

**Proof of the Existence of Hell:
An Extension of the Stone Paradox**

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Abstract:

As shown in [24], the paradox of the stone is a failed attempt to show that “omnipotence” is a contradictory concept. An element of the argument presented there is that God, while unable to lift the stone, can nevertheless annihilate it. This work considers the amplification of the paradox of the stone to the form generated by the question: can God create a stone which He will not be able to lift, nor, once created, will He be able to destroy.

Keywords: stone paradox, omnipotence of God, mercy of God, free will, apokatastasis, empty hell, emptiness of hell.

Although, according to the teaching of the Catholic Church, God is merciful and just, quite often two alternative visions of God clash in the minds of many Christians. According to the first, God is just: He damns unrepentant sinners to hell for their sins. In this vision, the mercy of God plays no major role, practically speaking: it exists, but it is without consequence. According to the second vision, God is merciful. He forgives sinners, because He must forgive: He loves human beings so much. In this vision, divine justice does not play a major role – it, too, exists, but without consequence. It is also easy to see that more and more often the first vision loses to the second in Christians’ minds – to the point, supposedly, that the greatest authorities of the Catholic Church have proclaimed the validity of the thesis that hell does not exist, or, even worse, that it is empty. And this is so despite the fact that, in the discussions that theologians have about universal salvation, the dominant view seems to link God’s justice to His mercy; this is only strengthened by the hope of universal salvation.¹

This paper proposes a logical analysis of this theological problem based on the Catechism of the Catholic Church in the sense that premises based on the Catechism will be adopted and then conclusions will be drawn from them. This means that conclusions should be accepted by anyone who accepts the rationale. In this sense, belief in the thesis that hell exists is conditional; it depends on belief in the underlying assumptions. The essay is written in the convention of a logical analysis of a theological problem, similar to the publications of Jan Woleński [37] or Ireneusz Ziemiński [38].

The purpose of this article is not to resolve the question of whether God's justice is actually doomed to the status of a fiction and in this sense loses out to His mercy. Our sole purpose is to ascertain whether the thesis about the emptiness or non-existence of hell can be true in light of the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Our considerations will be based on an analysis of the well-known stone paradox – more precisely, its stronger version. Let us start by recalling the paradox in its basic form.

The point of the stone paradox is to try to prove the non-existence of an omnipotent being. The effect of the simple question of whether God can create a stone that He cannot bear is to show that the concept of omnipotence leads to a contradiction. If God can create such a stone, it means that the stone will effectively limit God's power and God will no longer be almighty. If God cannot create such a stone, it means that He is not omnipotent. There is no other way out; therefore, an omnipotent being cannot exist. Perhaps the simplest solution to this dilemma is to assume that God is bound neither by the laws of logic nor by the principle of non-contradiction. Such a solution would be consistent with the views of Pietro Damiani [9] and Descartes [11-13]. It turns out, however, that this solution is unnecessary, because the argumentation of the stone paradox is itself not logical. Does God's ability to create a known stone mean that the stone already exists? Of course not. In *Topics* (Book IV, 136a) Aristotle [1] cautions against making the mistake of equating the ability to do something with doing it. Therefore, proof of the non-existence of an omnipotent being does not lead to a contradiction.

However, the problem identified in the question about the possibility of making a stone is quite serious. The stone is here a representative of potential objects, each of which would limit God's omnipotence in a particular way. There are many potential objects of this type. The question about creating the known stone can be replaced by other analogous ones: *Can God formulate a mathematical problem so difficult that He cannot solve it Himself? Can God create two flowers that differ in fragrance so subtly that He Himself will not recognise the difference?* And so on. All such questions have a common essence, a problematic one: can God in some specific way, and therefore to a certain extent, limit His omnipotence? A number of issues arise here: among them are the issue of how we understand divine omnipotence, how we understand the scope and temporality of its limitation, and how we think about the possibility of God's return to omnipotence. An extensive discussion that takes into account these and other issues can be found in Łukowski [24].²

As previously noted, the possibility of creating a known stone does not contradict God's omnipotence. However, an inability to create this or any other stone already contradicts it. Therefore, of these two options, we choose the first: we assume that God, if He wishes, can create a stone that will limit His omnipotence to a certain extent. This limitation is expressed in the fact that God will no longer be able to pick up this one stone, though He will still be able to pick up all the other stones among which they will certainly be heavier than the special one. After all, the problem does not lie in the weight of the stone, but in God's self-limitation. However, adopting this assumption raises another important question: can God regain His omnipotence? A return to omnipotence would mean that God could pick that stone up as well. Thus, the stone would lose its essence. It would no longer be the stone that God cannot lift. It should be noted that God's return to full omnipotence does not change the fact that to the question of whether God can create a stone that He cannot lift, an affirmative answer still remains the true answer. After all, depriving the stone of its unique property makes it no longer a stone that God cannot lift, so it is no wonder that God can lift it. God's regaining of omnipotence can be achieved either by depriving the stone of its unique property or by annihilating the stone. In both cases, the stone that God cannot lift ceases to exist. In the first, the stone ceases to exist as the one that God cannot lift, and in the second, it ceases to exist altogether.

It is not difficult to see that the question that constitutes the essence of the stone paradox in its traditional form can thus be reinforced: *Can God create a stone that He cannot lift and after creation cannot destroy?* Of course, the word 'destroy' can take one of two meanings: stripping the stone of this unique property, that is, to make it an ordinary stone, or annihilating it literally. This means that we are dealing with two questions:

1. *Can God create a stone that He cannot lift and after creation cannot transform into an ordinary stone?*

2. *Can God create a stone that He cannot lift and after creation cannot annihilate?*

Naturally, the stone still represents any logically possible object for which God would deprive Himself of some of His power, but this time He is doing it irreversibly. The answer to each of these two questions is the same: Yes. Apparently, God can create such an object now that He has already created it. It is a human being endowed with free will – that is, the freedom to make decisions.

We adopt the understanding of human freedom following the Catechism of the Catholic Church [8]:

Part 3, Section 1, 1730: ‘God created man a rational being, conferring on him the dignity of a person who can initiate and control his own actions.’

Part 3, Section 1, 1731: ‘Freedom is the power, rooted in reason and will, to act or not to act, to do this or that, and so to perform deliberate actions on one’s own responsibility. By free will one shapes one’s own life.’

Part 3, Section 1, 1732: ‘As long as freedom has not bound itself definitively to its ultimate good which is God, there is the possibility of choosing between good and evil, and thus of growing in perfection or of failing and sinning.’

Part 3, Section 1, 1733: ‘The more one does what is good, the freer one becomes. There is no true freedom except in the service of what is good and just. The choice to disobey and do evil is an abuse of freedom and leads to “the slavery of sin.”’

Part 3, Section 1, 1734: ‘Freedom makes man responsible for his acts to the extent that they are voluntary.’

According to the Catechism, as long as the human being’s freedom is not established in God, the human being can choose good, but she or he is also able to choose evil, thus opposing God. God’s limitation in being able to lift a stone has its counterpart here in God’s limitation in being able to prevent human beings from doing evil. On the other hand, God’s limitation in the possibility of annihilating the stone (totally or only essentially) has its counterpart in God’s limitation in the (total or essential) annihilation of the human being, which means the immortality of the soul. A person decides for her- or himself who she/he is and who she/he will eventually become. However, regardless of whether the human soul will strive towards God or towards satan, God will keep it for all eternity. The immortality of the soul is a guarantee for the human being’s freedom. Therefore, on the one hand, the human being has the right to resist God’s will by sinning, and therefore to act against Him. Undoubtedly, this limits the omnipotence of God, which ceases to be complete in the presence of the human being. The human being can therefore limit God’s omnipotence with her/his actions that are not in accordance with the will of God. On the other hand, God cannot annihilate the human being since He has given her/him freedom. The annihilation of a person acting against God’s will would be tantamount to denying a person her/his free will: she/he would have freedom as long as she/he acts in accordance with God’s will, but as soon as she/he opposes Him, she/he is annihilated. In such a situation, human freedom would only be an illusion. Human freedom, then, will not be reduced to a mere fiction, but only if God actually allows human being to lapse without the threat of annihilation.

Human beings will have freedom only when it can follow their own decisions without being destroyed for doing so. Human beings may even turn away from God, and God has to accept that, because this was a decision God made when He created them. God can grant human freedom only by endowing human beings with immortality. What can God do with a human being who consciously and consistently refuses to obey Him, who consciously turns away from Him, who does not want to be with God, who chooses satan? God’s gift to this person is to respect this decision, that is, to allow this human being to choose eternity with satan and eternal isolation from God. This is the consequence of human freedom. Hell is nothing more than isolation from God and eternal communion with satan.

The Catechism teaches nothing else:

Part 1, Section 2, 1033: 'To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God's merciful love means remaining separated from him forever by our own free choice. This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called "hell."'

Part 1, Section 2, 1035: 'The teaching of the Church affirms the existence of hell and its eternity. Immediately after death the souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into hell, where they suffer the punishments of hell, "eternal fire." The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God, in whom alone man can possess the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs.'

Part 1, Section 2, 1037. 'God predestines no one to go to hell; for this, a willful turning away from God (a mortal sin) is necessary, and persistence in it until the end.'

Hell is necessary for God to respect human freedom. Since human being does not want to be with God, but with satan, God must respect human being's decision, otherwise He would deny human freedom. From this perspective, hell is not a punishment for human sins, but a necessity resulting from human freedom; it is the guarantee that a human being will be able to achieve a goal sovereignly chosen by her- or himself. It is not God who condemns humans to hell; human beings condemn themselves to hell with their sovereign choice. With the existence of hell, God completes His promise to make humans free. Moreover, it is clear from 'Part 1, Section 2, 1033' that human being who chooses eternity with satan blocks the working of God's mercy - by rejecting God she/he rejects Him along with His mercy. Thus, not only is there no contradiction between God's mercy and God's justice, but the two attributes require each other.

Therefore, the answers to the two questions asked above are in the affirmative:

1. *Yes, God can create a stone that He cannot lift and not make it an ordinary stone after creation.*
2. *Yes, God can create a stone that He cannot lift and after creation annihilate.*

Summary

Acceptance of specific assumptions should result in the acceptance of the resulting conclusions. This should also be the case when accepting the thesis that God created the human being and gave her or him the freedom to choose between good and evil. If we accept these assumptions, we should in consequence also accept the thesis about the existence of hell and reject the thesis assuming its emptiness.

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Notes

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1. E.g. Edith Stein [34], Hans Urs von Balthasar [2-7], Karl Rahner [29], Michael Schmaus [32], Gisbert Greshake [15], Henri de Lubac [10], Waław Hryniewicz [17-21], Romano Guardini [16], Walter Kasper [22].
 2. It contains detailed analyses of the positions of various philosophers and their works, such as Johannes Duns Scotus [14], Pier Damiani [9], Thomas de Aquino [36], René Descartes [11-13], Bertrand Russell [30], Richard Swinburne [35], Ralph McInerney [25], John L. Mackie [26], G. B. Keene [23], Bernard Mayo [28], C. Wade Savage [31], G. I. Mavrodes [27], David E. Schrader [33].