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Improvable Creations

PETER VAN INWAGEN
University of Notre Dame
vaninwagen.1@nd.edu

Abstract: God must create the best. But there is no best. Therefore, there is no God. Various philosophers—among them Stephen Grover and William Rowe—have endorsed more elaborate versions of this argument. Dean Zimmerman (in "Resisting Rowe's No-Best-World Argument for Atheism") has subjected their defenses of the argument to careful scrutiny—scrutiny that was in fact *so* careful that there remains very little to say about the argument. This essay contains my attempt to supply that very little.

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God must create the best. But there is no best. Therefore, there is no God. Various philosophers—among them Stephen Grover (Grover 1988) and William Rowe (Rowe 2002)—have endorsed more elaborate versions of this argument. Dean Zimmerman (Zimmerman 2019) has subjected their defenses of the argument to careful scrutiny—scrutiny that was in fact *so* careful that there remains very little to say about the argument. This essay contains my attempt to supply that very little.

1. Definitions and Principles

I begin with an attempt to make the meanings of the terms that will figure in the argument of Part 2 of this essay as clear as possible.

Let us say that we know what it means to say that a proposition x is the conjunction of the proposition y and the proposition z.

Thus, the proposition that life is real and life is earnest is the conjunction of the proposition that life is real and the proposition that life is earnest—but the proposition that it is not the case that if life is real, then life is not earnest is not the conjunction of the proposition that life is real and the proposition that life is earnest, although it is logically equivalent to their conjunction.

Having said this, let us say further that we know what it means to say that, for any propositions, the *y*s, *x* is the conjunction of the *y*s.[1]

And let us say that we know what it means to say that a proposition *x* is the denial of a proposition *y*. (The proposition that it is not the case that life is real is the denial of the proposition that life is real, but the proposition that if life is real then it is not the case that life is real is not the denial of the proposition that life is real, although it is logically equivalent to its denial.)

We proceed to a series of definitions.

> *x* is a simple proposition $=_{df}$ *x* is a proposition and it is possible for one to consider *x* without considering any proposition other than *x*.

So, for example, the proposition that life is real is a simple proposition because one can consider it without considering any other proposition, but the proposition that life is real and life is earnest is not simple because one cannot consider it without also considering both the proposition that life is real and the proposition that life is earnest. And nor is the proposition that it is not the case that life is real a simple proposition, for one cannot consider it without also considering the proposition that life is real.

> *x* is a possible world $=_{df}$ *x* is a possible proposition and for some *y*s (*x* is the conjunction of the *y*s and $\forall z$ (*z* is one of the *y*s $\rightarrow$ *z* is either a simple proposition or the denial of a simple proposition) and $\forall z$ (*z* is a simple proposition $\rightarrow$. *z* is one of the *y*s or the denial of *z* is one of the *y*s)).[2]

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[1] We assume that: The conjunction of the conjunction of the *x*s and the conjunction of the *y*s is the conjunction of the *x*s and the *y*s (that is, is the conjunction of the *z*s such that, for all *w*, *w* is one of the *z*s if and only if *w* is one of the *x*s or one of the *y*s).

[2] "But why not simply say that a possible world is a possible proposition that, for every proposition, strictly implies either that proposition or its denial?" Unless one assumes that strictly equivalent propositions are identical that definition is consistent with the thesis that every possible world is strictly equivalent to other possible worlds—and thus that there is are many actual worlds. The elaborate definition in the text above is designed to avoid this consequence: the actual world is the conjunction of all the true propositions that are either simple propositions or the denials of simple propositions, and there is only one of those. It is, incidentally, not a presupposition of this essay that just any propositions have a conjunction. (Why not? Hint: Consider the conjunction of the propositions that do not have themselves as conjuncts . . .) We do, however, assume that the *x*s

Hereinafter, 'possible world' will be abbreviated to 'world'. Since "worlds" are propositions, actuality is simply truth. But only one world can be true, and we can therefore speak of *the* actual world:

x is the actual world $=_{df}$	x is a world and x is true.
x is true in y $=_{df}$	x is a proposition and y is a proposition, and x would be true if y were true
x exists in y $=_{df}$	y is a proposition and x would exist if y were true.
x is the cosmos $=_{df}$	x is the fusion (or mereological sum) of all beings[3] other than God.[4]

We next introduce the idea of an *horation*. ('Horation' is an extant but obscure word, which, owing to its obscurity, I feel justified in using as a pure term of art.) I cannot offer a Chisholm-style definition of this word, but I can give an account of the meaning I wish to impose on it. An horation is a divine speech act (an act universal or act type). My paradigm example of God's performing (or, as I shall say, *issuing*) an horation is his saying, "Let there be light" in Genesis 1.3. We cannot of course suppose that (except possibly when engaged in conversations with human beings) God really utters words in a natural language, but it is a useful myth. And let us introduce some grammatical uniformity into our myth by, instead of, e.g., 'Let there be light' and 'Let the firmament divide the waters from the waters', writing 'Let it be the case that there is light' and 'Let it be the case that the firmament divides the waters from the waters'. If I say, for example, that the proposition that light exists is the "propositional component" of the horation God issues when he says, "Let there be light," my meaning is, I hope, clear. If x is an

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have a conjunction if each of the xs is either a simple proposition or the denial of a simple proposition.

[3] That is, concrete objects, entities with causal powers.

[4] Those who accept any answer to the Special Composition Question less profligate than Universalism will deny (in the Ontology Room) that the cosmos exists. I am, of course, one of them. I regard the cosmos as I regard the planet Jupiter: as a "virtual object." (See van Inwagen 1990, 112 and 124.)

horation and *y* is an horation, *x* and *y* are identical just in the case that their propositional components are the same.

We proceed to a second series of definitions

God ordains the truth of *x* =$_{df}$ *x* is a contingent proposition that is strictly implied by the propositional component of an horation that God issues

God directly ordains the truth of *x* =$_{df}$ *x* is the propositional component of an horation that God issues

God indirectly ordains the truth of *x* =$_{df}$ God ordains the truth of *x* and does not directly ordain the truth of *x*

x is the selection proposition on the *y*s =$_{df}$ the *y*s are worlds and there are worlds that are not among the *y*s and *x* is the proposition that one of the *y*s is the actual world

x is a selection proposition =$_{df}$ for some *y*s, *x* is the selection proposition on the *y*s

God creates *x* =$_{df}$ For some *y*, *y* is a proposition and God ordains the truth of *y* and *x* exists only in worlds in which *y* is true.

This completes my attempt to make the meanings of the terms that will figure in the argument of Part 2. I proceed to list and discuss some principles that will figure as premises in that argument.

We shall assume the truth—in fact the necessary truth—of three principles.

Divine Necessity

God exists in all worlds.

Ordination-Creatures

There are beings other than God only if God ordains the truth of the proposition that there are beings other than God.

(It follows that God has created all beings other than himself. For if there are such brings, God has ordained the truth of the proposition that there are beings other than God, and such beings exist only in worlds in which that proposition is true.)

Ordination-Selection

> If God ordains the truth of any proposition, he directly ordains the truth of exactly one selection proposition.

Let us look at some examples of the implications of Ordination-Selection. Suppose there are exactly five possible worlds, w_1, w_2, w_3, w_4, and w_5. And suppose that God directly ordains the truth of the selection proposition on w_1, w_2, and w_3 (i.e., the proposition that one of w_1, w_2, and w_3 is the actual world). Suppose, that is, that he issues the horation we represent mythically by imagining that he speaks the words

> Let it be the case that one of w_1, w_2, and w_3 is the actual world.

Then—by Ordination-Selection—he does not directly ordain the truth of the selection proposition on w_1, w_2, w_3, and w_4, or of the selection proposition on w_2 and w_3, or of the selection proposition on the worlds identical with w_1, or of the selection proposition on any of the twenty-eight other pluralities of worlds. Nor does he ordain (either directly or indirectly) the truth of the selection proposition on w_1 and w_2, or the truth of the selection proposition on w_2 and w_3, or the truth of the selection proposition on the worlds identical with w_1, or the truth of the selection proposition on any of the three other pluralities of worlds that are properly among w_1, w_2, and w_3. (Moreover, he does not ordain the truth of any proposition strictly equivalent to any of these six selection propositions. For example, if there are women more than two meters tall in and only in w_1 and w_2, God does not ordain the truth of the proposition that there are women more than two meters tall.) It also follows that he *does* ordain (indirectly) the truth of the selection proposition on these two pluralities:

> w_1, w_2, w_3, and w_4 w_1, w_2, w_3, and w_5.

(And indirectly ordains as well the truth of any proposition true in exactly the worlds w_1, w_2, w_3, and w_4 and in exactly the worlds w_1, w_2, w_3, and w_5. For example, if there are neutron stars in and only in the worlds w_1, w_2, w_3, and w_5, then God

indirectly ordains the truth of the proposition that neutron stars exist.) Note that if the *y*s are two or more in number and *x* is the selection proposition on the *y*s and God directly ordains the truth of *x*, then for some *z*, *z* is one of the *y*s, and *z* is actual and the fact that *z* and not another of the *y*s is actual has no explanation whatever; which of the *y*s is actual is, in every sense, a matter of chance.

2. The No Best World Argument

The core of Rowe's argument is contained in the following paragraph:

> But what if there is no best world? What if, as Aquinas thought to be true, for each creatable world there is a better world that God can create instead? In short, there is no best world. Here, I believe, in supposing that God exists and creates a world when for every creatable world there is a better creatable world, we are supposing a state of affairs that is simply impossible. I'm not suggesting here that there is an impossibility in the idea that God exists. Nor am I suggesting that there is an impossibility in the idea that for every creatable world there is a better creatable world. I am suggesting that there is an impossibility in the idea both that God exists and creates a world and that for every creatable world there is a better creatable world. For whatever world God would create he would be doing less good than he can do. And it is impossible for God to do less good than he can. The underlying principle yielding the conclusion that there is an impossibility in the idea both that God creates a world and that for every creatable world there is a better creatable world is the following:
>
> > If an omniscient being creates a world when there is a better world it could create, then it would be possible for there be a being morally better than it. (Rowe 2002, p. 410)

I will call the principle stated in the offset lines *Better*. It is, I think, evident that the No Best World Argument stands or falls with *Better.* The remainder of this essay is little more than an examination of *Better*.

Let us begin this examination by asking what a "world" is—that is, is a world of the kind referred to in the No Best Worlds Argument a *possible* world (an abstract object) or is it a cosmos—a mereological sum or fusion of the furniture of earth and the choir of heaven? If the former, we face a difficulty. It is obvious that the word 'world' in *Better* refers, or is intended to refer, to something created, something that is made. And possible worlds are not made things. According to the option chosen in this essay, they are certain propositions.

Might an advocate of the "'worlds' are possible worlds" answer to our question solve this problem by rewriting *Better*—by replacing creation with actualization? Perhaps in the following way?

Let us say that

God actualizes (the world) $x =_{df}$ For some *y*s, God ordains the selection proposition on the *y*s and x is one of the *y*s and x is actual

God strongly actualizes (the world) $x =_{df}$ For some *y*s, God ordains the selection proposition on the *y*s and for all z if z is one of the *y*s, $z = x$

God weakly actualizes (the world) $x =_{df}$ God actualizes x and God does not strongly actualize x.

And let us replace *Better* with

Better'

> If an omniscient being strongly actualizes a world when there is a better world it could strongly actualize, then it would be possible for there be a being morally better than it.

There are two unrelated objections to *Better'* that I think are worth consideration:

> I very much doubt whether God has strongly actualized α (where 'α' rigidly designates the world that happens to be actual). And if God has not strongly actualized α, no omniscient being has strongly actualized a world.
>
> I very much doubt whether any possible world is better than any other.

I doubt whether God has strongly actualized α, because it seems evident that if a world x has been strongly actualized, no creature has in x the ability to act otherwise than it does. And I am firmly wedded to the conviction that some creatures have that ability in α.

This objection can be met, however, for it is possible to frame the No Best World Argument—or what is *essentially* the No Best World Argument—without assuming

that God has strongly actualized α. For suppose God has only weakly actualized α. That is, for some *x*s that are two or more in number and one of which is α, he has said

> Let it be the case that one of the *x*s is the actual world;

and it has come to pass that that—for no reason whatever—α and not some other one of the *x*s was the actual world. But if for every world there is a better, God might have indirectly ordained the truth of the proposition that a world better than α was actual by, for some *y*s such that, for all *z*, if *z* is one of the *y*s, *z* is better than α, directly ordaining the truth of the selection proposition on the *y*s.

I doubt whether any possible world is better than any other because God exists in (and is supremely good in) every possible world. A possible world in which God has created nothing is unimprovable—for not only is God's goodness infinitely greater than the collective goodness of the totality of any possible creation, but every good in any possible creation can be nothing but faint copy of some good that exists within the divine nature.[5] This objection to *Better'* is a consequence of the fact that the "possible worlds" that figure in the No Best World Argument are supposed to be possible worlds in Leibniz's sense: possible *creations*; and "present day" or "modal logic" possible worlds are possible *realities*. But we can focus on the value of creations if we turn to the other sense of 'world', the furniture-of-earth-and-choir-of-heaven sense.

There is of course only one of these—only one "cosmos"—so it is trivially false that "for each creatable world there is a better world that God can create instead." But we can say this (one might dispute it, but I will not):

> For each possible world in which there is a cosmos, that cosmos has in that world a specific degree of goodness.

(Degrees of goodness are numbers, or at least abstract objects of a sort that can be linearly ordered—and, of course, if in world *x* the cosmos has degree of goodness *n* and in world *y* the cosmos has degree of goodness *m*, and *n* is greater than *m*, then *x* is a world with a better cosmos than *y*'s. (It is irrelevant to this point whether the

[5] It may be protested that the more evil there is in a world, the worse that world is, and that, therefore, some worlds are better than other worlds. If this is true, however, and if it is the only reason for which some worlds are better than others, it is not the case that for each world there is a better: all worlds in which there is no evil will be of equal value and will be more valuable than any other worlds.

cosmos that exists in x is the cosmos that exists in world y.) If we assume that for any degree of goodness there is a higher degree of goodness, and assume that for every degree of goodness, it is possible for there to be a cosmos that is good to that degree, the No Best World argument is easily stated in terms of degrees of goodness.

> God superordains the degree of goodness x $=_{df}$ For some ys, God directly ordains the truth of the selection proposition on the ys, and x is the lowest degree of goodness of the cosmos in any of the ys.

The crucial premise of the No Best World argument now becomes

Better″

> If an omniscient being superordains a certain degree of goodness when it could have superordained a higher degree of goodness, then it would be possible for there be a being morally better than it.

And how plausible is this premise? For my part, I can say only that I can't see why anyone would think it plausible.

If I were present at a paper that was about God but on some topic remote from the question of his existence or non-existence, and if one of the premises of the speaker's argument was

> It is impossible for God to do less good than he can,

I'm fairly sure that when the time came for the Q & A, I'd tell the speaker that I thought there was a rather obvious counterexample to that premise: "For suppose that for any good state of affairs God can bring about, there's a better state of affairs he can bring about. In that case, obviously, whatever God does, whatever states of affairs he brings about, he will have been able to bring about a state of affairs that is better than any he actually has brought about. A more plausible principle would have been

> If there is a state of affairs that God can bring about such that no state of affairs he can bring about is better than that state of affairs, *then* it is impossible for God to do less good than he can."

The idea of God's goodness is simply that he is as good as it is possible for a being to be. The No Best World argument is essentially an attempt to show that it is impossible for there to be a being who is as good as it is possible for a being to be. And the argument does not consider the intrinsic properties of the being to whose existence it is addressed, but considers instead one of his relational properties—being such that, for every degree of goodness he can superordain, there is a higher degree of goodness he can superordain. I do not find it plausible to suppose that the goodness of any being (divine or human, finite or infinite) can depend on its relational properties in this way. I will present an example to illustrate what I mean.

Many philosophers have held that finite beings can, for all they are finite, be perfect in their kind. And if that is so, perhaps it's not too great a stretch to maintain that finite beings can be perfect in *a* kind. Suppose, for example, that her friends and relations describe Susan as a "perfect mother." That is to say, they regard her as unimprovable *qua* mother. (They'll concede that she can't sing on key and that her French definitely isn't up to par, especially her use of the *passé composé*.)

The following principle—the Maternal Probabilist Principle—may seem plausible.

> If a mother ensures that the probability that her children will come to harm is n, and if she knows that she could have ensured (at no cost of any sort) that the probability that her children would come to harm was less than n, then she's not a perfect mother.[6]

But suppose the Devil comes to Susan and makes her this offer:

> Pick a probability greater than 0—any probability other than 0 whatever—and I (using an art that I have) will bring it about that that probability is the probability that your son will come to a bad end.

[6] Compare the principles B* and B** in (Zimmerman 2019, 463 and 465).

Now, obviously, whatever probability greater than 0 Susan chooses, she could have chosen a smaller one. And, just as obviously, that fact is simply irrelevant to the question whether she is a perfect mother. Her situation is a straightforward counterexample to the Maternal Probabilist Principle.

Someone might protest that the Maternal Probabilist Principle was not very plausible anyway, owing to the fact that some probabilities are so minute that if the probability of one's suffering a certain baleful fate is of their order, reducing it does not count as a boon. And they would, I presume, be quick to point out that there is no analogue of this in the case of *Better''*. A world in which the chance of Susan's beloved son's being gored by a water buffalo while crossing Times Square is one ten thousandth what it is in the actual world is not on that account a better world than the actual world. For that matter, a world in which *everyone's* chance of being gored by a water buffalo while crossing Times Square is one ten thousandth what it is in the actual world is not on that account a better world than the actual world.

We can elaborate the story of Susan to meet this protest, however. Suppose the Devil makes this speech to her:

> I have come hither from going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it. And in my travels, every time I noticed anyone mentioning or writing a particularly large number I made a record of that number — and I heard many thousands of large numbers mentioned. I have now in mind the largest of them all, call it *N*. I know the probability that your son will come to a bad end, and—*voilà*—I have, all in an instant, increased that probability by a factor of *N* (it's still less than or equal to 1, of course). But you may name a number, any finite number however large, and, if *n* is the number you name, I will reduce the probability of your son's coming to a bad end by a factor of *n.* So, for example, if this morning your son's probability of coming to a bad end was 0.0001 and *N* is 10,000, there's now one chance in ten of his coming to a bad end. If the number you choose is one million, that chance will be reduced to one in ten million.

Since Susan has no idea what number *N* is, the larger the number she names the better. And, of course, whatever number she names, she could have named a larger one. And yet she is a perfect mother. The Maternal Probabilist Principle is therefore false—for once a woman is a mother, whether she's a *perfect* mother is entirely a matter of her intrinsic properties; her relational properties (such as there

being no number for her to choose that is the best possible number for her to choose) are irrelevant to the question whether she is a perfect mother.

And, similarly, the principle

> If an omniscient being superordains a certain degree of goodness when it could have superordained a higher degree of goodness, that being is not a morally perfect being

is false, for whether a being is a morally perfect being is entirely a matter of its intrinsic properties; its relational properties (such as there being no degree of goodness for it to superordain that is the highest degree of goodness it is possible for it to superordain) are irrelevant to the question whether it is a morally perfect being.

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