The "No Best World" Argument:
A Strong or Weak Objection to the
Possibility of Perfect Goodness?

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This paper will take for granted that, by definition, God is a perfect being and must necessarily exhibit the attribute of perfect goodness (Morris 418). The term "perfect goodness" carries some potential ambiguity (Murphy sec. 1). Some believe the term "perfect goodness" to be interchangeable with the term "absolutely perfect" (sec. 1). In this sense, "to call a being perfectly good is just to say that it qualifies as an absolutely perfect being" (sec. 1). This definition will not be used in this paper; instead, "perfect goodness" will refer to a specific kind of perfection: moral perfection. To say that God must be perfectly good is to say that God must have morally unsurpassable agency (God's desires, character traits, actions, etc., are morally perfect and thus morally unsurpassable) (sec. 1).

It seems intuitive that perfect goodness is at least possible, though at second glance this may not be the case. When morality is judged comparatively (desires, character traits, actions, etc., are judged by comparison), it is not clear that perfect moral goodness is possible at all. As long as it is possible for a being with agency to choose an action, using the comparative model of morality, it may be the case that in a given scenario, there is always a morally better action that that being could perform (Murphy sec. 4).

Given this definition of perfect goodness and the comparative model of morality, one could conceive the following scenario. God actualizes some world. God has the ability to create or actualize an infinite number

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of possible worlds. For every one of these possible worlds that God could have actualized, God could have created a morally better world by either increasing happiness or reducing suffering. Thus, by actualizing a world, God would have chosen to create a morally surpassable world. It seems as though a morally unsurpassable being (or a perfectly good being) would choose to actualize the morally best world. But if for any possible world actualized there is a morally better possible world, it is impossible for God to create a morally unsurpassable world. It is thus impossible for a being to be perfectly good. This is a typical example of a "No Best World" scenario.

The "No Best World" argument is as follows:

(1)   Necessarily, God actualizes some world.

(2)   Necessarily, for each actualizable world w_1, there is an actualizable world w_2 such that from the moral point of view one would prefer w_2 to w_1.

(3)   Necessarily, for whatever world that God actualizes, there is a morally better world that God does not actualize yet could have (from (2)).

(4)   Necessarily, for whatever world that God actualizes, God's act of actualizing that world is not as morally good as some other act that God does not perform but could have (from (3)).

(5)   Necessarily, for whatever world that God actualizes, God's agency is not as morally good as it could have been (from (4)).

(6)   Necessarily, God's agency is not perfectly good (from (1), (5)). (Murphy sec. 4)

If the "No Best World" argument is successful, perfect goodness is impossible. This would also render the existence of God impossible because there is no way for God's agency to be morally unsurpassable and God, by definition, must be perfectly good. This argument, however, is not successful and is a weak objection to the possibility of perfect goodness. I will proceed to undermine the "No Best World" argument in three ways: (1) with a certain understanding of what makes a world "morally best," there is a best world; (2) if the argument for our world being the uniquely best world is not compelling, at the very least, there are no better worlds than ours; and (3) God could have had reasons for creating a world that are not based on the objective moral value. I will conclude that even if the

created world is morally surpassable, this does not negate the possibility of perfect moral goodness.

Leibniz's Objection to Premise (2)

Premise (2) states that for every possible world that God could actualize, there is always another morally preferable possible world. Leibniz objects to this premise because he believes that it is possible for God to have actualized a morally best world (*Discourse* sec. 3; "Essays" 128).[1] The reasoning hinges on what is meant by a "morally best" world. Scholars debate exactly what Leibniz qualifies as the morally best world, but for this paper Leibniz will define the best world as "the one that yields the greatest variety of phenomena governed by the simplest set of laws" (Murray et al. sec. 2). The variety of phenomena that Leibniz refers to includes different creatures, natural events, and experiences. This variety demonstrates the fullness of God's creative power and allows for the existence of a wide range of goods, such as beauty, moral virtues, and physical phenomena. A world with more variety provides more opportunities for goodness and value to be realized. The simplicity of laws refers to the natural order. For Leibniz, the morally best world is a world where the concepts of simplicity and diversity are perfectly balanced and in harmony with one another (*Discourse* sec. 3). There is no way for God to make this perfectly balanced world morally better. Given this understanding of a morally best world, it becomes very hard to claim that there is not a morally best world.

Furthermore, Leibniz argues that the only being that would know whether the current world is morally best is God (Murray et al. sec. 2). Any doubt "has arisen merely because we are not well enough acquainted with the general harmony of the universe and of the hidden reasons for God's conduct" (Leibniz, *Discourse* sec. 3). Given this definition of what constitutes a morally best world, the morally best world could be morally unsurpassable even if humans could not intuitively see why.

Rowe's Objection to Leibniz

William Rowe adamantly rejects Leibniz's definition of what constitutes a morally best world (Murphy sec. 4). Rowe believes that for

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[1] Leibniz goes further than this claim and makes the argument that the current world actualized is in fact the best possible world. For the sake of the "No Best World" argument, however, one must only reject premise (2) by claiming that it is merely possible for God to create a morally unsurpassable world.

any given world, another could exist with more total well-being, whether by increasing happiness or reducing suffering. Thus, there is no logical endpoint—no "best" world (Rowe 410). Rowe believes that a morally good world has to do with factors such as well-being, flourishing, and reduction of suffering. Using Rowe's definition of a morally good world, it stands that there would be no best world. God could always create a world with more flourishing, more well-being, or less suffering. One way God could increase the value of a world in this way would be to create more people.[2] God could create a world identical to this one except add one more happy person (Climenhaga 370). This could be done an infinite number of times. Scholars reference two additional examples of ways that God could improve a possible world an infinite amount of times. The three examples are as follows:

> (A)   If God exists, God could have made a better world than this one by creating more creatures.
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> (B)   If God exists, God could have made a better world than this one by creating more species.
>
> (C)   If God exists, God could have made a better world than this one by lessening the suffering of creatures. (Climenhaga 371)

Each of these examples either reduces suffering or adds well-being. The question then becomes which standard of a morally best world is more compelling.

Rowe seems to think that the balance between variety and simplicity might not capture moral value in a way that is intuitively satisfying. For instance, a world with less suffering but slightly more complexity might seem morally preferable to a simpler but more painful world. Leibniz might argue that less suffering in the world may cause God to make the natural laws more complex, and therefore less exemplary of God's creativity and goodness. God could theoretically remove the Oklahoma City bombing from the world. However, this would probably require some divine intervention that would make the current governing laws more complex (Murray et al. sec. 2). Leibniz's reasoning is very compelling, but one may be urged to accept Rowe's characterization of a morally good world because it seems more intuitive. Let's say that Rowe's objections to Leibniz are acceptable. Should we now accept premise (2) of the "No Best World" argument? Nevin Climenhaga believes otherwise.

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[2] "Goodness" and "value" are being used interchangeably.

Climenhaga's Objection to Premise (2)

Climenhaga does not argue that there is a morally best world, but that "there are not other worlds better than ours" (368). He does this by arguing that, "given theological assumptions that the proponent of the ["No Best World" argument] ought to accept, if God created the world, then there is an infinite amount of value in our world" (369). Most traditional forms of theism hold the belief that people in the universe will continue to live after death in some form of an afterlife. Given the existence of the afterlife, Climenhaga makes three assumptions in his argument. First, he assumes that God would want to create more beings in the afterlife, given the truth of (A). Second, he posits that humans will live eternally in the afterlife. Third, he assumes universalism, the belief that all people will ultimately enjoy eternal communion with God. If one does not agree with any of these assumptions then the argument will fall short, but the assumptions should appeal to someone who believes in (A), (B), and (C). If one accepts these assumptions, then the value of the world is infinite. The sum of the average value of each individual is infinite. Each person enjoys eternal communion with God, and since there are an infinite amount of persons that God creates over time in the afterlife, "there are then an infinite number of infinitely valuable lives in the world" (372).[3] It is impossible for an actualizable world to have more value than a world with infinite value. This would leave no possible world morally preferable to the actualized world.

Objections to Climenhaga and Climenhaga's Response

Philosophers have argued against this view by suggesting that God could have given the world more value by adding locations, which are "value-bearing" parts of a world (creatures or species), or lessening people's suffering in their earthly lives (Perkins 242; Climenhaga 370).
Adding Locations:

> If (i) W* has all the locations that world W has and then some, (ii) the values of the shared locations are the same, and (iii) the values of the non-shared locations in W* sum to a positive number, then W* is better than W. (Climenhaga 375)

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[3]While there may be other contributing factors that add to the value of a possible world, this does not detract from the world's infinite value. Other factors that could add to the value of a possible world, such as the quality of relationships or the social arrangement, will be absolutely perfect in the afterlife and therefore not a problem for the world's infinite value

Climenhaga responds to the claim that adding more creatures or species would add value to the given world by arguing that the viewpoint implies accepting unreasonable metaphysical positions about the nature of God. The only way to defend the claim that God could create a morally better world by adding locations is to say that

> (a) locational (e.g., personal) identity conditions are such that God could have created the same locations in some world W* as in [the actual world], (b) there are uncountably many possible locations for God to create (so that God can create some extra people in W*), but (c) God cannot perform an uncountably infinite number of tasks (otherwise he could just create all the uncountable locations), and (d) there is a determinate fact about all of God's (logically) future actions. (Climenhaga 380)

The metaphysical cost of taking all of these claims as true is extraordinarily high and not a feasible position. In other words, the claim that God could create a morally better world by adding more people or species depends on controversial assumptions about identity, infinity, and divine action.

To respond to the claim that lessening people's suffering during their earthly lives would add more value to a possible world, Climenhaga appeals to the incomparable nature of a world with evil and a world without it. In an infinite world, it is likely that changing one aspect of the world will lead to infinitely many other aspects of the world being changed. This makes comparison impossible.

If Climenhaga's argument is successful, then it is possible for God to create an unsurpassably good world because it has infinite value. Some may not find this argument compelling because the assumptions it makes about the nature of a theistic God are not intuitively obvious. For example, it is not intuitively obvious that humans or creatures will live eternally in the afterlife, or for that matter, that all humans will be redeemed and have communion with God. This leaves his argument unconvincing to most Christians and Muslims. Climenhaga, however, is not appealing to the Christian or Muslim, but to the proponent of the "No Best World" argument who will already believe certain claims about what gives a world value and should find his assumptions compelling. Therefore, Climenhaga makes a strong case for the infinite value of our world. If his argument is not satisfying, I believe that premise (4) of the "No Best World" argument still fails to withstand criticism.

Objection to Premise (4) using Raz's Framework

Premises (3) and (4) are as follows:

(3)   Necessarily, for whatever world that God actualizes, there is a morally better world that God does not actualize yet could have (from (2)).

(4)   Necessarily, for whatever world that God actualizes, God's act of actualizing that world is not as morally good as some other act that God does not perform but could have (from (3)).

The logic from (3) to (4) may seem straightforward, but a distinction can be drawn between the *event* of God actualizing a world and God's *decision* to actualize a world. The event might be necessarily surpassable, but God's choice might not be (Murphy sec. 4). When analyzing the event itself, one would consider only whether it would have been better for that action not to occur. This view does not take into account all the reasons behind the deliberate decision. When taking into account all of the reasons for a specific decision, could God's choice to actualize a world that is morally surpassable still be the morally best action?

Take a first-order reason to mean a reason to perform, or refrain from performing, a certain act (Raz 39). Imagine that God was trying to decide how to actualize some possible world. God may try to decide strictly based on first-order reasons, whether or not a world is morally best or not. This, however, would leave God unable to make any choice because God cannot justifiably create any world that could be morally surpassed in value by another possible world. It may be possible for God to choose to actualize a particular possible world based on Joseph Raz's concept of second-order reasons, one of which he describes as "'exclusionary': an exclusionary reason is a reason that directs one not to treat a first-order reason as relevant in one's deliberation" (Murphy sec. 4; Raz 39).[4] If Raz is correct, then it is possible for God to have a reason to disregard the moral value of possible worlds when choosing a world to actualize.

For instance, God may decide that because it is impossible to actualize a world that is unsurpassable, it is also impossible to choose to actualize any world based on its moral value alone. This would be God's exclusionary reason. God might then decide to create a world based on some other

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[4] It is important to note here that Raz does not directly object to premise (4) of the argument in his work. He simply presents a theoretical framework where a (second-order or exclusionary) reason can effectively render another (first-order) reason irrelevant in determining an action.

personal reasons that are not morally objectionable (Murphy sec. 4). God may prefer a particular world due to its balance of a variety of phenomena and simple laws. Or God may prefer a certain world because there are certain geographical features and the existence of these features exemplifies some other important attribute of God's character (creativity, for example). The exact reason is not important here, nor is it necessary that humans know it. It is only relevant that it is *possible* for there to be a reason for God to actualize some world not based on first-order reasons. Thus, if it is possible for God to have a reason to exclude a world's objective moral value when deciding to actualize a possible world, then the action of God actualizing some world might be morally unsurpassable even if the created world is not (Howard-Snyder 261).

Possible Objection to Raz's Framework

Some philosophers hold the belief that God must create a morally unsurpassable world in order to be a morally unsurpassable being (Leibniz, "Essays" 128; Wielenberg 57). Wielenberg argues that if God actualizes a surpassable world then God "is not unsurpassably disposed to pursue intrinsic value states proportionally, which entails that [God] is not unsurpassably virtuous" (57). Leibniz similarly believes that God doing a lesser good than is possible is a kind of evil and therefore incompatible with a morally unsurpassable being ("Essays" 128).[5]

Both propositions that a morally unsurpassable being must create the morally best world fall short. Neither takes into account the suggestion that God could have a reason to choose a world that is not based on that world's moral value. Therefore, I believe that premise (4) does not logically follow from premise (3). And if premise (4) of the "No Best World" argument fails to withstand criticism, then while one may concede that God could have, or did, actualize a morally surpassable world, one does not need to concede that God is not a perfectly good being or that it is not possible for perfect goodness to exist.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the "No Best World" argument does not pose a significant challenge to the possibility of perfect moral goodness. By examining premise (2) through Leibniz's criteria for a morally best world

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[5] Though Leibniz believes in a different standard for a "morally best world," the point still applies.

and Climenhaga's argument for infinite value, it becomes evident that a "best" or "unsurpassable" world can either exist or the concept can be rendered unnecessary given infinite moral value. Even if one does not find these arguments convincing, Raz's second-order reasons demonstrate that God's morally perfect agency does not depend on creating a morally unsurpassable world, but rather, on the rationality and intention behind the decision. While objections from Rowe, Wielenberg, and others challenge traditional assumptions, they do not ultimately preclude the logical coherence of perfect goodness or the existence of a perfectly good God. Therefore, the "No Best World" argument, though conceptually intriguing, fails to undermine the possibility of perfect moral goodness.

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