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No best world: creaturely freedom

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Abstract: **William Rowe and others argue that if this is a possible world than which there is a better, it follows that God does not exist. I now reject the key premise of Rowe's argument. I do so first within a Molinist framework. I then show that this framework is dispensable: really all one needs to block the better-world argument is the assumption that creatures have libertarian free will. I also foreclose what might seem a promising way around the 'moral-luck' counter I develop, and contend that it is in a way impossible to get around.**

In this article's first part,[1] I introduced the better-world argument (BWA) against God's existence and claimed that moral-luck considerations could block it. I now argue that, given a Molinist view of providence, God suffers circumstantial moral luck, and this suffices to block BWA. I then take up a non-Molinist picture of divine providence. On it, God suffers moral luck in both circumstances and consequences, and so again, BWA fails.

Molinism and moral luck

I now show why even God suffers moral luck. I begin with Molinism. On this view, the counterfactuals of freedom (CFs) that God finds true constrain what God can achieve with free agents, for they establish how they would co-operate with His projects: if, in fact, Judas were offered salvation in situation S, he would reject it, it is not in God's all-things-considered power to actualize any world in which Judas in S accepts salvation. God might be morally lucky or unlucky in the CFs He finds. They might permit Him great acts of benevolence or limit the gifts He can give: if Judas would reject it in S, it is not in God's all-things-considered power to give him the gift of salvation in S.

It's conceivable that Molinist constraints have far-reaching consequences. Perhaps the CFs whose antecedents include the existence of a certain sort of universe have creatures doing great moral evil. If so, God might have to make another, radically lesser sort of universe to ensure that His creatures do best

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morally – for instance, one with significantly more natural evil. He might have to give less to each creature if He is to pursue His legitimate interest in creating morally good creatures – even if He wants to give more and is exactly as disposed to give more as He is in worlds whose CFs permit this. (Perhaps He even *ought* to give less, given the prevailing CFs.) God has no control over what CFs there are. He must just accept them. They aid, impede or perhaps even block His projects altogether. And they could easily have been far worse for Him, or far better. All of this seems to make it perfectly sensible to say that He has been lucky or unlucky in them, depending; on Molinism, God suffers circumstantial moral luck. If Molinism is true, God's record of benevolence might well vary from world to world independent of His degree of that virtue. How fully God is disposed to give gifts might not be the sole thing determining His record of gift-giving.

Call each group of worlds with the same non-null set of CFs, a galaxy.[2] Then a response might suggest itself if CFs place a ceiling on what gifts He can give. This ceiling is either: (a) a simple maximum gift He can give in each galaxy; (b) an upper limit His gifts can approach asymptotically ('external upper bound'); or (c) a maximum or external upper bound *per* universe-duplicate. The thought here is this: parts of a universe can be duplicated and never affect one another, given the right natural laws and boundary conditions. So, e.g. there is a possible world just like ours save that its universe consists of two qualitatively identical parts with no spatial, temporal, or causal connections, each qualitatively identical with our universe throughout its history. And for every galaxy G, there is a galaxy G*, each of whose possible worlds is in effect a doubling (tripling, etc.)[3] of the contents of G's possible worlds. Suppose that G*'s CFs would be G's twice over. Then if there is (say) a maximum gift God can give in G, the maximum gift God could give in G* will be twice as large, and CFs will determine not a maximal gift *simpliciter* but a maximal gift *per* universe-duplicate. If G*'s CFs would not be G's, they would surely be very like G's. For the creatures of one of G*'s universe-duplicates could just *be* G's, and any creatures not in G would *ex hypothesi* differ from G-creatures only in haecceity – and it is hard to see that this sort of difference would lead to drastically different possible actions and CFs. So if G*'s CFs would not be G's twice over, G*'s maximum gift will likely be *around* twice G's.[4]

On (b) or (c), the response contends, Molinism doesn't help; BWA remains, since for every gift God could give, a greater is possible. On (a), if God is really perfectly benevolent$_v$, He will give the most He can, given the CFs,[5] and any of His purposes that legitimately override His desire to be benevolent. Suppose a set of CFs, C1, allows God a maximum gift compatible with (say) His legitimate interest in maximizing creatures' moral status with aggregate value V.[6] If so, if God has this interest and is perfectly benevolent$_v$, He gives gifts with value V. Given C2, things are better for Him: the maximum has value V + 3. So if God is perfectly benevolent$_v$, He gives gifts with value V + 3.[7] Once we factor CFs into

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the picture, only being less benevolent$_v$ could explain God's giving less than He might. And so even if (9a) does not apply to God, it appears that:

(9a*) For all *xy*, if *x* and *y* are moral agents whose acts of benevolence are subject only to Molinist moral luck and *x* has a better record of benevolent acts than *y*, *x* is more benevolent$_v$ than *y*

will apply given Molinism.[8] Conjoin this with suitable premises including:

(8e*) Necessarily, for all *xy*, if *x* has a better moral record subject only to Molinist moral luck than *y*'s and *x* is more virtuous than *y*, *x* is morally better than *y*,

plus something close to BA, and something close to BC will follow, thus giving us a B-type principle sufficient to drive BWA. All Molinism seems to do is narrow the worlds that give rise to BWA to those of a single galaxy.

But look again. The C1 and C2 galaxies (we can suppose) differ only in their CFs and in whatever else must change to accommodate this difference. The difference in CFs affects how great God's gifts are in these galaxies. God's record of benevolence is less in C1 worlds. But His benevolence$_v$ can nonetheless be equal in the C1 and C2 galaxies. I flesh this out as follows. If CFs determine a maximal gift in both, God is equally and maximally benevolent$_v$ in both if God would give the maximum in both, whatever it is.[9] His benevolence$_v$ in both is a disposition to give the most His circumstances permit, and only the circumstances determine differences in gift. If CFs impose an external upper bound in both, God is equally benevolent$_v$ in both, if God's gifts in both would fall within the same interval of values just below the bound. His benevolence$_v$ in both would be a disposition to give no gift further than some particular amount from the bound, and only difference in bound would determine differences in gift.[10] If the CFs impose a maximum *per* universe-duplicate in both, God is equally and maximally benevolent$_v$ in both if God gives the maximum per duplicate in both, even if He creates different numbers of duplicates in the two galaxies; He is maximally benevolent to each creature (compatible with best benevolence to all the rest) or to each universe, however many or few duplicates He makes. If they impose an external upper bound *per* duplicate, we can treat this along the lines so far indicated. If, in the C1 galaxy, CFs determine a maximum and in the C2 an external upper bound, the matter is more complex.

But clearly God's benevolence$_v$ is maximal if He is subject only to Molinist moral luck and would give the maximal gift in C1 worlds. If it is not possible that He give a maximal gift in C2 worlds, this can't count against the claim that His benevolence$_v$ is maximal there: one can't legitimately be given a lesser grade morally for not doing what cannot be done.[11] Elsewhere, I develop two ways to make sense of maximal-degree benevolence$_v$ given an external upper bound.[12] If either is viable, one can use it to claim that God's degree of benevolence$_v$ is

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equal – maximal – in both C1 and C2 worlds. So, with this one promissory note, it is not at all obvious that God's benevolence$_v$ must differ, galaxy to galaxy, for it is not at all obvious why these aren't legitimate ways to rate benevolence as equal. Of course, if CFs impose an external upper bound in a galaxy, to that extent BWA remains to be dealt with. But my point *here* is simply that difference in CFs doesn't clearly entail difference in degree of benevolence$_v$. This point is part of defeating BWA, as it leaves viable the claim that within Molinism, God can differ in benevolence-record between galaxies without differing in degree of benevolence$_v$. That is, the apparent coherence of this treatment of equal benevolence$_v$ is reason to think (9a*) false, thus blocking the BWA comeback to my argument from Molinism.

Suppose, further, that God's degree of benevolence$_v$ does differ between galaxies. Why would it? One might suggest that God's acts explain this, by producing His virtues. But even if they do, there are reasons He does some acts rather than others. On Molinism, plausibly at least some involve galaxies' CFs. The theist committed to perfect benevolence$_v$ is entitled to suggest that the difference in God's degree of benevolence$_v$ is systematic – that as opportunities to give rise, so do gifts, compatible with God's morally legitimate aims other than gift-giving. If we accept this suggestion, then CFs become important, since only difference in these constitutes a difference in divine opportunities, unless there are also contingently necessary truths. Now there are two ways to look at this proposed difference in benevolence$_v$.[13] On either, God begins (we may presume) with at least some inclination toward benevolence. On one (i), God's giving the gifts that He does produces His final degree of benevolence$_v$ – i.e. God in each world brings it about that He has the degree He winds up with in that world – and so the difference in degree of benevolence$_v$ is not made till God acts. This has two variants. Perhaps (ia) God produces His final degree of benevolence$_v$ all at once, in choosing a world to actualize or willing to actualize it. Or perhaps (ib) God grows in benevolence$_v$ gradually, as He actually gives the gifts through time that He initially chose to give.[14] On the other (ii), God's giving gifts does not produce but merely expresses His benevolence$_v$, and so the difference in degree of benevolence$_v$ exists prior to God's actual giving.

(ib) is foreign even to Western theism's scriptural roots, let alone its developed philosophical expressions.[15] The Bible sums up God's character as perfect.[16] God's benevolence$_v$ is part of His character. So the Bible commits itself to God's being perfectly benevolent$_v$. If God has still more gifts to give, and how much He has given determines how benevolent$_v$ He is, He is perfectly benevolent$_v$ at best only after His last gift, and if (as Biblical eschatology suggests) there never *is* a last gift, He is never perfectly benevolent$_v$. Friends of BWA must let theists explicate God's character as they choose (as long as their explication is coherent), on pain of simply talking past them. There is nothing incoherent in the thought that God gets credit for all His benevolence as soon as He chooses a world, and

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asserting this begs no questions against BWA. So BWA has no right to insist on (ib), and Western theists are within their rights to reject it.

(ia) has it that God makes Himself as benevolent$_v$ as He ever is by making one choice.[17] This will also be unacceptable to temporalist Western theists, for a reason it shares with the gradual-growth model. On both models, if God is temporal, at some time He is not yet as morally good as He shall be.[18] But it's nigh universally held that being morally perfect is a prerequisite of being God. If God has moral growth yet to come, He is not yet morally perfect. So on both models, either He who winds up as God is not initially God and grows into the job (unacceptable to any Western theist), or His moral perfection carries no implications for His benevolence (unintuitive and also (I'd argue) unscriptural), or being morally perfect does require being benevolent to some degree, but God can count as overall morally perfect with a degree of benevolence$_v$ so low that only willing to give the gifts of an entire possible world raises it to perfection (also unintuitive). So only atemporalists, I suggest, could find (ia) at all attractive. On an atemporalist view, God would just timelessly make His decision, and so timelessly would have all the benevolence$_v$ He ever has: there would be no part of His life at which He was not yet at His final degree.

But problems about the relation between act and virtue affect (ia) even on atemporalism. If (ia) just equated having a particular degree of a virtue with having a particular record of its acts, we could disregard it, for it is surely possible that the same record lead to different degrees of a virtue: some people just 'take to' moral goodness more easily than others, due to internal factors. The view would instead have to be that one divine act creates God's final disposition. I can best raise the problem with this view by supposing first that God is temporal. If He is temporal, He first decides to give gifts, then carries through. If the carrying through consists in performing further actions, it is hard to see why this would not add some increment to His virtue if it is open to increase (it does in our case), nor why it would not be open to increase if an initial act had already increased it: why would only one increase be possible?

In all other cases, the more one does, the more one's disposition increases. And if anything it is more virtuous (and so virtue-inducing) actually to give a gift than merely to decide to give one: follow-through matters, and is the harder part. Now if God is timeless, there is no sequence between His decision and the acts in which He carries through, but if they are distinct acts, we still have to wonder why only one of them, the decision, has any effect on His degree of virtue. It's possible to hold that God performs only one action, which has different temporal manifestations at different times, or that God does many actions, but His contribution to any one is identical with His contribution to any other.[19] This would make good sense of one divine activity establishing a divine virtue, at least if we can make sense either of a timeless being's having dispositions or of a virtue's being neither a disposition nor a simple record of acts. But since either view

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of divine action is not a necessary part even of belief in divine timelessness, it is hard to see how the BWAer could force theists in general to accept it.[20]

If God's acts produce His benevolence$_v$, and a galaxy's CFs are, as it were, obstacles that limit His choice of action, it is clear how they help explain God's degree of benevolence$_v$: they do it by impeding His having any higher degree, at the very least by keeping Him from making higher-value choices. If this impediment even partly explains the differences in God's degree of benevolence, (i) leads directly to a claim of divine moral luck. But there are problems with (i): either version is unacceptable to Western temporalist theism, and the only account of God's action that makes sense of (ia)'s relation between act and disposition has little to commend it to theists. This forces us to consider (ii). As only (ii) is compatible with God's being morally perfect *ab initio*, only (ii) will have much pull for most Western theist thinkers. But on (ii), given Molinism, there can be no explanation at all for God's differing in degree of benevolence$_v$ between galaxies. If this is so, given Molinism and (ii), this claim is implausible.

On (ii), God has His final degree of benevolence *ab initio*, before any choice. So only factors present at that point could explain it. On Molinism, *ab initio* the only given facts are God's having His nature, the truth of necessary truths, and the CFs. The first two are constant between actually possible galaxies.[21] So they couldn't explain a variance in benevolence$_v$ between galaxies. If there are divine CFs, the relevant ones will either constitute God's degree of benevolence$_v$ or be grounded on it. For virtues are dispositions to act. On a conditional analysis of dispositions, God's having this degree will just consist in these CFs being true. So on a conditional analysis, difference in CFs doesn't explain the difference in degree of benevolence: it *is* the difference, which is left entirely without explanation. On any other account, it will be something that provides a categorical ground for these CFs. On these accounts, difference in CFs doesn't explain difference in degree of benevolence; instead it is explained by it, and the difference in degree is again unexplained. So only difference in creaturely CFs is available to explain differing divine degrees of benevolence$_v$. But if they do not do so by conditioning His choice of action, as on (I), creaturely CFs can explain God's differing degrees of benevolence only if the difference in these would make Him less benevolent in one galaxy, even before He has made any choices.

But it's hard to see how God's circumstances can infect His moral qualities before He even has a chance to use them. God's nature, strength of will, inclinations to love certain sorts of good, and any intentions these suffice to fix seem matters quite independent of how things are outside Him in advance of His choices. These seem sufficient to determine a level of goodness on their own. Someone might reply that God sees that He (say) can't give more gifts than N, given the galaxy He's saddled with, and as He is perfectly rational, this automatically adjusts His dispositions to give, reducing them to N-level. But this isn't how it is for us: we can perceive moral opportunities and obstacles

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and undergo no moral change at all, even if we see perfectly well what they mean for our plans. This is not a function of being imperfectly rational, and so it's not clear why we should suppose things to differ in God's case. I suggest, then, that on Molinism there is no way for BWA to make out the claim that God differs in benevolence between galaxies, depending on the gifts He is able to give in those galaxies, which is both plausible and acceptable to Western theism. If this is true, the way is clear for Molinists to hold that He does not so differ.

Molinists can call (3) irrelevant. For that better worlds are possible does not entail that they are within God's actual all-things-considered power: (3) causes trouble only if it is the case too that if there are better possible worlds than ours, God could have actualized some of them. One could reply that even given Molinism, better worlds are always possible and within God's reach because qualitative duplicates of universes can share a possible world. But Molinists can assert in this case that God's benevolence *to each duplicate* is maximal – and so call this too irrelevant by properly parsing perfect benevolence.

I now take up a non-Molinist view of providence.

Incompatibilist freedom and moral luck

Molinists suppose that God created agents with a sort of freedom incompatible with causal determinism. There would be no point to their theory if He had not. Had God given creatures only a sort of freedom compatible with His causally determining their actions, He could know what they would do and organize His providence without recourse to knowledge of CFs, and could in fact determine what these are rather than have to work around them. Let's now reject Molinism, and consider just the lesser thesis Molinists suppose, that God has given creatures incompatibilist freedom.[22]

Daniel and Frances Howard-Snyder suggest another divine moral-luck scenario. They suggest that a deity, Jove, might pick among good creatable worlds by creating a randomizing device and creating the world it picks.[23] On their story, Jove determines a range of acceptable worlds, then lets the indeterministic machine pick, and creates the world picked. Jove places the pick of a world to create in something he can overrule – he might after all refuse to create the world the randomizing machine selects, or decide to control it after all – then does not overrule it. That it is in Jove's control whether he is in control of what world he makes doesn't alter the fact that he is not in complete control of what world he makes if he does not overrule the machine. That is, that he is in control of whether he is subject to moral luck in creating does not change the fact that if he does not overrule the machine, he is subject to moral luck; as the fact that drunken drivers control whether they drink and drive on any given night does not change the fact that if they drink and drive, they incur either the bad moral luck of causing an accident or the good moral luck of avoiding this bad luck.

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I submit that if Molinism is false, then if God creates free agents, the world eventually made actual is selected by something like the Howard-Snyder procedure, and God is as a result subject to consequential moral luck. If Molinism is false, God does not, in deciding what to create, know what free agents would do in various possible circumstances. There is nothing of this sort to know.[24] But if God is omniscient about what is possible, He knows all that they might do. He also knows what they are likely to do in each possible situation. For He knows what their powers and dispositions would be in each, and these determine probabilities for outcomes even where free choice is involved. Thus, for every stage of every possible world, including all His possible actions in each world, God knows what is likely to ensue after that stage. Being wise, He selects an initial world-segment to create using His knowledge of the possible, ordered via His knowledge of probability.[25] God knows that $W_{1...n}$ are all the possible initial segments of worlds, and knows what is most likely to ensue given each, and what is most likely to ensue given that, and so on.

So God actualizes an initial segment that will yield (way down the line) a best chance or set of chances of achieving a best possible proportion of His most favoured purposes, and tries to sway things in each subsequent segment of unfolding concrete actuality so as to favour this result. Further, for any possible free agents in any possible circumstances, God also knows what the worst they can do will be. Perhaps He also selects with an intent not to let things get as bad as the worst creatures might do. If He does all this, He in effect selects a range of acceptable worlds from among which the eventual actual world would come.[26] God places which world in this range eventuates in the hands of an indeterminist agency He can overrule – the free agency of creatures – then does not overrule it.

But His world-selection set-up is not entirely random. For God influences the 'machine' at all points toward a better outcome. As perfectly wise, God chooses His initial segment with a plan in mind: He wants not just an initial segment, but an entire universe-history of a particular sort which achieves His purposes in creating, and so He has in mind how He will promote His goals. God's plan deals with each possible point at which a free creaturely action might help determine the ongoing course of history: for each such action, God determines what He would do in response. These responses, too, are scripted in light of His knowledge of what further developments they would probably lead to: again, if Molinism is false, then in His plan-making there is nothing more to go on. It's a good question whether God subsequently changes His plan. He does not if He is atemporal. Changing a plan would entail undergoing some intrinsic mental change. Nothing atemporal can change intrinsically; something changes intrinsically only if it has an intrinsic property at one time and lacks it at another. Again, He does not change plan if He is temporal and He does not acquire any foreknowledge of what free creatures will do by determining what He will create, or creating it: only such knowledge would be a basis for changing the plan.

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But it is controversial whether even a temporal God who foreknows creatures' actions could change His prior plans in light of this.[27] It could be, then, that the plan God makes based entirely on His knowledge of the probabilities is the only one He ever has.

If God creates free agents, it is up to them how well they co-operate with His plans. He may be lucky or unlucky in how His creatures choose to act, even if He has great control over their initial endowments, natural tendencies etc., and constantly tries to influence events in His direction.[28] For He could fully control their actions only by abrogating their freedom. Again, how creatures act will affect what gifts God is able to give them, if e.g. He has overriding reason to give certain sorts of gift only if creatures act in certain ways. So if there are worlds in which God creates free agents, God's record of benevolence might vary from world to world due entirely to factors over which He (voluntarily) has no control. Some might suggest that permitting freedom does not subject Him to luck, strictly so-called. Perhaps God wasn't lucky the Virgin Mary said 'Yes'. He was able to stack the odds in His favour, and likely did so. Still, He did not control this, it could have gone the other way, and what He could do depended on what she said. And any case in which factors outside one's control help determine one's moral record is one of moral luck.

Let's now add a further assumption, that God has no control over modal truth. Only Descartes and perhaps Anselm have ever denied this. If God has none, the content of possible worlds is not in God's control. If it is not, it is not in His control what creatures are possible, what their possible states and powers are, and so what each is likely to do in each possible situation. All of this subjects God to circumstantial moral luck somewhat as Molinism would, since all of this affects His choices: in determining His plan He must work around what free creatures are likely to do in each possible situation, as a Molinist God must work around what they *would* do. Given morally legitimate or overriding plans and purposes then, God could, by an analogue of Molinist moral luck, have to create a much lesser universe than He would have preferred otherwise, since perhaps only such a universe generates His best chance(s) of His best result. He might have (say) to permit more natural evil to give Himself His best chance(s). Now the contents of possible worlds generate a set of world-indexed truths: if in W it is the case that P, there is also the world-indexed truth that P in W. That P in W is a necessary truth, as what truths a possible world contains does not vary world-to-world. So the 'luck' generating factor here is a set of necessary truths over which God has no control. We usually call only contingent circumstances lucky or unlucky. But again, 'moral luck' is just a term for factors outside one's control that affect one's moral record. So even necessary truths can legitimately be sources of moral luck.

Now perhaps if God is perfectly benevolent, then given the facts about what is possible and probable, God makes the most benevolent decisions open to

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Him at every stage (if there are such). But even so, those decisions are shaped by factors God does not control. So on two assumptions that are not at all controversial to theists – incompatibilist created freedom and no divine control over necessary truth – it emerges that a perfectly benevolent God might have a record of benevolence which is less than it might have been due to factors He does not control. God might be as fully disposed to give as He would have been had circumstances and consequences let Him be more generous.[29] He could be just as benevolent$_v$ in a world in which Judas refused an offer of final salvation, denying God the chance to give this gift, as in a world in which Judas accepted His offer. So even if (9a) is true, on our two assumptions, God does not satisfy its antecedent. Nor does he satisfy (9a*)'s.

As record and virtue are both relevant to moral stature and do not march in tandem, B is ambiguous at least between

> B1 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 with a better moral record than it,

and

> B2 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 more virtuous being than it.

B1 still seems true. But if my arguments have been sound, B1 doesn't entail B2. And if even God is subject to moral luck, then if He winds up actualizing a lesser world (with the mixed co-operation of free creatures), it does not follow that there could be a more virtuous being: B2 is false.

At this point the theist's move should be plain: the theist should say that

> (11) The claim that God is EMP concerns His virtues, not His record,

though of course it places constraints on His record. Perhaps if there is no best world, a maximal benevolence-record is impossible. But many theists who've called God EMP have not meant to say that He had a maximal record of any sort. Anselm, for instance, asserts that God is EMP, then explicates this purely in dispositional terms, speaking first of His lacking the power e.g. to lie, then parsing this latter in terms of His having powers such that nothing can cause Him to do wrong.[30] Medieval Aristotelians like Aquinas naturally read being EMP as a matter of virtues.[31] Further, consider some qualities God is often said to have essentially – truth (honesty), other-directed love, justice, and mercy.[32] It's orthodox to hold that God is able not to create, and Anselm and Aquinas were orthodox. (And to assert that God could have failed to create begs no question against BWA. For (4) does not imply that God creates: for all (4) implies, there could be a best possible world, and it could be one with God alone.) If God did

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not create, He would have no record for honesty, justice, mercy, or other-directed love.

But He would still have all these qualities, if they are His essentially. So the only way these could be ascribed to Him essentially would be as virtues, and so even if Anselm, Aquinas *et al.* had not been explicit on the matter, it would have been most charitable to read them so. If this is the right way to take claims that God has many moral qualities essentially, it is not clear why we should take others in another way. Moreover, to hold that God would have no record for justice (etc.) but would be perfectly just (etc.) if He did not create begs no questions against anyone who thinks that God's *benevolence* necessitates Him to create. Suppose this to be so. Then God creates necessarily. So it is a *per impossibile* assumption that God not create, and the impossibility involved includes that God would not then have been perfectly benevolent. But nothing in the idea that God forfeits His perfect benevolence requires us to hold that He forfeits any *other* moral perfection. On present assumptions, the claim that:

(12) Had God created nothing at all, He would have been perfectly just,

has an impossible antecedent. It is thus trivially true, on the standard approach to these matters. So too then is:

(13) Had God created nothing, He would not have been perfectly just.

But while both are true, both do not equally reflect the facts about God's justice, and so one of them ought to be ignored. If God's benevolence requires Him to create, then my claim that God would have been perfectly just had He not done so is just a claim that only (12) reflects the facts, so that in reasoning about God's justice we should apply (12) and ignore (13). And this claim seems correct.

Many theist friends of essential moral perfection accept (11). The theist is free to parse being EMP as a matter only of being perfectly virtuous as long as doing so is coherent and does not grossly violate the sense we'd incline to give 'morally perfect'. The claim that someone is perfectly virtuous seems coherent. The claim that someone has any virtue in any degree essentially is not compatible with the way humans acquire virtues: we have only as much virtue as we develop by acting well, and if our degree of a virtue changes, there is no particular degree of it we have essentially. But it's far from clear that the way humans acquire virtue displays part of the nature of virtue as such. Conee makes a gross-violation claim, insisting that having an unsurpassable record must be part of the concept of a morally perfect agent, because such an agent must be 'ideal in every morally relevant respect … as morally good as possible'.[33] But if it is impossible to be ideal in one particular morally relevant respect, a morally perfect agent can only be one ideal in enough other morally relevant respects. The axioms of naïve set theory reflect the sense we initially incline to give 'set'. When they turn out to

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hide paradox and alternate axioms emerge, these do not grossly violate the sense of 'set'. They merely show what the sense has to be, on sufficient reflection.

The importance of the moral-luck argument

We have done moral evil. We have done it only if we were responsible for our actions. So we have done it only if we are free. If we are free, either there would have been CFs about our actions for God to know, or knowledge of what we could and were likely to do was all a God could have to go on in picking which creatures to create. On either assumption, God would be subject to moral luck, and so BWA would fail. So if we have done moral evil, BWA fails.

Necessarily, free creatures can realize values that unfree creatures cannot. So necessarily, free creatures add something to a world's value that nothing unfree can contribute. As this is so, if possible worlds all rank on a unitary scale of value, there is a point P on that scale above which all possible worlds containing creatures include free creatures. This is not to deny that there are possible worlds containing created freedom to which possible worlds containing none are superior. For there are very good possible worlds with no free creatures. (Some contain great beauty, pleasant lives for unfree animals, and unfree person-like creatures who have pleasant lives enjoying music, chess, philosophy, and other higher-order pleasures.) And there are unimpressive possible worlds containing created free will. (Some are drab, ugly worlds in which just one free creature briefly exists and makes just one choice of no moral significance.) Surely some of the former are better than some of the latter, if they all rank on a common value-scale.

But consider any possible world without created freedom, however good. There is a world indiscernible from that one save that in addition, it contains some part of some universe in which free creatures make a contribution to world-value that is on balance positive. Thus for any world without freedom, there is a straightforwardly superior world containing freedom. Thus, again, all worlds above P containing creatures contain free creatures. But then if God creates and makes a sufficiently high-value choice of world, He must be subject to moral luck. BWA contends that it is an imperfection in God to make an insufficiently high-value choice of world. So one who pushes BWA presumably will say that God must make a high-enough-value choice of world to be saddled with moral luck. But if God is saddled with moral luck, BWA fails. The BWAer either will or won't concede it a genuine possibility that God exist and avoid moral luck by creating a sufficiently low-value world. If this is possible, a premise of BWA must be false. If it is not possible, a moral-luck rejoinder to BWA is available, and so the argument fails.

Suppose on the other hand that possible worlds do not all rank on a unitary scale of value. If this is so, there are worlds neither better than, worse than

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or equal in value to other worlds: incommensurable pairs of worlds. Suppose for simplicity that there are just two groups of worlds G and G*, all worlds in G on a common scale, all worlds in G* on a common scale, and no world in G commensurable with any world in G*. Then God could not be liable to BWA for choosing a G-world over a G*-world, for this would not be a choice of less good over more good. Within the G-worlds, all would proceed as in the last paragraph. So nothing in the last paragraph depends on the assumption that all worlds are commensurable. The upshot, again, is that BWA fails.

Moral-luck rejoinders

One may wonder whether Rowe *et al.* can avoid the moral-luck response by rebooting BWA in terms of worlds God tries to actualize, not worlds He succeeds in actualizing. This would give us

> B3 If an omniscient being tries to actualize a world when there is a better world it could have tried to actualize, then it is possible that there exist a being morally better than it.

A problem with B3 is that if Molinism is false, what God attempts, strictly speaking, is not to actualize one world, but to get a sufficiently high-value result: to get some world from among an infinity of possible continuations of a world-segment He initially creates. If this is so, then if Molinism is false, quite likely for every world God tries to actualize,[34] there is a better world He tries to actualize in the same act, and it is not ruled out that God's initial act of creation includes trying to actualize all worlds better than some particular world. But if Molinism is false, it is not possible to do better than this. We can try to rectify this with

> B4 If an omniscient being attempts to actualize one from among a set of worlds when there is a better set of worlds one from among which it could have attempted to actualize, then it is possible that there exists a being morally better than it,

and in parallel to (4),

> (14) If an omniscient being than which there cannot be a morally better attempts to actualize one from among a set of worlds, there is no better set one from among which it could have attempted to actualize.

One problem with appeal to B4 or (14) is that this world's not being the best possible or being less good than infinitely many are not strong reasons to conclude that God *tries* to do less good than He might. Given created free will but without Molinist resources, the best God can do is actualize an initial

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world-segment whose possible continuations give Him the best overall chance of realizing the best overall outcome. For all we know, the continuations of the segment God chose include every world above a given point on the scale of value – which would not be a case of attempting to do less good than He might. That an initial segment has all these good continuations is compatible with some of its possible continuations leading to a very bad outcome: all that follows about God's choice is that He chose this initial segment despite this possibility, because it was more likely that a much better outcome ensue.

So we can't simply assume that if God chose an initial segment whose worst possible outcome was less bad than the worst possible outcome of the one He actually chose, He would have chosen a better set of possible outcomes – i.e. attempted to actualize one from among a better set of worlds. For God must accept tradeoffs: perhaps He would have purchased that less bad worst possible outcome only by giving up so much chance at such better outcomes that overall, the set with the less bad worst outcome is not better. Further, that an initial segment makes a better or best outcome more likely is not just compatible with, but co-plausible with, its being the case that the chance of a very good outcome be very low. For each initial segment has infinitely many continuations, types of continuations, and morally significant types of continuation. Most of these outcomes, then, have infinitesimal (or, paradoxically, zero[35]) probability. So God's best bet could well be on an initial segment whose morally best outcome has an extremely low but finite probability, this being all it takes to outweigh any sum of a finite number of infinitesimal probabilities.

Again, what makes an initial segment a best bet might be neither its best nor its worst possible outcome, nor their probabilities, but perhaps that the outcomes between these, while perhaps not great, are overall fairly good. A rational God might well pursue a maximin strategy, making the choice with the best chance of avoiding the worst and achieving the fairly good rather than the choice with the best chance of the best (given that the choice yielding the latter might also make the overall set of non-best outcomes significantly worse and significantly more likely). One might expect a God concerned to minimize (say) creaturely suffering to make such a choice, out of His mercy and compassion. It could be precisely perfect benevolence that leads God to forego attempting to actualize the best in favour of a less bad worst case *and* a better overall set of mid-range cases. *For all we know about the actual world, God has done precisely this, for the best possible moral reasons.* And again, for all we know about the actual world, it *is* a continuation of the initial world-segment that gave God His best chance at a best possible result (if there are such). Given that the best possible worlds including creatures all include created free agents, it is fully compatible with this being a world than which infinitely many are better that God did make the best attempt at the best He could make, and He got things as they are despite His best efforts. So the prospects of an argument based on B4 and (14) do not look good.

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This comeback supposes a non-Molinist account of God's choice of initial segment. A Molinist counter is simpler. God can't rationally aim to actualize a world (or one from a set of worlds) that His knowledge of CFs tells Him He cannot actually get: say, aim for the best possible world, knowing that, given the actual CFs, the best He will get will be something less. One can't rationally intend to bring it about that P if one knows that the result of trying to do so will be not-P and does not 'hide' the knowledge from one's decision process, e.g. by some sort of self-deception (which is itself in this instance a form of irrationality). So God can't rationally aim for any world better than the best the CFs actually permit, if there is one. For Molinism, given that God is rational enough to be guided by His knowledge of CFs, any world that God attempts to actualize He succeeds in actualizing: God has complete providential control by way of His knowledge of CFs, and so what He chooses (appropriately guided by this knowledge), He gets. If God is necessarily perfectly rational and necessarily omniscient about CFs, then, B4 is strictly equivalent to B1 or B2. And so for the Molinist, this epicycle of the argument can be treated as the original was.

Another B-type principle is

> B5 If an omniscient being picks a world (or an interval of worlds) as the worst it will permit when there is a better world (or interval) that it could have picked, then it is possible that there exists a being morally better than it.[36]

Rowe's argument for B tacitly premises B5: for it to be possible that there be another creator, 2, with standards of goodness so much higher than 1's that 2 would rule the world 1 picks insufficiently good to create, is for it to be possible that there be another creator who picks a better world or interval as the worst it will permit. It is possible, Rowe argues, that God have set a higher lowest permissible result, and given B5, this implies that His benevolence is not unsurpassable.[37] But given created freedom and non-Molinism, God could have benevolent reasons to allow a worse lower bound. If He has no control over the content of the possible, it is not in His power to have just anything continue on from a given initial world-segment. He has to accept tradeoffs.

It could be that initial world-segments with higher lowest possible results all have less good highest attainable results and less impressive mid-range results, and that in some of those with lower worst possible results, the best and the better are good enough, and their chances sufficiently greater, to make it overall most rational and benevolent to 'bet on' an initial segment with a worse lower bound result. Similarly, there may be tradeoffs in selecting a lowest permissible result among the possible results (if God does not make both choices at once by selecting an initial segment whose lowest possible result *is* His lowest permissible result). It could be that the price of ruling out one sort of possibility is ruling another in. And if what would get ruled in is bad enough, and its

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probability high enough if permitted, it would be better to permit a worse lower bound with (say) a much lower probability of coming about. Here, as with B3 and B4, the Molinist rejoinder is simpler: we needn't speak of God's permitting lowest possible results, for guided by His knowledge of CFs, God has complete control over what He gets – He suffers no consequential moral luck. So B5 is for Molinists strictly equivalent to B1 or B2.[38]

Notes

1. Brian Leftow 'No best world: moral luck', *Religious Studies*, **41** (2005), 165–181.
2. The term is Thomas Flint's.
3. From now on take this qualification as made throughout.
4. I'll henceforth ignore the duplicate-universe complication unless it is directly relevant.
5. Quinn suggests this latter move by restricting his consideration to worlds an omnipotent being is able to actualize, rather than worlds absolutely possible but for some reason beyond its reach; 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), 204–205. Molinist CFs are one sort of thing that places some set of worlds beyond its reach.
6. Note that this would not imply that there is a best C1 world.
7. If there is no best C1 or C2 world and there is no maximum value for divine gifts in either a C1 or a C2 world, the C2 worlds can still be understood as better for God this way: for every C1 world, there is a maximally similar C2 world, and in that world, God is able to give greater gifts than in the corresponding C1 world.
8. For convenience in reading the two parts of this article together, I continue to refer to propositions mentioned in part 1 by the numbers they have there, and use one continuous numbering system running through both parts (rather than beginning again at (1) in part 2).
9. If there is a fact about what God would do, there are CFs for God, not just creatures. Molina himself denied that there are (so Alfred J. Freddoso 'Introduction', in Luis de Molina *On Divine Foreknowledge*, Alfred J. Freddoso (tr.) (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 51–52). But this is consistent with Molinism. Some Molinists hold that these CFs are made true by God's actual volitions; Thomas P. Flint *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 56–57. Molinists who denied divine CFs could still hold to equal divine virtue by substituting for the text's claim 'if God's dispositions made it probable to the same degree in both that He would give the maximal gift'. The variations in the rest of the paragraph can be treated in parallel.
10. Note that at this point I'm not claiming that His benevolence would be maximal – only that it would be equal despite the difference in gifts.
11. Rowe concedes this; William Rowe *Can God Be Free*? (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 101.
12. Brian Leftow 'Perfect benevolence', unpublished.
13. See Thomas Morris 'Perfection and creation', in Eleonore Stump (ed.) *Reasoned Faith* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 242.
14. Obviously, only the first is compatible with divine timelessness.
15. It is highly unusual even among 'process' theists, who alone might be expected to have some sympathy for it. See e.g. Charles Hartshorne *The Divine Relativity* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1947), 44, 75.
16. II Samuel 22.31; Psalms 18.30; Matthew 5.48.
17. Or, having made the choice, by willing to do what He has chosen to do. Which one says doesn't matter for present purposes.
18. Even if God's life has a first instant (hard to square with being eternal) and God makes His choice at the first instant and at that instant wills to actualize the world chosen, on (1a) God has His final degree of benevolence only thereafter.
19. The thought in the latter case would be that God (say) causes the burning bush to burn and parts the Red Sea, the two are distinct actions, but each action consists of two parts, the one divine eternal activity and a different set of temporal events.

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20. Certain strong theses of divine simplicity would entail it, but these are highly controversial even among theists.
21. If some necessary truths are contingent, they are nonetheless true in all actually possible galaxies.
22. Henceforth 'free' always expresses the concept of this sort of freedom, unless otherwise noted.
23. Daniel and Frances Howard-Snyder 'How an unsurpassable being can create a surpassable world', *Faith and Philosophy*, **11** (1994), 260–268.
24. If God is necessarily omniscient, then if there were, He would know it, and so He would be in a Molinist creation-situation.
25. A possible world represents a complete possible history for all of reality. Creating an initial world-segment is creating a concrete world which is, at its outset, as a particular set of worlds represents the outset of history to be.
26. A possible world is a *complete* possible history. So if God does not predetermine what world shall wind up actual (e.g. by Molinist means), till history ends, all that has happened is compatible with any of a probably infinite set of worlds winding up as the actual world. If history never ends, there never is one single actual possible world. There is one single actualized world-segment, which is common to indefinitely many possible worlds which have been partially actualized.
27. If a temporal God had foreknowledge of free creaturely actions on which to base providential decisions as history unfolds, He would equally foreknow His own future providential actions, since what creatures do is partly in response to His own prior actions. Even if He didn't literally 'see' His future acts of providence, He would 'see' creatures' response to them, and be able to infer the divine acts to which they were responding. If God in this way foreknew His own actions, He would know what He had decided to do in providence logically before deciding to do it. This is at least an odd consequence. Some argue that it is incompatible with God's being free or His ever deciding to do what He foreknows He will do; Richard LaCroix 'Omniprescience and divine determinism', *Religious Studies*, **12** (1976), 365–381; Tomis Kapitan 'Can God make up His mind?', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, **15** (1984), 37–47; for discussion, see Philip Quinn 'Divine foreknowledge and divine freedom', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, **9** (1978), 219–240; David Hunt, 'Divine providence and simple foreknowledge', *Faith and Philosophy*, **10** (1993), 394–414, with the reply by Kapitan. The issues are complex, and I cannot discuss them here.
28. If I am by nature human, God had no choice about making me human. If being human includes having some degree of certain endowments and tendencies, this too is not in His control – unless necessary truths about things' natures are. But being human obviously is compatible with wide variation in how strong various tendencies are and how well we are endowed in various ways. God can adjust these to favour His plans and/or the best outcomes.
29. The circumstances here are necessary world-indexed truths about the contents of worlds. So 'had circumstances let Him' amounts to 'had there been a different set of worlds'. That is, my claim here commits me to a subjunctive conditional of the form 'there are different possible worlds > God does A'. One can cash this out in terms of contingently possible worlds, or in terms of talk of a hypothetical second logical space discrete from our own.
30. Anselm *Proslogion*, 7; *De Concordia*, I, 2.
31. So e.g. Thomas Aquinas *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, 93 and 95.
32. See e.g. *ibid*., I, 93; *idem Summa Theologiae*, Ia 20 and 21.
33. Earl Conee 'The nature and impossibility of moral perfection', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, **54** (1994), 820.
34. In one sense of 'tries'. In another, what He tries for is the world He'd most like to get. But nothing requires us to say that God has such a world, particularly if there is no best possible world.
35. Where there is nothing to make one outcome more likely than another – as is so before God makes any creative choice – the probability of the outcomes is simply $1/n$, where n is the number of possible outcomes. Standardly, where $n =$ any order of infinity, $1/n = 0$.
36. The 'interval of worlds' option is to allow that perhaps there is no worst world God will permit, but rather a best world He will not permit. Supposing the value of worlds to vary continuously, there is either a worst He'll permit or a best He'll not permit, but not both. Whichever it is, there is no closest to the boundary world of the other sort.
37. So Rowe *Can God Be Free?*, 94–97.
38. My thanks to Daniel Howard-Snyder and an anonymous referee for this journal for many helpful points.

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