

Can God create a Stone so big that He cannot move it?

This is the standard question asked in every philosophy class. In fact numerous Atheists have posited this question in an attempt to prove that there is no God. I will attempt to answer this question three ways.

- I. The Sentence Analysis way
- II. The Logical way using Set Theory.
- III. The Rational way using the Nature of God.

I. The Sentence Analysis way

The Sentence Analysis way is simply to analyze the sentence and rephrase it simply.

First let us understand our definitions. By God we mean something so powerful that cannot be resisted by anything. Or for short we'll just call it "something that can't be resisted."

By 'stone so big' we mean something so big and heavy that it can resist everything. We'll call it "something that can resist everything".

Now when we replace those definitions in our sentence we get this:

"Can something that can't be resisted, create something that can resist everything?"

OK but we seem to be forgetting something. If something is created it will have to exist and for this to work both of these have to co-exist. So the real statement becomes:

"Can something that can't be resisted co-exist with something that can resist everything?"

Well immediately, we see the sentence is pure nonsense. If something can't be resisted how can something exist that can resist it? Either it can or it can't. It is or it isn't. It can't be both.

In fact our original statement can be further logically contracted to: Can something that can't be resisted be resisted?

This violates the law of non-contradiction. i.e. A cannot be both A and NOT A at the same time.

If you disagree with the law of non-contradiction then an ancient Muslim scholar named Abū Alī al-Husayn ibn Abd Allāh ibn Sīnā or Avicenna for short has the cure as follows:

*Any one who rejects the law of non-contradiction should be beaten and burned. He should be beaten until he accepts the fact that to be beaten is NOT the same as to **not** be beaten and he should be burned until he accepts the fact that to be burned is not the same as to **not** be burned.*

Avicenna AD981-AD1037

II. Using Set Theory.

OK now let's look at the Set Theory method. Let's first break our problem down into definitions just like we did the first way.

- a) By God we really mean an Irresistible Force (let's call that F)
- b) By "stone so large" we really mean an Immovable Object (let's call that O).

But immediately we see the problem. For if the set of F is all Forces that are Irresistible and the Set O are all objects Immovable we see that the elements in set F cannot co-exist with the elements in Set O.

For if O exists then no F can coexist. Think about it in words. In the universal set where an Irresistible Force exists, there cannot exist in the same universal set an immovable Object. Because by defining an immovable object you have also defined that there is no irresistible force. So by the very act of defining an Irresistible Force, you have eliminated an immovable object from that Universal set.

Note too that in this statement I am not suggesting that God is part of a Universe (He is an extra dimensional being outside of the multiple dimensional universe since he created it – see my paper on www.RationalFreeThinker.com called “Who is Agent X”). In this particular argument, we are discussing the Universal set, i.e. the set of all things that exist. God is a part of this set. We are not describing the Universe that we exist in. Notice too that if anything is not part of U, the universal set. Then it does not or cannot exist.

OK back to our argument:

F is a subset of U $F \subset U$
O is not a subset of U $O \not\subset U$

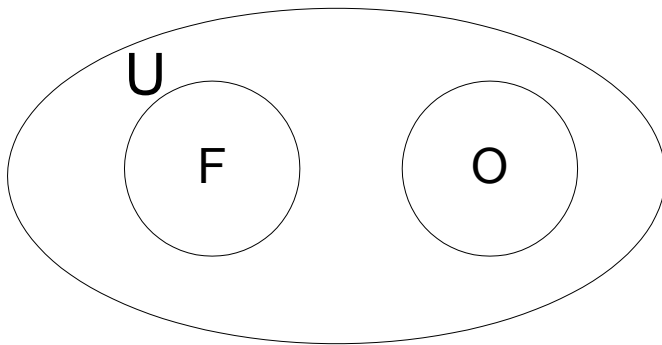
Then using set theory. What is the intersection of F and O? Answer: a null set i.e. ϕ .

So $F \cap O = \phi$

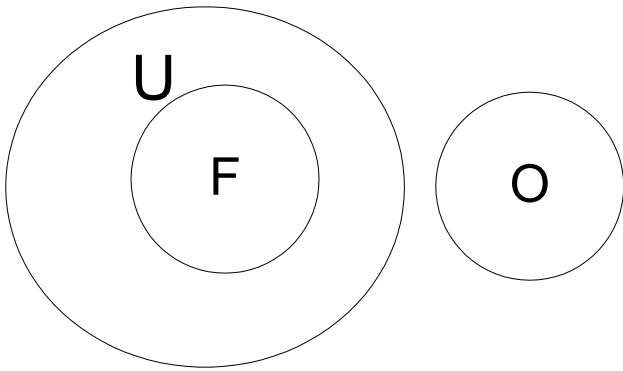
Thus we see it makes no sense to define an immovable object and an irresistible force in the same universal set (or the same sentence).

Let's show this diagrammatically.

The question is trying to posit this relationship. In the Universal Set of all things U, there exists both F and O.



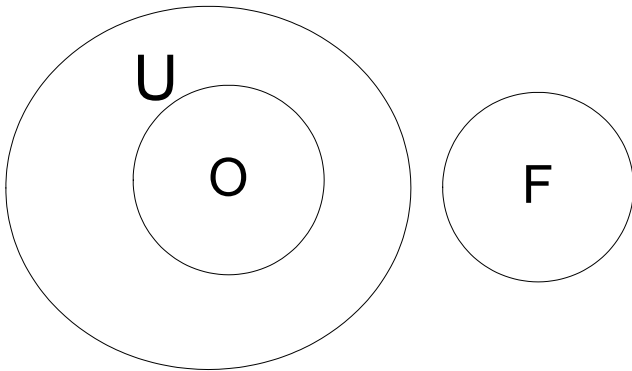
But as we've seen, that is not possible, one logical alternative is that either F is not a subset of U or O is not a subset of U e.g.



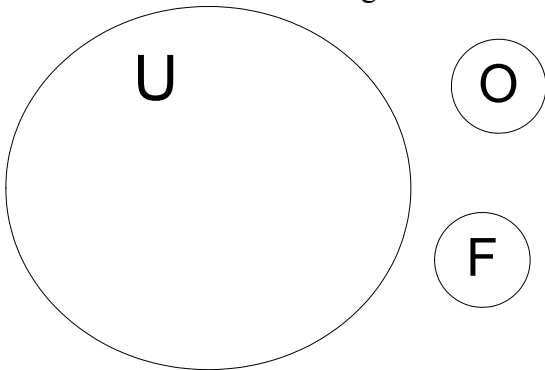
In which case either U is not the entire universal set of all elements or O simply does not exist at all. In other words if O is not a subset of U then O does not exist. Because U by definition is All things that Exist.

And no you can't argue that I've proven that O exists but is separate from U, because you'd have to specifically prove that O exists apart from U and by definition that is false. (Note if we are talking about the Universe and not the Universal set, we know at the point of the Big Bang all things started to move so O that is anything Immovable can be scientifically proven to NOT exist in the Universe, though not the Universal set). Note too that we cannot appeal to multiple universes, because by definition U consists of ALL things that exist. If multiple universes exist then they are a subset of U.

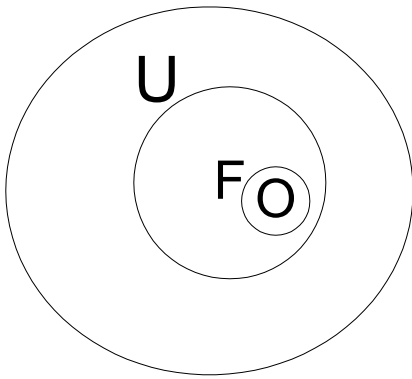
Note there are other possibilities where O exists but F does not exist.



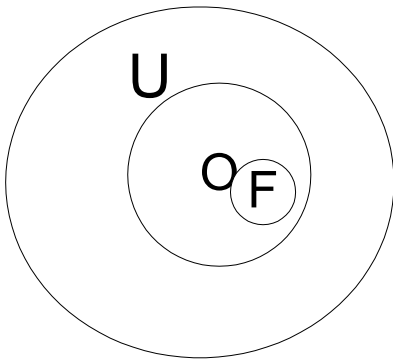
Or where both don't exist e.g.:



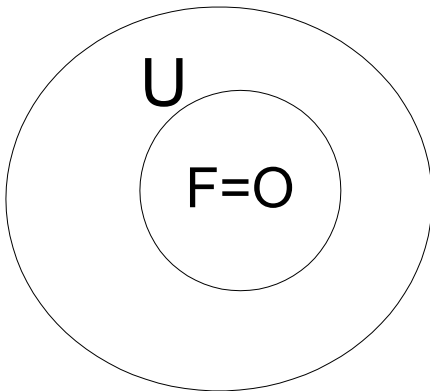
Now it must be noted that there could be a condition where both O and F can co-exist, but that could only be if O is a subset of F e.g.



But so far the logic says that the opposite could be true as well i.e.: F is a subset of O



And if both are true then in that case $O = F$.



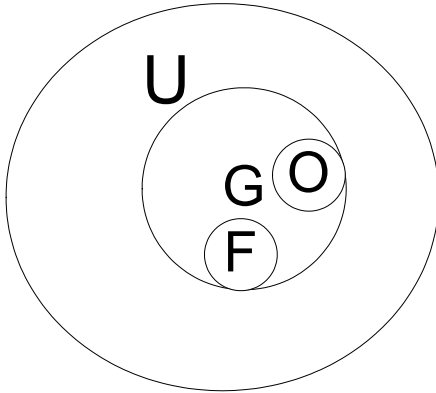
This then it would mean that the only way there could exist a God and an immovable object in the same universal set is if the immovable object was part of God or God was a subset of the immovable object or if God **were** the immovable object.

In the latter case what you have really asked is: Can God move Himself if he doesn't want to move.

But then you could ask that of yourself. Can you make *yourself* move if you didn't want to move?¹ We are again seeing the silliness of the question.

¹ Yes, yes, I'm assuming that your legs are not suddenly controlled by an alien entity or something because then that wouldn't really be you, would it? I'm also assuming that we are discussing wills and not discussing paralysis.

Or we could also say that both O and F are subsets of one entity: G



That would mean that the entity G (yes God) has a few characteristics amongst others.

1. That he cannot be resisted and
2. That nothing else can move him if he did want to be moved.

A concise answer?

But the question has been asked. So what is the proper way to answer it concisely?

The answer is: All you have managed to prove is that language allows you to create grammatically correct but meaningless sentences. It's just pure nonsense.

E.g. This is Round Square in $2D^2$.

The sentence is meaningless, because by defining a Square in 2 dimensions you have simultaneously defined that it cannot be round in the same 2 dimensions.

Another similar sentence would be: I painted this door red with black paint.

Naturally I am excluding the old sly double meanings in the question e.g. "What is black and white and red all over?" Answer: a Newspaper, but the real question was "What is black and white and *read* all over?" The slyness is in tricking the listener to assume the word read (past tense) was the word for the color red.

A silly question to begin with

In reality this question is asking: Can an object that cannot be moved be moved. Or can a force that cannot be resisted be resisted. It's a self contradictory statement and shows perhaps the ignorance or unintelligence of the person who asks the question (i.e. that they are unable to process or understand what they've asked).

A similar sentence would be: This statement is a lie.

This as any Star Trek fan will know was the way Spock and Kirk defeated Harry Mudd's robots.

We call these statements **Suicide Statements**. See the paper on the Sermons page of this website (www.NoBlindFaith.com) called Suicide Statements for more such self contradictory statements and easy ways to refute them. It turns out that lots of people spout these suicide statements without realizing that they are spouting nonsense. Here are a few teasers:

² Note that a 3D round square would be a squat cylinder.

1. It's wrong to impose your morals on others.
2. There is no absolute truth.
3. You can't know anything about God.
4. You shouldn't go around telling people that their religion is wrong.

III. Using the nature of God.

Let's now discuss the same question using the nature of God as defined by the Bible. First the Bible does not say that God can do everything. The word translated for Omnipotence is the Greek word Pantocrator. It means "Ruler" of all things. It has never meant: Capable of doing ALL things. Which is what many people seem to mistake it for.

In fact there are many things that God cannot do, for instance:

- a) God cannot sin
- b) God cannot cease being God
- c) God cannot cease knowing everything
- d) God cannot forget
- e) God cannot learn anything new
- f) God cannot be surprised
- g) God cannot create a god that is greater than Him (related to c)
- h) God cannot create anything that defeats Him (related to c)

And so on and so forth. And this is necessary for God is a rational and logical God. Thus his nature has to be both rational and logical.

If someone insists that God can do anything, ask them where they got that idea from. It's not in the Bible. They made it up. Or they presumed that that was what the Bible said, or they presumed that that was what was needed for God to exist. But that is illogical

So if you go back to the stone question, the way this question is usually posed is as such:

Atheist: Do you believe God can do anything?

To which the sucker Theist is supposed to say: Yes.

Then out comes the stone question

Atheist: Well in that case, can God create a stone so big that He cannot move it?

To which the sucker Theist is supposedly stuck: Because if he says: Yes.

Then the answer comes back:

Atheist: Well in that case God can't do everything because that means He can't move the stone.

But if the sucker Theist says: No.

Then comes the almost identical response:

Atheist: Well in that case God can't do everything because he can't create the stone.

But the real problem was way back when our sucker Theist said yes to the Can God do anything question. The answer back there should have been:

Theist: No, we believe God is Omnipotent, this means all powerful. Being powerful does mean you can do irrational things or impossible things.

And that should have been followed by the list of things God cannot do.

- a) God cannot sin
- b) God cannot cease being God
- c) God cannot cease knowing everything
- d) God cannot forget
- e) God cannot learn anything new
- f) God cannot be surprised
- g) *God cannot create a god that is greater than Him (related to c)***
- h) God cannot create anything that defeats Him (related to c)

And since (g) above has already been mentioned, it would immediately pre-nullify the question about God and the immovable Object.

So if the Atheist still asks: Can God create a stone so big that He cannot move it?
The Theist spoils his fun by saying: No, because as I told you God cannot create anything that would defeat him or stop him from being God.

I hope this helps you in class. Feel free to give this entire paper to your teacher, skeptic or otherwise and they can feel free to disagree with me and email me directly at neils_stone@NoBlindFaith.com. After all I could be wrong. I'm only human and I can be moved.

Neil Mammen
San Jose, CA

Originally written sometime in 1996 for a college student who'd been asked this question.

Appendix:

Can God do Anything? (A blog I wrote for www.crossexamined.org)

In a response to one of our readers, I said that God cannot do anything. The reader responded? Then what about Miracles.

So let me see if I can clarify.

1. God cannot do "anything."

He cannot do anything which is not actually possible, for example he cannot make $1+1=3$, He cannot make black actually white, He cannot paint a door black with red paint bought from Home Depot and no added chemicals (at least not without some sort of other activity), He cannot give someone freedom of choice and then and then not let them choose (note some of these are obviously irrational but it would seem fallacious to try to argue that the source of all rationality could be irrational itself).

So if someone asks you if God can do anything. Say "No."

2. Miracles are not actually impossible

Miracles are not actually impossible because any miracle or supernatural event could have been made to take place if enough technology or knowledge was available or if an extra-dimensional being was able to manipulate molecules.

For instance in the Home Depot Paint example above, He could manipulate the molecules to change them into the molecules of Black Paint. He could make it grow a black fungus. But red paint paints red even for God unless He does something besides paint.

Ah but you ask, what about the water into wine miracle. Well the water was changed into wine. It wasn't water that was also wine (and while it could have been hypnotism, the passage indicates it wasn't). He changed the water molecules into wine molecules (and very good wine at that). Was it synthetic wine, sure it was. Of course he could have also swapped the water for real wine.

So we see none of these miracles are actually impossible

Now it's worth noting that the impossibility is usually in philosophical or conceptual issues. E.g. making the square root of $-1 = 1$. Or making the cube of 5, 124.

You see making $1+1 = 3$ is not a matter of manipulating molecules. It is dealing at a much higher level. It's dealing with things at the point of rationality. Mess with that and everything stops being cohesive, the universe starts to unravel.

3. But I thought God was Omnipotent.

God IS omnipotent (all powerful) but he is not omni-able (i.e. able to do anything). There's a clear distinction between the two. We believe that God is all powerful, not all capable when it comes to irrationality. And if you think about this, this is really tied into His character, His personality, His being.