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ROBERT ADAMS AND THE BEST POSSIBLE WORLD

Mark L. Thomas

Robert Merrihew Adams argues that it is permissible for a perfectly good moral agent to create a world less good than the best one she could create. He argues that God would exhibit the important virtue of grace in creating less than the best and that this virtue is incompatible with the merit considerations required by the standard of creating the best. In this paper I give three arguments for the compatibility of merit consideration and graciousness of God toward creation. I conclude that grace would not release a perfect agent from responsibility to create the best.

In "Must God Create the Best?" Robert Merrihew Adams argues for the denial of the following claim:

(P) If a perfectly good moral agent created any world at all, it would have to be the very best world that he could create.¹

Adams' intent is to establish that God could create a world less good than the best one possible without sacrificing his perfect goodness. The first main section of his argument responds to potentially forceful objections—based on deontological moral considerations—to creation of less than the best. Adams considers in the second section of his argument the possibility that God would exhibit a character flaw in creating a world less good than the best one possible even if, in creating such a world, he refrained from wronging anyone and showed perfect kindness to everyone. It is on this second part of Adams' argument that this paper will focus.

Adams' strategy is to argue that God would manifest a virtue rather than a vice in creating less than the best.² He posits the Judeo-Christian virtue of grace which he defines as the disposition to love independent of considerations of the merit of the beloved. Adams' argument does not rest on just this notion of grace, however. Central to his argument is the claim that God acts graciously in *creating* a world.³ Adams uses the phrase "graciousness in creation,"⁴ and by this term he seems to mean that the act of creating a group of creatures is an act of love toward them without regard to their merits. God's creation of a possible world is a gracious act.

Adams succinctly states his argument by claiming the following inconsistency between grace and merit:

...(i)that grace, as a disposition to love that is not dependent on the merit of the beloved, is one of the best virtues, and

(ii) that a creator's choosing to create and love less excellent creatures than he could have chosen must necessarily manifest some imperfection in the creator's character.

For (ii) can hardly be asserted except on the basis of the assumption

(iii)that it would be an imperfection to choose objects to be created and loved on any basis other than merit;

and (iii) is a denial of (i).⁵

Without here reconstructing his argument, I take Adams' central point to be that, if God has the perfection of being gracious in creation, then he cannot be faulted for creating a world less good than the best one possible, for claiming such a fault needs an additional claim that the merit of a possible world must be the basis for creation of it. Such concern with merit is incompatible with the motivation of grace according to Adams.

Even though I agree that grace is a critical divine virtue, in the following sections I shall mount two sets of arguments against Adams' claim that, because of his graciousness, God need not create the best. The first two arguments challenge Adams' particular use of grace with regard to creation. The second set of arguments works against Adams even if one accepts his characterization of creation at the global level as gracious.

Grace for creatures versus grace for a world

Premise (ii) of Adams' argument above is ambiguous. The statement refers to the creation of *less excellent creatures* than are possible; however, the point of contention is whether a creator's choosing to create a less excellent *world* than he could have chosen would necessarily exhibit a character flaw. Adams may very well be using "creatures" as a shorthand reference to a world, but "less excellent creatures" could also refer to creatures considered as to their merit *as individuals*. Regardless of Adams' intended meaning, this ambiguity provides a cue for a relevant distinction.

There are different levels to be considered in creation of a complex whole, and therefore God's relations to each of these levels may be substantially different. God would create individual creatures taken as individuals. Further, relations between these things are possible, so there would be various sets of these individuals. Finally, God would be creating a whole world taken in the highest global sense, including all individuals, subsets, and their relations. The act of creation, then, has at least two important senses: creation of a world as a whole and creation of individual creatures as individuals.

In conjunction with this distinction, I offer two observations concern-

ing creation. The first is that it is possible that the best possible world would not be simply a collection of the best possible creatures considered individually. The second is that grace seems most relevantly operative in the relation between God and creatures as individuals. There is therefore room for God to choose a possible world on the global level in terms of merit while choosing some creatures considered individually on terms other than merit, namely by motivation of grace.

One might object that, if God selects a world on the basis of merit, then he would also be selecting the individual creatures which compose that world on the basis of merit, because the merit of a possible world is determined by the parts and their relations. One might further argue that, even if God does not select the best possible creatures, he nevertheless selects them on the basis of their merit with regard to the world as a whole. However, it is possible that, given the complexity of the best possible world, there could be some variance among some of the possible creatures selected while still preserving the value of the world on the global level. It is possible that two possible worlds could tie as best in terms of global merit. Possible world 1 would involve creature A and creature B and their relations, while possible world 2 would involve creature C and creature D and their relations (but neither would include both sets), and each combination would contribute equally to the global merit of the best world. God might therefore choose one duo on the basis of grace in Adams' sense, even though on the global level God would be creating the best possible world with a focus on merit. Therefore, it is unclear that there is necessarily a strict incompatibility between the standards of grace and merit in God's act of creation.

Is "gracious creation" coherent?

Again, the claim that God acts graciously in creating is crucial to Adams' argument. If, for example, one were to claim that God acts lovingly and graciously only after creation occurs, and not in the act of creation itself, then the virtue of grace would be fully compatible with merit-based considerations of which world to create. More specifically, the claim (ii) in Adams' argument would be revised to:

(ii ca⁶) that a creator's choosing to *create* less excellent creatures [a less excellent world] than he could have chosen must necessarily manifest some imperfection in the creator's character.

And (ii ca) would then be based on:

(iii ca⁷) that it would be an imperfection to choose objects to be *created* on any basis other than merit.

Once "love" is removed from the statements, (iii ca) is not obviously a denial of (i), and, therefore, (ii ca) is consistent with (i). So, if the act of creation precedes God's acts of grace, then Adams' argument against the principle (P), that God must create the best, fails.

I shall present an argument for the claim that "graciousness in creation" lacks coherence (though, due to objections which can be made, I do not claim that this argument is conclusive). First, Adams argues against claims that God has wronged or acted unkindly toward merely possible beings; such claims lack substance. Adams says, "The moral community consists of actual beings....A merely possible being cannot be (actually) wronged or treated unkindly."⁸ By the same token, neither can merely possible beings be treated benevolently or have their situation improved from a moral point of view; consistency requires this extension of Adams' argument.⁹ Furthermore, an important component of grace is that it involves loving acts, and loving acts inherently benefit creatures. Loving acts are inherently kind acts rather than unkind or neutral acts. So one cannot act graciously toward possible creatures; therefore, "gracious creation" seems incoherent just as is the notion of wronging a possible creature.¹⁰

The comparative neutrality of grace

The following three objections affect Adams' argument even if the notion of gracious creation remains intact. Initially, I want to establish what I call the comparative neutrality of grace. Grace could be a reason for choosing to create a possible world. If God is gracious, and if the creation of a group of creatures is a loving act, then God's virtue of grace provides a reason for the creation of a world. God would simply be expressing his love in a magnificent and powerful way. However, grace, as Adams defines it,¹¹ cannot be a reason for the creation of one world rather than another, and this situation faces God prior to his creation of a world. God has a whole range of possible worlds from which to choose: the best, the worst, and those in-between. Again, grace is love without any regard for the merit of the beloved. So God could love any one world just as much as another.¹² Grace is neither a preference for perfection nor for imperfection; in fact, it contains no merit-based preference at all according to Adams. Grace is equally capable of expression through the creation of any possible world.

The virtue of grace is neutral, then, to any one world compared to another; therefore, I call this attribute the comparative neutrality of grace. God's moral perfection is a factor in the creation of a world, and grace is a central element of God's perfection. The creation of any possible world would be consistent with the grace element of God's perfect goodness. Not only could God create the best, and not only could he create some world where all creatures are very happy, but he also could exhibit grace through loving any world whatsoever (just as he might desire to create or love any world whatsoever).

Since grace is neutral in this way, one of the following must be the case: either there is another reason besides grace for the creation of a particular world or God acts arbitrarily in choosing a possible world for creation.

Reductio ad absurdum

A more forceful, though simple, argument can be developed from the preceding remarks. If all choices of a possible world are equally capable

of being an expression of grace, then, just as God can create graciously a world somewhat less good than the best possible, so too God can create the worst possible world graciously. God can manifest his virtue (of grace) and therefore his goodness¹³ by creating the world with the most cruelty and suffering possible. Unless God is morally irrational, he will base his choice of a possible world on something besides grace alone.

The grace-plus argument

Since, as I have argued, grace is neutral in a comparison of one possible world to another, grace must not be the only component of God's choice of a world if he is to act rationally.¹⁴ Further, consideration of merit cannot provide any part of the basis of God's choice of a world if the option of a world less good than the best possible is to be preserved. Even the tiniest consideration of merit in creation would tip the moral scale toward the best possible world, since it contains the most merit. Adams' argument is actually ambiguous at this point, although given his conclusion he must have intended to eliminate merit considerations altogether. The claim (iii) can be interpreted either as

(iii m¹⁵) that it would be an imperfection to choose objects to be created and loved on any basis other than one *containing* merit

or as

(iii ma¹⁶) that it would be an imperfection to choose objects to be created and loved on any basis other than merit *alone*.

Statement (i) has a similar ambiguity. It may mean either

(i g¹⁷) that grace, as a disposition to love that is not *mostly* dependent on the merit of the beloved, is one of the best virtues

or

(i ga¹⁸) that grace, as a disposition to love that is not dependent on the merit of the beloved *at all*, is one of the best virtues.¹⁹

The difference between (iii m) and (iii ma) involves the degree to which merit must permeate the basis for God's perfect actions. The claim that merit must be considered or else an action is imperfect is weaker than the claim that if anything but merit is considered an action is imperfect. The difference between (i g) and (i ga) is likewise one of weaker and stronger versions of grace. Obviously, the stronger version of grace is conducive to Adams' conclusion. A separate issue which may involve an implicit assumption of Adams is whether or not grace wholly permeates the basis of an act of God.

Claim (iii ma), then, is inconsistent with both (i g) and (i ga). Claim

(iii m), however, is consistent with (i g). Therefore, if the two interpretations, (iii m) and (i g), can be justified, then Adams' conclusion is blocked. If grace can be defined with room for even the smallest amount of merit-consideration, then God could act with grace plus merit in creating a world. Again, I have argued that, based on the neutrality of grace, if merit were considered in even the smallest amount the best possible world would be chosen. Claim (iii m) could be held without entailing that God could not act graciously in creating a world.

Furthermore, claim (iii m) may also be consistent with (i ga), depending on one's assumptions about the complexity of actions and the permeation of those actions by grace (if grace is a basis for one's actions). If God's action is sufficiently complex to allow both grace and merit-consideration to form its basis, then (iii m) would be compatible with both (i g) and (i ga). If 1% of a decision is based on considerations of merit while 99% of the decision is based on grace, it is plausible to call the ensuing action gracious. And, again, if even the smallest amount of merit were considered in the creation of a world, then the world chosen would necessarily be the best one possible, due to the neutrality of grace.

Virtue plus

This discussion can be broadened. Adams wants to ignore utilitarian considerations in the discussion of which world(s) God should create.²⁰ However, total exclusion of teleological considerations from moral discussion seems extreme.²¹ It seems that if a virtue were to lead one equally to two actions, but if the second of those actions were also recommended by teleological considerations, then the second action should be chosen over the first. Virtue-plus is a better justification than virtue alone. And if a perfectly good God can graciously create two worlds, but if the second world would contain the best consequences, then from a holistic moral perspective God should choose the second world, which would be the best one possible.

Concluding remarks

I have attempted to elucidate difficulties which would result if God were to act only on grace in creating a world, and I have therefore been arguing that more than just grace should provide the basis for God's decision. If merit-based considerations are included in the basis, then the best possible world would be chosen. However, Adams might reject such considerations as wholly incompatible with grace as he understands it.

Still, I have given arguments for compatibility between merit-considerations and grace. Merit and grace may be congruous along the distinction between the global and individual levels of creation. Further, a temporal demarcation between creation and post-creation graciousness would also mediate the conflict. Finally, there may be space for compatibility between merit and grace even regarding creation considered as a single act of God (with a complex basis), if one takes the merit stipula-

tion in sense (iii m). Even adopting Adams' notion of grace, it may be possible for God to choose to create some creatures (most likely, some set of rational creatures) on the basis of grace while choosing to create the world as a whole because it is the best one possible.

Much of the force of an argument like Adams' is in its applicability to the presence of evil in our actual world. One simply struggles with the claim that this world is the best God could create, and if its being created graciously could release God from charges of wrongdoing one could at least continue to affirm God's perfect goodness. I have serious doubts, however, that grace would release God from culpability in creating less than the best.²²

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NOTES

1. Robert M. Adams, "Must God Create the Best?" in *The Virtue of Faith and Other Essays in Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p.51.

2. One might raise a question about the structure of this part of Adams' argument. One might question whether the claim that "action X manifests a virtue" entails the further claim that "action X cannot manifest a vice." Adams is arguing against that latter sort of claim regarding the action of creating less than the best possible world. More would need to be said about the compatibility of virtues and vices.

3. One might question whether the religious tradition supports Adams' use of the notion of gracious creation of a world. Adams does seem to misinterpret the scripture (*Psalms* 8: 3-6) he presents (p.57) as support for his argument concerning grace and the rejection of (P). The deprecation of humanity in the scripture Adams quotes is not a contrast between possible human beings in various possible worlds. Rather, the contrast is between humanity and the other works of God or even between humanity and God—in the actual world. The scripture is neutral to the issue of whether or not this world is the best possible or even whether or not we are the best human beings possible.

4. Adams, pp.56-57.

5. Adams, note 6, p.63.

6. The mnemonic here is ii [c]reation [a]lone, or (ii ca).

7. iii [c]reation [a]lone.

8. Adams, p.53.

9. One might object that consistency further requires that merely possible beings cannot be assessed in terms of merit. However, I do not think this conclusion follows from Adams' assertion that the moral community consists of only actual beings. What is essential to membership in the moral community in Adams' sense is moral action which either harms or benefits another; merely possible creatures are unable to receive such real harms or benefits. However, God could certainly assess the merits such possible creatures would have were they to exist (through his omniscience, for example). Such assessment of merit would have to be considered a morally neutral act with regard to the possible creature (the assessment could not harm or benefit the possible beings).

10. Adams might respond in either of two ways, and at least one of the

responses seems reasonably forceful. He might counter by saying that an act can be gracious without any creature necessarily receiving benefit. Perhaps the substance of God's grace comes from his disposition toward creatures whether possible or actual, so the act of creation could be gracious without necessarily benefiting any creature. Such a response has some plausibility, for one might act with particular intended consequences, yet those consequences might be kept from fruition by external interference. For example, a certain academic might graciously bequeath her estate to a university, yet a diabolical fiend—perhaps a disgruntled graduate student—might nevertheless poison her, alter the will, and escape with the inheritance. However, an omnipotent deity cannot be so easily released from responsibility due to external factors. In the initial act of creation, an omnipotent creator's actions must be efficacious.

On the other hand, Adams might claim that the actual creatures, after creation, receive the benefit of the gracious creation, rather than the possible creatures. Such a suggestion is surely plausible. A beneficent act might improve the situation of the beneficiary only after the action occurs; for example, the aforementioned academic might benevolently and anonymously establish a trust fund for another; further, the trust fund might be established for one before she is born, while she remains a possible creature. So it is possible that the benefit of gracious creation only affects actual creatures.

11. Adams, p.56.

12. I am setting aside the issue of whether worse creatures require a comparatively greater expenditure of grace by God; such a principle may lead to the conclusion that a God acting on grace in creation should create a very bad world—perhaps the worst world—in order to bestow the most love.

13. Admittedly, the relation between the virtue of grace and God's overall goodness is left unprobed. On this relation, I interpret the strategy of the second section of Adams' paper to be to argue that part of God's perfect goodness is the virtue of grace, which entails that God need not create the best possible world. However, I do think there is room for compatibility between grace and merit—concern as components of God's goodness.

14. If God's grace were merely triggered by a certain group of creatures in the way human love for an individual often seems to be, then one might argue that creation by grace alone is as rational as is marriage based on love alone. However, it is dubious that on the human level one's love is (or should be) ever wholly independent of evaluative or merit-based considerations.

15. iii [m]erit.

16. iii [m]erit [a]lone.

17. i [g]race.

18. i [g]race [a]lone.

19. A separate problem is whether grace is completely compatible with the other virtues which a perfectly good God should have.

20. Adams, p.52.

21. See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 1971), p.30.

22. I am grateful to Mark Kulstad, George Sher, Keith DeRose, and Michael Beaty for helpful comments on various drafts of this paper.