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Publisher: Routledge

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## Philosophical Papers

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rppa20>

### Rowe's Argument from Improvability

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Version of record first published: 02 Sep 2009.

To cite this article: Michael Almeida (2006): Rowe's Argument from Improvability, *Philosophical Papers*, 35:1, 1-25

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/05568640609485169>

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## Rowe's Argument from Improvability\*

*Michael Almeida*

**Abstract:** William Rowe has argued that if there is an infinite sequence of improving worlds then an essentially perfectly good being must actualize some world in the sequence and must not actualize any world in the sequence. Since that is impossible, there exist no essentially perfectly good beings. I show that Rowe's argument assumes that the concept of a maximally great being is incoherent. Since we are given no reason to believe that the concept of a maximally great being is incoherent we have no reason to believe *Rowe's Argument from Improvability* is sound.

### 1. Introduction

William Rowe has argued that a perfectly good being is *maximally excellent* in every action. A perfectly good being fulfills every moral obligation and never does an action that is less good than another he could do instead. And so according to Rowe it is necessarily true that a perfectly good creator does not actualize a world that is less good than another world he could actualize. Rowe's *Principle B* expresses this moral restriction on perfectly good creators.

- B. Necessarily if an omniscient and omnipotent being actualizes a world when there is a better world that it could have actualized, then that omniscient and omnipotent being is *not* essentially perfectly good.<sup>1</sup>

Rowe observes that if there is some best possible world then *Principle B* will commit theists to the position that ours is the best. But few theists are prepared to defend the Leibnizian position that our world is as good as any world God might have actualized. The more common and defensible conclusion is that there is no best possible world.

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\* I thank Bill Rowe for many comments and much discussion of the points in this paper. I also thank Klaas Kraay, Bruce Reichenbach and referees at *Philosophical Papers* for their comments.

<sup>1</sup> Rowe often presents B without explicitly stating that it is a necessary truth about all possible omniscient and omnipotent beings. But he does hold that it is necessary. See his 'Can God Be Free?' *Faith and Philosophy* (2002) p. 416.

Suppose then that there is no best possible world. Suppose instead that there are infinitely many possible worlds arranged from  $w_0$  to  $w_\infty$  in an increasing order of value. The infinite sequence, let's assume, is countable and has no upper bound. Assume further that for any world in the sequence, it is morally better to actualize that world than to actualize no world at all.<sup>2</sup> So if it would be better to actualize no world at all rather than to actualize a world containing lots of gratuitous suffering or a world containing no rational beings or a world containing no sentient beings, and so on, then such worlds are not in the infinite sequence.

Since there is no best world in the sequence theists are not committed to the conclusion that the actual world is better than any other logically possible world. That of course is welcome news for theism. But it also follows that necessarily any world that a perfect being does actualize is improvable. And according to William Rowe that is unwelcome news for theism. Indeed according to Rowe it is *impossible* that a perfect being should actualize an improvable world.

... If Principle B is true, as I think it is ... then if it is true that for any creatable world there is another creatable world better than it, then it is also true that *no* omnipotent, omniscient being who creates a world is essentially perfectly good. Moreover, if we add to this Kretzmann's first conclusion that a perfectly good, omnipotent, omniscient being must create, it will follow that there is no omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being.<sup>3</sup>

Call that argument *Rowe's Argument from Improvability*. In section (2) I provide a version of *Rowe's Argument from Improvability* that avoids several problems plaguing other arguments from improvability. I develop the argument in the quasi-formal language of possible world semantics and show that it is valid. In section (3) I consider an objection from William Hasker and Thomas V. Morris that Rowe's *Principle B* makes moral

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2 Of course if we assume that a perfect being that actualizes no world in fact actualizes a world by omission then a perfect being must actualize some world or other. The default world contains only those things that necessarily exist.

3 William L. Rowe, 'Can God Be Free?' *Faith and Philosophy* (2002) p. 412.

demands that are impossible to fulfill. I show that no assumption in Rowe's argument entails that a perfect being is required to do the impossible. The objection from Morris and Hasker therefore fails. In section (4) I show that *Rowe's Argument from Improvability* is sound only if the concept of a maximally great being is incoherent. But Rowe provides no evidence at all that the concept of a maximally great being is incoherent. I conclude that Rowe provides us with no reason to believe his argument is sound. In section (5) I consider Nelson Pike's influential argument that no possible being has the attributes of omnipotence and moral perfection. If no possible being has the attributes of omnipotence and moral perfection then *Rowe's Argument from Improvability* is sound. But I show that Pike's argument contains some assumptions that are simply unwarranted. I conclude that the argument is no more credible than *Rowe's Argument from Improvability*. I offer some closing comments in section (6).

## 2. Rowe's Argument from Improvability

For each English premise in *Rowe's Argument from Improvability* I include a formal counterpart. The variables  $x$  and  $y$  have as a domain the set of possible worlds in the infinite sequence of worlds. The variable  $O$  has as a domain the (possibly empty) set of omniscient and omnipotent beings. The initial premise in *Rowe's Argument from Improvability* is *Principle B*.

1. Necessarily if an omniscient and omnipotent being actualizes a world when there is a better world that it could have actualized, then that omniscient and omnipotent being is *not* essentially perfectly good.

$\Box(\forall O)(\forall x)((O \text{ actualizes } x) \ \& \ (\exists y)((x < y) \ \& \ \Diamond(O \text{ actualizes } y)) \supset \sim(O \text{ is essentially perfectly good}))$

There is a more convenient and intuitive expression of *Principle B* in (2). Premise (2) follows from exportation and contraposition on (1).

2. Necessarily, if an omniscient, omnipotent and essentially perfectly good being actualizes a world, then there is no better world that it could have actualized instead.

$$\Box(\forall O)(\forall x)((O \text{ is essentially perfectly good}) \ \& \ (O \text{ actualizes } x)) \supset \\ \sim(\exists y)((x < y) \ \& \ \diamond(O \text{ actualizes } y))$$

Since Rowe maintains that all perfectly good beings are maximally excellent the moral restriction in *Principle B* requires that no essentially perfectly good being actualize a world that is less good than another world they could actualize instead.

The second assumption in Rowe's argument is the *No Best World* hypothesis. It is especially difficult to formulate the hypothesis in a precise and plausible way. The basic claim is that for each world in the sequence there is some better creatable world. The *No Best World* hypothesis entails that there is no world in the sequence that an omnipotent and omniscient being cannot (at least) weakly actualize. So if there are worlds that are not even weakly actualizable—perhaps worlds containing libertarian-free agents that do no wrong—then such worlds are not in the sequence. But even the strong assumption that every possible creature is transworld depraved does not preclude the possibility of an infinite sequence of (at least) weakly actualizable worlds.

No plausible version of the *No Best World* hypothesis can require that for every world in the sequence there is a better world that some perfectly good being might create. Erik Wielenberg suggests, for instance, the principle NBW'.

What we need is a principle that implies that there is no best world *among the worlds that God can actualize*. This principle does the trick:

NBW': For each possible world that God has the power to actualize, there is a better possible world that God has the power to actualize.<sup>4</sup>

According to Wielenberg NBW' should be restricted to those possible worlds that *God can actualize* and (presumably) the principle is true at

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<sup>4</sup> See Erik Wielenberg, 'A Morally Unsurpassable God Must Create the Best', *Religious Studies* (2004) p. 21.

every possible world. Wielenberg's suggested principle is in premise 2a.

- 2a. Necessarily every world in the infinite sequence is less good than another world in the sequence that an omniscient, omnipotent, essentially perfectly good being could actualize.

$\Box(\forall x)(\exists O)((O \text{ is essentially perfectly good}) \ \& \ (\exists y)((x < y) \ \& \ \Diamond(O \text{ actualizes } y)))$

It is evident that Wielenberg does not intend his principle to be in conditional form and (2a) is obviously not a conditional. According to Wielenberg the *No Best World* hypothesis directly entails that the actual world is surpassable for God. But a possible world  $w$  is surpassable for God if and only if there is some possible world  $w'$  such that God can actualize  $w'$  and  $w'$  is better than  $w$ .<sup>5</sup> But then the *No Best World* hypothesis entails that there exists some essentially perfectly good being that can actualize a world that is better than the actual world. That of course is inconsistent with the central conclusion of *Rowe's Argument from Improvability* that there is no essentially perfectly good being that can actualize any world. So (2a) is not an especially good or useful version of that hypothesis.

Phil Quinn has suggested that we define an actualizable world as one that some omnipotent being could actualize. More formally Quinn suggests that an actualizable world  $w$  is such that it is possible that there is an  $O$  such that  $O$  is omnipotent and  $O$  actualizes  $w$ .<sup>6</sup> Since we have restricted quantification to omnipotent and omniscient beings the *No Best World* hypothesis should state that for every world in the infinite sequence there is a better world that some omnipotent and omniscient being could actualize.

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5 See Erik Weilenberg, 'A Morally Unsurpassable God Must Create the Best', *Religious Studies* (2004) pp. 1 and 23.

6 See Philip L. Quinn, 'God, Moral Perfection and Possible Worlds', in (eds.) Frederick Sontag and M. Darrol Bryant, *God: The Contemporary Discussion* (New York: The Rose of Sharon Press, 1982) esp. 204 ff.

- 2b. Necessarily every world in the infinite sequence is less good than another world in the sequence that some omnipotent and omniscient being could actualize.

$$\Box(\forall x)(\exists y)((x < y) \ \& \ \Diamond(\exists O)(O \text{ actualizes } y))$$

It is consistent with (2b) that no omnipotent and omniscient being is essentially perfectly good. So the premise happily does not entail that an essentially perfectly good being can actualize some world. But the *No Best World* hypothesis in (2b) fails to quantify over all omnipotent and omniscient beings. This is an important problem since the strongest conclusion we can derive from (2b) together with *Principle B* is that *some* omnipotent and omniscient beings are either not essentially perfectly good or they do not actualize a world. And that conclusion is too weak for *Rowe's Argument from Improbability*. It is consistent with that conclusion that there is another omnipotent, omniscient, essentially perfectly good being that *does* actualize a world. Suppose, for instance, that some omnipotent and omniscient being can actualize no world better than *w*. Since there are no assumptions at all in *Rowe's Argument from Improbability* concerning the limits of omnipotence we cannot know that there is no such omnipotent being. But then it follows from *Principle B* that some omnipotent, omniscient, and essentially perfectly good being might actualize a world. And again that is not consistent with Rowe's conclusion that no essentially perfectly good being can actualize any world.

It is consistent with the moral requirement in *Principle B* that an essentially perfectly good being actualizes a world that is less good than other worlds that *other* omnipotent and omniscient beings can actualize. Indeed there might be infinitely many better worlds that other omnipotent and omniscient beings could actualize. So it is reasonable to suggest that the problem in *Rowe's Argument from Improbability* is *Principle B* rather than the *No Best World* hypothesis in (2b). The principle might be too weak to capture the moral requirements on perfect beings.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The problem is reminiscent of Plantinga's *McEar* for definitions of omnipotence. See Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967) p. 170 and



Stephen Grover has proposed the alternative principle that no morally perfect being can actualize any world that is less good than another world that some (other) omnipotent being could actualize.<sup>8</sup> And Grover's principle together with (2b) might entail that no omnipotent, omniscient and essentially perfectly good being actualizes any world. But even assuming Grover's strong principle of moral perfection (2b) is an unacceptable version of *No Best World*.

Premise (2b) commits us to there being omnipotent and omniscient beings in nearly every world in the sequence. But certainly an argument against the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient and essentially perfectly good being should not commit us to the existence of other sorts of omnipotent and omniscient beings. It's not much more obvious that there are omnipotent and omniscient not-so-good beings than that there are omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good beings.

There is a formulation of the *No Best World* hypothesis that does not commit us to the position that there exist omniscient and omnipotent beings in any world. Bruce Langtry has suggested that there might be no possible worlds that are *prime*. A possible world is prime if and only if God (if he exists) can actualize it and cannot actualize a better world than it.<sup>9</sup> According to Langtry the supposition that there are no prime worlds entails that for any world which God can actualize there is a better world which God can actualize. More recently Klaas Kraay has proposed the same formulation of *No Best World*.

The hypothesis of no prime worlds ... holds that for any possible world  $x$  that an omnipotent being has the power to actualize, there is a better world,  $y$ , that the omnipotent being could have actualized instead of  $x$ .<sup>10</sup>

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Richard LaCroix, 'The Impossibility of Defining "Omnipotence"' *Philosophical Studies* (1977) 181-190. If we suppose, for instance, that  $w$  is the best actualizable world for O and  $w$  is (nonetheless) among the worst worlds, it is difficult to conclude that O actualizes  $w$  and O is morally perfect.

8 See Stephen Grover, 'Why Only the Best is Good Enough', *Analysis* (1988) 224.

9 Bruce Langtry, 'God and the Best', *Faith and Philosophy* Vol. 13 (1996) 311-328.

10 See Klaas Kraay, 'Rowe's A priori Argument for Atheism', *Faith and Philosophy* (forthcoming).

Premise (2c) states as Kraay and Langtry suggest that necessarily for every world in the sequence that an omniscient and omnipotent being can actualize, there is some better world he can actualize.

- 2c. Necessarily an omnipotent and omniscient being can actualize a world in the sequence only if there is some better world he could actualize instead.

$$\Box(\forall O)(\forall x)(\Diamond(O \text{ actualizes } x) \supset (\exists y)((x < y) \ \& \ \Diamond(O \text{ actualizes } y)))$$

The more literal reading of (2c) states that necessarily *every* omniscient and omnipotent being is such that either he can actualize no world at all *or* he can actualize a world that is less good than another world he could actualize. Premise (2c) does not entail that there are omniscient and omniscient beings in any world at all. But (2c) has the particularly unintuitive consequence in (2d).<sup>11</sup>

- 2d. Necessarily *if* there is a best actualizable world in the sequence then no omnipotent and omniscient being can actualize it

$$\Box(\forall O)(\forall x)(\sim(\exists y)((x < y) \ \& \ \Diamond(O \text{ actualizes } y)) \supset \sim\Diamond(O \text{ actualizes } x))$$

It is not clear how we might know this about every omniscient and omnipotent being. Indeed it seems nearly trivial that if there is a best *actualizable* world in the sequence then some omniscient and omniscient being can bring it about. It might be true, for instance, that an omnipotent, omniscient and essentially perfectly good being could actualize such a world. Or perhaps an omnipotent, omniscient and morally decent being could do so. We are simply in no position to know. So the *No Best World* hypothesis in (2c) is not especially good either.

The *No Best World* hypotheses in (2a)-(2c) have obviously unacceptable implications. But there is a better version of the hypothesis that avoids these difficulties. Consider the *No Best World* hypothesis in premise (3).

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<sup>11</sup> (2d) is just the contrapositive of (2c).

3. Necessarily, for every possible world in the sequence, every omnipotent and omniscient being could actualize some better world.

$$\Box(\forall O)(\forall x)(\exists y)((x < y) \ \& \ \Diamond(O \text{ actualizes } y))$$

(3) does not entail that any omnipotent being actualizes any world at all. Further it does not entail that omnipotent beings exist in any possible world. Premise (3) does not entail the unintuitive consequence except in a trivial way.<sup>12</sup> So (3) avoids the all of problems noted above.

But there is an additional objection to (3). It might be true that some omnipotent and omniscient beings exist in no more than one or two worlds. We are again in no position to know. But if some omnipotent and omniscient beings exist in just a few worlds then we cannot reasonably claim that for every world in the sequence *every* omnipotent and omniscient being can actualize some better world. Certainly no omnipotent and omniscient being can actualize any world in which it does not exist.

The solution to this problem is to restrict quantification to the domain of essentially omnipotent, essentially omniscient and necessarily existing beings. Certainly the restriction only makes premise (3) more credible. Further the restriction does not commit us to the existence of such beings in any world. The solution does make it more difficult to direct *Rowe's Argument from Improvability* against beings that are not maximally great. But then, as Plantinga has suggested, most theists do not think of God as a being that just happens to be of surpassing excellence in this world. So the restricted version of the *No Best World* hypothesis in (3) seems the best version of that principle.

From premise (2) and premise (3) we arrive at Rowe's first conclusion in (4).

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12 If the *No Best World* hypothesis in (3) is true then the antecedent of the unintuitive consequence in (2d) is *necessarily* false. So premise (3) trivially entails (2d). But this is no objection to (3). If the antecedent of (2d) is necessarily false, then it is impossible that some world is the best actualizable. But then no omniscient and omnipotent being can actualize a best world.

4. Necessarily no omniscient, omnipotent, essentially perfectly good being actualizes a world in the sequence.

$$\square(\forall O)(\forall x)((O \text{ is essentially perfectly good}) \supset \sim(O \text{ actualizes } x))$$

Of course the conclusion in (4) is consistent with there being an essentially omnipotent, essentially omniscient, essentially good and (perhaps even) necessarily existing being. The conclusion entails only that such a being could not have actualized any world in the sequence and so could not have actualized our world.

The final assumption in Rowe's argument is attributed to Norman Kretzmann. Kretzmann argues in contrast to Aquinas that God was not free to choose *whether* to create a world.

The question I raise ... is why God, the absolutely perfect being, would create anything at all ... I summarize my own position by saying that God's goodness requires things other than itself as a manifestation of itself, and that God therefore necessarily (though freely) wills the creation of something or other, and that the free choice involved in creation is confined to the selection of which possibilities to actualize for the purpose of manifesting goodness .... So, although I disagree with Aquinas's claim that God is free to choose *whether* to create, I'm inclined to agree with him about God's being free to choose *what* to create.<sup>13</sup>

And according to Kretzmann, Aquinas is further committed to the view that there is no best possible world.

... According to my attempted explanation here of Aquinas's claim that God could create a better world than this one, it is also *impossible* that God create something than which he could not create something better. My conclusion in the preceding essay and my explanation in this one taken together entail that a perfectly good (omniscient, omnipotent) God *must* create a world less good ... than one he could create.<sup>14</sup>

The more cautious expression of Kretzmann's conclusion does not entail that God exists or that God creates anything at all. The conclusion is

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13 See Norman Kretzmann, 'A Particular Problem of Creation: Why Would God Create This World?' in (ed.) Scott MacDonald, *Being and Goodness: The Concept of the Good in Metaphysics and Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 229-230.

14 Ibid. p. 238.

rather that a perfectly good (omniscient, omnipotent) God, *if He exists*, must create some world in the sequence. So the final assumption of Rowe's argument is in premise (5).

5. Necessarily an omniscient, omnipotent, essentially perfectly good being must actualize some world in the sequence.

$$\Box(\forall O)(\exists x)((O \text{ is essentially perfectly good}) \supset (O \text{ actualizes } x))$$

And from premises (4) and (5) we arrive at Rowe's final conclusion that necessarily there exists no essentially perfectly good being.

6. Necessarily there is no omnipotent, omniscient, essentially perfectly good being.

$$\Box\sim(\exists O)(O \text{ is essentially perfectly good})$$

It is of course consistent with *Rowe's Argument from Improvability* that some non-traditional God exists. The argument does not obviously show that some *nearly* perfect being does not exist. Nearly perfect beings, for instance, might not be governed by *Principle B*. It is also consistent with the argument that an essentially omnipotent, essentially omniscient, essentially perfectly good being exists in the actual world but does not exist in every other world. The actual world might have been the best of those worlds that are actualizable. But Rowe's argument does provide powerful reason to conclude that a maximally great being exists in no world at all.

### 3. Morris and Hasker on *Principle B*

William Hasker and Thomas V. Morris have argued that the moral standard expressed in *Principle B* is too high. *Principle B* prohibits an essentially perfectly good being from actualizing a world when there is a better world it could actualize instead. But according to Hasker it is *necessary* that an essentially perfectly good being actualize a world when there is a better world it could actualize instead. Here is Hasker.

... So let us ask what if God had created a better world? Would it then be true that God 'failed to do better than he did', when doing better was possible for him to do? The answer, of course, is yes .... It's clear then that the only way

God could be freed from the charge of ‘failing to do better than he did’ is if there were a *maximally excellent* world, one than which even God could not create a better. But that is by hypothesis impossible; the *No Best World* hypothesis precludes it. This, however, means that whatever world God should create, it is a *necessary truth* that he could have created a better one; in this sense, it is a necessary truth that God ‘failed to do better than he did’.<sup>15</sup>

Since there is no maximally excellent world Hasker concludes that an essentially perfectly good being *must* actualize some world in the sequence when there is a better world it could have actualized. *Principle B* therefore demands the impossible and the principle ought to be rejected.

But Rowe is not committed to this conclusion about *Principle B*. Suppose it is true that for every world in the infinite sequence there is some better world that God could actualize instead. Hasker formalizes his *No Best World* hypothesis in (7).<sup>16</sup>

7. Necessarily God fails to actualize the best world he can.

$$\Box(\forall x)((\text{God actualizes } x) \supset (\exists y)(\sim(\text{God actualizes } y) \ \& \ \Diamond(\text{God actualizes } y) \ \& \ y > x))$$

It’s true that *Principle B* prohibits an essentially perfectly good being from actualizing a world when there is a better world it could actualize instead. But, contrary to Hasker, *Principle B* does not demand the impossible.

B. Necessarily, if an omniscient, omnipotent and essentially perfectly good being actualizes a world, then there is no better world that it could have actualized instead.

$$\Box(\forall O)(\forall x)((O \text{ is essentially perfectly good}) \ \& \ (O \text{ actualizes } x)) \supset \sim(\exists y)((x < y) \ \& \ \Diamond(O \text{ actualizes } y))$$

Premise (7) and *Principle B* together entail that an essentially perfectly good being *might not* actualize a world in the sequence when there is a better world it could actualize instead.

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15 William Hasker, *Providence, Evil, and the Openness of God*, (London: Routledge Press, 2004) p. 172.

16 *Ibid.*, pp. 172-173.

Suppose for *reductio ad absurdum* that God actualizes some world or other in the sequence.

8. God actualizes some world in the sequence.

$(\exists x)(\text{God actualizes } x)$

Premise (8) of course entails that God actualizes some arbitrarily selected world  $w$ . So premise (9) follows immediately from (8).

9. God actualizes  $w$ .

Since God is an omniscient, omnipotent and essentially perfectly good being, it follows from *Principle B* and (9) that there is no world  $y$  better than  $w$  that God could actualize instead.

10. There is no world  $y$  better than  $w$  that God can actualize.

$\sim(\exists y)((w < y) \ \& \ \diamond(\text{God actualizes } y))$

But of course it follows from (7) and (9) that there is some world  $y$  better than  $w$  that God could actualize instead.

11. There is some world  $y$  better than  $w$  that God can actualize.

$(\exists y)((w < y)) \ \& \ \diamond(\text{God actualizes } y)$

Premises (10) and (11) are plainly inconsistent. So our assumption in premise (8) must be false and we arrive at (12).

12. God does not actualize a world in the sequence.

$\sim(\exists x)(\text{God actualizes } x)$

Of course, according to Kretzmann's conclusion in (5), God must actualize some world in the sequence or God does not exist. Suppose we assume that Kretzmann's conclusion is true. It follows from (12) and (5) that God does not exist. And Rowe is no doubt committed to this conclusion.

According to Hasker the central problem for *Principle B* is that it demands the impossible. Contrary to the prescription in *Principle B*,

Hasker contends that God *must* actualize a world in the sequence when there is a better world he could actualize instead. He provides this formal version of his claim.

13. Necessarily God fails to actualize a better world than he did.

$$\Box(\exists x)((\text{God actualizes } x) \ \& \ (\exists y)(\sim(\text{God actualizes } y) \ \& \ \Diamond(\text{God actualizes } y) \ \& \ y > x))$$

But it follows directly from our conclusion in (12) that Hasker's claim in (13) is false. We therefore reach the conclusion from *Principle B* and Hasker's *No Best World* hypothesis that *possibly* God does not fail to actualize a better world than he did.

14. Possibly God does not fail to actualize a better world than he did.

$$\sim\Box(\exists x)((\text{God actualizes } x) \ \& \ (\exists y)(\sim(\text{God actualizes } y) \ \& \ \Diamond(\text{God actualizes } y) \ \& \ y > x))$$

Hasker is mistaken in his claim that ‘... *the only way* God could be freed from the charge of “failing to do better than he did” is if there were a *maximally excellent* world, one than which even God could not create a better.’ Another way God is freed from the charge of failing to do better than he did is by actualizing *no world* at all. It is then true that necessarily God fails to actualize the best world he could and also true that God does not fail to actualize a better world than he did. Contrary to Hasker's conclusion the propositions in (a), (b) and (c) are perfectly consistent.

(a.) Principle B.

$$\Box(\forall O)(\forall x)((O \text{ is essentially perfectly good}) \ \& \ (O \text{ actualizes } x)) \supset \sim(\exists y)((x < y) \ \& \ \Diamond(O \text{ actualizes } y))$$

(b.) No Best World: Hasker's Version

$$\Box(\forall x)((\text{God actualizes } x) \ \supset \ (\exists y)(\sim(\text{God actualizes } y) \ \& \ \Diamond(\text{God actualizes } y) \ \& \ y > x))$$



(c.) Possibly God does not fail to actualize a better world than he did.

$$\sim \square(\exists x)((\text{God actualizes } x) \ \& \ (\exists y)(\sim(\text{God actualizes } y) \ \& \ \diamond(\text{God actualizes } y) \ \& \ y > x)).$$

It follows that there is no maximally excellent world and *Principle B* does not demand the impossible. Hasker's objection to *Rowe's Argument from Improbability* therefore fails.

Thomas V. Morris has concluded similarly that the moral requirement in *Principle B* is not consistent with the *No Best World* hypothesis. Here is Morris.

But failing to do the best you can is a flaw or manifests and incompleteness in moral character ... only if doing the best you can is at least a logical possibility. If doing the best he can in creating a world is for God an impossibility, given the range of omnipotence and the nature of those considerations making the notion of a best of all possible worlds an incoherence, then not doing his best in creating cannot be seen as a flaw or as manifesting an incompleteness in the character of God.<sup>17</sup>

But nothing Morris says here presents any problem for *Principle B*. According to *Principle B* failing to do better than you did is indeed a moral flaw and according to the *No Best World* hypothesis it is not possible to do the best you can. Morris's objection presents a problem for *Principle B* only if the *No Best World* hypothesis entails that necessarily God fails to do better than he did.<sup>18</sup> But as we saw the *No Best World* hypothesis entails no such thing. So Morris's objection to *Principle B* fails as well.

The assumptions in *Rowe's Argument from Improbability* include *Principle B* and the *No Best World* hypothesis. And on Rowe's assumptions it is evident that *Principle B* does not require the impossible. But consider whether *Principle B* requires the impossible on assumptions Rowe does

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17 Thomas V. Morris, 'Perfection and Creation' in Eleonore Stump (ed.), *Reasoned Faith* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993) p. 244.

18 Rowe makes a similar observation in response to this objection from Thomas Morris. See his, 'Can God Be Free?' *Faith and Philosophy* (2002) p. 419 ff.

not endorse. Suppose we assume instead that *Principle B* is true and that God exists. Does *Principle B* make any moral demand that is impossible for God to fulfill? The answer is again no. If God exists and *Principle B* is true then the *No Best World* hypothesis is false. Therefore *Principle B* does not demand the impossible.

Suppose instead that God exists, *Principle B* and the *No Best World* hypothesis are true. Does *Principle B* make any moral demand that is impossible for God to fulfill? These propositions in fact form an inconsistent triad and so the supposition is impossible. So obviously there is no sound argument from these assumptions to the conclusion that *Principle B* demands the impossible.

Suppose finally that the *No Best World* hypothesis is true and that God exists. Rowe would certainly agree that these assumptions entail that *Principle B* is false. But this objection presents no problem at all unless the evidence for *Principle B* is weaker than the evidence for God's existence. But Hasker and Morris offer no argument that the probability that God exists exceeds the probability of *Principle B*.<sup>19</sup>

The objection to *Principle B* advanced by Hasker and Morris certainly fails under the assumptions of Rowe's argument. But the objection fares no better under assumptions Rowe never makes. It should be evident that the problem with *Rowe's Argument from Improvability* is not that *Principle B* demands the impossible.

#### 4. Is Rowe's Argument Sound?

According to Rowe it follows from the concept of moral perfection that an essentially perfectly good being cannot actualize a world when there is a better world he could actualize instead. Indeed essential perfect

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19 Cf. William Hasker, *Providence, Evil, and the Openness of God*, (London: Routledge Press, 2004) chapter 11, pp. 172 ff. Hasker's formal argument against *Principle B* simply assumes in premise (3) that necessarily God actualizes some world. But this objection presents no problem unless the evidence for premise (3) is greater than the evidence for *Principle B*. Suppose it is agreed that the *No Best World* (NBW) hypothesis is true and the probability of *Principle B* on the evidence is greater than .5. Since (NBW) and *Principle B* entail that God does not exist, the probability that God exists is less than .5.

goodness even limits what an essentially omnipotent, essentially omniscient, and necessarily existing being *can* do.

Of course it was my aim ... to show that even if it is better to create a world than not to create at all, in the case of an infinite number of increasingly better worlds, no omnipotent, omniscient being that creates a world could be *supremely perfect*.<sup>20</sup>

An essentially omnipotent being that is supremely perfect cannot actualize any improvable world. Of course other philosophers have reached similar conclusions on the moral limitations of omnipotent beings. Theodore Guleserian for instance concludes that essential perfect goodness limits the kinds of worlds that an essentially omnipotent, essentially omniscient, essentially perfectly good and necessarily existing being can actualize.

... Surely it is plausible to suppose that we can conceive of some possible worlds that are so full of misery and so lacking in redeeming value that, necessarily, no [morally perfect] being ought to—or would—allow them to become actual.<sup>21</sup>

*Principle B* is supposed to express this necessary truth concerning all essentially perfectly good, essentially omniscient, essentially omnipotent and necessarily existing beings.

B. Necessarily, if an omniscient, omnipotent and essentially perfectly good being actualizes a world, then there is no better world that it could have actualized instead.

$$\Box(\forall O)(\forall x)((O \text{ is essentially perfectly good}) \ \& \ (O \text{ actualizes } x)) \supset \\ \sim(\exists y)((x < y) \ \& \ \Diamond(O \text{ actualizes } y))$$

*Principle B* informs us that in addition to the more familiar limitations that an essentially perfectly good being cannot lie, cannot break a promise and cannot deceive, we should include the limitation that an

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20 William L. Rowe, *Can God Be Free?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) p. 134.

21 Theodore Guleserian, 'God and Possible Worlds: The Modal Problem of Evil', Vol. 17, *Noûs* (1983) 221-238.

essentially perfectly good being actualizes only those worlds that are unimprovable.

But compare the *No Best World* hypothesis. The hypothesis entails that every essentially perfectly good, essentially omnipotent, essentially omniscient and necessarily existing being actualizes only those worlds that are *not* unimprovable. According to the *No Best World* hypothesis essentially perfectly good beings are *not limited* by their moral perfection. *Principle B\** follows directly from the *No Best World* hypothesis in (3).<sup>22</sup>

B\*. Necessarily, if an omniscient, omnipotent and essentially perfectly good being actualizes a world, then there is some better world that it could have actualized instead.

$$\square(\forall O)(\forall x)((O \text{ is essentially perfectly good}) \ \& \ (O \text{ actualizes } x)) \supset (\exists y)((x < y) \ \& \ \diamond(O \text{ actualizes } y))$$

According *Principle B\** every essentially perfectly good being that actualizes a world *must do worse* than it could. The principle informs us that an essentially perfectly good being can actualize a world only if there is better world he could actualize instead.

So according to *Principle B* maximally great beings actualize a world only if there is *no* better world they could actualize instead. And according to *Principle B\** maximally great beings actualize a world only if there is a better world they could actualize instead. It should be evident that we have no reason to believe both *Principle B* and *Principle B\** unless the concept of a maximally great being is logically incoherent. But Rowe provides no reason to believe that the concept of a maximally great being is incoherent.<sup>23</sup> We therefore have no reason to believe both

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22 To derive B\* from (3) simply disjoin to (3) the proposition that it is not the case that an omnipotent and omniscient being is essentially good and actualizes a world or  $\sim((O \text{ is essentially good}) \ \& \ (O \text{ actualizes } x))$ .

23 Bruce Reichenbach urged that Rowe does offer in favor of *Principle B* that it appears self-evident or appears to follow self-evidently from God's moral perfection. Further Reichenbach suggests that Rowe does offer in defense of the hypothesis of *No Best World* that divine freedom seems to demand it. But what I am arguing is that in the case of *Principle B*, Rowe claims that moral perfection *trumps* divine freedom. And in the case of

*Principle B* and *Principle B\**. But then of course we also have no reason to believe that Rowe's premises—*Principle B* and the *No Best World* hypothesis—are *both* true. And so we arrive at the conclusion there is no reason to believe that *Rowe's Argument from Improvability* is sound.

### 5. Are Maximally Great Beings Possible?

There is no argument that *Principle B* and *Principle B\** are both true. But in defense of Rowe's argument there is a more basic principle of moral perfection. Nelson Pike has urged that it follows from the concept of moral perfection that there are *some* consistently describable states of affairs that a morally perfect being cannot actualize. There are for instance some consistently describable states of affairs that are sufficiently bad that no morally perfect being could actualize them. So it follows from Pike's concept of moral perfection that necessarily if a being is essentially perfectly good then there are some worlds that he cannot actualize.

- G. Necessarily, if a being is essentially perfectly good, then there are some possible worlds that he cannot actualize.

$$\Box(\forall z)(\exists x)((z \text{ is essentially perfectly good}) \supset \sim\Diamond(z \text{ actualizes } x))$$

According to Pike *Principle G* governs every essentially perfectly good being and the principle is considerably weaker than *Principle B*. It is consistent with *Principle G* for instance that an essentially perfectly good being can actualize some improvable worlds and perhaps most improvable worlds. The principle requires only that there are some worlds that an essentially perfectly good being cannot actualize.

Pike has also suggested the basic principle of omnipotence that every omnipotent being can actualize *any* consistently describable state of affairs.

- G\*. Necessarily, if a being is essentially omnipotent, then he can actualize any possible world.

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the *No Best World* hypothesis Rowe claims that divine freedom *trumps* moral perfection. And these are what we have no reason to believe unless we already believe that the concept of a maximally great being is incoherent.

$$\Box(\forall z)(\forall x)((z \text{ is essentially omnipotent}) \supset \Diamond(z \text{ actualizes } x))$$

According to Pike *Principle G\** governs every omnipotent being. But if *Principle G* follows from the concept of moral perfection and *Principle G\** follows from the concept of omnipotence then there is a credible argument that the concept of a maximally great being is incoherent. Here is Nelson Pike.

On the analysis of 'omnipotent' with which we are working, it follows that God (if He exists) can bring about any consistently describable state of affairs. However, God is perfectly good .... Hence some consistently describable states of affairs are such that God (being perfectly good) could not bring them about. The problem, then, is this: If God is both omnipotent and perfectly good, then there are at least some consistently describable states of affairs that He both can and cannot bring about. There would thus appear to be a logical conflict in the claim that God is both omnipotent and perfectly good.<sup>24</sup>

The initial premise in the argument expresses Pike's concept of omnipotence. It follows from the concept of omnipotence that necessarily, if a being is essentially omnipotent, then he can actualize any possible world. And since strengthening antecedents is valid for strict conditionals it follows immediately from *Principle G\** that necessarily if a being is essentially omnipotent and essentially good then it is possible that he actualizes any possible world.

15. Necessarily if a being is essentially omnipotent and essentially perfectly good then he can actualize any possible world.

$$\Box(\forall z)(\forall x)((z \text{ is essentially omnipotent \& essentially perfectly good}) \supset \Diamond((z \text{ actualizes } x)))$$

Pike's second premise expresses his concept of moral perfection. It follows from the concept of moral perfection that necessarily, if a being is essentially perfectly good, then there are some worlds that he cannot actualize. But strengthening antecedents on *Principle G* entails that

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24 Nelson Pike, 'Omnipotence and God's Ability to Sin' in Louis Pojman (ed.) *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology* (Boston: Wadsworth Publishing Co. 1998) pp. 283-293. Pike does not conclude from this that God does not exist.

necessarily if a being is essentially omnipotent and essentially good then there are some worlds that he cannot actualize.

16. Necessarily if a being is essentially omnipotent and essentially perfectly good then he cannot actualize some worlds.

$$\Box(\forall z)(\exists x)((z \text{ is essentially omnipotent \& essentially perfectly good}) \supset \sim\Diamond((z \text{ actualizes } x))$$

And from (15) and (16) it follows that there is some world  $w$  such that any essentially omnipotent and essentially perfectly good being both can and cannot actualize  $w$ . But of course that is impossible. It is therefore impossible that any being is both essentially omnipotent and essentially perfectly good.

17. It is impossible that any being should possess the attributes of essential omnipotence and essential perfect goodness.

$$\Box\sim(\exists z)(z \text{ is essentially omnipotent \& essentially perfectly good})$$

And of course it follows from Pike's conclusion in (17) that the concept of a maximally great being is incoherent.

But how credible is Pike's argument? The argument simply assumes that each of the incompatible attributes is *separately* coherent. And that assumption is unwarranted. Indeed there is good reason to believe that assumption is false. There is an argument no weaker than Pike's argument that his concept of moral perfection is incoherent and that his incompatible attribute argument is therefore unsound.

On the traditional view of theism there is no incoherence in the concept of a necessarily existing being that is essentially omnipotent, essentially omniscient and essentially morally perfect. But the traditional view is coherent only if it is possible that some necessary being is essentially perfectly good and essentially omnipotent. Traditional theism therefore entails (18).

18. It is possible that necessarily some being is omnipotent and essentially perfectly good.

$\diamond\Box(\exists z)(z \text{ is essentially omnipotent \& essentially perfectly good})$ .

We derive from (18) and (15) that it is impossible that a being is essentially omnipotent and essentially perfectly good only if he cannot actualize some world.

19. It is impossible that if a being is essentially omnipotent and essentially perfectly good then he cannot actualize some world.

$\Box\sim(\forall z)(\forall x)((z \text{ is essentially omnipotent \& essentially perfectly good})$   
 $\supset \sim\diamond(z \text{ actualizes } x))$

It follows immediately that *Principle G* is necessarily false. And any concept of moral perfection that entails *Principle G* is incoherent. (19) entails (20).

20. It is impossible that if a being is essentially perfectly good, then he cannot actualize some world.

$\Box\sim(\forall z)(\exists x)((z \text{ is essentially perfectly good}) \supset \sim\diamond(z \text{ actualizes } x))$

This counterargument of course assumes that there is no incoherence in the traditional conception of God. Indeed the counterargument assumes that the traditional concept of God is what David Chalmers has called *ideally conceivable*.<sup>25</sup> But the traditional concept of God is ideally conceivable only if the concept does not entail a contradiction. Since Pike's argument entails that the traditional concept *does* entail a contradiction, we seem to arrive the conclusion the traditional concept of God is not ideally conceivable.

Of course Pike's argument assumes that there is no incoherence in his concept of moral perfection or his concept of omnipotence. Indeed Pike's argument assumes that the concept of moral perfection and the

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25 David Chalmers, 'Does Conceivability entail Possibility?' in Tamar Szabó Gendler and John Hawthorne (eds.) *Conceivability and Possibility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press (2002)). On at least one analysis in Chalmers's discussion S is ideally conceivable when there is a possible subject for whom S is *prima facie* conceivable with justification that is undefeatable by better reasoning. See p 148 ff.



concept of omnipotence are ideally conceivable. But Pike's concept of moral perfection is ideally conceivable only if the concept does not entail a contradiction. Since the counterargument entails that Pike's concept of moral perfection *does* entail a contradiction we seem to arrive at the conclusion that Pike's concept of moral perfection is not ideally conceivable.

But neither of these conclusions is reasonable. Compare, for instance, the following similar argument that the property of *being maximally great* is incoherent.

Consider the property of being in less than perfect company, where it is understood that a person has that property in a world *w* just in case every person in *w* ... has some degree of imperfection, however slight. It may be that we enjoy (or are burdened with) this property in the actual world. But even if we are not, surely, one would think, it is *possible* that this property is instantiated. ... But if so then Plantinga's extraordinary property [of being maximally great] is impossible; there is no possible world in which it is instantiated. If either of these properties is instantiated in some world, then the other is uninstantiated in ... every possible world. Since only one can be instantiated, which, if either, might it be?<sup>26</sup>

It is *prima facie* conceivable that something has the property of being maximally great. The concept contains no apparent contradiction. But there is a proof that it is *necessarily false* that something has the property of being maximally great. So it is not ideally conceivable that something has the property of being maximally great. The proof entails that the concept of being maximally great is incoherent.

But it is also *prima facie* conceivable that something has the property of being in less than perfect company. There is nonetheless a proof that it is necessarily false that something has the property of being in less than perfect company. So it is not ideally conceivable that something has the property of being in less than perfect company. The proof entails that the concept of being in less than perfect company is incoherent.

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26 William L. Rowe, 'Modal Versions of the Ontological Argument' in Melville Y. Stewart (ed.) *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology of Contemporary Views* (Sudbury: Jones and Bartlett Press, 1996) p. 199 ff.

But neither of these conclusions is reasonable. It seems obviously unreasonable to conclude that the concept of being in less than perfect company is incoherent. The argument that the concept is incoherent includes the unwarranted assumption that the concept of being maximally great is ideally conceivable. After considerable reflection we simply do not know that the concept of being maximally great is ideally conceivable.

But it is also obviously unreasonable to conclude that the concept of being maximally great is incoherent. The argument that the concept is incoherent includes the unwarranted assumption that the concept of being in less than perfect company is ideally conceivable. After considerable reflection we simply do not know that the concept of being in less than perfect company is ideally conceivable.

Of course the same problem afflicts Pike's argument. Pike concludes that the concept of being maximally great is incoherent. But Pike's argument includes the unwarranted assumption that his concept of moral perfection is ideally conceivable. After considerable reflection we simply do not know that Pike's concept of moral perfection is ideally conceivable. And so again it is unreasonable to conclude that the concept of a maximally great being is incoherent.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

The version of *Rowe's Argument from Improbability* developed in section (1) is valid and it does avoid the difficulties plaguing other arguments from improbability. The premises in Rowe's argument, *Principle B* and the *No Best World* hypothesis entail that there exists no maximally great being. And, contrary to Hasker and Morris, these assumptions do not entail that a maximally great being is required to do the impossible.

The central problem with Rowe's argument is that there is no reason to believe that both *Principle B* and the *No Best World* hypothesis are true. These premises are true only if the concept of a maximally great being is incoherent. And Rowe's argument provides no reason to reach that conclusion.

Nelson Pike does offer an argument that no possible being has both the attribute of omnipotence and the attribute of moral perfection. And Pike's argument does support the conclusion that *Principle B* and the *No Best World* hypothesis are both true. But there are equally compelling reasons to believe that Pike's argument is unsound.

The version of *Rowe's Argument from Improbability* developed in section (1) is clearly valid. But we have no reason to believe that the argument is sound. It seems fair to conclude that *Rowe's Argument from Improbability* does not show that a maximally great being is impossible.

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