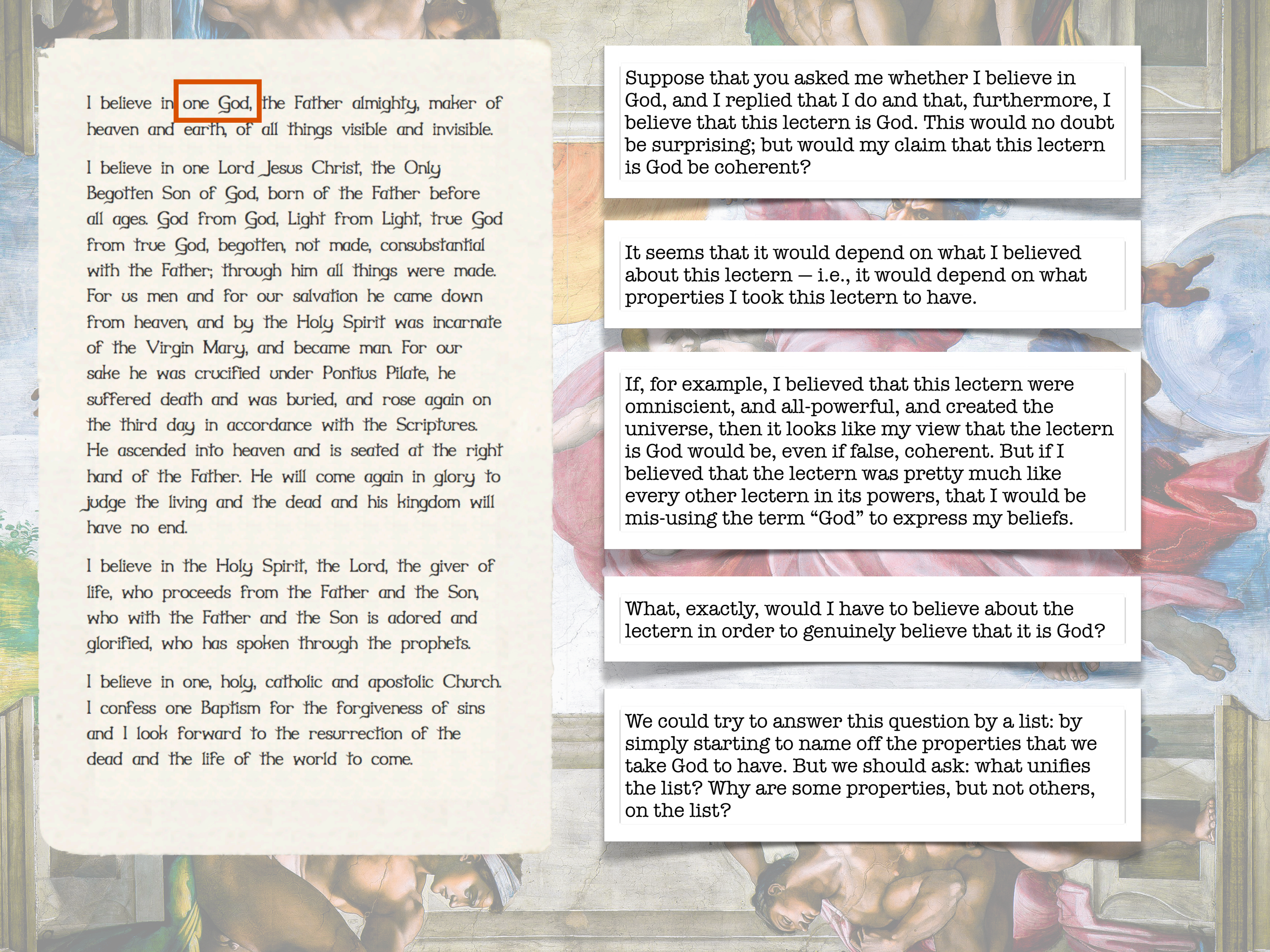




The attributes of God  
and the paradox of  
omnipotence



I believe in **one God**, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.

I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

Suppose that you asked me whether I believe in God, and I replied that I do and that, furthermore, I believe that this lectern is God. This would no doubt be surprising; but would my claim that this lectern is God be coherent?

It seems that it would depend on what I believed about this lectern – i.e., it would depend on what properties I took this lectern to have.

If, for example, I believed that this lectern were omniscient, and all-powerful, and created the universe, then it looks like my view that the lectern is God would be, even if false, coherent. But if I believed that the lectern was pretty much like every other lectern in its powers, that I would be mis-using the term “God” to express my beliefs.

What, exactly, would I have to believe about the lectern in order to genuinely believe that it is God?

We could try to answer this question by a list: by simply starting to name off the properties that we take God to have. But we should ask: what unifies the list? Why are some properties, but not others, on the list?

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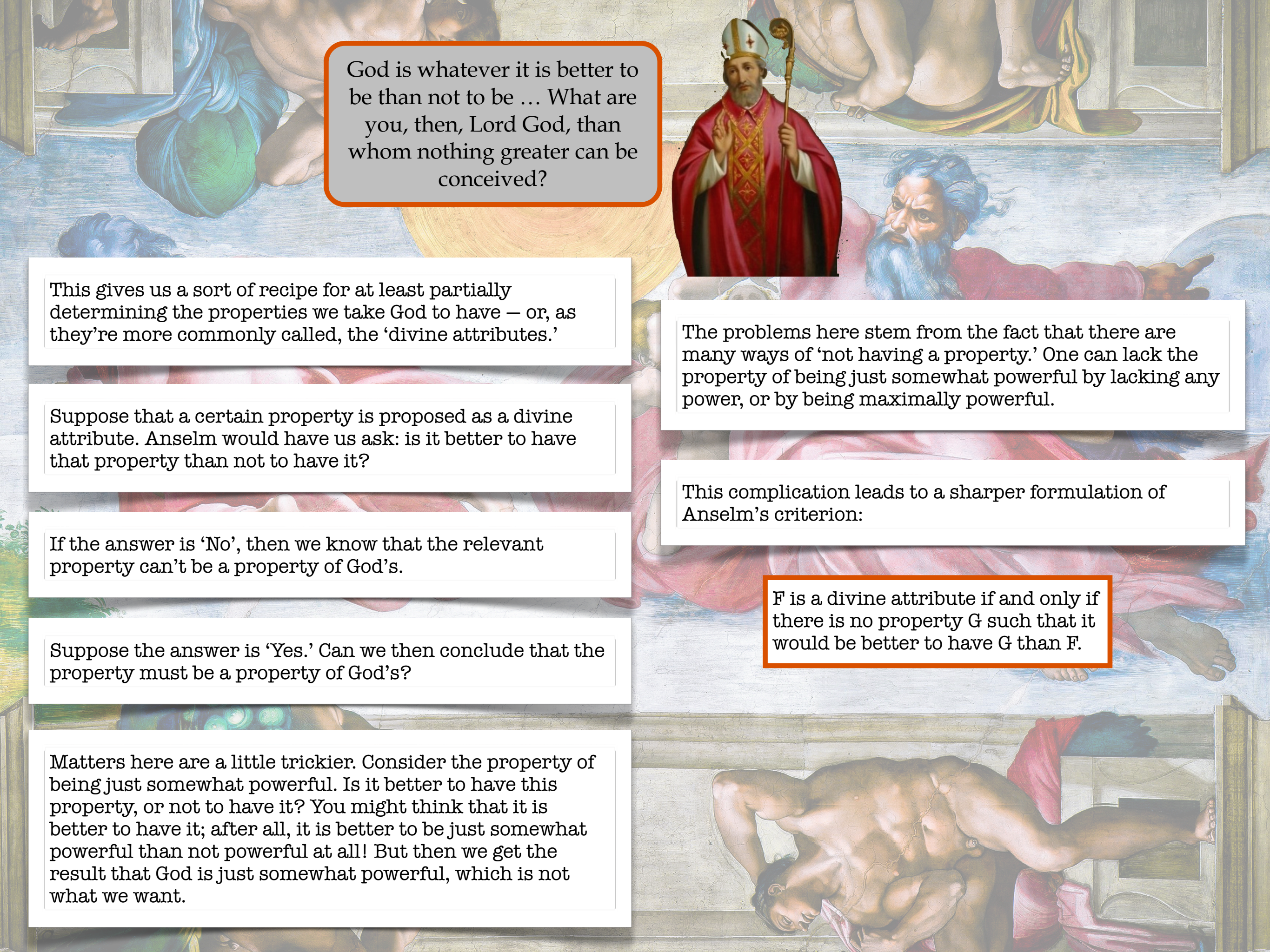
This is a question which St. Anselm — an 11th century English monk — tried to answer. In his Proslogion he wrote:

God is whatever it is better to be than not to be ... What are you, then, Lord God, than whom nothing greater can be conceived?

This gives us a sort of recipe for at least partially determining the properties we take God to have — or, as they're more commonly called, the 'divine attributes.'

Suppose that a certain property is proposed as a divine attribute. Anselm would have us ask: is it better to have that property than not to have it?





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If the answer is 'No', then we know that the relevant property can't be a property of God's.

Suppose the answer is 'Yes.' Can we then conclude that the property must be a property of God's?

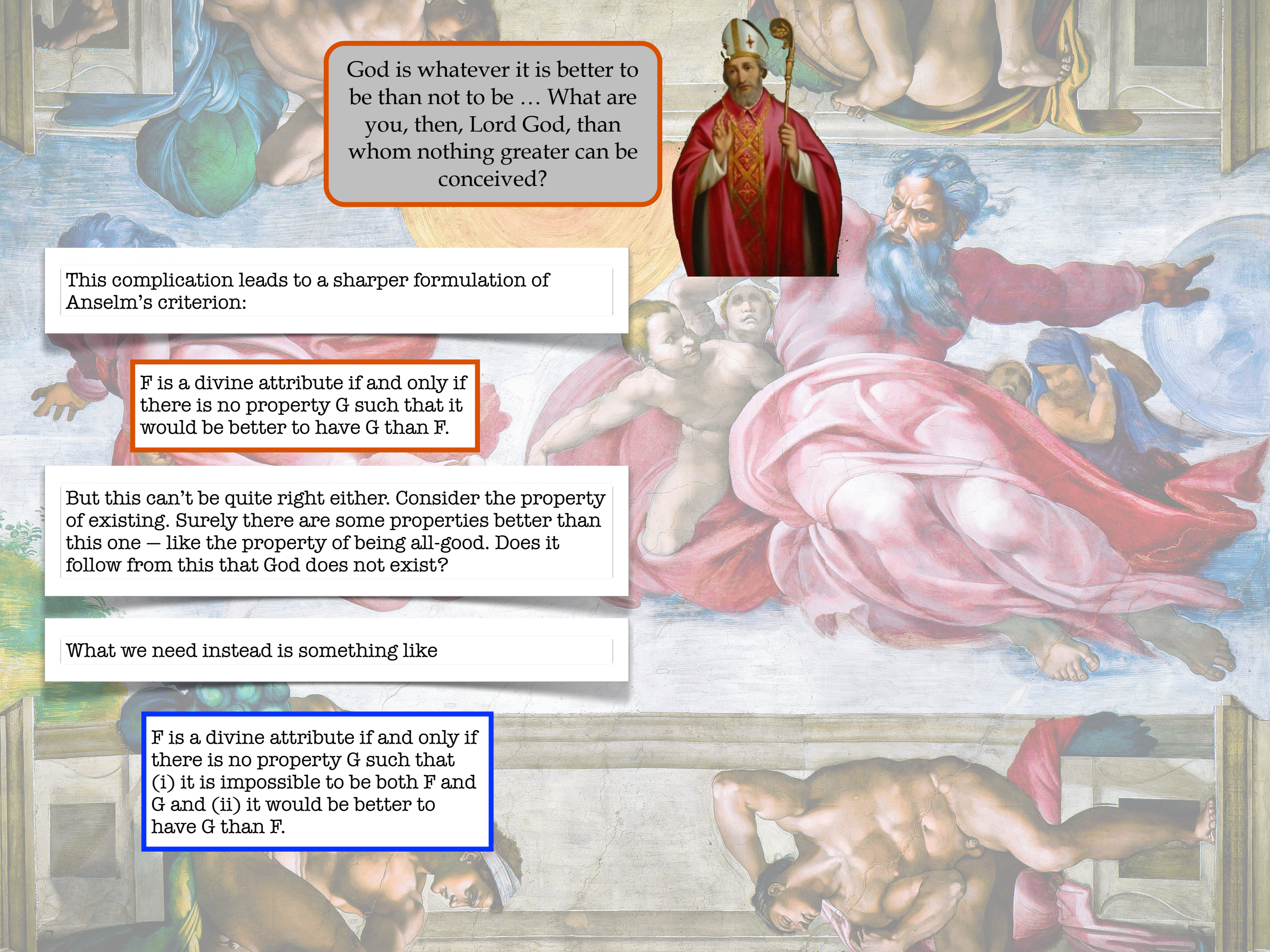
Matters here are a little trickier. Consider the property of being just somewhat powerful. Is it better to have this property, or not to have it? You might think that it is better to have it; after all, it is better to be just somewhat powerful than not powerful at all! But then we get the result that God is just somewhat powerful, which is not what we want.



The problems here stem from the fact that there are many ways of 'not having a property.' One can lack the property of being just somewhat powerful by lacking any power, or by being maximally powerful.

This complication leads to a sharper formulation of Anselm's criterion:

$F$  is a divine attribute if and only if there is no property  $G$  such that it would be better to have  $G$  than  $F$ .



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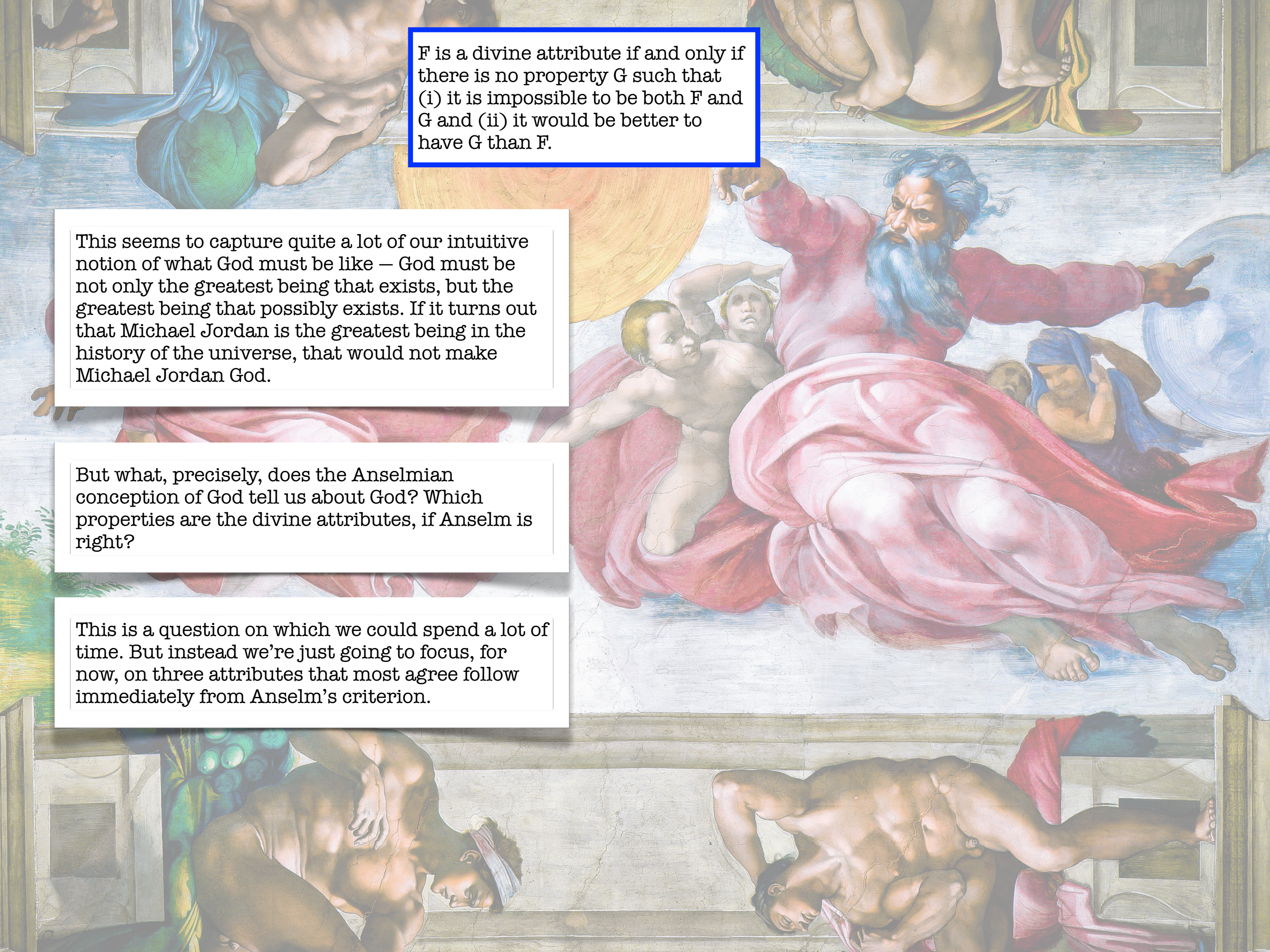
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But this can't be quite right either. Consider the property of existing. Surely there are some properties better than this one – like the property of being all-good. Does it follow from this that God does not exist?

What we need instead is something like

F is a divine attribute if and only if there is no property G such that (i) it is impossible to be both F and G and (ii) it would be better to have G than F.

The background of the entire page is a detail from Michelangelo's famous fresco, 'The Creation of Adam'. It depicts the reclining Adam on the left, reaching towards the God on the right. The God is shown as an elderly man with a long white beard, wearing a red robe, reclining on a blue cushion. He is pointing his right hand towards Adam. Other figures, including the Virgin Mary and the Holy Spirit, are visible in the background. The scene is set in a room with a wooden floor and a doorway.

F is a divine attribute if and only if there is no property G such that (i) it is impossible to be both F and G and (ii) it would be better to have G than F.

This seems to capture quite a lot of our intuitive notion of what God must be like — God must be not only the greatest being that exists, but the greatest being that possibly exists. If it turns out that Michael Jordan is the greatest being in the history of the universe, that would not make Michael Jordan God.

But what, precisely, does the Anselmian conception of God tell us about God? Which properties are the divine attributes, if Anselm is right?

This is a question on which we could spend a lot of time. But instead we're just going to focus, for now, on three attributes that most agree follow immediately from Anselm's criterion.

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omniscient

omnipotent

omnibenevolent

Many take this to be the core of our conception of God: that God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good. But, as we'll see, even this beginning of a list of the divine attributes leads to immediate problems. Today, we'll focus on the problems to which omnipotence gives rise.

omniscient

omnipotent

omnibenevolent

What, exactly, does it mean for a being to be omnipotent?

A natural answer to this question is:

But now consider the following question:

(1) A being is omnipotent if and only if that being can do anything.

Could God create a stone so large that even God could not lift it?

Yes


No

Then there's something God cannot do: namely, lift the stone.

Then there's something God cannot do: namely, make the stone.

Either way, given definition (1) of omnipotence, God is not omnipotent.





This is evidently an argument for the conclusion that there could not be a being which can do anything. But the way that we presented the argument was not especially precise; it did not make clear exactly how the argument was supposed to work.

In order to get clearer on this, it is good to begin with a question: what is an argument?

An argument consists of two parts. First, there's what you're arguing for - the **conclusion** of the argument. Second, there's the stuff you say in support of that conclusion. The claims you make in support of a conclusion are the **premises** of the argument.

So to give an argument is to enumerate some premises in support of a conclusion. But suppose that you are given an argument for some conclusion — say, the conclusion that there is no omnipotent being. How do you tell whether that argument is a good or bad argument? What does it even mean to say that an argument is good or bad?

We can begin by considering some examples of arguments. One good way to write out an argument is by listing the premises of the argument by number, and then writing the conclusion, as follows:

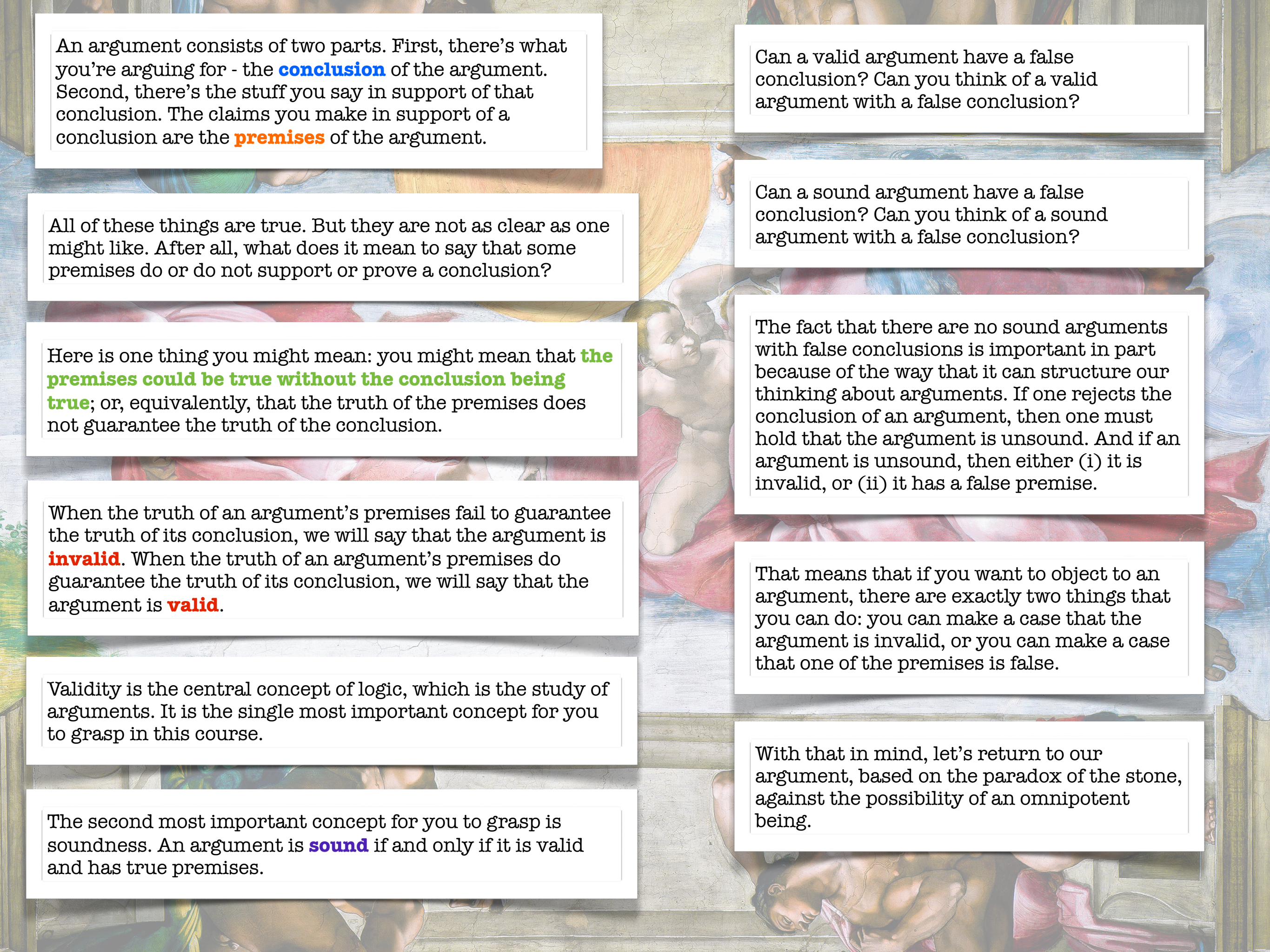
1. Notre Dame is in Indiana.
2. Indiana is the Hoosier State.

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C. The number of beer bottles on Notre Dame's campus right now is odd.

There's obviously something wrong with this argument; it is not a good argument. But why? The problem is not really with the premises; both of them are true, after all. Rather, the problem is with the relationship, or lack thereof, between the premises and the conclusion. You might express this by saying that the premises have nothing to do with the conclusion, or that they don't really support the conclusion, or that they don't prove the conclusion.

All of these things are true. But they are not as clear as one might like. After all, what does it mean to say that some premises do or do not support or prove a conclusion?



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Here is one thing you might mean: you might mean that **the premises could be true without the conclusion being true**; or, equivalently, that the truth of the premises does not guarantee the truth of the conclusion.

When the truth of an argument's premises fail to guarantee the truth of its conclusion, we will say that the argument is **invalid**. When the truth of an argument's premises do guarantee the truth of its conclusion, we will say that the argument is **valid**.

Validity is the central concept of logic, which is the study of arguments. It is the single most important concept for you to grasp in this course.

The second most important concept for you to grasp is soundness. An argument is **sound** if and only if it is valid and has true premises.

Can a valid argument have a false conclusion? Can you think of a valid argument with a false conclusion?

Can a sound argument have a false conclusion? Can you think of a sound argument with a false conclusion?

The fact that there are no sound arguments with false conclusions is important in part because of the way that it can structure our thinking about arguments. If one rejects the conclusion of an argument, then one must hold that the argument is unsound. And if an argument is unsound, then either (i) it is invalid, or (ii) it has a false premise.

That means that if you want to object to an argument, there are exactly two things that you can do: you can make a case that the argument is invalid, or you can make a case that one of the premises is false.

With that in mind, let's return to our argument, based on the paradox of the stone, against the possibility of an omnipotent being.

Could God create a stone so large that even God could not lift it?

(1) A being is omnipotent if and only if that being can do anything.

Yes

No

When you're trying to figure out how an argument works, a good way to do it is to begin by clearly stating the conclusion to be argued for.

Then there's something God cannot do: namely, lift the stone.

Then there's something God cannot do: namely, make the stone.

A good next step is to list some of the main premises.

1. Either (a) God can create a stone so large that God cannot lift it, or (b) God cannot create a stone so large that God cannot lift it.

These seem to be the main explicit premises of the argument. Now our question is: do they give us a valid argument for our conclusion, or do we need to add extra assumptions?

2. If (a), then there is something God cannot do.

3. If (b), then there is something God cannot do.

C. God is not omnipotent.

(1) A being is omnipotent if and only if that being can do anything.

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At this stage, a good question to ask is: does anything follow from the premises we have on the table already?

So it looks like 4 follows from 1, 2, and 3 together. But how can we get from 4 to our conclusion?

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2. If (a), then there is something God cannot do.

3. If (b), then there is something God cannot do.

4. There is something that God cannot do. (1,2,3)

5. A being is omnipotent if and only if that being can do anything. (Def. 1 of omnipotence)

C. God is not omnipotent.

(1) A being is omnipotent if and only if that being can do anything.

Is this argument valid?

The point of formalizing an argument in this way is that, once we are sure that our argument is valid, we can now clearly isolate the assumptions needed to derive the conclusion. Given that the argument is valid, we know that if the conclusion is false, one of the premises must also be false.

Suppose that someone were to reject the conclusion, and support this by arguing that premise (4) – and no other premise – is false. Would this make sense?

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C. God is not omnipotent. (4,5)

No. We have to distinguish between **independent** and **derived** premises. If we're presented with a valid argument for a conclusion we wish to resist, we need to find an independent premise – one which is not supposed to follow from other premises – which it is plausible to reject. In the case of the above argument, this gives us four choices: premises 1, 2, 3, and 5.

But does the believer in God really have to reject the conclusion? Could we just accept the result that God is not omnipotent?

Not, it seems, if we accept the conception of God as the greatest conceivable being, and hence Anselm's criterion:

F is a divine attribute if and only if there is no property G such that (i) it is impossible to be both F and G and (ii) it would be better to have G than F.

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Aquinas agreed with Anselm that God is the greatest being conceivable, and hence had to find a response to this argument. We can see how he would respond to this argument by looking at his account of omnipotence.

Here's what I think Aquinas has in mind here. There seems to be a distinction between truths which are **necessary** – which could not have been otherwise – and truths which are **contingent** – which could have been otherwise.

First, he considers definition 1 of omnipotence above, and gives the following objection:

But consider some necessary truth – like the claim that triangles have three sides. If definition 1 of omnipotence were true, then God could make a triangle which does not have three sides. After all, definition 1 of omnipotence says that God can do **anything**.

If God were omnipotent, then all things would be possible; nothing, therefore, impossible. But if we take away the impossible, then we destroy also the necessary. ... Therefore there would be nothing at all that is necessary in things if God were omnipotent.

But if God could make a triangle without three sides, there could have been a triangle without three sides; and in that case the claim that triangles have three sides is not necessary, but contingent.

(1) A being is omnipotent if and only if that being can do anything.

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But if God could make a triangle without three sides, there could have been a triangle without three sides; and in that case the claim that triangles have three sides is not necessary, but contingent.

The conclusion is that if there is a distinction between necessary and contingent truths, as there seems to be, then omnipotence can't be understood according to definition 1. Hence, Aquinas concludes, this definition of omnipotence is incorrect.

This gives us a response to our argument because, if that definition is incorrect, then premise 5 of our argument is false.

But we can't stop there; one wonders what omnipotence is, if it is not the ability to do anything.

(1) A being is omnipotent if and only if that being can do anything.

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This leads Aquinas to say:

The first alternative account Aquinas considers is:

God is called omnipotent because he can do all things that are possible absolutely.

(2) A being is omnipotent if and only if that being can do anything that it is possible for that being to do.

Which we can formulate as:

The problem with this, Aquinas says, is that it leads to a 'vicious circle'. According to definition 2, if we want to understand what God's omnipotence is, we have to first know what it is possible for God to do – but that's exactly what we wanted to find out!

(3) A being is omnipotent if and only if that being can bring about anything which is possible.



(1) A being is omnipotent if and only if that being can do anything.

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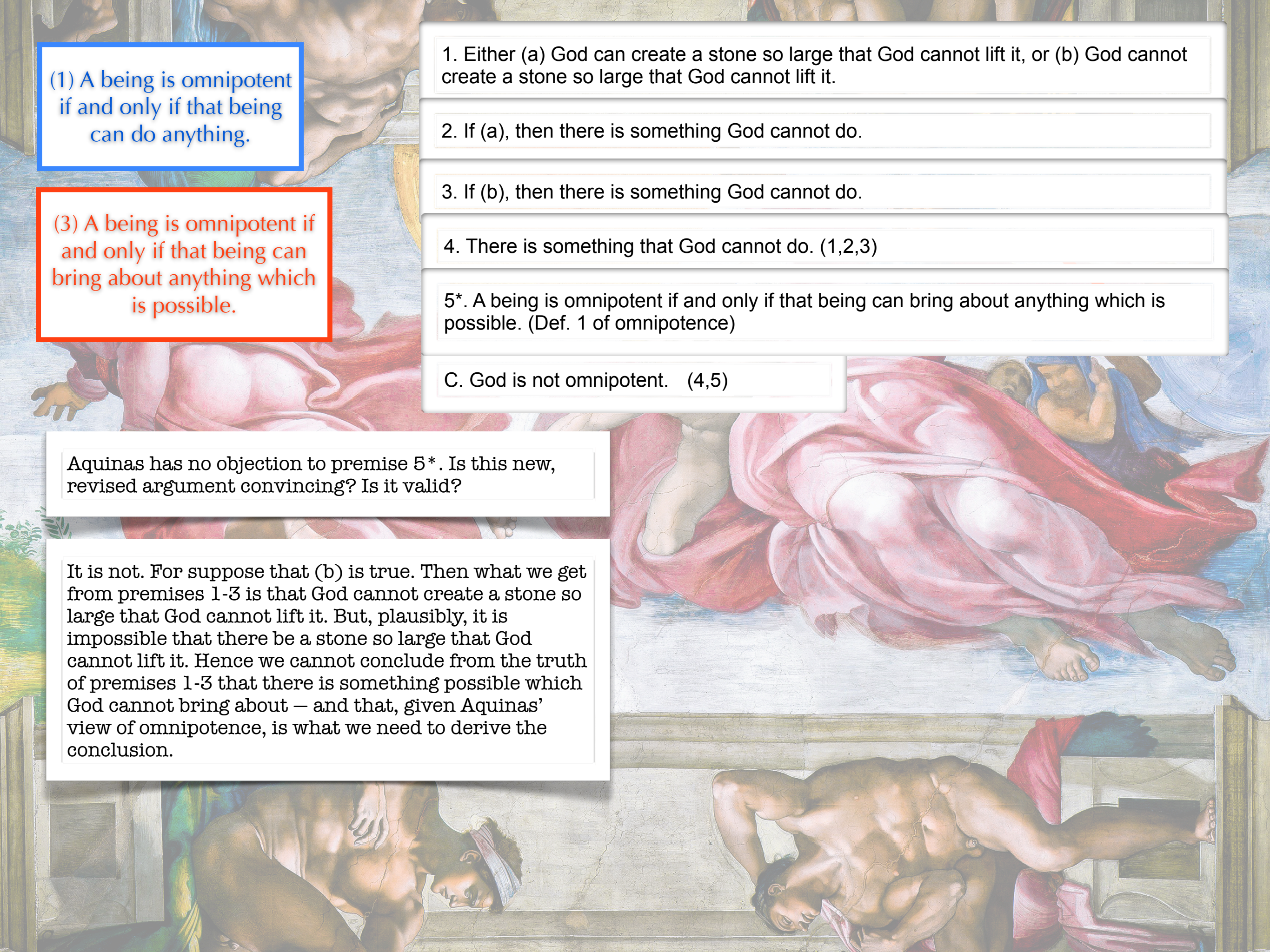
C. God is not omnipotent. (4,5)

Suppose that Aquinas is right about this, and that omnipotence should be understood according to definition 3. Then we have a way out of the argument, because this falsifies premise 5.

But one might wonder: could we revise the argument so as to avoid this objection?

And it might seem that we could: we could just replace premise 5 with:

5\*. A being is omnipotent if and only if that being can bring about anything which is possible. (Def. 1 of omnipotence)



(1) A being is omnipotent if and only if that being can do anything.

(3) A being is omnipotent if and only if that being can bring about anything which is possible.

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5\*. A being is omnipotent if and only if that being can bring about anything which is possible. (Def. 1 of omnipotence)

C. God is not omnipotent. (4,5)

Aquinas has no objection to premise 5\*. Is this new, revised argument convincing? Is it valid?

It is not. For suppose that (b) is true. Then what we get from premises 1-3 is that God cannot create a stone so large that God cannot lift it. But, plausibly, it is impossible that there be a stone so large that God cannot lift it. Hence we cannot conclude from the truth of premises 1-3 that there is something possible which God cannot bring about — and that, given Aquinas' view of omnipotence, is what we need to derive the conclusion.

(1) A being is omnipotent if and only if that being can do anything.

(3) A being is omnipotent if and only if that being can bring about anything which is possible.

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Let's return to our original argument. Suppose that we do not find Aquinas' definition of omnipotence plausible, perhaps on the grounds that it unduly restricts God's power.

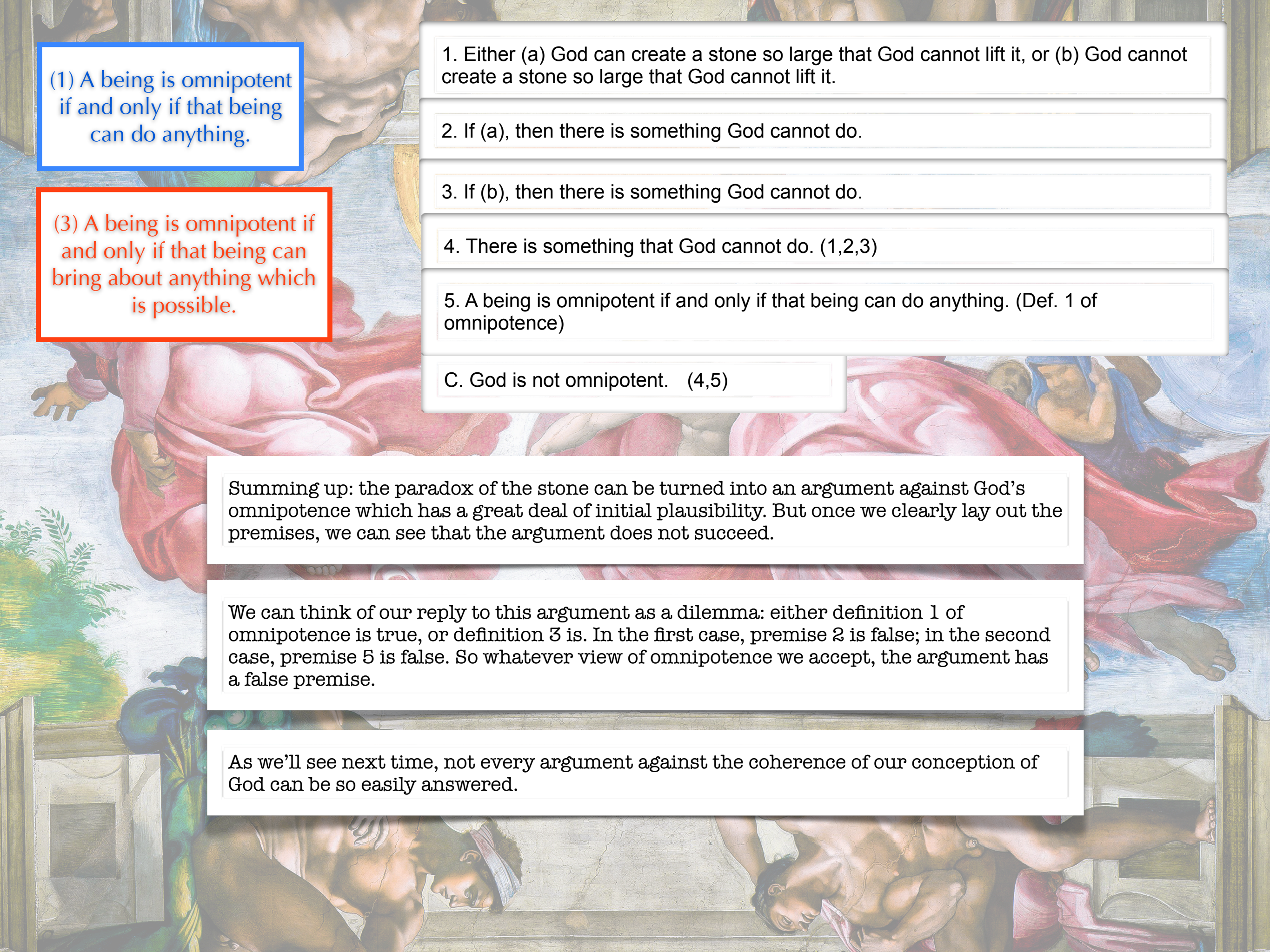
The idea, presumably, is something like this: if (a) is true, then God can make a stone — call it X — so large that God cannot lift it. But then God cannot lift X, and so there is something that God cannot do.

This might lead us to stick with definition 1 of omnipotence. If we do this, we can hardly reject premise 5 of the argument. Is there any other plausible objection we can make to the argument?

But how do we know that, having made X, God cannot lift it? One wants to say: because the definition of X is 'a stone so large that God cannot lift it.' It would be a contradiction for God to lift it!

Somewhat surprisingly, the answer is 'Yes.' Let's look more closely at premise 2 of the argument. Why is this supposed to be plausible?

To which the defender of definition 1 of omnipotence can say: So what? According to my definition of omnipotence God can bring about impossible states of affairs. So God can make a stone too large for God to lift, and also lift it.



(1) A being is omnipotent if and only if that being can do anything.

(3) A being is omnipotent if and only if that being can bring about anything which is possible.

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Summing up: the paradox of the stone can be turned into an argument against God's omnipotence which has a great deal of initial plausibility. But once we clearly lay out the premises, we can see that the argument does not succeed.

We can think of our reply to this argument as a dilemma: either definition 1 of omnipotence is true, or definition 3 is. In the first case, premise 2 is false; in the second case, premise 5 is false. So whatever view of omnipotence we accept, the argument has a false premise.

As we'll see next time, not every argument against the coherence of our conception of God can be so easily answered.