EVER BETTER SITUATIONS AND THE FAILURE OF EXPRESSION PRINCIPLES

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William Rowe argues that if an omnipotent, omniscient being were faced with an infinite hierarchy of better and better worlds to create, that being could not also be unsurpassably morally excellent. His argument assumes that, at least in ideal circumstances, degree of moral goodness must be perfectly expressed in the degree of goodness of the outcomes chosen. Reflection upon the application of analogous expression principles for certainty and desire shows that such principles can be expected to fail for anyone capable of facing an infinite range of options.

Rowe's Argument

William Rowe has argued that if an omnipotent, omniscient being were faced with an infinite hierarchy of better and better worlds to create, that being could not also be unsurpassably morally excellent.¹ The argument relies crucially upon Rowe's principle B.

B: If an omniscient being creates a world when there is a better world it could have created, then it is possible that there exist a being morally better than it.²

This is backed up by the intuitive thought that: in general, someone willing to settle for a less good outcome, other things being equal, is morally inferior to someone who has higher standards.³

Here is my reconstruction of Rowe's argument:

1. For any x and W : if x is all-powerful and all-knowing in W , and there is no maximum to the goodness of the worlds available to x , then x could have ensured the existence of a better world than W .

¹Rowe, "The Problem of Divine Perfection and Freedom," "The Problem of No Best World," and "Can God Be Free?"; the fullest presentation is in Rowe, *Can God Be Free?*, Ch. 6. The core argument was also stated succinctly in a one-page 1988 article by Stephen Grover ("Why Only the Best is Good Enough").

²Rowe, *Can God Be Free?*, 91.

³Rowe, *Can God Be Free?*, 100–101.

2. For any x and W : if x , in W , could have ensured the existence of a better world than W , then W is a possible world in which x is not as good as x could have been. [Implication of Rowe's Principle B]
3. So, for any x and W : if x is all-powerful and all-knowing in W , and there is no maximum to the goodness of worlds, then W is a world in which x is not as good as x could have been. [From 1 & 2]
4. There is no possible world W in which God exists but is not as good as God is in some other world W^* —nor is there any world in which any other being is better than God is in W . [Moral Unsurpassability]
5. So, for any W : if there is no maximum to the goodness of worlds, then, if God exists in W , God is not all-powerful and all-knowing in W . [From 3 & 4]
6. There is no possible world in which God exists but is not all-powerful and all-knowing. [Essentiality of Omnipotence and Omniscience]

So, for any W : if there is no maximum to the goodness of worlds, then God does not exist in W . [From 5 & 6]

Which is to say, if there is no maximum to the goodness of creatable worlds, God is impossible.

The argument has elicited a wide range of responses; but it is fair to say that most critics take issue with B, denying it for one reason or another. Principle B is a kind of "expression principle"⁴—it links a psychological state or character trait that comes in degrees, on the one hand, with its expression in behavior under idealized circumstances, on the other hand. Most critics of Rowe's argument claim that, when faced with an endless sequence of better and better options, choosing a worse world than one could is compatible with moral unsurpassability. When circumstances present ever better options from which to choose (what Chris Tucker calls an "Ever Better Situation"⁵), the value of one's choice will not precisely express the goodness of one's motives or character.⁶

This criticism of B will seem intuitive to those already convinced, by similar examples, of the appropriateness of "satisficing"—choosing a good enough option when one could do better. Michael Slote famously argues for a "Satisficing Consequentialism" partly on this basis. He first points out that *rationality* seems not to be impugned by choosing a good enough option from an endless series of better and better options:

⁴Compare Morris's use of the term "Expression Thesis" ("Perfection and Creation," 242).

⁵Tucker, "Satisficing and Motivated Submaximization," 130.

⁶Representatives include Morris, "Perfection and Creation," 243–245; Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder, "How an Unsurpassable Being Can Create a Surpassable World" and "The Real Problem of No Best World"; Hasker, *Providence, Evil, and the Openness of God*, 171–173; and Langtry, *God, the Best, and Evil*, ch. 2. Norman Kretzmann foresaw Rowe's argument, and made the same move (Kretzmann, "A Particular Problem of Creation," 238). A different sort of challenge to principle B has been developed by Brian Leftow. He argues that even God

How do we react to fairy tales in which the hero or heroine, offered a single wish, asks for a pot of gold, for a million (1900) dollars, or simply, for (enough money to enable) his family and himself to be comfortably well off for the rest of their lives? In each case the person asks for less than he might have asked for, but we are not typically struck by the thought that he was *irrational* to ask for less than he could have.⁷

Slote then draws a similar conclusion about the *moral* status of someone forced to choose among options that benefit others to higher and higher degrees, without limit:

[C]onsider a fairy-tale wish regarding people other than oneself. A warrior has fought meritoriously and died in a good cause, and the gods wish to grant him a single wish for those he leaves behind, before he enters Paradise and ceases to be concerned with his previous life. Presented with such an opportunity, may not the warrior wish for *his family* to be comfortably well off forever after? And will we from a common-sense standpoint consider him to have acted wrongly or non-benevolently towards his family because he (presumably knowingly) rejected an expectably better lot for them in favor of what was simply good enough? Surely not.⁸

As Chris Tucker has pointed out, Slote's reaction is widely shared; satisficing in Ever Better Situations has seemed highly intuitive to many moral philosophers—so intuitive as to be “banal,” and hardly worthy of the name “satisficing.”⁹ According to Tucker, it should rather be thought of as a kind of “motivated submaximization”—a situation in which, while aiming at as much good as possible, one settles for less than one could because of “countervailing considerations.”¹⁰ Tucker argues that theists who reject B are merely committed “to the appropriateness of motivated submaximization,” which comes at little cost since it is “so popular and well supported in the mainstream literature.”¹¹

I agree with Tucker and the rest of the critics of B, and will attempt to bolster confidence by telling a couple of stories. The stories raise problems for analogous expression principles that might be thought to govern other personal characteristics besides moral goodness, benevolence, or purity of motivation. These morally charged character traits come in degrees because they depend upon psychological dispositions that also come in degrees—e.g., some people are more willing to make personal sacrifices for the sake of others in need, and qualify as more benevolent in virtue of that fact. The hypothesis that moral perfection is a coherent

might be subject to moral luck, and wind up with a less good world for reasons that do not impugn God's character (I say “largely,” because the argument includes several dilemmas, and not all the horns ascribe moral luck to God); see Leftow, “No Best World: Moral Luck” and “No Best World: Creaturely Freedom.”

⁷Slote, “Satisficing Consequentialism,” 147.

⁸Slote, “Satisficing Consequentialism,” 150–151.

⁹Tucker, “Satisficing and Motivated Submaximization,” 130.

¹⁰Tucker, “Satisficing and Motivated Submaximization,” 130.

¹¹Tucker, “Satisficing and Motivated Submaximization,” 138.

notion depends upon the idea that there is at least one combination of these psychological dispositions that makes for maximal moral goodness. But should we expect these kinds of gradable psychological traits to be capable of full expression, even in ideal circumstances, when there are infinitely many better and better options available to an agent, with no best?

Reflection upon a couple of other gradable psychological states strongly suggests a negative answer. Certainty and desire come in degrees, and they may well have upper limits—at least, there may be highest degrees of certainty or desire available to creatures like us. We naturally expect that, in ideal circumstances, different degrees of certainty and desire would be expressed in different kinds of behavior. But when agents are supposed to be capable of contemplating infinitely many acts, or even indefinitely many acts, B-like principles for the expression of certainty and desire lead to analogues of Rowe's argument. The results are highly counterintuitive, and this supports the general claim that simple expression principles, like B, should be expected to fail in cases relevantly like an Ever Better Situation.

Expression Principle for Certainty

I begin with the failure of an expression principle for certainty—a principle that seems very plausible, until one considers the infinite case.

In general, the amount of money one is willing to bet reflects one's certainty about the outcome. If an ideal gambler is in ideal circumstances—she is clear-headed, not making any mathematical or logical mistakes, acting entirely out of self-interest—her willingness to risk larger and larger sums should be expected to go up with her degree of certainty. So this expression principle about idealized gamblers seems, *prima facie*, reasonable:

B*: If an ideal gambler in ideal circumstances bets n dollars on a given outcome, but could have bet more than n dollars, then it is possible for the gambler to be more certain about that outcome.

Suppose there is a cosmic lender, Donna, who has convinced an ideal gambler, John, that, for any sum of money he can think of, she will give him that much money to bet on the outcome of a game. Donna plays the role of "The Lender," a role that requires convincing any reasonable person that you have any amount of money the person can name.

Now suppose the game is this: there is a mathematically challenged rich man, Donald, whom the gambler believes to be as rich as Donna; and Donald bets John that $2 + 2 = 5$. John is *absolutely certain*, as certain as it is possible for John to be of anything, that Donald is wrong about this. John has several thousand dollars to bet, but—because the situation is an ideal one, in which John is purely self-interested, and there are no other relevant considerations—John would bet anything he can get his hands on that Donald is wrong. However, Donna, the Lender, is nowhere to be found. So John bets Donald \$1000 that $2 + 2$ is not 5. Donald says, "That's not very much. Let's make this bet interesting; for any amount of money you can name, I'll bet you that much money that I'm right and you're wrong."

Suddenly, Donna enters the room, and offers to cover John's bet. John, relieved, chooses the first astronomical amount he can think of—three hundred billion dollars—although John could easily have chosen a larger number. While selecting this number, John does not lose any confidence in his knowledge of mathematical facts; he knows he must choose some amount, and that his choice will have to be to some degree arbitrary—not correlated precisely with his rational expectations. John wins the bet, and becomes fabulously wealthy.

If B^* is true, there is a deep incoherence in this story, one that can be revealed by an argument that mirrors Rowe's:

- 1*. For any x and W : if x is an ideal gambler in W and x borrows n dollars from the Lender to bet on an outcome, then x could have bet more on that outcome—for example, x could have asked for $n + 1$ dollars.
- 2*. For any x and W : if x , in W , is an ideal gambler who could have bet more on an outcome, then W is a possible world in which x is not as certain of the outcome as x could have been. [B^*]
- 3*. So, for any x and W : if x is an ideal gambler in W and x borrows n dollars from the Lender to bet on an outcome; then W is a world in which x is not as certain of the outcome as x could have been. [1^* & 2^*]
- 4*. In W^* (the world of this story), John is an ideal gambler who is as certain of the outcome as he could be of anything—there is no possible world in which John is more certain about something.
- 5*. So, for any W : if W is a world in which John borrows n dollars from the Lender to bet on a certain outcome, then John is not absolutely certain that the outcome will occur (John is not as certain as he is in W^*). [From 3^* & 4^*]
- 6*. But W^* is a world in which John borrows n dollars from the Lender to bet on a certain outcome (that is part of the story).

CONTRADICTION: In W^* , John is not as certain about the outcome as John is in W^* .

What this argument shows is that, if B^* is true, the conclusion of the story about John, Donald, and the Lender was deeply incoherent. Once Donna offered to cover John's bet, the story could only be continued in one way, so long as John remains an ideal gambler in ideal circumstances (that is, John does not become confused or distracted, and John does not cease to be purely self-interested): "John's absolute certainty about the simplest mathematical facts faded away in the presence of the Lender." But there seems nothing inconsistent in finishing the story with John's making an arbitrary choice, and *denying* that John's certainty changes.

Slote's first fairy-tale moral seems exactly right: When it is better to choose arbitrarily among excellent options rather than not to choose at all, the rational person will choose arbitrarily. There might be some amounts that it would be positively crazy for John to choose, and some that are borderline; but as long as there are many that are perfectly excellent, choosing one when a better is available is consistent with John's being an ideal gambler—he is not making any mathematical or logical errors, he is driven only by self-interest.¹² And the kind of information gained when Donna enters the room, which has nothing to do with whether two and two make five, should have no effect upon John's level of certainty.

Surely the better thing to say is that 2^* and its justification, B^* , the certainty analogue of B , should not be expected to hold when a gambler has infinitely (really, in this case, indefinitely) many options from which to choose, and no best option. When confronted by infinitely many (or indefinitely many) choices of a sort that *normally* can be counted upon to precisely reflect or express an agent's level of certainty, one should no longer expect the choice to express the agent's certainty.

Expression Principle for Desire

Here is a similar case in which a different sort of mental state—degree of desire to reach some place—might be expected to be expressed by a different kind of action—the speed with which one travels. On the face of it, an analogue expression principle is plausible (once the case is set up just right): degree of desire should, other things being equal, be expressed in the speed with which one satisfies the desire. But, in the infinite or indefinite case, one should no longer expect the relevant expression principle to hold.

Suppose that an ideal traveler—someone who only cares about the time it takes to get to her destination, and who makes no logical mistakes in her practical reasoning—wants to reach New York quickly, and wants this as much as she could want anything. Since she wants nothing else that could conflict with this desire, she will use the fastest method, and spare no expense. Someone who claims to be in this situation, but who takes the Queen Elizabeth or makes a stopover in Boston to see relatives, does not

¹²Tucker cites several affirmations of the rationality of this sort of “first pass satisficing” (i.e., the rationality, in *Ever Better Situations*, of choosing an arbitrary but highly prized outcome), including Pollock, “How Do You Maximize Expectation Value?,” 417–418; Schmidt, “Satisficing as a Humanly Rational Strategy,” 41–44; and Slote, *Beyond Optimizing*, 110–123 (“Satisficing and Motivated Submaximization,” 130). I would add that even James Dreier, who explicitly argues against the idea that the norms of rationality permit satisficing (“Why Ethical Satisficing Makes Sense and Rational Satisficing Doesn’t”), would allow that John’s choosing an arbitrary amount to bet is more rational than John’s not betting at all. Dreier is inclined to say that John faces a rational dilemma: whatever John bets, he can be faulted from the standpoint of practical reason; he is not *perfectly* rational (personal communication). As Daniel Rubio has pointed out to me, this conclusion does not save an expression principle such as (B^*), which is not about whether satisficing in *Ever Better Situations* is compatible with being certain and being perfect rational, but rather whether it is compatible with being certain and being entirely self-interested and logically infallible.

after all have this maximal desire to get to New York quickly, or else she is not an ideal traveler. This suggests an expression principle:

B*: If an ideal traveler is willing to settle for a trip to her goal at a certain number of meters-per-second, but could have chosen a faster speed, then it is possible for her to have a stronger desire to reach her goal.

Now take someone who really does have this extreme desire, someone who desires to reach a loved one in New York City as much as she could want anything; and convince her that the following is true:

Our scientists have created a teletransporter that cannot get you to New York at the speed of light, but it can get you there at any speed you choose short of that. The speed of light in a vacuum is 299,792,458 meters per second. You can choose 299,792,457 meters and 9 decimeters per second, or 299,792,457 meters and 99 centimeters, or 299,792,457 meters and 999 millimeters or. . . . Now tell us how fast you want to get there.

Of course normal people will think that such tiny differences in speed could never matter to them or their loved ones, since the differences could never be noticed by themselves or their friends in New York. But if our idealized agent believes, rightly or wrongly, that any fraction of a second could be detected by the person she is trying to reach, and that every fraction of a second apart is a sad one for that person, then "it doesn't matter" is not an option. For any ".999999 . . ." chosen, something faster could have been chosen.

Obviously, a parallel argument could be constructed that would show the incoherence of our ideal agent retaining her degree of desire when forced to choose an arbitrary but extremely high speed. (Constructing the argument is left as the proverbial exercise for the reader.) The result seems as unsatisfactory as in the case of certainty. Would the fact that she is confronted with this kind of choice necessarily *alter* her mental states, rendering her either *less* anxious to get to New York or else causing her to make some kind of serious mistake in her practical reasoning?¹³ The first option does not seem psychologically inevitable; and the second option seems to be an overly harsh judgment. So the expression principle B*, which seems safe enough in the finite case, should not be expected to remain true when an agent believes she is confronted with an Ever Better Situation.

Conclusions

The engine behind Rowe's argument is principle B, an expression principle. And reflection upon the application of expression principles to

¹³As in the parallel argument about certainty, some will say that the traveler in this Ever Better Situation is being perfectly rational, so long as she chooses a speed that is *fast enough*. Others will say that, although it would be positively irrational to choose not to go at all (so it is rationally required to choose some speed or other), nevertheless, whatever speed is chosen, the ideal traveler is open to some kind of rational criticism. (See n. 12 above.)

beings facing an infinite (or indefinite) range of options strongly suggests their invalidity in such cases. The possibility of a maximum of some psychological characteristic—certainty, desire, moral goodness, love; or, for that matter, uncertainty, distaste, moral turpitude, hatred—should not be undermined by the possibility of circumstances arising in which the degree of the characteristic cannot be fully expressed. If some such virtues, vices, and attitudes admit of highest possible degrees (even if that maximum is relative to a kind of creature), it should be possible for an agent to have the highest degree, face an infinite (or indefinite) range of options, and choose one that does not perfectly reflect the character or attitude of the agent.¹⁴

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¹⁴I have told these parallel stories about certainty and desire in many contexts, and learned a lot from the ensuing discussions. I thank participants in workshops at the École Normale Supérieure; the Baylor Summer Seminar at Columbia, Missouri; the Boston University Institute for Philosophy and Religion; Oxford University's Samuel Butler Society; the God and Goodness workshop hosted by the Rutgers Center for the Philosophy of Religion; and "Quo Vadis, Metaphysics?" (a conference honoring Peter van Inwagen) in Warsaw, Poland. I am particularly grateful to Daniel Rubio and Jamie Dreier for some last-minute help with my criticism of (B*).