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No best world: moral luck

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Abstract: **William Rowe and others argue that if ours is a possible world than which there is a better, it follows that God does not exist. If this is correct, then if there is no best possible world, it is not so much as possible that God exist. I reject the key premise of Rowe's argument. The key to seeing that it is false, I suggest, is seeing that God is subject to something fairly called moral luck. In this first part of the article, I set up Rowe's argument, indicate my strategy, introduce the notion of moral luck and show how it bears on Rowe's claims.**

Many theists claim that:

(1) Necessarily, if God exists, then God is omnipotent, omniscient, essentially morally perfect, and such that if He exists in a possible world, He has created *ex nihilo*, and conserves in existence all that world's concrete things other than Himself.

Many who argue that there is no such God appeal to facts about evil: a morally perfect being with enough power and knowledge to do better, they claim, would surely make a universe with less. Recently, some authors have argued that even if there were no evil at all, and much more good than there is, the universe that would then exist would still be one that the God described above could not have made. All that one needs to disprove such a God's existence, they claim, is that there be a better universe God could have made. Such arguments hinge on theses like the one William Rowe calls 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 exist a being morally better than it.[1]

(B) speaks of creating worlds. But Rowe's worlds are possible worlds, Plantingean maximal states of affairs, and Rowe really means actualizing these, i.e. so acting in the concrete realm that a particular maximal state of affairs obtains.[2] So I now state Rowe's Better World Argument (BWA) in terms of

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actualizing worlds. *Per* (1), necessarily, if God exists, God is omniscient and omnipotent. So necessarily, if God exists, then if there are better possible worlds than ours, God could have actualized some of them. So given (B), necessarily, if God exists, then if there are better possible worlds than ours, it is possible that someone be morally better than God actually is. *Per* (1), necessarily, if God exists, God is essentially morally perfect (EMP), and

(2) Necessarily, no-one can be morally better than someone EMP.

So necessarily, if God exists, no-one can be morally better than God actually is. And so, given (1), (2), and (B), if there are better possible worlds than ours, then if God existed, a contradiction would follow, that it is and is not possible that someone be morally better than God. So given (1), (2), and (B), if there are better possible worlds than ours, then God does not exist. But

(3) For every possible world there is a better.[3]

So God does not exist.[4] One can display BWA's core more briefly this way. (B) is equivalent to the claim that:

(4) If an omniscient being than which there cannot be a morally better actualizes a world, there is no better world it could have actualized.

(4) imperils forms of theism including (1) if there is no best possible world, for if there is none, then no matter what world God actualizes, there is a better He could have actualized.

Let's consider BWA's premises. (1) is standard perfect-being theism. A case for (3) runs this way. For at least some sorts of good thing, e.g. contented cows, more equally good things of this sort are better. Add to a possible world more equally good things of one of these kinds, properly arranged – the cows need enough space, fodder, etc. – and the result is a better possible world. Adding one cow to a world with no cows is a limiting case of this. So, for any world, this sort of addition seems possible. Again, more *better* good things are better. For any world containing n conscious beings as happy as they can be, there could be a world containing $n+1$ conscious beings able to be happier and as happy as they can be. Adding one conscious being to a world with none or one better conscious being to a world with only lesser conscious beings is adding more better good things. So for any world, this sort of addition seems possible.[5] So it seems that there is no best possible world: (3) seems true. But (2) is actually ambiguous, between

(2a) Necessarily, for all x and worlds W, if x is EMP in W, no-one in W is morally better than x is in W; and

(2b) Necessarily, for all x and worlds W, if x is EMP in W, no-one in any world is morally better than x is in W.

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(2a) is true. There is no higher moral status than being EMP. So if God is EMP in every possible world, in no possible world is anyone God's moral superior – *in that world*. But what BWA needs is (2b). (2b) is not obvious. I suggest in a companion paper that an EMP God can be morally better than the same EMP God in another world.[6] If this is true, (2b) is false and BWA fails.[7] But here I target (B). I first consider the arguments for (B).

Why (B)?

Rowe argues (B) this way: suppose that omniscient being C1 picks a world to create. C1 picks a world only if C1 judges it acceptable for creation. What C1 judges good enough to create indicates how good C1 is.[8] If there is a better world C1 could have created, it is possible that there be another creator, C2, with standards so much higher than C1's that C2 would rule the world C1 picks not good enough to create, and for this reason pick the better world. C2's standards would indicate how good C2 is. So C2's goodness would exceed C1's. So, if an omniscient being creates a world when there is a better world it could have created, there could be a being morally better than it: which is (B).[9] Rowe takes it that if C1 tolerates a lesser world, the reason is that C1 has lesser standards for world-choice. I suggest in Part 2 of this article (forthcoming) that, on assumptions most theists make, C1 might tolerate a lesser world due to having the best possible standards and an unsurpassable level of goodness. Why C1 tolerates what C1 does matters to how good C1 is. If my alternate explanation of C1's choice is viable, there is no clear reason to accept Rowe's assumption: my story is (I claim) no less plausible.

Now these stories are incompatible. They also exhaust the possibilities: either C1's choice stems from the best possible standards etc., or it stems from ones less good than other possible standards etc. If this is so, and there is no reason to prefer one story to the other, the rational course is either to suspend judgement or have in each a 0.5 degree of confidence. If we do the first, we must also suspend judgement on Rowe's argument, and so it does not raise our confidence in (B). If we do the second, we must say that Rowe's argument does not of itself make (B) more likely than not (which is not a mark of great success), and does not raise our confidence in (B) to over 0.5 if we have no other reason to accept (B), to which Rowe's argument can be added.

One could also rest (B) on some thoughts of Leibniz:

> To do less good than one could is to be lacking in wisdom or goodness … . God is bound by a moral necessity to make things in such a manner than there can be nothing better: otherwise … he would not himself be satisfied with the work, he would blame himself for its imperfection, and that conflicts with the supreme felicity of the divine nature.[10]

One component of goodness is benevolence. Were God satisfied with less than the best He could give, Leibniz seems to think, this would show Him to be less

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than perfectly benevolent, unless, by lack of knowledge ('wisdom'), He did not see what more He might do, or He knew what better He might do but, due to failure in practical reason ('wisdom'), did not apply His knowledge, or did not prefer the better to the worse, or chose what He preferred less to what He preferred more.[11] Langtry has a related thought: if one world is better than another then, *ceteris paribus*, God has more reason to make the better one, and a perfectly rational being will more incline to do what it has more reason to do, on pain of acting less rationally than it might.[12] Langtry's argument gives us not (B) but a principle that would work as well,

(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 be someone wiser (more rational) than it.

All of these arguments assume that God has complete control of how much good He does by creating. Only in this way can Rowe and Leibniz take it that differences in worlds' goodness must express differences in their creators' wisdom or goodness. If a creator need not get quite the world it wants, then even if two equally wise and good creators try to actualize just the same states of affairs, they need not get the same resulting world. If they need not, it is just false that different world entails different moral stature.

Suppose that God does not entirely control how much good He does by creating: suppose, for instance, that God in creating sets in motion indeterministic processes He does not control, and these affect how much good the creative act winds up accomplishing. Then, it could be that God creates non-divine things which might have brought about more good than they actually did, and so winds up doing less good overall (directly, by creating, and indirectly, by setting these processes in motion) than He might have. But *pace* Leibniz, this is not to His goodness's discredit if He was not in control and did not determine the outcome. If He had good-enough reason to have it so, it is not to His wisdom's discredit either. Assuming He'd done His best to direct the processes (short of controlling them, which (again) we're presuming He has good-enough reason not to do), it would not be rational for Him to blame Himself for resulting imperfections, and so He would not. And any reason He'd have to set such processes in motion would be sufficient only if He could assure Himself that even the worst-case result would be one He could be satisfied with.

Similar considerations apply to (B*): without an assumption of complete divine control, differences in worlds needn't correlate with differences in wisdom, for what God has most reason to bring about isn't necessarily what gets brought about. I shortly show how to defeat not just these arguments, but (B) and (B*), by denying the divine-control assumption – and that it is in fact virtually an entailment of Western theism that this assumption is false.

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How intuitive is (B)?

Rowe also claims that (B) is intuitive enough not really to need arguing: that if (B) survives objections, it qualifies for acceptance.[13] How intuitive a principle is in itself is a matter of how confident we should be that it is true, apart from all argument. So let's now consider this. Since (B) is a conditional, this matter gets a bit complex. If (B) seems plausible, this is (I think) because its antecedent (an omniscient being creates a world when there is a better world that it could have created, henceforth (BA)) seems to imply its consequent (it is possible that there exists a being morally better than this omniscient being (henceforth BC)). But (BA) concerns the value of a product, and (BC) the moral status of an agent. So there must be further suppressed premises to get us from a claim about the one to a claim about the other.

Let's say that x and y are morally indiscernible iff x and y have precisely the same virtues and vices to precisely the same degrees plus either identical or equivalent moral records. Take it that their records are identical iff for every good (bad) act x has performed, y has performed a token of that act-kind perfectly similar in all morally relevant respects, and that xy's moral records are equivalent iff for every good (bad) act x has performed, y has performed a token of a different act-kind on which supervene precisely the same moral properties in the same degrees. Then (BA) implies (BC) only when conjoined with the likes of

(5) For all x, if x is omniscient, then if x actualizes a world and there is a better world x might have actualized, x knows this.
(6) For all x, if x can actualize a world and knowingly does not, there can be a being which actualizes that world which is at least x's equal in power and knowledge and morally indiscernible from x save for this act of creating.
(7) Necessarily, for all xy, if in W x actualizes world W and in W* y instead actualizes W*, and W* is a better world than W, and nothing else distinguishes these actions morally, y's action in W* is morally better than x's action in W. And,
(8) Necessarily, for all xy, if x in W and y in W* are morally indiscernible save that one action of x is morally better than one action of y, x is in W a morally better being than y is in W*.

Now (5) is patent. (6) is almost as clear: the being might well be x itself in another possible world. But there are problems with (7) and (8). I use these to object to (B). For (B) is true just if (BA) implies (BC). If it is given that (5)–(8) are true that (BA) implies (BC), (BA) implies (BC) only if all of (5)–(8) are true.[14] But there is good reason to think that at least one is not true. If there is, there is good reason to think (B) false.[15]

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One could claim that if all we have is some reason to think that one of (5)–(8) false, we should, instead of calling (B) false, just consider how confident we should be in (B). So here's another way to use objections to (7) and (8) against (B). We should have in (B) roughly the confidence we would have in accepting (BC) if we believed (BA) (and made minimal adjustments to render our belief-set with this addition maximally rational).[16] So, if it seems to us that (BA) implies (BC), we should have a confidence near certainty in (B). But again, it's really (BA) plus (5)–(8) that implies (BC). If at least one of (5)–(8) is false, then even if (BA) plus (5)–(8) implies (BC), it might in fact be the case that (BA) is true but (BC) false.

So how should we adjust our confidence in (B) as doubts about (7) and (8) arise? Our confidence in (BC) might have three sources: (BA) plus (5)–(8), (BC)'s 'intrinsic credibility',or something involving neither (BC), nor (BA), nor (5)–(8). If there is such a thing as intrinsic credibility, (BC)'s is moot. We cannot rule it out that (BC)'s omniscient being is EMP. For, apart from BWA, it's not clear that we have reason to do so,[17] and to appeal to BWA here would be question-begging. But if (2b) is true, then if (BC)'s omniscient being is EMP, what (BC) asserts to be possible isn't. (If (2b) is false, BWA fails, as BWA requires (2b).) So it seems that apart from arguments for (BC), we should suspend judgement on it. No other arguments for (BC) are in sight. So, our confidence in (BC) given (BA) probably should drop to nearly the lower of our confidence in (7) and our confidence in (8): if my only reason to think (BC) true is that I think that (BA) plus (5)–(8) are true and imply it, the less my confidence in the premises, the less should be my confidence that (BC) is true. Any who find my case against (7) or (8) convincing, then, will have little reason to think (BC) true, even if they accept (BA). If we should have in (B) roughly the confidence we would have in accepting (BC) if we believed (BA), and it is the case that accepting (BA) would leave us with little or no confidence in (BC), we should have little or no confidence in (B): a good case against (7) or (8) defeats the claim that (B) has any great intuitive plausibility on its own.

With their import clear, I now raise questions about (7) and (8).

Some questions about benevolence

The thought behind (7) is presumably that if one creates a better world, *ceteris paribus* one does a more benevolent or generous action. But this needn't be so. Benevolence or generosity are directed *towards* particular recipients. One can't be benevolent without benefiting someone or other. But some ways to make worlds better do not benefit any creature in them. Consider two possible worlds W and W*. They are indiscernible save that in W*, a beach has one more grain of sand on it. Nothing flows from this. The sand-grain's presence or absence does not affect a world's beauty – nor the experience of any sentient creature; W and W* are without sentient creatures. Now grains of sand are good things. So W* is very slightly better than W. But suppose that creator C1 would create W*, and

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creator C2, W. Would C2 have been less benevolent or generous? C2 denies no creature in W any gift C1 gives creatures in W*: if W and W* lack sentient creatures, there is no-one to whom the sand-grain is given.[18] For that matter, if W and W* had sentient beings, but none to whom the grain of sand's existence makes any difference, what sense would there be in claiming that the grain is given to them? They don't own it. They don't enjoy it without owning it. They merely co-exist with it.

It is surely possible to co-exist with something that brings one no benefit. If it can be the case that in adding a good to a world God does not benefit any creature in that world, differences in goods created don't entail differences in benevolence.[19] If in adding the good God is not being generous *to* anyone, adding the good does not make the act more generous. If so, arguably creating a world with more goods which are not goods *for* their creatures needn't be a *morally* better action. For it's not obvious what moral virtue this would express or develop. One way God could add good to a world that would not be a good for its creatures would be to add beauty to it that no creature ever perceives. Suppose that two painters are morally indiscernible up to time *t*, and at *t* complete canvases one of which has more aesthetic merit than the other, then both destroy the canvases so that no-one ever sees them. Is it at all plausible that one painter is *ipso facto* morally better than the other, as of *t*?[20] Perhaps it is in some sense a better action to realize more non-moral good without being more benevolent, but it remains to be shown that the sense must be moral. Only a claim about being morally better is relevant to (B) or to an objection to (1).

The obvious rejoinder here is to substitute for (7) a claim such as,

> (7a) Necessarily, for all *xy*, if in W *x* actualizes world W and in W* *y* instead actualizes W*, and W* is a *morally* better world than W, and nothing else distinguishes these actions morally, *y*'s action in W* is morally better than *x*'s action in W.[21]

Talk of morally better worlds cannot just amount to talk of worlds it is morally better to actualize, on pain of reducing (7a) to vacuity. Factors making worlds morally better might include e.g. more moral good, less moral evil, a better good/evil balance, more and/or better right acts, less and/or less bad wrong acts, a better right/wrong balance, less suffering or less natural evil. The best account will probably have to include most or all of these to deal with counter-examples.

I now argue that, on reasonable assumptions, in many cases a deity's activity cannot account for the moral difference between how things are in one world and how they would be if another world were actual. If so, then it can be the case for some *xy* that *x* actualizes a world and *y* would have actualized a morally better, but *y*'s activity would not have accounted for the difference in their moral values. But then, if nothing other than the worlds' moral differences distinguishes their actions morally, *y*'s action would not have morally surpassed *x*'s, since only facts

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for which an action somehow accounts can affect its moral value. So, if it can be the case that a deity's activity cannot account for worlds' moral differences, (7a) is false. If on the other hand a deity's activity can, in all cases, account for the moral difference between worlds, I suggest that it may well turn out that a morally better world than ours is not both possible and in God's all-things-considered power.

Now to the argument. In many cases, the difference in worlds' moral value consists in creatures' right and wrong acts, or the moral good and evil inherent in creatures' doing certain acts. In these cases, divine activity can account for the whole moral difference between worlds only if it can wholly account for creatures' doing what they do. It wholly accounts for this iff God causes creatures to act. If He does so, He does so just by willing, as He does all things. I now consider two ways God might will creatures' actions.[22]

On the simpler, God has an executive volition – of the sort by which He creates the world – simply that I do A. If He does, it is not possible that I resist His will, or fail to do A. God is omnipotent. So, if He executively wills a state of affairs within His power, He cannot fail to bring that state of affairs about. That I do A is something God could bring about. So, on this alternative, I am not able not to do A.[23] Further, I do not initiate my actions: God does. Only compatibilists will think that this can leave intact my moral responsibility for my actions. But Western theists, at any rate, cannot appeal to compatibilism here. If compatibilism is true, then it is possible for God to leave us free and responsible and yet causally determine what we do – so that, say, we do no moral evil at all. If this is possible, it is hard to argue that there is good reason for God to allow the moral evil He has.

There have of course been theist compatibilists, e.g. Augustine, Calvin, and Leibniz. But almost no philosopher thinks their approaches to moral evil adequate.[24] I here side with the majority: if compatibilism is true, the problem of moral evil is insoluble and so God does not exist. If compatibilism is false, the sort of divine causation just outlined would remove my responsibility for my actions. If I'm not responsible for my actions, my doing them is not part of a world's moral value, for in doing them I do not act rightly or wrongly, or do good or evil actions (as distinct from actions with good or evil consequences[25]).[26] So God cannot, by causing creatures' actions in this way, account for worlds' differences in moral value.

You might reply: so in this case God is the sole agent morally responsible for (say) my truth-telling. Doesn't this give us the result that God accounts for the moral difference between a world in which I tell the truth and one in which I lie? I reply that if only God is morally responsible for my truth-telling, this is not a world whose moral value consists partly in my telling the truth. It is one whose moral value consists partly in God's causing me to tell the truth. So, even if God can in this way cause a world to be actual in which I tell the truth, He cannot in

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this way cause to be actual a world whose moral value consists partly in my right acts.

If the problem with the first way God might will my actions is that I cannot resist Him, then perhaps God might will instead that I do A iff I choose to do A, and that I am free not to choose this. Then it is open to me not to do A. But then if I choose not to do A, or fail to choose, God does not get full moral credit for this. He might get some for influencing my choice in ways that do not determine it. But merely partial credit won't let God account for the whole difference in worlds' moral value. This leaves open the possibility of worlds whose sole moral difference consists in those aspects of my actions for which God gets no credit, which would falsify (7a). If I choose to do A, what then? Either,

(a) I alone then cause my doing A;
(b) God alone then causes my doing A;
(c) God and I each partly cause my doing A;
(d) God and I overdetermine it that I do A: we each causally suffice for this on our own.

On (a), God's volition brings about nothing at all.[27] So God gets no moral credit at all for my actions, and so does not account for worlds' moral differences where creaturely free actions constitute these. On (b), I get moral credit for choosing to do A, but not for doing A. God causes that, as surely as if He simply willed that I do A, and the problem is as it was in the last paragraph. Further, this leaves it possible that God not get the moral credit for the moral difference between a pair of possible worlds, since it is possible that what makes one world better consist entirely in those parts or aspects of creaturely choices, for which He gets no credit. On (c), the problem is similar: it's possible that worlds differ morally due entirely to that in creatures' actions for which God gets no moral credit. On (d), God and I share moral credit. But then it is possible that what makes a world better consists entirely in creaturely acts God overdetermines. Where causes A and B overdetermine an effect, neither A nor B is the cause of the effect: the only cause that can be assigned is the sum of A and B.

On one theory of providence, God can will me to act in another way, which might, by His control of what I do, get God moral credit for moral differences between worlds that arise out of my doing what I do. It's conceivable that God control without causing, as in this Frankfurt-style example: mad scientist, Max, plants an electrode in my brain that will cause me to intend to kill someone if I do not form the intention on my own. But I do form the intention on my own. Here, Mad Max controls my intention – it is no longer up to me whether I form the intention. But he does not cause me to form the intention, since the electrode never came into play. So, he does not cause me to bring this decrement of moral value into the world – which our intuitions recognize by declaring him not guilty of my act if I act on the intention. If God merely controls without causing, God

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does not cause the moral difference between worlds. But His control guarantees that the difference will be there, and if He has arranged things suitably, He (unlike Max) might get moral credit for creatures' actions.

One theory of divine providence allows for this. On Molinism, God can control my acts without causing me to do them.[28] On Molinism, in each possible world, God finds unalterable contingent truths about what agents other than He would freely do in various possible circumstances ('counterfactuals of freedom', henceforth CFs). Since God cannot alter the CFs, as He considers what to create, worlds in which these CFs are true are His only 'live' options. Suppose that, in fact, were Judas offered final salvation in situation S, he would reject it. If that's true, then it is not in a Molinist God's all-things-considered power to actualize any world in which Judas in S accepts salvation.[29] God has the all-things-considered power to try, but if He tried, He would fail: Judas in S would reject the offer. Worlds with different CFs are possible, but if only certain CFs are in fact true; it is only the case that God could have actualized worlds with other CFs (had their CFs been true instead). It is (again) not actually in His all-things-considered power to do so.

Given Molinist resources, God can control my actions. If, in fact, were I in situation S I would do A, God can take advantage of this to get me to do A, for He can so manipulate things that I wind up in S. He can will me to do A merely by willing arrangements that lead me eventually to be in S. But God need not cause me to do A. Once I get into S, I take care of that myself. By guaranteeing that I do A, God seems to earn moral credit for my act. But because He does not cause it, one might argue, I get moral credit for it too: the same moral credit seems to accrue to us, but in different respects.

Perhaps Molinism does not remove my responsibility by keeping me from initiating my actions. But it's arguable that Molinism does not genuinely preserve my ability to do otherwise. The CF *were I in S, I would do A* is true from all eternity. So too is it that God has so willed that I will come to be in S. So, from all eternity there is a cause that guarantees that I will be in S. In no possible world is it the case that God has so willed that I will be in S, and the CF is true, and yet I do not do A. Given these conditions, I cannot do otherwise: it is merely the case that I could have done otherwise (had they not obtained). So Molinism removes my all-things-considered ability to do otherwise, and if this is necessary for moral responsibility, it removes my moral responsibility.[30]

And there is a further worry: even if God does not will that I do A, but merely so wills that I come to be in S, doesn't He, in fact, initiate my action, albeit indirectly? What initiates my action makes the first difference in the world that guarantees that (barring miracle) I do A. On the Molinist scenario, I do not make this first difference at the moment of choice. God makes it from all eternity. If this is correct, then God removes my responsibility much as He would if He just directly caused my actions. So I submit that, if God controls my action by Molinist

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means, He removes my moral responsibility for what I do – and so again, He is unable to account for the increment of moral value my actions bring a world. So, it seems that there is no way God can get all the moral credit for differences between worlds consisting in the acts creatures do in them. So it seems that (7a) comes out false, no matter how we treat God's relation to creaturely action.

Suppose finally that I'm wrong about Molinism, and that God can control creaturely action by Molinist means and still have creatures count as morally responsible. If God has this kind of control over creaturely action, the problem of moral evil gets harder to handle. The Molinist response is, in essence, Plantinga's free-will defence.[31] This claims precisely that, given the CFs there actually are, it is not in God's all-things-considered power to actualize a world morally better in terms of the conditions listed above. Such worlds are possible, but they involve different CFs. The upshot, then, is this. If Molinism does not preserve created moral responsibility, then where worlds' moral differences hinge on creaturely action, God's actualizing worlds cannot account for the whole of their moral differences, and so (7a) is false. If Molinism does preserve this, Molinist free-will defences are available to contend that morally better worlds than ours are not in God's reach. If they are not, it turns out false that

(4a) If an omniscient being than which there cannot be a morally better actualizes a world, there is no morally better world it could have actualized,[32]

and since an argument depending on (7a) must appeal to (4a), not (4) or (B), BWA fails. So if Molinism preserves created moral responsibility, BWA fails if the free-will defence succeeds: one needs no more to defeat BWA than one does to defeat the standard problem of moral evil.

Records and virtues

I now turn to (8). Prima facie, more than one factor contributes to an action's moral value: there are, at least, the intention it's done with, its kind (e.g. murder), the virtue (vice) the action expresses or fosters, and its consequences.[33] I soon argue that their consequences sometimes make actions morally better without entailing that *agents* are morally better. This turns out to affect (8). Again, if x and y are morally indiscernible save that one action of x is morally better than one action of y, x has a better moral record than y. But more than a record is involved in x being morally better than y.

There is also the question of how virtuous the two are. Leibniz seems to think that lesser record entails lesser virtue: in the text quoted, he moves directly from doing less good (and so having a lesser record) to lacking some 'wisdom or

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goodness', which are virtues. The relevant sort of goodness is surely benevolence, so Leibniz seems to think that:

(9) Necessarily, for all *xy*, if *x* has a better record of benevolent acts than *y*, *x* has a higher degree of the virtue of benevolence (henceforth benevolence$_v$) than *y*,

and,

(10) Necessarily, for all *xy*, if *x* has a higher degree of some virtue than *y* and *xy* are otherwise equal in virtue, *x* is morally better than *y*.

If (9) turns out false, (10) becomes questionable, for there are then at least two independent factors to consider in comparing moral status, record, and degree of virtue. If better record does not automatically bring with it greater virtue, it might be possible that there be two agents *xy* morally indiscernible save that *x* has slightly more of one minor virtue than *y*, and *y* has a better record than *x* of acts expressing a major virtue. To me at least it is not clear that in this case, overall *x* is *y*'s moral superior.

I now argue against (9): *x* and *y* could be equally benevolent$_v$, I claim, even if their records are unequal. Being benevolent$_v$ involves more than having compiled a particular moral record. I show first that general considerations about moral luck cast doubt on (9). In Part 2 of this article I shall introduce, in connection with Molinism, the idea that God may have His own moral luck to deal with, and show that this is directly relevant to what sort of world He makes. I then show that on an assumption much less contentious than Molinism, something similar follows.

Moral luck and benevolence

To be subject to moral luck is to have factors that we do not control affect what we are responsible for, and so what moral praise or blame we deserve. Acts' circumstances and consequences can involve moral luck. As to the first, Germans living under the Nazis had the opportunity and duty to resist the Nazis. Many (it's safe to assume) did not even sincerely intend to do so. They were surely at fault for this. They would have been so even if no bad consequences had flowed from it (as might have been so had the regime fallen just after a given set of failures). We had the good luck not to face these challenges. So we did not so fail. But it was not up to us that we did not fail. Perhaps we were certain to fail, had we been so challenged. The Germans simply had the bad luck to be challenged, and we simply had the good luck not to face the circumstance the Germans did. Luck provided or withheld occasion to form morally creditable or discreditable intentions.[34] It thus affected agents' moral records and even their degrees of virtue. More generally, it is (mostly) not in our control what temptations we face. It might be that, had we met the very temptation which led someone to become

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corrupt, we too would have been corrupted. But we are not corrupt – because we had the good moral luck not to have the chance to be, even though we were no more virtuous than those who fell were before they fell.

There is also moral luck due to acts' consequences. Suppose that you and I are morally indiscernible and share some vices: we are both habitual drunks and both so irresponsible as habitually to drive when drunk. One night, as we separately drive home drunk, you chance to have a child run out in front of your car. You are so drunk that you do not see the child until you hit it. You strike and kill the child. I drive home without incident. You now have a blot on your moral record I lack: you have killed a child. Yet this doesn't entail that your character was or is now any worse than mine. On any reasonable definition of vice, your vice might be unchanged: you might e.g. be exactly as disposed to drive drunk as you were before.[35] You have simply had bad moral luck due to someone else's free action, and I have had the good moral luck that the child did not happen to run in front of *my* car.[36] Some deny the existence of consequential moral luck.[37] But the child's death is an evil. You freely put yourself in the condition, owing to which you couldn't avoid hitting the child. That you could not avoid hitting the child does not diminish your moral responsibility for hitting it, given that you are responsible for your condition. Perhaps you do not deserve the blame a murderer would deserve, but surely you deserve some blame you would not have deserved had the child not run out.

Consequential moral luck can infect benevolence. You and I, say, are equally rich and benevolent$_v$, and both intend to give £1,000 to friends in need for precisely similar reasons. We bag the money in small bills as a strange sort of joke. I hand my money to my friend. You, unfortunately, have cerebral palsy and have limited control over your limbs: as you reach out with the bag, you lose control of it, a gust of wind carries the bag away and scatters the money, and your friend winds up with none. We had the same intention. Your intention has had different consequences than mine, for reasons beyond your control. I now have a better record for benevolence than you: I have given £1,000 to those in need and you have not. Yet this doesn't seem to entail that you are any less benevolent$_v$ than I. We might still have the virtue equally. Rather, your disability has brought bad moral luck upon you, and I have had the good luck not to suffer from it.

If it is good luck not to suffer bad luck, moral luck infects all human moral records. But even one moral-luck case of the right sort is enough to falsify (9). So, while moral luck is controversial, I submit that (9) is false. Still, even if it is, it could be that having a better moral record none of which is due to moral luck entails being better morally – that is, that

(9a) Necessarily, for all *xy*, if *x* and *y* are moral agents whose acts of benevolence are not subject to moral luck and *x* has a better record of benevolent acts than *y*, *x* is more benevolent$_v$ than *y*.

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And it is hard to see how God's record of benevolence could be subject to moral luck. Still, on certain assumptions, it is. In Part 2 of this article, I show that something like moral luck crops up for God, given only a claim almost all theists accept. If it does, (9a) does not apply in God's case, and for Him as for us, lesser record does not entail lower degree of virtue. This leaves us in a complex situation, for then we have more than one proposition to consider in evaluating (8):

(8a) Necessarily, for all *xy*, if *x* and *y* are morally indiscernible, save that one action of *x* is morally better than one action of *y*, *x* has a better moral record than *y*.

(8b) Necessarily, for all *xy*, if *x* has a better moral record for virtue V than *y*, *x* is more V-virtuous than *y*.

(8c) Necessarily, for all *xy*, if *x* has a better moral record than *y*, *x* is morally better than *y*.

(8d) Necessarily, for all *xy*, if *x* is overall more virtuous than *y*, *x* is morally better than *y*. And,

(8e) Necessarily, for all *xy*, if *x* has a better moral record than *y* and *x* is overall more virtuous than *y*, *x* is morally better than *y*.

Since I soon argue that even God faces moral luck, we needn't consider versions of these qualified (as is (9a)) to exclude moral luck: they won't apply to God. Now (8a) is true and (8e) is extremely plausible. But (8b), I've argued, is false: we might have the drunk-driving vice equally, yet my drunk-driving record is better than yours if I do not run over a child and you do.[38] (8c) seems false. For it seems possible that *x* have a better moral record than *y* even if *y* is so much more virtuous that on balance *y* is morally better: *x* might benefit by moral good luck, *y* suffer moral bad luck. We must (I think) suspend judgement on (8d). For it seems possible that *x* be very slightly more virtuous than *y* but live only a short life of minimal moral exertion, thus not compiling much of a moral record, while *y* lives a long life, never quite becoming as virtuous as *x* was at death but by dint of long effort expressing less virtue amassing a considerable moral record – length of life is in this case itself a sort of moral luck.

In this case I simply do not know which to call morally better. But even given suitable tautologies (e.g. that what world one creates affects one's moral record), the conjunction of (BA), (5)–(7), (8a), and (8e) does not entail (BC). If so, there is no genuine intuitive reason to accept (B). (B)'s intuitive appearance dissolves on closer inspection, and so BWA fails if I can block the arguments for (B) and (B*). Moral luck turns out to provide one way to do so. For I will show in Part 2 of this article that if God has given creatures incompatibilist freedom,[39] He suffers moral luck, and so is not in complete control of how much good He does by creating: the control assumption mentioned earlier is false. This (again) places God beyond the reach of (9a) and luck-free versions of (8b)–(8d). Finally, as emerges later, it also falsifies (B).

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Nor is it ad hoc for theists to hold that God has given creatures this sort of freedom. It is the sort of freedom we think we have anyway, pre-philosophically. So, if we think there is a God, it is the sort we pre-philosophically incline to think that He has given us. I'd argue in addition that there is no solution to the problem of moral evil without appeal to it at some point. If that is, in fact, true, then since if there is moral evil, God exists only if there is a solution to the problem of moral evil, if there is moral evil, God exists only if creatures have such free will: given that there is moral evil, its existence is just an implication of mainstream Western theism, not a further assumption we're importing.

Notes

1. William Rowe *Can God Be Free?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 91.
2. *Ibid*., 77, n. 4.
3. *Ibid*., *passim*. Wielenberg replaces (3) with a claim that God can actualize a better world than this; Erik Wielenberg 'A morally unsurpassable God must create the best', *Religious Studies*, **40** (2004), 57. Sobel uses a consequence of (3), that this is not the best possible world; Jordan Sobel *Logic and Theism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 468.
4. Like arguments occur in Wielenberg 'Morally unsurpassable God'; Stephen Grover 'Why only the best is good enough', *Analysis*, **48** (1988), 224; Sobel *Logic and Theism*; and Earl Conee 'The nature and impossibility of moral perfection', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, **54** (1994), 815–825. Philip Quinn used essentially the same considerations to argue not that there is no God *tout court*, but that God is not a perfect being: Quinn rejects 'perfect-being theism' in favour of what he has called (in correspondence) 'pretty-impressive-being theism'; Philip Quinn 'God, moral perfection and possible worlds', in Frederick Sontag and M. D. Bryant (eds) *God: The Contemporary Discussion* (New York NY: The Rose of Sharon Press, 1982), 197–213. Nicholas Everitt argues that the fact that this world is not as perfect as God Himself entails that God does not exist; *The Non-Existence of God* (London: Routledge, 2004), 243–244.
5. The conscious beings *could* be disembodied spirits. So there are no physical prerequisites for adding conscious beings.
6. Brian Leftow 'Perfect benevolence', unpublished.
7. To make this pellucid: if God can be EMP in two worlds yet be better morally in one, He could be better morally in one by virtue of making a better world there, yet exist in both. But BWA's claim is that if God could have made a better world, He does not exist in ours.
8. Rowe *Can God Be Free?*, 119.
9. *Ibid*.
10. Gottfried Leibniz *Theodicy*, E. Huggard (tr.), A. Farrer (ed.) (LaSalle, IL: Open Court Press, 1985), 252–253, quoted at Rowe *Can God Be Free?*, 17. For a recent parallel see Thomas Flint 'The problem of divine freedom', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, **20** (1983), 255.
11. The last two clauses are suggested by Sobel *Logic and Theism*, 469.
12. See Bruce Langtry 'God and the best', *Faith and Philosophy*, **13** (1996), 320.
13. Rowe *Can God Be Free?*, 124.
14. Or their like. I'll ignore this qualification hereafter, taking it that objections like the ones I lodge will apply too to other principles enough like (5)–(8) to get us from (BA) to (BC).
15. Rowe calls (B) a necessary truth (*Can God Be Free?*, 97). A reasonable interpretation of an indicative conditional prefixed by a '$\Box$' is as stating an entailment. So here is a second way to put the objection: P entails Q only if P implies Q. (BA) does not imply (BC). So (BA) does not entail it either, and so (B) is false.
16. 'Roughly' allows that factors other than confidence in the consequent given the antecedent are relevant here, but suggests that in (B)'s case these factors will not greatly alter how confident we should be in the conditional. For discussion of general difficulties here see Jonathan Bennett *A Philosophical Guide to Conditionals* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), 45–77.

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17. I parry another in my 'Necessary moral perfection', *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, **70** (1989), 240–260.
18. It would not be plausible to claim that it's given to itself or to the beach.
19. It would not be plausible to claim that God benefited the extra sand-grain by creating it.
20. We might infer that one is better at painting or had a better idea, if both were trying their best. This analogy would raise a different, non-moral question about God: if God creates a surpassable universe, does it follow that some other possible deity or God, in another possible world, could have had better ideas or been better at creating? Perfection at creating is a matter of execution, not of the task God chooses to execute. Nothing in the claim that a world is surpassable implies that its creation has not been perfectly executed. As to better ideas, if both God and a hypothetical second deity are omniscient, their ideas as to possible universes could differ only if what is possible differed: if, say, had this other deity been actual, better possible universes would've been available. If no better universes were possible, God is certainly not to be faulted for not knowing of any.
21. Quinn argues in terms of morally better worlds ('God, moral perfection and possible worlds', 213). Rowe's use of 'better' rather than 'morally better' is in deliberate contrast to Quinn (*Can God Be Free?*, 82, n. 10).
22. There are others. For instance, God might will me to do A by willing something to cause me to do A. Obviously this won't preserve my moral responsibility unless compatibilism is true. Thus, I need discuss only the simplest compatibilist case, as I do in the text.
23. That God can bring it about that I do A does not imply that He can bring it about that I do A with freedom to do otherwise. Now what God brings about is that I do A, not that He does it. So strictly, it is not God alone who actualizes this world: I help. But this complication doesn't matter for present purposes.
24. Paul Helm defends theist compatibilism. See his *Eternal God* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 1988), 109–170, and *The Providence of God* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1994), 174–177.
25. If I kill you but am not responsible for doing so, your death is an evil consequence of the action if you do not deserve to die. Other features of an act that might make it morally good or evil are its kind, the intention with which it is performed, and its relation to virtuous action. I do not murder you if I do not act responsibly. So I do not perform an act of an evil kind. My intention might or might not have governed/caused the action. If it did not, it could not make the act evil. (It's another matter whether having the intention was itself evil.) If it did, then I was nonetheless not responsible for the act only if I was not responsible for the intention – e.g. because I was caused to have it in some responsibility-removing way. But acting on an intention brought about in a way that removes my responsibility for the act cannot make an act evil. If I am brainwashed into killing you, I may act on an intention I have only due to my conditioning. If the brainwashing renders me not guilty of murder, it *ipso facto* keeps my intention from making the act count as murder. If my intention does not govern the action, the act does not express any virtue or vice of mine, even if my physical powers cause it. Nor does it develop any virtue or vice, since virtues and vices are habits of intentional action. Nor is it an evil act by being the sort of act a virtuous person would not do, since only the virtuous person's intentional actions serve as paradigms. If my intention does govern the action, I'd argue that virtues and vices are habits of actions intentional in the right way, and the rest would go as it did on the supposition that my intention did not govern the action.
26. Now for any orthodox Western theism, there is a sense in which God brings it about that creatures do what they do. For on any orthodox Western theism, at every region in spacetime God conserves in existence that region and all its occupants. Events occur in space–time regions. So God conserves events while they occur. Actions are a sort of event (*pace* David-Hillel Ruben, *Action and its Explanation* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), 177). So God conserves actions. God's conserving actions is His bringing it about that the actions occur. But for an action to occur is for its agent to do it. So on an orthodox Western account, God does bring it about that creatures do what they do. But there are two conceivable relations between God's conserving causation and creaturely agents' acting. Perhaps creatures do what they do because God conserves them in doing it. Or perhaps God conserves them in doing it because they do it. That is, either God or the agent, but not both, gets credit for initiating the action. If the agent initiates, then God brings it about that the agent acts, but it would not be apt to say that He causes the agent to act. The claim that God conserves but the agent initiates can seem paradoxical. The whiff of paradox can be dispelled, but I cannot tackle this here.

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27. If God is able to have a wholly ineffective volition *ad extra*, still He would know that this would be ineffective and He would see the pointlessness of this. So arguably if He is perfectly rational, He would not will that I do A iff I choose to do it if (a) is the proper parsing of this.
28. For a comprehensive treatment see Thomas Flint *Divine Providence* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).
29. For present purposes we needn't consider such complications as Plantinga's distinction between strong and weak actualization; Alvin Plantinga *The Nature of Necessity* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 1974), 172–173. All-things-considered power is power to do an act given all actual circumstances.
30. For other arguments along these lines see Kenneth Perszyk 'Molinism and the consequence argument', *Faith and Philosophy*, **20** (2003), 131–151; Langtry 'God and the best', 315–319; Hugh Rice *God and Goodness* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 2000), 98–101.
31. For which see e.g. Plantinga *Nature of Necessity*, 164–193. Below I connect natural evil with moral evil in a different way from Plantinga.
32. Cashing out 'could have' in terms of the worlds actually in God's all-things-considered power.
33. Of course, the standard moral theories try to reduce the number of relevant factors. My point is that like any other reductive theories, these have a weight of initial intuition to overcome.
34. Thomas Nagel 'Moral luck', in *idem Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 34.
35. Nor would your failure to intend to reform after killing a child mean you had become morally more insensitive. For you might undergo no moral change precisely due to the degree of moral insensitivity you had going in, and your moral insensitivity itself might guarantee that your moral insensitivity does not change, either.
36. *Ibid*., 29.
37. So e.g. H. Jensen 'Morality and luck', in Daniel Statman (ed.) *Moral Luck* (Albany NY: SUNY Press), 131–140; Nicholas Rescher 'Moral luck', and N. Richards 'Luck and desert', in *ibid*., 141–166, 167–180.
38. This is because you have driven drunk with worse consequences than I. Its consequences make your act worse than mine. Some might suggest that the act is not worse *qua* act of drunk driving, but rather *qua* act of killing, and so your record for drunk driving is no worse than mine – rather, we've performed equal acts throughout, but you have a moral blot on some other part of your record. Fine; as long as it's a blot you're responsible for, I can adjust the example so as to equalize us in the relevant *other* virtue before and after this blot.
39. Henceforth 'free' always expresses the concept of this sort of freedom, unless otherwise noted.

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