

Is God Free?

If we understand omnipotence as "Having the maximum amount of power that the most perfect being could have", then God's power will be limited by His other characteristics. Now, one of those characteristics is MORAL PERFECTION. If the definition of omnipotence that we have settled on is correct, then this leads us to ask this question: If God's choices are limited to the morally perfect ones, does God have free will? It seems like, if God is morally perfect, then he must always do what is best. But, there is only ever one path of choices that is THE BEST. And, in that case, it seems as if God is incapable of choosing anything but that one path of choices.

1. Is God Obligated To Create The "Best" World?: This puzzle comes to light especially when we ask the following question: Was God free to create a world that is less than the best world?

Was God OBLIGATED to create this world and no other? Imagine that God sort of has all of the various options laid out before him in his mind. As he considers all of the various "possible worlds," which one would God choose?

- 1) Well, CLEARLY a morally good God cannot create one of the BAD worlds. A morally blameless God cannot produce a world where the suffering or badness on a whole outweighs any happiness or goodness. Right?
- 2) But, which of the GOOD worlds would God choose to create? It seems that, if he does not bring about the absolute BEST world, God would be acting, as Rowe points out, "to bring about less good than he can."

Rowe thinks that a perfect being could not act in such a way. He thinks the following principle is plausible:

- **Plausible Principle:** If a "perfect being" creates a world, and there is a BETTER world that it COULD HAVE created, then it is possible for there to be a being that is morally better than that (namely, one that is just like this supposedly "perfect being" except that it creates some BETTER world).

If this principle is true, then God, if He is truly a perfect being, MUST create the best world.

2. Is THIS The "Best Of All Possible Worlds?": Leibniz answered this question 300 years ago by stating: Yes, God was morally required to make the best of all possible worlds, and it follows that THIS world is the best possible world.

Leibniz was then ridiculed by others, because it sure seems like there could be worlds that are much better than this one. Voltaire's *Candide* (1759), for instance, is a satire on this sentiment. Candide's life is surrounded by death, murder, theft, poverty, and disease, but the catch phrase repeated sarcastically throughout is, "But this is the best of all possible worlds!"

If there is anything that the responses to the problem of evil demonstrated, however, is that the best of all possible worlds probably includes SOME suffering. So, however implausible this may seem, if God IS obligated to create the best world, it is always open to the theist to insist that THIS IS the "best of all possible worlds"—i.e., there is ultimately some good explanation for why God allows exactly this much suffering.

3. Is There A "Best" World?: The question remains, is it coherent to claim that there is a "best" world? Rowe does not think the idea of a "best" world is coherent. It seems like, no matter how awesome a world is, God could ALWAYS make it a little better by adding more happiness (e.g., by creating just one more happy person, making ice cream taste just a little better, etc.). How would there be a CAP on the amount of happiness God could put in a world? It seems that the series or spectrum of worlds in terms of goodness is infinite, extending forever with no end point or "best" world.

This means trouble for the theist, if the above principle is true. If one accepts the "Plausible Principle," and there is no "best" world, then God CANNOT EXIST! Whoa...

Here's why:

1. Suppose God exists (defined as the most perfect possible being).
2. There is no "best" world.
3. If there is no BEST world, then for ANY world God creates, God could have done better (namely, by creating a better world).
4. But, by the Plausible Principle, if God could have done better, then it is possible for there to be a being more perfect than God (namely, one just like God in every way, except that it creates a better world).
5. But, this is absurd (nothing can be better than the most perfect being).
6. Therefore, the original supposition that God exists must be false (since it entails an absurdity).

It seems that the premise that the theist will want to reject is premise 4 (or else, premise 2—but we're assuming that premise 2 is true for now). How is premise 4 justified? Rowe points out, "if an omniscient being creates a world when it could have created a better world, then that being has done something less good than it could do (create a better

world). But any being who knowingly does something (all things considered) less good than it could do falls short of being the best possible being.”

4. Potential Objections: Here are some responses that the theist might give to Rowe:

- (1) Ought Implies Can: “Ought implies can” is a popular slogan in Ethics. If God OUGHT to do something, it had better be the case that he CAN do it. But, if it is logically impossible for God to create the BEST world (since there IS NO best world), then God cannot be at fault for creating any good world. It seems like one can only be at fault for failing to do what is POSSIBLE. Creating the “best” world is impossible.

Reply: Rowe points out that this response is confused: God’s fault is not that He doesn’t create the BEST world. Rather, the fault Rowe attributes to God is that, no matter what God does (i.e., whatever world God chooses to create), it will always turn out that He could have done BETTER.

- (2) The “Plausible” Principle Is Impossible: It seems that, if Rowe’s principle is true, a contradiction results. For, it seems better for God to create a world with happy creatures than not create at all. So, God SHOULD create a world. On the other hand, it seems that God SHOULD NOT create a world, since if he creates any of the worlds, he will be doing something that is less than the best (and God should never do less than the best). Thus, if Rowe’s “Plausible Principle” is true, God both SHOULD and SHOULD NOT create a world. This is a contradiction. Therefore, Rowe’s principle is false.

Reply: Rowe points out that the principle does not lead to a contradiction. The implication is not that God should not create a world. Rather, it is that He SHOULD create a world. But, no matter which world He creates, it will always be the case that he should have created a BETTER one. The contradiction is not derived from the principle, but rather from the perfection of God! Therefore, the principle REALLY leads to the conclusion that God cannot exist (at least, that God cannot exist if there is no best possible world, or if there IS one and this is not it).

- (3) Worlds Are Incommensurate: One might claim that the goodness of worlds is not comparable. Thus, there is no “best” world. But, neither are there worlds that are “better” than this one. Possible worlds are simply not able to be compared with one another in terms of the “better than” or “worse than” relation.

Reply: Okay, sure, this would solve the problem. But the claim being made seems implausible. Surely we CAN compare possible scenarios. Imagine that the

ACTUAL world contained one less case of rape and dismemberment. SURELY that world is "better" than this one? Claiming that it is neither better nor worse (since it is incommensurable) seems radical and implausible.

- (4) God Creates ALL Good Worlds: Some theists have claimed that God has created ALL of the (infinitely many) good worlds. So, beyond our own universe, there exists an infinity of other worlds on a spectrum of goodness from just barely good, to better, to even BETTER, and so on to infinity.

Reply: First, note that this thesis takes the most implausible atheist hypothesis AND the most implausible theist hypothesis. For, NOW we're stuck with a perfect being AND an infinity of universes. But, furthermore, why would a morally perfect God create a world that is just BARELY good? If God was going to create an infinity of universes, why wouldn't he just make a bunch of duplicates of the REALLY AWESOME ones?

5. Conclusion: Rowe's conclusion is that, (1) If there IS a best possible world, and this is not it, or (2) If there is NOT a best possible world—either way, God does not exist. So, the theist must insist that there IS a best possible world, and this IS it. Leibniz saw this 300 years ago, and accepted its implications (claiming that there IS a "best of all possible worlds" and we're in it). Does this seem correct to you?