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# HOW AN UNSURPASSABLE BEING CAN CREATE A SURPASSABLE WORLD

Daniel and Frances Howard-Snyder

This seems coherent: a morally unsurpassable and omnipotent being (Jove) is faced with a choice of which world to actualize where for any he might actualize there is a better. He creates a device that randomly selects from amongst the worlds he can actualize. The world that is chosen is, of course, surpassable, and yet, he seems not. We defend this conclusion against three versions of the claim that since someone could produce a world which surpassed Jove's, that being could morally surpass Jove. The first is that a superior being confronted with Jove's choice would not create at all; the second is that he would use Jove's device and it would select a superior world; the third is that he would create a superior world without using Jove's device. We argue that none of these ways of behaving would show that he was morally superior to Jove.

Imagine that there exists a good, essentially omniscient and omnipotent being named Jove, and that there exists nothing else. No possible being is more powerful or knowledgeable. Out of his goodness, Jove decides to create. Since he is all-powerful, there is nothing but the bounds of possibility to prevent him from getting what he wants. Unfortunately, as he holds before his mind the host of worlds, Jove sees that for each there is a better one. Although he can create any of them, he can't create the best of them because there is no best. Faced with this predicament, Jove first sorts the worlds according to certain criteria. For example, he puts on his left worlds in which some inhabitants live lives that aren't worth living and on his right worlds in which every inhabitant's life is worth living; he puts on his left worlds in which some horrors fail to serve an outweighing good and on his right worlds in which no horror fails to serve an outweighing good. (We encourage the reader to use her own criteria.) Then he orders the right hand worlds according to their goodness and assigns to each a positive natural number, the worst of the lot receiving '1,' the second worst '2,' and so on. Next, he creates a very intricate device that, at the push of a button, will randomly select a number and produce the corresponding world. Jove pushes the button; the device hums and whirs and, finally, its digital display reads '777': world no. 777 comes into being.

We see no incoherence in this story. Now, consider the proposition that Jove is not only good but essentially unsurpassably good. Suppose we add



this to our story. Does some glaring incoherence reveal itself? We can't see one. If our story (so amended) is a logical possibility, then there is no contradiction in supposing that an essentially morally unsurpassable, essentially omnipotent and omniscient being could create a world inferior to some other world he, or some other possible being, could have created.

It is important to see that our (amended) story does not merely suggest that Jove is not at fault in creating a world less than the best he could have created. It suggests much more than that an essentially omnipotent and omniscient being does nothing wrong in creating a surpassable world. It suggests that his creating a world inferior to one he or some other possible being could have created does nothing to impugn his status as essentially morally unsurpassable *in any respect whatsoever*. And so we claim that if any philosophical story can illustrate a logical possibility, our story illustrates how it is possible for an essentially morally unsurpassable, essentially omnipotent and omniscient being to create a surpassable world.<sup>1</sup>

We expect some people to disagree with us. We expect they will say things like this:

An omnipotent being can actualize any actualizable world. If he actualizes one than which there is a morally better, he does not do the best he can, morally speaking, and so 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;<sup>2</sup>

or perhaps this:

A being is necessarily an absolutely perfect moral being only if it is not possible for there to be a being morally better than it. If a being creates a world when there is some morally better world that it could have created, then it is possible that there be a being morally better than it. For it would be possible for there to be an omnipotent being who creates a better world than the first being could create but did not.<sup>3</sup>

Apparently, these people assume that, if it is possible for there to be an omnipotent being who when faced with Jove's predicament creates a better world, then—so long as nothing else about him made him morally worse than Jove<sup>4</sup>—, he would be morally better than Jove. If they don't assume this, then even if it is possible for there to be such an omnipotent being, that would hardly suffice to show that Jove was morally surpassable. Therefore, the possibility of an omnipotent being creating a better world than Jove created shows that Jove is morally surpassable only if his creating a better world shows he is, *ceteris paribus*, morally better than Jove. So, to judge whether the possibility in question shows that Jove is morally surpassable, we must reflect on the ways in which an omnipotent being could behave differently from Jove and ask regarding each, "All else being equal, would his behaving like that demonstrate he was morally better than Jove?"

We shall sketch three ways in which an omnipotent being could behave differently from Jove and argue that in each case the being in question is clearly no morally better.

## 1

The first suggestion is the simplest: if an omnipotent being were faced with Jove's choice and did not create at all, then, *ceteris paribus*, he would be morally better than Jove.

Before we evaluate this alternative, two preliminaries are in order. First, we have been speaking as if Jove created a possible world. This is not strictly true. Possible worlds are necessarily existing abstract entities that have their being independently of anyone's creative activity. So Jove doesn't create a possible world; he creates individuals and in so doing brings it about that one of the infinitely many existing possible worlds is the actual world. Secondly, Jove doesn't have the option of making it the case that there is no actual world. There must be some actual world, and it is up to Jove which it is. If Jove lies back and plays dead, if he refrains from using his creative powers, a world will nevertheless be actual and it will be his responsibility. That world will have no concrete being other than Jove in it. Call any world in which there is nothing other than its creator in it a *virtually empty world*.

With these points in mind, consider the proposition that if an omnipotent being were faced with Jove's predicament and refrained from creating, he would be morally better. Is this true? Let an *Adams world* be a world in which every creature is at least as happy on the whole as it could be and in which no creature has a life so miserable on the whole that it would have been better had it never existed.<sup>5</sup> Nothing in our story about Jove rules out the possibility that all the worlds at Jove's right hand are Adams worlds. So consider this question: would an omnipotent being faced with a choice between actualizing a virtually empty world and an Adams world demonstrate that he was morally better than Jove if he created nothing?

We believe not. For, first of all, while there is nothing to recommend a virtually empty world over an Adams world, there is much to recommend an Adams world over a virtually empty world. Secondly, and perhaps a bit more contentiously, it is not possible for a morally unsurpassable creator to actualize the virtually empty world. Whatever else may characterize moral unsurpassability, love does, and it is not possible to exhibit the best sort of love if there is no one else around. Thus, since a morally unsurpassable being would surely prefer to exhibit his love rather than not, he would be constrained by his nature to create an Adams world over a virtually empty one. And so we conclude that if an omnipotent being faced with Jove's predicament did not create, it's false that he would be morally better than Jove.

## 2

We imagined that Jove used the randomizer and world no. 777 was the result. Now imagine a world in which an omnipotent being, call her Juno, constructs and uses an exact replica of Jove's randomizer but, because it churns out number 999, a better world than Jove's is actualized. *Ceteris paribus*, does Juno's using the device to produce world no. 999 show that she is morally better than Jove?

Of course not. Factors outside of one's control can make a difference to how much good one brings about *without* making a difference to how good one is. Jove has no control over what number his randomizer will deliver. Thus, given his resolve to let the device do its thing, it is not up to him which of the worlds to his right is actualized. And precisely the same can be said about Juno. Thus, even if a better world results from Juno's using the device, that's no reason to infer that she is morally better than Jove.

Perhaps it will be objected that as a society we punish the drunk driver who hits and kills a child more severely than we punish the drunk driver who gets home safely, even if we think that it was a matter of sheer luck that the second got home safely and the first did not. If this response is rational, one might infer that the first driver did greater wrong and, hence, is a worse person than the second driver. One might be tempted to generalize that if factors outside one's control make a difference to how much good one brings about, then they make a difference to how good one is. In that case, the objection goes, we should infer that Jove is a worse person than Juno after all.

Philosophers disagree over whether the first driver did something wrong that the second driver did not do. We shan't get bogged down in that debate. But even granting that the first driver did do something wrong that the second driver did not, clearly it is a mistake to infer that, for this reason alone, the first is a worse person than the second. To think otherwise is like supposing that if Jeffrey Dahmer had been caught and brought to trial in 1985 and thus had slain fewer boys, he would have been a better person; it is like supposing that if Mother Teresa had been assassinated in 1990 and thus had cared for fewer destitute people, she would have been a worse person. A more plausible view is that while it is appropriate to punish the first driver more severely for the extra wrong (we are supposing) he did, we oughtn't to infer that he is a worse person.

## 3

Suppose we agree that, *ceteris paribus*, Jove and Juno are morally equivalent. "Nevertheless," you might insist, "Jove is morally surpassable. For imagine Thor, a possible omnipotent being who faces Jove's choice. Instead of constructing and using a randomizer to select which of the infinitely many progressively better worlds to actualize, Thor actualizes world no. 888 *without*

using a randomizer. Surely, Thor in world no. 888 is morally better than Jove in world no. 777 and hence Jove is morally surpassable."

But is it true that, if an omnipotent being in Jove's predicament created a better world without using an indeterministic device, then, *ceteris paribus*, he would be morally better than Jove? In what would that betterness consist? Obviously it would not consist in the fact that Thor actualized a better world than Jove. For given that Jove and Juno are morally equivalent, if Thor is better than Jove, then he's better than Juno; but the world Thor actualizes is inferior to the world Juno actualizes. So if Thor is better than Jove, it must be in virtue of some other difference between them. Perhaps the crucial difference is a difference in attitude. For example, one might urge that there is a significant moral difference between a creator who, faced with Jove's choice, settles for letting some random occurrence determine which world he creates and a creator who, faced with the same choice, deliberately picks a specific world for some reason. This line of thought seems quite plausible when we consider human analogies. Imagine a parent trying to decide what school to send her son to. We'd surely think better of her if she picked a particular school on the basis of its comparative merits rather than leaving the matter to chance, which seems uncaring at worst and insufficiently attentive at best. In a similar fashion, we might imagine Thor considering whether to create world no. 777, and then noticing out of the corner of his mind's eye world no. 888 and, seeing that it is better, reasoning as follows: "World no. 888 is better than world no. 777 and, surely, it's preferable to actualize a better world if I can." And so Thor doesn't settle for world no. 777 and actualizes world no. 888 instead.

But this difference between Thor and Jove does not show that Thor is morally better than Jove. To see why, suppose that prior to constructing the randomizer, Jove reasoned like this: "World no. 888 is better than world no. 777 and, surely, it's preferable to actualize a better world if I can. And world no. 999 is better than world no. 888. Surely it's preferable to actualize a better world if I can. And world no. 1099 is...hold on here! If I keep this up, I'll actualize a virtually empty world. Perhaps I should create an indeterministic device that..." The rest of the story has already been told. The important point to see here is that given a choice between infinitely many progressively better worlds to actualize, Jove wisely rejects Thor's principle that if there's a better world than *w*, don't create *w*, *not* because he is casual or uncaring or objectionably settling for less, but because that principle in that context would lead him (and Thor, were he rational) to do nothing, which is far worse than using the randomizer.

Perhaps there is some other relevant difference between Thor and Jove that would make Thor morally better than Jove. For example, one might note that we have assumed that the only reason Thor might have for picking world no.

888 over another is that the former is better than the latter. But there are plenty of other considerations that might constitute Thor's reason for picking no. 888. Thus, on this retelling of the story, Thor decides on his own for a reason to create some particular world whereas Jove allows something else to make the decision for him. In that case Jove, unlike Thor, abdicates his status as rational agent in the creative process and is therefore worse than Thor.<sup>6</sup> By way of reply, note that by creating the indeterministic device Jove does decide on his own for a reason to produce some world or other; he does not abdicate his status as a rational agent. Perhaps the objector will say that Thor is more rational than Jove in virtue of narrowing down the options to one. But this is an illusion. Thor is not better *qua rational agent* than Jove since on this retelling of the story Thor selects world no. 888 not because of its goodness but because he simply prefers it, say, because it has simpler laws or lots of waterfalls and jagged peaks and he likes those things. But having and acting on such preferences is not enough to make Thor more rational than Jove.

## 4

We have considered three ways an omnipotent being might behave differently than Jove:

- i. Do nothing.
- ii. Use Jove's randomizing procedure to produce a better world.
- iii. Use a non-randomizing procedure to produce a better world.

In each case we've seen that Jove is not morally worse.

There are other ways in which an omnipotent being could behave in Jove's predicament. But those we can think of are either just plain silly or subject to objections we've raised regarding (i), (ii) and (iii). An instance of the second sort is this: suppose an omnipotent being creates a better world using a randomizing procedure *different* than the one Jove used. For example, imagine Jac, an omnipotent being who believes that if he guarantees that some worse right hand worlds are not actualized, he would be morally better than one who could but didn't guarantee this. Thus, instead of using Jove's procedure, Jac might first "halve" the right hand worlds then use the randomizer to produce one of those worlds in the right half. The problem with this procedure is that if Jac has enough reason to halve at all, he has enough reason to halve again, and again, and again, and a virtually empty world threatens. To avoid this result, one might recommend to Jac that he first use the randomizer to select a number of halvings, then, after reassigning integers to the remaining worlds, use it once more to pick which of the remainder to actualize. But this doesn't help. If Jac has enough reason to use the device

twice—first to halve the worlds on his right and second to select a particular world to actualize—, then he has enough reason to use the device three times—first to halve the worlds on his right, second to multiply that number by another randomly selected number and third to select a particular world to actualize. And if he has enough reason to use the device three times, he has enough reason to use it four times...and we're off to the races. Far from guaranteeing that worse right hand worlds aren't actualized, the recommended reasoning leads to a virtually empty world.

We'd like to consider one more objection.<sup>7</sup> Presumably there are many different randomizers which Jove might have used to pick a world to create. Let R1 stand for the device Jove actually used, and let R2 to Rn stand for the others. Now, one might argue that if Jove is omniscient, then he would know, for any of R1 to Rn, which world it would select if he were to create that device. So, prior to making R1, he knew that, if he made R1, it would select world no. 777. Now, suppose he also knew that one of the other randomizers, say, R2, would select a world better than no. 777, and that no randomizer would in fact select a world better than the one selected by R2. Wouldn't we then have sufficient grounds to infer Jove was morally surpassable?

That all depends. Suppose there are no truths about which world a randomizer would select were it created. Then Jove wouldn't know for any device which world it would select. So we would not on these grounds rightly infer Jove's moral surpassability. But suppose Jove does have the knowledge in question. Still, we ought not to think less of Jove. After all, for all we know the randomizer Jove uses selects a better world than any other randomizer would select. Of course, for all we know, there is no best randomizer because it could be that for any device he might create, there is another he could have created which would have selected a better world than the first one would select. Should we think less of Jove for not creating the best randomizer in that case?

No. But countenancing infinitely many randomizers raises a related worry. If Jove thinks that the best way to produce a world is to construct a randomizer, then surely he'd think that the best way to select a randomizer would be to construct a randomizer to pick one. An infinite regress looms. Of course, Jove would have the same sort of reason for ending this infinite regress as he would for creating the device in the first place. Perhaps he would arbitrarily pick some device, for no reason at all, save that some device has to be chosen in order to avoid a virtually empty world.

We imagine our reader will ask: if Jove can do that, why can't he just pick some world arbitrarily without creating a randomizer in the first place? That's a good question. And here we remove our mask. The randomizer has served its purpose: had Jove just up and created world no. 777 in the scenario originally described, so doing would not have reflected badly on him in any way at all.



## 5

Perhaps there are ways we haven't thought of in which an omnipotent being could behave differently from Jove. There's always that danger to beware of in drawing inferences over a territory whose boundaries are not clearly discernible. But our hunch is that they too will be like the cases we have considered. If our hunch is correct, then Jove nicely illustrates how an unsurpassable being can create a surpassable world.

This consequence should be of some interest to those who, imbued with the spirit of Anselm, are tempted to believe propositions like these:

- Q. Necessarily, for any  $w$ ,  $w'$  and  $x$ , if  $w$  is an actualizable world and  $w'$  is an actualizable world and  $w$  is a morally better world than  $w'$ , then if  $x$  is an omnipotent moral agent and  $x$  actualizes  $w'$ , then  $x$  is such that there is some possible world in which there is a  $y$  such that  $y$  is a better moral agent in that world than  $x$  is in  $w'$ .
- R. If a being creates a world when there is a morally better world that it could have created, then it is possible that there exists a morally better being than it.<sup>8</sup>

And it should be of special interest to those who are further tempted to think that "on the supposition that for every creatable world there is another world that is better than it,...principle [R] leads to the conclusion that there is no essentially omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being."<sup>9</sup> Although what we have said may not be sufficient to reject Q and R outright, we certainly hope, by Jove, that it is enough to help those so tempted to resist believing them.<sup>10</sup>

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## NOTES

1. Of course, we have represented Jove as being spatially located, as being both omniscient and coming to learn things, and as having a choice about whether to create worlds that an essentially morally unsurpassable being could not create, i.e., those on the left hand side. Moreover, we have assumed that the ranking Jove gives the right hand worlds does not permit ties and that there wouldn't be so many worlds that they couldn't be mapped one-to-one to the positive natural numbers. And we have left untold the inner workings of the randomizing device. We invite the fastidious reader to retell our story in such a way as to avoid these mundane infelicities.

2. See Philip Quinn, "God, Moral Perfection, and Possible Worlds," in *God: The Contemporary Discussion*, edited by Frederick Sontag and M. Darrol Bryant (New York: The Rose of Sharon Press, 1982), p. 213.

3. This is, virtually, what William Rowe writes in “The Problem of Divine Perfection and Freedom,” in *Reasoned Faith* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, forthcoming), edited by Eleonore Stump, p. 8 and pp. 10-11.

4. Hereafter, we shall either leave this qualification tacit or use “*ceteris paribus*” as a reminder.

5. See Robert M. Adams, “Must God Create the Best?,” in *The Virtue of Faith and Other Essays in Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 53.

6. We are grateful to Thomas Flint for this objection.

7. The discussion of the next three paragraphs is almost entirely due to comments we received from Flint.

8. See the previously cited essays by Quinn and Rowe.

9. We think here of William Rowe, in an amended later version of the previously cited essay.

10. We are grateful to five people: William Rowe, for his interest and invaluable input; Philip Quinn, for conversation, correspondence and encouragement; Jan A. Cover, for Sunday afternoon (and, no, we refuse to add that craziness about creating all the worlds); Peter van Inwagen: for the conceptual space provided by “The Place of Chance in a World Sustained by God”; and Thomas Flint, for comments which in substance and spirit are an example *par excellence* of how refereeing should be done.