want, even if it's not necessarily the right decision. On the contrary, this is also incoherent because if we truly had freewill, then how can God know what decisions we are going to make or what's going to happen in our future? God would surely have foreknowledge if He was divinely omniscient. God's omniscience is described in Psalms 147:4-5:

*"He determines the number of stars and calls them each by name. Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit."<sup>18</sup>*

This suggests that nothing is outwith the realms of God's knowledge, and His power and strength is unimaginable to us. This is coherent because only a being so powerful and knowledgeable would be able to have this gift, and the only being capable, by definition, is God. In addition, Genesis 3 depicts God's omniscience through the story of the Fall:

*"...The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die."<sup>19</sup>*

<sup>16</sup> Ronald H. Nash *The Concept of God: An Explanation of Contemporary Difficulties with the Attributes of God* (Zondervan, 1983) p.52

<sup>17</sup> Ibid p.52

<sup>18</sup> Bible Gateway *Psalm 147:4-5* <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=psalm+147%3A4-5&version=NIV>

<sup>19</sup> Bible Gateway: Genesis 3 <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=genesis+3&version=NIV>

*To what extent is the concept of God incoherent?*

This suggests that God commanded Adam and Eve to not eat the fruit, and warned them of the consequences of their actions, but they still chose to sin. This is incoherent because if God was omniscient, He would have foreknowledge of what Adam and Eve were about to do and could have put a stop to it. He may have been aware of the possibility of sin since He gave Adam and Eve free choice. However, if He could see that we were about to disobey Him and if He had chosen to put a stop to it, can we really call it freewill? This leads into one of the criticisms of God being divinely omniscient – the problem of reconciling freedom and foreknowledge.

While Christian theists argue for the existence of God being coherent, and God being omniscient, there are a number of criticisms and objections towards this claim. One problem with the concept of divine omniscience is reconciling freedom and foreknowledge.<sup>20</sup> If God truly knows all of our future decisions or actions, then our future is decided for us and is already in place. However, if the future is in place, then there would seemingly be nothing we can do to change it. A human being's ability to make their own decisions is what constitutes freewill, and thus divine foreknowledge defeats this concept of freewill. This makes the concept of omniscience incoherent because human beings cannot have complete control of actions if God has already pre-determined them. Furthermore, there is no evidence to prove or disprove God being able to determine our future decisions, which highlights the inconsistency of the concept of omniscience, and therefore it is incoherent.

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<sup>20</sup> Philosophyofreligion.info <http://www.philosophyofreligion.info/arguments-for-atheism/problems-with-divine-omniscience/>

To what extent is the concept of God incoherent?

On the other hand, Irenaeus' Theodicy aims to counteract the problem of divine foreknowledge. The theodicy states that God's main aim in creating human beings was to make them flawless, and in His likeness. According to 'The Study of Philosophy', the theodicy also claims that God's work is a "*work in progress*", and human beings are created "*in God's image*".<sup>21</sup> However, genuine human perfection cannot be created, but has to develop through making decisions and experiencing consequences. Furthermore, since God created us with freewill, He had to have given us the potential to disobey Him. Therefore, there would be no such potential if there was never any possibility of evil. If humans were created perfectly, and if God maintained his 'perfect' world, then free will would not exist. The natural order of the universe had to have been designed with the possibility of causing harm, and humans had to have been imperfect with God standing back from His creations. This means that humans must have used their freedom to disobey God and cause suffering and evil. God cannot contradict our freewill by eradicating evil and suffering, but eventually, it is thought that evil and suffering will be overcome and everyone will develop into God's likeness, just like how He envisioned at the beginning. Therefore, temporary evil and suffering is justified.<sup>22</sup> This suggests that God is partly to blame for the evil and suffering in the world, and He had full knowledge of the evil and suffering but still chose to let it happen. This makes the concept of God being omniscient incoherent because God could just have easily created the universe and its creations perfectly to begin with.

Vardy claims there are two ways of presenting God's knowledge. Either if God knows Y, then necessarily Y will happen (if Y is an event in the world), or if Y happens, then

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<sup>21</sup> S. Morris Engel, A. Soldan, K. Durand *The Study of Philosophy* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2007) p.214

<sup>22</sup> A. Jordan, N. Lockyer and E. Tate *Philosophy of Religion for A-Level* (Nelson Thornes, 1999) p.97/98

*To what extent is the concept of God incoherent?*

necessarily God knows Y.<sup>23</sup> This means that in regards to the first way, event Y happens due to God's knowledge, and in the second way, event Y must happen in order for God to know about it. The first way leads into predestination, while the second one doesn't. In the first way, events happen in the world because God knows they will happen, which suggests that human beings, in actual fact, cannot be 'free'. This goes against the idea of humans having freewill, as it implies that we are not truly free and God inevitably has the final decision in everything we do. St Thomas Aquinas argues that God is not a being with attributes, all God's attributes are identical to each other. God's wisdom, love, justice, knowledge etc. are all identical in God. This suggests that God does not depend on the universe for anything, and He doesn't depend on His knowledge of His creations.<sup>24</sup> This further implies a view of determinism, which is the view that every action or event, including human decisions and interactions, is inevitable and a "*necessary consequence*."<sup>25</sup>

One problem with the concept of God being omniscient is the problem of experiential knowledge.<sup>26</sup> This is knowledge gained by experience, and is an *a posteriori* argument. For example, knowledge of what it is like to sin can only be gained by committing sin. Therefore, some of these experiences are such that they cannot be obtained by God. This makes the concept of God being omniscient incoherent because of the idea that certain knowledge can only be gained through experience, and because God would never sin, He would therefore never know about sinning. This links back to the concept of omnipotence, and the example of God being unable to swim since He is out with time and space. If God would never know about sinning, then He mustn't be neither omnipotent nor omniscient.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid (Puzzle of God) p.159

<sup>24</sup> Ibid p.160

<sup>25</sup> The Information Philosopher <http://www.informationphilosopher.com/freedom/determinism.html>

<sup>26</sup> Simplyphilosophy.org <https://simplyphilosophy.org/study/experiential-knowledge/>

To what extent is the concept of God incoherent?

Overall, the concept of God being omniscient is totally incoherent because it is inconsistent and there are some things in the universe that cannot be automatically understood – not even God – as they require commitment and interaction in order to gain that understanding. Some things in the universe are subjective in their understanding, such as sinning, so therefore not even God would be able to understand. However, if God is divinely omniscient, then it can be argued that He would be able to understand anything, regardless of the subjectivity of it.

The final concept of God which will be discussed is the concept of omnibenevolence. The concept of omnibenevolence means that God is all-loving; God has perfect and unlimited goodness.<sup>27</sup> According to David Basinger, the definition of an omnibenevolent God must *“create the best possible world which He can create.”*<sup>28</sup> This suggests that if He was truly all-loving, He would strive to create a perfect world for His creatures, and would want for them to live in happiness and peace. However, in the Bible, there are examples of God destroying things if people disobey God or rebel against Him, which would suggest that God is not all-loving. One example of God destroying things is in Jeremiah 45:4 –

*“Thus says the Lord, “Behold, what I have built I am about to tear down, and what I have planted I am about to uproot, that is, the whole land.”*<sup>29</sup>

This is incoherent because this doesn't appear to be an act of love, and if God was truly all-loving, He wouldn't be purposely destroying things as He would want to keep His creations perfect. However, many Christians argue that in order for God to be fully omnibenevolent, it

<sup>27</sup> Oxford Dictionary <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/omnibenevolence>

<sup>28</sup> David Basinger *In What Sense Must God be Omnibenevolent?* From *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* (1983 Martinus Nijhoff Publishers) p.1

<sup>29</sup> Bible Gateway – Jeremiah 45:4

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=jeremiah+45%3A4&version=NIV>

*To what extent is the concept of God incoherent?*

is in His nature to punish people. According to Christianity, God's love doesn't change; it's just our responses that change depending on how we approach God.<sup>30</sup> This suggests that God will always love His creations infinitely, and if those who worship God perhaps turn away from Him, He will still love them regardless. This is coherent because perhaps God has to show us some 'tough love' in order for us to understand the extent of our bad behaviour. Perhaps it is necessary for God to punish, but God does it out of love and thoughtfulness, not to be harsh.

However, the concept of omnibenevolence often contrasts definitions of omniscience and omnipotence. This means that if God was truly omnipotent, then He couldn't be omnibenevolent as He allows suffering to continue. Furthermore, if God was omniscient and omnipotent, He couldn't be omnibenevolent as suffering hasn't been ended. The Inconsistent Triad, derived by J.L Mackie emphasises this further. He claims that there are:

*"three statements that cannot logically all be true at the same time without leading to a contradiction."*

The Inconsistent Triad states that:

1. God is all good.
2. God is all powerful.
3. Evil exists.<sup>31</sup>

This makes the concept of omnibenevolence incoherent because if God is willing to get rid of evil, and God is able to get rid of evil then surely there should be no evil. However, since evil exists then God cannot be omnibenevolent and omnipotent and therefore doesn't

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid <https://revisionworld.com/a2-level-level-revision/religious-studies/philosophy-religion/attributes-god/omnibenevolence>

<sup>31</sup> Problem of Evil (1 of 4) An Introduction | by MrMcMillanREvis  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qilO5AJjkw&t=85s>

*To what extent is the concept of God incoherent?*

exist.<sup>32</sup> This means that religious believers would have to give up this traditional belief in God, and most believers don't want to have to do this, and so would argue that the Inconsistent Triad is false and the concept of God is coherent. On the contrary to this, Mackie stated that,

*"God is not in our sense benevolent or sympathetic: he is not concerned to minimise evil, but only to promote good; and this might be a disturbing conclusion for some theists."<sup>33</sup>*

This suggests that it is not God's intention to abolish evil, but instead to promote benevolence through His creations. This means that God may not be omnibenevolent in the sense that He won't erase evil, but we can consider Him to be benevolent in other ways, such as encouraging goodness. This is incoherent because God surely would want to erase all forms of evil if His creations were being caused harm or discomfort, and if He was omniscient then He would know that His creations were suffering.

St Thomas Aquinas argued that we cannot judge the seemingly unjust world because we don't know God's 'master plan'. There may be a better outcome for events that seem to cause suffering, and that God understands our suffering and can relate to us.<sup>34</sup> This means that God's work may not be complete yet; there may be more in store for the universe and we just haven't discovered it yet. This is incoherent because if God really did understand our suffering, He would make a conscious effort to erase it. Therefore, God cannot be omnibenevolent because if He loved His creations He would want the world they live in to be perfect, with no evil or suffering. John Stuart Mill openly criticised the concept of an omnibenevolent God, with reference to the Design Argument, arguing that God cannot be

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid

<sup>33</sup> J. L. Mackie *Evil and Omnipotence in Mind* (1955) p.200-212

<sup>34</sup> Ibid

*To what extent is the concept of God incoherent?*

loving if He created a world where animals must kill each other to survive.<sup>35</sup> This is incoherent because if God was so perfect, He would have surely created an equally perfect world. If the idea that God is truly omnibenevolent was true, God would have created a world where all his creations are loving to one another, rather than fighting as predators and prey.

Overall, the concept of God being omnibenevolent is incoherent because God cannot be omnibenevolent if there are examples of things in the universe that are not perfect, as it shows that God doesn't love his creations enough to fix the imperfections and make the universe an all-loving place.

In conclusion, I would argue that the concept of God is fundamentally incoherent. God cannot be omnipotent if there is evil and suffering in the world, He clearly doesn't have the power to erase, or He is not omnibenevolent in that He doesn't want to fix it. God also cannot be completely omniscient if He created human beings with the ability to sin and have freewill. If He was truly omniscient, He would know when humans were going to sin and could potentially put a stop to it. In addition, if God was truly omnibenevolent, He would ensure that His creations were nothing less than perfection. However, the universe is far from perfect. Therefore, I would argue that the main concepts of God - omnipotence, omniscience and omnibenevolence are incoherent.

**Word count – 4259**

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<sup>35</sup> Revision World <https://revisionworld.com/a2-level-level-revision/religious-studies/philosophy-religion/attributes-god/omnibenevolence>

To what extent is the concept of God incoherent? L

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*To what extent is the concept of God incoherent?*

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