

# Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

---

Volume 13 | Issue 3

Article 10

---

7-1-1996

## The Real Problem of No Best World

Frances Howard-Snyder

Daniel Howard-Snyder

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

---

### Recommended Citation

Howard-Snyder, Frances and Howard-Snyder, Daniel (1996) "The Real Problem of No Best World," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 3 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol13/iss3/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

## THE REAL PROBLEM OF NO BEST WORLD

Frances and Daniel Howard-Snyder

Jove, an essentially omnipotent, essentially omniscient and morally good being, faced with a choice of which world to create (where for any he might create there is a better) randomly selects no. 777. Is he, therefore, morally surpassable? William Rowe says "yes". For Thor, an essentially omnipotent and essentially omniscient being in Jove's predicament who does not randomly create but selects no. 888 because he is prepared to select no world less than no. 888, has a degree of moral goodness that exceeds Jove's. By exploring two options—either Thor has a reason for being so prepared or he doesn't—we question the coherency of Rowe's Thor.

In "How an Unsurpassable Being Can Create a Surpassable World" (*Faith and Philosophy* 11, April 1994, 260-68), we argued that we have no reason to think that an essentially omnipotent, essentially omniscient and morally unsurpassable being cannot create a world that is morally inferior to some other world that he or some other being could have created. To see this, we envisaged Jove—an essentially omnipotent, essentially omniscient and good creator—"discovering" that for any world he creates there is a morally better one he could create. Faced with this predicament, we argued that, after sorting and ranking the worlds according to certain reasonable criteria (in order to eliminate worlds with, e.g., persons whose lives are irredeemable), if Jove randomly created, say, world no. 777, he would not thereby be shown to be morally surpassable. Our argument consisted in determining whether other essentially omnipotent and essentially omniscient beings faced with Jove's predicament could act in ways that showed that they were morally superior to Jove. Our conclusion was that, so far as we could see, they could not.

William Rowe, in "The Problem of No Best World" (*Faith and Philosophy* 11, April 1994, 269-71), responded to our argument by imagining an essentially omnipotent and essentially omniscient being in Jove's predicament, Thor, who does not randomly create a world "but selects world no. 888 over Jove's world no. 777 because he sees that it is better and prefers creating no. 888 to creating any lesser world." Rowe writes that

Thor's degree of moral goodness presumably is such that he is prepared to settle for world no. 888, but not to settle for the



world (no. 777) that Jove's degree of moral goodness allows him to settle for. We thus have reason to believe that Thor's degree of moral goodness exceeds Jove's, that Thor is morally better than Jove. (270)

It appears that, according to Rowe, what makes Thor morally superior is the fact that he has a higher standard than Jove. Worlds which Jove considers acceptable, Thor rejects as unacceptable. Thus Thor, unlike Jove, is not prepared to settle for any world less than no. 888.

What should we make of this interesting challenge?

For starters, note that either Thor has a reason for being so prepared, and so selects no. 888 as the cutoff point according to some general principle, or he does not have a reason. We contend that by exploring each of these options, one can see that Rowe's story about Thor is, for all anybody reasonably believes, incoherent.

### I

Suppose that Thor has a reason for being prepared to select no world less than no. 888. Of course, not any old reason will do. Here are three constraints. First, Thor's reason must not be morally defective or wholly frivolous. If Thor is prepared to create no world less than no. 888 because he is vain or simply fond of that number, then the fact that he is prepared to create no world less than no. 888 does not show that he is better than Jove. Secondly, Thor's reason must not be a reason which Jove uses initially to sort worlds. Thirdly, whatever reason Thor has for not creating a world less than no. 888 must not also be a reason to create a world *better* than no. 888. For example, suppose Thor's reason is this: worlds numbered 888 and higher are better than worlds numbered 887 and lower. This reason relies on the general principle that if world *w* is better than world *w*-1, then *w*-1 is unacceptable for creation. Any being who accepted an instance of this principle when it involved the world no. 888 but did not accept other instances of it would be irrational, and hence not essentially omniscient. Any being who accepted the principle in its full generality would be led never to create, given (as we are supposing) that for each world there is a better.

So, our question is this: are there any principles that meet these constraints and which Thor acts on but Jove does not?

Of crucial importance here is the fact that if there is a *finite* number of principles that meet these constraints, then we can stipulate that Jove acts on the highest of them, and thus Rowe's story about Thor is obviously incoherent (since it has Thor acting on a higher principle than Jove) and poses no objection to our argument.

We can imagine someone sympathetic with Rowe picking up on this last point and answering our question as follows: "It is possible for Thor to act on a principle which was neither morally defective nor frivolous nor such that anyone who embraced it would be rationally compelled to rule out more and more worlds *ad infinitum*. But since for every princi-

ple *there is* one which expresses a higher standard, Jove had to embrace one which was not the highest. For any principle Jove possibly embraces, however, I stipulate that Thor embraces a higher one that would result in his treating as unacceptable some worlds that Jove would treat as acceptable. Thus, Thor is *necessarily* morally superior to Jove, and the principle on which he acts meets the constraints you laid down above."

Has our hypothetical interlocutor really expressed a coherent possibility here? If it is coherent, then the principle that Thor acts on must have these features:

1. It divides the worlds into two groups (the acceptable and the unacceptable).
2. It is a reasonable principle that a morally good being might well use to sort worlds.
3. It is such that it is not irrational to act in accordance with it without acting in accordance with one which expresses a higher standard.
4. It is such that there is another principle which treats as unacceptable some of the worlds which were treated as acceptable by it, and that other principle is such that there is a third principle which treats as unacceptable some of the worlds which were treated as acceptable by the second, and so on, ad infinitum.

Here are some principles which seem to satisfy constraints 1, 2 and 3.

- a. No world in which beings live lives which are not worth living is acceptable.
- b. No world in which beings experience gratuitous suffering is acceptable.
- c. No world in which beings live lives which are not as happy and fulfilled as those lives could possibly be is acceptable.
- d. No world empty of sentient, rational beings is acceptable.

But, do these principles satisfy constraint 4? Some of them partially do. For example, b seems to express a higher standard than a. But why suppose that for every such principle, there is a higher? It seems odd to say the least that there should be infinitely many such general principles. At least we see no reason to accept that there are.

On the supposition that Thor has a reason for being prepared to create no world less than no. 888, it is, at best, unclear whether Rowe's story about Thor is coherent.

## II

Let us now explore the second option. Suppose that Thor has no reason for being prepared to select no world less than no. 888. In that case, either he selects no. 888 arbitrarily as his minimally acceptable world, or he is constrained to do so by causes over which he has no control. If the former, then in every morally relevant respect, he acts no differently from Jove. If the latter, then we are to think of him as driven by his

nature, say, his compassion or perfectionism, which is in part constituted by or results in his preparedness to select no world less than no. 888.

But in that case, his preparedness is nothing other than a tendency to act *in accordance with* (as opposed to a tendency to act *on*) some principle such as a-d above. Everything we have said about principles above, however, applies here. Either there are infinitely many such principles for Thor to act in accordance with or there are not. If there are not, then we stipulate that Jove can choose to act on the highest, and so Thor is morally no better than Jove. If there are, then either the one that Thor acts in accordance with satisfies constraint 3 or it does not. If it doesn't, then Thor would be irrational in picking world no. 888 as his minimum, and hence not essentially omniscient. If it does, then provided it satisfied all other constraints, Thor *would* be morally better than Jove, but it is not reasonable to believe that there are infinitely many principles which satisfy constraints 1-3.

We conclude, then, that Rowe's story about Thor can be used to show that Jove is morally surpassable *only if* Thor acts on or in accordance with a principle for selecting worlds to create, and that principle meets constraint 4. But, it is not reasonable to believe that there is such a principle and, thus, for all anybody reasonably believes, Rowe's story about Thor is incoherent. Indeed, it nicely highlights the fact that the *real* problem of no best world is that, *contra* Rowe, we have no reason to think that an essentially omnipotent, essentially omniscient and morally unsurpassable being cannot create a world that is morally inferior to some other world that he or some other being could have created.

Western Washington University  
Seattle Pacific University