

Is the Existence of the Best Possible World Logically Impossible?

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ABSTRACT: Since the 1960s an increasing number of philosophers have endorsed the thesis that there can be no such thing as “the best possible world.” In this paper I examine the main arguments for this thesis as put forth by George Schlesinger, Alvin Plantinga, Bruce Reichenbach, Peter Forrest, and Richard Swinburne. I argue that none of these arguments succeed in establishing the thesis and that the logical possibility of the best possible world is as yet an open question.

SINCE THE 1960S VARIOUS PHILOSOPHERS have argued that there can be no such thing as the “best possible world.” Their arguments appear to have been well received, for it is nowadays reported that the view that there can be no best possible world is the majority view among philosophers. Lloyd Strickland, for example, says that “a consensus view has been reached that the very concept of the best of all possible worlds can be shown to be incoherent.”¹ Similar reports can be found in the works of Thomas Morris² and Stephen Grover.³

The main philosophical relevance of the claim that there can be no best possible world is that, if true, it serves to invalidate a set of arguments against the existence of God of roughly the following form: If God did exist, our world would be the best possible world; but our world is apparently not the best possible world; hence God does not exist. The prospect of invalidating arguments of this sort has been a main source of motivation for attempts to show that there can be no best possible world.

In this paper I examine the standard arguments in the literature for the claim that there can be no best possible world, put forth by George Schlesinger, Alvin Plantinga, Bruce Reichenbach, Peter Forrest, and Richard Swinburne, respectively. I argue that none of these arguments succeed in showing that there can be no best possible world. In so arguing I am not contending that there *can* be such a thing as the best possible world. My own position is that the logical possibility of the best possible world is as yet an open question, and it is this position that I am ultimately seeking to vindicate in this paper.

In assessing the standard arguments for the claim that there can be no best possible world, it is important to be clear about what is being claimed. The claim that there can be no best possible world is the claim that it is logically impossible that

¹Lloyd Strickland, “Determining the Best of All Possible Worlds,” *Journal of Value Inquiry* 39 (2006): 37.

²Thomas Morris, “Perfection and Creation” in *Reasoned Faith*, ed. Eleonore Stump (Ithaca NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1993), p. 237.

³Stephen Grover, “Incommensurability and the Best of All Possible Worlds,” *The Monist* 81 (1998): 648.

the best possible world exists, i.e., that the supposed existence of the best possible world entails a logical contradiction. An argument for the claim that there can be no best possible world is thus an argument for the claim that the supposed existence of the best possible world entails a logical contradiction.

Now the claim that the supposed existence of the best possible world entails a logical contradiction could be understood in at least two ways; namely as

- (i) the claim that the proposition “the best possible world exists” *by itself* (conceptually and/or logically) entails a contradiction; or as
- (ii) the claim that the proposition “the best possible world exists” *in conjunction with* certain further obvious propositions (conceptually and/or logically) entails a contradiction.

As we shall see further on, proponents of the claim that there can be no best possible world put forth arguments that suggest that it is (ii) rather than (i) that they have in mind, although they often express themselves as if it were (i) they had in mind. I shall in this paper for the most part take them as making the latter claim.

The claim that there can be no best possible world should be carefully distinguished from various related but distinct claims, such as

- (i) that it is improbable that the best possible world exists,
- (ii) that the best possible world might not exist,
- (iii) that the actual world cannot be the best possible world, and
- (iv) that various attributes traditionally ascribed to God entail that there can be no best possible world.

Arguments have been proposed for these latter claims too, but they will not be our concern in this paper.⁴ Our concern in this paper will only be with the claim that there can be no best possible world, i.e., that the supposed existence of the best possible world entails a contradiction.

1. SCHLESINGER’S ARGUMENT

George Schlesinger was the first modern philosopher to develop an argument for the claim that there can be no best possible world.

In his 1964 paper Schlesinger argues that there can be no “greatest state of happiness.”⁵ Although Schlesinger does not explicitly say that his argument has any consequences as regards the impossibility of the best possible world, in his 1965

⁴For an argument of type (i) or (ii), see, e.g., Campbell Brown and Yujin Nagasawa, “The Best of All Possible Worlds,” *Synthese* 143 (2005): 309–20. For an argument of type (iii), see, e.g., William Mann, “The Best of All Possible Worlds” in *Being and Goodness: The Concept of God in Metaphysics and Philosophical Theology*, ed. S. J. MacDonald (Ithaca NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1991), pp. 251–77. For an argument of type (iv), see, e.g., Lawrence Resnick, “God and the Best Possible World,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 10 (1973): 313–17.

⁵George Schlesinger, “The Problem of Evil and the Problem of Suffering,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1 (1964): 246.

article he goes on to claim that the argument of the 1964 paper shows “that the best of all possible worlds is a logical impossibility (as far as the maximum happiness of all creatures is concerned).”⁶

Schlesinger’s argument from the earlier paper is restated and revised in his publications of 1970, 1977, and 1988.⁷ In these restatements the concept of “the degree of desirability of a state” plays an important role. The “desirability” of a state is a state similar to happiness but somewhat deeper. Happiness, Schlesinger thinks, is a state that can be experienced by, say, humans and pigs alike, but it is clear, Schlesinger thinks, that the state of being a human is more desirable than that of being a pig. Now the desirability of a state is something that is said to come in degrees, but there is no *maximum* such degree:

I take it that, conceptually, there is no limit to the degree which the desirability of state may reach. One can easily conceive a super-Socrates who has a much higher intelligence and many more than five senses through which to enjoy the world and who stands to Socrates like the latter stands to a pig. And there is the possibility of super-super-Socrates and so on *ad infinitum*.⁸

Schlesinger takes the above consideration to imply that the concept of the best possible world is incoherent or logically contradictory. He says:

In some respects, “the best of all possible worlds” is incoherent, and in others, it is not, for some things do not admit maximization while others do. There can be no world in which all creatures are, or indeed any creature is, in a state of maximum desirability. It makes no sense, therefore, to complain that the degree of X’s state of desirability is much less than the maximum. On the other hand, it has yet to be shown that a world in which perfect justice prevails is logically impossible.⁹

In saying that the concept of the best possible world is incoherent “[i]n some respects,” Schlesinger seems to assume that the concept comprises several distinct components, some of which are coherent and others of which are not. Among the incoherent components is the idea of a world in which humans are in a maximum state of desirability; among the (possibly) coherent components is the idea of a world in which there is perfect justice.

Schlesinger’s line of reasoning could perhaps be converted into the following explicit argument:

- (1) If it were possible that the best possible world exists, it would be possible that humans be in a state of maximal desirability.

⁶George Schlesinger, “Omnipotence and Evil: An Incoherent Problem,” *Sophia* 4 (1965): 21.

⁷George Schlesinger, “On the Possibility of the Best of All Possible Worlds,” *Journal of Value Inquiry* 5 (1970): 229–32; *Religion and Scientific Method* (Dordrecht, Holland: Reidel, 1977); *New Perspectives on Old-Time Religion* (Oxford UK: Clarendon Press, 1988).

⁸Schlesinger, *Religion and Scientific Method*, p. 62; see also his “On the Possibility of the Best of All Possible Worlds,” p. 230; and *New Perspectives on Old-Time Religion*, p. 55.

⁹Schlesinger, “On the Possibility of the Best of All Possible Worlds,” p. 230.

- (2) It is not possible that humans be in a state of maximal desirability.
- (3) Hence if the best possible world were to exist, it would be possible and not possible that humans be in a state of maximal desirability; which is a contradictory.
- (4) Hence it is logically impossible that the best possible world exists.

Is Schlesinger's above argument sound? It is not clear that it is, for it relies on at least two assumptions that are less than obvious.

First, it is assumed in (1) that the concept of the best possible world is such that the proposition "the best possible world exists" entails that "the best possible world contains humans." But nothing has been said to show that this is the case. Why should it be thought absurd to think it possible that the best possible world, if it exists, does not contain any humans at all?

And secondly, it is assumed in (2) that the degree of desirability of a state admits of no maximum. But why should this be thought obvious? In particular, why should it be thought absurd to suppose that a human can be in a maximally desirable state? It is not obvious that by continuously adding higher intelligence and additional sense organs to someone would automatically render that person's state "more" desirable. Why should it (say) be ruled impossible that a person's state is maximally desirable when it consists in a perfect *balance* between certain finite properties?

Schlesinger's argument would only be sound if we granted the dubious assumptions on which it rests. But since these assumptions can be reasonably doubted—and have at any rate not been shown to be necessary—it follows that it is not clear that the argument is sound. Accordingly, Schlesinger's argument does not succeed in showing that the best possible world is a logical impossibility.

2. PLANTINGA'S ARGUMENT

Alvin Plantinga suggests an argument for the impossibility of the best possible world.¹⁰ Although his suggestion is put very briefly and may not qualify as an "argument" according to some usages of this term, it has often been understood in the literature as an argument.¹¹ Moreover, Richard Swinburne, in his influential 1979 book *The Existence of God*, develops what is basically a restatement of Plantinga's argument, with only a few minor modifications.

Plantinga's "argument" is really only a question and a suggestion: "[W]e have the question whether *there is* such a thing as the best of all possible worlds, or even *a best*. Perhaps for any world you pick, there is a better."¹² In *God, Freedom and*

¹⁰Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford UK: Clarendon Press, 1974); *God, Freedom and Evil* (New York NY: Harper & Row, 1974).

¹¹See, e.g., David Blumenfeld, "Is the Best Possible World Possible?" *Philosophical Review* 84 (1975): 163–65; Nagasawa and Brown, "The Best of All Possible Worlds," pp. 310–11; and David Basinger, "Divine Omniscience and the Best of All Possible Worlds," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 16 (1982): 144.

¹²Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, p. 168.

Evil Plantinga puts these questions in a form that suggests that he is not only asking questions but is also implying an answer (and therewith an argument):¹³

[W]hat is the reason for supposing that *there is* such a thing as the best of all possible worlds? No matter how marvelous a world is—containing no matter how many persons enjoying unalloyed bliss—isn't it possible that there be an even better world containing even more persons enjoying even more unalloyed bliss?¹⁴

The answer suggested by the last question in this quotation is obviously that this *is* possible, i.e., it is possible that for every possible world containing unalloyed bliss there is another possible world containing even more unalloyed bliss.

But how does this possibility bear on the question of the possibility of the best possible world? As follows: if for every possible world containing unalloyed bliss there is another possible world containing even more unalloyed bliss, then, obviously, there could be no possible world containing a maximum degree of unalloyed bliss, for such a world would be such that there would be no other world that contains more unalloyed bliss than it. And if there is no possible world containing a maximum degree of unalloyed bliss, then—it is assumed—there can be no best possible world.

In his 1979 book Swinburne states an argument that has basically the same structure and content as Plantinga's above argument:

[T]ake any world *W*. Presumably the goodness of such a world . . . will consist in part in it containing a finite or infinite number of conscious beings who will enjoy it. But if the enjoyment of the world by each is a valuable thing, surely a world with a few more conscious beings in it would be a yet more valuable world. . . . I conclude that it is not, for conceptual reasons, plausible to suppose that there could be a best of all possible worlds, and in consequence God could not have overriding reason to create one.¹⁵

The main difference between the above argument and Plantinga's is that whereas Plantinga speaks of "unalloyed bliss," Swinburne speaks of "enjoyment." We could perhaps explicate Plantinga's above argument as follows:

- (1) A possible world containing a greater number of people experiencing unalloyed bliss would be better than a world containing a lesser number of people experiencing unalloyed bliss (all else being equal).
- (2) For any possible world there is another possible world containing a greater number of people experiencing unalloyed bliss.
- (3) Hence for any possible world there is another possible world that is better.
- (4) If it were possible that the best possible world exists, it would be possible that there is no world that is better than the best possible world.

¹³To be fair it should be noted that Plantinga at one place suggests that the question of the possibility of the best possible world is an open question; see "The Probabilistic Argument from Evil," *Philosophical Studies* 35 (1979): 9.

¹⁴Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil*, p. 34.

¹⁵Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford UK: Clarendon Press 1979), p. 114.

- (5) Hence if it were possible that the best possible world exists, it would be possible that there is and is not a world that is better than the best possible world; which is contradictory.
- (6) Hence it is logically impossible that the best possible world exists.

The above argument has at least two problems.

The first problem is that it is not obvious, contrary to what is assumed in (1), that a world would be “greater” than another world by virtue of the *number* of people experiencing unalloyed bliss in it. Why should it be considered absurd that a world containing (say) a million blissful persons would be greater than a world containing 144,000 blissful persons? It is not clear why this should be so, and vague intuitions (which are all we seem to have in this matter) are hardly sufficient to settle the question.

Secondly, and more seriously, (2) assumes that every possible world contains *people* (or conscious beings), for it would only be possible that the latter world spoken of in (2) contains a *greater* number of people if the former world spoken of in (2) contains at least *some* number of people. But surely there are possible worlds containing no people at all. Hence (2) seems to be false.

Suppose that one sought to avoid the above problem by revising (2) thus: “For any possible world *containing people* there is another possible world containing a greater number of people experiencing unalloyed bliss.” The problem with this suggestion is that it would bar us from the inference of (3); we would then have to revise (3) thus: “Hence for any possible world containing people there is another possible world that is better.” And this revision of (3) would in turn bar us from inferring the contradiction in (4), and hence the conclusion (5). For the above reasons Plantinga’s argument seems unsuccessful.

3. REICHENBACH’S ARGUMENT

Bruce Reichenbach argues that “the notion of the best possible world is not meaningful,”¹⁶ that “the very concept of such a world [i.e., the best possible world] is indeed a chimera,”¹⁷ and that “it is meaningless to claim that there is an upper limit—a best possible world.”¹⁸

Reichenbach’s argument is similar to Plantinga’s, but differs from it in at least two respects. First, Reichenbach does not limit himself to the phenomenon of “unalloyed bliss” when comparing worlds, but allows that such phenomena take the form of “happiness,” “pleasure,” “utility,” “virtue,” “moral goodness,” “goodwill,” and so on.¹⁹ Whichever of these phenomena one selects, the concept of the best possible world will turn out meaningless, Reichenbach thinks. And secondly, whereas

¹⁶Reichenbach, “Must God Create the Best Possible World?” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 19 (1979): 208.

¹⁷Reichenbach, *Evil and a Good God* (Bronx NY: Fordham Univ. Press 1982), p. 128.

¹⁸Reichenbach, “Basinger on Reichenbach and the Best Possible World,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 20 (1982): 345.

¹⁹Reichenbach, *Evil and a Good God*, pp. 127–28.

Plantinga's argument speaks of some worlds as better than others depending on the number of people experiencing unalloyed bliss in the worlds, Reichenbach's argument speaks of some worlds as better than others on the basis of the sum total of the things that such people experience (i.e., happiness, pleasure, utility, and so on). Here is Reichenbach's argument:

The best possible world would consist of those states of affairs which would maximize the sum total of utility, benefit, or good in the world. . . . Other possibilities would include the production of the most virtue, moral goodness, or good-will in the world. But no matter which of these be accepted [i.e., happiness, pleasure, utility, happiness, virtue, moral goodness, goodwill, and so on], whether individually or in combination . . . , one could imagine an infinite series of optimific states in which for any amount of optimific states of affairs n , one could conceive of $n + 1$ optimific states of affairs, or considered qualitatively for any degree of optimificity in the world one could conceive of even more optimificity. For example, for any sum total of happiness n which might be produced, it would be possible to think of a greater total of happiness, $n + 1$, which might have been produced. Thus, there could be no best possible world, since for any world which we would name there would always be another which was more optimific.²⁰

In the above argument Reichenbach seems to invite his readers to pick any kind of thing that might be thought of as making a world better. Suppose we pick happiness. Then the argument proceeds to claim that for any amount of happiness n that may exist in a world, there will be a larger amount $n + 1$ in some other world, and so on ad infinitum. Hence the best possible world cannot exist. We could perhaps explicate Reichenbach's argument as follows:

- (1) A possible world containing a greater sum total of happiness, or pleasure, or goodness, etc., would be better than a world containing a lesser sum total of these things (all else being equal).
- (2) For any possible world with the sum total n , there is another possible world with the sum total $n + 1$.
- (3) Hence for any possible world there is another possible world that is better.
- (4) If it were possible that the best possible world exists, it would be possible that there is no world that is better than the best possible world.
- (5) Hence, if it were possible that the best possible world exists, it would be possible that there is and is not a world that is better than the best possible world; which is contradictory.
- (6) Hence it is not logically possible that the best possible world exists.

The above argument does not seem to be sound.

A first problem it is that it assumes in (3) that every possible world contains a sum total of happiness, or pleasure, or moral goodness, etc., and it seems plain that since some possible worlds contain no conscious beings this need not be the case.

²⁰Ibid.

A second problem concerns the assumption in (1) and (2) that such things as happiness, pleasure, moral goodness, etc., are capable of a “sum total.” This assumption, and the associated idea that there can be a number n of happiness, pleasure, moral goodness, etc., to which a further number (“1”) can be added, yielding the sum total in question (i.e., “ $n + 1$ ”), is far from obvious or even intelligible. For what sense could we give to talk of (say) “3 happiness + 1 happiness,” or “5 pleasure + 1 pleasure,” and so on? It would seem much more intelligible to speak, as Plantinga does, of a greater number of *people* (or *conscious beings*) experiencing happiness, pleasure, etc., rather than of the sum total of happiness, pleasure, etc. Besides this worry there is also a more “metaphysical” worry: suppose, as seems plausible, that happiness, pleasure, etc., are *properties* (or, more generally, abstracta); how then could there be *more* than one happiness, pleasure, etc., in a possible world? It would seem more sensible to speak of a larger number of people “exemplifying” or “instantiating” or “having” these properties, than of a larger “sum total” of happiness, pleasure, etc.

For these reasons I take it to be plain that Reichenbach’s argument could hardly be said to show that the best possible world is impossible.

4. FORREST’S ARGUMENT

In his 1981 publication Peter Forrest develops an argument against the possibility of the best possible world that relies in part on a theological premise. The core of the argument is put very briefly by Forrest as follows:

It is plausible that for every possible world there would be a better one, for only God is “that than which no greater can be conceived of.” If this is the case, God could not create the best possible world, just as he could not name the greatest integer.²¹

As can be seen, the theological premise on which this argument relies is the Anselmian idea that God alone is “that than which no greater can be conceived.” Given this premise, Forrest takes it to follow that the creation of the best possible world is on a par with the naming of the greatest integer—that is, it is an impossibility.

We could perhaps explicate Forrest’s argument as follows:

- (1) God alone is that than which no greater can be conceived.
- (2) Hence every possible world is such that a greater possible world can be conceived.
- (3) If it were possible that the best possible world exists, it would not be possible that there is a world that is better than the best possible world.
- (4) Hence, if it were possible that the best possible world exists, it would be possible that there is and is not a world that is better than the best possible world; which is contradictory.
- (5) Hence it is not logically possible that the best possible world exists.

²¹Forrest, “The Problem of Evil,” 52.

Is this argument sound? A first objection might be that it assumes that God exists and that God alone is that than which no greater can be conceived, in which case the impossibility of the best possible world would be conditioned on theistic assumptions and at least non-theists would be free to deny the alleged impossibility.

A deeper objection, however, is that the argument involves a confusion of the categories of (what we could call) “things of a certain kind” and “things of all kinds.” Things other than God could be the best possible things of *their* kind, while they are not for that reason the best possible things of *all* kinds, which, according to the present argument, only God is. For example, God’s being that than which no greater can be conceived may be consistent with a man’s being the best possible man, a virtue’s being the best possible virtue, a gift’s being the best possible gift, and so on. There is no inconsistency in saying that God is greater than any possible man, virtue, or gift, and at the same time that there could be such things as the best possible man, virtue or gift. (This absence of inconsistency holds irrespectively of whether one concedes that there *are* such things as the best possible man, virtue, or gift.) Applied to possible worlds, this entails that there is no inconsistency in saying that God is that than which no greater can be conceived and at the same time that there is a world that is the best possible *world*. (If we assumed that God just *is* a world, there would be an inconsistency, but this assumption would, of course, be confused about the concept of God.) Hence the inference of (2) from (1) does not hold, and the argument turns out invalid.

For the above reason I conclude that Forrest’s argument is invalid.

5. SWINBURNE’S ARGUMENT

I mentioned above that Swinburne’s 1979 publication offers a restatement of Plantinga’s argument. In his 2004 book Swinburne proposes to offer a new and original argument for the impossibility of the best possible world. The argument goes as follows:

[T]here could not be such a world [i.e., the best possible world]. For suppose that there is such a world, *W*. *W* will presumably contain a finite or infinite number of conscious beings. Would a world be a worse world if, instead of one of these conscious beings, it contained another with the same properties—if, instead of Swinburne, it contained a counterpart of Swinburne who wrote an exactly similar book and in other ways had exactly similar properties and did exactly similar actions? Surely not. But then there will be no unique best of all possible worlds. . . . I conclude that it is not, for conceptual reasons, plausible to suppose that there could be a best or equal best of all possible worlds.²²

This argument seems to be explicable as follows:

- (1) If it were possible that the best possible world exists, every other world would be worse than it.

²²Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2nd edition (Oxford UK: Clarendon Press 2004), pp. 114–15.

- (2) If it were possible that the best possible world exists, it would contain conscious beings.
- (3) The replacement of one of the conscious beings in the best possible world with a counterpart would result in a distinct possible world which would not be worse than the best possible world.
- (4) Hence if it were possible that the best possible world exists, there would both be and not be a world that is worse than it; which is contradictory.
- (5) Hence it is not possible that the best possible world exists.

Although this is in many respects a thoughtful argument, it relies on at least one assumption that is less than obvious, and is for this reason unsuccessful.

The assumption in view pertains to (3)'s claim that the replacement of one of the conscious beings in the best possible world with a counterpart would result in a distinct possible world *which would not be worse* than the best possible world. This claim would be true only if the conscious beings in the best possible world that are replaced by counterparts are *not necessary to the best possible world*. For example, it must be assumed that "original Swinburne" is not necessary to the best possible world, since "original Swinburne's" replacement by "counterpart Swinburne" is not thought of as having an impact on the best possible world's status as *best* in any way. But why should this assumption be considered obvious? And why should it be thought absurd that "original Swinburne" for some reason or other is not necessary to the best possible world, or that the "original" of something has some value that its "counterpart" lacks? For all that we know, original Swinburne might be indispensable to the best possible world. If this possibility is allowed (and why shouldn't it be?), it follows that (3) is false, and hence that the argument is unsound.

6. SUMMARY

In the foregoing I have examined the standard arguments in the literature for the impossibility of the best possible world and have found them wanting. Each of these arguments, I have argued, involve at least one assumption that is either false, dubious or confused. If I am right in this, it follows that the existence of the best possible world has not been shown to be logically impossible.

The philosophical relevance of this conclusion is that arguments against the existence of God that rely on the premise that a perfectly good God would create the best possible world should not be dismissed on the ground that the concept of the best possible world has been shown to be logically contradictory. For, as we have seen, it has not.