The Problem of No Best World

William L. Rowe

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Professors Daniel and Frances Howard-Snyder hold that there is no reason to believe that it is logically impossible for an essentially omnipotent, omniscient, morally unsurpassable being to create a world that is morally inferior to some other world he, or some other possible being, could have created. They try to show this by imagining an omnipotent, omniscient good being, Jove, who creates a good world by using a randomizing device. They then argue that there is no reason to think that Juno and Thor (other omnipotent beings who happen to create better worlds) would be morally superior to Jove. I argue that in the case of Thor, once we explicitly acknowledge his omniscience as well as his omnipotence, we do have a reason to think that he is morally superior to Jove. Hence, I conclude they have failed to show how an unsurpassable being can create a surpassable world.
lesser world. Even though Juno ends up producing a better world than Jove, the Howard-Snyder’s are clearly right in viewing Jove and Juno as morally equivalent. But what of Thor? From their discussion it would seem that Thor is morally superior to Jove and Juno, for it looks as though Thor’s degree of moral goodness is such that he is not prepared to settle for world no. 777 unless he is unable to create a better world. But the fact that Jove intentionally included worlds numbered 1 – 777 as possibilities for selection by his randomizing machine shows that Jove is morally prepared to settle for any of the worlds from 1 – 777 even though he is able to create a better world. So, it does appear that, other things being equal, Thor is a morally better being than Jove.

I noted earlier that our authors do not explicitly make Juno and Thor epistemically equivalent to Jove. This is unfortunate for it leads them to impute a principle of action to Thor that cannot possibly apply to an omnipotent, omniscient being who chooses to create from among infinitely many progressively better worlds. Thus they say:

The important point to see here is that given a choice between infinitely many progressively better worlds to create, Jove wisely rejects Thor’s principle that if there’s a better world than w, don’t create w...because that principle in that context would lead him (and Thor, were he rational) to do nothing, which is far worse than using the randomizer. (6)

Now if the principle in question, “if there’s a better world than w, don’t create w,” were Thor’s guiding principle, then Thor could not be omniscient and create anything—for, as the authors say, Thor is facing “Jove’s choice,” the choice of selecting among infinitely many progressively better worlds. But once we do provide a level playing field for Thor and Jove, specifying that Thor, like Jove, is omniscient as well as omnipotent, we see that given his selection of world no. 888, no such principle can be motivating Thor. (For, knowing that he must select among infinitely many progressively better worlds, such a principle would prohibit Thor from creating the world he does create, no. 888.) Rather, Thor’s degree of moral goodness presumably is such that he is prepared to settle for world no. 888, but not prepared to settle for the world (no. 777) that Jove’s degree of moral goodness allows him to settle for. We thus have reason to believe that Thor’s degree of moral goodness exceeds Jove’s, that Thor is morally better than Jove.

What the Howard-Snyder’s may have shown—and this is important—is that the fact that one omnipotent, omniscient being creates a world that is morally inferior to the world that another such being would create does not show, by itself, that the first being, other things being equal, is morally inferior to the second. What they have not shown is that an omnipotent, omniscient being who creates a world morally inferior to another world it could have created can be morally unsurpassable.
NOTES


2. In order not to beg the question at issue, the Howard-Snyder’s do not assume that Jove is morally unsurpassable.

3. In the context of this discussion, a being is morally unsurpassable only if it is logically impossible for there to be a morally better being.

4. For some reason the Howard-Snyder’s neglect to attribute omniscience to Juno and Thor. I assume this to be a slip. Clearly, if we want to compare their goodness to Jove’s, we should attribute to them the infinite power and knowledge that was attributed to Jove. I’ll return to this point in discussing Thor’s degree of goodness.

5. And the same is true of Juno, even though she accidentally ends up with world no. 999.

6. It is important to note that to say one being is morally better than another is not to imply that the second being has done anything morally wrong or violated any moral obligation.