Every Road Ends at the Same Sea

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> If God is perfectly good, knows everything and can do anything, did he have a choice when he made the world? The philosopher William Rowe argued that the answer comes very close to no. This essay is my answer. If every road God would choose ends at the same sea, no road is better than another, and yet the roads are nothing alike, so the choice is real. It also says plainly what that answer costs.

The question

Here is a puzzle I have not been able to leave alone. I think it is one of the sharpest arguments ever made against the traditional idea of God, and I think it has an answer.

Suppose God is perfectly good, knows everything and can do anything. Now ask a simple question. When God made the world, did he have a choice?

It sounds like an easy yes. The philosopher William Rowe spent years showing how hard it is to say yes. He wrote a whole book on it called *Can God Be Free?* His answer comes very close to no.

The trap

Rowe starts from one principle, and it is hard to argue with. If you could have made a better world and you made a worse one instead, then we can imagine someone better than you: the one who would have made the better world. God is supposed to be the being nobody could be better than. So God can only make a world if there was no better world he could have made.

Now there are three ways things could be.

Maybe there is one best world. Then God had to make it. A perfect being cannot do less than the best. But then creating was not a choice at all. It was more like a calculator returning the only correct answer, and nobody thanks a calculator. Rowe's point is that gratitude only makes sense toward someone who could have done otherwise.

Maybe there is no best world. For every world there is a better one, with one more happy person or one more good day, forever. Then whatever God makes, he could have done better, and a better creator can be imagined. So no creator is perfect.

Or maybe several worlds tie for best. Then God does get to choose. But it looks like choosing between two identical cans of soup. Nothing rides on it. God would be free only where it makes no difference what he does.

So God is not free, or not perfect, or free in a way nobody should care about. That is the trap.

The idea

My answer goes through the third door, the tie. I want to show that the tie does not have to be a tie between cans of soup.

The idea is one I call convergence. It borrows from an old Christian hope called universalism, which says that in the end every person is reconciled with God and with everyone else. Nobody is forced. Each person comes around freely, however long it takes, because the door never closes.

Picture every world God might create as a road. Each road has different people on it, different loves, different wars, different mistakes. Now suppose that every road God would ever choose ends at the same sea. On every one of them, each person eventually arrives, freely, and is whole.

Then ask Rowe's question again. Which road is the best one?

I am going to argue that none of them is. No road is better than another. And yet the roads are nothing alike. If that is right, God has a real choice between real alternatives, and Rowe's trap does not close.

Two ideas do the work.

First idea: better has to be better for somebody

A world can only be better than another world if it is better for someone. Philosophers call this a person-affecting view, which just means that value has to land on a person. There is no cosmic scoreboard hanging above everyone's heads, adding up points that no one ever feels.

This matters more than it seems, because different worlds mostly contain different people. Change history even a little and different couples meet, and different children are born. You would not be in most of the other worlds God could have made. Someone else would be there instead.

So take two roads with completely different travelers. Is the first road better for the people on it? Not compared to the second, because they are not on the second road at all. There is nobody who walks both and gets shortchanged on one. A world with more people in it is not better for anyone either. The extra people would be fine, but nobody was waiting somewhere to be let in.

That handles most comparisons between worlds. It does not handle the hard one.

Second idea: a finished life

The hard one is the same person on two roads. On one road her life is gentle. On the other she goes through something terrible first. Both roads reach the sea. Surely the gentle road is better for her?

Here I lean on the philosopher Marilyn McCord Adams and her idea of defeat. An evil is defeated when it is not just paid back, the way a court awards damages, but woven into a life that is good as a whole. Think of two brothers who betray each other, spend twenty years not speaking, and then find their way back. The reconciliation is one of the best things in either life. It could not exist without the break. Nobody says the betrayal was good. But the life that contains both is not a damaged copy of some smoother life. It is a different life with goods of its own.

Adams thought that with God this can happen even to the worst things people go through. That is a big claim, and I am only asking you to grant that it is possible.

Now, who gets to say whether her life was worse for what it contained? I say she does. Not in the middle of the suffering, when nobody can see what it will come to mean, but at the end, knowing everything, under no pressure, free to say otherwise. If she looks at the gentle life she might have had and would not trade, I do not know who has the standing to overrule her.

There is one more piece. The sea is not a large amount of good. It is everything. There is an old idea in theology that union with God leaves nothing left to want. You cannot add to everything. One more good day along the road does not make a completed life better, any more than you can make a full glass fuller.

Put the two ideas together. Roads with different travelers cannot be ranked, because nobody walks both. Roads with the same traveler cannot be ranked either, because she ends up whole on each and would not trade. So no road to the sea is better than any other.

Why the choice is real

Here is where the soup cans go away.

These roads tie, but they are not copies. They are entire histories with nothing in common except how they end. Choosing among them is not like picking a can off a shelf. It is like the choices the philosopher Ruth Chang calls hard choices. Two careers. Two cities. Whether to have a child. Often neither option is better, and they are not exactly equal either. They are just different, and the reasons run out.

Nobody thinks those choices are coin flips. They are the choices where you find out who you are, because nothing outside you made the decision for you. When someone chooses a husband or a wife, there is usually no fact that this was the best possible spouse on earth. That is not an insult. The love is in the choosing.

So with God. If the roads tie, then nothing forced God's hand toward this world, with these people in it, with you in it. He could have made others. He could have made none. He made us. That is a choice a person can be thanked for. And it is the opposite of a choice that does not matter. To us it is the difference between existing and never existing at all.

Thomas Aquinas said something more than seven centuries ago that fits here. We love things because they are good. With God it runs the other way. Things are good because he loves them.

The part that is hard to swallow

I owe you the cost, because there is one.

My view says that a world with a horror in it, a horror that is finally defeated, is not a worse world than a gentler one. Most people's first reaction is that this is monstrous. The best statement of that reaction is in Dostoevsky. Ivan Karamazov describes the torture of children and says that if this is the price of some final harmony, the price is too high. He respectfully returns his ticket.

I concede more to Ivan than most religious answers do. The child's suffering buys nothing. The sea does not need it. I am not saying the pain was a necessary ingredient in some greater good, and I think anyone who says that deserves Ivan's anger. I also concede that nobody gets to forgive on the child's behalf.

Then why did it happen? Because free people cannot be made to choose well, even by God. Getting through all of history with nobody doing anything terrible requires every choice to go right. Getting home only requires each of us to turn around once, with no deadline. The first is easy to fail. The second, given enough time, is hard to fail. So it is not strange that every road could be rough and every road could still reach the sea.

And none of this means the suffering does not matter while it is happening. It matters completely. My claim is narrower and it is about the end. If the child herself, whole, knowing everything, free to refuse, would not trade her life, then to insist that her life was worse anyway is to appeal to that cosmic scoreboard, the one that counts a loss nobody has.

You can believe in the scoreboard. Plenty of serious people do. But notice what it costs. If the scoreboard is real, then every world could have scored higher, and we are back in Rowe's trap with no way out. I would sooner give up the scoreboard than give up either God's goodness or God's freedom.

What I am and am not claiming

I have not shown that everyone is saved. I do not need to. Rowe's argument says that perfect goodness and real freedom cannot go together, full stop. To answer that, it is enough to describe one way they could. Convergence is one way.

It also turns a common complaint around. Critics of universalism say it ties God's hands, because it takes every world with a lost soul off the table. I think it does the reverse. If every road God would choose ends at the same sea, his goodness is settled at the destination, and that is exactly what leaves him free everywhere else. Free to choose which road. Free to choose which travelers. Free to choose us.

If that is how it is, then the old habit of saying thank you for being here turns out to make sense after all.

Sources and a note on method

The body of this essay names five thinkers and quotes none of them directly. Each is paraphrased, and each paraphrase was checked against the source or a reliable account of it.

William Rowe's argument is from his book *Can God Be Free?* (Oxford University Press, 2004). The way I lay out the trap, one best world, no best world, or a tie, follows the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy's entry Divine Freedom by Klaas Kraay, which surveys Rowe and the replies to him. The line about God being free only where it makes no difference what he does is Edward Wierenga's objection (2002) in my words, as that entry reports it. The worry that a choice between tied worlds is no better than a coin toss is David Mason's (1982), also as the entry reports it. The cans of soup are my version of Thomas Senor's example (2008) of a store stocked with identical boxes of the same cereal, where, he writes, "one's freedom is strictly superficial."

Marilyn McCord Adams's idea of defeat is from *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (1999). Ruth Chang's hard choices are from her work on parity, starting with "The Possibility of Parity" (*Ethics*, 2002). The Aquinas line is my paraphrase of the *Summa Theologiae*, part I, question 20, article 2, where he says our love does not cause a thing's goodness, while "the love of God infuses and creates goodness". Ivan Karamazov's argument is in *The Brothers Karamazov*, book V, chapter 4, "Rebellion", where in the Constance Garnett translation he says the price asked for harmony is too high and "most respectfully" returns the ticket.

Left out on purpose: the technical machinery of the longer academic paper this essay comes from, including what God can know about free choices, whether God might create every good world at once, and the full list of replies to Rowe. The two brothers who reconcile are an illustration, not a story about anyone I know. The longer paper, with the full argument and references, is available on request. The earlier essays in this series are The Ego Death of Society, The Utility of Not Caring, Failing Confidently, Impatiently Waiting, Personal Bubble Universe and Why a Smart Machine Would Keep Us.

I used AI to research and draft this, under my direction, with a standing instruction to tell me where I was wrong before telling me where I was right, and every claim was checked against its source before it went in.