CAN GOD BE FREE?

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The major conception of God in the West is that he necessarily exists and is necessarily all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good. Can God, so conceived, be *free* with respect to the possible world he selects to create? I argue that if there is a best creatable world, God is not free to create any world other than the best world. I also argue that if for every creatable world there is a better creatable world, it cannot be that God exists and is the creator of a world.

The question, Can God Be Free?, is an important philosophical question. But before endeavoring to answer this question, there are two preliminary points that must be discussed. The first, and most important, is this: What conception of God is being presupposed when we ask whether or not God can be free? The conception of God presupposed here is the idea of God that has been dominant in the major religions of the West – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The dominant idea of God in these religious traditions is of a being who necessarily exists and is necessarily all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good. Thus when we ask whether God exists, we here mean to be asking whether there is a being who necessarily exists and is necessarily all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good. Of course, it is no easy matter to say in any precise way just what it is for a being to be all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good. Nevertheless, we will presuppose here that some plausible account can be given of these attributes. Second, when we ask whether God can be free, we need to first ask: "free with respect to what?" Clearly, in an important sense God is not free with respect to doing evil, for if he were free with respect to doing evil he would be free to cease to be perfectly good. But if there is such a being as God he is no more free to cease to be perfectly good than he is free to cease to exist, to cease to be all-powerful, or to cease to be all-knowing. God is necessarily perfectly good, all-powerful, and all-knowing. He is, therefore, not free to cease to possess these perfections. Hence, in our question "Can God be Free?" we are not asking whether God can be free with respect to his essential attributes. For the answer to that question is clearly negative. What then are we asking about when we ask whether God can be free? We are asking whether God is free with respect to *creating a world*. And one persistent theme in the great religious traditions of the West is that God does enjoy freedom with respect to creating a world. This freedom is thought to be twofold:

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1. God was free to refrain from creating any world at all;

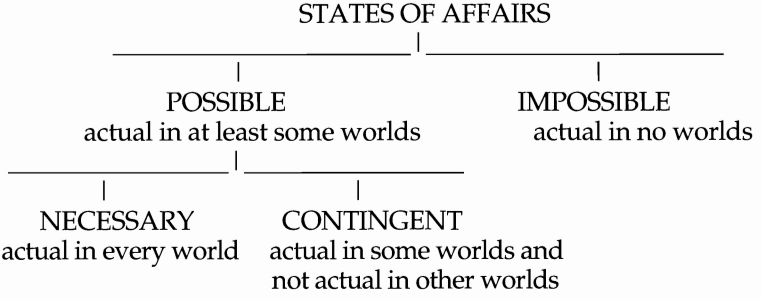
and,

2. God was free to create other worlds instead of the world he did in fact create.

So, supposing there is such a being as God, the question we shall explore here is whether God was free not to create at all, and free to have created other worlds than the one he has created. If we assume with Leibniz that among possible worlds there is one that is best, it is difficult to see how the best possible being (God) would be free to create some world other than the best. But before we pursue the question of whether God must create the best possible world, it will be helpful here to pause in our discussion and try to get clearer about the notion of a possible world and some related concepts.

Often we think that although things are a certain way they didn't have to be that way, they could have been different. Suppose we were late getting to class today. We believe, however, that things could have turned out differently. Had we not stopped on the way to chat with a friend, for example, we almost certainly would have been on time. So, what we may call the *actual* state of affairs, our being late for class, need not have been actual at all. Here then we make a distinction between two possible states of affairs – ways things might be – and note that although one is actual (our being late for class today), the other (our being on time for class) was possible, it could have been actual instead. The link between possible states of affairs that are not actual and our common ways of thinking about the world lies in our frequent belief that things could have been otherwise. Whenever we correctly think that things could have gone in a way different from the way they actually went, we are distinguishing between some possible state of affairs that is actual (the way things did go) and some possible state of affairs that didn't become actual (the way things could have gone but didn't). Every state of affairs that is actual is clearly a *possible* state of affairs, one that, logically speaking, could be actual. But, as we've seen in the example of our not being late for class, possible states of affairs may fail to be actualized. Perhaps, then, we should think of a possible state of affairs as one that could be actual and could fail to be actual. But this view overlooks a useful distinction philosophers draw between a state of affairs that is *possible* and a state of affairs that is *contingent*. A contingent state of affairs is a possible state of affairs that may be actual or fail to be actual. Since a possible state of affairs is one that could be actual, if it is also such that it could fail to be actual (like, for example, our being on time for class today), then it is a *contingent* state of affairs. It can be actual and can fail to be actual. But some states of affairs are such that although they are possible, and therefore can be actual, they cannot fail to be actual, they *must be* actual. These possible states of affairs are necessary, not contingent. Consider the state of affairs consisting in the number three's being larger than the number two. Certainly, this state of affairs is possible – it's not like there being an object that is both square and round, an impossible state of affairs. So, it is a possible state of affairs. But is it contingent? Could it have

failed to be actual. No. The number three's being larger than the number two is not just possible, it is also necessary, it obtains in every possible world. So, while many possible states of affairs are contingent in that they obtain in some worlds but not in others,[1] many possible states of affairs are necessary, they obtain in every possible world. The following diagram shows the way philosophers often distinguish among states of affairs.



In order to grasp the idea of a *possible world* it is helpful to consider two important relations among states of affairs: *inclusion* and *preclusion*. A state of affairs S *includes* a state of affairs S* just in case it is impossible that S should obtain and S* not obtain. (For example, *Gordie Howe's being the greatest hockey player of the 20th century* includes *someone's being the greatest hockey player of the 20th century*.) S precludes S* just in case it is impossible that S obtain and S* obtain. (So, *Gordie Howe's being the greatest hockey player of the 20th century* precludes *Wayne Gretsky's being the greatest hockey player of the 20th century*.) Following Alvin Plantinga, we can now say what it is for a state of affairs to be *maximal* and, therefore, a *possible world*. "A State of affairs S is . . . *maximal* if for every state of affairs S', S includes S' or S precludes S'. And a possible world is simply a possible state of affairs that is maximal."[2]

Having seen that a possible world is a maximal state of affairs, we can now consider what it is for a possible world to be better than some other possible world. Some states of affairs may be said to be intrinsically better than other states of affairs. For example, following Samuel Clarke we may say that *there being innocent beings who do not suffer eternally* is necessarily better than *there being innocent beings who do suffer eternally*. Of the second of these two states of affairs we would say that it is a bad state of affairs, something that ought not to be. But the first state of affairs is not a bad state of affairs. The basic idea here is that some states of affairs possess intrinsic value. That is, they may be intrinsically good, intrinsically bad, or intrinsically neutral (neither good nor bad). They are intrinsically good by virtue of containing intrinsically good qualities such as happiness, love, enjoyment, beauty, good intentions, or the exercise of virtue.[3] And states of affairs are intrinsically bad by virtue of containing intrinsically bad qualities such as unhappiness, hate, dissatisfaction, ugliness, bad intentions, or the exercise of vice. Still other states of affairs, may contain little or no intrinsic value. *There being stones*, for example, is a state of affairs that contains little if any intrinsic value. Such states of affairs are, we might say,

intrinsically neutral. But *someone's being happy*, for example, is an intrinsically good state of affairs, while *someone's being unhappy* is an intrinsically bad state of affairs.

One might infer from the preceding paragraph that if God exists, the world he creates would not include any bad states of affairs.[4] However, supposing it would be in God's power to create such a world, there are at least two reasons to question this inference. First, as theodicists have argued since the time of Augustine, freedom of the will, if not itself a great intrinsic good, appears to be indispensable for some of the very important goods we know of – freely given love, freely sacrificing for the well-being of others, freely chosen acts of charity, etc. Indeed, from the point of view of the creator it might well be uninteresting to create beings who are programmed from the start to worship God, to honor him, to do good to others. From the perspective of the creator it may well be better to have beings who can freely choose to love and worship or not to love and worship, for love and worship that is freely given is of much greater value than love and worship that is compelled. But if God does choose to create a world with creatures free to do good or evil, the world may include evil as a result of some of their free choices.[5] Second, there is a principle, *the Principle of Organic Unities*,[6] held by a number of philosophers from Leibniz to the present day. According to this principle, the intrinsic value of a whole may not be equal to the sum of the intrinsic value of each of its parts. Compare, for example, *Jones's feeling happy upon contemplating torturing an innocent human being* with *Jones's feeling unhappy upon contemplating torturing an innocent human being*. The difference between these two states of affairs is that the first contains an intrinsically good state (Jones's feeling happy) as a part, whereas the second contains an intrinsically bad state (Jones feeling unhappy) as a part. But surely the first state as a whole is a much worse state of affairs than the second. So, while a given part of a whole may be intrinsically good (Jones's feeling happy), the whole of which it is a part may be worse for the presence of the good part than it would be were a certain bad part (Jones's feeling unhappy) to be in its place. So, for all we know, the best world may include some intrinsically bad states of affairs. It hardly follows from this consideration that there may be tears in heaven, but it does suggest that we should hesitate to conclude too much from the mere presence of some tears on earth. For, as we've seen, a state of affairs that constitutes an *organic unity* may be better for the presence of a bad part than it would be were the bad part replaced by a good part. So, again, we must note that a possible world with some bad parts may be better than a possible world with no bad parts.

We've seen that the good-making qualities (happiness, love, enjoyment, beauty, good intention, an exercise of virtue, etc.) figure in states of affairs (e.g., someone's being happy, someone's loving another, etc.) that are intrinsically good; whereas the bad-making qualities (unhappiness, hate, dissatisfaction, ugliness, bad intentions, or the exercise of vice) figure in states of affairs (e.g., someone's being unhappy, someone's hating another, etc.) that are intrinsically bad. It is important, however, to distinguish the *intrinsic* value of someone's being unhappy from the *extrinsic* value of someone's being unhappy. The intrinsic value of a state of affairs is inher-

ent in that state of affairs – it necessarily belongs to that state of affairs no matter what that state of affairs is a part of or what the circumstances are in which it occurs. But the extrinsic value of a state of affairs may change from one set of circumstances to another. Sometimes, for example, a person's being unhappy is productive of good, in which case it may be a good thing (i.e., it may be extrinsically good) for that person to be unhappy. But that doesn't affect the matter of the intrinsic value of someone's being unhappy. For it is a good thing that the person was unhappy only in the sense of what that person's unhappiness leads to, or is a necessary part of, not in terms of its own intrinsic value. Unhappiness, in itself, is always bad. In addition, we should not confuse the intrinsic value of a state of affairs with the intrinsic value of a state of affairs of which it is a part. As we've noted someone's being unhappy on contemplating the undeserved suffering of others is a better state of affairs than someone's being happy on contemplating the undeserved suffering of others. But that truth is entirely compatible with someone's being happy necessarily being *intrinsically better than* someone's being unhappy. For the intrinsic value of the part, someone's being unhappy, must not be confused with the intrinsic value of the whole (someone's being unhappy on contemplating the undeserved suffering of others) of which it is a part.

Since a possible world just is a *maximal* state of affairs, its value will reflect the values of the states of affairs contained in it. So, possible worlds themselves will be intrinsically good, intrinsically bad, or intrinsically neutral. In addition one possible world will be intrinsically better than, equal to, or worse than another possible world. And, as Leibniz noted, it is by knowing the intrinsic values of the possible worlds that God is guided in his choice of a world to create.

We are now in a position to consider seriously our question: Is God free with respect to creating a world? Assuming that God exists, this question falls into two parts: (1) Was God free to refrain from creating any world at all?; (2) Was God free to create other worlds instead of the world he did in fact create? Let's begin with our second question. We earlier noted that possible worlds can be ranked according to their value all the way from bad worlds, to neutral worlds, and then to good worlds. Suppose then that God chooses to display his goodness and power in creating a world. We can imagine God, as it were, surveying all these worlds and deciding which one to create. He considers all the bad worlds, the neutral worlds (neither good nor bad) and all the good worlds. Let's suppose, along with Leibniz and Samuel Clarke, that the series of increasingly good worlds culminates in the best possible world, a world than which no possible world is as good or better. Similarly, we can suppose that the series of increasingly bad worlds culminates in a world than which no possible world is as bad or worse.[7] Faced with choosing from among these two series of worlds the world he shall create, it is obvious that an infinitely good being would not, indeed *could not*, create one of the bad worlds. Which good world would he then create? Again, it seems obvious that he would create the very best world, the best of all possible worlds. As Leibniz points out: since "to do less good than one could is to be lacking in wisdom or in goodness," the most perfect understanding "*cannot fail* to act in the most perfect way, and consequently to

choose the best."[8] In a well-known essay[9] Robert Adams has argued on the basis of the doctrine of divine grace that God would not be morally obligated to create the best world that he can. But even if his argument is successful, it still may be necessary for God to create the best world he can. It just won't be his moral duty.[10] In short, his creating the best world may be a supererogatory act, the morally best act he can do, even if his failure to do it would not be a violation of his moral duty. And it appears to be inconceivable that a supremely perfect being would act to bring about less good than he can. On the assumption that God (the supremely perfect being) exists and that there is a best, creatable world, we've reached the conclusion that God is neither free not to create a world nor free to create a world less than the best creatable world. Indeed, God would of necessity create the best of the creatable worlds, leaving us with no basis for thanking him, or praising him for creating the world he does. For given that God exists and that there is a best creatable world, God's nature as an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being would require him to create that best world. Doing less than the best he can do – create the best creatable world – would be inconsistent with his being the perfect being he is.

But what if there is no best world? What if, as Aquinas thought to be true, for each creatable world there is a better world that God can create instead?[11] In short, there is no best world. Here, I believe, in supposing that God exists and creates a world when for every creatable world there is a better creatable world, we are supposing a state of affairs that is simply impossible. I'm not suggesting here that there is an impossibility in the idea that God exists. Nor am I suggesting that there is an impossibility in the idea that for every creatable world there is a better creatable world. I am suggesting that there is an impossibility in the idea both that God exists and creates a world and that for every creatable world there is a better creatable world. For whatever world God would create he would be doing less good than he can do. And it is impossible for God to do less good than he can. The underlying principle yielding the conclusion that there is an impossibility in the idea both that God creates a world and that for every creatable world there is a better creatable world is the following:

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

Since God is a being than which it is not possible for there to be a morally better being, it is clear, given both the principle just cited and the no best world hypothesis, that God could not exist and be the creator of a world. For any being that exists and creates a world when there is a better world it could have created instead is, according to the principle cited above, a being than which a morally better being is possible, and, therefore, not the best possible being. So the issue now before us is whether this principle (if an omniscient being creates a world when there is a better world it could create, then it would be possible for there to be a being morally better than it) is indeed true. My own view is that the principle in question will appear to many to be plausible, if not self-evident. For 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. So, unless we find some reason to reject the principle stated above or a reason to reject the line of argument supporting it, we are at the very least within our rights to accept it and use it as a principle in our reasoning. But the result of using this principle in our reasoning about God and the world is just this: if the actual world is not the best world that an omnipotent, omniscient being could create, God does not exist. God does not exist because were he to exist and create a world when there is a better world he could have created instead, then he would be a being than which a better being is possible. For he himself would have been a better being had he created a better world. But since it is not possible for any being (including God) to be better than God (the best possible being) in fact is, the world God has created must be the very best world he could have created. Therefore, if God does exist and creates a world W, W is the very best among the worlds that God could have created. W is the best creatable world. Hence, we see the problem of no best creatable world. For if for every creatable world there is a better creatable world and our principle is true, God does not exist. What then can be said against the principle: if an omniscient being creates a world when there is a better world it could create, then it would be possible for there to be a being morally better than it?

We may begin by considering the view set forth by Norman Kretzmann in his perceptive study of Aquinas's view of creation. In the course of his discussion of Aquinas, Kretzmann concludes with Aquinas that for any world God might create there is a better world he could create. (His disagreement with Aquinas concerns only whether God is free not to create at all.) Kretzmann's second conclusion – the one presently of interest to us – is that it is a *mistake* to think (as I do) that if God exists and cannot avoid choosing something less good than he could choose, then God cannot be essentially perfectly good. And he proceeds to explain why he thinks it is a mistake.

> Like Aquinas, I think that the logical truth that God's actions conform to the principle of noncontradiction entails no limit on his power. And if it would be a violation of the principle of noncontradiction for God to create a world better than any other world he could create, then a fortiori that logical truth which does not diminish his power also leaves his *goodness* undiminished. God's being that than which nothing better can be conceived of cannot entail his producing a world than which none better can be conceived of. No matter which possible world he actualizes, there must be infinitely many possible worlds better than the actual world in some respect or other.[12]

Kretzmann relies on what he takes to be an analogy or parallel between power and goodness. His idea is this. Since we agree that failure to bring about what is logically impossible does not imply any limit on God's power, we should also agree that failure to bring about what is logically impossible does not diminish God's goodness. Given that there is no best possible world, Kretzmann points out that it is logically impossible for God

to create a world better than any other world he could create. So, the fact that God does not create such a world diminishes neither his power nor his goodness. And that being so, Kretzmann sees no difficulty in God's being perfectly good and creating a world less good that other creatable worlds.

Perhaps we can view Kretzmann as appealing to the following principle:

> A. If S is a logically impossible state of affairs, then the fact that a being does not bring about S does not entail that the being in question lacks power or perfect goodness.

This principle strikes me as self-evidently true. The fact that God fails to do what *logically cannot be done* is a bad reason to think that God is morally imperfect or lacking in power. On Aquinas's view it is logically impossible for God to create the best possible world. And since he cannot do that, the fact that he doesn't do it, as Kretzmann notes, implies no imperfection in God. I entirely agree with Kretzmann's point on this. But the fact that there is a bad reason to conclude that God is not perfectly good does not mean that there is no good reason to conclude that God is not perfectly good. And the fact that God fails to do what *logically can be done* may be a good reason to conclude that God is not perfectly good.[13] The principle that provides this good reason is the principle we've already introduced and will now refer to as "Principle B."

> B. If an omniscient being creates a world when there is a better world that it could have created, then it is possible that there exists a being morally better than it.[14]

If B is true, as I think it is, and if it is also true that

> C. If a being is essentially perfectly good then it is not possible that there exist a being morally better than it,

then if it is true that for any creatable world there is another creatable world better than it, it is also true that *no* omnipotent, omniscient being who creates a world is essentially perfectly good. Moreover, if we add to this Kretzmann's first conclusion that a perfectly good, omnipotent, omniscient being *must* create, it will follow that there is no omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being.

Suppose Aquinas and Kretzmann are right in believing that for any creatable world there is another creatable world that is better than it. Our second objection emerges when we consider what the theistic God is to do in this situation. If some creatable world is better than any world God alone inhabits, then, on my principle B (slightly extended) it appears that God must create some world. On the other hand, as we've just seen, on my principle B it also follows that he cannot create a world if some other creatable world is better. "So", the objector now concludes, "on your principle B it follows that God must create a world and also must not create a world. Surely, then, since your principle leads to a contradiction, however plausible principle B sounds, we must reject it."

My response to this objection is that on the supposition that for every creatable world there is another world that is better than it, principle B does not lead to a contradiction. What principle B leads to is the conclusion that there is no essentially omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being.

But is principle B true? Daniel and Frances Howard-Snyder have endeavored to refute principle B by inviting us to consider three hypothetical world creators: Jove, Juno and Thor.[15] They suppose Jove to be an omnipotent, omniscient being who is confronted with an infinite number of increasingly better possible worlds from which to select one to create. Jove, they suggest, decides to create one of these good worlds by using a randomizing device. Being good, Jove has no interest in creating a world that isn't good.[16] Each of the infinite number of good worlds is assigned a positive natural number beginning with '1' for the least good world, '2' for a slightly better world, and so on. Jove uses the randomizing device to pick one of these good worlds, and, as a result, world no. 777 is created. Now, of course, Jove could have created a better world. But the Howard-Snyders think that it does not follow from this fact that Jove is *morally surpassable*. That is, from the fact that Jove could have created a better world than the world he did create (no. 777), they think that it does not follow that it is *logically possible* for there to have existed a being with a degree of moral goodness in excess of Jove's.[17]

In a response to their article[18] I suggested the following:

> In support of their view the Howard-Snyder's invite us to consider other possible omnipotent, omniscient[19] world creators, Juno and Thor, and argue that although they produce morally better worlds than Jove, they are not morally better creators. Juno does just what Jove did but her randomizing machine happens to select a better world, no. 999. Thor doesn't use a randomizing machine 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. Even though Juno ends up producing a better world than Jove, the Howard-Snyder's are clearly right in viewing Jove and Juno as morally equivalent. For had her randomizing machine hit on world 777, rather than world 999, Juno would have created world 777. So, it was blind luck, not a higher standard of selection, that resulted in Juno's selection of world 999. But what of Thor? From their discussion it would seem that Thor is morally superior to Jove and Juno, for it looks as though Thor's degree of moral goodness is such that he is not prepared to settle for world no. 777 *unless* he is unable to create a better world. But the fact that Jove intentionally included worlds numbered 1 - 777 as possibilities for selection by his randomizing machine shows that Jove is morally prepared to settle for any of the worlds from 1 - 777 *even though* he is able to create a better world.[20] So, it does appear that, other things being equal, Thor is a morally better being than Jove.[21]

In a subsequent article[22] against principle B, the Howard-Snyders question my account of Thor, suggesting that it is incoherent. They wonder

what principle or reason Thor acts on. They say:

> For example, suppose Thor's reason is this: worlds numbered 888 and higher are better than worlds numbered 887 and lower. (This seems to be the reason that Rowe has Thor act on. See the quotation above.) 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.[23]

This leads them to suggest that my account of Thor is *incoherent*. But I believe it is clear from my article that I do not have Thor act on the principle "don't create if there is a better creatable world," for such a principle, given that for any world there is a better, can only result in Thor's not creating any world at all. Since Thor is *omniscient* and does in fact create world 888, it logically follows that he cannot act on the principle that they suggest I have him act on. Of course, while Thor, given his infinite intelligence, cannot act on such a principle, it doesn't follow that with finite intelligence I cannot make the mistake of attributing to Thor such a principle of action when he creates world 888. So, what principle do I have Thor act on? I believe that the principle on which Thor acts is very much like the principle on which Jove acts. Let's look again at Jove. Some worlds he sees as not good enough to be acceptable as candidates for creation. The worlds that are acceptable to him in terms of his own degree of goodness are then ordered in terms of increasing goodness, and one of them, world 777, is randomly selected for creation. Thor, as I have described him, does pretty much the same thing. The difference is that worlds 1 - 800 are insufficiently good to be acceptable to him as candidates for creation, given that there are better worlds he can create. The worlds that are acceptable to him in terms of his own degree of goodness are then ordered in terms of increasing goodness and one of them, world 888, is randomly selected for creation. I conclude that the description the Howard-Snyder's give of Jove is logically consistent with there being a being who is better than Jove. And the story we have told about Thor is consistent and, if true, gives us reason to believe that Thor is a better being than Jove.

Can we state the principles on which both Jove and Thor act, and explain how it is that although they act on the same principles, they produce worlds that differ in their degree of goodness? I suggest that Jove and Thor may act on the following principles:

> P1: Do not create any world that is not a good world.
>
> P2. Do not create any good world whose goodness is less than what one judges as *acceptable*, given that one can create a better world.

Clearly, both Thor and Jove act in accordance with P1 and P2. Neither is

prepared to create a less than good world. And neither is prepared to create a good world whose degree of goodness is less than what he judges as acceptable in a world, given that he can create a better world. The difference between them is this. Jove's standard of goodness in world creating is such that he is prepared to settle for *any* good world even if there is a better that he can create. Thor, however, has a higher standard. He is not prepared to create any of the good worlds from W1 to W800 *provided* there is a better world that he can create. Of course, Thor's allegiance to P2 does not preclude him absolutely from creating, say, W777. It prevents him only on the condition that there is a better world he can create. Gala apples taste much better than Jonathan apples. I know that, and my standard of apple selection is never to come home with Jonathan apples when Gala are available. But that doesn't mean I won't or can't select Jonathan apples when Gala apples are not available. A good apple, even if it's a Jonathan, is better than no apple at all.

In their article the Howard-Snyders suppose that it cannot be that Thor and Jove act on the *same* principle. They suppose that if my story about Thor being better than Jove is correct then Thor must be acting on a *higher principle* than the principle on which Jove acts. And, since there will be worlds better than the world Thor creates, they then conclude that "there is another principle which treats as unacceptable some of the worlds which were treated as acceptable by Thor's principle, 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*." Lacking a proof of the impossibility of such an infinite array of world-creating principles, they say,

> 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.[24]

As I've tried to make clear above, the story I tell is quite consistent even if there is no such infinite progression of world-creating principles. Principles P1 and P2 will suffice so long as for any being in the position of Jove or Thor there is another being whose degree of goodness is such that its application of P1 and P2 results in the selection of a better world to create. And if we allow, as the Howard-Snyders do, an infinite number of possible worlds beginning with Jove's good world W1, why not allow the possibility of an infinite series of good world creators each being better than the preceding one. Indeed, why not allow, if needed, an infinite number of different but related world-creating principles. But, as I've suggested, I don't see the necessity of supposing that my story is coherent only if there is an infinite number of distinct world-creating principles. But suppose an infinite number of such principles is required. Perhaps it is odd at that there should be infinitely many world-creating principles. But even if it is odd, we should note that oddness and impossibility are far different matters. Many extremely odd things are logically possible. And if it is logically possible that there is an absolutely infinite number of increasingly better worlds, why should it be impossible that there be an infinite number of principles of world creation? In any case, however, I see no reason to think that there

need be an infinite number of such principles in order for the story of Thor and Jove to be coherent. Indeed, I have suggested that Jove and Thor can act on the very same principles. Moreover, since it is possible that there be world creators whose degrees of goodness increasingly exceed Thor's, it is possible that the very same principles would result in increasingly better beings creating increasingly better worlds than Thor's world.

The fundamental question at issue in the discussion concerning Jove and Thor is this: Is it logically possible both that for any creatable world there is a better creatable world and that there exists an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being who creates one of these creatable worlds? My position is that it is not possible that both should be true.

Why do I hold this position? I hold it because, as I've stated earlier, I think the following [Principle B] is necessarily true.

> B. If an omniscient being creates a world when it could have created a better world, then it is possible that there be a being morally better than it.[25]

By telling their story about Jove, the Howard-Snyder's hoped to cast doubt on Principle B. I believe that my alternative story about Thor undermines their attempt. Where does this leave us? I assert that B is necessarily true. Many theists assert the following [Principle A] to be true.

> A. It is logically possible both that for any creatable world there is a better creatable world and that there exists an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being who creates one of these worlds.

Both of us cannot be right. But how can we hope to settle the question of who has the more plausible position? Are we simply at a stalemate, a situation where neither can show the other's position to be implausible without employing as a premise one of the principles that is at issue in the debate? I believe that the Howard-Snyder's have endeavored to advance the debate in a way that does not beg the question. They suppose both that Jove is an omnipotent, omniscient creator of a good world (# 777) and that for every creatable world there is a better, but leave as an open question whether Jove's goodness can be unsurpassable. The question then is whether we have some good reason to think that an omnipotent, omniscient creator of a better world than # 777 may be better than Jove. As we've seen, the answer depends on the *reason* such a being has for creating a better world than # 777. If such a being (their Juno), given her degree of goodness, judges as acceptable for creation the *same* worlds as Jove, then the fact that her randomizer selects world # 999 for creation gives us no reason at all to think that Juno is a better being than Jove, even though she ends up creating a better world than does Jove. But if, like Thor, the being's degree of goodness is such that he judges that worlds of lesser value than # 800 are unacceptable candidates for creation, then the fact that its randomizer selects world # 800 or higher gives us reason to think that Thor is a better being than Jove. Of course, if we had simply concluded that Jove's goodness is surpassable because Jove could have created a world better than #

777, this would have been to beg the question at issue. For we would have been appealing to Principle B to rule out Jove being an unsurpassably good being. But no such appeal was made in reasoning to the conclusion that Thor is a better being than Jove.

Principle B, if true, does not refute theism. But if both principle B and theism are true, then the world we live in is an unsurpassably good world – no possible world that an omnipotent being could have created would be better than the actual world. I suspect that part of the motivation for the theist to accept the view that there is no best creatable world is that the alternative seems (1) to limit severely God's freedom in creating, and (2) to leave the theist with the burden of defending the Leibnizian thesis that this world, with all its evil, is a world than which a better creatable world is not even a logical possibility.

Thomas Morris, like the Howard-Snyder's and Kretzmann, thinks that among the worlds creatable by God there is no best world. He notes two difficulties in the Liebnitzian idea that there is a best possible world. First, he points out that some philosophers are doubtful that there is a single scale on which all creaturely values can be weighted so as to determine what world possesses the maximum amount of value. "Some world A might be better than rival world B in some respects, but with B surpassing A in others, and the relevant values not such that they could be summed over and compared overall."[26] In short, if some valuable states of affairs are incommensurable with other valuable states of affairs, it may be impossible to rank the states of affairs in terms of one being better than, worse than, or equal to the other. And if that should be so, we could have two worlds such that neither is better than the other, worse than the other, or equal in value with the other. Second, Morris notes that a number of philosophers have thought that for any world containing "a certain number of goods, n, there is always conceivable a greater world with $n + 1$ goods, or good creatures. So, on the simplest grounds of additive value alone, it seems impossible there could be a single best possible world. And without this, of course, the Leibnizian demand collapses."[27] But Morris's main concern lies elsewhere. Like the Howard-Snyders and Kretzmann, Morris wants to show that there is no incoherence in the idea of a *perfectly good* creator creating a world when there is *no best world* for that being to create.

> For just as it seems initially very natural to suppose that a superlatively good, wise, and powerful being will produce only an unsurpassable perfect creation, so likewise it can seem every bit as natural to suppose that an incoherence or impossibility discovered in the latter notion indicates an incoherence or impossibility buried within the former.[28]

Since it is just that incoherence we have been arguing for, it is important to note Morris's efforts to show that the incoherence in question is imagined, and not real. Noting that Quinn holds that in the no best world scenario a creator of a world is such that "it is possible that there is an agent morally better than he is, namely an omnipotent moral agent who actualizes one of those morally better worlds," and Rowe holds "if a being were to create a

world when there is a morally better world it could create, then it would be possible for there to be a being morally better than it,"Morris states that these views are "absolutely unacceptable to traditional theists, for whom both perfection and creation are important ideas."[29]

In developing his objection to the views expressed by Quinn and Rowe, Morris introduces a useful thesis – *the Expression Thesis: The goodness of an agent's actions is expressive of the agent's goodness.* I'm inclined to take something like this thesis as underlying the claim expressed in principle B: If an omniscient being creates a world when it could have created a better world, then it is possible that there be a being morally better than it. Of course, the expression thesis depends on what Morris may well have supposed: that the agent's motive for performing the good action is to bring about a good state of affairs. Without supposing that motive we have no reason to think that the goodness of an agent's action – measured in terms of the quality of its result – is expressive of the agent's goodness. But what are we to say of a being who performs an action that he knows will bring about less good, all things considered, than he could have brought about by performing a slightly different action? In this case, applying the expression thesis, we should conclude that the agent's degree of goodness is something less that it could be. For the agent has acted to bring about less good than he knew would have been brought about by his performing a slightly different action. But clearly, if an agent knowingly acts to bring about less good overall than he could have brought about by performing a slightly different action that was in his power to perform, that agent's degree of moral goodness is somewhat less than it could be. And it is precisely this point that underlies the judgment that in the no best world scenario it is impossible for the creator to be perfectly good. For, as we saw in the discussion of the Howard-Snyder's story about Jove, Juno, and Thor, when a being creates a world that is less good than another world it could have created, the world it creates will satisfy its standard of world-creating, even given that it could create a better world. But then it is possible that there should be a being whose degree of goodness is such that it will not create that less good world given that it is able to create a better world. So, again I conclude that if a being creates a world when it could have created a better world, then it is possible that there should be a being morally better than it. And from this it follows that if for every creatable world there is a better creatable world, there is no absolutely perfect being who creates a world. And since it is better to create a good world rather than not create any world at all, on the no best creatable world scenario there is no maximally perfect being.

Morris's basic mistake, I believe, is his view, shared by Kretzmann, that to hold, as I do, that if there is no best world for a being to create then no being can create a world and be a being than which a better creator is impossible, just is to hold God accountable for not doing what is logically impossible to be done – creating the best world. Thus Morris writes:

> If you and I do less well than we're capable of doing, then those around us may conclude, and may sometimes justifiably conclude, that we are not at the level of goodness that could be exemplified. But

> failing to do the best you can is a flaw or manifests an incompleteness in moral character in this way only if doing the best you can is at least a logical possibility. If doing the best he can in creating a world is for God an impossibility, . . . then not doing his best in creating cannot be seen as a flaw or as manifesting an incompleteness in the character of God. The notion of a perfect expression of an unsurpassable character would then itself be an incoherence.[30]

Of course, if it is logically impossible for there to be a best world, then God's not creating the best possible world does not count against his perfect goodness. Nowhere do I suggest that it does. What counts against God's perfect goodness (specifically, his moral perfection) is his creating a world when he could have created a world better than it. The charge is not that a being who fails to do what is impossible to be done (create the best world when there is no best world to be created) is lacking in perfect goodness. The charge is that a being who creates a world when it could have created a better world is less than supremely perfect. And the plain fact is that if there is no best creatable world then God, if he creates a world, will create a world than which he could have created a better world.[31] Morris simply fails to address the issue at stake here.

It is important to distinguish three different principles:

> a. Failing to do the best one can is a defect only if doing the best one can is possible for one to do.
>
> b. Failing to do better than one did is a defect only if doing better than one did is possible for one to do.
>
> c. Failing to do better than one did is a defect only if doing the best one can is possible for one to do.

Both (a) and (b) are true. But (c) is not true. And it is (c) that Morris needs to make his argument work.

Suppose, for the moment, that you are an omnipotent, omniscient being and are contemplating the infinite series of numbers: 1, 2, 3, 4, etc., etc. You are also contemplating the infinite series of creatable worlds containing creatures that are overall good worlds, as opposed both to bad worlds and neutral worlds – worlds that are neither good nor bad. You let each of the numbers represent the overall degree of good that a possible world possesses, where '1' represents the least good world – a world with no pain perhaps, and just one momentary experience of pleasure on the part of some lower animal. '2' represents the possible world that is one degree better than the world 1, '3' represents the possible world that is one degree better than the world 2, etc., etc. Being omniscient you see that there is no best possible world for you to create. Just as the series of natural numbers increases infinitely so does the series of increasingly better worlds from which you will select one to create. Seeing that there is no best possible world to create, you realize that no matter how good a world you create there will be better worlds you could have chosen to create instead of it.

Glancing at world 1, and comparing it with world 1000, you see that world 1000 is significantly better than world 1, just as you see that world 1000,000 is significantly better than world 1000. Nevertheless, in spite of noticing the enormous disparity between the least good world and the goodness of some worlds numerically much greater, you decide that you will create the *least good* world and proceed to actualize world 1. Isn't it obvious that in deliberately choosing to create the *least good* of the infinite series of increasingly better possible, creatable worlds you display a degree of goodness in world-creating that is inconsistent with *perfect goodness*?

> "Wait!" you will say. "You judge me unfairly. I see that if I could have created a maximally good world I might be subject to some criticism here for creating a world so limited in value as world 1. But there is no maximally good world. So clearly I'm *perfectly justified* in creating the *poorest* in the infinite series of increasingly better worlds. You should not have any doubts at all about my being *perfectly good*!"

Surely this defense of one's "perfect goodness" is woefully inadequate. A perfectly good being cannot, consistent with its perfect goodness, consciously elect to create the least good world when there is an infinite number of increasingly better worlds as available for creation as the least good world. But it is just this conclusion that Morris's position would require us to accept. Since the conclusion is clearly false, if not absurd, we should reject it. Instead, we should say that the degree of goodness an omniscient being possesses is reflected in the degree of goodness in the world it creates. And what this reasoning leads us to is the conclusion Leibniz reached: An unsurpassably good, omnipotent, omniscient creator will create an unsurpassably good world. Indeed, unsurpassable goodness in an omnipotent, omniscient world-creator is consistent only with the creation of an unsurpassably good world. For there is an impossibility in the idea both that there exists an infinite series of increasingly better creatable worlds and that there also exists an unsurpassably good, omnipotent, omniscient being who creates one of these worlds.

The conclusion we've just reached points to an incompatibility between the necessary existence of the theistic God and the *possibility* Morris embraces: that the series of increasingly better creatable worlds goes on to infinity. But how could a mere possibility be inconsistent with the existence of the theistic God? After all, isn't it one thing to conclude that God's infinite perfection precludes his actualizing a bad possible world, and quite another thing to conclude that God's infinite perfection precludes there even being such a thing as a bad possible world? And if God's existence doesn't rule out bad possible worlds, why should it rule out an infinite series of increasingly better possible worlds? The answer to these questions consists in seeing that if God necessarily exists and is necessarily such that whatever world is actual can be so only by virtue of his creating it, then since it is impossible for God (an absolutely perfect being) to create a bad world, there cannot be any bad worlds. In short, given God's necessary perfections and necessary existence, the only possible, non-actual worlds are worlds God *can create*. And once we see that given God's

necessary existence and necessary perfections no world creatable by God can be a bad world, we are well on our way to seeing that it is likewise impossible that there should be an unending series of increasingly better creatable worlds.

Morris nicely captures the essence of the view I've just described by noting that such a God "is a delimiter of possibilities."

> If there is a being who exists necessarily, and is necessarily omnipotent, omniscient, and good, then many states of affairs which otherwise would represent genuine possibilities, and by all non-theistic tests of logic and semantics do represent possibilities, are strictly impossible in the strongest sense. In particular, worlds containing certain sorts or amounts of disvalue or evil are metaphysically ruled out by the nature of God, divinely precluded from the realm of real possibility.[32]

Return now to our earlier contention that possible worlds include very good worlds, neutral worlds, and very bad worlds. In addition we suggested that just as for every good world there is a better possible world, so too for every bad world there is a possible world whose degree of badness is greater. Morris will allow that such worlds are "conceivable." But since he holds that God is a *delimiter of possibilities* and that it is impossible for God to create a world that is a bad world, the bad worlds we conceive of are not, at least for the theist, *genuinely possible*. For the only way such worlds could be genuinely possible is for it to be possible for God to create them. But God's perfect nature necessarily precludes him from creating such worlds. Therefore, such worlds aren't really possible all things considered.

Morris's general point here strikes me as sound. If p is necessarily true and q is inconsistent with p, then, even though we can conceive of q and q seems to us to be paradigm case of a genuine possibility, q isn't really possible at all. So, if there is a necessarily perfect being who necessarily exists, then even though we can *conceive* of a bad world, that bad world is really not a *possible world* provided that for a world to be actual it must be actualized by the necessarily perfect being. Consider, for example, a world in which nearly all the sentient beings have lives so full of suffering that it would be better had they never existed. Such a world is a bad world. Is this world, so understood, a possible world? It certainly seems to be. But given that a possible world can be actual only if it is created by a necessarily perfect being, and such a being necessarily exists, then that world really isn't a possible world, it only seems to be possible. Of course, what is sauce for the goose (Morris) is sauce for the gander (Rowe). If this bad world, which certainly seems to be possible, really is a possible world, then it is simply *impossible* that there is a necessarily perfect being who is necessarily the creator of any world that is actual. Which then are we more sure of: that some bad world is genuinely possible or that there necessarily exists a being who is necessarily omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good? The former is a "delimiter of necessities" just as the latter is a "delimiter of possibilities." Just as what is necessary precludes certain "possibilities," so does what is possible preclude certain "necessities." The theist begins with the neces-

sary existence of a being who is essentially perfect and concludes that a bad world isn't even a possibility. The non-theist begins with the possibility of there being a bad world and concludes that there is no essentially perfect being who necessarily exists.

Suppose we accept Morris's view about God as a delimiter of possibilities. Suppose, that is, that we agree with him that if there is a being who exists necessarily, and is necessarily omnipotent, omniscient, and good, then many states of affairs which otherwise would have been possible are strictly impossible. If so, then if there is such a being we should agree that there are no possible worlds that are overall bad worlds. For such a world is possible only if it is possible for God to actualize that world. But God's necessary perfections preclude him from actualizing it. Therefore, such a world is not really a possible world.

Having adopted Morris's view that God is a delimiter of possibilities, suppose we now return to the stalemate between the view I've argued for:

> *It is impossible for God to exist and create an inferior world when he could have created a better world;*

and the view my opponent maintains:

> *God is free to create some good world even though there is an unlimited number of better worlds any one of which he could have created instead.*

My opponent may well agree with me that given God's absolute perfection God could not create a world less than the best world. In short, *if* there is a best world all things considered, we may both agree with Leibniz and Clarke that God will necessarily create that world. (Of course, there remains the problem of explaining the precise sense in which God could be *free* in creating the best possible world.) It is only when we come to the no best world scenario that our views clash so profoundly. But Morris, perhaps unwittingly, has shown us a way to resolve the problem. God is the ultimate *delimiter of possibilities*. Thus, if God exists the series of increasingly good possible worlds has a limit – the best possible world. A creator that is necessarily good could not possibly create a less than good world. So, given that this being is a delimiter of possibilities, there are no possible worlds that are not good worlds. Furthermore, a necessarily perfect being could not possibly create a world that is less good than some other world it could create. So, given that this being creates a world and is a delimiter of possibilities, the world he creates cannot be one than which there is a better creatable world. Thus, following the path that Morris has pointed out, we conclude that God's necessary existence and necessary perfections would rule out two seeming possibilities: (1) there being possible worlds that are bad; (2) there being no best possible world. If God exists, his necessary existence and necessary perfections rule out the apparent existence of possible worlds that are bad as well as the apparent possibility that for any world God can create there is a better world he could create. What then should we conclude about the *actual* world? We should conclude that if the theistic God does exist, the actual world is the best possible world.[33] And therein lies the

seeds of another argument against the existence of the God of traditional theism. For however much we may succeed in trying to fit the terrible evils in our world into some rational plan, few are prepared to think with Leibniz that this world is as good as any world could possibly be.

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NOTES

1. In saying that a state of affairs *obtains* (or is *actual*) in a given possible world we mean that that state of affairs would be actual were that world the actual world.
2. Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 45.
3. See Roderick M. Chisholm, "The Defeat of Good and Evil," in *The Problem of Evil*, ed. by Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).
4. Actually, since possible worlds necessarily exist, God doesn't create them. But from the fact that a possible world exists, it doesn't follow that it is *actual*. Only one world can be the actual world. And what God does is create particular things – stones, human beings, etc.– and enable them to be arranged in such a way that a particular possible world is actualized. So, it is not in the literal sense of 'creates' that God creates a world. With this understood, we will continued to refer to some possible world as being 'created' by God.
5. But surely there would be possible worlds in which creatures are free to do good or evil and, as it happens, always use their freedom to do good. Wouldn't God create one of those worlds? For an impressive argument as to why it might not be in God's power to create such a world see Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford University Press, 1974), Ch. IX.
6. See G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), pp. 187ff.
7. In the service of simplicity we will set aside the neutral worlds.
8. See Leibniz's *Theodicy*. trans. E. M. Huggard, ed. Austin Farrer (LaSalle, Ill: Open Court 1985), section 201. (Emphasis mine)
9. "Must God Create the Best?" *Philosophical Review* 81 (July 1972): 317-32.
10. I advance this point in "The Problem of Divine Perfection and Freedom," *Reasoned Faith*, ed. Eleonore Stump, Cornel University Press, 1993, 223-233.
11. Aquinas didn't understand a world to be a maximal state of affairs. But were he to have thought of a world in this way he would have asserted that there is no best world.
12. "A Particular Problem of Creation," 238.
13. In this discussion of Kretzmann I suppose, for effect, that it is possible for God to be less than perfectly good. What is true is that any being that fails to do what is the best it can do is not perfectly good and, therefore, not God.
14. As we noted earlier, a being may be perfectly morally correct in the sense of never failing in its obligations and still be such that it could be morally better by virtue of the performance of some supererogatory act.
15. Daniel and Frances Howard-Snyder, "How and Unsurpassable Being Can Create a Surpassable World," *Faith and Philosophy*, April, 1994.
16. In order not to beg the question at issue, the Howard-Snyder's do not assume that Jove is morally unsurpassable.

17. In the context of this discussion, a being is morally unsurpassable only if it is logically impossible for there to be a morally better being.
18. "The Problem of No Best World," *Faith and Philosophy*, April, 1994.
19. For some reason the Howard-Snyder's neglect to attribute omniscience to Juno and Thor. I assume this to be a slip. Clearly, if we want to compare their goodness to Jove's, we should attribute to them the infinite power and knowledge that was attributed to Jove. I'll return to this point in discussing Thor's degree of goodness.
20. And the same is true of Juno, even though she accidentally ends up with world no. 999.
21. It is important to note that to say one being is morally better than another is not to imply that the second being has done anything morally wrong or violated any moral obligation.
22. "The *Real* Problem of No Best World," *Faith and Philosophy*, July 1996.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 423.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 424.
25. Indeed, it is possible for that very being to have been better than it in fact is.
26. "Perfection and Creation," *Reasoned Faith*, ed. Eleonore Stump, Cornel University Press, 1993, 223-233.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 237.
28. *Ibid.*
29. *Ibid.*, 239.
30. *Ibid.*, 244.
31. This is technically incorrect. For if there is no best world, but several worlds equally good and none better, then a being could freely chose one of these worlds to create. The reader is to understand that in supposing that there is no best world we are thinking only of the circumstance in which for every world there is a better world.
32. *Anselmian Explorations*, (University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), p. 48.
33. If we countenance libertarian freedom among the creatures in the best possible world, it could be that the best possible world is not creatable by God. For if the creatures are free to do right or not do right, then it won't be entirely up to God whether the best world he can create is the best possible world. I ignore these complications here. But clearly they are important to a thorough discussion of the problem of divine freedom.