Ryerson University
Digital Commons @ Ryerson

Philosophy Publications and Research | Philosophy

1-1-2005

William L. Rowe's A Priori Argument for Atheism

Klaas J. Kraay
Ryerson University, kraay@ryerson.ca

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.ryerson.ca/philosophy

Part of the Philosophy Commons

Recommended Citation
Kraay, Klaas J., "William L. Rowe's A Priori Argument for Atheism" (2005). *Philosophy Publications and Research*. Paper 8.
http://digitalcommons.ryerson.ca/philosophy/8

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy at Digital Commons @ Ryerson. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Ryerson. For more information, please contact bcameron@ryerson.ca.

WILLIAM L. ROWE'S *A PRIORI* ARGUMENT FOR ATHEISM

Klaas J. Kraay
Ryerson University

This paper appears in *Faith and Philosophy* 22 (2005): 211-234. The published version can be found online at: http://www.pdcnet.org/collection/faithphil_2005_0022_0002_0211_0234.pdf.

ABSTRACT: William Rowe's *a posteriori* arguments for the non-existence of God are well-known. Rather less attention has been given, however, to Rowe's intriguing *a priori* argument for atheism. In this paper, I examine the three published responses to Rowe's *a priori* argument (due to Bruce Langtry, William Morris, and Daniel and Frances Howard-Snyder, respectively). I conclude that none is decisive, but I show that Rowe's argument nevertheless requires more defence than he provides.

The hypothesis of no prime worlds (NPW) holds that for any possible world *x* that an omnipotent being has the power to actualize, there is a better world, *y*, that the omnipotent being could have actualized instead of *x*.[1] NPW is generally deployed to defend theism against the charge that God *failed to do his best* in actualizing this world.[2] Sometimes this view is deployed to defend theism against the charge that God *failed to do better* in actualizing this world.[3] These defences are compelling, and, accordingly, critics of theism have developed new anti-theistic arguments on NPW. Most anti-theistic arguments on this view are *a posteriori*: they typically hold that a God-actualized world would exhibit (or lack) certain features, and that, since the actual world fails (or seemingly fails) to conform to these expectations, it is reasonable to believe that God does not exist.[4] Since most of these arguments appeal to certain claims about evil, they may be treated as versions of the problem of evil. Such arguments are controversial, and the literature surrounding them is vast.

Recently, a few authors have advanced versions of a remarkable *a priori* argument against theism on NPW.[5] This argument is ambitious: it can be understood to suggest that God's existence is *impossible* on NPW. If sound, then, this argument should force the theist to give up either theism or NPW. In what follows, I discuss William L. Rowe's elegant and intriguing articulation of this argument. I examine recent responses to Rowe's argument due to Bruce Langtry, Thomas Morris, and Daniel and Frances Howard-Snyder.[6] I conclude that none is successful, but I show that Rowe's argument nevertheless requires more defence than he provides. The *a priori* case against theism on NPW, then, not yet complete.

1. ROWE'S *A PRIORI* ARGUMENT FOR ATHEISM ON NPW

Rowe's exposition of this argument is swift:

> A being is necessarily an absolutely perfect moral being only if it is not possible for there to be a being morally better than it. If a being creates a world when there is some morally better world that it could have created, then it is possible that there be a being morally better than it. Since our assumption [NPW] implies that for any world an omnipotent being creates there is a morally better world that it can create, it follows that any such being who creates even a very good world cannot be an absolutely perfect moral being. Although the omnipotent being in

> question could be a very good moral agent and enjoy a significant degree of freedom in creating among a number of very good worlds, it could not be an absolutely perfect moral being. The existence of the theistic God who creates a world is inconsistent with the supposition that among the worlds he can create there is no morally unsurpassable world.[7]

The argument in this passage may be formalized in the following manner:

(1) On NPW, if there is an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good being, then it is always possible for that being to actualize a morally better world.
(2) On NPW, if it is always possible for an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good being to actualize a morally better world, then it is always possible for that being to have been morally better.
(3) Therefore, on NPW, if there is an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good being, then it is always possible for that being to have been morally better.
(4) On NPW, if there is an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good being, then it is not possible for that being to have been morally better.
(5) Therefore, on NPW, there is no omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good being.

Premise (1) is simply an expression of NPW, and premise (4) is an analytic truth. Premise (2) is the crucial move in this argument, since it is required for (3), and (3) and (4) together comprise the contradiction that completes the *reductio* of the antecedent of (1). Rowe, it must be noted, offers no explicit argument for premise (2). I concur with Bruce Langtry, who, referring to this premise, holds that "[w]e ought, in the present context, be discontent with any mere appeal to intuition in defence of Rowe's premise, but rather demand an argument in favour of it."[8] So, why might one hold (2)? This premise alleges a connection between the goodness of an actualized world and the goodness of the actualizing agent. Perhaps, then, Rowe thinks that, *ceteris paribus*, in actualizing a better world, one performs a better *action*. And perhaps he also thinks that, *ceteris paribus*, if one performs a better *action*, one is thereby a better *agent*.[9] Both claims have been rejected by Rowe's critics, and these moves will be assessed in Sections 2, 3, and 4. Since premise (2) seems to conflate these two distinct claims, it will be useful to recast Rowe's argument in a manner that distinguishes them. This will also enable us to see better precisely how Rowe's critics engage his argument. Suppose, then, that we reformulate Rowe's argument in this way:[10]

(6) On NPW, an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being is possible.
(7) On NPW, it is always possible for the *product (or outcome) of the world -actualizing action* of the omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being to have been better.
P1 **If it is possible for the *product (or outcome)* of a world-actualizing action performed by some being to have been better, then, *ceteris paribus*, it is possible for *that action* to have been better.**[11]
(8) Therefore, on NPW, it is always possible for *the world-actualizing action* of the omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being to have been better.
P2 **If it is possible for *the world-actualizing action* performed by some being to have been better, then, *ceteris paribus*, it is possible for *that being* to have been better.**
(9) Therefore, on NPW, it is always possible for the *omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being* to have been better.
(10) On NPW, it is not possible for an *omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good*

being to have been better.

(11) Therefore, on NPW, no omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good being is possible.

The argument is now a straightforward *reductio* of (6).[12] Premise (7) is a restatement of NPW, and (10) is an analytic truth. (9) and (10) together comprise the contradiction required to complete the *reductio*. The crucial moves in this argument, then, are the inference from (7) to (8) and the inference from (8) to (9). These inferences are made valid by the insertion of two principles: P1 and P2. These, of course, are the principles that I suggested might underwrite premise (2) of the first formalization of Rowe's argument. It is worth emphasizing that inasmuch as Rowe offers no explicit support for (2), he offers no explicit defence of these principles: they are entirely suppressed in his argument. Bruce Langtry, Thomas Morris, and Daniel and Frances Howard-Snyder have all recently criticized these principles. After briefly rejecting the arguments of Langtry and Morris in Sections 2 and 3, I offer, in Section 4, a detailed analysis and criticism of the Howard-Snyders' complex argument against Rowe.

2. LANGTRY'S CRITICISMS OF P1

Langtry offers two criticisms of Rowe, and both can be construed as objections to P1. Here is the first:

> Does [NPW] imply that for any action actualising a world that God can perform there is a morally better alternative action that he can perform? No. It is logically necessary that if a being is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good then it cannot act in a morally better way, or more rationally, than it in fact acts. What [NPW] implies is that, given that an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good being is logically possible, there are worlds V and W *such that V is better than W*, and God can actualise V without violating any moral duty, but God's actualising V *is not a morally better action*, or more rational, than his actualising W" [emphasis added].[13]

If this move is successful, P1 founders and the inference from (7) to (8) is undercut. Unfortunately, however, this move fails. Notice that Langtry offers no *argument* against P1 here. He merely observes that *if* a perfectly good being is logically possible, then P1 must be rejected. But Rowe's argument (as I have construed it) purports to be a *reductio* of the very claim that a perfectly good being is logically possible, and the mere assertion of the first premise of a *reductio* is not sufficient to show that the *reductio* fails. At minimum, *independent* reasons for asserting such a premise must be established. Langtry, in effect, has merely shown he agrees with Rowe in thinking that { NPW, (6), P1 } is an inconsistent set.[14] But he offers no reason for thinking that P1 should be rejected, rather than, say, (6).[15]

In an endnote, Langtry offers a second line of attack against Rowe. He identifies and criticizes the following suppressed premise in Rowe's argument: "... other things being equal, in intentionally bringing about the better state of affairs one acts in the morally better way."[16] Since this premise is a generalized version of P1, I will take Langtry's subsequent argument to be a criticism of this moral principle.[17] Langtry suggests that

> ... *when a being is choosing a world to create from an infinite hierarchy of better and better worlds*, the conclusion that one could always have acted in a morally better way is defeated by the fact that some worlds are *good enough*. Rejection of what would be entirely acceptable were it not for the option of choosing the better

> would be no sign of superior excellence of character; rather the defective nature of the attitude would be shown in the paralysis and self-stultification which it induced.[18]

I take it that the second sentence in this passage is meant to support the first. (Taken independently, the first statement merely asserts that there are *good enough* worlds: worlds which, in this context, include God's existence. But this amounts to another arbitrary rejection of P1, and accordingly does not settle the question in Langtry's favour). The argument, then, appears to be that P1 is false because it would have a paralytic and stultifying effect on the agent who employs it as a rule for action in this context.

This, however, still does not suffice for the rejection of P1. A further premise is required, such as (for instance) the claim that it is impossible that God's actions be paralyzed or stultified. But such an assertion just amounts to another arbitrary denial of Rowe's claim that (6), not P1, should be rejected. In short, Langtry rejects P1 because it (together with NPW) appears to have unwelcome consequences for theism, but such a rejection is unmotivated, because it offers no *independent* reason for thinking P1 false. Rowe knows perfectly well that P1 and NPW jointly have unwelcome consequences for theism: his argument, after all, is an elaboration of this basic insight.[19]

Here too, then, the disagreement between Rowe and Langtry can perhaps best be understood as before. They both appear to agree that { NPW, (6), P1 } is an inconsistent triad. To resolve this inconsistency, Rowe would presumably prefer to argue from NPW and P1 to the denial of (6), while Langtry, as we have seen, argues from NPW and (1) to the denial of P1. But neither offers independent reason for their preference: Rowe offers no argument for P1, and Langtry offers no argument for (6). This debate, then, ends in stalemate.

3. THOMAS MORRIS' CRITICISMS OF P2

Thomas Morris does not address P1, but instead offers a criticism of P2. His strategy is to suggest and attack two claims that might be thought to underwrite this principle:[20]

The Production Thesis:	The goodness of an agent's actions is *productive* of the agent's goodness.
The Expression Thesis:	The goodness of an agent's actions is *expressive* of the agent's goodness.

Morris concedes that something like the production thesis may be true for human beings: "Since at least the time of Aristotle, we have realized that we can become good, at least in part, by doing good."[21] He denies, though, that the production thesis applies to God:

> [I]f anything like the production thesis is true of any sorts of beings at all, it is true only of beings with moral potential. A greatest possible being is by definition not a being with moral potential. Thus, to assume the unrestricted truth of the production thesis is just to beg the question against perfect being theology.[22]

As for the expression thesis, Morris thinks that this may be trivially true of human beings: however we act, even when we act akratically, we express our goodness (or lack thereof). And he thinks that God's goodness is expressed in his actions.[23] But he denies that this expressive connection holds *perfectly* in God's case on NPW:

> ...failing to do the best you can is a flaw or manifests an incompleteness in moral character in this way only if doing the best you can is at least a logical possibility. If doing the best he can in creating a world is for God an impossibility [on NPW] ... then not doing his best in creating cannot be seen as a flaw or as manifesting an incompleteness in the character of God. The notion of a perfect expression of an unsurpassable character would then itself be an incoherence. To assume otherwise would, again, just be to beg the question against perfect being theology.[24]

So Morris thinks that neither argument for P2 has merit, and, accordingly, that P2 should be rejected.

Strictly speaking, it is not clear that Morris' argument concerning the expression thesis engages Rowe: Rowe, recall, does not fault God for having *failed to do his best* in actualizing a world on NPW. Rowe's point, rather, is that no matter what a being does on NPW with respect to world-actualization, that being is surpassable, in which case no such being can be God.[25] Leaving this aside, it is clear that Morris' arguments concerning the production thesis and the expression thesis have a common form: they both allege that since these the thesis in question cannot sensibly apply to God, it should not be used to support P2. In short, then, Morris' point seems to be this: since the notion of a perfectly good being is coherent on NPW, P2 should be rejected. But this, like Langtry's argument, merely amounts to an *assertion* of the first premise of Rowe's *reductio*, and, again, no such mere assertion can undermine a *reductio*: independent argumentation is required.[26]

Morris thus appears to agree with Rowe that the following triad is inconsistent: { NPW, (6), P2 }.[27] And, while Rowe would presumably endorse NPW and P2 in order to reject (6), Morris endorses (6) and NPW in order to reject P2. But neither author offers any independent argument for their preference: as noted, Rowe does not argue for P2, nor does Morris argue for (6). This debate too, then, ends in stalemate.

4. THE HOWARD-SNYDERS' CRITICISM OF ROWE

Daniel and Frances Howard-Snyder advance an argument that purports to show that, *contra* Rowe, perfect being theology is not incoherent on NPW. It is not clear from the text whether their argument is to be construed as a denial of P1 or a denial of P2, but if their argument is successful, at least one of these principles is false.[28] In this section, I outline and criticize their complex argument.

4.1. JOVE'S USE OF A RANDOMIZING DEVICE

In "How an Unsurpassable Being can Create A Surpassable World", Daniel and Frances Howard-Snyder introduce a novel thought-experiment. They imagine a being named Jove who is omnipotent, omniscient, and unsurpassably good, and who is unable to actualize a prime world, there being none. Jove divides the set of all possible worlds into two subsets based on certain axiologically-relevant criteria.[29] Worlds in the better subset are given unique ordinals: the worst of the lot receives '1', the second-worst '2', and so on.[30] Jove selects from these worlds at random, and world no. 777 is actualized.[31] The Howard-Snyders conclude that Jove's "...creating a world inferior to one he or some other possible being could have created does nothing to impugn his status as essentially morally unsurpassable *in any respect whatsoever*."[32]

To defend this strong claim, the Howard-Snyders consider three alternative actions that a being in Jove's situation might perform, and they conclude that none is morally better than Jove's action.[33] First, the Howard-Snyders imagine that Jove might create nothing, such that the

resulting world contains only Jove and whatever other necessarily-existing entities there may be. They argue that this course of action is *not* morally preferable to the use of the randomizer, since world no.777 has much to recommend it over the world that results when Jove creates nothing.[34] Second, they imagine that another perfect being, Juno, uses the randomizer and actualizes world no.999. They hold that Juno's action is no better than Jove's, since

> [f]actors outside of one's control can make a difference to how much good one brings about *without* making a difference to how good one is. Jove has no control over what number his randomizer will deliver. Thus, given his resolve to let the device do its thing, it is not up to him which [world]... is actualized. And precisely the same can be said about Juno. Thus, even if a better world results from Juno's using the device, that's no reason to infer that she is morally better than Jove.[35]

So far, the Howard-Snyders' case is uncontroversial. Some controversy has arisen concerning the third alternative action that they propose, however, and so I turn to this now.

4.2. Thor's Action and Rowe's Criticism

The Howard-Snyders next imagine that an omnipotent and omniscient being, Thor, eschews the randomizer and instead actualizes world no.888. The Howard-Snyders reject two reasons for thinking that Thor is better than Jove. They first urge that, *ceteris paribus*, Thor's putative betterness cannot

> ... consist in the fact that Thor actualized a better world than Jove. For given that Jove and Juno are morally equivalent, if Thor is better than Jove, then he's better than Juno; but the world Thor actualizes is inferior to the world Juno actualizes. So if Thor is better than Jove, it must be in virtue of some other difference between them.[36]

Second, they urge that Thor's *attitude* (in rejecting the randomizer) must not be thought superior to Jove's attitude:

> The important point to see here is that given a choice between infinitely many progressively better worlds to actualize, Jove wisely rejects Thor's principle that if there's a better world than *w*, don't create *w*, *not* because he is casual or uncaring or objectionably settling for less, but because that principle in that context would lead him (*and Thor, were he rational*) to do nothing, which is far worse than using the randomizer [emphasis added].[37]

William Rowe objects to this last point. He suggests that Thor "... selects world no. 888 over Jove's world no. 777 because he sees that it is better and prefers creating no. 888 to creating any lesser world."[38] Accordingly, Rowe thinks that Thor cannot be following the principle that the Howard-Snyders impute to him, for if he were, he would not settle for 888: "... knowing that he must select among infinitely many progressively better worlds, such a principle would prohibit Thor from creating the world he does create, no. 888."[39]

Rowe's point here is unfair to the spirit (if not, perhaps, the letter) of the Howard-Snyders' argument. The Howard-Snyders do not mean to suggest that Thor *acts* on this principle; clearly, he doesn't. Rather, they meant to point out that *if* Thor adopts this principle, since he knows that there is no prime world, his decision to actualize world no.888 is *irrational*, and, accordingly, Thor cannot be an unsurpassable being.[40] In any event, Rowe offers a new argument for the conclusion that Thor is morally better than Jove:

> Thor's degree of moral goodness presumably is such that he is prepared to settle for world no. 888, but not to settle for the world (no.777) that Jove's degree of moral goodness allows him to settle for. We thus have reason to believe that Thor's degree of moral goodness exceeds Jove's, that Thor is morally better than Jove.[41]

If Thor is morally better than Jove, then Jove is – after all – a surpassable being, and the Howard-Snyders' argument fails.

4.3. THE HOWARD-SNYDERS' RESPONSE TO ROWE

Recently, the Howard-Snyders have responded to this argument.[42] Crucial premises of their response turn on the *sorting process* that a prospective creator would use to bisect the set of all worlds into (i) a set of worlds the being is *unprepared* to actualize; and (ii) a set of worlds the being is *prepared* to actualize. The Howard-Snyders' original paper explained this process as follows:

> Although [Jove] can create any [world], he can't create the best of them because there is no best. Faced with this predicament, Jove first sorts the worlds according to certain criteria. For example, he puts on his left worlds in which some inhabitants live lives that aren't worth living and on his right worlds in which every inhabitant's life is worth living; he puts on his left worlds in which some horrors fail to serve some outweighing good and on his right worlds in which no horror fails to serve an outweighing good. (We encourage the reader to use her own criteria). Then he orders the right hand worlds according to their goodness and assigns to each a positive natural number, the worst of the lot receiving '1', the second worst '2', and so on.[43]

Since Jove's randomizer selects from all the 'right-hand' worlds, Jove must be prepared to actualize any one of them.[44]

The Howard-Snyders agree with Rowe that the salient difference between Jove and Thor is that Thor, unlike Jove, is prepared to settle for 888 (even though there are infinitely many better worlds) but unprepared to settle for 777. They further suppose that "... Thor, unlike Jove, is not prepared to settle for any world less than no. 888".[45] Jove thus bisects the set of all possible worlds at (just below) world no. 1, while Thor bisects the set of all possible worlds at (just below) no. 888. The Howard-Snyders' argument begins with the following disjunction:[46]

> (12) Thor either has or lacks a principle that justifies his unwillingness to settle for any world less than no. 888.

The Howard-Snyders think that any principle that justifies a bisection must satisfy the following conditions:[47]

> (i) It divides the set of possible worlds into two groups (the acceptable and the unacceptable);[48]
> (ii) It is a reasonable principle that a morally good being might well use to sort worlds (i.e. it is neither morally defective nor wholly frivolous);
> (iii) It is such that it is not irrational [or immoral] to act in accordance with it without acting in accordance with one which expresses a higher standard.[49]

Such principles can be ranked: a principle that justifies a bisection at (just below) world *x* is *higher* than a principle that justifies a bisection at (just below) world *y* just in case *x* is a better world than *y*. And the Howard-Snyders appear to assume that the *higher* the principle, the *better* that principle is.[50] It is clear that on NPW, there are infinitely many possible points at which to bisect the set of all possible worlds. *If* each of these bisections could be justified by a principle that meets conditions (i)-(iii), then there would be no *highest* principle justifying a bisection: for any such principle, a *higher (and better)* principle would be possible. The Howard-Snyders reject this view. Their argument may be expressed as follows:

(13) Either there is a highest principle that satisfies conditions (i)-(iii), or there is not.
(14) There is a highest principle that satisfies (i)-(iii).[51]
(15) Jove acts on this principle.[52]
(16) Therefore, no being can act on a higher principle than Jove's principle.
(17) Therefore, Thor lacks a principle for being unprepared to settle for any world less than 888.

The Howard-Snyders have a very strategic reason for asserting (14). If (14) is false, they fear that Rowe might argue in the following manner:

> It is possible for Thor to act on a principle which was neither morally defective nor frivolous nor such that anyone who embraced it would be rationally compelled to rule out more and more worlds *ad infinitum*. But since for every principle *there is* one which expresses a higher standard, Jove had to embrace one which was not the highest. For any principle Jove possibly embraces, however, I stipulate that Thor embraces a higher one that would result in his treating as unacceptable some worlds that Jove would treat as acceptable. Thus, Thor is *necessarily* morally superior to Jove ...[53]

To block this move, then, the Howard-Snyders assert (14) and stipulate, in (15), that Jove acts on the highest partition principle there is. The Howard-Snyders' *dialectical* reason for asserting (14), then, is clear. But what are their *philosophical* reasons? The Howard-Snyders make just three claims in defense of (14):

(iv) "It seems odd to say the least that there should be infinitely many such general principles."[54]
(v) "At least we see no reason to accept that there are [infinitely many such general principles]."[55]
(vi) "...it is not reasonable to believe that there are infinitely many principles which satisfy constraints (i)-(iii)."[56]

By themselves, these claims do not constitute an *argument* for (14). I will return to this point below. First, however, the remainder of the Howard-Snyders' argument must be outlined. Having concluded that Thor lacks a good principle for bisecting just below no. 888, the Howard-Snyders continue with an argument best expressed as a constructive dilemma:[57]

(18) Since Thor *lacks* such a principle, either he selects no. 888 arbitrarily, or he is determined by his nature to select no. 888.
(19) If Thor is determined by his nature to select no. 888, then his unpreparedness to select a world worse than no. 888 is nothing other than a tendency to act *in accordance with* (as opposed to a tendency to act *on*) a principle that satisfies conditions (i)-(iii).

(20) Either there is a highest principle that satisfies conditions (i)-(iii), or there is not.
(21) There is a highest principle that satisfies (i)-(iii).
(22) Jove acts on this principle.
(23) Therefore, no being can act *in accordance with* a higher principle than Jove's principle.
(24) Therefore, if Thor is determined by his nature to select no. 888, Jove is morally unsurpassable.
(25) If Thor selects no. 888 arbitrarily, then he is not morally better than Jove.
(26) Therefore, if Thor selects no. 888 arbitrarily, Jove is morally unsurpassable.
(27) Jove is morally unsurpassable. [from (18), (24), and (26)]

On the Howard-Snyders' story, then, Jove uses an unsurpassable partition principle that satisfies (i)-(iii) in order to sort worlds, and then randomly selects a world from the higher subset for actualization. For any world selected by the randomizer, there are infinitely many better worlds that Jove has the power to actualize. But were Jove (or anybody else) to actualize any world better than the one selected by the randomizer, either this would not be a better *action*, or it would be a better action, but Jove (or anybody else) would not be a better *agent* for performing it. Thus, if the Howard-Snyders' argument concerning Jove is sound, then at least one of these moral principles is false:[58]

P1 **If it is possible for the *product / outcome* of a world-actualizing action performed by some being to have been better, then, *ceteris paribus*, it is possible for *that action* to have been better.**

P2 **If it is possible for *the world-actualizing action* performed by some being to have been better, then, *ceteris paribus*, it is possible for *that being* to have been better.**

Thus the Howard-Snyders conclude that Rowe's argument fails.

4.4. Criticisms of the Howard-Snyders' Defence of Jove

Premises (18) and (19) may be controversial, but I will not address them in what follows. Notice that (21) is identical to (14). I pointed out above that the Howard-Snyders offer no argument for (14). The same is true of (21). To the extent that these crucial premises are unsupported, then, the Howard-Snyders' argument in (12)-(27) is unconvincing. A stronger criticism would, of course, show that (14) and (21) are *false*, thereby undercutting the Howard-Snyders' argument in two places. I have no such criticism, but I can offer some modest considerations against (14) and (21). These reasons are not decisive, but they are, I think, suggestive. In 4.4.1., I offer these reasons, and in 4.4.2. I develop an independent criticism of the Howard-Snyders' argument on the concessive assumption that (14) and (21) are, after all, true.

4.4.1. Modest Considerations against (14) and (21)

The Howard-Snyders suggest several sample partition principles which, they claim, satisfy conditions (i)-(iii):[59]

(vii) No world in which beings live lives which are not worth living is

acceptable;

(viii) No world in which beings experience gratuitous suffering is acceptable;

(ix) No world in which beings live lives which are not as happy and fulfilled as those lives could possibly be is acceptable;

(x) No world empty of sentient, rational beings is acceptable.

Each of these principles suggests a certain property which, if instantiated, tends to make the resulting world good. (Let's call these *world-good-making-properties*, or WGMPs). The partition principles (viii)-(x) divide the set of possible worlds into those that have, and those that lack, a given WGMP. Clearly, there are many different candidate WGMPs, and so many further partition principles could be devised in the manner of (vii)-(x). On the Howard-Snyders' view, these could be ranked too.

Now, if there is only a finite number of WGMPs, then there can only be a finite number of principles that take the form of (vii)-(x): principles which divide the set of possible worlds into those which have and those which lack a given WGMP. If so, at least one such principle must be unsurpassably high. But there is absolutely no reason to think that there is a finite number of WGMPs. And if there is an infinite number of WGMPs, then, possibly, there is no highest principle that takes the form of (vii)-(x) and meets conditions (i)-(iii).[60]

It might be replied that this argument illicitly assumes that all partition principles take the form of (vii)-(x) by referring *only to one* WGMP.[61] Perhaps, for example, there is a single partition principle that refers to every WGMP that there is, even if there are infinitely many such properties. (Devising such a principle, of course, would not be a problem for an omniscient agent.) This principle would, then, divide the set of possible worlds into those in which *every WGMP* is instantiated, and those in which this is not the case. If there were such a principle, it might be thought unsurpassable, in which case the Howard-Snyders are entitled to stipulate it to be the one that Jove employs. It is not obvious, however, that such a principle would be unsurpassable. It is simply not clear that worlds in which *every WGMP* is instantiated are better than those in which not every WGMP is instantiated.[62] Perhaps at some point, or in certain combinations, the instantiation of more WGMPs no longer makes worlds better. Thus this proposal fails to show that there is an unsurpassable partition principle.[63]

Moreover, this proposal assumes that every WGMP is an "all-or-nothing" property, and this, I believe, is false. Many plausible WGMPs are *degreed* properties; indeed, advocates of NPW typically rely on just such properties to support NPW, since, they argue, there are some WGMPs that simply cannot be *maximally* instantiated in some world. Richard Swinburne, Bruce Reichenbach, and George Schlesinger all argue in this manner.[64] Richard Swinburne takes this view in the following passage:

> ... take any world *W*. Presumably the goodness of such a world ... will consist in part in it containing a finite or infinite number of conscious beings who will enjoy it. But if this enjoyment of the world by each is a valuable thing, surely a world with a few more conscious beings in it would be a yet more valuable world – for there would be no reason why the existence of the latter should detract from the enjoyment of the world by others – they would always be put some considerable distance away from others, so that there was no mutual interference. I conclude that it is not, for conceptual reasons, plausible to suppose that there could be a best of all possible worlds, and in consequence God could not have overriding reason to create one.[65]

This passage seems to suggest the following WGMP:

(xi) There being a great number of conscious beings who enjoy the world.

This WGMP can fail to be instantiated at all in a world, but, there being no unsurpassably great number, it seems that this WGMP cannot be *maximally* instantiated in any world.[66]

Bruce Reichenbach offers a more general account of how worlds might be thought better and better *ad infinitum*:

> What sorts of states of affairs are counted as the most beneficial or optimific? Hedonism suggests states of affairs which produce pleasure; utilitarianism suggests utility; eudaimonism, happiness. Other possibilities would include the production of the most virtue, moral goodness, or goodwill in the world. But no matter which of these be accepted, whether individually or in combination, ... one could imagine an infinite series of optimific states in which for any amount of optimific states of affairs n, one could conceive of n+1 states of affairs, or considered qualitatively for any degree of optimificity in the world one could conceive of even more optimificity ... Thus there could be no best possible world, since for any world which we could name there would always be another which was more optimific.[67]

On this view, another WGMP would be:

> (xii) The world's being comprised of optimific states of affairs.

Again, while this property may fail to obtain in some worlds, it seems that – if Reichenbach is right – this property cannot be maximally instantiated in any given world.

George Schlesinger argues in similar fashion, employing the still more general notion of the "degree of desirability of a state" (DDS). Schlesinger does not say precisely wherein the DDS consists, but it appears that the desirability of a state is equivalent to the *goodness* of that state. (States need not be desired in order to be desirable, nor desirable in order to be desired.)[68] The desirability of a state can thus be mapped against an absolute external scale, and Schlesinger urges that this scale has no upper limit:

> Now I take it that, conceptually, there is no limit to the degree which the desirability of a state may reach ... A mortal's possibilities are physically limited, hence there is, in his case, a natural limit which applies to the principle ['increase the DDS as much as possible'] but there is no limit to what God can do. It is, therefore, logically impossible for him to fulfill the ethical principle, i.e., to do enough to discharge his obligation to raise the DDS of every creature to the height beyond which he cannot increase it. Just as it is logically impossible to name the highest integer, it is impossible to grant a creature a DDS higher than which is inconceivable; thus it is logically impossible for God to fulfill what is required by the universal ethical principle and therefore he cannot fulfill it, and is therefore not obliged to fulfill it.[69]

Schlesinger's WGMP, then, is

> (xiii) The states of affairs' (that comprise creaturely existence in the world) being desirable.

Again, while worlds may lack property (xiii), on Schlesinger's account, there is no world in which property (xiii) is unsurpassably instantiated.

These *degreed* WGMPs can be used to develop partition-justifying principles that do not take the form of (vii)-(x). Consider these examples:

(xiv) No world below level L (at which there are fewer than *x* conscious free creatures who enjoy the world) is acceptable;[70]

(xv) No world in which the *optimificity of the states of affairs that comprise that world* falls below level L is acceptable;

(xvi) No world in which the *desirability of the states of affairs that comprise creaturely existence in that world* falls below level L is acceptable.

(Equally, of course, these *degreed* WGMPs might be included in partition principles that refer to many WGMPs.) For consistency, the Howard-Snyders should presumably insist there is some maximum level L beyond which all putative partition-justifying principles fail to satisfy at least one of critiera (i)-(iii). But why should all putative principles beyond some such level L be morally defective, frivolous, or such that their invocation renders the invoking agent irrational? Such an insistence seems entirely at odds with the very reasons that motivate NPW. So it is very difficult to imagine how the Howard-Snyders could consistently argue for this view.

The Howard-Snyders assert (14) and (21) – the claim that there is an unsurpassable partition principle – in order to next stipulate that Jove acts on this principle. They stipulate this in order to block Rowe from stipulating that Thor acts on a higher principle than Jove's. I have offered modest considerations against (14) and (21). While these considerations are not decisive, they do suggest that the Howard-Snyders' insistence that there is a highest partition principle requires significant argument in order to be compelling. That said, it can be shown that Jove is surpassable even if (14) and (21) are granted. I take up this task next.

4.4.2. Jove's Surpassibility Granting (14) and (21)

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that (14) and (21) are granted. Suppose, in other words, that the Howard-Snyders are right to assert that there is an unsurpassable partition principle that a being could use to bisect the set of possible worlds. Even in this case it can be shown that Jove – who, by stipulation, uses such a principle – is surpassable. To see this, notice that there is a logical distinction between the partition principle a creator uses to bisect the set of possible worlds and the 'subsequent' decision procedure he uses to select a world for actualization from the higher subset. Since I am here granting (14) and (21), I assume that a being who selects a world from that subset cannot possibly *act on* or *act in accordance with* a higher principle than Jove's. But does it follow *tout court* that such a being cannot be better than Jove?

No. Consider Odin, an exceedingly good, omnipotent, omniscient being, who faces the world-actualization problem on NPW. Odin divides possible worlds according to the highest partition-justifying principle that there is: Jove's principle. Whereas Jove proceeds to select randomly from the upper subset of worlds, Odin employs the following decision procedure: he takes the ordinal selected by Jove's randomizer, *adds one*, and actualizes the resulting world. Whatever world Jove actualizes, then, Odin actualizes one better.

This thought-experiment is not frivolous: it shows that Jove is surpassable. Odin is certainly no worse than Jove (on the Howard-Snyders' analysis) with respect to the partition-justifying principle he chooses, since he too uses the highest such principle that there (by hypothesis) is: Jove's principle. His logically-subsequent decision procedure invariably results in better outcomes than does Jove's, so there is at least some reason to think that he, Odin, is better than Jove.[71] Odin may perhaps be surpassable, but even if surpassable, if he is superior to Jove (by virtue of employing a logically-subsequent decision procedure that always returns a better outcome), then, *ceteris paribus*, Jove is, after all, surpassable.

The Howard-Snyders might object that Odin, as described, *does not* in fact use Jove's partition principle. Such an argument might proceed as follows:

> Odin will never actualize Jove's world no.1, since, even if Jove's randomizer generates no.1, Odin will actualize world no.2. Therefore, Odin's set of actualizable worlds, in effect, differs from Jove's, in which case Odin must be using a partition principle different from Jove's. And, since Jove's partition principle (by stipulation) is unsurpassable, Odin's cannot be better, and so it is false that Odin is better than Jove.

While it is true that Odin will never actualize world no.1, this cannot by itself show that Odin's partition principle differs from Jove's. There is, after all, an important distinction between partition principles and logically-subsequent decision procedures, and, as described, Odin and Jove differ only with respect to the latter. I urged earlier that the Howard-Snyders' account of partitioning should be construed to mean the right-hand worlds are *prima facie* acceptable for actualization, and so there is no inconsistency between Odin's finding a certain set of worlds (namely, Jove's set) *prima facie* acceptable for actualization, and its being the case that Odin will never, in fact, actualize the worst world in that set, no.1.[72] Indeed, if it shows anything at all, this objection suggests another reason for thinking that Odin is better than Jove: not only will Odin always actualize a better world than the one that Jove actualizes, Odin, unlike Jove, will never actualize world no.1. So much the better, say I, for Odin!

Alternatively, the Howard-Snyders might concede that Odin is better than Jove *in virtue of always actualizing a better world*, but insist that Odin does not surpass Jove *on the whole*, since Odin uses a decision procedure that is suspect in some way. In particular, the Howard-Snyders might claim that Odin's decision procedure is suspect because it fails to satisfy some new conditions, such as these variants of (ii) and (iii):

> (ii') It is a reasonable *decision procedure* that a morally good being might well use to select worlds (i.e. it is neither morally defective nor wholly frivolous);
>
> (iii') It is a *decision procedure* such that it is not irrational [or immoral] to act on or in accordance with it without acting on or in accordance with one which expresses a higher standard.

But, while Odin's decision procedure may not satisfy these new conditions, it would be unreasonable to require that it *should*, since these are variants of necessary conditions on the partition principle of an *unsurpassable being*, and Odin is not advanced as a candidate for this post: I argue only that Odin surpasses Jove. In short, these alleged deficiencies in Odin can show at most that he is surpassable, not that he fails to surpass Jove. They are therefore irrelevant to the issue at hand. Odin's decision procedure, I submit, is no stranger, and no more arbitrary, than Jove's decision procedure. In fact, it contrasts favourably with Jove's, since it always returns a better outcome, and this provides reason for thinking that Jove is, after all, surpassable. So this imagined reply also misses the mark.

The Howard-Snyders intended to defend the unsurpassability of Jove in order to undermine Rowe's *a priori* argument for atheism. If, that is, Jove (as described) could exist on NPW, then Rowe's argument fails, either because P1 fails or because P2 fails.[73] The Howard-Snyders' argument for the unsurpassability of Jove turns on the claim that there is a finite number of partition principles, and that Jove acts on the highest of these. In Section 4.4.1, I argued that the Howard-Snyders have not shown that there are only finitely many such principles, and that there may well be infinitely many. In Section 4.4.2, I urged that *even if* there is a highest principle, it does not follow that Jove is unsurpassable, since it is reasonable to believe that Jove's decision procedure for selecting a world for actualization is surpassable. Thus, the Howard-Snyders' effort to undermine Rowe's argument is unsuccessful.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

William Rowe's *a priori* argument for atheism is elegant, and it may be thought to appeal to some plausible moral intuitions. I have shown that it withstands Daniel and Frances Howard-Snyder's complex criticism. Further, I have shown that neither Langtry's criticisms of P1 nor Morris' objections to P2 are decisive, since they depend on assumptions which Rowe would reject. But, of course, this does not mean that Rowe's argument is sound. Space does not permit a detailed criticism of this argument itself, but I should point out that its success depends on the unrestricted truth of P1 and P2. As I noted above, Rowe conflates these crucial premises in his exposition. To the extent that these principles are undefended, then, Rowe's argument is insufficiently supported. Attention to this matter may provide the most fruitful avenue for further discussion of this intriguing argument.

Ancestors of this paper were read at the 4th Annual Brown University Graduate Student Philosophy Conference (Providence, RI, February 19-20, 2000), the Canadian Philosophical Association Annual Congress (Edmonton, May 24-27, 2000), and the American Philosophical Association Pacific Division Meeting (Seattle, March 27-30, 2002). I am grateful to my commentators on those occasions: Michael Pace, Jonathan Strand, and Wes Morriston, respectively. I am also indebted to discussions with Daniel Howard-Snyder, Bernard D. Katz, Elmar Kremer, Bruce Langtry, Jordan Howard Sobel, Steve Wykstra, and Dean Zimmerman. Finally, thanks are due to William Hasker, and to two anonymous referees for *Faith and Philosophy*. This paper was received on Nov. 25, 2002, and was accepted for publication on March 24, 2003.

NOTES

[1] The expression 'prime world' in this context is due to Bruce Langtry in "God and the Best", *Faith and Philosophy* 13 (1996): 311-328. NPW differs from NBW (the view that there is no *best* world) only if there are possible worlds that God cannot actualize. In what follows, I will remain neutral on whether there are such worlds, and, therefore, neutral on whether NPW differs from NBW. Space does not permit a detailed excursion into difficult questions concerning what sorts of factors contribute to (or detract from) the goodness of worlds, how these factors so contribute (or detract), whether all worlds are commensurable, etc. I will simply assume for the sake of discussion that worlds can be ranked in terms of goodness, and in Section 4, I will assume (for simplicity only) that there are no ties, and that all worlds are commensurable.

[2] In fact, the distinction is not always drawn between NPW and NBW, and so some authors urge that if there is *no best world*, it follows that God cannot sensibly be expected to *do his best* in creating a world. Thus Peter Forrest suggests that "[i]t is plausible that for every possible world there could be a better one ... If this is the case, God could not create the best possible world, just as he could not name the greatest integer" ("The Problem of Evil: Two Neglected Defences", *Sophia* 20 (1981): 52. Similar arguments can be found in Reichenbach, B., "Must God Create the Best Possible World?", *International Philosophical Quarterly* 19 (1979): 203-212, and *Evil and a Good God*, New York: Fordham University Press, 1982, Chapter 6; Schlesinger, G. *Religion and Scientific Method*, Boston, D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1977, Chapter 9); Swinburne, R., *The Existence of God*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979, 113-114, 144ff; and Kretzmann, N., "A Particular Problem of Creation: Why Would God Create This World?", in *Being and Goodness* [S. MacDonald, Ed.], Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991, 229-250.

[3] William Wainwright observes that

> [t]he critic complains that God could have created a better order. But even if God had created a better order, he would be exposed to the possibility of a similar complaint [on NPW]. Indeed, [on NPW] no created order is such that God would not be exposed to the possibility of a complaint of this sort. The complaint is thus inappropriate. Even though there are an infinite number of created orders better than our own, God can't be faulted simply because He created an order inferior to other orders that He might have created in their place (*Philosophy of Religion*, Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1988, 90).

Note that Wainwright only intends to defend theism against the specific (but abstract) charge that God *could have created a better world* than the actual world on NPW. William Rowe endorses this defence in "The Problem of Divine Perfection and Freedom", in *Reasoned Faith* [Stump, E., Ed.], Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993, 230.

[4] Arguments of this form on NPW are discussed in Basinger, D. "In What Sense Must God Be Omnibenevolent?", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 14 (1983): 3-15; Chrzan, K. "The Irrelevance of the No Best Possible World Defense", *Philosophia* 17 (1987): 161-166; Elliot, R. "Divine Perfection, Axiology, and the No Best World Defence", *Religious Studies* 29 (1993): 533-542; and Kretzmann, N. "A Particular Problem of Creation".

[5] William Rowe offers this argument in "The Problem of Divine Perfection and Freedom", 230. Others who discuss a similar argument include Stephen Grover (in "Why Only the Best is Good Enough", *Analysis* 48 (1988): 224); Jeff Jordan (in "The Problem of Divine Exclusivity", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 33 (1993): 92ff), and Norman Kretzmann (in "A Particular Problem of Creation", 238). Strictly speaking, such arguments are not arguments *from evil*, since they are *a priori*. Rather, they might best be understood as arguments *from claims concerning the surpassability of world-actualizing agents on NPW*.

[6] Howard-Snyder, D. and Howard-Snyder, F., "How an Unsurpassable Being can Create a Surpassable World", *Faith and Philosophy* 11 (1994): 260-268; Langtry, B., "God and the Best"; and Morris, T.,

"Perfection and Creation", in *Reasoned Faith* [E. Stump, Ed.], Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993, 234-247.

[7] "The Problem of Divine Perfection and Freedom", 230.

[8] "God and the Best", note 8, 327.

[9] Commenting on Rowe's argument, William Morris states that "[s]imply put, the idea seems to be that, all else equal, the better the product, the better the act; the better the act, the better the agent" ("Perfection and Creation", 241).

[10] Rowe's original argument refers to the *moral* goodness of worlds. I have dropped this modifier in (6)-(11), since it is both implausible and unnecessary. It is implausible because *moral* goodness is best understood to be a feature of *actions* or perhaps *agents*, rather than a feature of *states of affairs* such as worlds. And it is unnecessary because Rowe's argument does not depend on this modifier in any way. (For a simpler formalization of Rowe's argument that retains the reference to the moral goodness of worlds, see Morris, T. "Perfection and Creation", 240.)

[11] If the goodness of the world-actualizing action *is itself* a contributing factor to the overall goodness of the resulting world, then, given the *ceteris paribus* clause, P1 is trivially true. (The state of affairs consisting in a world-actualizing action, after all, is included in the state of affairs that comprises that world.) Since P1 is intended to be a substantive, non-trivial claim, I propose to treat the goodness of a world *independently* of the goodness-conferring role that might be played by the relevant actualizing activity.

Also, while Rowe's original argument refers only to *moral* betterness, it seems that the being might also be thought better in terms of *rationality*. For this reason, I have refrained from modifying 'better' with 'morally' in P1 and P2. Bruce Langtry sketches a Rowe-style argument that turns on rationality in "God and the Best", 321ff.

[12] Rowe originally argued for the non-existence of God on NPW. The argument in (6)-(11) is stronger, since it argues for the *impossibility* of God on NPW. But if God is taken to be a necessary being, this is a distinction without a difference.

[13] Langtry, B., "God and the Best", 320. Langtry's position seems consistent with Aquinas' view of the matter:

> When it is said that God can make a thing better than He makes it, if *better* is taken substantively, this proposition is true. For He can always make something else better than each individual thing: and He can make the same thing in one way better than it is, and in another way not, as explained above. *If, however,* better *is taken as an adverb, implying the manner of the making; thus God cannot make anything better than he makes it, because He cannot make it from greater wisdom and goodness***.** But if it implies the manner of the thing done, He can make something better, because he can give to things made by Him a better manner of existence as regards the accidents, although not as regards the substance (*Summa Theologiae*, Q 25, Art. 6, emphasis added.)

[14] This way of understanding the debate was suggested to me by Jonathan Strand's comments on an earlier draft of this paper. I leave out P2 here, since it is not directly relevant to the discussion between Rowe and Langtry.

[15] Langtry may tacitly concede this very point in the following passage:

> It might be objected, "If V is better than W, and God can actualise V without violating any moral rules, then it follows that God has better reasons for actualising V than for actualising W, and so that God would be acting irrationally if he actualised W rather than

V". *Either these things do not follow, or else an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good being is logically impossible, or else there are prime worlds* [emphasis added, "God and the Best", 320].

Rowe, I take it, would agree.

[16] *ibid*., n.8, 327.

[17] Though Langtry formulates this principle in a general manner, he objects to its *application* to the context of world-actualization, and so Langtry's objection can properly be understood as a criticism of P1.

[18] "God and the Best", n.8, 327.

[19] In his commentary on an earlier version of this paper, Wes Morriston holds that P1 naturally suggests two rules for action:

(R1) Always do the action with the better possible outcome; and
(R2) For any possible act A, if there is an alternative possibility with a better outcome, then don't do A.

Morriston continues: "But then surely Langtry's point is correct. If there were no best possible outcome [on NPW], (R2) would indeed lead to paralysis. Consequently, I think he might argue with some plausibility that R1 and R2 are not acceptable rules *for the no prime world situation*. If this is right, then God's failure to follow them in this special case would not demonstrate a moral defect" ("Commentary on Klaas Kraay's 'William Rowe's *A Priori* Argument from Evil'", Pacific APA 2002, 3.) I agree that God's failure to follow these rules would not demonstrate a moral defect. But Rowe, I think, does not mean to suggest that it would. Rowe's point, rather, is that no matter what a being does with respect to world-actualization on NPW, that being is always *surpassable* (in which case no being can be God on NPW). In other words, for Rowe, the logical impossibility of following such a rule on NPW counts against the possibility of *God's existence*, not against the rule. I argue below, however, that this identification of (6) as the culprit – rather than P1 – is unmotivated.

Morriston also suggests a different argument supporting Langtry's conclusion: perhaps "...God does not fail to actualize a *better* world because he is indifferent to higher levels of goodness, but because his desire to actualize a *very good* world is so strong that it cannot be defeated by the fact that there is no *best* world for him to choose" (*ibid*). Rowe, it seems, could agree both that a creative agent need not be indifferent to higher levels of goodness, and that such an agent could have a strong and laudable desire to actualize a very good world. But Rowe remains free to suggest that on NPW, such a creative agent is always surpassable, in which no such agent can be God.

[20] "Perfection and Creation", 242.

[21] *ibid*.

[22] *ibid*., 243.

[23] *ibid*., 244. I thank Wes Morriston for reminding me of this.

[24] *ibid*.

[25] An anonymous referee suggests that the NPW situation is, in one crucial respect, similar to an alternate scenario on which there are very many equally-good worlds, all of which are unsurpassable. In both cases, this referee holds, God's inability to actualize the *best* world (there being none) should not count against God. This is true, but, like Morris' argument concerning the expression thesis, it is not directly relevant. The claim at issue is not that God is surpassable on NPW because he fails to actualize the *best* world; rather, God is held to be surpassable on NPW for having failed to actualize *a better world*.

[26] One way to offer independent argument against P2 would be to claim that it is objectionable, since it depends on a view concerning the relationship between the goodness of actions and the goodness of agents that is simply implausible in *human* affairs. Strictly speaking, Morris' arguments do not take this form, since he concentrates on the logical point that neither the production thesis nor the expression thesis could sensibly apply to *God*. That said, Morris does seem committed to the other claim in the following passage:

> Suppose that I give you five dollars. I could have given you ten, but I give you five. Suppose you do not particularly need the gift, nor do you need to be the recipient of a gift. Suppose, in other words, that it's pure supererogation on my part. I do a good deed that did not need to be done. If someone else instead had given you ten dollars, would it have been the case that she did a better deed than I? Would she, therefore, all else equal, have been a better person than I? I'm not convinced that this follows at all (241).

And, referring to this argument a few pages later, Morris denies "... that even in the human domain supererogation is always productive of the good in any highly specific, additive way" (243).

I am sympathetic to Morris' rejection of a specific, additive relationship between the goodness of supererogatory actions and the goodness of human agents. It does seem implausible to suppose that there is a law-like connection between even marginally-better supererogatory actions and the goodness of human agents. And Morris' point is to some degree relevant to the case of divine world-actualization, since this is standardly held to be an act of pure supererogation. That said, I do not think that Morris' claims concerning human supererogation count against P2, for P2 does not depend on there being such a strict, additive relationship between actions and agents. P2, recall, holds only that if it is *possible* for the world-actualizing action performed by some being to be better, then, ceteris paribus, it is *possible* for that being to have been better. On NPW, for any world that God actualizes, there are infinitely-many better worlds that God could have actualized instead. Granting P1, then, there are then infinitely-many better *actions* that God could have performed. If the performance of even *one* of these actions would entail that the world-actualizer is a *better agent*, then P2 stands, notwithstanding Morris' argument. And it seems implausible to suppose that the performance of *none* of these infinitely many better actions would entail that the world-actualizer is a better agent. Similarly, while it may be that a supererogatory gift of ten dollars does not entail that the giver is better than he who gave only five, it is plausible to suppose that the performance of *some possible action* would entail that the agent is better than he who gave only five.

[27] I leave out P1 here, since it is not directly relevant to the discussion between Rowe and Morris.

[28] In personal correspondence, Daniel Howard-Snyder assures me that their intended target was P2: "We definitely took ourselves to be undermining P2, if moral goodness is what's under discussion. I suppose we were granting – for the sake of argument, but only for the sake of argument – that P1 is true" (June 27, 2001).

[29] The Howard-Snyders say little about what the sorting criteria might be – they merely offer candidates: "For example, he puts on his left worlds in which some inhabitants live lives that aren't worth living and on his right worlds in which every inhabitant's life is worth living; he puts on his left worlds in which some horror fail to serve an outweighing good and on his right worlds in which no horror fails to serve an outweighing good. (We encourage the reader to use her own criteria)" (*ibid.*, 260). I will return to this point in section 4.3.

[30] The Howard-Snyders assume for the sake of simplicity that there are no ties, and that all worlds are commensurable. I will follow them in this.

[31] It is not clear to me whether an omniscient agent would *know* in advance what number the randomizer would generate. In either case, however, Jove's knowledge (or lack thereof) seems irrelevant to the Howard-Snyders' argument.

[32] Howard-Snyder, D. and F., "How an Unsurpassable Being can Create a Surpassable World", 261. In more mundane affairs, random processes can return better results than deliberate optimizing strategies. Canada's *Globe and Mail* reports that in a recent stock market competition where professional analysts were asked to choose just one stock selection which was then monitored for one year, "...a clockwork Santa toy beat the pros in a stunning victory with a blistering 179.2% return with the randomly selected Denbury Resources Inc", ("Plastics Firm helps Misener maintain Lead in Stock Contest", *Globe and Mail*, July 14, 2001, B9.) The *Globe* reports that the 2001 wildcard competitor is Jahe, a young female orangutang from the Toronto zoo. As of July 2001, Jahe was ranked fifth, but was still significantly outperforming the TSE 300 composite index.

[33] This strategy suffices to show Jove's unsurpassability only if these three alternatives exhaust the field of plausible alternative actions. The Howard-Snyders think that they do: "There are other ways in which an omnipotent being could behave in Jove's predicament. But those we can think of are either just plain silly or subject to the objections we've raised against (i), (ii), and (iii)" ("How an Unsurpassable Being can Create a Surpassable World", 265).

[34] *ibid*., 262. Of course, if this 'bare world' has so little to recommend it, then presumably it would not even belong to the set of 'right-hand' worlds from which Jove selects randomly.

[35] *ibid*., 263. Rowe agrees: "Even though Juno ends up producing a better world than Jove, the Howard-Snyders are clearly right in viewing Jove and Juno as morally equivalent" ("The Problem of No Best World", *Faith and Philosophy* 11 (1994): 270).

[36] "How an Unsurpassable Being can Create a Surpassable World", 264.

[37] *ibid*.

[38] "The Problem of No Best World", 269-270.

[39] *ibid*.

[40] In fact, the Howard-Snyders hold that irrationality is inconsistent with essential omniscience. ("The *Real* Problem of No Best World", *Faith and Philosophy* 13 (1996): 423. I disagree, since it seems entirely possible for a being who has the essential property of knowing all true propositions to act capriciously, akratically, irresponsibly, or irrationally. I take it, though, that any of these activities constitute some imperfection, in which case the being is surpassable.

[41] "The Problem of No Best World", 270.

[42] The Howard-Snyders reply to Rowe in "The *Real* Problem of No Best World".

[43] "How An Unsurpassable Bring Can Create a Surpassable World", 260. The Howard-Snyders appear to assume that there is no world that God cannot actualize. If this assumption is rejected, the intent of their passage can be preserved by substituting 'prime' for 'best'.

[44] I will follow the Howard-Snyders in assuming (for simplicity) that that it is within Jove's power to actualize any world from the higher subset.

[45] "The *Real* Problem of No Best World", 423. Strictly speaking, their original argument did not require this stronger claim.

[46] The formalization here is mine.

[47] "The *Real* Problem of No Best World", 424.

[48] If a world's being 'acceptable' entails that it could both be actual and include God, then the Howard-Snyders have begged the question. I take it, then, that they intend some *weak* sense of 'acceptable': something like '*prima facie* acceptable' or 'not obviously such that its being actual precludes God's existence in it'.

[49] Relatedly, it must also not be irrational to use a given principle without using a *higher iteration of the same principle*. For example, if Thor were to use the principle "if any world is actualizable and better than *w*, *w* is unacceptable for actualization" as a justification for actualizing no.888, he would be irrational, because this principle can be iterated *ad infinitum* on NPW. (The Howard-Snyders discuss something resembling this point on p.423.)

[50] Thus a being who acts on a morally better principle, is, *ceteris paribus*, morally better.

[51] "...if there is a *finite number* of principles that meets these constraints, then we can stipulate that Jove acts on the highest of them, and thus Rowe's story about Thor is obviously incoherent, (since it has Thor acting on a higher principle than Jove) and poses no objection to our argument", ("The *Real* Problem of No Best World", 423). Of course, it does not follow from the fact that a series is finite that one unique member of that series is highest. The strongest conclusion that is warranted is that *at least one* is unsurpassably high, so I will interpret the Howard-Snyders in this manner.

[52] The Howard-Snyders' noteworthy insight here is that, *if* there is a highest bisection-justifying reason, they are entitled to *stipulate* that it is Jove's. If so, then the mere fact that Thor's dividing line is higher does not constitute grounds for thinking that it is justified by a *reason* that meets conditions (i)-(iii). This in no way begs the question against Rowe.

[53] "The *Real* Problem of No Best World", 424.

[54] *ibid*.

[55] *ibid*.

[56] *ibid*., 425.

[57] The argument is found in *ibid*., 424-425. The formalization here, again, is mine.

[58] See note 28 above.

[59] *ibid*., 424.

[60] This argument is not decisive, though, since for all we know it may be that, though there are infinitely many WGMPs, there is nevertheless a highest (best, most important, most axiologically-significant) WGMP such that the relevant principle (the principle that divides worlds into those that exhibit this WGMP and those that lack it) is unsurpassable. That conceded, it is difficult to see how one might *argue* for this view.

[61] I thank Wes Morriston for noticing this.

[62] It is for precisely this reason that I define WGMPs to be properties which *tend* to make worlds good.

[63] The Howard-Snyders could concede that the partition principle that refers to *every* WGMP is surpassable, while continuing to insist that there is an unsurpassable partition principle. Again, though, it is difficult to see what *arguments* might be advanced for this view.

[64] Strictly speaking, these authors intend to argue that there is no *best* world, not that there is no *prime* world. Their arguments, however, can be applied to the question of prime worlds.

[65] Swinburne, R., *The Existence of God*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979, 114.

[66] As Grover notes, not only could the *number* of such creatures be limitless, perhaps their *enjoyment* could also be limitless, in which case there is more support for NPW:

> Perhaps any world containing conscious beings who enjoy it is bettered by a world containing the same beings enjoying their world even more. If there is no upper limit to enjoyment for these beings, it is implausible to suppose that there could be a best among possible worlds. If there is an upper limit to enjoyment for these beings, there may be worlds in which other kinds of beings are capable of higher levels of enjoyment, and still other worlds in which yet other beings enjoy themselves even more, and so on ("Mere Addition and the Best of All Possible Worlds", *Religious Studies* 35 (1999): 173.)

[67] Reichenbach, B. *Evil and a Good God*, New York: Fordham University Press, 1982, 127-128. Reichenbach first presented this argument in "Must God Create the Best Possible World?" (*International Philosophical Quarterly* 19 (1979): 203-212). Note that Reichenbach appears to equate conceivability with possibility. David Basinger responds to Reichenbach's earlier argument in "Must God Create the Best Possible World? A Response", (*International Philosophical Quarterly* 20 (1980): 399-341), and Reichenbach replies in "Basinger on Reichenbach and the Best Possible World" (*International Philosophical Quarterly* 20 (1980): 343-345).

[68] Schlesinger allies himself with Mill, whose doctrine of an objective hierarchy of states of affairs is encapsulated in the famous dictum "Better Socrates dissatisfied than the fool satisfied; better the fool dissatisfied than the pig satisfied" (Schlesinger, G. *Religion and Scientific Method*, 61). See also Schlesinger's "The Problem of Evil and the Problem of Suffering" (*American Philosophical Quarterly* 1 (1964): 244-24) and "On the Possibility of the Best of All Possible Worlds" (*Journal of Value Inquiry* 4 (1970): 229-232).

[69] *ibid.*, 61-62. Morris updates and defends Schlesinger's views in "A Response to the Problem of Evil", *Philosophia* 14 (1984): 173-186.

[70] Following Grover's suggestion, a similar principle could be devised to refer to the *level* of enjoyment of the world felt by its inhabitants. (See note 66.)

[71] Again, 'better' may be understood either as 'morally better' or 'more rational'.

[72] See note 48.

[73] See note 28.