

God Must (and Can) Create the Best

Marcy P. Lascano
California State University Long Beach

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ABSTRACT

The optimalist view, which says that God must create the best possible world, has two problems. One is that it entails that our world is the best possible world. The other problem is generated by a recent argument by William Rowe. Rowe argues that if the optimalist view is correct and there is no best possible world, then God does not exist. Against Rowe, I demonstrate that God can be morally unsurpassable by actualizing a plurality of worlds – a so-called “island universe.” This solution also solves the first optimalist problem since it entails that this world is not the best possible world but merely a morally acceptable or good world.

I: Introduction: The Problem

There is a simple “Leibnizian” argument to show that if God exists – and if he is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent - then he must create the best possible world. It can be rendered as follows:

1. It is necessary that God exists.
2. It is necessary that: if God exists, then God is perfectly good.
3. Therefore, it is necessary that God is perfectly good. (1, 2)
4. It is necessary that a perfectly good being always choose to do the best.
5. If God creates, it is necessary that he choose to create the best possible world.
6. God chose to create the actual world (our world).
7. Therefore, it is necessary that God chose to create the actual world, and the actual world is the best possible world. (4, 5, 6)

However, many theologically-minded philosophers have not wanted to accept this argument. To them, the conclusion that our world is the best possible world looks more like a *reductio ad absurdum* of God's existence. Consequently, there have been numerous attempts to show that God need not create the best possible world. Most such attempts, understandably, focus their attention on the truth of premises 4 and 5. These opponents want to show that a god who is necessarily perfectly good need not create the best.¹

However, I think that none of the arguments against the Leibnizian argument succeed.² In this paper, I assume that God must create the best, which I will hereafter call the "Optimalist" view. The optimalist view has two problems. One problem is that it entails that our world is the best possible world. While many would be happy to say that God always does the best he can, most people find it difficult to accept what seems to inevitably follow from this – that our world is the best possible world. The optimalist view would be much more palatable if this conclusion did not follow from it. The other problem with the optimalist view comes from a recent argument by William Rowe.³ Rowe argues that if the optimalist view is correct and there is no best possible world, then God does not exist. Rowe's claim is that if God fails to create the best world he is able to create, it is possible that some being be morally superior to God. This is so because it would be possible for some being to produce a morally superior world to the one God creates. Against Rowe, I will demonstrate that even if

there is no best possible world, God still may exist and be morally unsurpassable. My solution to Rowe's problem also solves the first optimalist problem. For given that this world exists, my solution implies that this world is a morally acceptable or good world rather than the best possible world.

The outline of the paper is as follows: In Section II, I discuss several ways in which it might be that there is no single best possible world and Rowe's argument that if this is true, then a morally unsurpassable God does not exist. In Section III, I offer my solution to Rowe's problem. In Section IV, I discuss the metaphysical and modal implications of the solution. In Section V, I discuss some objections to the view and give my replies. Finally, in Section V, I demonstrate how the acceptance of my solution gives us an answer to the first optimalist problem, and suggest some other theological benefits of the view.

I make the following (what I take to be harmless) assumptions:

- (A) If God exists, he necessarily exists
- (B) God has fully determinate knowledge of all the possible worlds before he creates.
- (C) All possible worlds exist prior to their actualization or creation.

II: No Best World

One might accept that God is necessitated to create the best, but argue that there is not best possible world. Proceeding in this way, one might avoid the apparently unsavory conclusion that this world is the best possible world. The proponent of this view tries to argue that since there is no best world for God to create, God's creation of a less than optimal world does not besmirch his goodness. In the same way that God's omnipotence is not threatened by his inability to do the logically impossible, God's omnibenevolence is not threatened by his inability to create the best world if no such world exists.

There are several routes to the conclusion that there is no single best possible world. For instance, if there are incommensurable values, it might be that there is no best possible world. It might be that there is a plurality of values, each of which is valuable in itself, but which cannot be converted to a single

common evaluative currency, so to speak. Consequently, particular values might be incomparable.⁴

Tim Chappell offers the following definition of ‘incommensurability’ in “The Implications of Incommensurability,”

(DEF IG) Goods G1 and G2 are incommensurable goods if and only if the rational agent (a) regards both G1 and G2 as of basic and non-negotiable importance, and (b) does not regard himself as rationally obliged to recognize any permanent and completely determinate order of priority between G1 and its instances and G2 and its instances. What, however, is a good? The answer is that a good is a rationally sanctioned aim: a good (or a value) is a generic aspect of possible options or states of affairs which in itself suffices to give a rational agent pro tanto reason (possibly both justifying and motivating) to promote or pursue or otherwise choose for those possible options or states of affairs.⁵

So, perhaps there is one possible world in which there is a maximal amount of freedom and another possible world with a maximal amount of happiness. These worlds are both maximally good, but, so the objection goes, we cannot compare the value of freedom to the value of happiness, because these goods are incommensurable. What is God to do? One might try to give one of the following responses to the problem of incommensurability.

(1) It seems improbable that there be incommensurable values if God exists. If God exists, one of his attributes is simplicity. Since God is simple, in God his power is his goodness, which is his love, which is his knowledge, which is his justice, etc. The theist that takes God’s simplicity seriously is committed to saying that these attributes (values) are all the same and are infinite in God.

(2) Even if one denies God’s simplicity and maintains that there are incommensurable goods within worlds, it does not seem to follow that there will be no way to compare some possible worlds and, perhaps even, to determine a best world. Suppose that there are a number of values, v1, v2, and v3 (for simplicity’s sake I

will use only three in this example). v_1 , v_2 , and v_3 are incommensurable. But we can add up the amounts of each in a world. Imagine the following worlds: alpha and beta:

Alpha: $v_1=7$, $v_2=2$, and $v_3=9$

Beta: $v_1=9$, $v_2=1$, and $v_3=8$

We have no way to determine whether alpha or beta is the better world since the values are incommensurable. However, consider the addition of the following world gamma:

Gamma: $v_1=17$, $v_2=15$, $v_3=20$

It seems that if we compare alpha, beta, and gamma, we can see that gamma is the best of the worlds, regardless of the fact that the values within the worlds are incommensurable. Gamma contains every possible value and it contains greater amounts of every possible value. If a Gamma world is possible, then even if values are incommensurable, worlds are partially comparable and in some cases it will be possible to determine a best world. Of course, not all worlds will be comparable. We can easily add another world, delta, which would make gamma incomparable.

Delta: $v_1=20$, $v_2=15$, $v_3=17$

The addition of Delta makes it impossible to determine to determine the best world from among Alpha, Beta, Gamma, and Delta. But even here, we are able to determine that Gamma and Delta are better than Alpha and Beta.

So, it might be the case that several worlds are “on par” in value, with no other worlds being better than these two worlds and every other possible world being clearly worse. If this were true, how would God choose among these worlds? If he is necessitated to create the best by his goodness he could not decide between the worlds on the basis of some other criteria. For, any criteria that God used in order to pick one of the worlds over the other would clearly be one that, according to God’s infinite wisdom, added to the value of that world. If he were to choose one world over the other based on its having more value of any kind, then the worlds could not actually be “on par” in value in the first place which contradicts the hypothesis that such worlds are possible. So, it

seems that it is possible that given incommensurable values that there be no way to determine a single best world. In which case, God must make the choice of which world to create based on arbitrary grounds. He must flip a coin, so to speak.

A second and more expedient route to the conclusion that there might be no best possible world is to imagine there is an infinite series of worlds, each better than the next. Suppose that for any world, W, there is another world, W*, where W* is better than W. On this view, there is an infinitude of worlds with each world getting better and better, but with no best world. If this is the structure of logical space, then for any world God chooses, there is a better world that he might have chosen instead. So, God cannot choose to actualize the best possible world because no such world exists.

Opponents of the optimalist view argue from the possibility of the non-existence of a best possible world to the claim that God can create something less than the best. It is claimed that since it is not metaphysically possible to create the best possible world, God cannot be expected to do so.

Unfortunately, this way out of the optimalist argument does not work. William Rowe has shown that given God's nature, if there is no best possible world, then the conclusion we should draw is not that God can do less than the best, but that God does not exist. Rowe begins by arguing that the following principle is true:

Principle B: If an omniscient being creates a world when there is a better world it could create, then it would be possible for there to be a being morally better than it.⁶

The problem is that, if there is an infinity of better and better worlds with no best world, whatever world God creates will be one such that he could have created a better world. Since God is morally perfect of necessity, if there can be a morally superior being, then God does not exist. Rowe is careful to note that it is not God's failure to produce the best possible world that counts against his perfect goodness. "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."⁷

One might object to Principle B on the grounds that the principle seems to rely on the idea that performing a morally better

action makes one a morally better being. The objector might make the following case.

Suppose that Ted Bundy is walking down the street and sees a handicapped homeless person with a sign asking for money for food. Suppose Bundy notices that his two morally upstanding neighbors have just passed the man, taking notice of him, but not aiding him in any way. Bundy decides to do something good. He gives the man \$100 from his wallet. Bundy performs an act better than his two morally upstanding neighbors, but no one would hold that he is a better moral agent than them for having done so. Bundy performs many other acts that are morally reprehensible. Thus one morally superior action does not necessarily make an agent a better moral agent. So perhaps the fact that a being could create a better world than the one that God creates does not mean that that agent is morally superior to God.

However, Principle B does not rely on the claim that performing a better action makes one a better agent. What Principle B shows is that if it is possible for a being to perform a better action than one an omniscient being did perform, it is *possible* that there be a better moral agent than the omniscient being.⁸ The Bundy example bears this out. By the fact that Bundy performs a better act than his neighbors we cannot conclude that he is a better agent than his neighbors. However, we can conclude that it is possible that there be a better moral agent than either of his neighbors, namely, another agent as good as the neighbors who does give the money.

Rowe's argument shows that the person who wants to reject the optimalist argument on the grounds that there may not be a best possible world fails in their attempt. Either God creates the best, or he does not exist. Since we cannot rule out the possibility that there is no best possible world, we seem to be stuck with the conclusion that God might not exist. As God is a necessary being, if it is possible that he does not exist, then it is necessary that he does not exist.

In the following section I propose a way out of Rowe's argument. I agree with Rowe that God necessarily does the best. However, unlike Rowe, I argue that even if there is no best possible world, God can still do the best.

III: Plural Actualization

Suppose that God is surveying the possible worlds for a candidate for creation. We should think of his choices as follows:

1. He can create none of the worlds.
2. He can create some worlds (at least one).
3. He can create all of the worlds.

I propose to reconcile the claim that God's nature requires him to always do the best and the claim that logical space may not contain one such world by appeal to the hypothesis of plural actualization. God's objective, given his nature, is always to do the best he can. He will create whatever is the best. If there is one single best possible world, then there is no problem. God will create that world. However, he may not be able to satisfy the requirement of doing the best by the actualization of a single possible world. If there are several possible worlds that are evaluatively tied or "on par" – say five – God can command that only those worlds be actualized. All five worlds will be actual. By creating some worlds rather than just one, God avoids making an arbitrary choice. He is truly able to do the best.

If there is an infinity of worlds such that there is no single best world, God can choose to actualize an infinite plurality of worlds.⁹ This plurality would include all and only the "morally acceptable" or "good" worlds, such that there is no plurality of worlds which is better. Actuality will be comprised of an infinite number of spatiotemporally disconnected worlds – so-called "island universes." This plurality of worlds will be such that it is impossible for a being to create any other plurality of worlds which is better than it.

By accepting plural actualization we can circumvent Rowe's worry. However, we have to translate Rowe's principle into pluralist language. Recall Principle B.

Principle B: If an omniscient being creates a world when there is a better world it could create, then it would be possible for there to be a being morally better than it.

Without translating Principle B to allow for plural actualization, we would still get Rowe's conclusion. For even if God were to create an infinite plurality of worlds, a being could create one world better than one of the worlds in the infinite

plurality God creates. This would be enough to satisfy the antecedent of the conditional in Principle B, and the conclusion would follow. However, we can easily translate Principle B into pluralist language *while preserving Rowe's motivating intuition that God is necessarily a morally unsurpassable being.*

Principle B Plural Version (PBPV): If an omniscient being creates no world, some world, or some worlds such that there is some world or some worlds better that it could create, then it would be possible for there to be a being morally better than it.

PBPV preserves Rowe's intuition that if God does less than the best, he is not a morally unsurpassable being. For on the amended version, if God creates one world when there is some better world to create, it is possible that there be a being morally superior to God. The amended version is also applicable in the case of the plural actualization of worlds. So if God creates some worlds such that there are some worlds better that a being could create, God would not be morally unsurpassable. I believe that PBPV has all the intuitive support as the original version. If Principle B is true, PBPV is true as well.

When we apply PBPV to a case where God creates an infinite plurality of worlds, we get the right result. As long as God is able to create an infinite plurality of worlds such that it is not possible for a being to create a world better than the worlds God actually creates, then God is morally unsurpassable. For this reason, Rowe's argument that God does not exist if God is morally unsurpassable and no best possible world exists, fails to go through.

Is there such an infinite plurality of worlds? There is. Imagine that God creates all the morally acceptable or good worlds. This infinite plurality, although all of its members are less than optimal worlds, is an optimal plurality. Neither God, nor any other being, can improve upon this plurality of worlds. In order to explicate this, let us consider whether there is a set of such worlds.¹⁰ Let A be the set of all morally acceptable or good worlds, w be some morally acceptable or good world, and w^* be some world better than w . Since A contains all the morally acceptable or good worlds, God cannot improve the set by improving a part of it. A already contains w^* , so God cannot

improve A by replacing w with w^* . Nor can he improve A by duplicating w^* . Call the duplicate of w^* , w^{**} . Since w^{**} is a morally acceptable or good world, it is also already in A. No attempt at replacing or duplicating worlds will result in a better set of worlds. The formal proof that the best set of worlds exists is as follows:

Call a world, w , good if, for any set S , $S \cup \{w\}$ is better than $S - \{w\}$. Call a world non-good if for any set S , $S \cup \{w\}$ is not better than $S - \{w\}$.

Assumption #1: All worlds are either good or non-good.

Assumption #2: Value is transitive.

Assumption #3: a) If $C = A \cup B$ where B is a set of good worlds, then C is better than A. b) If $C = A \cup B$ where B is a set of non-good worlds, then C is not better than A.

Proof that A is maximally good: Consider a set, B, distinct from A. B differs from A either by excluding some good worlds or by including some non-good worlds (or both). Let C_{good} be the set of good worlds not in B, and C_{notgood} be the set of non-good worlds in B. $B \cup C_{\text{good}}$ is better than (or equal to, if C_{good} is empty) B, by 3a. $A \cup C_{\text{notgood}}$ is not better than A, by 3b. Since $A \cup C_{\text{notgood}} = B \cup C_{\text{good}}$, by transitivity B is not better than A. Thus A is maximally good.¹¹

Accepting plural actualization makes it possible for God to do the best possible thing even when there is no best possible world. Since we cannot rule out the possibility that there is no single best world, and since Rowe's argument would otherwise threaten God's existence, we should accept plural actualization.

IV. Plural Actualization and Plural Quantification

In order to accept that God could actualize a plurality of worlds, we must accept the possibility of so-called "island universes." The standard Lewisian analysis of modality cannot account for the truth of the proposition that island universes exist. On the standard analysis a world is a maximally spatiotemporally

unified part of logical space, but island universes consist of spatiotemporally isolated parts. What I am proposing then, is that we accept a modification of the standard analysis of modality proposed by Phillip Bricker.¹² On Bricker's account a world is any maximally externally unified part of logical space.¹³ In addition, actuality is absolute rather than indexical. There is an ontological distinction between actuality and possibility.

Bricker argues that anyone who accepts a strongly Humean approach to modality should accept the following principle:

Generalized Principle of Solitude (GPS): For any worldbound or transworld individual, possibly, a duplicate of that individual exists all by itself.¹⁴

From GPS, we get island universes immediately when we quantify over transworld individuals.¹⁵ In order to accommodate the possibility of island universes, we must either change the criterion for demarcation of worlds, or modify the standard analysis of possibility. Bricker argues that it is more in keeping with our standard philosophical usage to amend the analysis of possibility rather than change what we typically mean when we refer to a possible world.¹⁶ On the amended analysis, possibility is represented by single worlds and by pluralities of worlds. A proposition will be true if it is true at no world, some world, or some worlds (although being true at some worlds does not entail truth at some world).

Plural Quantifier Version of the Amended Analysis of Modality: A proposition is metaphysically possible if and only if it is true at no world, some world, or some worlds.¹⁷

Accepting that possibility is quantification over some world or some worlds allows for the possibility of island universes. Indeed, the possibility is represented throughout logical space!

V: Objections

I will now consider three objections to my solution. The first objection concerns the amended analysis of possibility. The second is an objection to the assumption that all worlds are either

good or non-good. The third objection is that I have failed to show that our world is even a morally acceptable world.

An objector might argue that the way he uses the term “world,” only one world can be actual. Thus he will not accept my solution to Rowe’s problem. It is possible to accommodate the possibility of island universes by modifying the criterion of the demarcation of worlds. However, this would, as Bricker notes, involve either accepting a primitive worldmate relation or accepting that any aggregate of worlds is itself a world. Bricker writes, “A primitive worldmate relation is primitive modality” since it involves positing necessary connections between the worldmate relation and other relations, and general facts of modality which should be independent would depend upon how the worldmate relation is construed.¹⁸ If we accept that any aggregate of worlds is itself a world, we keep avoid primitive modality, but at a cost of having overlapping worlds. If every aggregate of worlds is a world, then some worlds will be parts of many other worlds. Given that the plural quantifier version of the amended analysis of modality avoids both these problems, it seems clearly superior. In addition, it does not require a radical departure in our thinking about modality. Every judgment about possibility that we make on the standard analysis still holds. We do not decrease the realm of possibility with the amended analysis. We only add more. Nor is it required that we always invoke the amended analysis in our everyday judgments about possibility, but we can quantify over a plurality of worlds when those rare occasions arise that show the standard analysis to be deficient. I think that the metaphysical and theological advantages of this view outweigh concerns about our hitherto notions of what can be actual.

A second objection to my solution might be to question the legitimacy of Assumption #1 – all worlds are either good or non-good. One might object that it is not clear that every world is either good or non-good regardless of what else is actual. Perhaps the actualization of a plurality of worlds would create an organic unity. In this case, the goodness of the whole of actuality would depend upon not only the intrinsic natures of each world actualized, but also on the fusion of their intrinsic natures. Consider a familiar example of an organic unity: Someone being tortured is intrinsically bad. Someone experiencing pleasure is intrinsically good. But someone’s experiencing pleasure because of someone

else being tortured contains no intrinsic goodness even though it seems to contain intrinsic goodness as a part.¹⁹ So, the objection goes, it might be the case that actualizing a plurality of worlds may not result in a perfect plurality. However, organic unities seem to depend on causal interactions of some kind, either physical or attitudinal. What makes the state of affairs of someone's feeling pleasure at another's torture lack intrinsic goodness is the attitudinal relation between the two subjects. Since island universes are completely (spatiotemporally and causally) isolated there is no causal interaction between worlds, and thus no organic unities.

A final objection to my solution is that I have failed to show that the actual world is even a morally acceptable world. This objection asks for a criterion of a morally acceptability for worlds. I cannot provide that. While I cannot provide an account of what it is that makes a world morally acceptable to God, I can say that it my solution does not maintain that this world is the best possible world, which seems to me a great advantage.

VI: This is Not the Best Possible World

Granted my proposal may seem rather unintuitive to some. It entails that there might be other worlds besides our world that are actual. However, we must remember the advantages of plural actualization.

First, we can be assured that no matter what the structure of logical space, it is possible for God to do the best he can. We preserve God's omnibenevolence. We maintain God's moral unsurpassability and his sovereignty, for no matter what the structure of logical space he has an optimal option for creation.

Second, my solution allows us to avoid an arbitrary limitation on God's power. If there is more than one best possible world, why should we hold that God is powerless to do anything other than make an arbitrary decision of which world to create? In addition, if there had been no morally acceptable worlds, why should we assume that God still had to actualize one? Finally, suppose, as some theists have argued, that God is a delimitter of possibilities and there are no morally unacceptable worlds. In this case should it not be an option for God to create them all? Accepting the amended analysis of modality allows us to accept universal actualization – all worlds could have been created. On the standard analysis of modality, there is no world where it is true

that everything exists. But it is true at the plurality of all worlds. The amended analysis also allows that had no world been up to God's standards, he could have created nothing at all. It is true at nothing (that is, if no world had been actualized) that nothing exists. God's omnipotence is truly given its full due by accepting plural actualization and the plural version of the amended analysis of modality.

Finally and most importantly, by accepting plural actualization, we have a nifty response to the problem of evil in our world. If we accept that God does the best, given that this world exists, we should conclude that God actualized an infinite plurality of morally acceptable worlds. That is, given that it seems clear that there are possible worlds that are morally superior to ours, we should assume that God has not created only this world, nor has he created only a finite number of worlds morally "on par." But notice, that this means this world is not the best possible world. At most, this world is one member of the infinite plurality of morally acceptable or good worlds. We do not have to wonder how it is that this world is the best possible world. We can rest assured that there are infinitely many more good worlds that God created, and we can know that our world is a world that an omnibenevolent creator would deem among the number of morally acceptable or good worlds. This is the solution to the other problem of optimalism. We get out of the conclusion of the argument with which I began this paper. If we modify the original argument to reflect the possibility of plural actualization, we see that the original conclusion, that this is the best possible world, does not follow – all that follows is a much weaker and more palatable conclusion.

1. It is necessary that God exists.
2. It is necessary that if God exists, then God is perfectly good.
3. Therefore, it is necessary that God is perfectly good. (1, 2)
4. It is necessary that a perfectly good being always choose to do the best.
5. If God creates, it is necessary that he choose to create no world, some world, or some worlds such that there is no better world that can be created.
6. God chose to create this world.

7. It is possible that a world be better than this world be created.
8. Therefore, this world is part of an infinite plurality of possible worlds such that there is no better world that can be created.

VII: Concluding Remarks

The optimalist view has long been a source of embarrassment for the theist. Its entailment – viz., that this is the best possible world – has been an object of scorn and ridicule at least since Voltaire’s *Candide*. However, the conclusion that if God exists, he must always do what is morally best is unavoidable, and I say desirable. We should embrace the view that a morally perfect agent will always perform the best possible act. With the acceptance of plural actualization, we can both preserve God’s moral perfection and avoid the unwanted conclusion that this is the best possible world.

¹Adams, Robert (1972). Must God Create the Best? The Philosophical Review, 81, 317-32. Adams’s article is an attempt to show that God harms no one by creating a less than optimal world.

² For a thorough defense of the optimalist view, see Rowe, William (2004). *Can God Be Free?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

³ Rowe, William (2004). *Can God Be Free?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

⁴ There may be another route to incommensurability. If there are indeterminate values, then one might be able to get incommensurability without a plurality of values.

⁵ Chappell, Tim (2001). The Implications of Incommensurability. *Philosophy*, 76 (295): 137-148.

⁶ Rowe, William (2004). *Can God Be Free?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 88-150.

⁷ Rowe, William (2004). *Can God Be Free?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 101.

⁸ Rowe, William (2004). *Can God Be Free?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 109.

⁹ Plural talk can be translated into talk of classes, or aggregates, but there are some advantages to the plural version of the amended analysis of modality that I am accepting.

¹⁰ I leave aside the issue of whether this would be a class rather than a set.

¹¹ I would like to thank Jake Bridge for all his help with the formal proof.

¹² For theological purposes I assume that God exists in metaphysical reality outside the possible worlds.

¹³ Bricker, Philip (2001). *Island Universes and the Analysis of Modality*. (In G. Preyer, F. Siebelt (Eds.), *Reality and Humean Supervenience: Essays on the Philosophy of David Lewis* (p. 32) Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001)

¹⁴ Bricker, 38.

¹⁵ Bricker offers other routes to island universes, but this is the most direct.

¹⁶ In order to accommodate island universes the criterion for demarcation of worlds would have to be changed in such a way that worlds would overlap. For instance, we might say that any aggregate of worlds is itself a world. Bricker, 45.

¹⁷ Bricker, 43-44. I have added the amendment to the plural quantifier version of the analysis suggested by Bricker that allows for quantification over the null plurality of worlds, 47-49.

¹⁸ Bricker, 39.

¹⁹ It should be noted that there are those who deny that this state of affairs contains no intrinsic goodness.