Response to Hasker

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Abstract: The issue between my view and Hasker's concerns a certain principle that he takes to be true, but I hold to be false. The principle in question asserts that failing to do better than one did is a defect only if doing the best one can is possible for one to do. I claim that this principle is false because if an all-knowing, all-powerful being were confronted with an unending series of increasingly better creatable worlds and deliberately chose to create the least good world, that being would thereby show itself to be something less than a supremely perfect world-creator. In fact, I argue that if a supremely perfect world-creator were to exist and create a world, it would have to be a world than which there is no better creatable world.

Hasker's review[1] carefully describes the chief points made in *Can God Be Free?*,[2] both in the first five chapters and in chapter 7 as well. Chapter 6, by far the longest chapter in the book, critically examines the important work of a number of contemporary philosophers (including Hasker) who have endeavoured, in one way or another, to defend God's freedom with respect to selecting among creatable worlds the one He will create. Hasker's description of chapter 6, however, is as brief as his accounts of the other much shorter chapters. This provides him the space to discuss his own objection to my view.[3] And, from my point of view, this is entirely appropriate on Hasker's part. For the objection he raises is important and worthy of serious consideration by readers of *Religious Studies.*

As Hasker reports, the main issue between us concerns three principles that I expressed as follows,

    (a)   Failing to do the best one can is a defect only if doing the best one can is possible for one to do.

    (b)   Failing to do better than one did is a defect only if doing better than one did is possible for one to do.

    (c)   Failing to do better than one did is a defect only if doing the best one can is possible for one to do.

Principles (a) and (b) are clearly true. Indeed, they seem to be necessary truths. Principle (c), however, is in my view false. For I hold that if an omniscient being were confronted with an infinite, unending series of *increasingly better* creatable worlds, any one of which it had the power to create, and that omniscient being deliberately chose to create, say, the *least good* creatable world, it would thereby show itself to be something less than a *supremely perfect world-creator*. Indeed, the following principle seems to me to be true:

> Principle B   If an omniscient being creates a world when there is a better world it could have created, then it is possible that there exists a being morally better than it.

I hold Principle B to be true because if a being were to create a world – let us suppose it is *the least good world* – when it could have created a much better world instead, it seems evident that there could be a *better world-creator*, a world-creator, say, whose degree of goodness is such that He simply could not create the least good world, given that there are much better creatable worlds. And a similar line of argument can be advanced for whatever world the being might select to create.

Hasker, however, objects to this view. He thinks that in the no-best-world scenario,[4] a necessarily existing, necessarily perfect being would be entirely free to create *any* one of the worlds in the infinite series of increasingly better creatable worlds. (Hasker and I both use the concept 'world' in a way which makes it strictly impossible for more than one world to be actual, although each of many worlds may be possible.) Indeed, Hasker claims, therefore, that such a being would be entirely free to create even *the least-good world*, a world than which no good world is less good. We can imagine such a world in which, say, the only living creature – a cricket perhaps – exists for but a moment, and in that moment experiences some degree of satisfaction.[5] According to Hasker, an infinitely good being might well chose to create that cricket world (or whatever world he would take to be the least good world) rather than a world a billion times better than it.

I confess that in my judgment this position is clearly incorrect, if not absurd. Perhaps aware of this difficulty, Hasker proposes that God might use a randomizer to select the world He is to create. So, I suppose, if the randomizer should select *the least-good* world, God can say to some puzzled angel, 'Don't blame me, blame the randomizer!' It is, I think, repugnant to suppose that an infinitely wise being would be reduced to having to use a randomizer to select, among worlds differing in value, the one He is to create.

Having a conviction that Hasker is wrong on this point, however, falls short of *showing* that he is wrong. Moreover, in his very fine book, and in a session of the Society for Philosophy of Religion during the spring of 2004, Hasker has given an important argument against my view, one to which I responded at the 2004 meeting of the Society for Philosophy of Religion. Undaunted by my response, in

his review of *Can God Be Free?* for *Religious Studies* he presents the same argument, continuing to argue that proposition (c), which I hold to be true, is in fact false. He calls this proof 'a conclusive refutation of Rowe's main argument' (460). He begins by producing another proposition, (c*) that is logically equivalent to (c). So, we now have my proposition,

> (c) Failing to do better than one did is a defect only if doing the best one can is possible for one to do;

and Hasker's proposition,

> (c*) If, necessarily, one does not do the best one can, then it is not a defect if one fails to do better than one did.

Since (c*) is logically equivalent to (c), any proof of the truth of (c*) is also a proof of the truth of (c). So, if Hasker has proved that (c*) is true, then I must be simply mistaken in holding that (c) is in fact false. How then does Hasker prove that (c*) is true? In examining his 'proof', one cannot help but note a somewhat strange remark he makes at the outset. He says: 'It will simplify the argument if we agree to consider the failure to act as itself an action. so that it is a necessary truth that the agent performs some action or other (even the ''action'' of failing to act). With this in place, we reason as follows: …'. 'Failing to act', by my lights *logically implies* not performing an action. When we are sound asleep we are failing to act. But, if we consider failing to act as itself an action, then when sound asleep we are performing actions, even if the 'actions' in question are called 'failings to act'. I suspect, however, that Hasker means something like 'intentionally failing to act'. In any case, he assures me that his argument does not depend on this questionable point.

Instead of continuing to criticize Hasker's argument directly, I will try to explain my reasoning so that the reader can see clearly whether it is correct or incorrect. Assume, as seems right, that it is better for God to create a good world than to create no world at all. If so, then since God's absolute perfection necessitates His doing what is better for Him to do, if there is a single good world God can create He will create that good world of necessity, and not freely. And if there are only two creatable worlds, and the second is better than the first, then God will create the second of necessity, and not freely.

But what if the creatable worlds are infinite, beginning with a least good world and proceeding without end toward better and still better creatable worlds? It is here that God – Yes, even God! – faces an insurmountable difficulty. He must create a good world, since to create a good world is better than not to create at all. But there is no particular world among the infinite series of increasingly better creatable worlds that His perfect goodness will permit Him to create. For suppose He picks world number 7005. World 7005 is better than a very large number of worlds, worlds 1 through 7004. But, of course, in creating world 7005 He would be

doing less good than He can. For He can instead create world 200,000. But the very same problem would exist with respect to creating it. For in creating world 200,000 He still would be doing less good than He can. And the grim truth is that no matter what world He might select from among the unending series of increasingly better creatable worlds, if He were to create that world He would not only be creating a very good world, but He also would be deliberately creating a world less good than some other much better creatable world.

Here then God would be in an impossible situation. For since creating a good world is better than not creating any world at all, He *must create* some good world. But since each good creatable world is less good than any world in an unending sequence of even better creatable worlds, there is no particular world that His absolute perfection permits Him to create. This being so, we see that a contradiction emerges when we suppose a being whose perfection is such that He cannot fail to do as much good as He can, and also suppose that, instead of there being a best creatable world, there is no end to the infinite series of increasingly better creatable worlds. The great philosopher Leibniz saw this problem, and his solution was to conclude both that there must be *a best creatable world* and that God has in fact created it. My own judgment is that Leibniz's reasoning on this matter is correct. So, *if* the high God of classical theism exists, the created world is the best of all creatable worlds. On the other hand, if our world, with all its evil, is not the best creatable world, the God of classical theism does not exist. I conclude, therefore, that Hasker's objection fails.

Although this line of reasoning appears to be correct, there are a variety of very important objections contemporary philosophers have set forth in an effort to show it to be mistaken. Hasker's objection is only one of nine such objections that are critically discussed in chapter 6 of *Can God Be Free?*.

Notes

1. William Hasker '*Can God Be Free?*: Rowe's dilemma for theology', *Religious Studies*, **41** (2005), 453–462.
2. William L. Rowe *Can God Be Free?* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004).
3. This objection is presented in his important recent book: *Providence, Evil, and the Openness of God* (London: Routledge, 2004).
4. In the no-best-world scenario a world-creator is confronted with an unending series of increasingly better creatable worlds.
5. Hasker is inclined not to view the cricket world as a good world, or good enough to figure in the series of good worlds. But pleasure or satisfaction (unless it includes something bad – e.g. taking pleasure in the suffering of others) is something that is intrinsically good, whether it be human satisfaction or the satisfaction of one of the lower animals. Thus, if there is nothing bad in the cricket world thus described, it is a good world, although perhaps minimally good. And we are here considering *all* the logically possible good worlds. That being so, the cricket world must be included in the series of possible, creatable worlds.