

God's Choice of a World

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Abstract: It has often been claimed that since God is a maximally great being, God must create the best possible world. For if God creates a less than best world, then God's creative work is morally surpassable which is supposed to be impossible. The first two articles in this issue examine whether God must create the best possible world on the assumption that such a world is possible. Alternatively, some argue that for any possible world God could create, there is always a slightly, if not vastly, better possible world such that there is no unique best possible world. But then God's choice of a world is never morally justified. These considerations have been leveraged to formulate an argument for atheism known as the Problem of No Best World. The final three articles in this issue address this argument. In different ways, each of the articles in this *Religious Studies Archive* focus on whether God could ever be justified in creating a less than best world.

Introduction

One of Leibniz's (1646-1716) most famous positions was that God necessarily creates the best possible world.¹ Leibniz was writing in the context of the problem of evil and many have been quick to observe that the actual world seems pretty far from the best.² Regardless of what one thinks of the problem of evil, many (if not most) of us share the modal intuition that things could go much better in the actual world. The first part of this article addresses the question of whether God can create a less than best world even if there is a best world. Robert Adams rejects Leibniz's claim and instead defends the idea that God could create a less than best world even if the best world were an option. The first two articles in this special issue reply to Adams.

The second part of this article address the question of whether God can create a less than best world if there is no best world to create. While *a posteriori* observations about the actual world have led many to doubt Leibniz's claim that this is the best possible world, contemporary philosophers of religion have generated an *a priori* argument for atheism from reflecting on divine creation. *The Problem of No Best World* follows Leibniz in concluding that God exists, then God necessarily creates the best possible world. For if God creates a less than best world, then God's work is morally surpassable which is

supposed to be impossible on perfect being theism. For any possible world God could create, there is always a slightly, if not vastly, better possible world such that there is no unique best possible world. But then God's choice of a world is never morally justified. The final three articles address this argument for atheism.

Can God create a less than best world even if there is a best world?

Robert Adams argues for the provocative claim that even if there were a best possible world, God is under no obligation to create it (1972). He believes that Leibniz's view entails utilitarianism which runs contrary to the Judeo-Christian conception of God. Furthermore, "God's choice of a less excellent world could be accounted for in terms of His grace, which is considered a virtue rather than a defect of character in Judeo-Christian ethics" (Adams 1972, 318-319). For no one would be harmed if God failed to create the best world, even if a best world was available. Adams believes that any world God creates only needs to have the following characteristics:

- (1) None of the individual creatures in it would exist in the best of all possible worlds.
- (2) None of the creatures in it has a life which is so miserable on the whole that it would be better for that creature if it had never existed.
- (3) Every individual creature in the world is at least as happy on the whole as it would have been in any other possible world in which it could have existed (1972, 320).

Consider that it's possible the best world may not contain creatures described in (3). The key to understanding Adams' position is grace, which he explains "may be defined as a disposition to love which is not dependent on the merit of the person loved. The gracious person loves without worrying about whether the person he loves is worthy of his love" (Adams 1972, 323-324). On this view, even if God creates the best creatures, God wouldn't have created them *because* they were the best.

Adams is aware that his position seems to suggest that it is permissible for prospective parents to take a drug in order to have a disabled child. He writes:

If the child is not worse off than if it had never existed, and if *its* never existing would have been a sure consequence of its not having been brought into existence as retarded, I do not see how *its* interests can have been injured, or *its* rights violated, by the parents' bringing it into existence as retarded (Adams 1972, 327).

Since the disabled baby is a different person from the baby who would have been born had the parents refrained from taking the drug, the disabled baby is not harmed by their parent's action (even if the action is wrong). Adams further claims that prospective parents would be doing nothing wrong if they failed to take a drug which would give them a superhuman child, though he acknowledges that there may well be conflicting intuitions about this case (Adams 1972, 329).

Adams' contention has hardly been met with universal praise.³ This special issue contains two articles that directly respond to Adams' claim that even if there is a best world, God does not have to create it. I include them because they each provide unique responses to Adams that haven't been raised elsewhere.

In "This world, 'Adams worlds', and the best of all possible worlds," Stephen Grover argues that Adams mistakenly conflates the concept of best creatures with the concept of best world (2003). According to Grover, "worlds are not creatures. They are, rather, collections or aggregations of them, and infinite collections or aggregations to boot" (2003, 155).⁴ Grover also notes though Leibniz explicitly rejects the notion of a best creature, Adams fails to consider whether the notion of a best creature is even coherent (2003, 155). Consider that the requirement to create the best possible creatures sounds akin to requiring God to create other Gods which is absurd. According to Grover it's conceivable that the best world does not contain the best creatures.

Grover observes that for Leibniz (and Lewisian modal realists) who reject trans-world identity, Adams' (3) is automatically met. He also claims that even for those who reject trans-world identity, (3) is probably still met. Since a lot of evil has occurred in order for us to exist as we do (e.g., past wars), if things had gone differently (i.e., better) it's difficult to see how *we* would still exist (i.e., how the same person would exist) (2003, 158-159). Finally, Grover explains that it's difficult to see how Leibniz's best world could satisfy Adams' (2). In light of the miserable lives certain people are forced to endure in our world, it's doubtful that our world meets (2). Grover concludes that:

The best possible world is not best in virtue of containing the most happiness, but contains the most happiness in virtue of being the best. Perhaps only Leibniz could have been quite so confident that metaphysical speculation was itself the source of happiness, and that the harmony of the world thus ensured the happiness of all those creatures who opened their minds to it. But it is hard to imagine any more satisfactory resolution to the apparent conflict between the unsurpassable goodness of God and the manifest imperfections of the world that remains within the confines of an orthodox philosophical theology (2003, 62).

For Grover, requirement (2) might be met by our world if we focus on contemplating the love of God, rather than on something like our own hedonistic happiness and pleasure.

The other article in this special issue that directly addresses Adams' is "A morally unsurpassable God must create the best" by Erik J. Wielenberg (2004). Wielenberg holds that Adams' is incorrect because he wrongly moves from "(1) God exhibits the virtue of grace and acts in a supererogatory fashion in actualizing the less valuable world, to the claim that (2) God does not exhibit a lack of moral virtue in actualizing the less valuable world" (2004, 52). But (2) does not follow from (1). It's possible for an action to be supererogatory in manifesting a particular virtue while simultaneously lacking a different virtue or manifesting a vice (Wielenberg 2004, 52). So, "even if it is true that God both manifests the virtue of grace and acts in a supererogatory fashion in actualizing the less valuable world, it does not follow that God does not also manifest a lack of virtue in actualizing that world" (Wielenberg 2004, 52). Adams' account therefore wrongly focuses on grace to the exclusion of all of the other divine attributes. Furthermore, it's possible that God could manifest grace even in the best possible world, something Wielenberg observes that Adams admits (2004, 53).

Can God create a less than best world even if there is no best world to create?

Daniel and Frances Howard-Snyder attempt to describe a plausible decision procedure which could justify God creating a less than best world in a scenario where no best world is possible. They ask us to imagine an omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent being named Jove. Jove desires to create a world, but discovers that for any world he could create, there is always a better one. So, he creates a randomizer that will select a world sufficiently good enough to create. The randomizer selects world no.777 (Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder 1994, 260). They claim that if this story is logically possible, "then there is no contradiction in supposing that an essentially morally unsurpassable, essentially omnipotent and omniscient being could create a world inferior to some other world he, or some other possible being, could have created" (Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder 1994, 261).

The Howard-Snyders' also argue that if there is no best world, it would not be better if God failed to create a world at all. For creating a world is a way for a morally unsurpassable being to exhibit love. So, even if there is no best world to create, it is better that Jove create world no.777 than no world at all (Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder 1994, 262). Of course, in such a scenario God would still exist (and any other necessarily existing objects), but nothing else. This is, strictly speaking, still a world but it is bare. So, the Howard-Snyders' are claiming that world no.777 is better than a world just containing God. They then ask us to imagine Juno, a being identical to Jove who uses an exact replica of Jove's randomizer device to create a world. Suppose the randomizer selects world no.999. The Howard-Snyder's contend that even though they create worlds with different values, there is no moral difference between Jove and Juno. Since Jove is

not in control of the output of the randomizer, he cannot be blamed if he creates a world inferior to Juno's (Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder 1994, 263).

Finally, the Howard-Snyders' ask us to imagine Thor, a being who is also identical to Jove and Juno. Thor creates world no.888 *without* using a randomizing device. We might be tempted to think that Thor is better than Jove (and hence that Jove is morally surpassable), since he create a better world (Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder 1994, 264). However, the Howard-Snyders' argue that Thor isn't morally superior to Jove because that would entail that he is also superior to Juno. But Jove and Juno are morally equivalent. That Thor intentionally chose to create a better world than Jove instead of leaving it to chance does not show that Thor is superior to Jove. For "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" Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder 1994, 264). Likewise, Jove's perfection is also not impugned even if he knew which world the randomizer would select prior to using it. This is because just as with world creation, for any randomizer Jove uses, there could always be a better one (i.e., one more likely to select better worlds). But this shows that the randomizer isn't necessary in the first place. For "had Jove just up and created world no. 777 in the scenario originally described, so doing would not have reflected badly on him in any way at all" (Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder 1994, 266). According to the Howard-Snyder's, then, if there is no best world, God need only create a sufficiently good enough world in order to preserve divine perfection.

The Howard-Snyders' argument has become influential in discussions of the Problem of No Best World. As such, the next article for inclusion in this special issue is Jesse R. Steinberg's "Why an unsurpassable being cannot create a surpassable world," since it responds to the Howard-Snyders' (2005).⁵ Steinberg asks us to suppose that Thor wishes to avoid the possibility of creating just a minimally good enough world (2005, 325). Further "[s]uppose he does this by first selecting a relatively high number and then randomly picking a number above this self-imposed minimum standard of creation. We might imagine that Thor selects this cutoff non-randomly by arbitrarily picking a relatively high number" (2005, 325). Thor then uses a randomizer device to pick a world above that cut-off. Imagine that Thor uses this method because he believes that it is "better than (a) using a simple random selection procedure which might result in his creating a minimally acceptable world; and (b) his selecting a world to create only if it is the best world he could create, as this would lead to creating no world at all" (2005, 326). According to Steinberg this (partially non-random) selection procedure is better than the purely random one used by Jove. Why? Because there is a greater chance of creating a better world. Thus, "it would be *morally better* for an agent to employ a non-random selection procedure like Thor's than to use a random selection procedure like Jove's" (2005, 326). Thor is better than Jove because he uses a better selection procedure.

Of course, Steinberg's larger point is that there could *always* be a better selection procedure, just as there could always be a better world. Since the selection procedure is within the agent's control, it's something that reflects the agent's moral value (Steinberg 2005, 328). He explains that:

Another way of putting this problem is that, assuming there is no best possible world, for any agent *x* that uses any selection procedure *p*, there is another (possible) agent *y* that uses a different procedure *q*, where *q* is a better procedure than *p*. If it is the case that the selection procedure an agent uses reflects his/her moral worth, then it follows that for any agent *x* who creates a surpassable world, there is a (possible) morally superior agent *y*. Therefore, a being that creates a surpassable world (using any selection procedure) could not be morally unsurpassable. So my point is that a morally unsurpassable being (confronted by the sort of predicament in which Jove and the others find themselves) is really a illusion much like the largest possible object. (Steinberg 2005, 328)

Finally, even if Jove can't be blamed for the world he creates and so his perfection remains unscathed in some minimal sense, his act of creation is hardly praiseworthy since he could have done better. And theists traditionally hold that God warrants praise for having created the world (Steinberg 2005, 331).

William Rowe's book, *Can God Be Free?* is widely cited in the literature on the Problem of No Best World (2004). This special issue therefore includes William Hasker's critical notice of the book, entitled "*Can God Be Free?: Rowe's dilemma for theology*" (2005). In the first half of the notice Hasker, provides a helpful summary of Rowe's book, while the second half takes issue with Rowe's analysis of the problem of no best world. I thus focus on the second half as it addresses the question of whether God can create a less than best world if there is no best world to create.

Hasker addresses Rowe's dilemma to the effect that that whether there is a best world or not, theism faces two problematic horns. First, if there is a best world, then God must create it and so isn't free. Second, if there is no best world, then God would not be justified in creating any world since God's work would always be morally surpassable. According to Rowe, the theist ought to reject both of these options. Much of the disagreement between Hasker and Rowe centers on the following principle which is endorsed by Rowe:

(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 (Hasker 2005, 457)

While some argue that Rowe's worry for divine creation if there is no best world is asking God to do the logically impossible, Rowe explains that nothing in his argument rests on

this claim. If there is no best world for God to create, it is still a fact that for any world God creates there is a better world. And so God's work is always surpassable. This has nothing to do with demanding that God do something logically impossible. According to Rowe, we need to differentiate between the following three 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 (Rowe 2004, 101–102)

Rowe claims that (a) and (b) are true, but (c) is false. However, (c) is what's required for the logical impossibility objection to succeed. Interestingly (c) is the target of much of Hasker's criticisms. He explains that using contraposition, from (c) we can derive:

(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 (Hasker 2005, 458).

Hasker then explains that when we perform the same transformations on (b) we get:

(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 (2005, 459).

He further says that to 'fail to do better than one did' implies that there was an action an agent could have performed but did not perform, and it was a better action than the one they did in fact performed. This gives us:

(9') If necessarily, one does not do the best one can, then, necessarily, one fails to do better than one did (Hasker 2005, 459).

When this principle is combined with (b*) (which is equivalent to (b)), Hasker claims Rowe is committed to:

(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 (Hasker 2005, 460).

But since (c*) is equivalent to (c) this means that the logical impossibility objection does in fact succeed. If (c*) is true, then (B) is false and Rowe's argument fails (Hasker 2005, 460).

Hasker concludes by claiming that Rowe's worries for divine freedom if there is a best world are overblown. He writes that "[t]he 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" (Hasker 2005, 460). Our gratitude to God is typically offered because of the fact that we exist, not because God has created us in the best possible world.⁶

Divine Satisficing and Motivated Submaximization

The final article in this special issue appeared very recently in *Religious Studies*. In "Is motivated submaximization good enough for God?" Klaas J. Kraay continues a debate with Chris Tucker about whether God could engage in *motivated submaximization* with respect to world creation (2021; see also Kraay 2013; and Tucker 2016, 2017). I include it because it addresses important questions about whether decision procedures that may be acceptable for humans can also be successfully applied to divine creation.

Let's first get clear on a related concept known as *satisficing*. Here is Tucker's definition:

Satisficing (with respect to good G.): an agent A satisfices with respect to G in a transparent situation iff:

(a) A aims, purely for its own sake, at promoting G to degree D but not as much as A can, and

(b) A chooses a suboptimal option with respect to G. that has a value greater than or equal to D because A knows it satisfies the aim in (a) (Tucker 2016, 133 quoted in Kraay 2021, 407).

Tucker believes that much of the criticism leveled at Adams targets divine satisficing, but that it's more accurate to understand Adams as appealing to a related but distinct concept, that he calls *motivated submaximization*. Tucker clarifies:

Motivated Submaximization: an agent A submaximizes with motivation in a transparent situation iff:

- (i) A aims at getting as much of good G as A can, but
- (ii) A chooses a suboptimal option with respect to G because of some countervailing consideration (Tucker 2016, 132 quoted in Kraay 2021, 407).

Tucker believes that Adams implicitly appeals to motivated submaximization and that this is a perfectly legitimate practice for God to engage in when selecting which world to create. Kraay reminds us that for Tucker, there are two important structural features of countervailing considerations. The first is that they 'operate independently of and against what they countervail' (Kraay 2021, 408; see also Tucker 2016 134).⁷ The second is that 'countervailing' is a success term. Something is only a countervailing consideration if it actually justifies an agent choosing a suboptimal option (Kraay 2021, 408).

Kraay provides a number of reasons for rejecting Tucker's proposal and thus he denies that God could engage in motivated submaximization in order to create a less than best world. According to Kraay, it's doubtful that divine creation (if there is no best world) can sensibly be thought to have the aim that Tucker set out in (i). Kraay asks: "why would God aim to maximize the axiological status of the actual world, when it is perfectly clear to him, given his omniscience, that this simply cannot be done?" (2021, 408). To hold that God could submaximize in this case is to ascribe an irrational aim to God. He also claims that though, according to Tucker the countervailing consideration in this instance is that there is no optimum (i.e., no best world), this consideration likely fails Tucker's own independence requirement. Remember that the countervailing consideration here, "refers to the very same good (the overall axiological status of the chosen world) that (i) picks out" (Kraay 2021, 408).

Kraay further claims that the most worrisome problem with appealing to motivated submaximization in this context is it 'subtly' begs the question against the proponent of the problem of no best world. This is because appealing to motivated submaximization *assumes* that God exists, but this is precisely what is at stake in the problem of no best world (Kraay 2021, 409). Kraay explains that:

To see how, recall that ‘countervailing’ is, for Tucker, a success term. Given this, to claim that there being no optimum is a countervailing consideration is, in effect, to stipulate that God can coherently choose a suboptimal world. And to stipulate this amounts to presuming that God is possible – which, of course, is the very claim at issue. The critic of this argument for atheism needs to do more than assert that there being no optimum is a countervailing consideration. The critic needs to show that it is more plausible to think that it is really a countervailing consideration than it is to think that [God cannot select a less than best world] is true rather than illicitly presuming that God is possible (2021, 409).

It will be interesting to see whether Tucker will mount a reply to these thought-provoking objections to divine motivated submaximization. Either way, it remains an open question the degree to which, if it all, decision procedures such as satisficing or submaximizing that might be acceptable for humans can be reasonably applied to God’s selection of a less than best world.

Additional Considerations

In this section I briefly consider some additional considerations that are not the object of significant attention in this special issue. One such topic has to do with cross-world comparisons. It is typically assumed that we can compare the axiological status of different possible worlds using some (implicitly) agreed upon criteria. But this assumption has not gone unchallenged in the literature (e.g., Kraay 2011a; Penner 2014). Additional questions emerge if there is no unique best world and instead perhaps a set of good, but incommensurate worlds. What could possibly justify God creating one of the particular worlds in this set, when there is no morally relevant difference between it and the other best possible worlds?

Finally, some philosophers have appealed to the idea of a multiverse in order to solve the problem of no best world. A multiverse contains universes which are spatial-temporally isolated from each other. Some argue that God created the best possible world which contains all of the universes sufficiently good enough to be worthy of creation (e.g., Kraay 2011b). This purports to solve the problems associated with world selection. For any universe that is good enough to create, if there is a better universe then God includes it in the multiverse too.

The multiverse idea also preserves two competing but seemingly important claims. First, it preserves the claim that as the best being God would create the best possible world. Second it preserves the incredibly strong modal intuition that our particular universe is not the best (i.e., the intuition that things could go better than they do). If there is one unique best possible world (along the lines of how Leibniz thought), then *nothing in the actual world could be other than the way it is*. If things were different, then they would be worse. But they cannot be worse since this is the best world, so nothing can be different. This violates incredibly strong modal intuitions to the contrary

to the effect that that things could have been otherwise (and importantly, better). Leibniz's best world entails modal collapse. The multiverse as the best possible world avoids (total) modal collapse because there are universes where things do in fact go differently (i.e., better) than the way things go in our universe. Questions remain. What about really awful universes that are not worthy of inclusion in the multiverse? On this model it's difficult to understand how such universes are genuine possibilities. Yet many of us seem to have the modal intuitions that things could be far worse than they are in the actual world. Also, what is the precise axiological threshold that a universe must meet in order to be included in the multiverse? Furthermore, what if there is no best threshold? If relevantly analogous, the considerations used to support atheism based on the fact there isn't a best world could be leveraged to create a similar problem for theism if there is no best threshold (See Johnson 2014). Finally, since we can still fairly ask whether our universe is in fact good enough to be included in a multiverse that is the best possible world, this theory does nothing to help with the problem of evil.⁸ It will be interesting to see in the future the degree to which, if at all, various scientific multiverse theories confirm or disconfirm these ideas (See Kraay 2015).

Conclusion

We've seen that there are divergent views when it comes to God's choice of a world. Philosophers of religion continue to publish innovative work on divine creation. In one way or another, each article in this special issue addresses the question of whether it is ever permissible for God to create a less than best world. With the exception of Hasker's article, each contribution to this issue poses a challenge to the idea that God could create a less than best world. Questions about the comparability of worlds, and the theistic multiverse, among others, remain. I hope that *Religious Studies* continues to provide a platform for debate about such issues.⁹

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Notes

¹ See Leibniz *Theodicy*, pt. I. However, Stephen Grover informs us that this claim actually isn't original to Leibniz. For example, both Kant and Plato endorse similar lines of reasoning. See Grover (2003).

² For example, Voltaire appears to mock Leibniz's claims in *Candide*.

³ See, for example Basinger (1983); Levine (1996).

⁴ See Leibniz *Theodicy* §§ 249, 251.

⁵ For the sake of argument, Steinberg assumes that challenges Grover raises to the Howard-Snyder's (which I don't focus on in this introduction) can be met.

⁶ See Rowe (2005) for a direct reply.

⁷ See Slote (1989).

⁸ For a dissenting view see Turner (2003).

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