

Two dozen compossibles

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Abstract Religious world-views tend to make many claims that may seem contradictory. A well-known pair is God's absolute goodness and the existence of intense evil. We present a simple model to show the compossibility of middle knowledge, grounded truth, libertarian free will, predestination, evil, hell, a sin-free heaven, God being perfectly just, free, praiseworthy, and necessarily omnibenevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent, this world being both replete with injustice and the best of all possible worlds, heinous suffering, no-one unjustly suffering, God's grace for the godly, the prospering of the godless, original sin, human responsibility, trans-world depravity, irresistible grace, and Arminian human choice. We briefly engage in a number of discussions regarding these compossibilities. The model is not intended to be realistic, but to allow inspection for its possibility. For that reason, its transcendent part is kept to a minimum. The model's possibility argues for the possibility that a realistic model containing such compossibles could exist – and even be actual.

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1 Introduction

Religious world-views tend to make many claims that may seem contradictory. A well-known pair is God's absolute goodness and the existence of intense evil. This paper shows the compossibility of a largish number of such claims, by a constructive existence proof: a possible world in which they all are actualised.

Apart from a small transcendent basis, covering mainly existence and freedom, our model is immanent, allowing inspection for possibility. I am not defending all the subsidiary claims I make here (such as *existence being good*). Their (com)possibility

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is an assumption, and might need additional defence. Qualifiers relating to belief systems (Arminian, Calvinist, Molinist) do not mean that the notions as described here would seamlessly fit in those belief systems, but merely that they share salient characteristics with the beliefs of those systems.

This possible world does not reflect my beliefs, and may well be unsuitable as part of a practical belief system. All it intends to do is to show compossibility, given the *individual* possibility of any claim – some non-self-contradictory shape of notions such as omnipotence or freedom is assumed.

Section 2 describes the transcendent assumptions, and section 3 the model. Section 4 describes and defends the compossibilities, and section 5 concludes.

2 The transcendent backdrop

While keeping the transcendent side to a minimum, to allow checking for possibility, some transcendent starting point is necessary.

2.1 Existence and character

We assume that where constraints are absent, beings freely exist, with a freely chosen way of being². God Himself is completely free, as there is literally nothing to constrain Him (hence the omnis), and has freely chosen to exist as a fully good being – He chose his essence, his nature, to be good. Being at the root of existence, He *is* the good.

Creaturely freedom exists precisely where God refrains from constraining, and souls (creatures with minds) freely exist with a freely chosen *character*. Since their freedom is restricted to the extent God refrained, they may not be able to choose a complete essence or nature. Yet, their metaphysically first act is freely choosing to exist with a freely chosen *character* – where, for our discussion, a character is a function from (potential) situations to choices made³.

2.2 Choices

The choice of a character is *transcendent* – made outside of time, in an eternal now.

2 Many other options exist, and any backdrop leading to the required freedom is acceptable. Here we simply chose the minimal one for the sake of exposition; to establish aseity and more rigorous omnipotence and omniscience a more elaborate transcendent backdrop would be required.

3 Freewill requires attributability – choices should be the being's, not arbitrary. While a mystery remains regarding the choice *of* character, choices *according to* character provide this attributability.

God's choice to be good encompasses His choice to create all souls in the best possible world, with freedom, i.e. they rather than God are the ultimate source of their choices.

Most of these souls would choose a good character, but a finite number (the "sinners") would not – they are free, after all, so their choice is not deducible from external factors⁴. Of this number, some (the "repenters") would repent under certain circumstances, but others (the "non-repenters") wouldn't.

Repentance here means a *final* choice, i.e. a choice *for all future*, for the good⁵.

2.3 Characters

This once-for-all choice of a character should not be seen in a restricting way. It is quite possible to choose a character that will, say, make grumpy choices in all situations that do not involve a life sequence including having an act of love bestowed on one, and friendly choices in all situations that do. In a temporal context, that would mean that the act of love had a transformative effect on the soul. In fact, repentance is an instance of precisely such a transformative event.

Since the choice of character is timeless, there is no future in which to regret or deny it, though choices made *according to* that character may act out in time, and be regretted. Likewise the effects – including on one's self – may be regretted. These may include restrictions on future choice options, such as addiction.

3 The model

God, in His love, wants every soul to find eternal bliss in a heavenly paradise, but that requires irrevocably choosing the good – either a good character or repentance. Being perfectly good, God can't be in full communion with sinners; being perfectly just, he would never allow a non-sinner other than Himself to suffer; and being perfectly loving, he would minimise the suffering even of sinners.

4 Maybe out of an infinity, the probability of a soul thus choosing being zero. Pruss' (2012) hypothesis that God could make the world such that people would freely choosing the good doesn't apply: being good means choosing the good, whatever it is, *because it is good*. (Conversely, a soul choosing against God *because it is evil* – say, in order to be independent – would form a counterexample to Pruss' hypothesis.)

5 Such a *final choice* may require an "end time" offering the option to choose at once for all future (a kind of sum or integral of all future choices). Or possibly a true choice for the good is necessarily final: once good, there is no rejecting the good – because that wouldn't be good. Or merely every choice after this point will happen to be one for goodness.

3.1 Middle knowledge

From a soul's character God can deduce what free (as "following from a freely chosen character") choice any soul would make in any given circumstance.

This grounds God's middle knowledge: God knows that confronted with situation X soul Y would make choice Z because He knows Y has a (freely chosen) character that would.

This model is immune to Robert Adams' anti-Molinist argument (Hasker, 2000), which is based on an unwarranted conflation of choice and action. The explanatory order assumed by that argument is *counterfactual truths* < *creation* < *existence* < *choices & actions*, whereas in our model the explanatory order is *soul creation* < *choices*⁶ < *counterfactual truths* < *world creation* < *in-world existence* < *actions*. The proper freedom principle then becomes "If I freely (choose to) do A in C, no truth that is strictly inconsistent with me refraining from A in C is explanatory prior to my choosing to act as I do in C" – which our model respects⁷.

3.2 The actual world

God plans an initial stage, which He organises so as to make it the best of possible worlds.

- 1 God separates the souls in non-sinners, repenters, and non-repenters. For each repenter he determines the life sequences leading to repentance.
- 2 The non-sinners are placed (as angels) in heaven, and the sinners (as angels or humans) in another realm, the universe – so that no non-sinner unjustly suffers under the effects of the sins of the sinners.
- 3 The universe is temporal, making transcendent choices impossible – we can only choose "for now". This allows repentance, by preventing sinners from irrevocably choosing against God: any choice against Him now may still be reverted later.
- 4 God determines the set of possible worlds in which all repenters undergo a life sequence⁸ leading to repentance⁹ – thus maximising the number of enjoyers of the infinite bliss He has in store for repenters.

6 That is: the character from which the choices follow.

7 Alvin Plantinga's pro-Molinist argument as given in Hunt (2002) would succeed in its A-form in a transcendent model as described in my [*Transcendent Mediocrity is the Neutral Position*](#).

8 Including the call of the Holy Spirit, and possibly answered prayers – another compossible. <<References to Stump vs. Hoffman?>>

9 That is, if for any soul i there is a non-empty set of possible initial life segments S_i such that any choice made by i in a segment following any $s_{ij} \in S_i$ will be a choice for the good, then in such a world that soul i lives some initial life segment $s_{ij} \in S_i$.

5 From this set, He selects the optimal world according to some just measure (is the suffering of repenters worse than the suffering of non-repenters?)¹⁰.

After this initial stage, the non-repenters are moved to a space outside of all communion with God, and the repenters, having actualised their repentance, enter heaven.

4 The compossibles

How does the model just described allow the compossibilities it depends on, and the ones mentioned in the abstract? Here we shall look at some pairs and triples often considered impossible.

4.1 Freewill and constancy

The act of choosing, whether transcendent or immanent, is an act exercising our freedom – not an act implying lack of freedom. Just as an immanent choice to do A instead of $\neg A$ does not imply a lack of freedom to do $\neg A$ – but rather an *exercising that very freedom* by choosing to do A –, a transcendent choice to do A rather than $\neg A$ does not imply a lack of freedom to do $\neg A$.

For choices that determine our existence, it makes sense to use an accessibility relation that makes only options under this choice possible, making the choice necessary. So, *given* that God has chosen to be good, His goodness is necessary. *Given* that He chose the logic He did, our logic is necessary¹¹. And God chose the actual world as the best possible world *given* our choice of character. With a wider accessibility, all these become contingent.

4.1.1 God's eternal goodness and omnipotence

How can God be almighty and yet unable to do evil? The answer is that He freely, timelessly, chooses to be good¹². Such a choice doesn't limit God, the way the choice to follow a diet may limit me subsequently, because for God there is no "subsequently". There is no such thing as regret about a choice, because that choice is being made *right now*, in the eternal *now*. (His timeless choices may concern specific times in His creation, of course – somewhat analogous to the way parents may be constant in their choice to let their child stay up later once she reaches ten years of age.)

¹⁰ Souls choose their character without knowing in what world they will appear.

¹¹ It would obviously be very hard to model the contingency of logic.

¹² Choosing for the good would also be the overly obviously "best" choice. If it sometimes seems different to us, that is because we live in a very exceptional part of the world, where all evil has been gathered. To a bug living in the trash can it may likewise seem unrealistic to assume that most of the house is quite clean.

4.1.2 God's necessary goodness and praiseworthiness

Since, unlike us, God didn't exercise the option to reject the good, He is praiseworthy for His choice – and since His choice is timeless, extending from eternity to eternity in all possible worlds that would encompass us, His goodness is necessary¹³.

Included in His transcendent choice to be good is His choice to create the best of all worlds. God is transtemporally free not to create, or to create any number of worlds of any quality – but He uses that freedom to choose for the good, which includes the creation of precisely the best of all possible worlds. So the answer to Rowe's (2002) question "Can God be Free?" depends on the scope of the accessibility relation implied in the modal verb "can". If taken wide enough, the answer is clearly "Yes", but if accessibility remains within God being Who He (by choice) is, the answer would be "No".

4.1.3 Man's freedom and goodness in heaven

People with free will going to heaven does not endanger heaven's goodness, since only non-sinners and repenters go there – and both have freely chosen never to sin (any more), either by having a good character or by having repented¹⁴.

The non-repenters will never choose the good, not even in the worst circumstances, and will be fully separated from it, according to their choice.

4.2 All turned astray

A set of seeming contradictions follows from the fact that, given a (perfect) correlation, people tend to assume causality in a given direction. This may be the Texas sharpshooter fallacy, however.

4.2.1 Freewill, fallenness, and predestination

All men will sin even though they have free will¹⁵ – simply because only sinners become men. And Adam sinned before procreating, because God chose a soul that would to be Adam. Had He chosen a soul that would first have procreated, a mix of

13 We could add that His goodness is *essential*, despite the fact that He could have chosen differently: since His transcendent choice *to be* included His being good, another choice would simply have resulted in the eternal existence of another, essentially different, type of being. This would answer the problem stated in Bergmann and Cover (2006). This is speculating about the transcendent level, however, which we try to minimise in this paper.

14 See note 3 for the "final choice" involved in repentance.

15 Also – we have free will even though our brains may be wired to make us do what we do, because, knowing our choices, God created a world in which we should make precisely those choices. And likewise for all determinism – see my [Freedom in a physical world](#).

sinner and non-sinner on this earth would have resulted, and the non-sinner would have suffered unjustly.

Likewise predestination: God chooses us according to His foreknowledge. All repenters He leads to repentance by bringing them in precisely such circumstances as will make them repent¹⁶.

4.2.2 Original sin and human responsibility

This also explains the compossibility of original sin and human responsibility. Precisely those who, freely, choose against the good both are “tainted” by that choice, exemplified in Adam’s first sin, and end up in the universe. As descendants of Adam we are sinners, but the causality runs from the latter to the former. And since that choice is free, we are fully responsible for it.

Saying “God cannot blame me for sinning – I am human, and all human beings are sinners” is like saying: “The judge cannot condemn me for being a criminal – I am an inmate, and all inmates are criminals”.

It also explains our being sinful before committing our first sinful act or thought in this world: we freely chose a sinful character¹⁷.

4.2.3 Calvinist irresistible grace and Arminian free choice

Since God is free to offer or refrain from offering the call of the Holy Spirit to those who He knows will even under grace reject the good, He has good reason to offer it to only those who will use it to choose the good. In that case all who are called will actually accept His offer, so in that sense grace is irresistible. Yet it is also true that our salvation fully depends on our *free* choice to use that grace for the good – Arminianism –, though the case where we make the other choice does not occur, since in that case we wouldn’t have received the call. This is a kind of Frankfurt (1969) case reminiscent of Newman’s paradox (Nozick, 1969).

This also answers the related worries that God be a respecter of persons in taking some, but not all, human beings in His grace, or that irresistible grace be incompatible with the freedom requirement for genuine love.

4.3 God’s omnipotence and man’s free will.

Man only has freedom to the extent that God freely refrains from determining, so God’s giving freedom is itself an exercise of His omnipotence.¹⁸

¹⁶ This also answers the religious luck question: why haven’t all access to believers, arguments, and so on that bring others to faith – another Texas sharpshooter instance.

¹⁷ Not unlike Kant’s (1793) *Hang zum Bösen*.

¹⁸ A more thorough form of omnipotence would require a more elaborate transcendent backdrop.

4.4 Suffering and this being the best of all worlds

Exceedingly likely, this is not the pleasantest of all possible universes. But is it the best? Two main senses of “goodness” are “ethical perfection” and “fitness for its purpose”. Both of those would *for the universe* translate into “maximising the number of saved souls”. Two principles are important here:

- People with pleasant lives tend not to abhor evil – including the evil in themselves.
- There is no finite evil so horrible that it isn’t outweighed by the good of another saved soul.

This universe is the best universe in which repenters can live, and together with heaven it makes for the best possible world. Doubting that would be like inmates doubting that they lived in the best of all possible worlds – whereas the existence of their prison would precisely be what made the world optimal.

An ancient question in this area is whether there isn’t for every world W_i a better one W_{i+1} , derivable from W_i by adding something good – maybe another happy soul. But possibly heaven contains all non-sinning souls, whereas the number of souls in the universe is determined by the number of souls choosing against the good. Increasing the number of souls in heaven would be impossible¹⁹, whereas increasing the number of souls in the universe would mean bringing sinless souls in this place of suffering²⁰.

Given that there is a finite number of sinners, who each live a finite time in the universe, presumably having a finite number of experiences, each chosen from a finite number of possibilities (being finite, we are unable to distinguish an infinity of experiences), there is no series as presupposed by the argument.

4.4.1 Evil and God’s goodness

As discussed in section 4.1.2 above, God Himself is perfectly good because He timelessly chooses to. He clearly is good towards all who choose the good – they are in heavenly bliss. Sinners choose against the good in full freedom, and are fully

¹⁹ The number of souls could be countably infinite, with higher numbers making no sense for souls, i.e. individuals. Theoretically, Rowe’s (2002) argument might apply to heaven, but his reasoning is flawed. If it is theoretically impossible for a being to create a world so that no better world is possible, then that being is not imperfect for creating a world such that a better world is possible. But why assume a limitless series of worlds? If perfect bliss is possible, then perfect bliss for each soul in heaven is possible – and it can’t get any better than that.

²⁰ Kraay (2010) gives another solution, accepting Rowe’s (2002) *No Best World* hypothesis: the world is the multiverse of precisely those universes that are worth creating. That would mean, however, that God intentionally creates worlds with flaws, which to me seems only tenable under some nonidentity view – that the people in those worlds can only exist there, and are worth existing.

responsible. It is part of His goodness to allow them to exist, and to save all repenters, by putting them in precisely those (possibly extreme) circumstances that would make them choose for the good²¹. Some people won't accept the good as long as there is a single other seeming option: they need to experience the true nature of evil – so saving them may include bringing them into the greatest pain and distress²². Others might need to experience *active* evil – such as being a murderous psychopath – before they will come to their senses and choose the good. Others again may need a strong reason to *do* good – and our world full of suffering provides many such reasons²³. Yet others may need to experience evil to reject a false, happy-clappy god image, and at death will be shown God as He is – the good itself – and given the option to accept or reject Him. God Himself paying the full price for the restoration makes Him perfectly good²⁴.

This also avoids the justified criticism of utilitarian theodicies by McKenzie (1984).

4.4.2 Suffering, justice, and God's love

No non-sinner suffers – none of them is in this universe. Sinners have chosen evil, which includes suffering. Any good still here is unmerited grace for them. Even the extreme distress some may suffer here (including the extreme distress some souls need to repent) is way less than what they have truly chosen by rejecting the good – even there is grace²⁵.

What about babies who suffer and die from birth defects soon after birth? Well, maybe some souls merely need to experience evil in order to recant and choose the

21 God is consequentialist here, but, being almighty, without trolley-problem-like choices. In fact, many ethical approaches merge under omnipotence.

22 And once saved, repenters will be thankful for being saved – otherwise they wouldn't have repented under those circumstances, whereas any non-saved repenters would presumably end up blaming God for the (even more) extreme pain and distress that rejecting the good implies, given that it is exactly under such circumstances that they would have repented, had they occurred when repentance was still possible.

23 And God built the world taking into account who will do good when, so the “don't interfere because the suffering is God's will” objection doesn't apply: if we do good, the best world will be a better one than if we don't. If none would sin, the best world would be eternal bliss for all.

24 Transcendently, Jesus does not pay for *our* sins, but for the sins He that took from us and are now His. This fulfils perfect justice. An immanent model would be this: *solidarity* defines the units of moral attribution – if my hand steals a cookie, my head may receive the punishing blow. Jesus offers solidarity with us; if we accept it, we become one body, and His suffering becomes *us* receiving the punishment for what *we* have done.

25 And just a thought: maybe in order to create a situation in which anyone savable would in fact be saved, God added zombies to the mix, people without qualia. Their seeming suffering (even in perdition) would not be real. This would also provide a cheap (but in an existence proof acceptable) way out of the problem of animal suffering.

good after all. No need for a longer life in this universe is needed for them. For other people it may suffice to *observe* evil, rather than undergo it – for which this universe gives ample opportunity.

4.4.3 This world's injustice and God's justice

In this universe, suffering is not proportional to guilt: many evildoers lead easy lives (often because of their evil), and many people doing good suffer. The traditional answer – that the afterlife will redress the balance so that in the end perfect justice will be done – is one side of the answer: those rejecting God will get what they want. There is, however, a stronger argument why there is no injustice right now already: each of us has rejected God and has no claim to any goodness. We all receive more goodness than we deserve, and none of us is unjustly deprived of it. So unless someone complains for having more goodness than he chose²⁶, there is no injustice involved.

Often *natural evil* is seen as problematic: it seems independent of our moral choices, and therefore unfair. However, any evil here is the direct result of our moral choice against goodness – had we chosen otherwise, we should not have been in this universe, and none of it is gratuitous, as it is there to help repenters being saved.

4.4.4 God's grace for the godly and the prospering of the godless

Since what is best (as recognised in hindsight) for someone and what makes a person currently happy are two wildly divergent things, God in his grace may bring suffering over those who may (and thus will) in the end accept the good.

Such reasons do not in general exist for the non-repenters, however, those who under no circumstance would accept the good. There may be extrinsic reasons to let them suffer – to the extent that that helps others to find salvation –, but no intrinsic reason. They face an eternity of suffering that suffices for any claim of justice, so God can show His love to them by giving them all possible happiness, up to the point where this would go against His justice or love towards others.

This also partially explains divine hiddenness: sinners persisting in the face of stronger evidence would only make the world worse.

4.5 Hell and God's love

So hell (in the sense of the eternal state outside heaven) exists out of freewill, and only contains those who choose to be there. Would it be loving to force any of the people in C. S. Lewis' *The Great Divorce* who choose hell to spend eternity in heaven instead?

²⁶ And such a complaint of unfairness, by someone who rejects goodness, would be inappropriate.

But some claim they would much rather not exist *at all*²⁷. That is a hard to evaluate claim, and there are plenty of cases where people retracted their claim when circumstances changed – e.g. under the influence of psychopharmaca. Maybe they mislead themselves in so thinking, but are still attached to the world, e.g. by hopes and fears. Since in our model existence is a free choice, all such claims would be false – no soul exists without having chosen to²⁸. In any case, existence being good, the genuine choice not to exist is a choice against the good – and those rejecting the good have no basis for complaint if things aren't good.

4.6 Suffering and eternal happiness

Some forms of light suffering are actually good in hindsight. Being thirsty on a hot day is often more than compensated by the extra pleasure one gets when drinking a cool drink afterwards. “It was worth it”, we say in such cases. Possibly, greater goods justify greater previous suffering – with the infinite good of heaven justifying every finite suffering we may undergo here on earth – so that those who have chosen the good will actually be grateful for the amount of suffering they have undergone, however atrocious.

So while heaven is already worth any finite suffering in that it outweighs it, it also is worth that suffering in the sense that the *increase in* bliss it yields already outweighs it, an increase that could not have been obtained without the suffering.

Finally, a sure expectation of the future bliss, and the knowledge to live within the good God's will can turn an objective suffering into a subjective joy (as shown by Paul in e.g. 2 Corinthians 4:17). This would solve the problem at least for those beings sufficiently advanced to enter into such a relationship with God²⁹.

27 As opposed to the wish not to exist *in one's current situation*, for instance.

28 Nor does God, Whose transcendent choice is *I am*.

29 A typical Christian solution – and one that depends on God's radical transcendence – is given in Revelation 7:17, 21:4. There a word for “removing” (ἐξάλειψω) is used that has a very strong legal meaning. It is also used in Acts 3:19 and Colossians 2:14 (and negatively in Revelation 3:5). Whereas the normal word for cancelling (a clause in) a legal document, χῆάζω, would mean that the text crossed out was no longer valid, ἐξάλειψω refers to a laborious process of dissolving the ink in oil and removing it that would lead to the offending text legally *never having been* valid. So if God is above physical and logical laws, He can *retroactively* undo all our suffering. This option is currently not in our intellectual grasp, and God being above logic makes *everything* compossible if He wills it, so it is not considered in the main text. One option that does not go beyond logic is the *nightmare defence* (Citron, 2015) – that as seen from above our reality is only a dream, and the saved ones will wake up from it.

5 Conclusion

I am definitely not claiming this scenario as truth: it makes God improbably anthropomorphic and almost henotheistically immanent, and its theodicy is woefully facile. However, to constitute a proof of compossibility it merely needs to be possible (and making the model mostly immanent helps confirming its coherence).

This model is also compossible with God being non-physical yet acting in the physical world³⁰; with knowledge requiring grounding and human knowledge of the external world being possible, and with the co-existence of truth as correspondence and truth as coherence³¹; with God both *being* good and *defining* the good³²; and with God being both completely free and necessarily and essentially perfect, and His being both timeless and acting in time³³.

An obvious refutation would be to show that the model's compossibilities don't translate to more realistic scenarios.

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30 As described in my [*Transcendent Mediocrity is the Neutral Position*](#).

31 As described in my [*Knowing in the Teeth of the Dialelus*](#).

32 As described in my [*From Is to Ought in One Easy Step*](#).

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