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A morally unsurpassable God must create the best

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Abstract: **I present a novel argument for the position that a morally unsurpassable God must create the best world that He has the power to create. I show that grace-based considerations of the sort proposed by Robert Adams neither refute my argument nor establish that a morally unsurpassable God need not create the best. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of my argument for the 'no-best-world' response to the problem of evil.**

Introduction

Anselm famously maintained that God is 'something than which nothing greater can be thought'.[1] Anselm's claim entails that God is unsurpassable with respect to His power, knowledge, and moral excellence. Unsurpassable moral excellence may be analysed as follows:

D1 *x* is a *morally unsurpassable agent in w* $=_{df}$ (1) *x* is an agent in *w*, and (2) it is not the case that there is some world *w′* and some being *y* such that *y* is a better moral agent in *w′* than *x* is in *w*.[2]

On the Anselmian view, God is a morally unsurpassable agent in the actual world. Furthermore, moral perfection is a component of the divine nature or essence. God is morally unsurpassable in every world in which He exists. If He exists necessarily, then He is morally unsurpassable in every possible world.

The following claim has long been the subject of intense philosophical debate:

P If a perfectly good moral agent created any world at all, it would have to be the very best world that he could create.[3]

The claim that will be the subject of this paper is not quite P but a closely related claim. To state this claim, it will be useful to introduce the following

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pair of definitions:

D2 Possible world w is *surpassable for* $x =_{df}$ there is some possible world w' such that (1) x can actualize w' and (2) w' is better than w.

D3 x is a *creator* $=_{df}$ x actualizes some world or other.

In what follows I argue that a God of the sort Anselm believed in must create a world at least as good as any other world He has the power to create. More precisely:

P′ Necessarily, *if* (1) x is an essentially omnipotent and omniscient creator, and (2) x is a morally unsurpassable agent in every world in which x exists, *then* (3) x actualizes some world w such that w is not surpassable for x.

I will argue that reflection on what it takes to be a morally unsurpassable agent and on moral virtue suggests that P′ is true. I will then examine the consequences of this result for the so-called 'no-best-world' response to the problem of evil. I will conclude by outlining the ramifications of all this for theists of the Anselmian variety.

Moral unsurpassability and moral virtue

We can begin our reflection on the concept of a morally unsurpassable agent by noticing that the concept is distinct from the property I shall call 'impeccability', where

D4 x is *impeccable* $=_{df}$ x never performs a morally wrong action.

Edward Wierenga points out that a being might be impeccable and yet fail to be an unsurpassably morally good agent: 'Imagine a malicious but thoroughly misinformed person who, unintentionally, manages to do what is right while trying to wreak incredible havoc … it seems that intentions, and perhaps also traits of character, are relevant to being morally good'.[4] Wierenga's imagined immoral bumbler is impeccable and yet obviously exhibits various moral failings. These failings, as Wierenga suggests, involve not his actions but rather his character. Moral unsurpassability is as much a matter of character as it is of action. A morally unsurpassable agent must be unsurpassably virtuous. More precisely:

MUA1 x is a morally unsurpassable agent in w only if it is not the case that there is some world w' and some agent y such that y is more virtuous overall in w' than x is in w.

A number of philosophers have claimed that at least some of the moral virtues involve some sort of positive affective or motivational relationship toward (the obtaining of) certain states of affairs. For example, Robert C. Roberts says that

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'some virtues are strongly determining, long-term concerns, loves, or passions for some class of states of affairs. Thus a person with the virtue of justice is a person with a passion for just states of affairs'.[5] According to Gregory Trianosky, '[t]o be benevolent involves being concerned to promote the well-being of others'.[6] Linda Zagzebski writes: 'A fair person is motivated out of emotions that make him want to see others treated equitably, and this leads him to want to produce a state of affairs in which the relations among people have this characteristic.'[7] Zagzebski's account of benevolence is similar to Trianosky's: '[T]he virtue of benevolence involves … a disposition to have characteristic emotions that direct action in a particular direction, probably the well-being of others'.[8]

Here we encounter a relatively rare phenomenon: a number of philosophers in rough agreement on a substantive issue in philosophy (moral philosophy no less)![9] And these philosophers agree for good reason – the point they agree on is surely correct. But the point raises the following question: what makes benevolence and justice and the like, virtues? The question arises because there are traits that consist in loving or being motivated to bring about certain states of affairs that are *not* virtues, such as the disposition to pursue the suffering of others. Given that there are many psychologically similar traits here but that only some of these traits are virtues, we might reasonably ask for an account of what makes the traits that *are* virtues, virtues.[10]

Thomas Hurka has proposed just such an explanation.[11] His view, roughly, is that virtue consists in 'loving the good and hating the evil as they are good and evil'.[12] Hurka's view, in part, is that benevolence and justice are virtues because the states of affairs toward which those traits are directed are intrinsically good, whereas the disposition to take pleasure in the suffering of others is not a virtue because the states of affairs toward which the trait is directed are not intrinsically good.

It is important to notice that 'love' functions as a technical term in this context. Hurka specifies the meaning of the term as follows: 'By ''loving x'' I mean having a positive affective or conative relationship to x. This takes three main forms: desiring or wishing for x when it is not present, actively pursuing x to make it present, and taking pleasure in x when it is present'.[13] Here, Hurka explicates loving in terms of concrete episodes. To love a thing, in Hurka's sense of 'love', is to wish for the thing, pursue the thing, or take pleasure in the thing. Having identified virtue with loving the good (and hating the evil), Hurka in effect identifies the virtues with concrete episodes. But the virtues are more properly understood as dispositions. Thus, a more plausible way of applying Hurka's central idea is to identify at least some of the virtues, not with episodes of loving the good and hating the evil but rather with *dispositions* to love intrinsically good states of affairs (or hate intrinsically evil ones). So, the virtue of justice, for example, is, or at least involves, the disposition to wish for, pursue, and take pleasure in just states of affairs.

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For the purposes of the present paper, it will be sufficient to focus on the pursuit of goodness. Reflection on justice, benevolence, and similar virtues suggests that one aspect or component of virtuousness is the disposition to pursue the obtaining of intrinsically good states of affairs. Justice, benevolence, and the like virtues are, at least in part, manifestations of this single underlying tendency.

The view that the disposition to pursue the obtaining of intrinsically good states of affairs is a component of virtuousness is intuitively plausible. Additionally, the view explains why benevolence and justice are moral virtues while certain psychologically similar traits are not. There are, therefore, at least two considerations in favour of the view: it is intuitively plausible, and is a good explanation of certain moral phenomena. I will assume the truth of this view in what follows. It is important to notice, however, that I am not *merely* assuming that the view is true. There are good reasons to accept such a view, and those that would reject such a view must address these reasons.

Notice that I am *not* claiming that *all* the moral virtues are manifestations of this single underlying tendency. That is, I am not claiming that every virtue is or involves a disposition to pursue intrinsically good states of affairs. Instead, I am making only the more modest claim that at least *some* of the virtues are or involve such a tendency and that the tendency in question is one component of moral virtuousness. There may well be other components of moral virtuousness; indeed, it may be the case, as I suggest below, that different virtues can come into conflict with each other.

If the view is correct, what light does it shed on the nature of unsurpassable virtuousness? Corresponding to any intrinsically good state of affairs, *p*, is the disposition to love *p*. Call dispositions of this sort 'intrinsic good-loving dispositions'. We might suppose that one component of unsurpassable virtuousness is the possession of every intrinsic good-loving disposition to an unsurpassable degree.

The problem with such a view is that it sets an unreachable standard for unsurpassable virtuousness. The reason is that there are pairs of intrinsic good-loving dispositions such that it is impossible for any being to have both members of the pair to an unsurpassable degree. Consider the disposition to pursue states of affairs in which others are happy and the disposition to pursue states of affairs in which everyone gets what he deserves. Suppose that the fate of Jones is in my hands. Jones is a vicious scoundrel who deserves to be quite unhappy. If I make Jones sufficiently unhappy I bring it about that he gets what he deserves. So, if I have the second of the two dispositions to an unsurpassable degree, I will bring it about that Jones is quite unhappy. But if I have the former disposition to an unsurpassable degree, I will bring it about that Jones is quite happy. I cannot do both; therefore, I cannot have both dispositions to an unsurpassable degree. The idea that an unsurpassably virtuous agent has each intrinsic good-loving

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disposition to an unsurpassable degree, while perhaps initially appealing, entails that necessarily, there are no unsurpassably virtuous agents. Another approach is in order.[14]

Another natural way of applying the Hurka-inspired view to unsurpassable virtuousness runs as follows. If the disposition to pursue the obtaining of intrinsically good states of affairs is a component of virtuousness, then an unsurpassably virtuous agent will be unsurpassably disposed to pursue states of affairs in *proportion* with their intrinsic value.[15] The greater the intrinsic value of a state of affairs, the more disposed an unsurpassably virtuous agent will be to try to bring about that state of affairs. Consider two states of affairs, p and q, both of which are intrinsically good, where p is intrinsically better than q. An agent who is unsurpassably disposed to pursue the obtaining of states of affairs in proportion with their intrinsic value will pursue p to a greater extent than he pursues q. This implies that if the agent can bring about p and can bring about q but cannot bring about both p and q, he will bring about p rather than q.[16] Let us refer to the extent to which a being is disposed to act in this way as the extent to which that being is disposed to pursue intrinsically valuable states proportionally.

Combining this view about unsurpassable virtuousness with MUA1 gives us the following principle:

> MUA2 x is a morally unsurpassable agent in w only if it is not the case that there is some world w' and some y such that y in w' is more disposed to pursue intrinsically valuable states proportionally than x is in w.

There is a complication. The complication arises from the fact that it is not clear that all the virtues fit the Hurka model. It may be that there are at least some moral virtues that neither are nor involve a disposition to pursue intrinsic value states proportionally. Consider fidelity, for instance. One plausible view is that fidelity is the disposition to keep one's promises (perhaps from a certain motive or from any motive belonging to a certain class of motives), and that this disposition is a virtue. But it is also plausible to suppose that the keeping of promises is not intrinsically good and hence that fidelity does not fit the Hurka model (call virtues that do not fit the Hurka model 'non-Hurka virtues').[17]

Suppose an agent is in a situation where she has these alternatives: keep a promise and thereby bring 1,000 units of goodness (and no evil) into the world or break the same promise and thereby bring 1,001 units of goodness (and no evil) into the world. If the person breaks the promise, she reveals a lack of fidelity. On the other hand, if the person keeps the promise, she reveals that she is not as disposed to pursue intrinsically valuable states as proportionally as she might be. Let's call cases of this sort, cases where the demands of some non-Hurka virtue conflict with the demands of Hurka virtue, cases of 'Hurka-conflict'.[18]

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We can define this notion of a Hurka-conflict more carefully as follows:

D5 *x* faces a *Hurka-conflict* in situation S $=_{df}$ there is some non-Hurka virtue, V, such that if *x* acts in accordance with V in S, then *x* pursues intrinsically valuable states less proportionally than *x* could otherwise.

The example above is one in which the agent faces a Hurka-conflict. If the agent in the example has fidelity to an unsurpassable degree (we are supposing that fidelity is a non-Hurka virtue), then she pursues the good less proportionally than she could if she didn't act in accordance with fidelity. Since I can see no way of establishing that cases of Hurka-conflict are impossible, our views on moral unsurpassability should allow for the possibility of such cases. This means that MUA2 must be revised as follows:

MUA2′ *x* is a morally unsurpassable agent in *w* only if it is not the case that there is some world *w*′ and some *y* such that *y* in *w*′ is more disposed to pursue intrinsically valuable states proportionally *when not facing a Hurka-conflict* than *x* is in *w*.

MUA2′ is meant to capture the intuitive notion that the pursuit of states of affairs in proportion with their goodness is a component of virtue and that, at least in situations to which no other virtue applies, an unsurpassably virtuous agent will pursue intrinsically valuable states of affairs proportionally.

I am now in a position to argue for the truth of P′. First, I will argue not for P′ itself but for a certain closely-related principle. I will then propose another principle which, together with the conclusion of the first part of the argument, entails P′. I suggest that we ought to accept the second principle (and therefore P′ as well). Finally, I will consider various objections that might be raised against my argument and show that each objection fails.

The main argument

Suppose that essentially omnipotent and omniscient creator A chooses to actualize a world *w*, having a value of *v*, and a second such creator, B, in a different possible world, choosing from among the very same worlds that A chooses from, chooses to actualize a distinct world *w*′, having a value of *v*′, where $v' > v$.[19] What can we conclude about the extent to which each of A and B is disposed to pursue intrinsically valuable states proportionally?

The answer is that since possible worlds are states of affairs, creator B is more disposed to pursue intrinsically valuable states proportionally than is creator A. Unsurpassably proportional pursuit requires that if one can bring about *p*, and one can bring about *q*, but one cannot bring about both *p* and *q*, and *p* is intrinsically better than *q*, then one brings about *p*. Creator B satisfies this requirement

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with respect to all the worlds that A does – plus at least one more. So creator A satisfies this demand of proportionality with respect to a proper subset of the worlds to which creator B satisfies the demand. Given that the two creators are otherwise identically disposed, it follows that creator B is more disposed to pursue intrinsically valuable states proportionally than is creator A. Therefore, MUA2′ implies that unless one of the creators faces a Hurka-conflict, creator A is not a morally unsurpassable agent.[20]

Now let us ignore creator B and focus only on creator A. Suppose that A selects for actualization some world, *w*, such that *w* is surpassable for A. This implies that there is a better world, *w*′, that A had the power to actualize, and in which A is otherwise disposed exactly as he is in *w*. In *w*′, A actualizes *w*′. Since *w*′ is better than *w*, and in *w*′ A is otherwise disposed exactly as he is in *w*, A is more disposed to pursue intrinsically valuable states proportionally in *w*′ than A is in *w*. MUA2′ implies that unless A faces a Hurka-conflict in selecting a world for actualization, A is not a morally unsurpassable agent in *w*.

All I have assumed about A is that A is an essentially omnipotent and omniscient creator. Thus, what is true of A is true of any essentially omnipotent and omniscient creator. And what is true of A is that if A actualizes a world that is surpassable for A, and A does not face a Hurka-conflict, then A is not a morally unsurpassable agent. Therefore, it is impossible that an essentially omnipotent and omniscient creator, who is a morally unsurpassable agent in every world in which He exists and who does not face a Hurka-conflict, actualizes a world that is surpassable for Himself.

The argument to this point, if successful, establishes not P′ but rather the following weaker principle:

> P″ Necessarily, *if* (1) *x* is an essentially omnipotent and omniscient creator, (2) *x* is a morally unsurpassable agent in every world in which *x* exists, and (3) *x* does not face a Hurka-conflict in selecting a world for actualization, *then* (4) *x* actualizes some world *w* such that *w* is not surpassable for *x*.

In order to move from P″ to P′, we need the following intermediate step:

> IS Necessarily, *if* (1) *x* is an essentially omnipotent and omniscient creator, and (2) *x* is a morally unsurpassable agent in every world in which *x* exists, *then* (3) it is not the case that *x* faces a Hurka-conflict in selecting a world for actualization.

This brings us to the second part of the main argument. How might one argue for IS? As I see it, the best way to proceed is to consider the traits that could plausibly be construed as non-Hurka virtues and try to determine if any of these traits could possibly generate a Hurka-conflict for a creator who is trying to decide which possible world to make actual. Honesty, fidelity, conscientiousness,

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and grace are traits that fall into this category. I will briefly consider the first three traits here; the discussion of grace is postponed to the next section.

It is hard to see how honesty, fidelity, or conscientiousness might generate a Hurka-conflict for a creator. Since no other beings exist prior to the creator's selection of a world for actualization, there are no other creatures toward whom the creator could be dishonest, or make (much less break) a promise, or indeed have any obligations at all. The creator might make a promise to Himself to actualize a world that is surpassable for Him – but of course He could just as easily release Himself from such a promise without violating any moral obligation.

Consider the following line of argument. Suppose the best world a given omnipotent and omniscient creator could actualize contains creatures who endure incredible amounts of pain. It might be suggested that a creator in such a situation has an obligation toward those creatures not to actualize the world in question. A creator in this situation who acts conscientiously pursues intrinsically valuable states less proportionally than He could have otherwise, and hence faces a Hurka-conflict in selecting a world for actualization.

My response to this suggestion is that the case must be made that an omnipotent and omniscient creator could face such a situation. There is a long tradition of arguments to the effect that the best of all possible worlds must contain suffering – but these arguments are typically made to support the claim that it would be morally permissible for God to actualize a world containing suffering! As far as I know, no one has argued that the best world God could actualize contains suffering, *and* that consequently God has a moral obligation *not* to actualize the best world. The fact that the world in question is the best one God could create is typically taken as a sufficient moral justification for God's selection of that world. If such a view is correct – and it certainly seems plausible – then the line of reasoning described above fails to establish the possibility of a conscientiousness-generated Hurka-conflict.

Such considerations do not decisively establish the truth of IS, but I think they at least place the burden of proof on those who would reject IS. Such objectors must identify a non-Hurka virtue that could generate a Hurka-conflict for an omnipotent and omniscient creator who is trying to decide which world to actualize. It might be thought that the most likely candidate for such a trait is grace; I turn now to consideration of this trait.

Objections from grace

Robert Adams suggests that God could exhibit the virtue of grace in creating a world less good than some other world He could have created.[21] Adams further argues that reflection on grace suggests that God's moral perfection does not entail that He must create the best world He can. It is worth considering,

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therefore, whether Adams's work on grace contains or lays the groundwork for a telling objection to my argument.

In light of Adams's claim that '[o]ne important element in the Judeo-Christian moral ideal is grace', let us grant that a morally unsurpassable agent will be gracious to at least a significant degree.[22] That is, we shall assume that grace is a virtue, and that a morally unsurpassable agent will have this virtue to a significant degree. Does this claim make trouble for my argument?

Adams's remarks on grace suggest a variety of ways of understanding that virtue. We shall consider these momentarily. At this point, however, it is worth noting an element common to all of Adams's characterizations of grace. Gracious love has as its object *particular beings or creatures* rather than *states of affairs*. It will become clear, I think, that being disposed to have gracious love for creatures and being disposed to pursue intrinsically valuable states proportionally are two distinct dispositions – dispositions that need not come into conflict with each other when it comes to selecting a world for actualization.

Adams initially characterizes grace as 'a disposition to love which is not dependent on the merit of the person loved. The gracious person loves without worrying about whether the person he loves is worthy of his love.'[23] However, Adams immediately revises this account of gracious love, suggesting that 'perhaps it would be better to say that the gracious person sees what is valuable in the person he loves, and does not worry about whether it is more or less valuable than what could be found in someone else he might have loved'.[24] Adams's remarks on grace in a more recent work resonate with the latter account of gracious love:

> … grace is love that is not completely explained by the excellence of its object. Within certain wide parameters, at any rate, it is not proportioned to the excellence of its object, nor conditioned on the degree of that excellence. To the extent that that degree can be measured, grace typically outruns it.[25]

Adams's view, then, is that the virtue of grace is a disposition to love other beings in a certain way. We can say that A graciously loves B when A knowingly loves B to a degree greater than B deserves or is worthy of being loved by A. If A exhibits this sort of love for B, then variations in the extent to which B deserves or is worthy of A's love, even if noticed by A, may not by themselves produce variations in the extent to which A loves B.

Suppose, then, that a morally unsurpassable agent is significantly gracious. Does this make trouble for anything I have claimed to this point? The answer is no. To see this, let us consider some grace-based objections to my position.

One objection runs as follows. Suppose that there is a very good possible world that is populated by a host of extremely excellent beings. Suppose that God does not actualize this world. Instead, God actualizes a less valuable world containing less excellent beings because He loves those beings far more than they deserve to be loved. God, in bringing into being the less valuable world, manifests the virtue of grace. In actualizing this less valuable world, He acts graciously and perhaps

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even acts in a supererogatory fashion. Hence, actualizing this less valuable world does not indicate a lack of moral virtue on His part, nor does it entail that He is not a morally unsurpassable being.

This argument goes wrong when it moves from the claim that (1) God exhibits the virtue of grace and acts in a supererogatory fashion in actualizing the less valuable world, to the claim that (2) God does not exhibit a lack of moral virtue in actualizing the less valuable world. The latter claim does not follow from the former. This is so because the same action might be supererogatory, indicate the presence of a given virtue, *and* indicate the absence of another virtue, or even the presence of a vice. Recall the case discussed previously involving Jones the vicious scoundrel. Suppose I can make Jones unhappy, thereby giving him what he deserves, or, at great and non-obligatory risk to myself, make Jones happy. In performing the latter action, I would be acting in a supererogatory fashion, and I would manifest both benevolence *and* a lack of justice (as well as, perhaps, the vice of injustice). Therefore, even if it is true that God both manifests the virtue of grace and acts in a supererogatory fashion in actualizing the less valuable world, it does not follow that God does not also manifest a lack of virtue in actualizing that world.

Indeed, MUA2′ implies that, unless God faces a Hurka-conflict, God *does* manifest a lack of virtue in actualizing the less valuable world. But this is perfectly consistent with the claim that God manifests the virtue of grace in actualizing the less valuable world. In actualizing the less valuable world, God manifests the virtue of grace *and* reveals that He is not as disposed to pursue intrinsically valuable states as proportionally He could be. Notice what I am *not* claiming. I am not claiming that in actualizing the less valuable world, God wrongs someone, or violates someone's rights, or performs a morally wrong action. Instead, my claim concerns God's moral virtue. The claim is that God's selection of the less valuable world reveals that He is not unsurpassably disposed to pursue intrinsically valuable states proportionally and therefore such a selection reveals that He is not a morally unsurpassable agent. What is wrong with God's selection of the less valuable world is not that it stems from love for creatures which outruns their merit; I have conceded that such love may be not only rational but virtuous and supererogatory. What is wrong with God's selection of the less valuable world is that it entails that He is lacking in another component of virtuousness – the disposition to pursue intrinsically valuable states proportionally. So, the objection sketched above fails, because showing that God could or would exhibit a given virtue by actualizing a less valuable world is not sufficient to establish that God does not *also* manifest a lack of virtue in actualizing such a world.

Perhaps a defender of Adams's position would reply that the claim that grace is a component of moral unsurpassability implies that God faces a Hurka-conflict in deciding which world to actualize. If this is correct, then the intermediate step, IS, is false, and my argument for P′ is undermined. Notice the change in strategy.

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In raising the previous objection, the defender of Adams's position was appealing to considerations about grace to argue directly against P″. Under the new strategy, the defender of Adams's position concedes that the disposition to pursue intrinsically valuable states proportionally is a component of unsurpassable virtuousness, but that in the case of God selecting a world for actualization, this component of unsurpassable virtuousness conflicts with another component of unsurpassable virtuousness – namely, grace. The conclusion of the objection is that IS is false.

This objection succeeds only if by actualizing a world at least as good as any other He could have actualized, God fails to act graciously, or at least fails to act as graciously as He could have, by actualizing some less valuable world instead. Is this the case?

Recall Adams's account of gracious love: A graciously loves B when A knowingly loves B to a degree greater than B deserves or is worthy of being loved by A. Suppose God actualizes the best world He can precisely because it is the best. Is this incompatible with His graciously loving every creature in the resulting world to *whatever degree He sees fit*? The answer is no, as Adams himself appears to concede: 'God could have chosen to create the best of all possible creatures, and still have been gracious in choosing them'.[26] If God's graciousness in creation is consistent with His creating the best possible *creatures*, then surely His graciousness in creation is consistent with His actualizing the best possible *world*. God's actualizing a world unsurpassable for Him is perfectly consistent with His loving the beings in that world to a greater degree than they deserve to be loved by Him. Therefore, even if grace is a virtue – a non-Hurka virtue – it does not follow that God faces a Hurka-conflict in selecting a world for actualization. God could be *unsurpassably* gracious and also actualize an unsurpassable world.

According to Adams, God's grace 'implies that there is nothing in God's nature or character which would require Him to act on the principle of choosing the best possible creatures to be the object of His creative powers'.[27] Perhaps Adams's idea is that God acts graciously in selecting a world for actualization only if (1) God actualizes a world containing a certain collection of creatures, (2) God graciously loves those creatures, and (3) it's not the case that He creates those creatures because they are the best possible creatures. But this conception of grace is also compatible with God actualizing the best *world* that He can. Perhaps the best world God can actualize contains all the best possible creatures; perhaps it doesn't. Either way, there is no difficulty in supposing that God's ultimate reason for actualizing that world is that it is the best *world* that He can actualize. God may act on the principle of choosing to actualize the best *world* He can without acting on the principle of choosing to create the best *creatures* He can.[28]

To this point we have been working with a conception of grace according to which grace is the disposition to love beings more than they deserve to be loved.

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A stronger conception of grace has it that God acts graciously in selecting a world for actualization just in case (1) God actualizes a world containing a certain collection of creatures, (2) God graciously loves those creatures, and (3) God creates those creatures precisely *because* they are not the best possible creatures. Two points can be made here. First, Adams explicitly rejects a conception of grace that involves preferring imperfection to perfection.[29] But the crucial point is that it seems quite implausible to suppose that grace understood in this way is a virtue (presumably this is why Adams rejects such a conception of grace). There is nothing virtuous about preferring imperfection as such.

In relation to this second point it is important to recognize the distinction between preferring imperfection as such and preferring imperfection as a component in some greater good. Perhaps there are greater goods in the best world God can actualize that entail the existence of imperfect beings.[30] On this view, while it may be accurate to say that God creates the creatures He does because they are imperfect, it is also true that He creates imperfect creatures in order to actualize the best world that He can. His ultimate reason for creating imperfect creatures is so that He may actualize the best world He can, and this is different from preferring imperfection as such.

Still another conception of grace has it that grace applies not to individual creatures but rather to possible worlds. It is clear that this is a move away from what Adams has in mind since it seems to require that we abandon the loving component of grace. It is hard to understand what it would be to love a possible world in sense in which Adams is using 'love'.[31] At any rate, this alternative conception of grace has it that God acts graciously in selecting a world for actualization just in case God gives no weight whatsoever to the values of the various worlds He can actualize.

My response is that the disposition to act in such a fashion is no virtue. It is one thing to claim that there is some virtue such that having the virtue does not require choosing the better to the worse.[32] It is quite another to claim that there is some virtue such that having the virtue requires giving absolutely no weight to considerations of value. This latter claim is question-begging at best and there is simply no reason to accept it. I conclude, therefore, that Adams's comments on grace give us no good reason to think that God faces a Hurka-conflict in selecting a world for actualization. Therefore, the grace-based objection to IS sketched above fails.

There is a final line of grace-based reasoning that is worth considering. This line of reasoning is based on the distinction between (1) the value a given possible world would have were it to be actual *without having been actualized by God* and (2) the value a given possible world would have were it to be actual *having been actualized by God*. Letting '$V1(w)$' indicate the first sort of value of a possible world w and '$V2(w)$' indicate the second sort of value of a possible world w, it might be suggested that for some possible world w, $V2(w) > V1(w)$.

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How might this be? One suggestion is that the property of *having been made actual by an exercise of divine grace* adds value to a possible world. Another way of putting this point is that the exercise of divine grace is itself intrinsically good and hence contributes to the overall goodness of any world in which it occurs. Given this claim, which I concede, it is possible that there is some world, w, such that there is no distinct world w' where $V1(w') > V1(w)$, but that there *is* some world w' such that $V2(w') > V2(w)$. Does this possibility make trouble for my argument?

The answer is no. Throughout the present paper I work with the second notion of value. When I speak of the intrinsic value of a possible world, I have in mind the *total* intrinsic value of the world, including any value that God's creative activities contribute to the world. My position is consistent with the claim that the best world God can actualize is one such that He exercise divine grace in actualizing it – and that it is precisely this exercise of divine grace that makes this world the best. It seems to me that the line of reasoning described above is relevant to the issue of what the best world God could actualize is like, but that it in no way conflicts with the argument for P′ that I have presented. If it turns out that the best world God can actualize is such that, were it not for His grace in the actualization of that world, it would not be the best, what follows is that God must actualize this world and must exercise divine grace in His act of creation. Another way of putting this point is that the world in question *includes* God's graciousness in creation, and hence in order to actualize precisely this world God must exhibit graciousness in creation. The crucial point here is that none of this conflicts with my main argument. Such considerations may have implications about the *nature* of the best world God can actualize, but they do not imply that God could actualize a world that is surpassable for Him.

It seems to me, then, that Adams's remarks on grace pose no threat to either P″ or IS. While it may be true that God could or would exhibit grace in actualizing a world surpassable for Him, it is also true that in so doing God would reveal that He is not unsurpassably disposed to pursue intrinsic value states proportionally. On the other hand, God's actualizing a world that is not surpassable for Him is consistent both with His exhibiting grace in actualizing a world *and* with His being unsurpassably disposed to pursue intrinsic value states proportionally. Therefore, God's unsurpassable virtuousness entails that He actualizes a world that is unsurpassable for Him – *even under the assumption that grace is a virtue*. Pace Adams, God must create the best – even if He is unsurpassably gracious.[33]

In arguing that P is false, Adams said he could see only two reasons someone might accept it: (1) 'a creator would necessarily wrong someone (violate someone's rights), or be less kind to someone than a perfectly good moral agent must be, if he knowingly created a less excellent world instead of the best that he could',[34] or (2) 'the creator's choice of an inferior world must manifest a defect of character'.[35] Adams concluded that since both (1) and (2) are false, there is no reason to think that P is true. I have argued that there is good reason to think

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that P′ is true. How does my argument correspond to Adams claims concerning (1) and (2)?

The answer depends on how we understand (2). In particular, it depends on how we understand the expression 'defect of character'. On the one hand, a defect of character might be understood as a vice. Then the claim would be

2′ The creator's choice of an inferior world must manifest a vice.

On the other hand, a defect of character might be understood as a lack of virtue – that is, failing to be as virtuous as one could be. Then the claim would be

2″ The creator's choice of an inferior world reveals that the creator is not as virtuous as he could be.

If Adams understands 2 as 2′, then Adams overlooked a third reason for believing P – namely, 2″. On the other hand, if Adams understands 2 as 2″, then Adam's claim that 2 is false is mistaken. 2″ is true.

The no-best-world defence

Consider the following simple formulation of the problem of evil.

The problem of evil

(1) The existence of God entails that the actual world is the best of all the possible worlds that God can actualize.
(2) If the actual world is the best of all the possible worlds that God can actualize, then the actual world contains no evil.
(3) The actual world contains evil.
(4) Therefore, God does not exist.[36]

In this section I focus on a certain objection to this argument. Here is a classic statement of the objection: 'the notion of the best possible world is meaningless, because for any world which might be so designated, there would always be another which was better'.[37] The objection appeals to the following principle:

NBW For each possible world, there is a better possible world.

NBW implies that there is no best possible world. This principle isn't quite what is needed here, however. What we need is a principle that implies that there is no best world *among the worlds that God can actualize*.[38] This principle does the trick:

NBW′ For each possible world that God has the power to actualize, there is a better possible world that God has the power to actualize.

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How exactly is NBW′ supposed to provide an objection to the problem of evil? Reichenbach's comments suggest that his view is that if NBW′ is true, then the expression 'best of all the possible worlds that God can actualize' is meaningless. If this were correct, then the version of the problem of evil presented above would be nonsensical since it would make use of a meaningless expression.

But it seems clear that the expression 'best of all the possible worlds that God can actualize' is not meaningless at all – in fact, it appears to have a relatively clear and straightforward meaning. Is there any reason for thinking that its apparent meaningfulness is merely apparent? Perhaps Reichenbach is suggesting that if NBW′ is true at all it is necessarily true. Perhaps the idea is that it follows that the concept expressed by 'best of all the possible worlds that God can actualize' is necessarily uninstantiated, and hence the expression itself is meaningless. This argument goes wrong in the last step. Expressions like 'round square' and 'highest even integer' express concepts that are necessarily uninstantiated, yet the expressions themselves are clearly not meaningless. Indeed, it is precisely because we understand these expressions that we can see that the concepts they express are necessarily uninstantiated.

So NBW′ does not imply that the expression 'best of all the possible worlds that God can actualize' is meaningless. Worse, by endorsing NBW′, the Anselmian theist appears to involve himself in a further difficulty. Consider the following argument.

The paradox of moral unsurpassability

(1) The existence of God entails that the actual world is not surpassable for God.
(2) The actual world is surpassable for God.
(3) Therefore, God does not exist.[39]

Since God is an essentially omnipotent and omniscient creator who is a morally unsurpassable agent in every world in which He exists, P′ implies that He actualizes some world that is not surpassable for Him. Hence, P′ implies the first premise of the argument above. Moreover, the second premise is an immediate consequence of NBW′. The problem is that God is morally unsurpassable only if He is unsurpassably virtuous. He is unsurpassably virtuous only if He actualizes a world that is unsurpassable for Him. This is so not because God is *morally obligated* to create the best nor because there is such a thing as the virtue of creating the best world, but rather because if God actualizes a world that is surpassable for Him, then He is not unsurpassably disposed to pursue intrinsic value states proportionally, which entails that He is not unsurpassably virtuous. But the truth of NBW′ implies that it is simply impossible for God to be unsurpassably disposed to pursue intrinsic value states proportionally. If NBW′ is true, then no matter

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what God does, He could have done better, and so He could have been more virtuous.[40]

P′ and NBW′ are consistent with each other, but their conjunction entails that God does not exist. Thus, the Anselmian theist who endorses NBW′ does herself a disservice. If the central argument of this paper is successful, the Anselmian theist must insist that NBW′ is false. She must hold that there is at least one world God has the power to actualize which is not surpassable for Him.

Interestingly, some philosophers have supposed that the truth of NBW′ would imply that God could create a world that is surpassable for Him and still be a morally unsurpassable agent. Such philosophers maintain that if NBW′ is true, then P′ is false. One such philosopher is Adams, who writes: 'if there is no maximum degree of perfection among possible worlds [actualizable relative to God], it would be unreasonable to blame God, or think less highly of His goodness, because He created a world less excellent than He could have created'.[41] More recently, Thomas Morris has written:

> [F]ailing to do the best you can is a flaw or manifests an incompleteness in moral character … 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.[42]

Let us say that

D6 *x* is in a *creative predicament* $=_{df}$ for each possible world that *x* has the power to actualize, there is a better world that *x* has the power to actualize.

The dialectical situation, then, is as follows. I have argued that

(1) It is impossible that God exists and is in a creative predicament.

But Adams and Morris maintain

(2) If NBW′ is true, then P′ is false.

Since my argument for (1) succeeds only if NBW′ and P′ are compatible, if Adams and Morris are right, then my argument fails. Who is right? Notice how Adams and Morris argue for (2). According to Adams, it is 'unreasonable to blame God, or think less highly of His goodness, because He created a world less excellent than He could have created'. According to Morris, if NBW′ is true, then 'not doing his best in creating cannot be seen as a flaw or as manifesting an incompleteness in the character of God'.

I can accept much of what Adams and Morris say here. For example, I can agree that we are not justified in *blaming* God for failing to create an unsurpassable world if NBW′ is true. After all, if NBW′ is true, He couldn't have done otherwise. And I can agree that, given NBW′, such a failure cannot be seen as a flaw in God's character, if by 'flaw' we mean something like a moral vice. My point is simply

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that if NBW′ is true then no matter what God does, He acts in a way that entails that He is not as virtuous as He could have been. Perhaps we ought not blame Him or think Him flawed for so acting; nevertheless, He could have done better and hence could have been more virtuous. And if failing to be unsurpassably virtuous is a kind of incompleteness, then NBW′ entails that God is incomplete.

I haven't merely *asserted* P′ – I've *argued* for it. Moreover, as I argued in the previous section, I've argued for P′ on grounds that are consistent with Adams's remarks concerning grace. So if Adams and Morris are right – if (2) is true – then either my argument is invalid or NBW′ entails the falsity of one or more of the premises of my argument. As far as I can see, neither of these is the case. I conclude that (2) is false.

Conclusion

I have argued that reflection on moral unsurpassability and moral virtue suggests that the following principle is true:

> P′ Necessarily, *if* (1) *x* is an essentially omnipotent and omniscient creator, and (2) *x* is a morally unsurpassable agent in every world in which *x* exists, *then* (3) *x* actualizes some world *w* such that *w* is not surpassable for *x*.

I have defended my position against grace-based considerations of the sort proposed by Robert Adams, showing that the view that God is gracious does not defeat my argument for P′. If my argument is successful, then the Anselmian theist is committed to the conclusion that God must actualize a world at least as good as any world it is within His power to actualize.[43] This means that the Anselmian theist cannot consistently appeal to a principle like the following to respond to the problem of evil:

> NBW′ For each possible world that God has the power to actualize, there is a better possible world that God has the power to actualize.

Moreover, to the extent that NBW′ is plausible, the Anselmian theist is in trouble. For, as the paradox of moral unsurpassability reveals, the claim that the Anselmian God exists together with P′ and NBW′ form an inconsistent triad.[44]

The Anselmian theist has various options here. One option is to stop being an *Anselmian* theist. Perhaps the moral of the story is that we ought to give up the idea that God is a morally unsurpassable agent in favour of some more modest claim concerning God's moral excellence. Perhaps we have learned a lesson about moral unsurpassability much like the lesson Peter Geach tried to teach us about omnipotence.[45] A second option is to stop being a *theist*. A third option is to deny NBW′. A fourth is to attack my argument for P′. What I have tried to show

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here is that not even the grace of God will help the Anselmian theist defeat my argument for P′. At the very least, the present paper moves the debate forward in that it shows that the old appeal to grace fails to prove that God can create anything other than the best.[46]

Notes

1. Anselm *Monologion and Proslogion*, tr. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis IN: Hackett, 1995), 99.
2. Although D1 defines what it is for a being to be a morally unsurpassable agent *in a given world*, in what follows I often speak of a given being as being a morally unsurpassable agent *simpliciter* – the relativization to a world is left implicit. D1 closely matches Philip Quinn's principle (8) in his 'God, moral perfection, and possible worlds', in Michael L. Peterson (ed.) *The Problem of Evil: Selected Readings* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 298.
3. This claim appears in Robert Adams 'Must God create the best?', originally published in *The Philosophical Review*, **81** (1972), 317–332; in this paper, I refer to the reprint of that paper found in Peterson *The Problem of Evil*, 275–288, 275.
4. Edward Wierenga *The Nature of God: An Inquiry into Divine Attributes* (New York NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 203.
5. Robert C. Roberts 'Aristotle on virtues and emotions', *Philosophical Studies*, **56** (1989), 294.
6. Gregory Trianosky 'Virtue, action, and the good life: toward a theory of the virtues', *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, **68** (1987), 126.
7. Linda Zagzebski *Virtues of the Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 131.
8. *Ibid.*
9. There are, of course, important differences among the views put forth by these authors.
10. I am not raising an objection against any of the views of the authors mentioned in the preceding paragraph. Some of these authors, for example Zagzebski, attempt to offer just such an explanation – see her 'The virtues of God and the foundations of ethics', *Faith and Philosophy*, **15** (1998), 538–553. Others are simply addressing some other topic.
11. See his 'Virtue as loving the good', *Social Philosophy & Policy*, **9** (1992), 149–168, and also his book *Virtue, Vice and Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). As Hurka himself notes in the preface to the latter work, the main elements of his views on virtue are not new; Hurka lists Brentano, Moore, Rashdall, and Ross as defenders of the view that he explicates and builds upon in his book. I should also point out that it is not clear that the authors from whom I previously quoted would welcome Hurka's explanation; Zagzebski, for example, explicitly rejects a view like Hurka's.
12. Hurka 'Virtue as loving the good', 152.
13. *Ibid.*, 150–151. Hating the evil presumably takes three corresponding forms: desiring or wishing for the absence of *x*, actively pursuing the absence of *x*, and taking pain in *x* when it is present.
14. I owe much in this paragraph to Jim Stone.
15. Such a view is obviously not novel. The notion that virtue involves proportionality goes back at least as far as Aristotle, who famously maintained that 'virtue both finds and chooses that which is intermediate'; Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics*, tr. W.D. Ross, in Richard McKeon (ed.) *Introduction to Aristotle* (New York NY: Random House, 1947), 340. The following consideration also supports this view. In situations in which two virtues conflict, for instance the situation described previously in which justice and benevolence conflict, we tend to think that the best way to resolve such conflicts is to do whatever produces the best consequences overall.
16. Strictly speaking this principle needs to be qualified with an 'everything else being equal'. More precisely, the principle holds so long as the states of affairs in question are equal with respect to their other sorts of value (e.g. extrinsic value). Since I will apply this principle to possible worlds, whose overall value is equal to their intrinsic value, this qualification does not affect my main argument.
17. This is not intended as an objection to Hurka's view; perhaps fidelity could be taken into account by a view of the sort Hurka describes. Or perhaps fidelity as I have characterized it here is not a virtue at all. I am merely suggesting that there *may* be virtues that do not fit his view and that fidelity is a plausible candidate for such a virtue.

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18. Other alleged virtues that might generate such situations include conscientiousness and honesty.
19. A further assumption is required here: that the two creators otherwise share all the same dispositions – that is, that in any other creative situation, A would have actualized a world *w* iff B would have actualized *w*.
20. It is important to notice that what matters here is the overall value *of* the worlds in question – which may or may not be a function of the total amount of good and evil *contained in* those worlds. Some have suggested that the overall value of a complicated state of affairs is not simply the sum of the intrinsic values of each of the states of affairs that are parts of the more complicated state of affairs. See, for example, G. E. Moore *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), ch. 6; Roderick Chisholm 'The defeat of good and evil', *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, **42** (1968/69), 21–38; and Noah Lemos *Intrinsic Value* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), chs 3 and 4.
21. Adams in Peterson *The Problem of Evil*, 281.
22. *Ibid.*, 280.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*
25. Robert Adams *Finite and Infinite Goods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 151.
26. Adams in Peterson *The Problem of Evil*, 281.
27. *Ibid.*
28. This point holds even if what makes the best world the best is that it contains the best possible creatures. What is at issue here is God's *reason* for selecting the best world of all those He can actualize.
29. Adams in Peterson *The Problem of Evil*, 281.
30. John Hick seems to propose this sort of view in 'The world as a vale of soul-making', in Peterson *The Problem of Evil*, 215–230.
31. Unless, of course, it means simply loving the inhabitants of that world – in which case we seem to be thrown back to something like one of the accounts of grace already discussed.
32. Notice that the claim that *virtue* does not require choosing the better to the worse is distinct from the claim that *grace* does not require choosing the better to the worse. I accept the second claim but deny the first. My reasons for this denial appear above.
33. For another critical discussion of Adams's remarks on grace see Mark L. Thomas 'Robert Adams and the best possible world', *Faith and Philosophy*, **13** (1996), 252–259.
34. Adams in Peterson *The Problem of Evil*, 276.
35. *Ibid.*
36. This formulation of the problem of evil is modeled on a formulation given by Fred Feldman in *A Cartesian Introduction to Philosophy* (New York NY: McGraw-Hill, 1986), 139.
37. Bruce Reichenbach 'Must God create the best possible world?', *International Philosophical Quarterly*, **19** (1979), 211.
38. Philosophers who offer simply NBW as the basis for a response to the problem of evil seem to be committing Leibniz's Lapse – from the fact that God is omnipotent, they infer that He can actualize any metaphysically possible world. Alvin Plantinga coined the phrase 'Leibniz's Lapse'; see Alvin Plantinga *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 180–184. That Leibniz's Lapse is indeed a lapse is a consequence of Molinism, a view recently explicated and defended by Thomas Flint in his *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* (New York NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); see especially 46–54.
39. William Rowe gives a similar argument in 'The problem of divine perfection and freedom' in Eleonore Stump (ed.) *Reasoned Faith: Essays in Philosophical Theology in Honor of Norman Kretzmann* (New York NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 223–233, 229–230. For another similar argument see Stephen Grover 'Why only the best is good enough', *Analysis*, **48** (1988), 224. Interestingly, Rowe elsewhere mentions something like NBW′ as a response to a certain version of the problem of evil; see his 'Evil and God's freedom in creation', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, **36** (1999), 105.
40. Strictly speaking, a person could hold that there is no *unique* best possible world actualizable by God without thereby committing himself to premise two of the paradox of moral unsurpassability (i.e. by holding that there is a tie for best among multiple worlds). But what I am calling the 'no-best-world' defence typically involves a claim like NBW′, and this is the claim that leads to trouble.

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41. Adams in Peterson *The Problem of Evil*, 275. For a different approach, see Daniel and Frances Howard-Snyder 'How an unsurpassable being can create a surpassable world', *Faith and Philosophy*, **11** (1994), 260–268.
42. Thomas Morris 'Perfection and creation', in Stump *Reasoned Faith*, 244.
43. Does this also imply that the actual world is the only possible world? The answer is no, for two reasons. First, everything I've said is consistent with the possibility that there is a multi-world tie for best. In this case, God could choose from any of the best worlds. Second, if Molinism is true, then, even if some world, *w*, is the single best world of all the worlds that God can actualize, this is a contingent fact. If things had been different, a different world, *w*′, might have been the single best world of all the worlds that God could actualize, in which case God would have actualized *w*′ rather than *w*. For more on this, see Flint *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account*.
44. It might be thought that there is an unstated assumption that underlies my argument for P′. The assumption in question is that all possible worlds are commensurable with respect to value. More precisely, it might be alleged that my argument for P′ assumes that for any pair of worlds *w* and *w*′, exactly one of the following is true: (1) *w* is better than *w*′, (2) *w* is worse than *w*′, or (3) *w* and *w*′ are equally valuable. But perhaps there is a fourth possibility – namely, that *w* and *w*′, while both good, are simply incommensurable in value. I think that reflection reveals, however, that P′ is consistent with the denial of the assumption in question and that such a denial does not entail NBW′. Suppose that there are two worlds, *w* and *w*′, such that there is no third world, *w*″, such that *w*″ is better than *w* or better than *w*′. Suppose further that *w* and *w*′ are incommensurable in value – that is, neither is better than the other, nor are the two equal in value. All of this is consistent with P′. P′ implies that an essentially omnipotent, omniscient, and morally unsurpassable creator who could actualize *w* and could actualize *w*′ *must* actualize one of these worlds – but that such a creator is free to pick which of the two worlds to actualize. P′ does not entail that such a creator actualizes a world that is *better* than any other world the creator could actualize; rather, it implies merely that such a creator actualizes a world *than which there is none better* that He could have actualized. (This is one important difference between P and P′.) As for NBW′, the scenario just described reveals that the incommensurability of value does not entail NBW′.

    In the scenario above, *w* and *w*′ are both unsurpassable for God, and yet the two are incommensurable in value. Therefore, my position is independent of the issue of the commensurability of value.
45. Geach suggested that we abandon the claim that God is omnipotent in favour of the claim that God is almighty. See Peter Geach 'Omnipotence', *Philosophy*, **48** (1973), 7–20. My own view is that Geach's suggestion about omnipotence is somewhat premature; see my 'Omnipotence again', *Faith and Philosophy*, **17** (2000), 26–47.
46. The initial draft of this paper was written while I was a Visiting Graduate Student Fellow at the Center for Philosophy of Religion at the University of Notre Dame. I have benefited greatly from comments made on this paper by a number of people. An earlier and shorter version of the paper was presented at the 1999 Midwest Regional meeting of the Society of Christian Philosophers at Marquette University. An earlier draft of the paper was also discussed by various persons related to the Center for Philosophy of Religion, including: Paul Richard Blum, Jeff Brower, Matt Davidson, Tom Flint, Bruce Gordon, John Hare, Jeff Hensley, Jennifer Herdt, Alvin Plantinga, Michael Rea, Bob Roberts, Brian Shanley, and Jim Stone. Bob Roberts and Jim Stone were kind enough to provide me with extensive written comments on the paper. Later versions were read by Noah Lemos and by two anonymous referees for *Religious Studies*. I am extremely grateful to each of these institutions and persons for their support. I suspect that many of the people I have listed here would find much to disagree with in the paper and of course I alone bear the responsibility for any remaining errors.

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