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Omnipotence
Dean Zimmerman, Negative Nelly, and the Divine Delegates

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Abstract: Should an omnipotent being be able to limit its own power? Along with Swinburne, Dean Zimmerman answers in the affirmative. My intuitions push in the opposite direction. The ability to limit one's own power constitutes a vulnerability. In this paper, I argue that a great deal hangs on this issue. If God cannot revoke His own omnipotence, then only a necessarily existent being can ever create anything truly ex nihilo. Moreover, if God cannot revoke His own omnipotence, then it turns out that theism entails idealism. No wonder that Zimmerman resists. I prefer to take the plunge and endorse idealism!

Keywords: Omnipotence, Idealism, Zimmerman, Swinburne

The title of this paper sounds like the name of an obscure album of psychedelic rock. That's my tribute to Dean Zimmerman's eclectic musical tastes. Dean is one of the reasons I decided to throw myself so fully into the philosophy of religion. His continued encouragement, and behind-the-scenes support has been indispensable to my career. Beyond my personal gratitude, the papers in this special issue of *TheoLogica* go some way to demonstrating the importance and creativity of his work. But philosophy to one side for a moment, I'm sure we'd all love to hear him play the keys alongside Negative Nelly and the Divine Delegates.

In this paper, I focus on two pieces of Zimmerman's writings. The first (chronologically) is a chapter on omnipotence in a festschrift for Richard Swinburne (Zimmerman 2015). This is the chapter in which Zimmerman presents his thought experiment involving Negative Nelly. The second is a short, but very imaginative, contribution to an online symposium on my own book, *The Principles of Judaism* (Zimmerman 2022). In his contribution to that symposium, Zimmerman develops a series of thought experiments giving rise to what I call his Divine Delegates.

Dean's Divine Delegates

In *The Principles of Judaism* (Lebens 2020), developing work co-authored with Tyron Goldschmidt (Goldschmidt & Lebens 2020), I presented an argument according to which God's omnipotence entails a form of idealism. A somewhat hasty sketch of that argument suffices for our purposes:

1. God is omnipotent.
2. If God is omnipotent, then all of the contingent features of any contingently existing object wholly depend upon God willing it to have those features.
3. If all of the contingent features of a contingently existing object wholly depend upon a mind willing it to have those features, then that object is an idea in that mind.

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4. All of the contingent features of any contingently existing object wholly depend upon God willing it to have those features. (From 1 and 2)
5. Every contingently existing object is an idea in the mind of God. (From 3 and 4)

There are plenty of reasons why a believer in God's omnipotence might want to deny the second premise of this argument. God, we imagine, doesn't will for bullets to kill innocent people, and yet innocent people get shot. Accordingly, you might think we should endorse a definition of omnipotence that doesn't demand the truth of this second premise.

And yet, the argument doesn't require a strong reading of God's willing. All it means for *x to will for y*, for the purposes of this argument, is that all things considered, *x* thinks it best to allow for *y* to transpire without exercising some sort of veto. Most definitions of omnipotence would concede that if God had seen fit to intervene and prevent the bullet from killing the innocent person, He could have done so, merely by willing it so. And thus, the fact that bullets sometimes kill innocent people is no reason for a believer in God's omnipotence to deny the second premise.

A believer in God's omnipotence might deny premise 2 if they're committed (as Zimmerman is) to a libertarian account of human freedom. Given a libertarian account of freedom, you might think, God *cannot* be responsible for our individual acts of decision making and willing—at least, not in the ways that premise 2 would suggest. If I have libertarian free will and I use it, at time *t*, to freely choose to ϕ, then, despite the fact that God could have killed me before *t*, and despite the fact that He can block all of the consequences that I may have intended would follow from my

decision, after *t*, the fact that I choose to ϕ at *t*, is *not* under God's control at *t*. In other words: our having libertarian freedom means that God's will isn't the cause of our choices. But, as Robert Koons (2002) points out, there's no reason to think that God cannot be the cause of our free actions. After all, wasn't Tolkien the cause of Frodo's free choices?

Admittedly, this response only works if, like me, you're willing to stratify reality into multiple levels of increasing (or decreasing) fundamentality. On this account, relative to the level of reality in which Frodo acts, it isn't true to say that Tolkien determines Frodo's choices—Frodo does. It is only relative to a *different* level of reality that we can say that Tolkien determines what Frodo does. Moreover, relative to that level of reality, it *isn't* true to say that Frodo is a free agent. Two agents cannot, relative to one level of reality, both be 100% causally responsible for the same action. Koons, by contrast, thinks that this rule—that two agents cannot both be 100% causally responsible for the same action—doesn't apply when one of those agents is God. But still, and even for Koons, God is only an exception to that rule because of the massive distinction between the level of reality upon which God stands, and the level of reality upon which other agents stand—a gap which mirrors the gap between Tolkien and Frodo.

Zimmerman, I think, would baulk at the idea that God's will could, in any sense, determine the content of our free choices. On this, we likely disagree. But even so, he doesn't focus his fire on premise 2. Instead, he puts pressure on premise 3. He does so via a series of thought experiments. First, he asks us to imagine that God gives "one angel the job of willing that, at the center of a certain room, there be some prime matter;[1] and another angel the job of willing that, if there's any matter at the center of that room, it takes on such-and-such properties (and no others)" (Zimmerman 2022, 2).

I call Zimmerman's angels, Divine Delegates. What's important to note is that neither delegate has a full idea of what, together, they're creating. The first delegate knows that she's willing prime matter into being, but she has no idea what form it will take. The second delegate knows that she's willing for any prime matter in the center of the room to take a certain form, should it exist. But she doesn't know whether there's any matter there to begin with. It seems clear that "the particle that

[1] Zimmerman recognises that it's something of a misconception to think about clumps of prime matter in a room, as if prime matters comes in identifiable portions. But that detail doesn't seem to undermine the point that Zimmerman wants to make by way of the thought experiment. As Zimmerman explains, "so long as the particles generated have more than one property, and the properties involved could be instantiated apart from one another, the story can be fleshed out in terms of two angels responsible for different properties."

results will not be an idea in either of *their* minds," despite the fact that all of "its properties are completely determined" by their two wills (*Ibid*.).

Next, Zimmerman asks us to imagine that one of the delegates takes a break. So, while one of them is off smoking a cigar, both the matter-generating and the property-imposing jobs get handed on to the one remaining delegate. "Still," Zimmerman plausibly asserts, "the temporary assumption of both jobs shouldn't make this particle a mere idea, whereas the earlier particles" or perhaps even the same particle a few minutes ago, "were not" (*Ibid*., 3).

If you don't like the division of labour between the Divine Delegates, perhaps because you don't think of substances as made out of prime-matter and form, the story can easily be retold. A bundle-theorist of substances, for example, can have one delegate declare, "Let such-and-such universals be instantiated at the center of the room (coinstantiated with whatever other universals are there)," and the other delegate can make a similar declaration about other universals coinstantiated at the center of the same room (*Ibid*., 3–4). Alternatively, their declaration could be about tropes, or whatever your metaphysics requires them to declare, so long as they share the labour, and neither one knows everything about what's going on (at least not until one of them takes a break).

Zimmerman calls his delegates "angels." I call them delegates. Why? Because I'm keenly aware of the fact that they're only receiving their power from God who delegates it to them. Zimmerman is aware that this might blunt the power of his thought experiment. He writes:

> Now, one could say that there's always *someone* whose mind contains a complete idea of every particle – namely, God. And since God gives the angels their powers, and holds them and everything else in existence, these stories cannot get off the ground; the fact that the angels don't have [full] ideas of the particles, at the first stage, [before one of them takes a break,] doesn't show that *nobody* does. (*Ibid*., 4)

But this doesn't deter Zimmerman in his rejection of premise 3. While one of the delegates is off smoking, the other delegate holds the entire particle in its mind and is responsible for willing all of its properties. At that moment, we're not inclined to say that the particle collapses into being an idea. The fact that the delegate herself, along with all of her properties, and all of her thoughts, is willed into being by God, doesn't undermine the fact that we have, in our hands, a counterexample to premise 3.

In my response to Zimmerman, in the course of the online symposium, I conceded that premise 3 had been shown to fail (Lebens, 2022). But I suggested a fix that

seemed to me well motivated and not at all *ad hoc*. Premise 3 suggests a sufficient condition for *x* being an idea in the mind of *y*. It states that coming under the control of some mind, for the possession of all of your properties, is sufficient for being an idea in that mind. Zimmerman's Divine Delegates help us to see that this isn't quite right. Being under the control of the mind of delegate 2, for the possession of all of your properties, is not sufficient for being an idea in the mind of delegate 2 when delegate 1 is taking her cigar break. But, I suggest, our failed sufficient condition becomes sufficient once we add two further clauses: that (1) no other mind has a similar power over *x*; and that (2) no other mind has a veto over the mind that has this power over *x*. So, the new premise 3 would read:

> 3*. If all of the contingent features of a contingently existing object, *x*, wholly depend upon a mind, *y*, willing it to have those features, and no other mind has a similar power over *x*, and no other mind has a veto over *y*'s power over *x*, then *x* is an idea in mind *y*.[2]

Why do I need both of these extra clauses? The first clause isn't a necessary condition for being an idea. As I said in my original response, "Ideas can be had by multiple minds. They can even be created, in a collaborative effort, by multiple minds, just as the Coen Brothers collectively created the screenplay for *Fargo*" (*Ibid*., 3). But I'm not interested in the *necessary* conditions for being an idea. I'm just interested in articulating one sufficient (even if unnecessary) condition for being an idea. All I have to do is to find that sufficient condition, and to show that it's met by any object created by an omnipotent God. So, the first added clause helps us not to be distracted by the (admittedly very real) possibility that single ideas can be had, and even produced, by many minds. Such things might exist, but they're a distraction for this monotheistic argument.

The second clause is motivated by the fact that so long as your will is subject to a veto, we have no *guarantee* that your mind has the sort of control over its objects that we would all intuitively (pre-theologically) take to be characteristic of the control that a mind has over its ideas. Again, this clause might not be necessary. There might exist ideas in minds that *are* subject to the veto of more powerful minds. But all I need is for premise 3*, with its two new clauses, to articulate a *sufficient* condition for being an idea in a mind, and it seems clearly to do that job. As I wrote:

[2] Premise 2 would have to be edited in analogous ways to preserve the validity of the argument.

> If something is dependent, at all times of its existence, for the possession of all of its properties, including its existence, upon the directly efficacious will of just one mind, *y*, and if no other mind has a veto over this power of *y*, then it remains difficult to believe that *x* is anything other than an idea in the mind of *y*. (*Ibid.*, 3–4)

God's omnipotence seems to put God in just this sort of relationship to all of His creations, and thus Goldsdchmidt's and my argument from omnipotence to idealism, with its newly fixed third premise, is valid. It doesn't matter how many delegates God may appoint. Since God retains a veto over all of their decisions, their power cannot really be compared to His. Their power is delegated. His power is in the driving seat. And since they, and all of their ideas, are subject to His complete control, they, like everything else that God creates, are ultimately *God's* ideas and nothing more.

I was quite happy with this response, until I received an e-mail from Dean about another matter entirely, but in which he briefly touched upon the symposium. He wrote, "Sam, is it your position that only a necessary being could create something *ex nihilo*? That seemed to be part of your reply. But I'm not seeing the connection between the two."

Dean was referring to a throw-away passage in my response that read as follows:

> [W]here do these two beings [i.e., the Divine Delegates] comes from? Who created them? Are they necessarily existent beings? I have good reason to believe that there's only one necessarily existent concrete being, not two. (*Ibid*., 3)

Although I later brushed these concerns aside, in order simply to engage with Zimmerman's thought experiments, and to amend my premise 3, Zimmerman was right, I think, to notice that this thought was actually playing a crucial role in my ultimate dismissal of his thought experiment. In order to see how, and to see whether my response stands up, we must take a detour through a discussion of omnipotence.

Negative Nelly

In his contribution to the Swinburne festschrift, Zimmerman seeks to defend and extend (in the face of new worries) the general approach that Swinburne (1993; 2009) takes towards defining "omnipotence." Swinburne embraces what Kenneth Pearce (2011) would call a "results-approach" to omnipotence, instead of an "action-approach'" which is to say that Swinburne seeks to define omnipotence in terms of

a range of *results* that an omnipotent being could bring about, rather than in terms of a range of actions that an omnipotent being could perform. A first stab at such a definition would look something like this:

(D) *x* is an omnipotent being $=_{df}$ for any state of affairs *S*, *x* can intentionally bring about S.

But most philosophers accept that the range of results, open to an omnipotent being to bring about, will have to be limited in some respect or other. For example, that a being can't bring it about that 2+2=5 is rarely seen as an impediment to her omnipotence. This might lead us to endorse:

(D1) *x* is an omnipotent being $=_{df}$ for any possible state of affairs *S*, *x* can intentionally bring about S.

But there are plausibly some possible states of affairs that couldn't possibly be brought about intentionally by any being. Zimmerman's example is "*a certain billiard ball's moving in a way that is not caused by anybody*" (2015, p. 95). Zimmerman also raises the concern that it's somewhat strange to talk about *anybody* bringing about *necessary* states of affairs. Theists don't tend to think that God intentionally brings it about that 2+2=4. Nobody needs to bring such things about. Accordingly, we can add another qualification and endorse:

(D2) *x* is an omnipotent being $=_{df}$ for any contingent state of affairs *S* that could possibly be intentionally brought about by someone, *x* can intentionally bring about *S*.

At the next stage of the analysis, Zimmerman follows Swinburne in adding a qualification designed to capture the fact that an omnipotent being can still be considered omnipotent even if it doesn't have the power to change the past.

Even if God exists outside of time, you might think that there's a sense in which things which are past *relative to our location on the timeline* are no longer subject to change. Especially if, like Swinburne and Zimmerman, you think that God exists in time with *us*, then you'll be all the more likely to think that the past is somehow beyond the reach even of an omnipotent God.

Goldschmidt and I would complain that, concerning the so-called accidental necessity of the past, there's been a certain lack of imagination in the history of western philosophy. We argue that, when our language is supplemented with

hyper-tenses, we really can make sense of God's changing the past (Lebens & Goldschmidt 2017). Accordingly, we would find no reason to limit our definition of omnipotence to respect the alleged fixity of the past. But I'll leave that discussion for elsewhere and follow Zimmerman and Swinburne for the purposes of exposition, which brings us to:

(D3) x is an omnipotent being $=_{df}$ for any contingent state of affairs S that could possibly be intentionally brought about by someone, and for any time t, if it is possible, given the actual history of the world up to and including t, that S obtain, then x can intentionally bring about S after t.

Next, Zimmerman follows Swinburne in adding what is perhaps the most innovative feature of Swinburne's account of omnipotence. According to Swinburne, and Zimmerman doesn't object, a truly omnipotent being needn't be omnipotent for all time. In fact, when faced with the so-called paradox of the stone (which asks whether God could create a stone too heavy for Him to lift), you might think that the logic of omnipotence dictates that, for fear of paradox, an omnipotent being better have the power, at one time, to render herself less than omnipotent at later times. In this way, God could create a stone of a certain weight at t_0, and by bringing about a future in which God is no longer omnipotent, God would have created a stone at t_0 that God cannot lift at t_1.

Personally, I have never been moved by the paradox of the stone. If omnipotence is already limited by the bounds of possibility, it seems obvious to me that a stone being too heavy for omnipotent beings to lift should be treated as an impossible state of affairs. Since we're talking about an impossible state of affairs, we're talking about something that falls beyond the domain of affairs that an omnipotent being has to be able to bring about. Even according to (D3), the omnipotent being can't create a stone too heavy to be lifted by that being while that being is *still* omnipotent. But then, if we've already reconciled ourselves to the fact that the very notion of such a stone is an impossibility, why feel any compulsion to fiddle with our definition of omnipotence? Why feel compelled to allow that omnipotent beings should be able to limit themselves, just so as to leave no stone unliftable?! I wonder, therefore, whether Swinburne and Zimmerman might be rather more motivated by the distinctly Christian idea that an omnipotent being should be able to choose to suffer, and even die, on the cross. Whatever their motivation, their definition of omnipotence becomes:

(D4) x is an omnipotent being at t $=_{df}$ for any contingent state of affairs S that could possibly be intentionally brought about by someone, if it is possible, given the actual history of the world up to and including t, that S obtain, then x can intentionally bring about S after t.

Later, we'll come back to this suggestion, that omnipotence can be a temporary state of affairs. But, for the meantime, we'll take it under advisement and move on with the dialectic.

The next qualification is motivated by a raft of problems. Some of these problems don't bother me. For example, Swinburne and Zimmerman worry that even an omnipotent God shouldn't have the power to make me freely decide to play football. According to them, if God made me decide to play football, then my decision couldn't have been free. As I've already mentioned, I don't feel the weight of this concern. I don't think there's a relevant difference here between Tolkien's ability to make Frodo feely decide to take the ring to Mordor, and God's ability to make me freely choose to play football. But, as I said, there are other worries that motivate the next amendment to our definition, and those other worries are sufficient on their own.

There are some things that God might be restricted from doing, but not because anything external to Him is holding Him back, but because His very nature, and indeed, His perfection, restricts Him from doing them. As Zimmerman puts the concern:

> Bringing about states of affairs that could only be caused by a morally imperfect being—for example, lying and promise-breaking—should not be within the power of an essentially morally perfect God; and yet they would be within the range of things that could be done by a less perfect being, who would therefore be able to do things God could not. Do we want to say that only an amoral being could be truly omnipotent? (Zimmerman 2015, 99)

As Zimmerman notes, if we were trying to define a notion of omnipotence for purely secular purposes, then we might be willing to accept that only an amoral being could be truly omnipotent. But, if we're interested in providing a plausible and coherent account of omnipotence that's also compatible with the key teachings of the religious traditions that believe in an omnipotent God, we would want to resist any such corollary. That provides motivation enough for me to get on board with the next amendment, which gives rise to:

(D5) x is an omnipotent being at t =df for any contingent state of affairs S that could possibly be intentionally brought about by someone, if it is possible, given the actual history of the world up to and including t, that S obtain, and possible that x intentionally bring about S, then x can intentionally bring about S after t.

Since lying and promise breaking aren't the sorts of activities that God could possibly bring about intentionally, God's inability to lie and break promises isn't going to undermine His omnipotence, according to (D5). But as Zimmerman quickly notes, a glaring problem with (D5) is that it would label any entity that can't bring about any states of affairs omnipotent. Why? Well, "if there is no S that x can intentionally bring about, then x satisfies (D5) trivially" (*Ibid*. 101). You and I are not rendered omnipotent by (D5). God is. These are good results. But so are the pebbles in my front yard. That can't be right. So, Zimmerman quickly refines the definition to give us:

(D6) x is an omnipotent being at t =df it is possible for x to intentionally bring about something; and for any contingent state of affairs S that could possibly be intentionally brought about by someone, if it is possible, given the actual history of the world up to and including t, that S obtain, and possible that x intentionally bring about S, then x can intentionally bring about S after t.

It's in response to analyses like (D6) that a famous new worry (with medieval precursors) emerges. McEar is the name of character created by Alvin Plantinga (1967, 168–173).[3] McEar is a strange breed of a creature, limited in its powers as a matter of necessity. There is, by necessity, only one action that McEar can possibly intentionally perform. He can intentionally scratch his left ear. Nothing else. Now, so long as McEar can scratch his left ear, and thereby perform every action among the actions that he is necessarily limited to perform, then McEar counts as omnipotent by (D6), even though he can only perform one measly and inconsequential task.

Zimmerman makes an important point about McEar:

> However silly the example might seem, there is a valid point behind it; for there is nothing silly about the idea that the powers of a particular kind of thing might be

[3] Although Plantinga coined the thought-experiment, the name, "McEar" is owed to Richard LaCroix (1977).

> limited in certain ways, and limited as a matter of necessity. Electrons have the power to attract protons and to repel other electrons. Would it be possible for a particular electron suddenly to gain the power to attract other electrons and repel protons? It is tempting to say: No, it is of the essence of an electron not to do such things. Something similar may well be true with respect to finite agents. Even if the wacky McEar is not a possible creature, there may nevertheless be essential limits to the powers of some beings—and, if so, why not to those of intelligent beings, like us? In that case, an essentially weak creature might always be at the height of its puny powers—able [intentionally] to do the full repertoire of things that such a being could possibly do—and thereby qualify as omnipotent [by the lights of (D6)]… even though the range of things it can do is very limited. (Zimmerman 2015, 103–104)

Swinburne's suggestion, to avoid the spectre of McEar, is to add to his definition of omnipotence, "a clause (loosely) to the effect that *P* is omnipotent only if he can bring about more logically contingent states than can any other logically possible person" (Swinburne 2009, 496). And thus, even though McEar "can bring about all that is logically possible for him to bring about, *viz.* that his left ear is scratched… other things can bring that about [too], and much else besides and so they have a greater claim to omnipotence than does McEar" (*Ibid.*).

Zimmerman (2015, 104–105) reconstructs Swinburne's response to McEar in two stages. "The first stage is to define what it is for a thing to be as powerful as it can be," which Zimmerman does by simplification of (D6), in order to yield:

> (D7) x is as powerful as x can be at t $=_{df}$ for any contingent state of affairs S that could possibly be intentionally brought about by someone, if it is possible, given the actual history of the world up to and including t, that S obtain, and possible that x intentionally bring about S, then x could intentionally bring about S after t.

This definition of "x being as powerful as x can be" paves the way for Zimmerman's reconstruction of Swinburne's McEar-proof definition of omnipotence:

> (D8) x is omnipotent at t $=_{df}$ it is possible for x to intentionally bring about something; x is as powerful as x can be at t; and, for any possible y, if y were to exist at t and be as powerful as y can be at t, the range of things x could intentionally bring about after t is greater than the range of things that y could intentionally bring about after t.

A nice feature of this definition of omnipotence is that it could satisfy even a secular account of the notion, unencumbered by the sensibilities of any particular religious tradition. It gives you something like the most powerful possible being, and if it turns out that that being happens also to be so good that it can't lie, then so be it; so long as there's nothing with a greater range of results that it could intentionally bring about, that being will be omnipotent.

So far, Zimmerman has merely been reconstructing Swinburne's analysis of omnipotence. It's at this point that Zimmerman charts new territory. He doesn't reject Swinburne's analysis, but he does raise a concern that's worrying enough to motivate an alternative analysis.

(D8) forces us to compare the ranges of results that multiple beings can bring about, to find the being with the largest range. And we're not just comparing the ranges of actual beings, but of all *possible* beings. If that's the case, then largeness here can't be a simple matter of cardinality, because the ranges in question will be infinite. We're talking about comparing the range of states of affairs that even god-like powers can bring about. Zimmerman explains:

> A general, god-like power to move things, or to create things, will include infinitely many distinct states of affairs that can be brought about by an agent with the power. There are, after all, infinitely many distinct speeds that things could be given and infinitely many distinct possible creatures that could be created. Knowledge of these different speeds and creatures would be required of any decent candidate for an omnipotent being [i.e., any being whose powers we would have to compare to arrive at an attribution of omnipotence]. Without infinitely discriminative cognitive abilities, even a very powerful being would not be able to intentionally bring about the precise states of affairs [that would have to fall within the relevant range of any being close to what] omnipotence would seem to require. (*Ibid*., 106–107)

Our usual mathematical representations of three-dimensional spatial regions, "or of the three-dimensional spacelike slices of a relativistic manifold—make use of non-denumerably infinite sets of points, equal in size to the set of real numbers" (*Ibid*., 107). Any candidate for being an omnipotent being, "ought to be able to select the precise locations of particles in these spaces, or the precise values of fields at points. Such powers," Zimmerman rightly concludes, "will require non-denumerable infinities of options from which to choose, infinities at least as large as the real numbers" (*Ibid*.).

Accordingly, we've established that the range of states of affairs within the power of any potentially omnipotent being—and thus of many of the beings that (D8) calls us to compare—is (at least) the size of the set of the real numbers. It follows,

therefore, that between all of the potential candidates for omnipotence, the differences between so-called greater and so-called lesser ranges cannot be differences in the *number* of states of affairs; since the ranges of all of the best candidates are equally numerous. Zimmerman concludes that, in order to make sense of greater and lesser, in this context, "Swinburne must appeal to a *measure* over these sets of states of affairs, one that allows precise comparison of equally numerous sets, neither of which is a subset of the other" (*Ibid.*, 108).

It won't be particularly difficult for the measure theorist to define a function from infinitely large sets of states of affairs to numbers that satisfy the mathematical criteria for being a measure – ordering them from lesser to greater. But Zimmerman's worry is this:

> [W]hat Swinburne needs is a natural way of comparing their sizes—a nonarbitrary measure, something based upon the relative importance of being able to bring about this or that state of affairs. Is it reasonable to hope for objective facts about such matters? Though the problems may be surmountable, there is reason to worry. (*Ibid.)*

These aren't the only concerns that Zimmerman raises for (D8), but they are sufficient for us to see why we might want an alternative analysis of omnipotence; an analysis that can bypass the concerns I've already raised. Zimmerman proposes:

> (D9) x is omnipotent at t $=_{df}$ it is possible for x to intentionally bring about something; x is as powerful as x can be at t; and, for any possible y, z, …, if y, z, …, can intentionally bring things about, and if they were to exist at t and be as powerful as they could be at t, the range of things x could intentionally bring about after t would include preventing y, z, …, from intentionally bringing anything about after t.

This definition bypasses any detour through measure theory. This definition picks out a being that's as powerful as it can be, and which can also thwart the will of any other. (D9) is in the spirit of Swinburne because it searches for the most powerful of all possible beings, but it avoids the messy questions about measure theory that Swinburne faces.

But then comes Negative Nelly. Nelly is supposed to threaten (D9) in much the way that McEar was supposed to threaten (D6). Zimmerman defines Negative Nelly as a being that is essentially weak: "necessarily lacking all but the power to thwart the wills of others by preventing them from being able to exercise their powers" (*Ibid*., 113). The problem is this: "When Negative Nelly is at full strength," that is to

say—when she's as powerful as a Negative Nelly can possibly be—"she is able to thwart the will of any possible being" (*Ibid*.). This means that she counts as omnipotent by the lights of (D9). "But a definition that is satisfied by a character with such purely negative powers" surely isn't adequate to count as omnipotent (*Ibid*.).

Ultimately, Zimmerman responds to this problem—a problem of his own invention—with the claim that a being like Negative Nelly isn't actually among the possible beings to begin with. To pose a problem for (D9), you need a being with "the ability to "freeze" *any possible being or group of possible beings*, however strong they might otherwise be. But she must also lack"—and she must lack as a matter of necessity—"sufficiently many other abilities so as to be obviously weak, too weak to conceivably qualify as omnipotent" (*Ibid*., 114). It's not a terrible price for (D9) to pay if it has to deny that there are possible beings who answer to that very peculiar description.

Moreover, Zimmerman can independently motivate the claim that Negative Nelly isn't so much as possible. It is often asserted—generally by Trinitarians—that there could be more than one omnipotent being. But this assertion is only made at all plausible on the condition that all of the omnipotent beings are somehow "modally linked—so that [none] could choose to bring about something that the other[s] could choose to prevent" (*Ibid*.). On a Trinitarian conception, the three omnipotent beings are all essentially perfectly good and perfectly knowledgeable. This makes it conceivable that they would never come to disagree. I'm not sure it's right that perfectly good and knowledgeable beings could never disagree, but again, we'll take it under advisement for now.

Zimmerman's point is that there couldn't be more than one Negative Nelly, even if there could be more than one omnipotent being. Since Nelly-two could "both prevent Nelly from bringing anything about and be prevented by Negative Nelly from exercising" her own power, Nelly-two would render Negative Nelly impossible (*Ibid*.). Okay. So what? Just because there can't be two Negative Nellies doesn't mean that there can't be one. But here's the rub. If Negative Nelly is so much as possible, then there couldn't possibly be a "Nelly-plus"—that's a being "who has Negative Nelly's powers *plus* some powers that Nelly is supposed to lack" (*Ibid*.) That's why the very possibility of Negative Nelly is "far from innocuous": "Hidden within the admission of her possibility is the denial of the possibility of all sorts of other entities with her thwarting powers *plus* other abilities" (*Ibid*.).

You might see why Nelly and Nelly-plus are not compossible, but you might wonder why they can't both be *possible*, even without being compossible. But I don't think Zimmerman should be too worried by this question. As I understand him, his

point is that the thwarting powers of Nelly and Nelly-plus (and indeed, the thwarting powers that are relevant to omnipotence) reach out to merely possible beings, and their merely possibly wills. So, if so many as one of our Nellys is possible, then none of the others are. And, as Zimmerman concludes:

> If the realm of possible beings has at most one being with Negative Nelly's thwarting powers, how plausible is it to suppose that this one lucky being would be otherwise so unlucky—so incredibly, and essentially, weak? (*Ibid*.)

And thus (D9) is safe. It doesn't need to be revised in the face of Negative Nelly because Negative Nelly isn't so much as possible. And yet the odyssey isn't over. Zimmerman introduces one more class of counterexample, and one more revision to overcome it.

As it happens, I'm not moved by the alleged counterexample, but I still think that Zimmerman's final revision is well-motivated. Zimmerman introduces the sort of counterexamples that bother him with the following introduction: "once free actions on the part of creatures are exempted from the control of an omnipotent being, a further difficulty emerges" (*Ibid*., 115). But as I've already stated, I don't see why the free actions of creatures, even on a libertarian conception of freedom, have to be exempted from the control of an omnipotent being. Nobody other than Tolkien can cause Frodo freely to choose to take the ring to Mordor. But Tolkien can. Nobody other than God can cause me freely to choose to play football. But God can. Nevertheless, let's look at the revision that Zimmerman introduces.

To make sense of the revision we need to draw a crucial distinction between "basic results" of an action or volition, and more distant results. My wife causes the fridge to get refilled every Friday. But this isn't plausibly described as a basic result of any of her actions or volitions. What she does is to write a detailed shopping list. I take it to the store and do the shopping. I bring the shopping home. Then she proceeds to fill the fridge with the produce. If God, by contrast, really wanted the fridge to be filled, we imagine that there would be no gap between His willing it full, and it being filled. It would be filled as a basic result of His volition. Not as a distant result.

Zimmerman thinks that restricting our attention to the range of states of affairs that a being can bring about as a basic result will help him to exempt the free actions of God's creatures from the control of omnipotence. That isn't my concern at all. But it does strike me that a being, all of whose volitions are directly efficacious, is more powerful than a being who can bring about all the same results but only as distant

consequences of her volitions. And thus, whether for Zimmerman's reasons, or for mine, our definition of "x is as powerful as *x* can be," is transformed from (D7) to:

(D7*) *x* is as powerful as *x* can be at *t* $=_{df}$ for any contingent state of affairs *S* that could possibly be intentionally brought about by someone as a basic result, and if it is possible, given the actual history of the world up to and including *t*, that *S* obtain, and possible that *x* intentionally bring about *S* as a basic result, then *x* could intentionally bring about *S* after *t*.

And (D9), our definition of omnipotence, becomes:

(D9*) *x* is omnipotent at *t* $=_{df}$ it is possible for *x* to intentionally bring about something; *x* is as powerful as *x* can be at *t*; and, for any possible *y*, *z*, …, if *y*, z, …, can intentionally bring things about, and if they were to exist at *t* and be as powerful as they could be at *t*, the range of things *x* could intentionally bring about as a basic result after *t* would include states of affairs that prevent *y*, *z*, …, from intentionally bringing anything about as a basic result after *t*.

Delegates and Deputies

With this background in place, I can explain more thoroughly why Dean's Divine Delegates don't worry me. And, I can explain what role is played in my response to the Delegates by my contention that (a) there is only one necessarily existing concretum, and that (b) only a necessarily existing being can create *ex nihilo*.

Recall: the Divine Delegates are supposed to undermine the third premise of Goldschmidt and my argument from omnipotence to idealism. For ease of reference, I reproduce my sketch of that argument once more:

1. God is omnipotent.
2. If God is omnipotent, then all of the contingent features of any contingently existing object wholly depend upon God willing it to have those features.
3. If all of the contingent features of a contingently existing object wholly depend upon a mind willing it to have those features, then that object is an idea in that mind.

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4. All of the contingent features of any contingently existing object wholly depend upon God willing it to have those features. (From 1 and 2)

5. Every contingently existing object is an idea in the mind of God. (From 3 and 4)

The behaviour of Dean's Divine Delegates is supposed to undermine any confidence we might have in premise 3. I concede that they do just that, but I'm not too bothered. I suggest that we revise the argument to become:

1*. God is omnipotent.
2*. If God is omnipotent, then all of the contingent features of any contingently existing object wholly depend upon God willing it to have those features, and no other mind would be possessed of a similar power over all objects, and no other mind would have a veto over God's power over all objects.
3*. If all of the contingent features of a contingently existing object, *x*, wholly depend upon a mind, *y*, willing it to have those features, and no other mind has a similar power over *x*, and no other mind has a veto over *y*'s power over *x*, then *x* is an idea in mind *y*.

4*. All of the contingent features of any contingently existing objects wholly depend upon God willing it to have those features, and no other mind is possessed of a similar power over all objects, and no other mind has a veto over God's power over all objects. (From 1 and 2)
5*. Every contingently existing object is an idea in the mind of God. (From 3 and 4)

The Divine Delegates are not counterexamples to 3*. My argument seems to be safe from Zimmerman's assault. But the trouble now shifts to 2*. Why should God's omnipotence entail that God has a power over all objects not had by any other mind? Don't the Trinitarians tell us that there can be *multiple* omnipotent beings, so long as they're modally intertwined in such a way as to ensure that their wills never come apart? Well, if we must, we can edit 2* and 3* to become:

2**. If God is omnipotent, then all of the contingent features of any contingently existing object wholly depend upon God willing it to have those features, and no other mind would be possessed of a similar power over all objects, unless that mind was necessarily determined always to agree with the will of God, and no other mind would have a veto over God's power over all objects.
3**. If all of the contingent features of a contingently existing object, *x*, wholly depend upon a mind, *y*, willing it to have those features, and no other mind,

> *z*, has a similar power over *x*, unless *z* was necessarily determined always to will what *y* wills, then *x* is an idea in mind *y* (and possibly also in mind *z*).

I don't object to this revision, even if I don't feel the force of the problem that motivates it. I find it hard to accept that there could be two (or more) omnipotent beings. Why? Because I find it hard to see what relation, other than numerical identity, could bring the two (or more) of them into such close modal harmony as to preclude any disagreement. Sure, they might all be perfectly rational and perfectly good and perfectly knowledgeable. But I can imagine that such beings, despite their shared perfections, could come to disagree as to whether a particular song, sung by their angelic chorus, should end with a minor or a major chord. The prospect of any such disagreement, it seems to me, would render them all less than omnipotent, unless one of them always won such disagreements, but, in that case, only one of them would be truly omnipotent.

And yet, it seems to me that there's a bigger worry to face 2*. Imagine that God can choose to limit his power, and to rein in His omnipotence. On this assumption, God could create His two delegates and delegate to one of them the power to confer existence upon particles in the center of a given room, and to one of them the power to confer properties upon said particles. And, He could confer upon both of them the power to fill in for the other, when one of them is taking a break. Moreover, God could, in delegating these powers, render Himself no longer omnipotent. He could either temporarily, or forever, abandon any veto power over the actions of His delegates. In fact, they're no longer really delegates, because God relinquishes altogether the power that He gives them. They are more like deputy gods.

Let's imagine, for the sake of argument, that this happens. We would have no reason to think that a given particle under the joint control of both deputies was an idea in either of their minds. And, some time later, we would have no reason to think that the particle suddenly became an idea in the mind of deputy-2, just because deputy-1 was taking a break. What's more, we can no longer say that the deputies and their actions are all contained in the mind of God, in virtue of the power that God has over all of them. God has—*ex hypothesi*—relinquished any such control. This blocks my response to Zimmerman's initial thought experiment. Divine deputies are a bigger headache for the argument from omnipotence to idealism than are Divine delegates.

But here's why I'm not fazed. First, I don't think omnipotence should be defined as attaching to agents for periods of time. I think that an agent is either omnipotent at all times, or not omnipotent at all. Why? Because I think that a being that is

essentially all-powerful is, all things considered, more powerful, and less vulnerable, than a being that is only contingently, or temporarily, perhaps even fleetingly, omnipotent. This will certainly be the right way to think about omnipotence if you arrive at the belief in God's omnipotence via perfect being theology. To have a perfection necessarily, Anselm would surely agree, is more perfect that to have it contingently. He thinks that way about the property of existence—that to exist necessarily is more perfect than to exist contingently; why wouldn't he think the same of power—that to have powers necessarily is more perfect than having them contingently?

Even without perfect being theology, and merely by reflecting upon the nature of power, and the modal profile of power, it seems plausible to me that true omnipotence has no vulnerabilities, nor even the *risk* of vulnerabilities, and thus, it seems plausible to me that a being is either essentially omnipotent or not omnipotent at all. Intuitions might vary on these matters. I can only report my own intuition!
If my intuition is right, then God could not create a stone too heavy for Himself to lift. He could not suffer. He could not die. And He couldn't create delegates over whom He has no future veto. Delegates, yes. Deputies, no. So, on my account of omnipotence, if God creates delegates, then they remain subject to His power and to His veto. Just as Zimmerman must reject the possibility of Negative Nelly, I reject the very possibility of Divine deputies.

But what if God didn't *create* these deputies? What if they just always existed, beyond the reach of God's control? Well, first of all, their existence would be ruled out by premise 1 of my argument. If God really is omnipotent, as the first premise asserts, then there can be no other beings with unthwartable wills (this follows from (D9*), even as amended in the small ways I might want to amend it). Moreover, if these deputies weren't *created*, then why do they exist? The only answer I can imagine is that they exist necessarily if they exist at all. But if they possibly exist necessarily, then (given S5 modal logic) they must actually exist.

A philosophy that posits only one necessarily existing concretum is on safer grounds, Okhamistically speaking, than a philosophy that posits more. I have reason to posit the existence of God—that's one necessarily existing concretum. I don't have any reason to posit others. But if uncreated Divine Deputies aren't actual, then it turns out that they're not even possible, since if they exist at all, they must exist necessarily. This, I think, was the reason I appealed, in passing, to there being only one necessarily existent concretum.

The argument from God's omnipotence to idealism stands. Moreover, it turns out that, if God—the only necessarily existing concretum—*can't* limit His omnipotence, then He can't create anything that functions totally independently of Him. And so,

if anything else in the universe has the power to create *ex nihilo*, it only has that power as a function of God's will; and not as a distant result of His will, but as a basic result. And so, fundamentally, or from God's perspective, the only thing that can *really* create anything is God Himself, since everything other than God is—at least from God's perspective—an idea; even if, relative to the world of ideas that God has dreamt up, it could be true to say that there are other concrete objects with the power to act and to create and to dream and to will, and material objects galore—still, from *God's* perspective, there's nothing more than God and His ideas. And that's the sense in which only the one necessarily existing concretum can create anything *ex nihilo*.

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