



OPTIMISM AND THE BEST POSSIBLE WORLD

A PHILOSOPHICAL HISTORY

Edited by Justin J. Daeley



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10 An Unsurpassable World

Nevin Climenhaga

10.1 Introduction

One of Leibniz's most infamous theses is that our world is the best of all possible worlds.¹ Contra Leibniz, most philosophers today—even most theistic philosophers—think that there are other better possible worlds than this one, and that if God exists, God could have created one of those instead of this one.

In between these two views, however, there is a third possibility that has received increased attention in recent years: that there are no other possible worlds better than ours, but there are other possible worlds that are as good as our world or incomparable with our world. (I will assume throughout that, if God exists, the possible worlds and the worlds God could create are coextensive, so that to say that there are no possible worlds better than ours is the same as saying that God could not have created a better world than ours.)² In this case, our world would be *unsurpassable* without being uniquely best.

A key factor that could make different possible worlds incomparable in value is the presence of various kinds of *infinities* in those worlds. For example, a natural argument for the thesis that any possible world is surpassable is that for any world, you can add an additional happy person. This is clearly true for any world with a finite number of people. But it is a more complicated question whether this is true for all worlds with infinite numbers of people. Similarly, while lives with a finite amount of value can seemingly be improved upon, it is a more complicated question whether it is always possible to improve a life with an infinite amount of value (for example, a life that never stops improving in the afterlife, or a life that culminates in an infinitely valuable union with God).

This chapter reviews and advances the recent philosophical debate over whether our world is surpassable, given that it may contain an infinite number of people and lives that go infinitely well. I draw in particular on Daniel Rubio's recent formal procedure for comparing worlds.³

The key aspect of Rubio's procedure that enables it to handle infinite worlds well is that, instead of comparing some overall numerical value assigned to different worlds, it directly compares the valuable things *within* two worlds and aggregates these individual comparisons to determine which world, if either, is better. In other words, instead of summing over the individual goods within each world and then taking the difference of the sums, it sums over the differences between the individual goods in each world. I argue that while Rubio's procedure does enable formal comparisons of many worlds containing infinities, it does not eliminate all infinity-caused incomparabilities. For example, a particular person's life in two different worlds may differ in infinitely many aspects, so that there is no way to move from comparisons of the individual aspects of the life to an overall verdict on which life is better. Given this, whether there is another world better than our own ends up turning on substantive metaphysical and normative questions: metaphysical questions about identity across possible worlds, and normative questions about what makes for a valuable life.

10.2 Comparing Infinitely Valuable Worlds

The contemporary debate over the surpassability of our world takes place in the context of a particular atheistic argument from evil, which I call the *Argument from Surpassability* (AFS). Call a world *surpassable* if there is another possible world better than it. According to the AFS, if God exists, he would not create a surpassable world. But our world is surpassable, and therefore (since if God exists, he created our world), God does not exist.⁴ The most common contemporary response to this argument has been to deny its first premise. The most common criticism of this premise is that *all* possible worlds are surpassable—and if it is impossible for God to create an unsurpassable world, then it is reasonable for him to create a surpassable one (provided that it is sufficiently good).⁵

In an earlier essay, "Infinite Value and the Best of All Possible Worlds," I defended an alternative response to this argument that instead challenges its second premise (and, by extension, the claim that all possible worlds are surpassable). I noted that there is not a lot of agreement on how to compare infinitely valuable worlds, with some philosophers denying that infinitely valuable worlds can ever be improved upon.⁶ Nevertheless, drawing on work by Bradley Monton and Peter Vallentyne and Shelly Kagan,⁷ I suggested two ways that infinitely valuable worlds could potentially be improved upon but argued that given plausible theological assumptions, the actual world cannot be improved upon in either way. The actual world may then be one of many unsurpassable infinite worlds that are incomparable with each other.⁸

In a critique of my essay, Daniel Rubio reconstructs my response to the AFS as follows.⁹ First, we make two theistic assumptions:

THEISTIC ASSUMPTION ONE God will never cease to create new people.

THEISTIC ASSUMPTION TWO Each person, at some point, will enter the beatific vision and thereafter enjoy a union with God that is infinitely valuable, compared to any other experience.

The argument then proceeds as follows:

- 1 The theistic assumptions are true.
- 2 Given the theistic assumptions, there are only two kinds of world that can surpass our world—those that add more good things to it while retaining everything that our world has (adding locations) or those that improve some of the things in it without countervailing consequences while retaining everything else that our world has (improving locations).
- 3 Given the theistic assumptions, there is no world that surpasses our world by adding locations.
- 4 Given the theistic assumptions, there is no world that surpasses our world by improving locations.
- 5 Given the theistic assumptions, our world cannot be surpassed [from (2), (3), (4)].
- 6 The world cannot be surpassed [from (1), (5)].

The terminology of “locations” here comes from [Valentyne and Kagan’s \(1997\)](#) work on infinite value theory and is based on the idea that there are bearers of value in the world—“locations”—that jointly determine the overall value of the world. Rubio assumes, and I’m happy to follow him on this for the sake of argument, that locations are people’s lives.¹⁰

Rubio denies premises (2)–(4) of this argument. Before getting to his arguments, a few comments on the above reconstruction are in order. First, it’s important to note that the theistic assumptions are *dialectical*—the idea behind them is that someone who advances an atheistic argument from the surpassability of the world should think that, if God exists, then these assumptions are true. If you think that our world not having as many people as it could or some people’s lives being improvable makes a world surpassable, and that God would not create a surpassable world, then you should agree that God would not stop creating more people who live valuable lives, and that God would eventually reconcile each person to himself. What I argued in [Climenhaga \(2018\)](#) is that if the theistic assumptions are true, then there is no clear reason to think that our world is surpassable.

Second, THEISTIC ASSUMPTION ONE was uncarefully phrased in my earlier essay. Strictly speaking my argument does not require that God’s

creation of people be infinitely extended into the future, only that God does not stop creating people when he could continue to create more. It is compatible with my argument that God creates all possible people in a single logical moment (if this is possible).

Third, premise (2) is a slightly stronger claim than the one I made in my essay. I do allow for another way our world could potentially be surpassed: by another world that does not have all the locations in our world but has a larger *cardinal number* of locations. The idea here was that when we're dealing with an infinite number of people, there are two ways we could get "more" people. The first is by keeping all these people and then adding some more—that's the one Rubio mentions in premise (2)—and the second is by creating a larger *cardinal number* of people— \aleph_2 instead of \aleph_1 , say. This latter way doesn't presuppose that the two worlds share any people in common.

With that said, Rubio's subsequent argument shows my weaker claim to be false as well, so this latter point does not make a material difference to the dialectic. Against (2), Rubio suggests the following formal procedure for comparing worlds: we represent worlds as ordered sets of locations of value, and then adopt the following ranking function that tells us which of a pair of worlds is better¹¹:

SD*: $w_j \text{ EX } w_k \text{ iff } >_{n=1}^{\infty} w_{jn}^* - w_{kn}^* \text{ iff } > \text{SD}^*$: tw_j^* is obtained from w_k by filling out w_j with placeholders for items in w_k but not w_j assigned to 0 value, and w_k^* is obtained from w_j by filling out w_k with placeholders for items in w_j but not w_k assigned to 0 value.

Informally, what Rubio's favored procedure does is look at each life in our two worlds and sum the difference in value between each of these lives. If that sum is positive, the first world is better; if it is negative, the second world is better. If one world contains a life and the other does not, then we insert a proxy "0" where that life would be in the other world.

The key philosophical innovation of Rubio's formal procedure is that it is fundamentally *comparative*. We make no assumptions about the absolute value of worlds—we need not even assume that it makes sense to say that a world is valuable to some degree—instead, we just *compare* the valuable things within a world, and this lets us say which world, if either, is better. "Infinite Value and the Best of All Possible Worlds" did consider principles that let us say that one world is better than another without assigning a specific value to them—namely, *Adding Locations* and *Improving Locations*—but these principles are *ad hoc*. Rubio gives us a more general procedure that includes these principles as limiting cases. This more general procedure advances on the *ad hoc* principles in two important ways.

First, Rubio's procedure does not require that the numbers at particular locations—numbers that represent how valuable a particular life is—be

Table 10.1 Comparing two worlds that both contain lives the other does not

<i>Person</i>	<i>Nevin</i>	<i>Daniel</i>	<i>Graham</i>	<i>Justin</i>	<i>...</i>
w_1	10	0	0	10	...
w_2	0	10	10	10	...
Difference	10	-10	-10	0	0

finite. Rubio uses surreal numbers to represent value, and this lets us add and subtract infinite numbers in the same way we add and subtract finite numbers.

Second, Rubio's procedure allows us to compare worlds w_1 and w_2 even when w_2 both contains some lives w_1 lacks and lacks some lives w_1 contains. In the example in Table 10.1, w_1 lacks Daniel and Graham, while w_2 lacks Nevin. And everything else is the same. Since w_2 adds two happy people from w_1 and only subtracts one, w_2 ends up overall better (even though, sadly, I'm not in it).

I previously said that in order to improve the world by adding locations (i.e., lives), we need to have either another world with a larger cardinal number of locations or another world that has all the locations this world has, and then some. But this second way of improving the world turns out to be too narrowly described. We can add some locations and take away others, provided that in so doing we add more value than we take away. I accept Rubio's correction here, and I think Rubio's formal procedure advances the methods available for comparing different worlds when infinities are involved. However, while premise (2) is false, there is a similar premise that remains plausible:

(2*) There are only two kinds of worlds that can surpass our world: those that add more good things (adding* locations), and those that improve existing things (improving* locations).

The argument can then proceed as before, except that we are now including more possible ways of improving our world by adding* locations or improving* locations. (These two ways then no longer individually give sufficient conditions for improving our world: one would have to look at the details to see if the rival world is indeed better.)

(2*) There are only two kinds of worlds that can surpass our world: those that add more good things (adding* locations), and those that improve existing things (improving* locations).

(3*) Given the theistic assumptions, there is no world that surpasses our world by adding* locations.

- (4*) Given the theistic assumptions, there is no world that surpasses our world by improving* locations.
 (5) Given the theistic assumptions, our world cannot be surpassed [from (2*), (3*), (4*)].

The third and fourth premises are then correspondingly stronger in the revised argument than in the original argument. Rubio's critiques of the original premises will apply to these revised premises as well. I turn to these critiques now.

10.3 Adding People

With respect to (3), Rubio argues that our world is surpassed both by worlds that have all the people our world has and then some, and by worlds that have a larger cardinal number of people. In "Infinite Value and the Best of All Possible Worlds," I discussed both these possibilities and identified some problems for them. Rather than rehash those problems and how Rubio's argument addresses them, I think it will be clearer here to stake out my current position, which is (thanks partly to Rubio's critiques) somewhat more moderate than my earlier position. My current position is that it is an open question whether (3)/(3*) is true, and that this depends in particular on contested metaphysical views about what determines personal identity across possible worlds. A strong form of essentialism implies that there are worlds with more people than ours, while a strong form of haecceitism allows that there are not. For views in-between, it depends on the details.

The problem of transworld identity (i.e., identity across possible worlds) is related to, but distinct from, the problem of identity through time. For simplicity's sake, I'll assume that once something begins to exist in a world, there are no barriers to God making that thing continue to exist forever (possibly with some gaps, for example, between a person's death and resurrection). This lets us set aside issues of temporal persistence and focus our discussion solely on the issue of whether an individual that has just come into existence in one world is the same as an individual that has just come into existence in another world. Put otherwise, what we are concerned with is what makes a newly created individual the individual it is.

Here are four possible views about what determines whether or not newly created individuals A and B in possible worlds w and w^* are identical:

HYPERESSENTIALISM

(A in w = B in w^*) $:\equiv$ (A and B share all their qualitative properties)

MODERATE ANTI-HAECCEITISM

(A in $w = B$ in w^*) $:\equiv$ (A and B share some particular set of qualitative properties)

MODERATE HAECCEITISM

(A in $w = B$ in w^*) $:\equiv$ (A and B share some particular set of qualitative properties and have the same haecceity)

EXTREME HAECCEITISM

(A in $w = B$ in w^*) $:\equiv$ (A and B have the same haecceity)

Here $X :\equiv Y$ means that Y is necessary and sufficient for X and that whether X is true is (solely) determined by whether Y is true—in other words, the combination triple bar/triple equals sign $:\equiv$ symbolizes the combination of logical equivalence and metaphysical determination. We assume throughout that A and B have just come into existence in their worlds. So these views tell us what it is that determines whether a newly created individual A in world w is the same as a newly created individual B in world w^* . (However, we leave open the possibility that what determines this includes future facts: this will be true on HYPERESSENTIALISM in particular.)

These views differ along two dimensions. The first dimension is whether qualitative properties help determine transworld identity. The second dimension is whether non-qualitative properties (haecceities) help determine transworld identity. Table 10.2 illustrates this interplay. The bottom right quadrant is empty because modal facts like whether A in $w = B$ in w^* cannot be brute. They have to depend either on qualitative or non-qualitative characteristics of A and B in w and w^* .

The views in the top two quadrants explain why newly created entities are the entities they are by appeal to pre-existent haecceities. For our purposes, a haecceity is just a non-qualitative property that is essential to an individual. If there are multiple non-qualitative properties essential to an individual, then the individual’s haecceity is the conjunction of all of these. Common expositions of haecceities identify them with the particular non-qualitative property of being a specific individual: so I have the haecceity *being me*, while you have the haecceity *being you*. I will not assume this identification here—in particular, I consider below a version

Table 10.2 Categorizing theories of transworld identity across two dimensions

	<i>Qualitative essences</i>	<i>No qualitative essences</i>
Pre-existent haecceities	MODERATE HAECCEITISM	EXTREME HAECCEITISM
No pre-existent haecceities	MODERATE ANTI-HAECCEITISM, HYPERESSENTIALISM	

of MODERATE HAECCEITISM on which a particular haecceity could have combined with different qualitative essences to make a different person, something not possible on the standard exposition of haecceities. I will assume, however, that haecceities cannot be multiply instantiated: if you have the haecceity you do, no one else in the same world can have that haecceity as well.

Note that EXTREME HAECCEITISM and MODERATE HAECCEITISM require *pre-existent* haecceities. On the way I am understanding these views, haecceities help determine individual identity at the moment an individual comes into existence. Consequently, they exist (logically) prior to individuals. It is possible that haecceities (i.e., non-qualitative essences) exist, but their existence is dependent on the individuals they belong to existing.¹² In this case, A in w and B in w^* having the same haecceity cannot be part of what makes it the case that A = B if A and B are newly created individuals. (However, if A and B are instead individuals at different points in time in the same world, their having the same haecceity could be part of what makes them identical.) For our purposes, this view counts as non-haecceitistic, because it has the same implications as non-haecceitistic theories about what non-actual individuals could have existed.¹³

Let's consider now what implications these views have for the truth of premise (3)/(3*) above, starting with EXTREME HAECCEITISM. According to EXTREME HAECCEITISM, haecceities are the only (non-trivial) essential properties of individuals. Consequently, "not only could Napoleon have been a poached egg, the world could have been qualitatively just as it actually is but such that a poached egg and Napoleon swap their respective qualitative roles."¹⁴

If EXTREME HAECCEITISM is correct, then the only constraint on what (combination of) persons God can create is what haecceities there are. Here there are two possibilities. The first possibility is that there is some cardinal number of haecceities, κ . In this case, God can create a world with a person corresponding to each haecceity and so create all κ possible people. We can imagine that there's a "bag of haecceities," of some determinate size, that God pulls haecceities out of and then instantiates. God can then just instantiate every haecceity in the bag and, in so doing, create every possible person. If God does this in the actual world, then (3*) is true.

One might think that God has not done this in the actual world because the actual world contains many objects that are not people, but (given EXTREME HAECCEITISM) could have been—such as the poached egg I had for breakfast. However, if there really are no restrictions on how haecceities are instantiated, then after the poached egg ceases to exist God could instantiate its haecceity in some other object—say the next human organism to be conceived. If he did this for all objects (perhaps according to

some unusual karmic principle of reincarnation), then he could create all possible people.

The second possibility is that there are “absolutely infinitely” many haecceities, in Cantor’s sense of the absolute infinite: that is, for any cardinal number κ , there are more than κ haecceities. Rubio argues that in this case, creating all possible people is impossible, because it is impossible to create absolutely infinitely many things.¹⁵ Here is how Rubio puts the argument that it is impossible to create absolutely infinitely many things in his contribution to this volume¹⁶:

The iterative conception of set says that sets at higher levels of the hierarchy are “built up” out of things that exist at lower levels of the hierarchy. This blocks Russell’s Paradox and has become the standard conceptual foundation of set theory. In the iterative conception, urelements (that is, the non-sets) exist at the 0th level of the hierarchy. They are all available for set-construction at the 1st level of the hierarchy. So there could be a set with all of them. But if there are so many concreta that they outnumber every cardinal, then some (perhaps all) of them can be put into 1-1 correspondence with the cardinal numbers. If they also form a set, then the axiom of replacement says that the cardinal numbers form a set. By definition, this would be the largest cardinal. But if the cardinal numbers form a set, then the powerset axiom says that they have a powerset. If they have a powerset, then Cantor’s Theorem says that it has cardinality greater than the set of cardinals. So the set of cardinals would and would not be the largest cardinal. Contradiction.

I’m not convinced by this argument. To begin with, note that while God’s actions need not take place in time, they are still plausibly *logically ordered*, in that some actions are explanatorily prior to other actions.¹⁷ Consequently, we can think of God as performing a (countably) infinite number of actions at a (countably) infinite number of successive logical moments.

We can grant that God cannot, in a single moment or even in a finite number of moments, create absolutely infinitely many people, because this would mean that there is (at that moment) some number of people in the world greater than any number. But here’s something God can do instead. God can just keep instantiating a larger cardinal number of haecceities at each subsequent logical moment. Imagine that, at each moment, God writes down some cardinal number that picks out some set of haecceities and then instantiates all the members of that set. (Note that if we assume that only countably many haecceities can be instantiated in a particular

universe, this means that in instantiating uncountably many haecceities at particular moments, God creates uncountably many universes.¹⁸ If God acts in this way, then for any particular haecceity, God can instantiate that haecceity at some moment. If he doesn't do it now, he can do it later. True, at any subsequent moment, for any κ , there will still be more haecceities than κ that God has not yet instantiated. But that doesn't imply that there are any haecceities that God does not instantiate at some moment or other.

This scenario is consistent with the iterative conception of set if we assume that the only things that exist are the things that God has already created—i.e., the universes God has created and the things in those universes. Note that this is consistent with eternalism about the things that exist *in our universe*: it could be that future things in our universe exist. It only requires the falsity of a very strong form of eternalism, according to which things God creates at all logical moments exist. Consequently, this position avoids some standard objections to presentism and growing-block theories, such as that they are inconsistent with special relativity.

In a conference panel on the AFS in which I suggested the above scenario as a challenge to Rubio's argument, Rubio replied that any procedure like the above that God uses could be dominated by a rival procedure.¹⁹ If God creates κ_1 people at time 1 in procedure 1, there is another procedure where God creates $\kappa_2 > \kappa_1$ people at time 1, and so on. So the world in which God uses the second procedure contains more people than the world in which God uses the first procedure.

I deny that this second procedure creates more people. It just creates them faster. On the haecceitism under consideration here, the same people are created on both procedures, just not at the same time. Pick a haecceity. In either world, you can find some action of God that instantiates that haecceity (in a person). So they have the same people, and neither world contains more people than the other.

However, one could argue that if there are absolutely infinitely many haecceities, it is impossible for God to follow a procedure like the one proposed here. For suppose for reductio that there are absolutely infinitely many haecceities and that there is some algorithm for instantiating each haecceity at some moment by creating a larger cardinal number of haecceities at each moment. This algorithm defines a well-ordered sequence of sets of haecceities that God instantiates at successive logical moments, $S = (s_1, s_2, \dots)$, such that for any cardinal number κ , there is some set in S with cardinality greater than κ . By the Axiom of Union, there is a set that is the union of the members of S . But this set then contains all haecceities, which contradicts the assumption that there are absolutely infinitely many haecceities—i.e., so many haecceities that there is no set of haecceities.

This reductio is sound. But what it shows is just that there is no *algorithm* that, for any haecceity, instantiates that haecceity at some moment.

But that there is no algorithm for achieving this does not mean that it is something God cannot do. It just means that God's procedure is one that in principle cannot be predicted beforehand. Instead, God can freely decide at each moment what set of haecceities to instantiate next, and in so deciding he is not limited to relying only on the results of finite mathematical computations. Consequently, a free and infinite God is plausibly able to do what mathematical algorithms cannot in precisely this kind of case.²⁰ And assuming that God can act in such a way that for any haecceity, he eventually instantiates that haecceity, God can act in such a way that there is no world with more people than this one.²¹

In the context of haecceitism, there is also a more direct response to Rubio's argument from the iterative conception of set. This response is that if this argument works, it not only shows that there are only κ -many concrete things in our world for some cardinal number κ , it also shows that there are only κ -many haecceities. For if there were absolutely infinitely many haecceities, then the haecceities could be put into correspondence with the cardinal numbers, and (by Rubio's argument) the cardinal numbers then form a set, again leading to contradiction. So if Rubio's argument works, then we are back to the first possible form of EXTREME HAECCEITISM, on which God has a bag of κ haecceities and he can instantiate each haecceity in the bag.

So, if EXTREME HAECCEITISM is true, God can create all possible people, and for all we know, that is what he has done (or is doing) in this world. Turn next to HYPERESSENTIALISM and MODERATE ANTI-HAECCEITISM, according to which there are no non-qualitative properties essential to individuals, and qualitative facts alone determine which persons are actual. HYPERESSENTIALISM is Leibniz's view that every aspect of the world is essential to the individuals in the world being the individuals they are—so that, if we changed the location of one particle in the world, all the individuals in the world change. In this case, since you are some definite person, then there is some definite way the world as a whole is, including the future. If the argument above is right that in order to create absolutely infinitely many people God must act in a way that is in principle indeterminate, then it seems that a world that is some definite way can only have κ -many people for some cardinal number κ . And in this case, there is another world with a larger cardinal number of people.

MODERATE ANTI-HAECCEITISM holds that only some qualitative properties are essential to individuals. If MODERATE ANTI-HAECCEITISM is true and the future is open, then it may be that (as I argued in "Infinite Value and the Best of All Possible Worlds") it is indeterminate what people our world contains. But Rubio observes that it could still determinately be the case that our world has fewer people than it could have. He illustrates this by assuming an origins essentialist form of MODERATE ANTI-HAECCEITISM,

on which what is essential to individuals is that they have the biological origins they do:

Now take a random sperm/egg pair that never make contact. If origins essentialism is true, then there is a possible person who would have come from their union, had there been any such union. Since there are presumably sperm/egg pairs that haven't met but could have, there are people who have been excluded from actuality, not because they are impossible with actual people, but because of contingent facts about relationship decisions. It would be a little difficult to believe that, necessarily, if any of those people had been actual, someone who is now actual would not be.²²

I think Rubio is right here, and I concede the point. There are sperm/egg pairs that never make contact, but that would have resulted in a person had they made contact. And it seems possible that one of those people could have been actual without making any other actual people non-actual. For example, it seems possible that a non-actual person—call her Anne—could have been conceived, and that immediately after conception, God could have transported Anne to another universe where she would not interact with any other actual people (and so not prevent anyone else from being conceived, or change any actual person's experiences in any way). So in this case, there are other possible worlds that add additional people who have good lives without changing any actual people's lives. Thus, on this form of MODERATE ANTI-HAECCEITISM, (3), and by extension (3*), is false.

Still, there may be some forms of MODERATE ANTI-HAECCEITISM that make (3*) true. Consider a weaker version of Leibnizian essentialism that only holds that every aspect of the world *until now* is essential to the individuals in the world being the individuals they are. For concreteness, let's combine this with the openness about the logical future suggested above, where God decides at each logical moment what (increasingly larger) set of universes to create next, but assume that inside each universe eternalism is true and the future is fixed. (If you like, you can motivate this view by assuming determinism about human actions but libertarianism about divine actions.) Then we have a world, w_3 , where at each logical moment a new set of universes is created. If we consider another world, w_4 , where God creates the same (qualitative) universes until logical moment t , then w_3 and w_4 have all the same people until t . And if God creates a different set of universes at t in w_4 than in w_3 , then all the other people in w_3 and w_4 differ.

This is the kind of scenario in which Rubio's improved procedure might let us compare w_3 and w_4 : the lives that are in both worlds cancel each other out, and for the lives that one world contains and the other does not,

we insert a proxy 0 at the other world, and then we compare the sums over the two sets of lives. But since there are absolutely infinitely many people created in both w_3 and w_4 after t , then God cannot replace the people lost in transitioning from w_3 to w_4 with a larger cardinality of people. He can create people *faster*, but he cannot create *more people*. Consequently, it does not seem that w_3 can be surpassed by creating a world with additional good lives, and so (3*) is true.

Moving now to MODERATE HAECCEITISM, we find that the situation is similarly complicated. Consider first a form of MODERATE HAECCEITISM on which haecceities corresponding to persons can only be instantiated in the qualitative roles of persons (whatever one takes that to involve). On this view, any two people in the world could swap their qualitative roles—e.g., Plato could have had all the qualitative properties that Leibniz had and vice-versa. But Plato could not have been a poached egg. On this form of MODERATE HAECCEITISM, the argument that God can instantiate all haecceities will proceed as it did with EXTREME HAECCEITISM. If there are κ -many haecceities for some κ , then God can instantiate them all, and there is no reason to think he has not done so in this world. If there are absolutely infinitely many haecceities, then God can continually instantiate more at each logical moment, and there is again no reason to think this is not what he is doing in this world. Either way, God can instantiate all haecceities, and (3*) is true.

But (3*) might be false for other forms of MODERATE HAECCEITISM on which there are further restrictions on which qualitative roles particular haecceities can be instantiated in. For example, consider a form of MODERATE HAECCEITISM that endorses origins essentialism.²³ On this view, it is essential to each person that she has the haecceity she does but also that she has the origins she does. Speaking a bit loosely, a person = a biological origin + a haecceity.

What implications this view has for (3) and (3*) depends on what origins and haecceities are combinable to make a person. Consider two (non-exhaustive) possibilities. On possibility 1, any haecceity can be combined with any origin (but once a haecceity is combined with an origin to make a person, it cannot be “reused” to make another person). Then the situation is the same as it was on EXTREME HAECCEITISM: God can follow a procedure that eventually instantiates any haecceity. If there are κ -many, he can instantiate all κ at once. If there are absolutely infinitely many, he can follow the above procedure to continually instantiate more at each logical moment. In this case there are other worlds with different people (since what person a haecceity makes depends on what origin it combines with), but no other worlds with more people, since at any other world the same haecceities are instantiated (even if they result in different people). So (3*) is true.²⁴

On possibility 2, each haecceity can only be combined with a single origin to make a person. (Each origin may have multiple haecceities that it

could be associated with, so that the sperm/egg pair that resulted in Plato could instead have resulted in Plato', or Plato'', etc. if combined with a different haecceity.) In this case, as on the anti-haecceitistic version of origins essentialism, it looks like there are sperm/egg pairs that never make contact, but that could have resulted in a person had they made contact (since they could then have been combined with an "unused" haecceity). So there could have been more people than there are, and (3*) is false.

The dialectic thus remains complicated. But the above discussion suggests two things. First, there are viable metaphysical theories that render (3*) true and viable metaphysical theories that render (3*) false. Second, the key factor determining whether (3*) is true is what the correct theory is for individuating persons. HYPERESSENTIALISM renders (3*) false, while EXTREME HAECCEITISM renders (3*) true. On MODERATE ANTI-HAECCEITISM and MODERATE HAECCEITISM, it depends on the details, but there is arguably a tendency for the former to make (3*) false and for the latter to make (3*) true.

10.4 Improving Lives

According to premise (2*) above, the second way our world could potentially be improved is by improving existing locations of value—that is, improving people's lives. Premise (4*) then says that our world cannot be improved in this way, if the theistic assumptions are true. Rubio thinks that this premise is also false. Rubio's style of argument here is familiar from the literature on the problem of evil and is similar in particular to R. K. Perkins's defense of the AFS that I discussed in "Infinite Value and the Best of All Possible Worlds":

Let us suppose in w_{11} Clarence eats one strawberry once, on his first birthday. The strawberry is of middling quality, and Clarence experiences an acceptable but by-no-means impressive sensation of tastiness. The better world w_{12} is almost exactly like w_{11} . But God gives Clarence a small gift: the middling berry produces a sensation of tastiness that rivals that of the very best strawberries. This change has no impact on Clarence's future behaviour. The memory, while a little more pleasant than in the other world, fades as memories of first birthdays often do, and has no impact on Clarence's subconscious mind. It is extremely plausible that there are no offsetting aftereffects of his slightly improved birthday.²⁵

In using his formal procedure to compare these two worlds, Rubio suggests that we "represent lives as ordered sets of numbers, with the numbers representing the value of the experiences contained in the life." This then

makes experiences the ultimate locations (bearers of value) in our value theory. How much better or worse world w_5 is than world w_6 depends on the sum of the differences between the values of the lives in the two worlds, and the difference between the value of a life in w_5 and the value of the corresponding life in w_6 is equal to the sum of the differences between the values of the experiences in the two lives. Rubio continues:

We can represent the two worlds as below, with the representation of Clarence’s life labelled ‘c’ and with the surreal number ω signifying the first in a string of experiences of the beatific vision:

$$w_{11}: \{ \langle n \dots \omega \dots \rangle_1 \dots \langle n \dots 1 \dots \rangle_c \dots \}$$

$$w_{12}: \{ \langle n \dots \omega \dots \rangle_1 \dots \langle n \dots 2 \dots \rangle_c \dots \}$$

As we can see, each world contains an unbounded infinite of lives. Each life eventually hits a point at which it has infinite-valued experiences. The only difference is in the value of Clarence’s birthday experience. ... [W]e can rank Clarence’s life in w_{12} as better than it is in w_{11} while leaving all else the same between the worlds, and therefore we can rank w_{12} as better than w_{11} .²⁶

To make the case clear, let’s focus on Clarence’s life in particular and fill out some other numbers for concreteness. Note that while Rubio’s exposition suggests that Clarence’s subsequent memory is more pleasant, to make the case as clean as possible we’ll assume that the only experience in Clarence’s life that differs between the two worlds is the strawberry-eating experience (labeled n) itself. Summing the bottom line in Table 10.3, we see that Clarence’s life in w_{11} is worse than his life in w_{12} .

I have two objections to this argument—one more persnickety and one more substantive. The persnickety objection is that Rubio hasn’t satisfactorily made the case that Clarence’s experiences after his first birthday are the same in both worlds. It’s unclear what the identity conditions for experiences across different possible worlds are. In principle, we have the same kinds of options as we do for individuating people across worlds. For experiences, though, both moderate and extreme varieties of haecceitism

Table 10.3 Comparing two lives differing in only one experience

Experience	1	2	...	n	...
Life in w_{11}	-5	3	...	1	...
Life in w_{12}	-5	3	...	2	...
Difference	0	0	0	-1	0

Table 10.4 Comparing two lives differing in infinitely many experiences

Experience	...	$(n+2)_{12}$	$(n+1)_{12}$	n_{12}	n_{11}	$(n+1)_{11}$	$(n+2)_{11}$...
Life in w_{11}	...	0	0	0	1	-5	7	...
Life in w_{12}	...	7	-5	2	0	0	0	...
Difference	...	-7	5	-2	1	-5	7	...

seem implausible—it seems that experiences should be individuated only according to their qualitative properties. Which qualitative properties are less clear, but one possibility is a kind of origins essentialism: an experience of Clarence’s in w_{11} is the same as an experience in w_{12} if and only if it is intrinsically the same and everything prior to it in Clarence’s life is the same. In this case, all Clarence’s experiences prior to eating the strawberry are the same, and his first birthday-experience is different (with the w_{12} experience being better than the w_{11} experience). But his subsequent experiences are also different, so that the above representation of the two lives is inaccurate. Instead, we can represent the two lives starting at the first birthday (experience n) as in Table 10.4.

Here, the experiences in w_{11} are represented on the second row but not the third, where they are replaced by 0s, and the experiences in w_{12} are represented on the third row but not the second, where they are replaced by 0s. Since there is no longer a one-to-one correspondence in the loci of value being compared, summing over the bottom row becomes more complicated. It is no longer the case that the difference in every column except n is equal to 0. Instead, in the bottom row we have an infinite number of non-0 values in both directions. There are ways of summing over this infinite series that result in -1 . For example, we could sum over it as follows:

$$1 + (-2) + (-5) + 5 + 7 + (-7) + \dots = -1$$

But we could also sum over the series by starting with experience n_{11}/n_{12} , then adding experiences 1_{11} and 2_{11} , then experience 1_{12} , then experiences 3_{11} and 4_{11} , then experience 2_{12} , and so on. And this could lead to a different result.

So, although Rubio’s procedure for comparing worlds/lives does answer many of my technical worries in my earlier essay, it still doesn’t straightforwardly let us compare worlds/lives that differ in *infinitely many* locations. In order to compare w_{11} and w_{12} above, we need a privileged way to sum over the bottom row. Perhaps we can argue that because experiences are intrinsically ordered, the first way of summing over it above is the correct one. Perhaps. Still, this is an additional commitment beyond the formalism.

Now, it might still seem obvious to you that Clarence’s life in w_{12} is better than his life in w_{11} . But I think we should be cautious of trusting our

intuitions about cases in this kind of infinitary setting absent a compelling general principle that they follow from, because we (or at least I) have opposite intuitions about formally similar cases. Consider the following case, which I presented in “Infinite Value and the Best of All Possible Worlds” as a counterexample to the suggestion that times in a life are locations:

Suppose that there is only one conscious being, and that we are comparing his experiences in two worlds. We are left with the result that

$\{W_7: 1, 2, 3, \dots\}$

is better than

$\{W_8: 0, 1, 2, \dots\}$,

even though W_8 might differ from W_7 only in that our conscious being took a nap before doing whatever it is that gives him ever-increasing utility in W_7 .²⁷

This case seems formally similar to the aforementioned Clarence case in Table 10.3. Before endorsing the claim that Clarence’s life in w_{12} is better than Clarence’s life in w_{11} in this way of understanding the case (where his experiences after his first birthday are different in the two worlds), I would want to see a general principle that got this result without also implying that in the case above the life in W_7 is better than the life in W_8 .

On the other hand, perhaps the intuition that Clarence’s life is better in w_{12} should cast doubt on the suggestion that his experiences in the two worlds are all different after his first birthday. Perhaps we should prefer a theory that individuates experience in such a way that if Clarence’s experiences after his first birthday are qualitatively identical in both worlds, then they are numerically identical as well.

This first objection, then, remains fairly speculative. My second objection, though, is less speculative. This objection is that experiences are not the ultimate bearers of value—or at least not the only ones. In the language of our formal value theory, they are not locations, or they are not the only locations. To begin with, it doesn’t seem like we can aggregate the values of the experiences in two lives to compare the values of those lives in the way that we can aggregate the values of the lives in two worlds to compare the values of those worlds. As I say in “Infinite Value and the Best of All Possible Worlds”:

Times or creaturely experiences could be moved around, and this would plausibly change the value of a world—for example, a (finite) life that goes from bad to good seems better than one that goes from good to bad, even if the total amount of happiness in each life is equivalent.²⁸

Rubio's ranking procedure would count the life {1, 2, 3} as equal to the life {3, 2, 1}. But the above intuition suggests that the first is better than the second.²⁹

One way of responding to the above is to hold that experiences are locations but that they should be aggregated in some way other than simple addition. However, there also seem to be other things besides experiences that make a difference to how good a life is—at least, if experiences are understood purely phenomenologically. Someone whose life is spent in Robert Nozick's experience machine is worse off than someone with phenomenologically identical experiences who is not in the experience machine.³⁰ There's something valuable about having our experiences correspond with reality, about actually relating to other people (and not just having experiences as of doing so), and so on.

The Clarence example arguably shows that certain substantive value theories imply that our world, and perhaps any world, is surpassable. In particular, additive hedonism seems to have this implication: if the value of a life is just the sum of the amount of pleasure contained in each experience in that life, then for any life that isn't chock-full of maximally pleasurable experiences, we can pick a single experience, increase its pleasurable-ness, and we've improved the life. But if additive hedonism is false, then it is less clear that for any life, a better one can be constructed in this way. If we broaden our conception of effects that could be normatively relevant, we might find that Clarence's strawberry experiences do have further important effects.

Here's one example. For Clarence's experiences to be different but nothing else to change in the physical universe, either there needs to be a miracle or the laws of nature need to be different. Since (by stipulation) Clarence's first birthday-experience has no other effects on anyone's experience, no one knows that one of these has occurred. So scientists studying the psycho-physical laws, for instance, will end up with a false belief when they believe "under these physical circumstances, a strawberry-eater will have a middling taste experience," or scholars of miracles will have a false belief when they believe "here are all the times God intervened in the world." Having false beliefs of these kinds is only very minimally bad, but having a less-than-ideal strawberry experience is also only very minimally bad, so it's no longer clear that the world is made better off by Clarence's strawberry eating experience being made more pleasurable.

Or perhaps it's part of entering the beatific vision that we eventually have every aspect of our lives revealed to us. In this case Clarence's experience will have a downstream effect in his own life, when he learns about it. Will this make his afterlife better or worse in some way? Maybe: maybe having had this one worse experience will let him identify more with other people who have had bad gustatory experiences, which is a good thing. The degree of identification will be minimal, but again, the badness of a

less-than-ideal strawberry experience is minimal, so it doesn't take much to counterbalance it.

Moreover, once we recall that we are dealing with infinite worlds here, it is possible that even a small change to one part of the world will result in an infinite number of normatively relevant effects elsewhere—such as changing the accuracy of an infinite number of beliefs. This is likely to result in incomparability for two reasons. First, as previously noted, two worlds that differ in infinitely many normatively relevant respects cannot necessarily be compared by Rubio's method. Second, if we are value pluralists, it is arguable that even in finite cases different types of value will sometimes be incomparable.³¹ If any change to a normatively relevant feature of our world leads to an infinite number of normatively relevant changes elsewhere, then perhaps any improvement of our world along some dimension of value will lead to a worsening along another dimension incommensurable with the first.

Of course, we can point to much worse things in the world than Clarence's strawberry experience. And it is correspondingly harder to identify something that keeps horrendous evils from making the world worse than it would otherwise have been. Here we enter more familiar problem of evil territory, where we have very significant evils and very significant potential goods that are argued to result from them. The main relevance of the present analysis to this debate is the point that a normative change to one part of the world is likely to result in corresponding changes to an infinite number of other parts in a way that results in incomparability.³² This is not necessarily less plausible for horrendous evils than for trivial bads, because even though eliminating a horrendous evil is a greater improvement on its own, horrendous evils tend to be causally intertwined with other parts of the world in such a way that eliminating them results in changes to more normatively relevant parts of the world.

Put otherwise, whereas many classical responses to the problem of evil are "greater-good" theodicies on which God preventing some evil would make things worse overall, taking seriously the infinity of the world opens up the possibility of what we might call "incomparability" theodicies. An incomparability theodicy identifies effects an evil has that make the world with and the world without that evil *incomparable*, so that neither is better than the other. These effects may be of the same kind as those identified by greater good theodicies, but an infinite future and an infinite number of people open up more opportunities for these effects to result in incomparability. If, for example, the evils you undergo or commit shape God's future strategies in reconciling you to himself (as in John Hick's "soul-making" theodicy),³³ and the ultimate character of your union with God (as in Marilyn Adams's Christ-centric theodicy),³⁴ then your life in the world with and the world without a particular evil might end up differing in infinitely many respects. And this might result in the two lives being incomparable, for the reasons given above.

The term “theodicy” is misleading in one respect here. I don’t think that the fact that removing various bad things from our world would lead to another world incomparable with our own *explains* why that bad thing is present in our world. And so I don’t take my arguments here to offer an explanation for why our world has the evils it does. Rather, I only take them to suggest that a particular atheistic argument from evil—one based on the alleged improbability of the world as a whole—is not successful.

10.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have considered the state of the art in comparing worlds with infinite numbers of people whose lives go infinitely well—a world that ours might very well be among, if theism is true. While recent developments in formal axiology allow us to compare many such worlds, many incomparabilities remain—especially among worlds that differ in infinitely many respects. Whether our world can be improved by adding more people to it ends up depending on the correct metaphysical theory of personal identity across different possible worlds. Essentialist theories tend to make it true that other possible worlds have more people than ours, while haecceitistic theories tend to leave open the possibility that God creates all possible people in this world—although in both cases it depends on the details of the theory. Whether our world can be improved by making people’s lives better depends on the correct normative theory of what makes for a valuable life. Additive hedonism implies that there are other possible worlds where the same people live better lives (unless HYPERESSENTIALISM is true, because then the people in this world do not exist in any other worlds—but if HYPERESSENTIALISM is true, then our world is surpassed by another world with more people than it). But more capacious value theories leave open that there are compensating effects of changes to a person’s experience in other worlds that make those worlds no better than ours. In particular, these value theories make it likely that a change to someone’s experience will have an infinite number of effects on other important things—e.g., the accuracy of other people’s beliefs, or the person’s afterlife character, self-knowledge, or eternal relationship with God—that will make the world with the change incomparable with our world.

In light of this, how should we evaluate the AFS, which argues from the alleged surpassability of our world to the conclusion that God does not exist? My arguments here suggest that while some metaphysical and normative theories will make the surpassability premise true, others will not. Moreover, the metaphysical and normative theories that make this premise false (such as haecceitism and value pluralism) are ones theists are antecedently more likely than others to accept. This blunts, even if it does not wholly eliminate, the evidential and dialectical force of the AFS.

With that said, infinite value theory is a young field. Perhaps in the future new methods for comparing infinite worlds will give us better tools for evaluating whether our world can be surpassed. Or perhaps new arguments for particular metaphysical and normative theories will make the surpassability premise of the AFS more or less plausible. While I hope this essay's analysis of the question of the world's surpassability improves on previous discussions, it is no doubt surpassable.

Notes

- 1 [Leibniz 1710/1985](#). For a recent exposition and defense of Leibniz's position, see [Daeley \(2021\)](#).
- 2 Strictly speaking, since the world includes God, God does not create a whole world, but only the things in the world besides God ([Climenhaga 2018](#): 387; cf. [Rubio 2024](#)). But I will continue to speak loosely of God creating worlds for ease of exposition.
- 3 Rubio, Daniel. "In Defence of No Best World," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 98 (2020a): 811–25.
- 4 For presentations of this argument, see [Perkins \(1983\)](#), [Sobel \(2004](#): 468), [Wielenberg \(2004](#): 57), [Hudson \(2013](#): 236), and [Kraay \(2013e](#): 399).
- 5 See [Plantinga \(1976b](#): 61), [Schlesinger \(1977](#): ch. 9–10), [Forrest \(1981\)](#), [Reichenbach \(1982](#): 122–28), [Morris \(1993\)](#), and [Swinburne \(1994](#): 134–36; 2004: 113–15). [Rubio \(2018\)](#) argues that the fact that there are no unsurpassable worlds implies that there are no rational constraints on what world God creates.
- 6 See [Cain \(1995\)](#) and [Hamkins and Montero \(2000\)](#).
- 7 Bradley Monton, "Against Multiverse Theodicies," *Philo* 13 (2010): 113–35. Peter Vallentyne and Shelly Kagan, "Infinite Value and Finitely Additive Value Theory," *Journal of Philosophy* 94 (1997): 5–26.
- 8 [Pruss \(2016\)](#) also argues that our world is unsurpassable but not uniquely best, appealing to other factors that can lead to incomparability. See [Rubio \(2024](#): sec. 10.5) for a review and critique of Pruss's arguments (which are distinct from but compatible with my own). For the sake of argument I am assuming that there is generally more value comparability than Pruss suggests, and exploring the conditions under which we might nevertheless find that many infinite worlds end up unsurpassable and incomparable with each other.
- 9 Rubio (2020a).
- 10 But see [Pruss \(2016\)](#), [O'Connor \(2022](#): 238–39), and [Li and Saad \(2024\)](#) for some objections to the idea that adding more people with overall good lives always improves the world.
- 11 [Rubio \(2020a](#): 819).
- 12 [Adams \(1981\)](#) endorses this view, while [Plantinga \(1976a\)](#) endorses MODERATE HAECCETISM as understood here.
- 13 Another possibility is [Williamson's \(2002\)](#) view that all actually existing individuals exist necessarily, but that it is a contingent fact whether a particular individual is concrete or not. This will have the same implications for what individuals God can make concrete as either EXTREME HAECCETISM or MODERATE HAECCETISM (depending on what restrictions are placed on what concrete properties a pre-existent individual can have). If we want to count it as a form of haecceitism, then instead of talking of A and B as newly created individuals, we could talk of them as newly concrete individuals.

- 14 (Cowling 2023: sec. 3). See Salmon (1996) for a defense of this view.
- 15 (Rubio 2020a: 820–21; Rubio 2024: sec. 10.4.1).
- 16 Rubio (2024: sec 10.4.1).
- 17 (Climenhaga 2018: 377. See also Climenhaga and Rubio 2022).
- 18 Cf. Climenhaga (2018: 373) on the relationship between God creating all possible people and “multiverse theodicies”
- 19 (Climenhaga 2020, Rubio 2020b).
- 20 The suggestion that by means of this kind of indeterminate process God is uniquely able to create absolutely infinitely many things aligns nicely with Cantor’s conception of the absolute infinite. In Cantor’s earlier thought, the absolute infinite is inherently inaccessible to us and actual only in God: “the true infinite or absolute, which is in God, admits no kind of determination” (Cantor 1883/1976: 175). In his later thought, the absolute infinite exists only potentially: while other infinities can exist either actually or potentially, the absolute infinite is always potential as the process of collecting together an absolutely infinite multiplicity can never be completed. See Jané (1995) for a careful exposition of the evolution of Cantor’s thought on the absolute infinite.
- 21 For a different response to the set-theoretic argument against an absolutely infinite number of existing things, see Menzel (2014).
- 22 (Rubio 2020a: 822).
- 23 My thanks to Amy Seymour (2020) for the observation that haecceitism and origins essentialism can be combined.
- 24 As previously noted, standard expositions of haecceities build into the concept that they cannot result in different people. This stronger conception of a haecceity would rule out possibility 1 and be committed to possibility 2.
- 25 (Rubio 2020a: 823).
- 26 (Rubio 2020a: 823–24).
- 27 (Climenhaga 2018: 382–83).
- 28 (Climenhaga 2018: 384).
- 29 Velleman (1991) influentially argues that the goodness of a life depends partly on its shape, and that a life that gets progressively better is better than a life that gets progressively worse. Many other philosophers have endorsed this thesis and offered various explanations for it (see, e.g., Glasgow 2013, Dorsey 2015, Dunkle 2022). Metcalf (2020) and Eslami and Egonsson (2021) use the intuitive value of positive trajectories (in individual lives and the world as a whole) to defend “axiological-trajectory” and “moral progress” theodicies.
- 30 Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974).
- 31 (cf. Pruss 2016).
- 32 (cf. Climenhaga 2018: 385–86).
- 33 (Hick 1966).
- 34 (Adams 1999).

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