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GOD AND THE BEST

Bruce Langtry

The paper reaches two main conclusions: Firstly, even if there are one or more possible worlds than which there are none better, God cannot actualise any of them. Secondly, if there are possible worlds which God can actualise, and than which God can actualise none better, then God must actualise one of them. The paper is neutral between compatibilist and libertarian views of creaturely freedom.

1. The main questions to be addressed

Let us begin by considering the proposition:

(I) Necessarily, if God exists, then there is no world—ie. no possible world—better than whichever world is actual.

Some philosophers doubt (I) on libertarian grounds. They argue “Maybe there are one or more worlds better than the actual one and they all contain free morally right decisions and actions by rational creatures. But if these decisions and actions are free then it is not entirely up to God whether they occur. They might fail to occur even though God exists.” (I assume that if God exists then he is essentially omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good.)

Nevertheless such libertarians might hold some sort of maximising doctrine about God’s creative and providential activity. To identify doctrines of this kind, we need some technical terminology. Following Alvin Plantinga, let us distinguish between *strong* and *weak* actualisation.¹ God strongly actualises a state of affairs if and only if he causes and determines it to be actual. He weakly actualises a state of affairs if he performs some action such that, if he were to perform it then the state of affairs would be actual.² Let us say that God *fully actualises a world* if and only if he strongly or weakly actualises every contingent state of affairs included in the world.

Some philosophers who reject (I) would assert the weaker proposition

(II) Necessarily, if God exists, then he cannot fully actualise a world better than whichever world is actual.



Which worlds containing God (ie., containing *God's existing*) also contain God's fully actualising them? Many philosophers would say: all of them. But this answer is controversial. For some philosophers believe that there are worlds containing events E, F,... which are both uncaused and such that there is no action A such that the proposition "God performs action A, and if God were to perform A then events E, F,... would occur" is true in those worlds.³ Therefore there are worlds containing God in which there are contingent states of affairs not fully actualised by God. Therefore there are worlds containing God which do not contain God's fully actualising them. God *cannot* fully actualise any of these worlds. Hence the suggestion that God must fully actualise the best world he can encounters an initial objection: God may be able to do better, by simply letting E,F,... occur along with his own contributions. Of course this is not an objection to (II). For (II) does not entail that necessarily if God exists then he fully actualises the best world he can.

Nevertheless there are libertarian maximisers whose views are not adequately captured by (II). This emerges when we consider the views of Molinists—another group of philosophers who deny that all worlds containing God contain God's fully actualising them. Molinists are libertarians who emphasize God's possession and use of middle knowledge. Middle knowledge is God's knowledge, logically and epistemically prior to any creative decisions he makes, of what undetermined events (such as free creaturely choices) would occur if such-and-such circumstances obtained. Those counterfactuals, concerning free choices and actions, of which God has middle knowledge, are called "counterfactuals of creaturely freedom."

Consider a Molinist who believes that any world better than the actual world contains free creaturely choices and actions. She will say that amongst the states of affairs included in any world better than the actual world are its being the case that such-and-such counterfactuals of creaturely freedom are true. God cannot strongly or weakly actualise these states of affairs. Hence God cannot fully actualise any world better than the actual world. But this result leaves it open whether God in his creative and providential actions does the best he can.

Let us say that God *Molina-actualises* a world W if and only if he strongly or weakly actualises every contingent state of affairs in W except the obtaining of the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom that are true in W. Then a debate between Molinists as to whether God is a maximiser can be formulated in terms of whether necessarily if God exists then he cannot Molina-actualise a world better than whichever world is actual.

In this paper I maintain overall neutrality with respect to Molinism and most other positions concerning freewill. Let us say that God *actualises* a world if and only if he either fully actualises it or Molina-actualises it. Then we can formulate the issue as one about the truth or non-truth of the proposition

(III) Necessarily, if God exists, then he cannot actualise a world better than whichever world is actual.

2. God's powers: compatibilist analysis

Let us say that a world is *maximal* if and only if there is no world better than it. In my opinion, currently available arguments do not succeed in settling one way or the other whether there is at least one maximal world. Nevertheless I shall assume at various points below that there is. It will become obvious that my main conclusions do not depend on the assumption.

I will also assume that every maximal world contains many free, morally right choices and actions by rational creatures, and no morally wrong ones. I have no proof of this supposition, but it seems plausible to me. Its chief opponents seem to be those, such as Leibniz, who hold on a priori grounds that the actual world is maximal. Of course many theologians have believed that the actual world, containing as it does Adam's sin and Christ's redemptive activity, is much better than the world that would have been actual had Adam resisted temptation. And greater-goods theodiscists often assert that we are better off with various moral evils and the greater goods for which they are logically necessary than we would have been with neither the moral evils nor the goods. But each of these statements is consistent with my assumption.

Does God have the power to actualise a maximal world? I will offer separate answers, taking first a compatibilist and then a libertarian viewpoint on freedom.

Suppose that God's determining all choices and actions by rational creatures is logically compatible with those choices and actions' being free. In that case, does God have the power to actualise a maximal world?

I propose to further subdivide the discussion, considering in turn the situation relative to two alternative theses:

- (a) God's perfect goodness entails that if God can actualise a maximal world then he does
- (b) Possibly, God is perfectly good and he can actualise a maximal world, but he does not

Suppose that (a) is true. Now we are also assuming:

- (i) Necessarily, every maximal world contains many free, morally right choices and actions by rational creatures (including free choices to do what is morally obligatory), and no morally wrong ones.

Now (a) and (i) jointly entail

- (ii) Necessarily, if God is perfectly good and he can actualise a maximal world then the actual world contains creaturely choices and actions, and no creaturely choices and actions are morally wrong.

Compatibilism tells us that "Necessarily, if initial conditions C held millions of years ago and universal laws of nature L are true then person A performs action X" and "Initial conditions C held millions of years ago and universal laws of nature L are true" are together consistent with "Person A does X freely". After all, an action's being determined is consistent with its being the case that the person would have acted differently if she had adopted different aims or values, if she had discussed her options further with friends, etc. Indeed an action's being determined is consistent with its being, in a sense, an "accident" that the person acted as she did: "If I hadn't glanced to my left at that precise moment then I would not have seen you, and I would not have..."

But whether or not God exists and is perfectly good is no accident. And (ii), in the present context, should be understood in such a way that it assures us that, *necessarily*, if God is perfectly good and can actualise a maximal world then he systematically arranges laws and initial conditions with the overriding intention of causing and determining it to be the case that no person performs a morally wrong action. Thus "No person ever performs a morally wrong action" differs vitally from "No person ever reads aloud the second 1000 digits in the decimal expansion of pi." There are maximal worlds, let us suppose, in which both are true, and both are determined to be true. But in many of those worlds the latter is only accidentally true, and lots of people are free to read aloud the digits. Given (ii), in none of those worlds are people free to act wrongly, for, however complicated the causal chains immediately preceding a person's decision, the non-occurrence of morally wrong choices and actions is built in to the structure of the creation just as much as if it were a law of nature. We need not take a stance on whether in a deterministic world everything that occurs is intended by God. The point is that even if God intends that some individual does not read aloud the second 1000 digits of pi, he might have lacked this intention, whereas according to (ii) he could not have lacked the intention that the individual not perform a morally wrong action.

Even if it is determined that S not do A, a human being S may still be free to do A. But if doing A is logically inconsistent with conjunction of the laws of nature and "There is carbon" or "There are planets" then S is not free to do A. And if doing A is logically inconsistent with the existence of God then S is not free to do A. Now "S performs a morally wrong action" is inconsistent with the conjunction of (ii) and "If God exists he is perfectly good" and "If God exists he can actualise a maximal world" and "God exists"—a conjunction which during this stage of the paper we are assuming to be true. The first three conjuncts, if true, are necessarily true.⁴ Therefore "S performs a morally wrong action" is logically inconsistent with "God exists". Therefore S is not free to perform a morally wrong action.

Some compatibilists will reject this reasoning. Some of these philosophers hold one or another conditional analyses of free action; for example, that an agent S is free to do A if and only if it is true that if S were to attempt to do A then S would do A. Others hold that S is free to do A if and only if S has the relevant capacities, and is not suffering from any of

a number of specified mental afflictions—eg., S is not brainwashed. The exact details need not concern us here. The point is that some compatibilists will say that, despite the cited differences between performing a morally wrong act and reciting the second 1000 digits of pi, in both cases the relevant conditions for freedom are fulfilled.

So much the worse for these analyses of freedom. Although various specific versions of compatibilism employ such analyses, compatibilism itself, the generic position, does not. Here is what I have to say to the proponent of the simple conditional analysis of free action (and variants on it). The relevant difference between performing a morally wrong act and reading aloud the second 1000 digits of pi is this: in the former case, but not the latter, the very structure of the creation rules out its being the case that both if S were to attempt to do A then S would do A, and S attempts to do A. Compatibilists ought to acknowledge that in such a situation S is not free to do A.

Hence compatibilists should agree that from (ii) we can infer

(iii) Necessarily, if God is perfectly good and he can actualise a maximal world then no rational creature is ever free to choose or act in a morally wrong way.

But (a) and (i) also jointly entail

(iv) Necessarily, if God is perfectly good and he can actualise a maximal world then rational creatures are sometimes free to choose or act in a morally wrong way.

From the conjunction of (iii) and (iv) we can infer

(v) Necessarily, it is not the case that both God is perfectly good and God can actualise a maximal world.

Since we are assuming that God exists and is perfectly good, we can conclude that

(vi) God cannot actualise a maximal world

Since either (a) or (b) is true, we can draw the following conclusion from Section 2: If theological compatibilism is true then either it is not within God's power to actualise a maximal world or this is within his power but his perfect goodness does not entail that he exercises the power. In either case it is obvious that if theological compatibilism is true then we have no a priori guarantee that if God exists then the actual world is a maximal one.

3. *God's powers: libertarian analysis*

Let us now suppose that theological libertarianism is true. Assume also, as in Section 2, that necessarily, every maximal world contains

many free, morally right choices and actions by rational creatures (including free choices to do what is morally obligatory), and no morally wrong ones. It follows immediately that God cannot strongly actualise any maximal world. The question remains, can he fully actualise one?

Perhaps some libertarians see things as follows. If rational creatures are to choose and act freely, then God, having set up the background conditions within which creatures' lives take place, must leave it up to them what they do. If God wants someone to freely act in a certain way, then he can influence her decision, but then must step back and hope for the best. Thus, necessarily, God does not have the power to fully actualise a maximal world—one in which there are morally right choices and no morally wrong ones—even if it turns out that the actual world is in fact maximal.

Other libertarians believe that the foregoing position involves an inadequate view of divine providence. Molinists will agree that God cannot fully actualise a maximal world, but will add that God may nevertheless be able to Molina-actualise one, and so to actualise one. Whether God has the power to actualise a maximal world is a contingent matter, depending on what counterfactuals of creaturely freedom are true.

There are two alternatives: firstly, that according to the true counterfactuals of creaturely freedom there is a possible set of circumstances in which free creatures would always choose and act rightly; and secondly, that there is no such set. In the former case, God has the power, by actualising the specified circumstances, to weakly actualise its being true that free creatures always choose and act rightly. In the latter case, God does not have the power to weakly actualise this state of affairs.

Let us concentrate on the first alternative. As in Section 2, let us consider in turn the situation relative to the two alternative theses:

- (a) God's perfect goodness entails that if God can actualise a maximal world then he does
- (b) Possibly, God is perfectly good and he can actualise a maximal world, but he does not

Suppose that (a) is true. Then we encounter an argument that is in many ways strikingly similar to one employed in Section 2, in connection with compatibilism. We are assuming:

- (i) Necessarily, every maximal world contains many free, morally right choices and actions by rational creatures (including free choices to do what is morally obligatory), and no morally wrong ones.

Now (a) and (i) jointly entail

- (ii) Necessarily, if God is perfectly good and he can actualise a maximal world then the actual world contains creaturely choic-

es and actions, and no creaturely choices and actions are morally wrong.

And (ii), in the present context, assures us that, necessarily if God is perfectly good and can actualise a maximal world then, even if God does not cause and determine any creaturely actions, he systematically arranges laws and initial conditions with the overriding intention that no person performs a morally wrong action. If so, then no one is free to act wrongly, for the non-occurrence of morally wrong choices and actions is built in to the structure of the creation just as much as if it were a law of nature. The structure of creation is not up to rational creatures.

It might be objected: People are free to act wrongly, since they have the power to act in such a way that, if they were so to act, then God could not actualise a maximal world. Look at it this way. Suppose that people are actually in circumstances C and act rightly; then according to Molinism the subjunctive conditional "If people were in C then they would act rightly" is true. Now if they had acted wrongly in C then a different subjunctive conditional would have been true, *viz.*, "If people were in C then they would act wrongly". If God had seen that this conditional was true, then despite the truth of (a) and (i) he might well still have placed people in C, since it may well have been true that he could not actualise a maximal world.

This objection fails. Whether or not God can actualise a maximal world depends, according to Molinism, on what counterfactuals of creaturely freedom are true. Nevertheless, whether or not God can actualise a maximal world is not up to rational creatures. I have no decisive proof of this last claim, but it appears to me highly plausible.

Suppose that it is up to me whether in my present actual circumstances I freely recite the second 1000 digits of pi, and so it is up to me whether the conditional "If I were in these circumstances I would recite those digits" is true. It does not follow that it is up to me whether there are *any possible circumstances* which God can actualise and in which I would freely recite the second 1000 digits of pi. Indeed this surely is not up to me, *ie.*, is not under my control. My powers over my own motivational structure do not extend so far. (I can clench my teeth and think to myself, "No matter what happens, I will not recite those digits!" but doing so will not suffice.)

Similarly, suppose that it was up to the rational creatures who in fact exist whether in the circumstances C₁ in which God in fact placed them, they always freely acted rightly. Nevertheless it was surely not up to them whether there were any possible circumstances which God could actualise and which were such that in those circumstances *some rational creatures or other* always freely acted rightly; nor was it up to them whether, if there were such possible circumstances, some of them were included in maximal worlds. Hence even though, according to Molinism, it had become in circumstances C₁ up to the rational creatures who in fact existed whether God *in fact* actualised a maximal world, it was not up to these or any other creatures whether God *could have actu-*

alised a maximal world.⁵

The foregoing claims are not certain; but I think that they are true. (It is not certain that there is at least one world at least as good as the actual world and which contains unicorns; but I think that it is true, and it would require a strong and surprising argument to remove my belief.) I conclude that the objection fails to undermine the claim that (ii) assures us that, if God is perfectly good and can actualise a maximal world then the non-occurrence of morally wrong choices and actions is built in to the structure of the creation just as much as if it were a law of nature.

Suppose that there is a prison governor who is able to predict accurately, five minutes in advance, when a prisoner will form the intention to try to leave. The governor normally leaves all the doors of the prison unlocked, but when she predicts an attempt to leave she initiates a process which, four minutes later, locks all the doors. Plainly, if the doors are unlocked at a given time, then there is a sense in which a prisoner can, during the next four minutes, leave the prison: if he tries to leave, then there is nothing the governor can do to stop him. Nevertheless there is an obvious sense in which no prisoner is free to leave. After all, the prisoners have all been confined against their will for years. They all want to leave, but they are as securely held as if they were chained to the walls.⁶ The upshot: There are many very different ways in which you can be deprived of your freedom. From a libertarian viewpoint, one of these ways is by having it built in to the nature of the system, unalterable by you, that you will never perform a certain type of act. This is our position if God can actualise a maximal world.

Hence from (ii) we can infer

(iii) Necessarily, if God is perfectly good and he can actualise a maximal world then no rational creature is ever free to choose or act in a morally wrong way.

But (a) and (i) also jointly entail

(iv) Necessarily, if God is perfectly good and he can actualise a maximal world then rational creatures are sometimes free to choose or act in a morally wrong way.

From the conjunction of (iii) and (iv) we can infer

(v) Necessarily, it is not the case that both God is perfectly good and God can actualise a maximal world.

Since we are assuming that God exists and is perfectly good, we can infer that

(vi) God cannot actualise a maximal world

Since either (a) or (b) is true, we can draw the following conclusion: If Molinism is true then either it is not within God's power to actualise a

maximal world or this is within his power but his perfect goodness does not entail that he exercises the power.

I have not examined all non-Molinist libertarian theories. But I conjecture that if libertarianism is true then we have no a priori guarantee that if God exists then the actual world is a maximal one. This result complements that reached at the end of Section 2.

4. What God will do if there are no prime worlds

Let us say that a world is *prime* if and only if God (if he exists) can actualise it and cannot actualise a better world than it. I don't think we know whether, if God exists, there are prime worlds. In this Section I consider what flows from the supposition that there are no prime worlds, and that

- (1) For any world which God can actualise there is a better world which God can actualise.

Might there nevertheless be a best (or equal best) world which God can actualise while remaining perfectly good? This would be so if all worlds which God can actualise better than some good world he can actualise were such that God's actualising them involved God's violating a moral duty (or otherwise acting in a shoddy manner). However we can rule this situation out. I shall argue that, given that there is some very good world which God can actualise without violating any moral duty, there will be no world better than this which God can actualise only if he violates a moral duty.

If God actualises a world *W* then *W* itself contains the state of affairs *God's actualising W*. If God has a moral duty not to actualise some state of affairs included in *W*, and if *God's actualising W* is included in *W*, then the state of affairs *God's violating a moral duty*, along with more specific states of affairs such as *God's telling a lie* or *God's unjustly punishing someone*, are also included in *W*. But if, as I have so far been assuming, God is *essentially* morally good, these constituent states of affairs are logically impossible, and therefore *W* is not a possible world after all. Thus there is no world *W* such that God actualises *W* only if he violates a moral duty.

What if we abandon the doctrine of essential moral goodness? Then *W* is possible. But if *W* includes *God's actualising W*, and God has a moral duty not to actualise some state of affairs included in *W*, then God is not perfectly good in *W*. Surely God's being less than perfectly good, and telling a lie (or whatever), must involve such a gigantic loss of value that *W* cannot be as good as a very good world which includes God's actualising the world and which God has no moral duty not to actualise.

Contrast God with Jim in Bernard Williams's well-known example.⁷ Jim is offered a choice about the fate of twenty innocent Indians captured by some South American soldiers: either Jim kills one Indian and the other nineteen go free, or else Jim refuses to kill and all twenty Indians are killed by the soldiers. Although deontologists will say that

Jim ought not to shoot an Indian, they agree that the state of affairs in which Jim shoots one and the other nineteen go free is better than the state of affairs in which he refuses and the soldiers shoot all twenty. The prohibition against murder operates as a side-constraint on Jim's actions. Now Jim is a human being, and no doubt already a sinner; if he commits an additional injustice, the heavens will not fall. But (according to theological tradition at least) God is different. In the actual world, God has infinite value, or perhaps a finite value so high that no group of other beings could collectively have an equal or greater value. And a vital contribution to that high value is made by God's moral perfection. An omnipotent, omniscient being who was a sinner might be very admirable, but would not be worthy of religious worship, and would have far less value than God has in the actual world.

Hence it hard to see how the additional good to be gained by God's violating a moral duty could ever outweigh the good that would thereby be lost. Hence if God has a moral duty not to actualise a certain world, then it is hard to see how it could be better than some very good world which it is morally permissible for him to actualise. (Call the argument of the last three paragraphs the *loss-of-value* argument.)

The foregoing argument has suggested that (1) is logically equivalent to

(2) For any world which God can actualise without violating a moral duty (or otherwise acting shoddily) there is a better world which God can actualise without violating a moral duty (or otherwise acting shoddily).

Does (2) imply that for any action actualising a world that God can perform there is a morally better alternative action that he can perform? No. It is logically necessary that if a being is omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good then it cannot act in a morally better way, or more rationally, than it in fact acts. What (2) implies is that, given that an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good being is logically possible, there are worlds *V* and *W* such that *V* is better than *W*, and God can actualise *V* without violating any moral duty, but God's actualising *V* is not a morally better action, or more rational, than his actualising *W*.⁸

It might be objected, "If *V* is better than *W*, and God can actualise *V* without violating any moral duties, then it follows that God has better reasons for actualising *V* than for actualising *W*, and so that God would be acting irrationally if he actualised *W* rather than *V*." Either these things do not follow, or else an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good being is logically impossible, or else there are prime worlds.

5. Prime worlds

What if we suppose that there are prime worlds? Let us now consider the claim:

(3) If there are prime worlds, then it follows via God's perfect goodness that he will actualise one of them.

In this section I argue for the truth of (3).

It might be thought that the discussion in Section 4 casts grave doubt on (3). Surely it would be an odd moral theory which declared: "If there are prime worlds then God's actualising the better world is always (providing that involves no violation of duty, etc) the morally better action, *whether or not the better world is itself prime*; whereas if there are no prime worlds then this need not be the morally better action." Nevertheless the oddity is not decisive. Relative to our current assumption that there are prime worlds, an infinite hierarchy of better and better worlds which God can actualise is logically impossible. It is hazardous to draw moral conclusions from logically impossible thought-experiments.

Here are two lines of thought in favour of (3):

(A1) *The appeal to God's rationality.* If God is perfectly good then he actualises no world such that he has better reasons all-things-considered for actualising some other world instead; and if a world is not prime, then God always has better reasons all-things-considered for actualising a prime world instead.

(A2) *The appeal to God's moral unsurpassability.* God's perfect goodness involves more than his doing nothing morally wrong and having no defects of character. It must also be the case that there is no world in which there is a being *x* (God himself, or some other being) such that *x* is a morally better agent in that world than God is in the actual world. Now if God actualises a world which is not prime, then he does not do the best that he can, morally speaking, and so it is possible that there is an agent better than God is in the actual world, namely, an agent who actualises a prime world. So if God is perfectly good then he actualises a prime world.⁹

The trouble with these two lines of thought is that they are mere argument-sketches. Consider a human agent Emily who brings about a state of affairs *x*, thereby passing over the option of bringing about a better state of affairs *y*. Utilitarians and other maximising consequentialists will say that Emily would have acted in a morally better way if she had brought about *y*. They might well hesitate about inferring that she would have been a morally better person. The complexities of utilitarian accounts of moral virtue leave room for there being special situations in which the less virtuous of two people will be the one more likely to perform the right action. Non-consequentialists will be even more doubtful. They will list many possible reasons why Emily may have done the morally better deed, acted more virtuously, and done what she had the best reasons for doing, in bringing about *x*.

Now there are many apparently relevant differences between Emily and God. So it may well turn out that God always has better reasons for actualising a prime world than for actualising any other world he can actualise. It may well turn out that if God actualises a prime world then he acts in a morally better way, and is himself morally better, than he

would be if he actualised a non-prime world. But these claims need argument. That argument is not supplied in statements (A1) and (A2).

A good but far from decisive argument for (3) can be constructed using the principle

(4) Other things being equal, in intentionally bringing about the better state of affairs one acts in the morally better way.

In a specific case, the conclusion that one acted in the morally better way can be defeated by various circumstances. (At least, this is what philosophers who reject maximising consequentialism will say.) I will argue that in the case of God's choosing between a prime and a non-prime world, none of these circumstances is likely to hold.

(4) is distinct from

(5) Other things being equal, one has a moral duty to bring about the best state of affairs that one can.

The defeaters relevant to (4) are a subclass of those relevant to (5). Our question is not whether God has a moral duty to actualise a prime world.¹⁰ It is whether his perfect goodness guarantees that he will do so.

Let us examine the defeaters that are most often involved with (4), and see whether any of them apply to God's choosing between a prime and a non-prime world.

Firstly, one may have a moral duty to bring about the inferior state of affairs, or (for some other reason) a moral duty not to bring about the better state of affairs. What about God? Well arguments presented in the first half of Section 4 suggest that it is highly doubtful that any prime world could be such that God had a moral duty not to actualise some state of affairs included in it, and so not to actualise the world itself. For example, the proposition that there is a world which God can actualise and has a duty not to actualise is logically incompatible with the proposition that God is essentially perfectly good.¹¹

Even if there is some prime world such that if God were to actualise it then he would violate a moral duty, this does not suffice to explain why, despite the truth of (4), God does not actualise a prime world. For there might be other prime worlds such that if God were to actualise one of them he would not violate a moral duty.

A second kind of defeater frequently involved with (4) is bound up with the role of friendships and loyalties, and other personal commitments, in morally admirable human lives. Sometimes it is morally permissible to abandon a friend, in order to bring about the best outcome, even when this is not the morally best thing to do. Might God ever act in a morally better way in actualising a non-prime world, in response to the claims of friendship? Is there a pair of worlds, V and W, such that V's containing God's helping a friend, or preserving his friendship with someone, makes God's actualising V a *morally better* action than God's actualising W, even though W remains a better world than V? I think not.

One reason why not can be gathered from the first half of Section 4. A being who could have acted in a morally better way is not morally perfect. (This principle can easily be misunderstood. It does not entail that if there are no prime worlds then God is not perfectly good.) So in *W* God is not morally perfect. But according to the doctrine of God's essential perfect goodness, there can be no such world. And even if we drop that doctrine, the loss-of-value argument renders it doubtful that *W* can really be prime.

Even if there is some prime world such that if God were to actualise it then he would decline to help his friend, or indeed abandon a friendship, this is not enough to explain why, despite the truth of (4), God does not actualise a prime world. For there might be other prime worlds such that if God were to actualise one of them he would not have to do one of these things.

Let *W* be a prime world, in which God sets aside considerations of friendship to bring about some specific good. Now there are two candidate ways that God might avoid such a situation. One is to find some other way of bringing about this good while acting out of friendship. The other is by not becoming the other person's friend in the first place, and forming other friendships instead. Is it plausible to suppose that *W* is such that there is no alternative world *V*, also prime, in which one of these options is successfully pursued by God? Not, I think, unless there is a general proof that there is only one maximal world. Similar remarks can be made about projects to which God has devoted himself, etc.

A third kind of defeater relevant to (4): the less good state of affairs is *good enough*. For example, suppose that the only difference (apart from entailed and supervenient differences) between two states of affairs *x* and *y* is that in *y* you are better off. *y* is better than *x*. But suppose that *x* is the status quo. Even though moving to *y* will not involve any great effort, you might choose to remain with *x*, on the grounds that *x* is entirely satisfactory, without thereby displaying any defect or limitation. Similarly, it may be argued, God can remain morally perfect and completely rational in actualising a non-prime world *V* rather than a prime one *W*, because the wholly satisfactory nature of *V* defeats the inference from "*W* is better than *V*" to "actualising *W* is a morally better action than actualising *V*".

I do not think that this argument is strong. In some situations we do regard choosing the good enough and declining the better as at least as morally good and rational a course of action as choosing the better. This is surely because we think that in these circumstances moderation in the pursuit of the good is a virtue, and dissatisfaction with what is entirely satisfactory—with what would be entirely satisfying if it were not for the option of taking the better—is less than admirable. But it is doubtful that in choosing between a prime and a non-prime world, God finds himself in such a situation. After all, in choosing the prime world God would not be acting in a greedy, or fanatical, or grandiose, or neurotically driven, manner. For if God is essentially good there is no world in which he acts in one of these ways; and if he is non-essentially good, no world in which he acts in one of the foregoing ways, and in which there-

fore he falls well short of perfect goodness, is prime.

A fourth kind of defeater relevant to (4): self-sacrificial actions. Perhaps from an impartial standpoint it is better that you should survive than that some stranger should survive, but sometimes your sacrificing your own life to save a stranger's is at least as morally good an action as not doing so. Might God self-sacrificially pass over a prime world in favour of a non-prime one?

Let us agree (though it is controversial) that God can in various ways help others at great cost to himself; maybe sending his Son to suffer and die for human sinners is an actual example. But maybe if he does so the result is a better actual world than would otherwise have obtained. Does God ever perform self-sacrificial actions to secure some good when both doing so will not yield a better world than not doing so and also there is no method of bringing about the same good without the self-sacrifice? I don't think we know whether this fourth kind of defeater applies in the case of God.

So far I have assumed that (4) is true, and examined various defeaters associated with it. I have argued that three of these defeaters are unlikely to apply in the case of God; with respect to the fourth it is not clear either way. Hence (4) provides a good but far from decisive reason for holding that if there are prime worlds then God will actualise one of them.

Let us now consider an objection to the truth of (4). Agents may have tastes, loves, projects and aims whose pursuit, even when it precludes bringing about the best state of affairs, need not mean that they are acting in a morally inferior way. A morally perfect agent need not always allocate attention and effort to what she cares about in strict proportion to the cosmic value of her doing so. Now God is a genuinely personal agent, with his own contingent character traits superimposed on the comparatively abstract attribute *perfect goodness*, and with his own contingent likes, interests, enthusiasms and pet projects.¹² God is not a device whose function or *raison d'être* is to discover what constitutes the best all-things-considered, and bring it about.

We might treat God's likings, etc, as a fifth kind of circumstance which defeats the argument from the antecedent to the consequent of the true principle (4), making God's actualising one world at least as morally good as the other, even though the latter remains the better world. Alternatively, the appeal to God's likings might be construed as an objection to (4). This is how I shall construe it here.

Which state of affairs would better: your now having a cup of coffee, or your now skipping coffee? Suppose that this cup of coffee will do no major damage to your health, and that your having it will not inconvenience anyone else. Then surely which state of affairs would be better depends mainly on what you would like to do, and on what you would enjoy more.

God is indeed not an impersonal machine for value-maximisation or best-attainment. One reason for this is that for many pairs of states of affairs, *x* and *y*, whether *x* is better than *y* depends partly or entirely on God's contingent likes, interests, and antecedent desires. For all I know,

Moses's leading the Israelites from Egypt and Miriam's leading the Israelites from Egypt form just such a pair.

So whether a world is prime may depend on God's likings. However this truth (if it is a truth) does not tell us whether the objection to (4) is correct.

Arguments already presented can be generalised to show that there is no pair of worlds, V and W, such that God's actualising V is a *morally better* action than God's actualising W, even though W remains the better world. For if God's actualising V is a morally better action than God's actualising W then in W God performs an act (*viz.*, actualising W) which is morally inferior to an act which he could have performed; hence in W God is not perfectly good. If so, then the doctrine of God's essential perfect goodness assures us that there can be no such world. And if we set aside that doctrine, it is doubtful that W can really be prime.

Should the appeal to God's likings, interests, enthusiasms and pet projects persuade us that there is a pair of worlds, V and W, such that God's actualising V is equally morally as good an action as God's actualising W, even though W is better than V? Well, is there a prime world W in which God deliberates about whether to actualise W or the non-prime V instead, finds that V fits in better with his own likes, etc, decides to actualise W instead on the grounds that W is better than V, and yet has not made a choice which is more morally praiseworthy than the contrary choice? Surely not. Remember that (with the possible but doubtful exception of cases in which the non-primeness of V is due to God's self-sacrificial actions in V) all of the apparent grounds for answering "Yes" have already been ruled out. In actualising W God is not violating a moral duty or in any other respect opening himself up to legitimate moral criticism. I assume that the evaluative difference between V and W is not so utterly *trivial* as to thereby preclude a moral difference between the alternative choices. How then, in passing over his own personal likes, and actualising the better world, can it fail to be the case that God has made the more morally praiseworthy choice?

Hence (4) withstands the objection based on God's likings, etc. One need not be a consequentialist to find (4) attractive. Moreover the various circumstances which can defeat the inference from "state of affairs x is better than state of affairs y" to "actualising x is a morally better action than actualising y" do not seem to hold in the case of God's choosing between a prime and a non-prime world. Therefore we have good, though not decisive, reasons for affirming:

(3) If there are prime worlds, then it follows via God's perfect goodness that he will actualise one of them.

This is one of the main conclusions announced at the beginning of this paper. We are now in a position to draw the other. Obviously if W is a maximal world and God can actualise W then W is prime. Therefore (3) entails that if there are maximal worlds which God can actualise, then it follows via God's perfect goodness that he actualises one of them. Now in Sections 2 and 3 I argued that either God cannot actualise a max-

imal world, or he can but his perfect goodness does not entail that he will. I conclude that

(6) God cannot actualise a maximal world.

6. Empirical considerations

If God cannot actualise a maximal world then, given the non-trivial assumption that God exists and if he exists then he actualised the actual world, it follows that the actual world is not maximal. This result should not be surprising. Recall that the argument in Sections 2 and 3, and therefore the overall argument for (6), depended on the assumption that necessarily every maximal world contains many free, morally right choices and actions by rational creatures and no morally wrong ones. Since it is obvious from everyday observation that the actual world contains many morally wrong choices and actions by rational creatures, the assumption commits us to saying that the actual world is not maximal.

But is the actual world prime? According to (3), if God exists and there are prime worlds, then the actual world is prime.

It might be thought: Surely it is plain on empirical grounds that if God exists he could have actualised a better world than this one. We can envisage many possible improvements to human life. Therefore if we endorse the arguments of Section 5, then either we must deny that there are prime worlds, or else we must deny that God exists.

I have argued elsewhere, in effect, against this conclusion.¹³ (3), together with the premise that there are prime worlds, do not provide the basis for a strong empirical argument against the existence of God.¹⁴

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NOTES

1. Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, Clarendon Press 1974, p.173.
2. The conditional here must not be of the back-tracking kind.
3. For example, Robert Merrihew Adams, *The Virtue of Faith and Other Essays*, Oxford University Press 1987, p.79.
4. Admittedly, even if compatibilism is true, the maximal worlds might all contain undetermined events which God cannot actualise, but surely if this is so then it is necessarily so.
5. Suppose that there is exactly one maximal world, and that it is up to the rational creatures who in fact exist whether in the circumstances in which God has in fact placed them they always freely act rightly. Then it is up to them whether God can actualise a maximal world. But I suspect that if there is any maximal world then there are many of them.
6. Suppose that you are held at gunpoint for several hours. During that period there may be some moment at which, unknown to you, it is true that if you run then your enemy's shots will miss and you will get away. The fact that you would like to escape and that at the moment in question you can escape (in one sense of 'can') does not mean that at that moment you are free to escape.

7. J.J.C Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, Cambridge University Press 1973, pp.98f.

8. William Rowe, "The Problem of Divine Perfection and Freedom," in Eleonore Stump, ed., *Reasoned Faith*, Cornell University Press 1993, p.230, writes: "A being is necessarily an absolutely perfect being only if it is not possible for there to be a being morally better than it. If a being creates a world when there is some morally better world that it could have created, then it is possible that there be a being better than it.... [Therefore] the existence of the theistic God who creates a world is inconsistent with the supposition that among the worlds he can create there is no morally unsurpassable world." I doubt Rowe's second premise. In briefly explaining why, I anticipate some things I will say in the next Section. We ought, in the present context, be discontent with any mere appeal to intuition in defence of Rowe's premise, but rather demand an argument in favour of it. The strongest argument I can think of appeals to my premise (4), from Section 5: other things being equal, in intentionally bringing about the better state of affairs one acts in the morally better way. But *when a being is choosing a world to create from an infinite hierarchy of better and better worlds*, the conclusion that one could always have acted in a morally better way is defeated by the fact that some worlds are *good enough*. Rejection of what would be entirely acceptable were it not for the option of choosing the better would be no sign of superior excellence of character; rather the defective nature of the attitude would be shown in the paralysis and self-stultification which it induced. Slightly different arguments along the same basic lines as Rowe's are advanced by Steven Grover, "Why Only the Best Is Good Enough," *Analysis* 48 (1988), p.224, and by Jeff Jordan, "The Problem of Divine Exclusivity," *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 33 (1993), pp.92f.

9. This argument is advanced by Philip L. Quinn, "God, Moral Perfection and Possible Worlds," in F. Sontag and M.D. Bryant, eds., *God: The Contemporary Discussion*, The Rose of Sharon Press, 1982, pp.212f, and endorsed by William Rowe, *op. cit.*, pp.228f, and by Jeff Jordan, *op. cit.*, p.93.

10. It would be widely agreed that Robert Merrihew Adams has shown that God does not have a moral duty to actualise a prime world; cf, Adams, "Must God Create the Best?" *Philosophical Review* 81 (1972), 317-332.

11. T.V. Morris, "Duty and Divine Goodness," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 21 (1984), believes that since God is essentially good and so could not violate his moral duties if he had any, he has none. But Morris believes that God necessarily "acts in accordance with those principles which express duties for a moral agent in his relevant circumstances". Would a proposed action's inconsistency with such a principle constitute a defeater for God's bringing about a state of affairs in the light of (5)? The arguments of Section 8 can easily be adapted to show that acting in accordance with the relevant principles would never lead God to refrain from actualising a prime world.

12. This view of God's likings is controversial. Leibniz is amongst those who would reject the final clause. According to Leibniz, although it is contingent that God chooses the best, God is pleased by things in direct proportion to their *prior* goodness. This goodness is goodness they possess as possible beings. Cf. G.W. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, ed. A. Farrer, Routledge and Kegan Paul 1952, p.183.

13. Cf. my paper "Can God Replace the Actual World By a Better One?" *Philosophical Papers* 20 (1991), 183-192.

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