

Ability-based objections to no-best-world arguments

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Abstract In the space of possible worlds, there might be a best possible world (a uniquely best world or a world tied for best with some other worlds). Or, instead, for every possible world, there might be a better possible world. Suppose that the latter is true, i.e., that there is no best world. Many have thought that there is then an argument against the existence of God, i.e., the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient and morally perfect being; we will call such arguments *no-best-world arguments*. In this paper, we discuss *ability-based objections* to such arguments; an ability-based objection to a no-best world argument claims that the argument fails because one or more of its premises conflict with a plausible principle connecting the applicability of some type of moral evaluation to the agent's possession of a relevant ability. In particular, we formulate and evaluate an important new ability-based objection to the most promising no-best world argument.

Keywords Existence of God · No-best-world arguments · Philosophy of religion

1 Introduction

In the space of possible worlds, there might be a best possible world (a uniquely best world *or* a world tied for best with some other worlds). Or, instead, for every possible world, there might be a better possible world; if this is so, then there is no

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best possible world.¹ To see how the latter might be the case, simply observe that, for any number of happy creatures in one world, there is plausibly another world containing a greater number of happy creatures. Suppose there is indeed no best world. Then many have thought that there is an argument against the existence of God, i.e., the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient and morally perfect being; we will call such arguments *no-best-world arguments*. In this paper, we discuss *ability-based objections* to such arguments; an ability-based objection to a no-best-world argument claims that the argument fails because one or more of its premises conflict with a plausible principle connecting the applicability of some type of moral evaluation to the agent's possession of a relevant ability.

In particular, after some preliminaries in Sect. 2, we discuss three no-best-world arguments. In Sect. 3, we show how two of these arguments easily succumb to an ability-based objection. In Sect. 4, we formulate the third no-best-world argument. In Sect. 5, we discuss and reject an ability-based objection to it from the existing literature. In Sect. 6, we present a novel ability-based objection to this no-best-world argument. Finally, in Sects. 7 and 8, we evaluate this objection. These last two sections form a dialogue. In Sect. 7, one author (Kierland) argues that the objection fails, and in Sect. 8, the other author (Swenson) replies and argues that the objection in fact succeeds.

2 Preliminaries

Using terminology that is now somewhat standard, we speak of *actualization* of a world. This is for two reasons. First, *all* objects exist in a world. There is thus no sense to be made of an agent “standing outside of” all worlds and then choosing one to “create”. Second, some take possible worlds to be necessarily existing abstract entities. On such a view, an agent might make it the case that one of those entities corresponds to or accurately represents reality, i.e., might *actualize* it; but the agent hasn't thereby created that entity itself. Relatedly, we speak of *world-actualizers*: omnipotent and omniscient agents who actualize a world. (A world-actualizer *necessarily* actualizes a world. If he “does nothing”, then he actualizes that world in which only he and all necessarily existing objects exist.) Also relatedly, we speak of *actualizable* worlds, since there are possible worlds which a world-actualizer cannot actualize. A world-actualizer cannot actualize a possible world in which he does not

¹ Like most philosophers, we do not take talk of possible worlds to be literal talk of concrete entities, but instead assume it is to be understood in some other way. Also, in this paper, we always use terms like ‘best’, ‘better’ and ‘ought’ to express moral notions. Finally, in contexts where the space of possible worlds is at issue, and in similar contexts, we always use terms like ‘might’ and ‘could’ to express notions of epistemic possibility.

Other philosophers who have considered the view that there is no best possible world (or a view very similar) include Kraay (2010a), Kraay (2010b, p. 357), Almeida (2008, p. 13), O'Connor (2008, pp. 113–114), Hasker (2004, p. 167), Rowe (2004, p. 88), Sobel (2004, p. 467), Turner (2003, pp. 144–146), Morris (1993, p. 237), Nozick (1989, p. 225), Quinn (1982, p. 204), Schlesinger (1977, pp. 62 and 77), Blumenfeld (1975, pp. 163–165), Plantinga (1973, p. 539) and Adams (1972, pp. 317–318).

exist. Also, considerations of free will might present an additional unavoidable limit on the possible worlds a world-actualizer can actualize.²

So the supposition needed by the argument mentioned in the previous section is more exactly: there is no best actualizable world (i.e., there is *neither* a uniquely best actualizable world *nor* an actualizable world tied for best with some other actualizable worlds); for each actualizable world, there is a better actualizable world. We will call this thesis *No Best World*. In this paper, we will simply grant that No Best World is true; we're interested in the question of what follows for the existence of God if it is. From here on out, we mean "actualizable world" by 'world'.³ In discussing the implications of No Best World, we simply assume that a world is the sort of thing that can be morally evaluated in terms of its goodness.

3 Two bad arguments

On the assumption that there is no best actualizable world, one might think it is easy to prove that God doesn't exist. Consider the *Ought-Mediated Argument*:

1. □ There is no best world.
2. □ If a world-actualizer exists, then he does not actualize a best world. (1)
3. □ A world-actualizer ought to actualize a best world.
4. □ If an agent does not do everything he ought, then he is thereby not morally perfect.
5. □ If a world-actualizer exists, then he is not morally perfect. (2, 3, 4)
6. □ If God exists, then he is a morally perfect world-actualizer.
7. □ God doesn't exist. (5, 6)

This is a bad argument. Premises 1 and 3 together conflict with a very plausible principle, *Ought Implies Can*:

- If X ought to do A, then X can do A.⁴

This principle entails that, if there is no best world, then it's not the case that a world-actualizer ought to actualize a best world. This is because No Best World entails that a world-actualizer cannot actualize a best world.

Premise 3 in the Ought-Mediated Argument is a claim about what a world-actualizer ought to do. One might thus think that an argument which avoids any such claim will succeed where this one fails. Consider the *Direct Non-Comparative Argument*:

² On these points of terminology, also see Kraay (2010b, pp. 358–359), Quinn (1982, pp. 201 and 204–205) and Plantinga (1974, pp. 169–174).

³ Which worlds are actualizable depends on which world-actualizer is in question (X can actualize a world in which Y does not exist, but Y cannot do so). As a result, maximum rigor would require that we acknowledge this dependence in our discussion (say, by indexing our quantifiers over worlds to world-actualizers). But since none of our points would be affected, we refrain from doing so in order to keep things simpler.

⁴ Where harmless, we leave universal quantifiers implicit. Also, in our discussion, we often leave implicit the necessity operator attaching to various claims.

1. □ There is no best world.
2. □ If a world-actualizer exists, then he does not actualize a best world. (1)
3. □ If a world-actualizer does not actualize a best world, then he is thereby morally imperfect.
4. □ If a world-actualizer exists, then he is not morally perfect. (2, 3)
5. □ If God exists, then he is a morally perfect world-actualizer.
6. □ God doesn't exist. (4, 5)⁵

However, this is also a bad argument. Its premises 1 and 3 together conflict with a principle that parallels Ought Implies Can. This is the very plausible principle, *Imperfection Implies Avoidability*:

- If X's doing A means X is thereby morally imperfect, then X can refrain from doing A.

This principle entails that, if there is no best world, then it's not the case that a world-actualizer's not actualizing a best world means he is thereby morally imperfect. This is because that there is no best world entails that a world-actualizer cannot refrain from actualizing a non-best world.⁶

4 A better argument

So instead consider the *Direct Comparative Argument*:

1. □ There is no best world.
2. □ If a world-actualizer exists, then he actualizes a world when instead he could have actualized a better world. (1)
3. □ If a world-actualizer actualizes a world when instead he could have actualized a better world, then he performs a world-actualizing action when instead he could have performed a better one.
4. □ If an agent performs an action when instead he could have performed a better one, then he is thereby morally imperfect.
5. □ If a world-actualizer exists, then he is morally imperfect. (2, 3, 4)
6. □ If God exists, then he is a morally perfect world-actualizer.
7. □ God doesn't exist. (5, 6)

⁵ The seeds of such an argument can be found in Blumenfeld (1975, pp. 175–177), who argues that Leibniz himself would acknowledge the claimed inconsistency in the combination of a morally perfect world-actualizer and the absence of a best world.

⁶ This objection has been recognized by many, including Rowe (2004, p. 90), Morris (1993, p. 244) and Kretzmann (1991, p. 238). Adams (1972) would object to premise 3 for a different reason: even if there is a best actualizable world, a morally perfect world-actualizer might not create it. He defends this claim on the Judeo-Christian ground that God need only refrain from wronging any of his creatures and instead treat them all with perfect kindness, and on the ground that God can achieve this by creating a world that is less than the best. Adams' view is challenged by Rowe (2004, Chap. 5), Morris (1993, p. 236) and Quinn (1982).

Most no-best-world arguments are along the lines of this one.⁷ Sometimes a no-best-world argument has a premise that is more like the relevant entailment of premises 3 and 4 together, which we'll call *Principle 34*:

- If a world-actualizer actualizes a world when instead he could have actualized a better world, then he is thereby morally imperfect.

For example, Rowe's no-best-world argument uses his *Principle B*:

- If an omniscient being creates a world when there is a better world that it could have created, then it is possible that there exists a being morally better than it.⁸

This argument faces no obvious ability-based objection. Unlike the Ought-Mediated Argument, none of its premises makes a claim about what a world-actualizer ought to do. And, unlike the Direct Non-Comparative Argument, what's at issue is a world-actualizer's actualizing a world inferior to another. In the Direct Non-Comparative Argument, what's at issue is the world-actualizer's actualizing a best world. The problem for it is that a world-actualizer can do no such thing, as there is no best world. But since (as guaranteed by the absence of a best world) whatever world a world-actualizer actualizes, he could have actualized a better world, no such problem faces the Direct Comparative Argument.

One could object to the argument in other ways. One could object to premise 1 or premise 6, or one could offer a non-ability-based objection to premise 3 or premise 4.⁹ But we are interested in the question whether, despite appearances, the Direct Comparative Argument is subject to one or more ability-based-objections.

5 Hasker's objection

Hasker claims the argument does in fact succumb to an ability-based-objection.¹⁰ His target is most exactly Principle B of Rowe's no-best-world argument, but his

⁷ For no-best-world arguments similar to our Direct Comparative Argument, see Kraay (2010a), Grover (2004, pp. 102–105), Rowe (2004, Chap. 6), Sobel (2004, pp. 466–474) and Wielenberg (2004, pp. 56–59). Our argument is most similar to Kraay's; our premise 3 corresponds to his P1, and our premise 4 is a generalization of his P2. The arguments in Grover and Rowe are put in terms of the possibility, for any world-actualizer, of a (perhaps distinct) world-actualizer better than him; see Rowe's Principle B below. Sobel introduces perfect rationality into his argument, taking moral perfection only to concern an agent's preferences.

⁸ Rowe (2004, p. 91). We attach the explicit necessity operator; otherwise this is a direct quote.

⁹ For discussion of some objections of these other sorts, see Kraay (2010a), Grover (2004, pp. 105–112), Rowe (2004, Chap. 6) and Sobel (2004, pp. 474–479). One could also reject the argument on the ground that the negation of the conclusion in line 7 (i.e., the claim that God possibly exists) is antecedently more plausible than premises 3 and 4; see Kraay (2010a). As we read Almeida (2008, pp. 27–34), his response is similar in spirit; it amounts to: although Principle 34 is *prima facie a priori*, so also is the negation of the conclusion, and thus the argument fails to be persuasive.

¹⁰ Hasker (2004, pp. 167–173). Although Hasker presents his objection using the term 'God', we put it in terms of world-actualizers more generally.

remarks apply equally to Principle 34 of the Direct Comparative Argument, so that's how we will present his objection.

Hasker correctly observes that, if No Best World is true, then the following is necessarily true: any world-actualizer actualizes a world when instead he could have actualized a better world. But recall Principle 34:

- If a world-actualizer actualizes a world when instead he could have actualized a better world, then he is thereby morally imperfect.

Hasker argues we can thus see that Principle 34 has this implication: a world-actualizer is morally imperfect on the ground that his world-actualizing action possesses a feature that, as a matter of necessity, it couldn't have not possessed (as Hasker puts it, on the ground that the world-actualizer fails "to contravene a necessary truth" (Hasker 2004, p. 172)). And this conflicts with Imperfection Implies Avoidability. So Hasker claims that, given No Best world, Principle 34 must be rejected (which means either premise 3 or premise 4 of the Direct Comparative Argument is false and the argument fails).¹¹

Let's say an action of X has the *Inferiority Feature* when the following is true:

X's action actualizes a world when X could have actualized a better world.

To put it in a nutshell, then, Hasker takes Principle 34 to amount to the following, which we'll call *Principle H* (for "Hasker"):

- If a world-actualizer's act of world-actualization has the Inferiority Feature, then he is thereby morally imperfect.

But, given No Best World, a world-actualizer's action must have the Inferiority Feature. So Principle H conflicts with Imperfection Implies Avoidability and thus must be rejected. Consequently, a world-actualizer's action having the Inferiority Feature fails to reveal an imperfection in him and the Direct Comparative Argument fails.

Does Hasker's objection succeed? Almeida argues that it doesn't.¹² Using the term 'God', since that's how Hasker himself presents his objection (cf. fn. 10 above), here's in effect what Almeida says. Principle H conflicts with No Best World and Imperfection Implies Avoidability *only if* it's also true that God possibly exists.¹³ Almeida's reasoning is complex, but it boils down to this. If God possibly exists, then there is a possible world where (a) Principle H says that God is morally imperfect on the ground of his world-actualizing action having the Inferiority Feature, but where (b) No Best World and Imperfection Implies Avoidability together imply that God is *not* morally imperfect on the ground of his

¹¹ Of course, one could instead reject No Best World, but then the argument would fail for a different reason: premise 1 would be false. In any case, like us, Hasker is exploring the consequences of No Best World for the existence of God.

¹² Almeida (2008, pp. 21–25).

¹³ At one point, Almeida makes this point by reference to "the assumption that an essentially perfectly good being possibly exists" (Almeida 2008, p. 25). But in such discussion, Almeida's quantification is often implicitly restricted to "the domain of essentially omnipotent, essentially omniscient, and necessarily existing beings" (Almeida 2008, p. 19).

world-actualizing action having the Inferiority Feature. But if God does not possibly exist, then there is no such possible world and there is no conflict among the principles (as Principle H is then vacuously true).¹⁴ And Almeida points out that the assumption that God possibly exists begs the question against the proponent of the Direct Comparative Argument.

Almeida is mistaken. The assumption that God possibly exists is not needed. All that's needed is the weaker assumption that a world-actualizer possibly exists (i.e., that an omnipotent, omniscient being who actualizes a world possibly exists), and this assumption does not beg the question. On this weaker assumption, there is a possible world where (a*) Principle H says that a world-actualizer is morally imperfect on the ground of his world-actualizing action having the Inferiority Feature, but where (b*) No Best World and Imperfection Implies Avoidability together imply that this world-actualizer is *not* morally imperfect on the ground of his world-actualizing action having the Inferiority Feature. Hence, on this weaker assumption, Principle H, No Best World and Imperfection Implies Avoidability are jointly incompatible.¹⁵

We have a conjecture about how Almeida makes this mistake. There is a common practice of using the term 'God' to talk generically about world-actualizers. This is both for dramatic effect and since the reason everyone is interested in principles and arguments concerning world-actualizers is the issue of whether God exists.¹⁶ But the difference is important in some contexts, since a world-actualizer need not have all the features of God and thus a world-actualizer could exist even if God could not. Hasker's objection is one such context.¹⁷ It's also possible that Almeida is implicitly thinking that a standard of moral perfection, such as that embodied in Principle H, only applies to morally perfect agents (in the case of Principle H, morally perfect world-actualizers, such as God). But that's a mistake. Genuine standards of moral perfection are just facts about *what it takes to*

¹⁴ In discussing something similar to the apparent conflict among Principle H, No Best World and Imperfection Implies Avoidability, Almeida quotes Hasker as saying "... 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 better" (2004, p. 172). And then Almeida says, "There is obviously another way that God is freed from the charge of failing to do better than he did. God is freed from the charge if *he does not exist*" (2008, p. 23).

¹⁵ It's interesting to observe that, if Almeida's reply to Hasker's objection to the Direct Comparative Argument were to succeed, then a parallel reply to the ability-based objection to the Direct Non-Comparative Argument (from Sect. 3) would also succeed. This parallel reply runs as follows: premise 3 of the Direct Non-Comparative Argument conflicts with No Best World and Imperfection Implies Avoidability *only if* it's also true that God possibly exists; but that begs the question against the proponent of the argument. However, this reply fails in the same way that Almeida's own reply does. What's true is that premise 3 of the Direct Non-Comparative Argument conflicts with No Best World and Imperfection Implies Avoidability *only if* it's also true that a *world-actualizer* possibly exists; and that doesn't beg the question.

¹⁶ Rowe (2004, p. 91, fn. 4) in effect admits that, for dramatic effect, he speaks of "God" when instead he should speak more generally of world-actualizers.

¹⁷ In fairness, this can perhaps be traced to Hasker's own way of putting the objection. However, contrary to Almeida (2008, p. 23), Hasker's formalizations do not contain the proper name 'God', but instead the constant 'P', which refers to "the agent"; see Hasker (2004, p. 172).

be morally perfect, and such facts don't change depending on whether the agent in question is morally perfect or not.

Rowe offers a different reply to Hasker's objection. Also putting that reply in terms of the Direct Comparative Argument, it's in effect that the objection misinterprets Principle 34. Rowe defends this charge by illustration.¹⁸ Every world-actualizer actualizes some particular world. So take any world-actualizer and call the particular world he actualizes *W1*. Could he have actualized a world better than *W1*? Yes, that's guaranteed by No Best World. But then, without any violation of Imperfection Implies Avoidability, Principle 34 entails the world-actualizer is not morally perfect. Of course, he couldn't have actualized a world that is not inferior to *some* other world (i.e., his world-actualization necessarily has the Inferiority Feature), but that is simply irrelevant. He could have actualized a world better than *W1*, and that's all we need for Principle 34 to have application.

We think Rowe's reply succeeds, and we will buttress it by making the misinterpretation maximally clear. On its intended interpretation, Principle 34 says the following:

- (for all world-actualizers *X*) [(for all worlds *W*) (*if X* actualizes *W* when instead *X* could have actualized a world better than *W*, *then X* is thereby morally imperfect)].

However, Principle H, Hasker's way of understand Principle 34, amounts to the following:

- (for all world-actualizers *X*) [*if* (for some world *W*) (*X* actualizes *W* when instead *X* could have actualized a world better than *W*), *then X* is thereby morally imperfect].

Given No Best World, the latter does violate Imperfection Implies Avoidability, since then the truth of (the relevant instance of) the antecedent of the "if, then" is not avoidable for any world-actualizer. But the former does not violate Imperfection Implies Avoidability, as the parallel claim does not hold for it. The crucial difference here is the scope of the quantifier over worlds, in one case '(for all worlds *W*)', in the other case '(for some world *W*)'. Hasker's mistake is thus a failure to appreciate a crucial scope aspect of Principle 34. Of course, Hasker (or someone else) could claim that, once made maximally clear in this way, Principle 34 no longer has the plausibility of its initial formulation. But we think that is clearly incorrect.¹⁹

¹⁸ See Rowe (2004, pp. 104–111). Rowe's illustration usually involves imagining a world-actualizer who actualizes the least good world, but this is inessential to his point.

¹⁹ Keeping in mind that a world-actualizer necessarily actualizes a world (cf. Sect. 2), it might seem that the two formulas in the main text are equivalent (in the sense of necessarily having the same truth value). However, this is mistaken. They would be equivalent if 'thereby' were removed from both of them, but the term makes a crucial contribution to what they say. Consider the following:

- (for all agents *X*, *Y*) [*if X* kills *Y*, *then X* is thereby morally imperfect].
- (for all agents *X*, *Y*) [*if* (*X* kills *Y* and $2 + 2 = 4$), *then X* is thereby morally imperfect].

6 Our objection

We want to explore a different ability-based objection to the Direct Comparative Argument. Hasker's objection takes No Best World as a given and then argues that Principle 34 is false. Our objection is similar in that it takes No Best World as a given and then argues against the conjunction of premise 3 and a principle which is equivalent to premise 4. (Recall that Principle 34 is the relevant entailment of premises 3 and 4 together.)²⁰

Our objection is most clearly explained by introducing the notion of an "ought of moral perfection":

$X \text{ ought}_{mp} \text{ to do } A =_{df}$

X 's doing A is required for X to be morally perfect = df

If X refrains from doing A , then X is thereby morally imperfect.

And, as noted, our objection is to a certain conjunction. One conjunct is premise 3, which more formally is:

- (for all world-actualizers X) [(for all worlds W) (if X actualizes W when instead X could have actualized a world better than W , then X performs a world-actualizing action when instead he could have performed a better one)].

The other conjunct is *Better Than Ought_{mp} Refrain* (or *Better*, for short):

- If X 's doing A would be better than X 's doing B , and if X can do A and can do B , then X ought_{mp} to refrain from doing B .

Given our definition of 'ought_{mp}', this principle is equivalent to premise 4.

In addition to No Best World, our objection assumes two other principles. One is *Ought_{mp} Implies Can*:

- If X ought_{mp} to do A , then X can do A .

Intuitively, performing an action is required for moral perfection only if one can perform the action. Furthermore, the principle is equivalent to Imperfection Implies

Footnote 19 continued

These two claims are not equivalent, but they would be were 'thereby' removed from both of them. The explanation of what's going on is that, roughly, any claim of the form

If A , then thereby B

is equivalent to the corresponding claim of the form

If A , then [B and (A 's being the case grounds B 's being the case)].

(For this to explain the above failure of equivalence, we must understand grounding in a pure or minimal fashion: a true grounding claim includes nothing extraneous in what is said to do the grounding.) We suspect that Principle B's failure to include 'thereby' (or anything equivalent) helps to explain why Hasker fails to see Rowe's point, but we don't have the space here to discuss further.

²⁰ As with Hasker's objection, one could reject No Best World, but then the argument would fail for a different reason: premise 1 would be false.

Avoidability, something accepted by all sides to the dispute over no-best-world arguments. The other principle is *Ought_{mp} Conjunction*:

- If X ought_{mp} to do C and X ought_{mp} to do D and ..., then X ought_{mp} to do (C and D and ...).

The ellipses (“...”) here stand in for any number of (including infinitely many) further conjuncts in the antecedent, and for the same number of corresponding “act-conjuncts” in the act-description in the consequent.

Ought_{mp} Conjunction is plausible as well. To see this, consider ordinary *Ought Conjunction*:

- If X ought to do C and X ought to do D and ..., then X ought to do (C and D and ...).

Ought Conjunction is very plausible. Intuitively, ought-claims can be combined in this way. The fact that Andy ought refrain from striking Bob and the fact that Andy ought refrain from striking Bob’s car seem together to entail that Andy ought to (refrain from striking Bob and refrain from striking Bob’s car). Furthermore, Ought Conjunction, when combined with Ought Implies Can, helps explain why certain ought-claims cannot simultaneously hold. If you ought to give a lecture in Kansas City at 6 pm, then it cannot be that you also ought to give a lecture in St. Louis at 6 pm. Why? Because, given Ought Conjunction, these two claims entail the following claim: you ought to (give a lecture in Kansas City at 6 pm and give a lecture in St. Louis at 6 pm). And, given that you cannot be in two places at once, this ought-claim conflicts with Ought Implies Can. Ought_{mp} Conjunction is plausible since parallel things can be said on behalf of it.

With these preliminaries out of the way, our objection is straightforward. No Best World implies:

- (for all world-actualizers X) [(for all worlds W) (if X actualizes W, then X could have actualized a world better than W)].

Together with premise 3 of the argument, that implies:

- (for all world-actualizers X) [(for all worlds W) (if X actualizes W, then X actualizes W when instead he could have performed a better world-actualizing action)].

But given Better, that means:

- (for all world-actualizers X) (for all worlds W) (X ought_{mp} to refrain from actualizing W).

And, together with Ought_{mp} Conjunction, that implies:

- (for all world-actualizers X) [X ought_{mp} to (refrain from actualizing W1 and refrain from actualizing W2 and refrain from actualizing W3 ... <and so on for each world>)].²¹

²¹ This step in the objection implicitly assumes that refraining from an action is itself an action.

But, since a world-actualizer necessarily actualizes a world (cf. Sect. 2), that contradicts Ought_{mp} Implies Can.²² The consequence is that, given the truth of our assumptions, either premise 3 or Better (which, again, is equivalent to premise 4) must be false.²³

Put simply, the objection is this. No Best World implies that, whatever world a world-actualizer actualizes, he could have actualized a better world. Applying premise 3, we get that, whatever world a world-actualizer actualizes, he could have performed a better world-actualizing action. Next, applying Better, we further get that, for any world, a world-actualizer ought_{mp} to refrain from actualizing it. Finally, applying Ought_{mp} Conjunction allows us in effect to conclude that a world-actualizer ought_{mp} to (refrain from actualizing any world). But that contradicts Ought_{mp} Implies Can, since a world-actualizer must actualize some world or other.

7 A reply to our objection (Kierland)

Our objection shows that the following conflict with each other, so that at least one must be given up: No Best World, premise 3, Better, Ought_{mp} Conjunction and Ought_{mp} Implies Can. However, we are taking No Best World as a given.²⁴ Further, I don't find rejecting Ought_{mp} Implies Can at all plausible. That leaves us with premise 3, Better and Ought_{mp} Conjunction. Each of these is intuitively plausible. However, I will argue that the story explaining *why* each is intuitively plausible shows that it's Ought_{mp} Conjunction that should be given up. As a result, the objection fails to undermine the Direct Comparative Argument.

The intuitive plausibility of premise 3 is the result of (i) the intuitive thought that there is a substantial consequentialist component to morality, and (ii) the intuitive thought that, in the circumstances of a world-actualizer, the consequentialist component has primary or sole significance. (For example, in actualizing a world, the world-actualizer directly or indirectly brings all other sentient beings into existence. It's plausible that, before he does so, he doesn't *owe* anything to anyone.²⁵)

The intuitive plausibility of Better is the result of the fact that 'morally perfect' is (what we can call) an absolute dimensional adjective. Compare 'empty', another absolute dimensional adjective: 'X is empty' entails 'X could not possibly contain less'. Likewise, 'X is morally perfect' entails 'X could not possibly be morally

²² This step in the objection implicitly assumes the following:

□ (for all worlds W) (W = W1, or W = W2, or W = W3 ... <and so on for each world>).

²³ Our objection implicitly assumes that a world-actualizer possibly exists (but *not* that *God* possibly exists). Otherwise, all the steps of the objection are vacuously true and there is no contradiction with Ought_{mp} Implies Can. Compare the discussion of Almeida's reply to Hasker's objection in Sect. 5.

²⁴ In any case, no proponent of the Direct Comparative Argument could reject No Best World; cf. fn. 20.

²⁵ Wielenberg (2004, p. 50) makes the same point.

better'.²⁶ And if an agent performs a worse action when instead he could have performed a better one, then he could have been morally better.²⁷

What about Ought_{mp} Conjunction? Begin with ordinary Ought Conjunction. Holding Ought Implies Can fixed, any reason to believe in moral dilemmas is a reason to reject or qualify Ought Conjunction. (In the sense we have in mind, an agent faces a *moral dilemma* when he ought to do A and ought to do B and ..., but cannot do (A and B and ...).) The intuitive plausibility of Ought Conjunction thus derives from the intuitive plausibility of the view that there are no moral dilemmas.²⁸ This connects with the motivation we offered for Ought Conjunction in the previous section: together with Ought Implies Can, it helps to explain why it cannot be that you ought to give a lecture in Kansas City at 6 pm *and* ought to give a lecture in St. Louis at 6 pm. But why think that's impossible? Suppose that you've both made a promise to give a lecture in Kansas City at 6 pm and made a promise to give a lecture in St. Louis at 6 pm. As a result, whatever you do, there will be some sort of moral cost, as at least one promise will be broken. Nonetheless, there will still be a morally best option. Perhaps your promise to give a lecture in Kansas City at 6 pm invited an unusually high degree of trust, and so it's morally best to give a lecture in Kansas City. Or perhaps instead more people in St. Louis than Kansas City will be disappointed at not hearing you give a lecture, and so it's morally best to give a lecture in St. Louis. Regardless, whichever option is best, and for whatever reason, that's what you ought to do.²⁹

²⁶ Compare the discussion of the grammar of 'perfect' and the definition of 'superlatively good moral agent' in Quinn (1982, pp. 208–209).

²⁷ Anyone who denies this faces the awkward question: what then does moral perfection require? Presumably, where there is a best option, we'll still want to say that moral perfection requires performing it. But some sort of cut-off line will be needed for cases where there is no best option. Whatever that cut-off line is, we'll have this unhappy result: performing an option which is inconsistent with moral perfection (in a situation where there is a best option) can become consistent with moral perfection simply by adding some better options (in such a way that there is no longer a best option in the situation), since then it may turn out to be above the cut-off line.

²⁸ Zimmerman (1996, Chap. 7) contains a nice discussion of, and helpful references to the literature on, the issue over moral dilemmas. His own view on the issue is in the spirit of what I say in the rest of this paragraph; cf. fn. 29.

²⁹ If there happens to be a moral tie between the two options, then you ought to (either give a lecture in Kansas City at 6 pm or give a lecture in St. Louis at 6 pm). The idea is that an agent ought to perform *one or another* of the morally best options available to him; in the special case where there is a *unique* best option, the agent ought to perform it. This idea is less controversial than it sounds, given how 'morally best' is to be understood in this context; cf. fn. 30.

Zimmerman (1996, Chap. 2) defends a view based on a version of this idea (using the notions of "accessible worlds" and "deontic value") and, in the rest of his book, uses this view to elucidate a whole range of quasi-logical and other high-level features of what one ought to do and related matters. Interestingly, Zimmerman considers the possibility that "an agent be faced with an infinite number of accessible worlds and that each world is such that there is a deontically better one" (p. 60) and, for such a possibility, persuasively defends the implication of his view that the agent "cannot avoid doing something wrong" (p. 61), i.e., that the agent faces a "prohibition dilemma" (p. 62). He observes that his view nonetheless implies that "obligation dilemmas" are impossible, i.e., that it's impossible that an agent "ought to do some act A and ought to do some act B but cannot do both" (p. 62). However, Zimmerman's view has this implication because obligation dilemmas, as he understands them, are restricted to *two* acts. His view in fact implies the possibility of moral dilemmas in the sense I've defined them (so long as refraining from an action is itself an action); an agent will face one whenever there is no deontically

The parallel goes for Ought_{mp} Conjunction. Its intuitive plausibility derives from the intuitive plausibility of the view that there are no perfection dilemmas. (In the sense we have in mind, an agent faces a *perfection dilemma* when he ought_{mp} to do A and ought_{mp} to do B and ..., but cannot do (A and B and ...).) And the intuitive plausibility of that view rests on the same sort of thought: whatever the situation, there will be a best option, and that's what the agent ought_{mp} to do.³⁰ However, while this thought is supported by reflection on ordinary cases, it ignores unusual cases where there is no best option. As a result, what underlies the intuitive plausibility of Ought_{mp} Conjunction actually only supports it in cases where there is a best option. So it leaves completely open what we should think about cases where there is no best option, something thus to be decided on the basis of other plausible principles. And Better gives a straightforward answer: every such case amounts to a perfection dilemma. For each of his options, the agent ought_{mp} refrain from performing it (since there is a better option). But of course the agent cannot refrain from performing one or another of his options.

This does not beg the question against Ought_{mp} Conjunction, as it would make no sense instead to reject Better on the basis of Ought_{mp} Conjunction. Think of it this way. We've got three principles: Better, Ought_{mp} Conjunction—Best Option, and Ought_{mp} Conjunction—No Best Option. If what I've said is correct, the first two, but *not* the third, have independent intuitive plausibility. So, given that Better and Ought_{mp} Conjunction—No Best Option conflict, it would make no sense to reject the former on the basis of the latter; rather, the reverse is obviously the right course. And this is so despite the fact that Ought_{mp} Conjunction—No Best Option *parallels* what is itself an independently plausible principle, namely, Ought_{mp} Conjunction—Best Option.³¹

Given this discussion, one might wonder whether the intuitive plausibility of either premise 3 or Better similarly rests on ignoring unusual cases where there is no best option. If my remarks above about what underlies their intuitive plausibility is

Footnote 29 continued

maximal accessible world. Relatedly, Zimmerman's view is inconsistent with Ought Conjunction in its full generality; Zimmerman correctly observes that his view entails his principle (2.40'b) (p. 68), but this is only Ought Conjunction as restricted to two conjuncts.

³⁰ So one ought, *and* ought_{mp}, to do what is morally best? Yes, that's the thought, but only under different interpretations of 'morally best'. In the case of 'ought', it means something like "highest degree in meeting moral requirements"; compare the notion of "deontic value" in Zimmerman (1996, pp. 14–20). On this interpretation, if an agent is not morally required to engage in significant sacrifice to save a life, then doing nothing can be (at least tied for) morally best. In the case of 'ought_{mp}', it means something like "highest degree in satisfying moral values". Plausibly, meeting one's moral requirements is one, but not the only, thing of moral value in the relevant sense.

³¹ It may be that Ought_{mp} Conjunction as applied to all cases has some degree of intuitive plausibility owing to the fact that it is a "logical looking" principle. Notice how it parallels the principle: if P, and if Q, then P&Q. But this sort of intuitive plausibility carries little weight on its own. After all, consider *Permissibility Conjunction*:

- If it is permissible for X to do C and permissible for X to do D and ..., then it is permissible for X to do (C and D and ...).

This principle may have some degree of intuitive plausibility because it's similarly "logical looking", but reflection upon cases makes us (rightly) quickly give it up.

correct, then the answer is no. Hasker in effect argues that the answer is yes for Better. Rowe articulates, and rejects, the following:

- (c) Failing to do better than one did is a defect only if doing the best one can is possible for one to do. (Rowe 2004, p. 105).

Hasker (2004, pp. 171–173) takes himself to show that (c) is in fact true, but he misinterprets (c) in the same way that, as we explained in Sect. 5, he misinterprets Principle 34. (Recall, we construe Hasker’s objection as targeting Principle 34, even though strictly speaking it targets Rowe’s Principle B.)

8 A defense of our objection (Swenson)

Here again is Ought_{mp} Conjunction:

- If X ought_{mp} to do C and X ought_{mp} to do D and ..., then X ought_{mp} to do (C and D and ...).

My co-author worries that our objection to the Direct Comparative Argument ultimately fails because Ought_{mp} Conjunction, which underlies our objection, lacks intuitive plausibility when the world-actualizer does not have a best option.

I’m not convinced by this worry, whose reasoning goes as follows. Ought_{mp} Conjunction is plausible because it is intuitive that there are no perfection dilemmas, and it is intuitive that there are no perfection dilemmas only because we are assuming that there is a best option available to the agent. Thus, in cases where there is no best option, Ought_{mp} Conjunction lacks intuitive support.

First, it seems to me that Ought_{mp} Conjunction has significant plausibility entirely independently of considerations arising from perfection dilemmas. Remember that Ought_{mp} Conjunction only entails that there are no perfection dilemmas in conjunction with Ought_{mp} Implies Can. Now suppose that you were to discover that there are in fact perfection dilemmas. Would it be obvious that you should give up Ought_{mp} Conjunction rather than Ought_{mp} Implies Can? I don’t think so. But this shows that Ought_{mp} Conjunction has significant plausibility independently of the role it plays in ruling out the possibility of perfection dilemmas.

Second, I doubt that intuitions against the existence of perfection dilemmas are the result of assuming that there is always a best option available to the agent. Rather, it seems to me that what motivates anti-perfection dilemma intuitions is the thought that there must be some acceptable or sufficiently good option available to the agent. In other words, the agent must have some way to avoid fault or imperfection open to him. In light of this reason, I claim that Ought_{mp} Conjunction does possess significant plausibility even in cases where the agent has no best option. Thus, I do not think it has been established that we should give up Ought_{mp} Conjunction rather than premise 3 of the Direct Comparative Argument or Better.

Finally, I want to bring out an additional cost of my co-author’s position, namely, rejecting Ought_{mp} Conjunction but accepting the premises of the Direct Comparative Argument. While it is possible to take this position without rejecting Ought_{mp} Implies Can, consider this very similar principle:

- (O) \square If X ought_{mp} to do C and X ought_{mp} to do D and ..., then X can do (C and D and ...).

(O) would have to be rejected since, in effect, it combines Ought_{mp} Implies Can and Ought_{mp} Conjunction, thus allowing our objection to the Direct Comparative Argument to bypass use of the latter. Now, Ought_{mp} Implies Can does not entail (O) if Ought_{mp} Conjunction is false. But (O) appears to possess much of the intuitive plausibility of Ought_{mp} Implies Can. (Perhaps this is evidence that Ought_{mp} Conjunction is true.) And, in my view, the combined cost of rejecting both (O) and Ought_{mp} Conjunction is simply too high.

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