

PERFECT GOODNESS AND DIVINE FREEDOM

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Rowe announces early on that “the overall conclusion of this book . . . is that God cannot enjoy very much in the way of libertarian freedom with respect to creation” (p. 7). In fact his conclusion is more complex than that. He intends to draw out some conceptual difficulties from conceiving of God as *the greatest possible being*, as “a being whose goodness, knowledge and power is such that it is inconceivable and logically impossible for any being, including God himself, to have a greater degree of goodness, knowledge, and power” (p. 1). Rowe poses a dilemma having to do with creation: either there was a best world for God to create or there was not. If the former, God’s goodness, knowledge, and power would require that he create that world. In that case, however, God would not have been able to do otherwise, so God would not be free. The second alternative divides into two: either there was an infinite series of better and better worlds or there were several worlds tied for best. If there is an infinite series of better and better worlds, then Rowe thinks that for any world God creates, it would be possible for someone to create a better world, so God would not be unsurpassably good. As for the case in which there are several worlds tied for best, it’s considerably less clear what Rowe’s view is, and I think this is the point at which his position is least defensible. But the upshot of Rowe’s dilemma is that either God is not free or he is not perfectly good. In the latter case, since being perfectly good is essential to the theistic conception of God, God would not exist.

Rowe’s procedure is to turn first to various historical philosophers who have written on the topics in which he is interested, including Leibniz, Clarke, Thomas Aquinas, and Jonathan Edwards. In addition, Rowe considers a substantial body of recent literature. Rather than looking in detail at Rowe’s engagement with these historical figures or with his contemporary critics, however, I propose simply to focus on the alternatives in his overall structure, namely, the alternatives that there is a best possible world, that there is an infinite series of better and better worlds, and that there is more than one world tied for best.

1. There’s a Best of All Possible Worlds

Let us turn to the first alternative, namely, that there is a best possible world for God to create. Later it will be important to go into more detail about what it is for a world to be available for God to create and what he does to ‘create’ a possible world. But the points I want to make here don’t require that precision. So for now let’s just consider the hypothesis that there is a best possible world. Rowe wants to hold, with Leibniz, that “to do less good than

one could is to be lacking in wisdom and goodness’” (p. 35). Accordingly, Rowe endorses an argument similar to the following:¹

Suppose

(1) There is a best possible world.

On the unstated assumption that modal claims and assessments of intrinsic value are necessarily true if true at all, it follows that

(2) Necessarily, there is a best possible world.

According to classical theism, or, better, perfect being theology,

(3) Necessarily, God is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good.

Moreover, it is evidently true that

(4) Necessarily, if God is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good, and there is a best possible world, then God chooses to create the best possible world.²

But from (2), (3), and (4) it follows that

(5) Necessarily, God chooses to create the best possible world.

The assumption that there is a best possible world thus has an extraordinarily strong consequence, namely, that it is necessary that God creates it. If ‘the best possible world’ is a rigid designator, as it would seem to be if it designates at all, then it is hard to see in what sense any other worlds are so much as possible.³ No other world could possibly be actual, so no other world would be possible. And every true proposition would turn out to be necessarily true. Nothing could be different from the way it is.

But Rowe’s interest in (5) is not that it collapses the distinction between truth and necessity. Rather, Rowe objects that if (5) is true then God is not free (p. 19). In some places he simply asserts that if God’s perfect goodness

1. Pp. 16–18. I have added the first two premises to make it clear that the argument is within the scope of the assumption that there is a best possible world, made the necessities explicit, and added the right conjunct to the antecedent of (4).

2. As Rowe notes, Robert Adams has denied (4) (pp. 55–87).

3. We will later distinguish possible worlds generally from *feasible* possible worlds, where the latter are ones that God is able to actualize. Whether there is a best possible feasible world and, if so, which world it is, is something that could vary from world to world. Thus, if it should turn out that, necessarily, God actualizes the best feasible world, it would not follow that only one world is possible. So even if the assumption that there is a best possible world is implausibly strong, the issue taken up in the text is worth pursuing, because it would arise if God’s goodness and power constrains him to actualize the best feasible world.

requires that he create the best possible world, then God is not free (p. 13). And in one place (p. 15) he seems to suggest that in such a case God wouldn't have *control* over his action. But I think that the heart of Rowe's claim that God would not be free in this situation is due to his commitment to a Principle of Alternative Possibilities. Early on Rowe formulates libertarianism as the view that "an agent's decision or action is freely performed only if at the time of the decision it was in the agent's power then and there to refrain from bringing about that decision" (p. 6). Later Rowe formulates a more careful version of the principle, inspired by Reid, according to which "freedom involves the power to cause a volition to do X and the power *not to cause* that volition" (p. 32).

God's being in a situation in which there is a best possible world is a special case—an extreme special case—of God's being in circumstances *C* in which he knows that a certain action *A* is the best action, he is able to do *A*, and he wants to do *A*. Given God's essential omniscience, omnipotence, and perfect goodness, it is plausible to think that

- (6) Necessarily, whenever God is in circumstances *C* in which he knows that a certain action *A* is the best action, he is able to do *A*, and he wants to do *A*, God does *A*.

But could God be free if he is in such circumstances? Rowe's answer seems clearly to be 'no'. If (6) is true, it's never possible that God be in such circumstances and fail to do *A*, or fail to cause the volition that causes *A*. And if it's not possible that God be in those circumstances and fail to do *A* or fail to cause the volition that causes *A*, then God does not have the power, in those circumstances, to do these things. His power does not extend to what is impossible.

I have suggested elsewhere that it might well be that God remains free in circumstances in which his knowledge, power, and goodness constrain what he does in this way.⁴ I think it is plausible to hold that what compatibilism says about free action might well make sense when applied to God's actions. The basic idea is that, according to compatibilism, the right sort of antecedent causal conditions, or the right sort of logically sufficient conditions, for performing an action are compatible with that action being done freely. Compatibilists typically distinguish between such conditions as the influence of drugs, the force of irresistible desires, or the machinations of nefarious neurosurgeons, on the one hand, from the beliefs and desires of an agent that arise in the usual and typically innocent ways. The presence of the former conditions or causes of an action is incompatible with its being performed freely; but the latter are, in some sense, the agent's *own* and therefore compatible with the agent's acting freely.

The feature of compatibilism that makes it seem unattractive to those of us who deny that it holds of free actions generally is that an agent's beliefs and

4. Edward Wierenga, 'The Freedom of God', *Faith and Philosophy*, 19 (2002), pp. 425–436.

desires typically arise from sources external to the agent, and, indeed, if determinism is true, from conditions antecedent to the agent's even coming into existence. But that doesn't hold in God's case. As C.S. Lewis put it,

Whatever human freedom means, Divine freedom cannot mean indeterminacy between alternatives and choice of one of them. Perfect goodness can never debate about the end to be obtained, and perfect wisdom cannot debate about the means most suited to achieve it. The freedom of God consists in the fact that no cause other than Himself produces His acts and no external obstacle impedes them—that His own goodness is the root from which they all grow and His own omnipotence the air in which they all flower.⁵

If God's knowledge, power, and goodness determine that he act in certain ways, then since it is his own essential perfections that do that, he can nevertheless be free in so acting.⁶

But what about the principle of alternative possibilities? Doesn't an agent *have* to have it within his or her power to do *something* different in order to act freely? Here I think the fact that there is a vast literature of attempts to formulate an adequate principle of alternative possibilities immune to Frankfurt-style counter-examples is instructive. Rowe's preferred Reidean formulation in terms of the power to refrain from causing the act of will that initiates an action, a variant of which I have also endorsed,⁷ is a refinement that comes after a long line of attempts to formulate the principle adequately.⁸ Why has it proven so difficult to find an acceptable statement of the principle? Is it that the truth of the matter is so delicate or so complicated? Here is a different proposal: it is that the intuitive use of the principle is as a test, an *approximate* test, for the presence of the wrong sort of antecedent conditions, the ones that would render an action unfree. It is difficult to state exactly because it is only a rough test. If this is right, then it doesn't matter that God fails the test posed by one's preferred principle of alternative possibilities. We can judge that actions proceeding from his own divine nature are free, and thus we do not need to employ a detector for the sorts of antecedent conditions which, if present in human agents, preclude their acting freely.

So here is the first point to make about Rowe's argument: I'm not persuaded that God couldn't be free, even if his essential perfections determine what he does, and thus even in circumstances in which he couldn't have done otherwise. In particular, why couldn't God be free even if there is a best possible world?

5. C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (Macmillan, 1962), p. 35; quoted in Thomas Talbott, 'On the Divine Nature and the Nature of Divine Freedom', *Faith and Philosophy*, 5 (1988), pp. 3–24.

6. Wes Morriston has recently given an alleged counter-example to this claim. See his 'Is God Free? Reply to Wierenga,' *Faith and Philosophy*, 23 (2006), pp. 93–98. I am not persuaded by Morriston's objection, but this is not the place to attempt a reply.

7. Edward Wierenga, *The Nature of God* (Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 85.

8. See, for example, Peter van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will* (Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 162ff.

2. How to Make a World

Thus far I have followed Rowe in speaking casually about God making a world. But, as Rowe notes, things are really somewhat more complicated. For Rowe, a possible world is a certain sort of state of affairs (pp. 74–77; see also p. 41). More precisely, it is what Plantinga calls a maximally consistent state of affairs; that is, it is a state of affairs S such for any state of affairs S, S' either *includes* or it *precludes* S' .⁹ States of affairs, and thus worlds, all *exist*. What we describe, informally, as God creating a possible world—as distinct from his, say, creating the heavens and the earth—is his *actualizing* a possible world. And he does that by *strongly actualizing*, that is, causing, or directly making to be the case, a part of the world.

I'm confident that Rowe explicitly accepts this much of Plantinga's picture of God's actualizing a world. But how exactly does God go about actualizing a possible world. Here Rowe says that “what God does is create particular things—stones, human beings, etc.—and enable them to be arranged in such a way that a particular possible world is actualized” (p. 77, n. 4). But how does that determine whether God actualizes one world rather than, say, another world with the same things in it? Rowe adds another detail later: “If a state of affairs consists of some human being's freely helping another human being, God cannot directly bring about that state of affairs by creating that person and ‘causing’ him to help another being. But by knowing in advance what that person will freely do in that situation, God may be able to indirectly bring about that state of affairs by bringing it about that that person is in that situation (p. 163, n. 15). Here Rowe seems to accept Molinism, a view which, even if he didn't explicitly accept it, would seem to be required by his argument.”¹⁰

Molinism is the claim that God has *middle knowledge*, that is, knowledge of propositions intermediate between his natural knowledge, which is of necessary truths and independent of his will, and his free knowledge, which is of contingent truths and dependent on his will. Propositions describing what free agents would do in various counterfactual circumstances (‘counterfactuals of freedom’) are taken, by Molinists, to be both contingent and independent of God's will.¹¹ If, as in Rowe's example, God knows that a person would freely do an action, A , in a particular situation, S , and God brings it about that S obtains, then by strongly actualizing S , God indirectly or weakly actualizes that person's freely doing A .

Taking this idea to the level of worlds, we can say that God weakly actualizes a possible world by directly or strongly actualizing a part of that world.

9. Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford University Press, 1974).

10. Rowe typically states his objection by reference to what an *omniscient* being creates. This suggests that there is something for an omniscient being to know about what world would result from its creative activity. At any rate, Rowe's principle (B) (below) is even less plausible on the assumption that God didn't know what world he was creating. Actions taken in unavoidable ignorance seem unlikely to count against a being's *goodness*.

11. The best and fullest account of Molinism is to be found in Thomas Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* (Cornell University Press, 1998).

God does his part, and then any free agents he creates add their share. More precisely (using Plantinga's notation), we can say that for a given possible world, W , there is the largest state of affairs included in W that God strongly actualizes, $T(W)$. But since $T(W)$ does not determine all of W , there is some other possible world, W' , such that $T(W)' = T(W)$. Whether God can actualize a world W then depends on which of the following is true:

- (i) If God were to strongly actualize $T(W)$ then W would be actual, or
- (ii) If God were to strongly actualize $T(W)$ then W' would be actual.

Just as God's ability to actualize a world depends on one of these 'counterfactuals of world-actualization' being true, for whichever one is false, there is a world that God is unable to actualize even though it's possible that he do so. For example, if (ii) is false, then God cannot actualize W' . To do so, he'd have to strongly actualize $T(W)$, but if he were to do that, he'd get W instead of W' .

An important moral here is that a world can be possible, and it can be possible that God actualize it, without its being *feasible*, that is, without God being able to actualize it. In our example, if (i) is true but (ii) is false, then W is feasible but W' is not. More generally, a world is feasible just in case there is some state of affairs God can strongly actualize and which is such that if God were to strongly actualize that world would be actual.¹²

With this background, we can turn to the second alternative.

3. There's an Infinite Series of Better and Better Worlds

In the case in which there is an infinite series of better and better worlds, Rowe thinks that no matter which world God actualizes, he could have actualized a better, or it's possible that he actualize a better, or it's possible that someone actualize a better. But, Rowe holds, if it's possible that someone create a better world, then God isn't unsurpassably good—his goodness could be surpassed by a deity who created a better world.

Rowe's fundamental principle here is

- (B) If an omniscient being creates a world when it could have created a better world, then it is possible that there be a being morally better than it (pp. 91, 104, 112, 114).

Rowe makes several claims that might be intended to support (B). For example, he claims that "the degree of goodness an omniscient being possesses is reflected in the degree of goodness in the world it creates" (p. 103), from which it follows that if an omniscient being creates a world when it is possible for a being to create a better world, then that being does not have the maximal amount of goodness.

12. I borrow the term from Thomas Flint, who gives a more intricate definition, the details of which need not concern us here (*Divine Providence*, pp. 51–54).

But why exactly should the value of the effects of an action redound precisely to the goodness of the agent? I fail to see that it does, and so I want to try to develop an objection to (B).

Rowe's principle (B) is explicitly restricted to cases in which the omniscient being *itself* could have created a better world. But the point of this condition, or so it seems, is to introduce the *possibility* of someone creating a better world. That is, the point of the condition that the being 'could have created a better world' is that, if that's so, then it's *possible for someone* to create a better world. And it is really the condition that it is possible that someone create a better world that inclines Rowe to conclude that it is possible that there be a morally better being, that God's goodness isn't *unsurpassable*. In other words, if (B) is true, then so is

- (C) If an omniscient being creates a world when it is possible that some being create a better world, then it is possible that there be a being morally better than it.

Or maybe (B) and (C) aren't related in quite that way. Perhaps it's simply the case that (B) is *no more plausible* than (C) is; if there's no reason to accept (C), there's no reason to accept (B). I think that in fact there are good objections to (C), and if I am right in thinking that (B) and (C) are related in this way, then there's no reason to accept (B).

Here's a case designed to discredit (C). Consider a world W and the largest state of affairs included in W that God strongly actualizes in W , namely, $T(W)$. As we saw above, there is another world, W' , such that the largest state of affairs that God strongly actualizes in W' is also $T(W)$. Then if God strongly actualizes $T(W)$, whether it's W that is actual or it's W' will depend on which of the following is true:

- (i) If God were to strongly actualize $T(W)$ then W would be actual, or
- (ii) If God were to strongly actualize $T(W)$ then W' would be actual.

Suppose that W is a pretty good world. It includes Adam and Eve and their progeny, but no sin and lots of human flourishing. Suppose also that W' is quite like W except that in it the free actions of some human agents lead to the earlier discovery and widespread dissemination of chocolate, a factor that gives W' a slight edge in overall value, given the somewhat greater amount of chocolate-derived pleasure enjoyed by its inhabitants. Suppose, finally, that it is (i) that is true and that God strongly actualizes $T(W)$.

Now (i) and (ii) are *contingent*; so (ii) could have been true. If it had been, and God had strongly actualized $T(W)$ then W' would have been actual. So it is possible that someone actualize W' . What should we say about this case? It is a case in which God actualizes a certain world, W , in circumstances in which it is at least possible that someone actualize a slightly better world, W' . Should we say that God isn't as good as possible, on the grounds that it is possible that someone actualize a better world? I think not. Surely, it is no reflection on *God's* goodness that, since the counterfactuals of world-actualization could have lined up slightly differently, it is possible that a slightly better world

could have been actualized. But this is to deny (C). And if (B) is no more plausible than (C), then (B) isn't plausible, either.

Here's a slightly different way of approaching these issues: when we think about divine attributes, we might rely on a naive or intuitive understanding of them. For example, it is tempting to think of omnipotence as requiring the ability to do absolutely anything. Only a few philosophers have succumbed to that temptation, however.¹³ Almost all of them have conceded that omnipotence does not require the ability to do what is logically or metaphysically impossible. Rowe himself seems committed to this refinement, since, as we noted above, he concludes from the assumption that it's not possible that God do otherwise that God is unable to do otherwise; that inference would not hold if God were omnipotent but omnipotence included the ability to do the impossible.

One way of seeing the appeal of the thesis that omnipotence does not include the ability to do just anything is to notice that all of the classical theists, such as Augustine, Anselm, Maimonides, Aquinas, etc., immediately followed their assertions that God is omnipotent with long lists of things that he was unable to do. These lists, moreover, tended not to be limited to things that were logically impossible; they included such possible items as sinning or falling short in action. So if a philosopher attempts to make trouble for the claim that God is omnipotent by contending that God should be able to do anything and then finding something impossible that God can't do, the proper response, it seems to me, is to say, 'But that's not what theists—even perfect being theists—mean when they say that God is omnipotent!'

If it's routine and unexceptional to say that certain refinements need to be made to the naive concept of omnipotence in order adequately to characterize God's power, why isn't a similar response exactly to be expected in the case of God's goodness? If it could be that there are conceivable extensions to the exercise of God's power, without discrediting his omnipotence, why couldn't there be conceivable enhancements of the exercise of his goodness, without posing a threat to his perfect goodness? If Rowe is right that an omnipotent, omniscient being who creates a world couldn't be perfectly good (in his sense in which (B) holds of perfect goodness), if there is an infinite series of better and better worlds, isn't the obvious and proper reply of the theist, 'But that's not what I mean by perfect goodness! I don't mean to attribute to God a property he couldn't have if there are better and better creatable worlds'? A response that leads to a deeper understanding of God's perfect goodness is to deny that it's a property he lacks if it's possible that someone create a better world. But that is to deny (B).

4. There Is More Than One World Tied for Best

Rowe actually says remarkably little about this alternative. In the introduction to his book he writes, "Along the way we will also consider the possibility that

13. An exception: Earl Conee, 'The Possibility of Power Beyond Possibility', in James Tomberlin (ed.), *Philosophical Perspectives V* (Ridgeview Publishing, 1991), pp. 447–473.

although there are a number of worlds equally good and none better—a view that appears to leave God free to select from among those equally good worlds the one he will create” (p. 6f.). I’ve only been able to find two subsequent mentions of this alternative, both relegated to footnotes. In the first Rowe simply acknowledges the possibility of there being multiple worlds tied for best and defers discussion of the topic until later (p. 101, n. 23). In the second, and more substantial note, Rowe says that this alternative leaves its proponents “burdened with having to defend the rather implausible claim that the actual world with all its evil is a world than which it is logically impossible that there should be a better world than it” (p. 132, n. 43). So perhaps Rowe’s view is that although the alternative that there are multiple worlds tied for best does leave God free to choose one, it is implausible that this alternative obtains. And the reason that it is implausible that this alternative is actual is that, if it were, then this world would be a world than which it’s not possible that there be a greater.

But this isn’t at all compelling. There may well be reasons for thinking that, for any given world, there is a better.¹⁴ Richard Swinburne notes that

often the range of actions open to God is an infinite range of actions, each of which is inferior to some other action. Thus, for any world of conscious agents which God could create *ex nihilo*, there is plausibly a better one—for instance, one obtained by adding one more conscious agent (sufficiently distant from the others not to crowd them). And so among the actions of creating conscious agents *ex nihilo* there is no best.¹⁵

Rowe himself gives a different example. He writes,

given the infinite distance between the goodness of existing creatures and the goodness of God, and given that the value of a possible world reflects the value of the creatures who exist in that world, it seems to follow that there is an infinite number of increasingly better worlds. For, supposing that the highest creatures (creatures most like God) in a given world W1 are human beings, there would be a possible world, W2, with creatures that are one step higher (more nearly like God) than the world with humans. But then, surely, there would be a possible world, W3, with creatures that are one step higher . . . than the creatures in W2, and so on ad infinitum (p. 39).

So if there’s something which contributes to the value of a world, whether additional conscious agents or additional kinds of creatures, and a world can contain any number of them, then it seems that there would be an ordered series of better and better worlds. In particular, this world is not the best of

14. Let’s just assume that we understand what it is for one world to be better than another without taking the time to discuss exactly what it is that determines the value of a world and without getting into the vexing issue of how to compare worlds that have an infinite value.

15. Richard Swinburne, *The Christian God* (Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 134.

all possible worlds, because however many conscious agents it holds, or however many kinds of creatures more like God it contains, there is another world that has more and is accordingly better.

But this point does not demonstrate that for any *feasible* world there is a better *feasible* world. For all we can tell, it might be that there is some world W which is such that, although there are better worlds, for any such world W' , if God were to strongly actualize $T(W')$, the result would not be W' but rather some other world, sharing $T(W')$ with W' , but itself inferior to W . If the counterfactuals of world-actualization line up in a certain way, God could be unable to actualize any world better than W . Moreover, there could be a number of worlds tied in value with W , all of which are such that no better world is feasible. It could even be that the *actual world*, with all its evils and its faults, is such that for any better world, if God were to try to actualize it, the result would be a world even worse than the actual world. For all we know, in other words, the actual world is one of several worlds tied for best feasible world. On Rowe's view of freedom, God would be free in creating any one of them, because whichever one he creates, he could have created a different one instead. It could also be the case, however, that there are multiple worlds tied for best world overall, as well. That would permit the following scenario for Rowe's third alternative: there are multiple worlds tied for best; there are multiple lesser worlds tied for best feasible; God is free in choosing from among the best feasible; but the resulting world need not even appear to be as good as possible. The proponent of this possibility, then, need not "defend the rather implausible claim that the actual world with all its evil is a world than which it is logically impossible that there should be a better world than it" (p. 132, n. 43).

Finally, this strategy of distinguishing best feasible worlds from best worlds overall allows a different response to Rowe's second alternative, the case in which there is an infinite series of better and better worlds. In that case, too it could be that several worlds are tied for best feasible, and that God chooses freely from among them. That there is no upper bound on how good a world can be does not imply that God could have created a world better than the one he did, and, thus, it does not imply that God is less than perfectly good.