

Can God Make a Rock So Big that He Cannot Lift It?



Stop, Surmise, & Define

Is the question being asked even possible. In other words, is the questioner/skeptic asking something of you that is impossible? Can God *MAKE* a rock SO BIG He CANNOT LIFT IT. Pause and reflect on this challenge... Are you being “set up” to fail? Is God truly all-powerful (omnipotent)?

Peter Kreeft, professor of philosophy at Boston College reminds us that “there is nothing more pointless than an answer to a question that is not fully understood”

(Making Sense Out of Suffering, p. 27)

Define “Omnipotence”

○ Omnipotence:

“The quality of being all-powerful, normally understood as the power to perform any action that is *logically possible* and consistent with God’s essential nature.”

C. Stephen Evans, *Pocket Dictionary of Apologetics & Philosophy of Religion* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), cf. omnipotent, 84.

Defined “Category Mistake”



“A common error in logic, found not least in religious discourse. It consists of erroneously grouping unrelatable classes of meaning, resulting in meaningless utterances.”

Geddes MacGregor, *Dictionary of Religion and Philosophy* (New York, NY: Paragon House, 1991), cf. category mistake, 105.

Categorical Impossibilities

... A person [in this case, God] is omnipotent *if and only if* he is able to do any **logically possible action**, any action, that is, of which the description is *coherent*. It may be objected that in order to be truly omnipotent, a person should be able to do not merely the logically possible, but the logically impossible as well. This objection is, however, misguided. It arises from regarding a logically impossible action as an action of one of one kind on a par with an action of another kind, the logically possible. But it is not. **A logically impossible action is not an action**. It is what is described by a form of words which purport to describe an action, but do not describe anything which is coherent to suppose could be done. It is no objection to A's omnipotence that he cannot make a square circle. **This is because "making a square circle" does not describe anything which it is coherent to suppose could be done.**

Richard Swinburn, *The Coherence of Theism* (New York, NY: Clarendon Press, 1999), 153-154.

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

This point was recognized by Aquinas. He wrote that:

“it is incompatible with the meaning of the absolutely possible that anything involving the contradiction of simultaneous being and not being should fall under divine omnipotence. Such a contradiction is not subject to it, not from any impotence in God, but simply because it does not have the nature of being feasible or possible. Whatever does not involve a contradiction is in the realm of the possible with respect to which God is called omnipotent.”

Summa Theologiae, vol. v. (Thomas Gilby trans.), Ia.25.3

Valid/Invalid Reasoning

Since the skeptic proposed a position supposedly using logic, it itself can be submitted to the same laws to be tested for validity.

“Fallacy: In order to reason validly one must discover what invalid reasoning is. The word “fallacy” is from the Latin *fallacia*, meaning “fraud” or “deceit”; but fallacies may be perpetuated *unintentionally* as well as *intentionally*, i.e., by sloppy thinking as well as by intent to deceive in order to achieve some political or other aim.

(MacGregor, *Dictionary of Religion and Philosophy*, 242.)

Example 1

Most atheists believe that the universe is eternal in some way (oscillating universe, string theory, etc), therefore, to ask “who Caused the universe” is a category mistake. It is like asking, “what caused the uncaused.”

Ravi Zacharias & Norman Geisler, eds., *Who Made God? And Answers to Over 100 Other Tough Questions of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 24.

Law of Contradiction (LNC):

**“I cannot type a single sentence in English.”
it asserts what it denies, and so is self-deleting, simply logically incoherent as a philosophical position.**

Tom Morris, *Philosophy for Dummies* (IDG Books; 1999), p. 46

Example 2

Most theists believe God has always existed, therefore to ask, “Who made God” is a category mistake. It is like asking, “who made the unmade.”

This is analogous to asking:

“what does the color green smell like.”

~ or ~

“fetch me from the toolbox my square circle.”

It is incoherent, illogical, a categorical misapplication. One needs only to apply the Law of Contradiction (LNC) to find the categorical mistake.

How Important Is LNC

One professor of philosophy says of LNC that it is “*considered the foundation of logical reasoning,*”

Manuel Velasquez, *Philosophy: A Text with Readings* (Wadsworth; 2001), p. 51.

Another philosopher says that a “*theory in which this law fails...is an inconsistent theory.*”

Ted Honderich, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, (Oxford Univ; 1995), p. 625.

Yet another professor says “Indeed, any theory which denies the existence of logical laws is instantly and irredeemably self-assumptively incoherent since that very denial is proposed as true in a way that logically excludes its being false.”

Roy A. Clouser, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality: An Essay on the Hidden Role of Religious Belief in Theories* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 84-85.



Mock Conversation

Tom asks you: “Didn’t Jesus say in Matthew 19:26, ‘With God all things are possible?’”

You Answer: “Yes.”

Tom continues: “Do you believe that God is all-powerful and can do all things?”

Again, you answer: “Yes.”

Now Tom thinks his moment is about to unfold, so with a sarcastic grin he asks: “Okay, can God create a rock so big that He cannot lift it?”

Applying What We Learned

Tom wants God to create a rock so big that He cannot lift it. What is Tom really asking God to do? In order to find out, we need to define and clarify the use of Tom's words. The first question that comes to mind is, "How big of a rock does Tom want God to create?"

Well, Tom wants God to create a rock so big that it would be impossible for Him to move it. Now, how big would a rock have to be for God not to be able to move it? The Earth is a "big rock," but, what's the biggest physical entity that exists? The biggest physical entity is the universe, and no matter how much the universe expands it will remain limited, a finite physical reality – a reality that God can "lift."

SO...

...if God created a rock the size of an ever-expanding universe, God could still lift or control it.

The only logical option, then, is for God to create something that exceeds His power to lift or control.

But since God's power is infinite, He would have to create a rock of infinite proportions!

This is the key: Tom wants God to create a rock... rocks are physical, finite things. **How can God create an object that is finite by nature – and give it an infinite size?** There is something terribly wrong with Tom's question.

Therefore...

...It is *logically* and *actually* impossible to create a physically finite thing and have it be infinitely big at the same time. By definition, an infinite, uncreated thing has no limits, and a finite, created thing does.

Consequently, Tom has just asked if God can create an infinitely-finite rock; that is, a rock that has limits, *and at the same time and in the same sense*, does not have limits.

This question, then, violates the law-of-contradiction and turns out to be utter nonsense, a categorical mistake.

This is key: Tom thought he was asking an important question, one that would put the Christian on the horns of a dilemma. *Instead*, he only managed to show his own inability to think clearly.

Turn the Tables

Now that we have a clear understanding of Tom's question, it's simply a matter of formulating a principal question to ask him to reveal his error. How about this one:

- ◎ "Tom, how big do you want God to create that rock? If you tell me how big, I'll tell you if He can do it."

You can keep asking Tom that question until it reaches the size of the universe and eventually introduce the idea of infinity. Once Tom reaches the point where he begins to see what he is really asking God to do, to create an infinite rock, he needs to be shown that he is asking God to do something that is logically irrelevant and impossible. God could no more create an infinitely finite rock than He could create a square circle: both are examples of intrinsic impossibilities.

Pause... Reflect

INTRINSICALLY IMPOSSIBLE

“Intrinsic” Defined: belonging to a thing by its very nature: e.g., *the intrinsic value of a gold ring*. C. S. Lewis said says of this:

- “It [the intrinsically impossible] is impossible under all conditions and in all worlds and for all agents. ‘All agents’ here includes God Himself. His Omnipotence means power to do all that is intrinsically possible, not to do the intrinsically impossible. You may attribute miracles to him, but not nonsense.” (The Problem of Pain, p. 28)

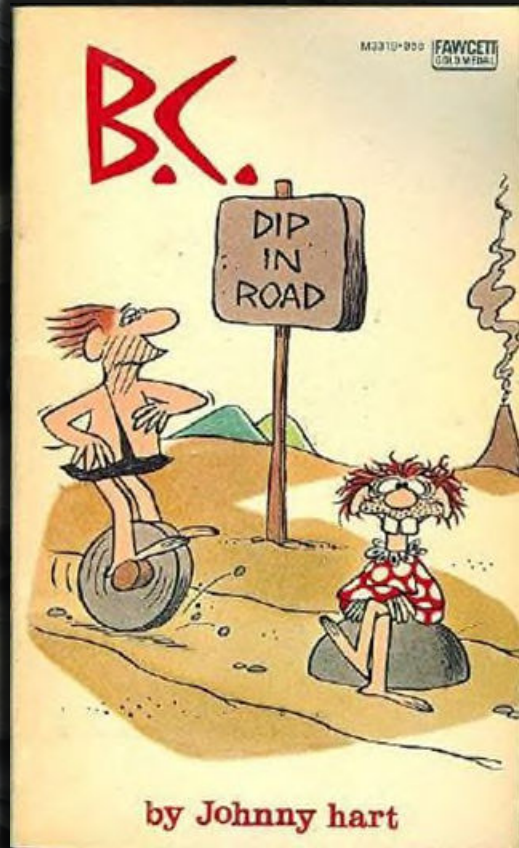
ANSWERING THE UNANSWERABLE

Not every question being asked is automatically meaningful just because it is a question. The question may sound meaningful, but we must be sure to test it with *first principles* to see whether it is valid in the first place. The key is to not respond too quickly to questions. You may wind up trying to find cogent answers to a question that has no logical relevance.

Final Thoughts

Make the Questioner Do the Work

What was presented as a proof against God was really quite the opposite, it ended up being a proof against the questioner's position. You did not have to open up your Bible or insert some religious position into the "equation." Mortimer J. Adler rightly points out that while many Christians are quick in responding to the conclusions in an argument often times the Christian is unaware that the point of departure is not in the conclusion, but in the starting premise, the foundational assumptions. All you had to do is meet the skeptic on his or her own turf and make him or her realize that they were starting from a position that is riddled with inconsistencies. You should ask them if this is a reasonable position to reject God from.



Maybe the skeptic should stick to **“Rolling Stones”** rather than asking others to create impossible ones.