RIVAL CREATOR ARGUMENTS AND THE BEST OF ALL POSSIBLE WORLDS

STEPHEN GROVER
Philosophy Department, Queens College, Flushing NY, USA
sgrover@qc1.qc.edu

'Rival creator' arguments suggest that God must have created the best of all possible worlds. These arguments are analyzed and evaluated, and Leibniz's position defended.

Orthodox philosophical theists believe that this world was created by a God that is perfect: perfect in knowledge, perfect in power, perfect in will. If creation is choice among possible worlds, perfect knowledge entails that God knows everything there is to know about all the possible worlds, and perfect power entails that God can create any possible world God chooses to create. But what about perfect will? According to Leibniz, God's perfect will entails that God would create only the best among possible worlds. Were there no best, or more than one best, God would not create at all.

In 1988, in a brief note in Analysis, I defended Leibniz. Were there no best possible world but rather an infinite series of worlds, each marginally better than its predecessor in the series, God must create a world less good than some other. Whichever world God creates, we can imagine another being – a 'weak god' – capable of creating a world better than the one that God created. This possibility, I claimed, was inconsistent with God's perfection. If God's action is surpassable by a possible being distinct from God, God is not unsurpassably good. As the easiest way to ensure that God's action in creation is unsurpassable by any other possible being is to maintain that this is the best possible world, I concluded that either this is the best possible world, or God is not perfect in power, not perfect in will, or does not exist.

My note soon provoked replies from Eric Kraemer in Analysis, and James Petrik in this journal. More recently, it has attracted criticism from K. H. A. Esmail, also in this journal. Arguments similar to mine have been discussed and rejected by Daniel and Frances Howard-Snyder. Despite these objections, I still think my argument important. But I no
longer think of it as mine. For the element that I thought original – the
strategy of invoking beings distinct from God – had already been used by
others, including Kant and Philip Quinn. In section 1, I summarize these
earlier arguments and a later one from William Rowe. These arguments
and mine are all reductios of the assumptions that (i) there is a God that
is perfect in power, knowledge and will; and (ii) there is no best possible
world, because every possible world is bettered by another. All these argu-
ments appeal to possible beings distinct from God – 'rival creators' – in
order to generate absurdity. But differences between these arguments
mean that some may succeed even if others fail. If any succeed, we must
conclude either that this is the best possible world or that orthodox the-
ism is, at least partly, false.

1. ‘Rival Creator’ Arguments

1.1 Leibniz

In the Theodicy, Leibniz does not appeal to possible rival creators. For Leib-
niz, the absurdity of supposing there is no best possible world is the
absurdity of supposing that God might have done better:

Now this supreme wisdom, united to a goodness that is no less infinite,
cannot but have chosen the best. For as a lesser evil is a kind of good,
even so a lesser good is a kind of evil if it stands in the way of a greater
good; and there would be something to correct in the actions of God if
it were possible to do better. As in mathematics, when there is no max-
imum nor minimum, in short nothing distinguished, everything is done
equally, or when that is not possible nothing at all is done: so it may be
said likewise in respect of perfect wisdom, which is no less orderly than
mathematics, that if there were not the best among all possible worlds,
God would not have produced any.

This argument works only for those already convinced that it is absurd to
think that God might have done better. Anyone who thinks that God's good-
ness merely implies that no other possible being might have done better than
God will be unpersuaded. The point of invoking rival creators is to show that
the conclusion of Leibniz's reductio is not so easily evaded.