

Is God Impossible?

A formal debate on whether or not
the attributes of the Christian God
exhibit logical contradictions

Saerules

versus

Arcanus

This document contains the complete formal debate between two members of the AtheistForums.org message board known as Saerules (atheist) and Arcanus (theist). In this debate, Saerules presented arguments intended to demonstrate that the Christian God cannot exist as claimed, on account of possessing attributes which result in logical contradictions. Against this view, Arcanus presented arguments intended to demonstrate that God is not so easily obviated because, he argues, the attributes of God actually do not result in any logical contradictions.

The debate took place at AtheistForums.org during the month of September in 2009, and may be viewed at its original location here: <http://www.atheistforums.org/thread-1813.html>.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEBATE PROPOSAL	3
-----------------	---

Opening Statements:

Saerules	4
Arcanus	5

Response to Opening Statements:

Saerules	7
Arcanus	8

Rebuttal Against Responses:

Saerules	10
Arcanus	11

Closing Statements:

<i>Saerules</i>	<i>(debate terminated)</i>
<i>Arcanus</i>	<i>(debate terminated)</i>

DEBATE TOPIC

Resolved: "The attributes of the Christian God exhibit logical contradictions."

PARTICIPANTS

Saerules: Affirming the debate resolution.

Arcanus: Denying the debate resolution.

STRUCTURE AND TIMELINE

Opening Statements (11 Sep 2009, 23:59 hrs. Pacific)

Response to Opening Statements (18 Sep. 2009, 23:59 hrs. Pacific)

Rebuttal Against Responses (25 Sep. 2009, 23:59 hrs. Pacific)

Closing Statements (2 Oct. 2009, 23:59 hrs. Pacific)

DEBATE RULES

WORD COUNT: Every submission by the participants in each of the four debate rounds is limited to not more than 1,500 words.

POST DURATION: The participants are given one full week to compose their submission for each of the four debate rounds, such that it will be available online by the morning of the Saturday at the end of each deadline week.

EXTENSIONS: If an extension of a post deadline is required, a request will be made no later than 48 hours prior to the deadline.

DEFAULTING ON THE DEBATE: Each participant agrees that going 48 hours beyond the post deadline date, without an agreed-upon extension, constitutes having defaulted on the debate.

PUBLICATION OF THE DEBATE: Each participant gives their consent to the completed debate being published outside of AtheistForums.org on his or her own web site, provided that proper attribution is maintained, using the names they each go by at AtheistForums.org, and the material is not altered in its content. Any further distribution requires the consent of both debate participants.

NON-PARTICIPANT QUESTIONS

Upon completion of the four debate rounds, the participants will open themselves up to questions, if there are any, from members who followed the debate. In order to curtail tedium and tangent, each member is restricted to: (i) three succinct questions, which are not more than five sentences each; (ii) one succinct follow-up question to each of the responses given.

Opening Statements

by Saerules

11 September 2009

In this debate, i am affirming that the Christian god (in the form it's followers usually believe it to be) is an impossibility... I am basing my evidence upon simple logic (With logical impossibilities existing within the text describing this god), not upon any scientific findings or metaphysical theories.

I start with my first point here, obtained from others: **"If God knows everything, he knows his own future. If he knows his own future, is he able to change it? If he is able to change it, then his original knowledge of his future was wrong, and he is not omniscient. If he isn't able to change it, then he is not omnipotent."**

An omnipotent being cannot fail to do anything. An omniscient being cannot change its mind. The god in Christianity has changed his mind many times in the bible (Contradiction, therefore it is impossible for "God" to be omniscient). To have ultimate power, one must have ultimate knowledge. If the Christian god is omnipotent: he is also omniscient (Contradiction, therefore it is impossible for "God" to be omnipotent). *The Christian god cannot exist in the form that many Christians believe him to exist as.*

My second point (obtained from myself): **If the Christian god unconditionally loves... then the human race is no more special to him than are rocks.** By the very definition of unconditional... (without regard for any attributes)... this god's statements about moralities and his judgements are immediately defaulted.

From the beginning of Genesis, to the end of Revelation: the Christian god has shown unfair favoritism, comparison of attributes, and judgements based upon them. *The Christian god does not love unconditionally.*

My third point (obtained from myself): **If the Christian god is jealous... then it is not alone.** Christians often think that their religion is monotheistical... and that their god is a jealous god. But if their god is a jealous god: he must have someone (or something) to be jealous of. Who could possibly have earned such a powerful being's jealousy?

If we are to have no other gods before this one, then those other gods must exist in some way. With all the angels, lesser demons, greater demons, Satan, Lucifer, YHWH, Jesus, The Four Horsemen, The Holy Ghost, The Mother Mary, Gog and Magog, and other such divine entities: it is not hard to guess that the Bible is inconclusive. If YHWH is jealous... it is because there are other gods for it to be jealous of.

Conclusion: The Christian god does not exist as most Christians think he does... he does not unconditionally love us... and if he does exist in some form: he lies to us, and is jealous of his peers and/or superiors.

Opening Statements

by Arcanus

11 September 2009

I am one of the newest members at the AtheistForums.org web site, having joined not much more than two months ago at the beginning of July. Although I cannot recall how I came to discover the site, I recognized it almost immediately as a highly opportune environment to have my ideas and beliefs critically engaged in a ruthless fashion, given the sharp antithesis expected between an orthodox Christian *Weltanschauung* and their atheistic convictions. With the Socratic method of elenctic apologetics¹, informed and influenced by the presuppositionalist school in the Reformed tradition², I wanted to confront whatever arguments that might be raised against Christian theism—to observe (i) through fiery trial whether it can withstand scrutiny or not, and (ii) whether that scrutiny itself is valid or not.

Through my experiences on that atheist message board I have encountered a large number of arguments critical of Christian theism, some of which—such as analyses of the Transcendental Argument—have been particularly informative and enjoyable. But one species of argument that had really caught my attention recently was being promulgated in a few different threads by a young woman named Saerules, which was essentially the position that God simply cannot exist. She reasoned that certain divine attributes claimed about God are in fact contradictory, such that God is a logically impossible being. It was the consistency with which she had been raising such arguments through several threads that finally enticed me to invite her to defend those arguments in a formal debate, in addition to the fact that others shared her thinking. Instead of chasing the arguments through the different threads they happened to appear in, I wanted to confront them fully in one single location and demonstrate once and for all how bankrupt such arguments are, in the hopes that she would finally abandon them in favour of arguments that are not so weak.

With respect to historic, orthodox Christian doctrine about the nature of God, some of the most frequently targeted attributes have been those 'omni' ones (e.g., omnipotence, omniscience, etc.), which can be found in such arguments as, for example, man's free will seeming to preclude a God who is omniscient, or the existence of evil seeming to preclude an omnipotent God who is all-loving, and so forth. They are also the subject of arguments that seek to prove God as a logically impossible being, such as the horribly popular rhetorical question, "Can God create a rock he cannot lift?" It is my contention that none of these arguments manage to achieve their goal, and sometimes for rather embarrassing reasons. For example, consider the rock-too-heavy argument. Although there are a few different ways to critique it, two of them prove especially embarrassing.

First, it invalidates itself by committing the Loaded Question fallacy³ (Lt. *plurium interrogationum*), which is identified by the presence of a stultifying presupposition that the respondent would otherwise disavow and usually begs the question. The common example widely used in basic philosophy texts to illustrate the Loaded Question fallacy is, "Have you stopped beating your spouse?" The question-begging assumption at center here coerces direct answers into serving the questioner's agenda⁴; viz. that the respondent is beating or has beaten his spouse. Whether the direct response is yes or no, either answer is forced into admitting spousal abuse by that question-begging presupposition. The same analysis is made of the question, "Can God create a rock he cannot lift?" Whether one answers with yes or no, both are coerced

-
- 1 Vlastos, Gregory. "The Socratic Elenchus." *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 1 (1983): 27-58. Print. Turretin, Francis. *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*. Trans. G. Musgrave Giger. Ed. J.T. Dennison, Jr. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992. Print.
 - 2 Sproul, R.C., John Gerstner, Arthur Lindsay. *Classical Apologetics*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984. pg. 183. Print.
 - 3 Walton, Douglas. "The Fallacy of Many Questions: On the Notions of Complexity, Loadedness and Unfair Entrapment in Interrogative Theory." *Argumentation* 13 (1999): 379-83. Print.
 - 4 "Loaded question." Wikipedia, *The Free Encyclopedia*. 21 Aug 2009, 01:36 UTC. Accessed 8 Sep 2009.

into admitting that God is not omnipotent—not because of any problem intrinsic to omnipotence, but rather because the question *in itself has already assumed* that God is not omnipotent. It assumes that a rock which God cannot lift is logically possible. But if an Immovable Object and an Irresistible Force are mutually exclusive, then *by presupposing as possible the existence of the former one has necessarily denied as impossible the existence of the latter*—i.e., commits the question-begging fallacy.

Second, if the rhetoric is implying that real omnipotence should be able to trump logical contradictions, such that a *truly* omnipotent being should, for example, be able to produce a square circle, then it destroys itself in a cloud of self-defeat by throwing out the baby with the bathwater. To suggest that nothing is impossible if given sufficient power—omnipotence—is to deny that real contradictions exist; i.e., if the impossible could become possible or actual simply by applying sufficient power to it, *then it was never impossible to begin with but merely difficult*. However, it should be obvious that this tosses the entire argument out the window. One who makes such an argument accidentally proves too much: if neither logic nor real contradictions exist, well then, the very objection one started out with vanishes (that God cannot exist in virtue of logical contradictions).

When an atheist familiarizes himself with the principles of sound reasoning and rigorously applies them to his thinking and argumentation, he discovers that such a commitment to rationality not only pulls the rug out from underneath many of what he thought were his strongest arguments against the God of Christian theism but also dismantles completely every single argument which attempts to prove that God is a logically impossible being. All such arguments always fail, and in practically every case that failure is due to some logical fallacy or another, either due to some logical fault in the argument itself or due to some misunderstanding about the nature of God (e.g., arguments involving the omniscience of God fatally omit the spatio-temporal implications of his omnipresent immanence). There are a number of arguments which attempt to prove that God is a logically impossible being, but instead of trying to obviate them all, for the purposes of this debate I shall wait to evaluate the ones that Saerules chooses to put forward. That is to say, given the limitations of this debate, it is practically impossible for me to deny the resolution of the debate (that God is a logically impossible being) for I would have to obviate every conceivable argument for it, and I simply have neither the word-count nor time allowances to accomplish such a feat. During the proposal stage, Saerules was encouraged to make her case on what she believes to be the three strongest arguments for it. So I will attempt to make my case once I have those arguments in hand.

1,070 words

Response to Opening Statements

by Saerules

18 September 2009

To perform the loaded question fallacy, the question must assume that the respondent has acted in a certain way. "**Have** you stopped beating your wife?" Is the classic example of the loaded question fallacy... and you will notice that it assumes that you beat your wife. "**Can** God create a rock he cannot lift?" Does not assume anything, and therefore is not a loaded question. Put simply: "*Can* God create a rock he cannot lift?" is asking if such an action is possible... "*Have* you stopped beating your wife?" is assuming the action has been done. That is why the question of "Can God create a rock he cannot lift" does not commit the loaded question fallacy. It is a question that is used for one purpose alone: to demonstrate that omnipotence is in itself a logical contradiction.

One might demonstrate the logical contradiction of omnipotence with a different question such as, "What could any omnipotent power create more powerful than itself?" Again the question only calls to mind the logical absurdity of the proposition contained in the concept of omnipotence. And that is the only agenda philosophers had in constructing the question "Can god create a rock he cannot lift."

Lastly, philosophers only use the word 'God' in their question... because they know that since omnipotence is a logical impossibility, then so is any power, including a god, that is claimed to be omnipotent. Therefore omnipotence remains a logical contradiction, and the omnipotent attribute of the Christian god is likewise impossible.

Another show of where these 'omni's of the Christian god fail:

1. From Gospel, we know that the Christian god is all-powerful - he can do all things which are logically possible.
- 2a. It is an action "to be" something." (If it were not, we could say that god could not choose how to be, which would be a limitation on 1)
- 3b. It is an action "to be" ... a god who hates its creations.
4. From Gospel, we know that the Christian god is all-loving.
5. From 1 and 4, we know that the Christian god is all-powerful and all-loving.
6. IF 5 is true, THEN 3b is false. IF 3b is false, THEN 1 is false. IF 1 is false, THEN 5 is false.

Considering that you spent three paragraphs mislabeling the rock argument a fallacy... there is nothing more I can respond to

Response to Opening Statements

by Arcanus

18 September 2009

The task for Saerules in this debate was to present arguments which affirm and support the resolution that “the attributes of the Christian God exhibit logical contradictions.” In her Opening Statements she was supposed to have listed three such arguments; unfortunately, she listed only one: that God's attributes of omniscience and omnipotence contradict one another. The other two arguments did not actually contrast attributes of God. Instead, they contrasted a specific attribute of his against some other supposed fact. But in neither case were the arguments successful at validly proving a logical contradiction, which I will show.

With respect to her one argument that did attempt to prove that God is impossible on account of a logical contradiction, whereby omniscience and omnipotence are said to be contradicting attributes, does the argument succeed? No, it does not, and for a reason similar to that which my Opening Statements had anticipated. Her argument contains a central mistake about the nature of God; for the argument to work it requires an entity who “knows his own future.” As a criticism of the Christian God it cannot work, because he has no temporal locality (like an unactualized future, as this case has it) by virtue of God being eternal pure actuality⁵. When an argument that is predicated on a being who has temporal limitations is presented as a criticism against the Christian God, it fails by arguing against a deity that is substantively different from that of Christian orthodoxy—and therefore risks the Straw Man fallacy. In his nature God is pure actuality, and in his operations God is immanent everywhere in our space-time manifold. In either respect, therefore, temporal limitations (such as having a future) is inapplicable.

I have used the following thought experiment to shed light on the consequences of omnipresence before with some success, so perhaps it might prove helpful again in the present discussion. Imagine that we observe a supernova in a galaxy two million light years away. From the perspective of that galaxy, the event was two million years ago. But from our perspective we are just now observing it. And from the perspective of another galaxy millions of light years further still, that supernova will not be observed for a very long time to come. So the question presents itself: *Is the event past, present, or future?* Evidently that will depend entirely on your spatio-temporal location. So then, what if you are omnipresent across all spatio-temporal locations at once?

In the words of Aiden W. Tozer, “In God there is no was or will be, but a continuous and unbroken is. In him, history and prophecy are one and the same.”⁶ And Charles Spurgeon, “With God there is no past, and can be no future ... What we call past, present, and future, he wraps up in one eternal now.”⁷ God does not have a future about which he might know something; moreover, for him there is no future about which he might change something. Therefore, if a criticism which presupposes a temporal entity is presented as a criticism of the Christian God, it risks committing the Straw Man fallacy by arguing against a deity that is considerably different from God as affirmed in orthodox Christian doctrine.

The second contradiction Saerules attempts to present an argument for is that God loves unconditionally and yet, at the same time, can be shown to not love unconditionally. This fails to prove a contradiction, however, and for two reasons. First, even assuming her statements are true she has not successfully made her case, because a real contradiction requires two logically inverted propositions to be asserted as true at the same time *and in the same respect*. If the love of God is “unconditional” (P) in one respect while at the

5 Dubray, Charles. “Actus Purus.” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 1. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907. Web. Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologica*. Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981. Part 1, Questions 2-11. Web.

6 Heitzig, Lenya. *Live Intimately*. Paris, ON: David C. Cook Publishing, 2008. pg. 50. Print.

7 Spurgeon, Charles H. “Gem #55.” *Spurgeon’s Gems*. New York: Sheldon & Company, 1859. Print.

same time “not unconditional” ($\neg P$) in a different respect, then this fails to qualify as a contradiction. Can this be found in orthodox Christian doctrine? Yes, clearly. Christianity holds that the difference which separates these two respects is Jesus Christ, the Mediator of the new covenant. When it comes to the human race on the whole, the love of God is “not unconditional” ($\neg P$); when it comes to those who are in Christ, the love of God is “unconditional” (P). So both P and $\neg P$ are asserted as true at the same time but *not at all in the same respect*. God's love is unconditional only for believers whose sins are covered by the propitiatory⁸ sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Second, her argument is predicated upon a God who “unconditionally loves ... the human race,” which is a very different sort of God from that of orthodox Christian doctrine. Apart from the atoning work of Christ, the human race is condemned under God's wrath against sin. Saerules was correct in her conclusion that “the Christian God does not love unconditionally” the human race. Apostolic teaching has never suggested otherwise, having always asserted that God loves unconditionally only his children.

The third contradiction that she presents is likewise not a contradiction, insofar as God being jealous does not contradict monotheism. Saerules argues that if God is jealous then “it is because there are other gods for it to be jealous of.” But this does not follow. God's jealousy is for the reverent affections of his people, which at times have been directed toward idols. However, there are very clear statements in the Bible that those idols are fashioned by hand and not real, that they “by nature are not gods,” that “an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one,” that “there is no God apart from me,” that there is only “one God and Father of all,” verses that can be multiplied a hundred fold (Gal. 4:8; Isa. 44:14-20; Isa. 45:21; John 17:3; 1 Cor. 8:4; Eph. 4:6; 1 Tim. 1:17). Although the Bible speaks about angels, demons, beasts and saints and so forth, nowhere does it describe them as deity. Mankind worships other gods, but it is sinful precisely because they are by nature not gods, as the Scriptures consistently state. “I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God,” the Lord declares to his prophet Isaiah. “Is there any God besides me? No, there is no other Rock; I know not one” (Isa. 44:6-8).

Saerules presented what she considered to be the three strongest arguments for proving that the God of Christian theism is an impossible being by reason of logical contradictions, yet none of them succeeded in making her case because they involved attributes or operations that do not correspond to God as affirmed by the Scriptures and orthodox Christian doctrine. First, the “omniscience vs. omnipotence” argument failed because God is not temporally bounded; second, the “unconditional love” argument failed because although both P and $\neg P$ are asserted as true at the same time, it is not in the same respect; third, the “jealousy” argument failed because the act of worshiping an idol does not make it a real deity.

1,200 words

8 Propitiation is that by which the just wrath of God is satisfied, whereby “it becomes consistent with his character and government to pardon and bless the sinner. The propitiation does not procure his love or make him loving; it only renders it consistent for him to exercise his love towards sinners. ... Christ is ‘the propitiation’ because by his becoming our substitute and assuming our obligations he expiated our guilt.” (Easton, Matthew G. *Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. 3rd ed. New York: Cosimo Classics, 2005. Print.)

Rebuttal Against Responses

by Saerules

25 September 2009

Not submitted. Through private correspondence, Saerules informed me that she wished to withdraw from the formal debate. She said she was growing frustrated with the form and rules of formal debate, stating that she had not really understood the nature and impact of debate guidelines. (For example, she asked about the propriety of raising new arguments near the close of the debate, as we currently are, and I informed her that it would be bad form because it denies me the opportunity to respond to them.) Therefore, due to her lack of experience with formal debate, her frustration at constraints imposed by ethical debate form, and her desire for a more informal setting, it was agreed by mutual consent to terminate the formal debate.

At the time of this writing (29 September 2009) our debate is continuing but in a more informal setting at the AtheistForums.org web site (see title page for relevant link). You are free to follow along there. Since this document was to contain the formal debate, the casual dialogue between myself and Saerules will not be included here.

Rebuttal Against Responses

by Arcanus

25 September 2009

In her most recent response, Saerules attempted to prove that the rock-too-heavy rhetorical device is not fallacious, but unfortunately it seems she neither understands the nature of the Loaded Question fallacy nor sees the fallacy being committed by this particular question. As Saerules correctly identified, in order for this particular fallacy to be committed there ought to be some internal feature that begs the question. (This is not necessarily true, but true often enough that we can work with it here in this discussion.)

But she incorrectly asserts that the rock-too-heavy rhetorical device “does not assume anything,” which she hopes to support by pointing to the auxiliary verb “can.” What she does not seem to recognize is that this fails to disprove the fallacy because (i) it is still ‘loaded’ with two or more questions and (ii) it is the hidden question that commits the fallacy by making a contentious assumption. Although it is legitimate to ask questions about what God can create—the obvious first question—it is illegitimate⁹ to assume that an Immovable Object is logically possible *when the question itself regards whether or not an Irresistible Force is logically possible*—the hidden second question—since the two phenomena are mutually exclusive.

So how does it contain multiple questions? And how is the fallacy committed? Consider two illustrative examples first. There is the familiar and classic example, “Have you stopped beating your spouse?” As the student of philosophy is typically shown, *there are actually two questions being asked here*. The first is, “Have you beaten your spouse?” The second is, “If so, have you stopped?” As we can see, the latter is the *obvious* question being asked while the former is the *hidden* question not being asked. It qualifies as a Loaded Question because it involves (i.e., is ‘loaded’ with) two or more questions, and it commits the question-begging fallacy by assuming the truth of spousal abuse in a question about spousal abuse.

Another example question would be, “Where did you put the cookies you stole?” Here there are actually three questions being asked: (i) “Did you steal the cookies?” (ii) “If so, did you put them somewhere?” and (iii) “If not, did you eat them?” The second is the *obvious* question being asked, while the first is the *hidden* question not being asked and producing the fallacy by assuming the truth of cookie theft in a question about cookie theft. (The third question exists tacitly if the answer is “nowhere” to the *loaded* question or “no” to the *obvious* question).

Understanding this, now consider the question, “Can God create a rock he cannot lift?” Within this single question about omnipotence there are actually two questions being asked: (i) “Can God create some rock?” (ii) “Can God fail to lift some rock?” On the one hand, that is how it is a Loaded Question; it involves or is ‘loaded’ with more than one question. The former question is the *obvious* one being asked, while the latter question is the *hidden* one not being asked. On the other hand, that is how it is fallacious; by virtue of assuming that God is not omnipotent within a question about whether or not God is omnipotent, which it does by assuming that an Immovable Object is logically possible (“a rock he cannot lift”) *when the question itself is about whether or not an Irresistible Force is logically possible*. As I said in my Opening Statements, “by presupposing as possible the existence of the former one has necessarily denied as impossible the existence of the latter” and thereby “commits the question-begging fallacy.”

As for the additional question she asked (about an omnipotent power creating something “more powerful than itself”), what she is doing is probing a tautology, for her question is asking, “Can something be more powerful than all-powerful?” Well, no—by definition. If she were so foolish as to think this somehow

⁹ As defined in the context of logic (q.v. “not in accordance with the principles of valid inference”; see entry at *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. Random House, Inc. Web. Accessed 24 Sep. 2009).

disproves omnipotence, I would direct her attention back to my Opening Statements where I had already addressed that sort of angle; that is, if she thinks that true omnipotence should be able to overwhelm even the logically impossible, her entire position in this debate would self-destruct: *"To suggest that nothing is impossible if given sufficient power" (in this case, omnipotence) "is to deny that real contradictions exist; in other words, if the impossible could become possible or actual simply by applying sufficient power to it, then it was never impossible to begin with but merely difficult. However, it should be obvious that this tosses the entire argument out the window. One who makes such an argument accidentally proves too much: if neither logic nor real contradictions exist, well then, the very objection one started out with vanishes (that God cannot exist in virtue of logical contradictions)."*

And as for her closing six-point argument, it did not prove any logical contradictions in God. If it succeeded at proving anything at all, it is that God does not indiscriminately love his creatures universally—which the Bible already admits, particularly in those passages that describe the wrath of God against unrepentant sinners living in obdurate rebellion against him.

871 words