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The Problem of No Best World

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Background

Traditional versions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all maintain that God is a perfect being (see Article 25, PERFECT BEING THEOLOGY). Famously, Anselm understood this doctrine to mean that God is a being than which none greater is *conceivable*. If conceivability does not exhaust possibility, the doctrine of divine perfection can be expressed in stronger terms: God is a being than which none greater is *possible*. This is often thought to entail that God is a necessary being (see Article 33, NECESSITY) who is essentially *unsurpassable* with respect to various attributes, such as power, knowledge, and goodness (see Articles 27, OMNIPOTENCE; 28, OMNISCIENCE; and 30, GOODNESS).

God is also traditionally understood to be the creator and sustainer of all that is (see Article 37, CREATION AND CONSERVATION). In contemporary analytic philosophy of religion, God's creating and sustaining activity is typically construed like this: God surveys the set of possible worlds (or at least the subset of those within his power to actualize), and then freely selects exactly one for actualization, on the basis of its axiological properties. Evidently, discussions of this issue assume that possible worlds have objective axiological status, and that they can be ranked. I will proceed on these assumptions.

So, let's say that *theism* entails that there necessarily exists an essentially unsurpassable creator and sustainer of all that is. What world will such a being select? Famously, Leibniz and others have held that there is exactly one best of all actualizable possible worlds, and that it is the only world worth selecting by God. But then a well-known objection to theism looms: surely *our* world, with all the horrors it contains, is not the best. This, of course, is a version of the problem of evil (see Article 56, THE LOGICAL PROBLEM OF EVIL; and Article 57, THE EVIDENTIAL PROBLEM OF EVIL). In response, it has been argued that God stands under no obligation to select the best actualizable world (Adams 1972), but this response has been widely criticized. (See, for example, Quinn 1982; Thomas 1996; Rowe 2004, 74-87; and Wielenberg 2004.) Other contemporary philosophers, following Aquinas, have suggested instead that perhaps there simply is no best actualizable world, but rather an infinite hierarchy of increasingly better worlds. (See, for example, Plantinga 1974, p.61; Schlesinger 1977; Forrest 1981; Reichenbach 1982, pp.121-9; and Swinburne 2004, pp.114-5.) Hereafter, I call this position NBW.

On NBW, it is no longer reasonable to demand that God select the unique best actualizable world: since there is no such thing, this is an impossible task, and hence cannot properly be demanded of God (see Article 27, OMNIPOTENCE). Some have thought that NBW inoculates theism entirely from the problem of evil (Schlessinger 1977), but this has not been well received. (One representative critic is Grover 1993.) Others have argued, against theism, that God ought to have actualized a *better* world than ours, even if no best world is available (Perkins 1983; Chrzan 1987; Elliot 1993). Against the ontological backdrop of NBW, then, the discussion of the problem of evil continues.

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In recent years, philosophers have pursued a different criticism of theism based on NBW. They have suggested on purely *a priori* grounds that NBW, together with some plausible principles concerning improvability, logically precludes the existence of an unsurpassable being. (This argument is advanced in various ways by Grover 1988, 2003, 2004; Rowe 1993, 1994, 2002, 2004; Sobel 2004, pp.468-479; and Wielenberg 2004). The core of this argument can be expressed with reference to the following inconsistent set of propositions:

NBW	For every world *w* that is within God's power to actualize, there is a better world, *x*, that God has the power to actualize instead.
P1	If it is possible for the *product* of a world-actualizing action performed by some being to have been better, then, *ceteris paribus*, it is possible for that being's *action* to have been (morally or rationally) better.
P2	If it is possible for the world-actualizing *action* performed by some being to have been (morally or rationally) better, then, *ceteris paribus*, it is possible for *that being* to have been better.
G	There *possibly* exists a being who is essentially unsurpassable in power, knowledge, goodness, and rationality.

Critics of theism urge that since this set is inconsistent, and since P1 and P2 are plausible, defenders of NBW ought to reject G. This amounts to an *a priori* argument for the *impossibility* of an essentially unsurpassable God on NBW, and has come to be called *the problem of no best world*. It is distinct from the problem of evil in several important respects. First, it proceeds entirely *a priori*, while arguments from evil generally contain at least one *a posteriori* premise about the existence, scope, or distribution of evil. Second, this argument concludes that an essentially unsurpassable God is *impossible* – a much stronger conclusion than arguments from evil can warrant. Third, this argument could still be advanced if evil were *metaphysically impossible*. It is an argument from *improvability*, rather than from *evil*.

Theistic Responses: Four Categories

In this section, I survey four broad ways in which the theist might respond. First, the theist might reject NBW and revert to the Leibnizian view that there is a unique best of all actualizable worlds (Grover 1988, 1999). But difficulties beset this move. There is the problem of evil, as noted above. In addition, there are doctrinal concerns for theism: God is traditionally taken to be *free* with respect to world-actualization, but if the only world an unsurpassable being can justifiably select is the best one available, is it still reasonable to suppose that God acts freely in this regard? And if not, is God's choice really a *good* one – one worthy of thanks and praise? (For negative answers to these questions, see Rowe 2004). Relatedly, some have suggested that if the only world God can select is the unique best, then modal collapse ensues: everything is necessary; nothing can be otherwise than it is (Resnick 1973; Heller 1999).

Second, the theist might try to reverse the argument: granting NBW, she might claim that G – a modest proposition – is better-supported than P1 and P2. How might she defend G? Of course, a good argument for the actual existence of an essentially unsurpassable deity would do, since this would establish *a fortiori* that such a being is possible. More modestly, she might try to show that God is possible, perhaps by urging that an essentially unsurpassable being is conceivable, and by claiming that conceivability is a reliable indicator of possibility. Or, more modestly still, she might follow Plantinga and argue that G can be a *properly basic belief* for the theist, given certain conditions. (See Article 78, REFORMED EPISTEMOLOGY.) If any such strategy makes it more plausible to maintain G than P1 and P2, then this argument fails.

Third, the theist might sacrifice her commitment to essential divine unsurpassability (in other words, deny G). She might concede that G is precluded by the conjunction of P1, P2, and NBW, and grant that the latter three are plausible. But she might then construct an account of divine perfection that does not involve essential divine unsurpassability, or some other notion of God altogether. (See Kraay 2005b, pp.30-2; Wainwright 2005, p.18.) This move is unlikely to please most traditional monotheists, however, since they typically consider essential divine unsurpassability to be non-negotiable.

Finally, of course, the most natural response for the theist is to attack P1 or P2 directly. This may take one of two forms: one might suggest that their conjunction is unmotivated (or defeated) by reflection on human cases, or one might allege that their conjunction is implausible in the divine case. In what follows, I briefly survey some important criticisms of P1 and P2 published to date. I argue that none is decisive, from which I conclude that, given the plausibility of NBW, the problem of no best world remains a significant threat to theism

Criticisms of P1

Bruce Langtry offers an argument that can be construed as a criticism of P1 (1996, 2006). He thinks that in ordinary human affairs, it may be the case that by bringing about better states of affairs, agents act in a better way. But Langtry denies that P1 is a plausible application of this insight to the divine case:

> 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 [NBW] 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 (1996, 320, and see 2006, 467).

In short, Langtry insists that on NBW, there are worlds *good enough* for God to actualize, and that, accordingly, God cannot be faulted for selecting one of these..

This argument, however, begs the question by tacitly assuming that an unsurpassable being is logically possible. On this assumption, granting NBW and P2, then of course P1 must be rejected. But the argument under review purports to show that G is false. It will not do to *assume* G in a response: supporting reasons must be offered, perhaps along the lines noted in the previous section. (See Rowe 2004, pp.121-127; Kraay 2005a.)

A more promising objection to P1 appeals to considerations about free will. Brian Leftow (2005a and 2005b) argues that P1 objectionably assumes that God has complete control over the axiological status of the *product* of his world-actualizing action. (See also Wierenga 2007, 212-214). Leftow rightly observes that the moral worth of actions performed by free creatures in that world is an important contributor to the overall axiological status of a world. But given *libertarian* freedom, which many theists accept, this significant determinant of the overall status of a world is, quite simply, beyond God's control. (See Article 54, FOREKNOWLEDGE AND FREE WILL; and Article 39, PROVIDENCE.) Accordingly, it is possible for the *product* of God's world-actualizing activity to have been better, even though God's *action* – in actualizing the world and the libertarian-free moral agents it contains – could not have been better. If this is plausible, P1 can be rejected.

Leftow's objection aims to depict a scenario according to which the antecedent of P1 is true, while its consequent is false. But how is *creaturely* freedom supposed to bear on the antecedent of P1, which concerns the product of a *divine* world-actualizing action? The objection contends that the better *creaturely* actions are, *ceteris paribus*, the better the product of *God's* action will be. Notice, however, that this assumes the *product* of a divine world-actualizing action to be the *entire* world under consideration, including the actions of creatures.

This assumption, however, is illegitimate: the actions of *creatures* are not properly considered part of the product of *God's* world-actualizing action. Libertarian actions are – by definition – outside God's control. (I here set Molinism aside, but see Article 39, PROVIDENCE.) God and creatures are standardly taken to be *collaborators* in the actualization of a world: both play a role in determining which world is actual. God is responsible for a world's being the way it is prior to the introduction of libertarian creatures, and God is also responsible for the introduction of such creatures: all this properly counts as the product of *God's* world-actualizing action. But if such creatures are introduced and act freely, they help make it the case that one world rather than another is actual, and such determinations count as the product of *their* world-actualizing actions. The resulting world, then, is partly the product of God's actions, and partly the product of creatures' actions. If this distinction is plausible, then Leftow's objection to P1 fails. (See Kraay 2007.)

Daniel and Francis Howard-Snyder (1994, 1996) offer a different argument against P1. They suggest a two-step model of world-selection, on which P1 can plausibly be denied. God first sorts the actualizable worlds into two subsets based on axiologically relevant criteria: one subset consists of 'acceptable' worlds, and the other contains the 'unacceptable' ones. The Howard-Snyders offer four examples of such sorting principles (1996, 424):

(i)   No world in which beings live lives which are not worth living is acceptable;
(ii)   No world in which beings experience gratuitous suffering is acceptable;
(iii)   No world in which beings live lives which are not as happy and fulfilled as those lives could possibly be is acceptable;
(iv)   No world empty of sentient, rational beings is acceptable.

Each member of the set of 'acceptable' worlds is next assigned a unique ordinal to represent its axiological status. The least acceptable world is '1', the second-least is '2', and so on. (For the sake of simplicity, they assume that all worlds are commensurable, and that there are no ties.) God then selects from this set of worlds *at random*. The Howard-Snyders think that, even though it is always possible for God to select a better world than he does, this

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model of world-actualization is unsurpassable. In short, they hold that on this model, the antecedent of P1 is true, but the consequent is false.

Are both parts of God's world-actualizing action unsurpassable, on this model? First consider the sorting of worlds into the categories 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable'. The Howard-Snyders claim that it is plausible to suppose that there is a unique *best partition principle*, and they stipulate that God acts on it (1996, 423-4). I agree that if there is such a principle, an unsurpassable being will act on it. But it is unreasonable to suppose that such a principle exists on NBW. The Howard-Snyders maintain that partition principles can be ranked, and presumably they are to be ranked according to the standard they express: the higher the partition point, the better the principle. But there are infinitely many points at which to partition the set of possible worlds. So the Howard-Snyders must hold that there is a unique partition point such that all principles that invoke a higher point fail to express a genuinely higher standard. But this is entirely at odds with the intuitions that drive NBW. It is much more plausible to think that, just as there are increasingly better worlds on NBW, so too there are increasingly better partition principles. (See Kraay 2005a.)

Suppose, though, that there is indeed a unique unsurpassable partition principle. God's use of this principle to sort worlds constitutes the first step in the two-stage process of world-actualization proposed by the Howard-Snyders' model. Recall that for their model to be a successful counterexample to P1, *both* stages of God's world-actualizing action must be unsurpassable. So let's consider the second stage: random selection. Some object that it is absurd to suggest that God use a randomizer, since God would *foreknow* the result (Rescher 1969, 156-7). But a reasonable reply holds that there are *no truths* concerning the deliverances of randomizers (Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder 1994, 266; Grover 2003, 148; Strickland 2006, 151). On this view, there is nothing for God to foreknow, in which case this does not count against his omniscience.

A randomizer is a device or procedure that delivers a random output. It seems reasonable to suppose that there is more than one possible randomizer. And perhaps they too can be ranked in terms of their axiological status. If so, it is natural to expect that God would use the *best* device or procedure available – supposing there is such a thing. But it's plausible to think that there is no best randomizer on NBW. *Ceteris paribus*, randomizer A is better than randomizer B if it reliably selects a better world than B does. Suppose, for example, that randomizer A is a device or procedure used to select a world from the set of 'acceptable' worlds, and that randomizer B uses the deliverances of A, and then *adds one*. Randomizer B will deliver a random result, to be sure, but it reliably picks out a better world than A does. So there is excellent reason for God to prefer randomizer B to A. But, of course, a similar procedure can be used to show that *any* proposed randomizer is surpassable. So it is difficult to see how the Howard-Snyders can justifiably assert that on their model, God uses an unsurpassable randomizing device or procedure. Accordingly, since they have not advanced a model of *unsurpassable* divine world-actualizing activity, their case against P1 fails. (For criticisms of the Howard-Snyders, see Grover 2003, 2004; Kraay 2005a, 2006, 2008; Rowe 1994, 2004, pp.94-8; and Steinberg 2005, 2007.)

Criticisms of P2

Thomas Morris identifies two theses that might be thought to underwrite P2 (1993, 242):

(v)   The goodness of an agent's actions is *productive* of the agent's goodness.
(vi)   The goodness of an agent's actions is *expressive* of the agent's goodness.

Morris thinks that both may be plausible in ordinary human affairs, but denies that either applies to God in this context. He reasons that (v) absurdly imputes *moral potential* to an unsurpassable being, and that (vi) absurdly suggests that there could be a *perfect expression* of God's goodness in choosing a world for actualization, even though this is impossible on NBW.

Morris' mistake – like Langtry's – is to assume that G can safely be granted in this discussion. Morris takes G to be unproblematic, and, given NBW and P1, he declares P2 absurd. But this merely begs the question. The burden of proof rests on the defender of the no best world argument to show that NBW, P1, and P2 are *each* more plausible than G, and the onus is on the critic to deny this. The critic cannot simply assume G: supporting reasons must be offered. (See Rowe 2004, 99-103 and Kraay 2005a.)

Like Morris, William Hasker thinks that an illegitimate complaint is made of God in the no best world argument, and his argument is best construed as a rejection of P2. In a series of papers (2004a, 2004b, 2005), Hasker defends the following argument:

(1)   If, necessarily, I fail to do the best I can, then, necessarily, I fail to do better than I actually did.
(2)   If, necessarily, I fail to do better than I actually did, then failing to do better than I actually did is not a moral fault.
(3)   If, necessarily, I fail to do the best I can, then failing to do better than I actually did is not a moral fault.

Clearly, (3) follows from (1) and (2). And, with respect to the selection and actualization of a world on NBW, the antecedent of (1) and (3) is true of God: it is impossible for God to 'do his best'. So, if Hasker's argument is sound, it is unreasonable to fault God for failing to do better than he does in actualizing a world on NBW. In other words, even though God's *action* could have been better, it is not the case that *God* could have been better: P2 is false.

But is this argument sound? Premise (1) is self-evident, so the key premise is (2). Hasker defends (2) by pointing out its similarity to

(4)   If, necessarily, I fail to do the best I can, then failing to do the best I can is not a moral fault.

(4) is not disputed in the literature on world actualization. So if Hasker is right that (2) should be accepted because of its similarity to (4), he has given good reason to think that his argument is sound.

Hasker claims that the salient similarity between (2) and (4) is this: both claims assert that God's *inability to contravene a necessary truth* cannot be deemed a fault. On NBW, it is a necessary truth that God *fails to do his best* with respect to world selection and actualization, and so, since not even God can contravene a necessary truth, this is no failure on God's part. Equally, on NBW, it is necessarily true that God *fails to do better* than he does with respect to world selection and actualization. So, by parity of reasoning, Hasker urges that God's failure to contravene this necessary truth should not be deemed a fault.

But there is an important difference between these two necessary truths. The reason why God is not properly to be blamed for failing to *do his best* (i.e. actualize the best

possible world) on NBW is that this is a *logically impossible task* – which is just to say that there simply is no task at all to perform. But in contrast, God's *doing better* than he does (i.e. actualizing a better world) is a *logically possible task* – and this is true no matter what world God actualizes on NBW. Given this difference, it is far from clear that Hasker has shown that God cannot reasonably be faulted for failing to do better than he does on NBW. (Criticisms of Hasker can be found in Almeida 2005, 2006; Kraay 2005b; Rowe 2004, pp.104-113; and Rowe 2005.)

In conclusion, if NBW is plausible, the problem of no best world poses a significant challenge to the core theistic belief that there necessarily exists an essentially unsurpassable being who is the creator and sustainer of all that is. I have outlined four broad ways in which theists might respond. The most natural response is to criticize either P1 or P2, but I have argued that several recent attempts fail. If I'm right, theists should attempt to construct new criticisms of these claims, or find another response to this problem. But it should be noted that defenders of this argument for atheism also bear the burden of showing that P1 and P2 are indeed plausible principles on NBW.

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