

Can God Be Free?: Rowe's dilemma for theology

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Abstract: In his book, *Can God Be Free?*, William Rowe has argued that if God is unsurpassably good He cannot be free; if He is free, He cannot be unsurpassably good. After following the discussion of this topic through a number of historical figures, Rowe focuses on the recent and contemporary debate. A key claim of Rowe's is that, if there exists an endless series of better and better creatable worlds, then the existence of a morally perfect creator is impossible. I show that this argument is unsound, since a key premise can be proved false from propositions Rowe himself accepts.

According to William Rowe, if God is unsurpassably good He cannot be free; if He is free, He cannot be unsurpassably good. The argument goes like this: if God is unsurpassably good, then He must under all circumstances do the very best thing it is possible for Him to do. In particular, God must make the very best decision it is possible for Him to make with respect to creating a world: assuming that there is one best creatable world, God must create that world and no other.¹ But if that is so, then God is not free with respect to His act of creation, and is deserving of neither thanks nor praise for so creating; He could no more help doing this than you and I can help breathing.

But suppose, as many have thought, that there is no best creatable world, but rather an endless series of better and better worlds, with no upper bound to the goodness of a possible creation? In this case, Rowe asserts, the prospects for theology are even worse, for such a situation is logically incompatible with the existence of an unsurpassably good creator. Consider this endless series of better and better worlds: God can create none of them, for each of them is such that there is a better world God could create, and in failing to create that better world He would show himself not to be an unsurpassably good creator. But neither can God refrain from creating any world at all, for in so refraining He would be choosing an option less good than many others available to Him, namely the option of creating one of the very good worlds it lies in His power to create. So if

we assume God to be confronted with such an endless series, it is impossible that He create any world, and also impossible that He refrain from creating – clearly, an impossible situation altogether! As noted, the conclusion to be drawn is that the existence of an endless series of better and better creatable worlds is logically incompatible with the existence of an unsurpassably good God.

Theists then are best advised to adopt the other option, and to maintain that there is a single best creatable world, or at least a set of ‘equal-best’ worlds, each of which is superior to any world not a member of that set. But while this option does not lead immediately to atheism, it may do so indirectly. For it lays a heavy burden upon the theist, who must now maintain that this our world, with all its suffering and evil, is indeed the very best world God could create. Theists must also cope with the extremely unpalatable consequence that, since God of necessity creates the best world (namely, this one), He is deserving of neither thanks nor praise for doing so. Pretty clearly, the book jacket understates the case when it asserts that this problem ‘may require some significant revision in contemporary thinking about the nature of God’!

This, in brief, is the argument of Rowe’s *Can God Be Free?*²² Most of the book is spent in examining, and finding wanting, various responses given by theists to the dilemma. For while the argument in its fully developed form is Rowe’s own, the tension between holding both that God is free in His creating, and that He cannot fail to do what is best, has been felt for a long time. The twists and turns in the historical discussion, ably detailed by Rowe, are fascinating in their own right, as well as for the light they can throw on the issue for us today.

The principal subject of chapter 1 is Leibniz, who willingly embraced the conclusion that God of necessity creates the best possible world, and that this our actual world is indeed the best possible. Leibniz recognized, however, the need to hold that God is free in creating, a need he provided for by distinguishing ‘absolute necessity’ from ‘moral necessity’: ‘God chose between different courses, all possible: thus metaphysically speaking, He could have chosen or done what was not the best; but He could not morally speaking have done so’ (17). Rowe, however, argues convincingly that Leibniz’s views commit him to the position that God’s creating the best possible world is indeed absolutely necessary: ‘despite Leibniz’s claims to the contrary, it is logically impossible for Leibniz’s God to prefer less than the best’ (20). So Leibniz’s proposed solution to the dilemma is a failure.

In chapter 2 the focus shifts to Samuel Clarke, who, in opposition to Leibniz, advocated what we would now call a libertarian view of free will: ‘the essence of liberty consists in a person’s having a continual power of choosing whether he shall act or whether he shall forbear acting’ (23). A central claim made by Clarke on our present topic is summed up in the following quotation: ‘God always discerns and approves what is just and good, necessarily, and cannot do otherwise: But He always acts or does what is just and good freely, that is, having at the

same time a full natural or physical power of acting differently' (24). But is God *really able* to 'act differently' – for instance, to choose to do something that is inherently evil? As Rowe points out, 'A loving grandfather undoubtedly possesses the physical power to cause the death of his five-year-old granddaughter by choking her. But it may well not be in his power to perform that action simply because it is not in his power to bring himself intentionally to choose to kill her' (28–29). And it would seem that God is in a similar position with regard to the power to do something evil. Indeed, Clarke admits that this is the case:

It being as truly impossible for such a free agent [as God], who is absolutely incapable of being deceived or depraved, to choose, by acting contrary to these laws, to destroy its own *perfections*; as for *necessary existence to be able to destroy its own being*. From hence it follows, that though God is both perfectly *free* and infinitely *powerful*, yet he cannot possibly do any thing that is *evil*. (29–30)

But does this not also mean that God cannot be free in His choice to do that which is good – for instance, in His choice to create the best possible world? Clarke's answer to this trades on a parallel between divine *freedom* and divine *power*:

It is no diminution of power not to be able to do things which are no object of power. And it is in like manner no diminution either of power or liberty to have such a perfect and unalterable rectitude of will as never possibly to *choose* to do something inconsistent with that rectitude. (30)

Rowe doesn't think this reply works. For, as we've seen,

... on Clarke's account of the nature of freedom, the power to choose otherwise is *necessary* for a choice to be free. Therefore, if it is not in God's power to choose to do evil, God does not freely choose not to do evil. And if it is not in God's power to intentionally act contrary to what is best, God does not freely choose to do what is best. (30)

In the end, then, Clarke, no more than Leibniz, is able to explain how God acts freely in creating the best of all possible worlds.

Leibniz and Clarke, in spite of their differences, agree that this world that God has created is in fact the best possible world. Thomas Aquinas, on the other hand, denies that there is any such thing as a best possible world. He holds, to be sure, that God has arranged the various parts that make up the actual world in the best possible way. But this leaves it open that there could be another possible world, consisting of other parts, which is better overall than the present world. Indeed, since God is infinitely perfect and creatures only finitely perfect, there will always be metaphysical 'room' for there to be creatures that are higher in the scale of perfection – closer to the perfection of God, so to speak – than any creatures in the actual world. There being, then, no best possible world, there is no necessity for God to create such a world – indeed, Thomas denies that it was necessary for God to create at all. Rowe's discussion of the issues that arise from Aquinas's position is full of interest, but space is limited and we must move on.

Chapter 4 is devoted to Jonathan Edwards, and focuses on his compatibilist views concerning the nature of free will. Edwards distinguishes two ways in which we may be unable to perform a particular action: we may be *physically* unable to perform it, meaning that even if we were to will the action, we would not be able to perform it. (We cannot, for instance, fly by flapping our arms, no matter how hard we try.) Or, we may be *morally* unable to perform the action, when ‘factors such as habits, dispositions, and motives render us *unable to will* a certain act’ (59). What is distinctive about Edwards is his insistence that only natural inability excuses a person from responsibility; moral inability is irrelevant to this. ‘It can’t truly be said, according to ordinary use of language, that ... a drunkard, let his appetite be never so strong, can’t keep the cup from his mouth’ (58). Rowe devotes considerable space to arguing against this compatibilist view, making good use of the case of Andrea Yates, a mentally disturbed woman who killed her own children by drowning them in the bathtub. Rowe argues that Yates was treated unjustly in her trial for murder, because Texas law prevented the jury from finding her insane on the ground that she was incapable, due to mental illness (*morally incapable*, in Edwards’s sense), of conforming her actions to the requirements of the law.

The chief importance of Edwards for our present topic, however, consists in the flaw he was able to point out in the thinking of his libertarian opponents. These opponents insisted, in the case of human beings, that in order to be deserving of either praise or blame they must be capable of both *willing* and *doing* the contrary of what is in fact willed and done. But in the case of God, they praise Him and give Him thanks, in spite of acknowledging that His perfect nature necessitates His doing always what is best for Him to do. This, of course, is the inconsistency Rowe has already pointed out in the case of Samuel Clarke, and he is happy to enlist Edwards’s argument in order to reinforce the point.

The fifth chapter brings the debate down to the present by discussing Robert Adams’s claim that, even if there is a best possible world, God is under no obligation to create it. An important theme in Adams’s argument is the divine attribute of *grace*, which he defines as ‘a disposition to love which is not dependent on the merit of the person loved’ (83). Both Christian theology and Christian worship often extol God’s grace, shown by His dealing with human sinners in a loving and gracious way of which we are completely undeserving. But if God is *obligated* to choose always the best, Adams reasons, there would be no scope for divine grace to influence any of God’s actions, since this obligation would control God’s choice of the actions to be performed. Rowe concedes that God may not be obligated to choose the best; perhaps some divine choices fall into the category of supererogatory acts rather than obligations. Nevertheless, he argues, a morally unsurpassable being will be unsurpassable in his acts of supererogation as well as in his fulfilment of obligations, so it still follows that a morally unsurpassable God will always choose the best.

Chapter 6, entitled 'Divine perfection and freedom: the contemporary debate,' is clearly the argumentative heart of the book, comprising by itself 63 of the book's 166 pages. In this chapter Rowe pursues, through many twists and turns, the question: What are the implications for divine perfection and freedom if there is no best possible world, but rather an endless series of better and better worlds? The answer, as stated in the initial paragraphs of this discussion, is that the existence of such a series is logically incompatible with the existence of a perfectly good God. We will return to this argument after a brief summary of the concluding chapter.

This chapter, 'Can God be the cause of His own nature?', is devoted to a discussion of Thomas Morris's proposal that God creates His own nature and is therefore causally responsible for it. This proposal is relevant to our discussion in the following way: it has been argued that, since God's nature necessitates His always choosing the best, He is deserving of neither praise nor thanks for doing so. But if it could be shown that God is in fact responsible for His having that perfect nature, it would follow that He is after all praiseworthy, both for the nature itself and for the actions He performs in consequence of having it.

Rowe finds Morris's claim that God creates His own nature to be problematic, but he does not reject it outright. Instead, he points out that, even if Morris's claim is correct, God would not possess libertarian freedom with respect to creating His own nature; it would (as Morris acknowledges) be *unavoidable* that God create His nature, and also unavoidable that this nature consist of the properties it does in fact consist of. So the original conclusion remains: even if God does create His own nature, He does so of necessity and is deserving neither of praise nor of thanks for so doing.

We now return to the argument of chapter 6, that the existence of an endless series of better and better creatable worlds is inconsistent with the existence of a morally unsurpassable creator. This conclusion is problematic for theology in several ways. First, to many theists it seems plausible on independent grounds that the goodness of creatable worlds has no upper bound, so the conclusion that this view is inconsistent with God's existence presents something of a conundrum. Furthermore, rejecting this possibility apparently commits the theist to holding that this is indeed the best creatable world, and that God was not free in creating it. Both of which are conclusions many theists would be reluctant to accept. So we need to examine carefully Rowe's reasoning. Central to his argument is the following 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 exist a being morally better than it. (97)

A little reflection shows that if principle (B) is accepted, Rowe's conclusion is inescapable: no matter which world God creates, there will always be a better

world He could have created, so under such circumstances no creator can be unsurpassably good. It has been objected by Norman Kretzmann and Thomas Morris that, given the no-best-world scenario, the requirement imposed by principle (B) is unreasonable, since it amounts to requiring God to do something logically impossible. Thus Morris:

But failing to do the best you can is a flaw or manifests an incompleteness in moral character ... 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, given the range of omnipotence and the nature of those considerations making the notion of a best of all possible worlds an incoherence, then not doing his best in creating cannot be seen as a flaw or as manifesting an incompleteness in the character of God. (101)

Rowe forcefully rejects this reasoning. He writes,

Morris's basic mistake, I believe, is his view, shared by Kretzmann, that to hold, as I do, that if there is no best world for a being to create then no being can create a world and be a being than which a better creator is impossible, just is to hold God accountable for not doing what is logically impossible to be done – creating the best world. (101)

After quoting the passage from Morris cited above, he continues,

Of course, if it is logically impossible for there to be a best world, then God's not creating the best possible world does not count against his perfect goodness. Nowhere do I suggest that it does. What counts against God's perfect goodness (specifically, his moral perfection) is his creating a world when he could have created a world better than it.

It is important to distinguish three different principles:

- (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.

Both (a) and (b) are true. But (c) is not true. And it is (c) that Morris needs to make his argument work. (101–102)

So the issue is well and fairly joined: if (c) is false, then Morris's objection fails and Rowe's argument succeeds, but if (c) is true, Morris is right and Rowe is wrong.

In order to resolve this dispute, we need to investigate the truth of (c). It will be useful, for this purpose, to get (c) into a slightly different form. Using contra-position, we obtain

(c') If doing the best one can is not possible for one to do, then it is not a defect if one fails to do better than one did.

Switching the modal operator from possibility to necessity gives us

(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.

Performing similar transformations on principle (b), we have

(b*) If, necessarily, one fails to do better than one did, then it is not a defect if one fails to do better than one did

We also need a clear understanding of the expressions 'failing to do the best one can', and 'failing to do better than one did'. To say that a person failed to do better than she did, in the sense relevant here, is to say that there was a possible action, one that was not performed but could have been performed, that would have been better than the action actually performed. This can be symbolized using the following abbreviations:

x, y variables taking as values actual or possible actions;
 $x > y$ x is better than y ;
 Px the agent performs x .

Then, 'the agent failed to do better than she did' is represented as:

$$(\exists x)[Px \ \& \ (\exists y)(\sim Py \ \& \ \Diamond Py \ \& \ y > x)]$$

The formula for 'necessarily, one does not do the best one can' will be

$$\Box(x)[Px \supset (\exists y)(\sim Py \ \& \ \Diamond Py \ \& \ y > x)]$$

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:

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| (1) | $\Box(x)[Px \supset (\exists y)(\sim Py \ \& \ \Diamond Py \ \& \ y > x)]$ | Assumption for conditional proof |
| (2) | $\Box(\exists x)Px$ | Premise |
| (3) | Pa | From 2, EI |
| (4) | $Pa \supset (\exists y)(\sim Py \ \& \ \Diamond Py \ \& \ y > a)$ | From 1, UI |
| (5) | $(\exists y)(\sim Py \ \& \ \Diamond Py \ \& \ y > a)$ | From 3,4 |
| (6) | $Pa \ \& \ (\exists y)(\sim Py \ \& \ \Diamond Py \ \& \ y > a)$ | From 3,5 |
| (7) | $(\exists x)[Px \ \& \ (\exists y)(\sim Py \ \& \ \Diamond Py \ \& \ y > x)]$ | From 6, EG |
| (8) | $\Box(\exists x)[Px \ \& \ (\exists y)(\sim Py \ \& \ \Diamond Py \ \& \ y > x)]$ | From 1–7; what follows from necessary propositions is itself necessary |
| (9) | $\Box(x)[Px \supset (\exists y)(\sim Py \ \& \ \Diamond Py \ \& \ y > x)] \supset \Box(\exists x)[Px \ \& \ (\exists y)(\sim Py \ \& \ \Diamond Py \ \& \ y > x)]$ | From 1–8, conditional proof |

Reverting to ordinary English, we have

- (9) If necessarily, one does not do the best one can, then, necessarily, one fails to do better than one did.

And now let us combine this with principle (b*), equivalent to (b) which Rowe has endorsed:

- (b*) If, necessarily, one fails to do better than one did, then it is not a defect if one fails to do better than one did.

From (g') and (b*) together, it follows that:

- (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.

But (c*) is equivalent to (c), which, by Rowe's own admission, enables Morris's objection to succeed. It is interesting to note, however, that (c*) does not straightforwardly entail the falsity of Rowe's principle (B). For if there is in fact a best creatable world, then the antecedent of (c*) will be false, and thus implies nothing concerning the truth of the consequent. But of course Rowe's interest in this chapter lies in applying (B) on the supposition that there is no best creatable world or group of worlds. And on that assumption, (B) and (c*) contradict each other, and since (c*) is true, (B) is false and Rowe's argument collapses.

This result is a conclusive refutation of Rowe's main argument. We may conclude, then, that there is no reason why the theist should not embrace the no-best-world doctrine, thus avoiding the unwelcome conclusion that God's choice of a world to create is necessitated. Under those circumstances, it may be that God will select a world for creation at random, out of those worlds that meet some required level of goodness. Or perhaps some other decision-procedure is available to God; it may be just a trifle presumptuous for us to assume we have thought of all the ways in which the Creator might make his decisions!

It is still worthwhile, however, to explore the implications of the other possibility – that there is indeed a best creatable world, or a set of equal best worlds, and God of necessity creates that world, or a member of that set of worlds. I believe Rowe has exaggerated the difficulties for theology that result from this view. The doctrine that it is appropriate to praise and thank God only for matters concerning which God has libertarian freedom is highly dubious; certainly it has never been accepted by the main Christian tradition. In the *Gloria* we 'give thanks to thee [God] for thy great glory'; it is not to be supposed that being glorious is optional for God!

There is indeed a certain kind of praise – *moral* praise, construed in a fairly narrow, more or less Kantian, sense – which requires libertarian freedom. But this sort of praise may be not be especially relevant in relation to God; very few believers seem to feel it appropriate to praise God for his steadfastness in resisting temptation! Furthermore, even apart from this objection, there may be an opportunity for praise and thanks Rowe has not considered. It could be that there exist a number of equal best creatable worlds, and some of those worlds include us, the persons now existing, whereas others do not. Under those circumstances,

presumably not even Rowe would object to our praising and thanking God for his goodness to us, in creating us when he could equally well have refrained from doing so.

Defending the claim that the actual world is the best, or one of the best, creatable worlds undeniably presents a challenge for the theist. But here also, Rowe has exaggerated the difficulty. He does this when he writes,

I suspect that part of the motivation for the theist to accept the view that there is no best creatable world is that the alternative seems both to limit severely God's freedom in creating, and to leave the theist with the burden of defending the Leibnizian thesis that this world, with all its evil, is a world than which a better creatable world is not even a logical possibility. (98)

This is a mistake, for reasons that should be familiar from Alvin Plantinga's free-will defence against the logical problem of evil.³ As Plantinga pointed out, Leibniz's assumption that the creatable worlds include all the logically possible worlds is incorrect, *if* we attribute libertarian free will to the creatures. No doubt there are very good possible worlds, in which there are many wise and happy creatures who always do what is right on every occasion. However, it may be beyond God's power to actualize such worlds, for the following reason. Were God to perform the divine creative actions necessary to actualize one of these worlds, many or all of the rational creatures would freely choose to act contrary to God's loving purposes for them, thus bringing sin and evil into the world. This means that not all logically possible worlds are actually *creatable*, and in view of this the prospects may be better than one would have supposed for defending the claim that the actual world is 'one of the best' creatable worlds.

I believe, in fact, that the requirement that the actual world be one of the best creatable worlds is very nearly equivalent to a requirement stated by Rowe in another context: 'An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.'⁴ This, of course, is the key ethical premise in Rowe's evidential argument from evil. If we generalize from 'intense suffering' to evil in general, and attribute creative power to the omniscient, wholly good being, then we are very close to the requirement that this being actualize the best creatable world. It is my impression that a good many theists, especially those of the Molinist persuasion, do in fact believe that this is one of the best creatable worlds. The currently most popular response to the evidential argument from evil is the 'sceptical-theist' defence, which argues that we are in too poor an epistemic position to be able to determine that there exist unjustified evils. This defence has been challenged, of course, and the discussion doesn't seem likely to reach consensus in the foreseeable future. My point here is merely that the 'best-creatable-world' requirement does not add much by way of an *additional* burden for theists who already accept Rowe's requirement concerning the justification of evils.

There remains yet another possibility, noted by Rowe but not developed, that if accepted would circumvent many of the problems discussed so far. Perhaps there is no best creatable world, nor any equal best set of worlds, not because the series of better and better worlds goes on without limit but because there exists, prior to God's creative decision, no fully determinate ranking of the relative values of the different worlds. As Morris puts it, 'Some world A might be better than rival world B in some respect, but with B surpassing A in others, and the relevant values not such that they could be summed over and compared overall' (99). There would then be incommensurable values to be realized in various creatable worlds, and it would be a matter for divine decision whether A should be preferred to B or vice versa. This proposal, which I believe corresponds closely to the most plausible account of libertarian free will, gives God a much wider scope for creative choice than is allowed by the 'group-of-equal-best-worlds' scenario, and without the arbitrariness suggested by God's use of a randomizing device in selecting a world to actualize. Fuller development of this option, however, must wait for another occasion.⁵

Though numerous disagreements have been expressed, I do not want to close without saying that *Can God Be Free?* is an excellent book, one that probes important questions with both historical erudition and philosophical insight. Depending on the predilections of the reader, it can be viewed as an outstanding contribution either to anti-theistic argumentation, or to philosophical theology.

Notes

1. Possible worlds, of course, are abstract objects and as such are not created; what God does, strictly speaking, is to *actualize* some one possible world by performing those divine actions required for it to be actual. Rowe recognizes this, but uses in his book the more familiar terminology that speaks of God as 'creating' a world, and we shall do likewise in this discussion.
2. William L. Rowe *Can God Be Free?* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004). Page references in the text are to this book; Rowe's quotations from other authors are referenced by the pages on which they are found.
3. The points made here can also be made without assuming divine middle knowledge. But the free-will defence involving middle knowledge provides a convenient and familiar framework for our discussion.
4. William L. Rowe *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction* (Belmont CA: Wadsworth, 1978), 87.
5. Would this proposal enable us to make sense of the claim that God need not have created any universe at all? I believe the answer is yes, but the point can't be developed further here. There is some additional discussion of these points in 'The freedom and goodness of God', ch. 11 in William Hasker *Providence, Evil, and the Openness of God* (London: Routledge, 2004).