

Hyperspace and The Best World Problem: A Reply To Hud Hudson

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Hud Hudson's *The Metaphysics of Hyperspace* provides a fascinating, well-argued tour through wide range of important problems and debates in contemporary metaphysics and philosophy of religion. The chapters are largely self-contained; but one overarching theme is that belief in what we might call the *Hyperspace Hypothesis* affords enough theoretical utility that, for those with the right sorts of background beliefs, there are multiple inference-to-the-best-explanation arguments to be had for the conclusion that the hypothesis is true. The arguments on this score are interesting and original. Each merits serious attention. But there is no way to do all of them justice in a short symposium paper like this one. Thus, I shall restrict my attention to just one of them—one of three “explicitly religious reasons for believing in hyperspace.”

According to Hudson, belief in hyperspace can provide the resources for buttressing one of two traditional responses to what might be called the *Best World Problem*. Moreover, if he is right, it turns out that an unadvertised side-benefit is that belief in hyperspace provides an answer to an argument for atheism that arises in connection with the Best World Problem and that has received a great deal of recent attention. In this paper, however, I shall argue that belief in hyperspace in fact provides neither of these benefits. I'll begin by briefly sketching the Best World Problem and the argument for atheism that arises in connection with it; and I'll then explain how belief in hyperspace is supposed to help solve the Best World Problem and to answer the atheistic argument. I will then argue—in the familiar tradition of trying to show respect and affection for one's friends by objecting vigorously to their arguments and conclusions—that belief in hyperspace in fact offers no help with respect to either the Best World Problem or the atheistic argument, and that even if it did, this fact would not count as reason to believe in hyperspace.

The Hyperspace Hypothesis is just the thesis that, in addition to the three-dimensional space in which you and I live and move and have our being, there are some, perhaps many, perhaps a vast plenitude of additional three-spaces located at some distance from ours along another spatial dimension. In Chapter 7 of his book, Hudson argues that embracing this hypothesis provides theists with resources to buttress one of two traditional responses to the Best World Problem. Following is his own initial (rough) statement of the problem:¹

One rather plausible expectation of a being who is essentially omnipotent, essentially omniscient, and essentially perfectly good is that this being create the best possible world. However, the amount, the types, the intensity, and the distribution of evil we see around us seem to point rather overwhelmingly to the conclusion that ours is most certainly not the best possible world. So if things are as they seem, the theist who ascribes to God these attributes is in trouble. (163 – 164)

One response to this problem—a response that Hudson does *not* defend, but which will nonetheless be relevant for our purposes—is to deny the implicit supposition that there *is* such a thing as a “best world.” It might be that worlds are incommensurable with respect to overall goodness, so that the notion of ‘best’ doesn’t even make sense. Or, more plausibly, it might be that *every* possible world will be improvable along some dimension—perhaps by adding extra goods or, if the world contains evil, by removing instances of evil. There might be no upper bound on how good a world can be; or, if there is, it might be that the space of possible worlds just approaches that bound as a limit. Thus, for all we know, there might be an infinite hierarchy of worlds, each better than the preceding, so that no matter what world God had actualized, God might have actualized some better world.

The idea that there might be such an infinite hierarchy of worlds has been widely discussed, in no small part because it looks as if a case for atheism can be built upon it. Thus:²

- (1) For every world *w* that includes a creator, there is a world better than *w*.

¹ All page references herein are to Hud Hudson, *The Metaphysics of Hyperspace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

² The argument presented here is a modified version of an argument that has been developed and defended in several places by William Rowe. For the most recent and fullest statement of Rowe’s argument, see his *Can God Be Free?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

- (2) If Premise (1) is true, then for every world w that includes a creator, the following proposition is true in w : There is an act (namely, *create a better world*) that w 's creator C might have done such that, had someone done that act, that person would have done better than C .
- (3) If S does φ , and if there is an act φ^* that S might have done such that someone who had done φ^* would have done better than P , then P is morally surpassable.
- (4) Therefore: If Premise 1 is true, then, for every world w that includes a creator, w 's creator is morally surpassable.
- (5) Therefore: Necessarily, there is no morally perfect creator.
- (6) Therefore: Necessarily, the God of classical theism does not exist.

Premises (2) and (3) will, of course, be controversial, but I won't bother to comment upon them here. What is relevant for our purposes is just the fact that (i) theists who defend (or inadvertently fall into) the 'infinite hierarchy' response to the Best World Problem must somehow contend with this argument, and (ii) if Hudson's response to the Best World Problem is sound, then (conveniently) the first premise of the argument is true only if the second is false.

I said a moment ago that the 'no best world' response (and therefore the 'infinite hierarchy' response) is *not* endorsed by Hudson. What he endorses, rather, is the response that says that God *did* create the best world after all. The way in which the Hyperspace Hypothesis is supposed to buttress this response is just by providing a way of making it plausible.

Sometimes when we talk about 'our world', what we have in mind is just the universe of three spatial dimensions and one temporal dimension in which we live. Using the term 'world' that way, the Best World Question—the question of whether God has actualized the best possible world—is equivalent to BWQ1:

(BWQ1) Has God actualized the best possible 3-space?

More often, however, when we philosophers talk about 'our world', what we have in mind is the actual or spatiotemporally proximate *modally relevant object*. (A 'modally relevant object' is just whatever sort of thing is quantified over by the possibility- and necessity-operators:

Lewisian maximal objects, maximal consistent states of affairs, etc.) On this way of using the term ‘world’, the Best World Question is equivalent to BWQ2:

(BWQ2) Has God actualized the best modally relevant object?

Now, the way in which the Hyperspace Hypothesis is supposed to help us to address the Best World Problem is as follows. First, it allows us to give an affirmative answer to the Best World Question, interpreted as BWQ1, while acknowledging that *our own* 3-space is not the best possible. Second, it allows us to render more plausible the claim that the answer to BWQ2 is affirmative as well.

Suppose, for example, that “before” creation, God surveyed every possible way in which a universe with three spatial dimensions could turn out. Suppose further that God separated these possibilities into two classes: one which includes all and only those 3D universes that fall above a certain threshold of goodness—a threshold that marks the minimum degree of goodness that a world must achieve in order to be creatable by a morally perfect being—and another class which includes all and only those worlds falling below that threshold. Now suppose that God created *every* universe in the first class and embedded all of them in the same 4-space. Then, if there is such a thing as the best possible 3-space, God created it. Of course, it doesn’t follow from this that *ours* is the best possible 3-space; but that is precisely the point. The proponent of the Best World Problem tries to raise trouble for theism by pointing out that a good God would have to actualize the best possible 3-space, but that our 3-space is clearly not the best possible. On Hudson’s view, however, the theist may respond by noting that this is a problem only under the assumption that God has actualized just one 3-space. Armed with the Hyperspace Hypothesis, we may suppose that God has actualized many 3-spaces, and that the best 3-space is among those actualized, while at the same time acknowledging that ours is not that best one.

Moreover, even if there is no best possible 3-space, the supposition that God might have actualized *every* creatable 3-space undercuts the second premise of the aforementioned argument for atheism (assuming, at any rate, that ‘world’ throughout that argument is interpreted as ‘3-space’). For if God has created *every* creatable 3-space, then there is no 3-space *w* such that a creator could have done better than God by creating *w*. Thus, Premise 2 of the atheistic argument comes out false.

So if the Hyperspace Hypothesis is true, we have the resources for answering BWQ1 affirmatively. As an added side benefit, we also have the resources for avoiding the aforementioned case for atheism if we

choose not to answer BWQ1 affirmatively. But how might the Hyperspace Hypothesis help us to provide an affirmative answer to BWQ2? According to Hudson, if one places sufficient weight on the value of diversity, one might think that a 4-space which includes every creatable 3-space might, overall, be better than a 4-space which includes (say) only unsurpassably good 3-spaces, or some other sub-class of the class of creatable 3-spaces. Thus, by appealing to the value of diversity, one might see one's way clear to believing that the actual *modally relevant object* is the best of all possible. And so BWQ2 would get an affirmative answer as well.

What shall we think of this response on behalf of the theist? Note first that, even if it is sound, the benefits secured here by the Hyperspace Hypothesis can just as easily be secured by other, not obviously less plausible hypotheses. Moreover, Hudson is well aware of these hypotheses. Thus, in the course of articulating an objection to his "fine tuning argument for hyperspace" (given in Chapter 1 of the book), he writes:

What is salient about [the Hyperspace Hypothesis] is that it invokes terrifically many different regions that vary independently with respect to their cosmic conditions. But there are other hypotheses in the neighborhood which share that salient feature without special appeal to hyperspace. Such alternatives include (i) the countless Lewis worlds...; (ii) the plentiful domains of inflationary cosmology; (iii) the abundant universes born of quantum vacuum fluctuations; (iv) the ancient idea of an eternal return in an oscillating big bang/big crunch universe; (v) the modern M-theory speculation of a cyclical big splat/big bounce sequence for pairs of three-branes floating in a multi-dimensional space; and (vi) the branching cosmoi posited by many worlds interpretations of quantum theory. (44)

These words apply equally well in the present context. What is salient with respect to the Best World Problem is the thought that there might be a vast plenitude of 3-spaces, *not* that those 3-spaces are embedded in hyperspace. Thus, the theoretical utility afforded to the theist by the Hyperspace Hypothesis with respect to the Best World Problem can be had as easily from any of the other six hypotheses. Why, then, should we think that we have here any "explicitly religious reason" for believing the Hyperspace Hypothesis?

In the pages following the passage quoted above, Hudson makes two substantive points. First, he notes that there might be other considerations (both physical and philosophical) for ruling out some or all of the competing hypotheses. Second, he argues that the Hyperspace Hypothesis is more atheism-friendly; for positing a brute plenitudinous hyperspace invites no uncomfortable questions about the "mechanism"

that generates the many worlds in question, whereas such questions do arise in connection with whatever naturalistic mechanisms might be thought to generate the many worlds involved in the other hypotheses. But in a theistic context, the sorts of mechanism-related questions that Hudson has in mind are obviated; and the fact that *other* reasons might be invoked to favor the Hyperspace Hypothesis over its competitors goes no distance toward helping us to see why attention to the Best World Problem should *in itself* count as reason to believe the Hyperspace Hypothesis (as opposed to a more general many-worlds thesis shared in common by all of the hypotheses). For all Hudson has said, it seems that the most we could get from attention to the Best World Problem is just a push in the direction of belief in many worlds. But it would take other reasons to push us further, toward belief in the Hyperspace Hypothesis in particular.

But this is the best-case scenario—one in which we have granted, for the sake of argument, that the Hyperspace Hypothesis actually helps with the Best World Problem. In fact, however, it is not clear to me that it does. Consider again BWQ2:

(BWQ2) Has God actualized the best modally relevant object?

It is, I think, clear in the literature on the Best World Problem that BWQ2, rather than BWQ1, is the salient version of the Best World Question. Participants in the conversation about the Best World Problem seem to care about BWQ1 only to the extent that it might be taken (mistakenly, no doubt) to be equivalent to BWQ2. So the really important question from the point of view of one who wants to invoke hyperspace to help the theist solve the Best World Problem is just the question of whether the Hyperspace Hypothesis really helps us to provide an affirmative answer to BWQ2. One important reason for thinking that it does is, again, just the thought that we might see diversity as *such a great value* that it would justify God in actualizing a modally relevant object that includes good-but-far-from-perfect 3-spaces like ours, rather than just 3-spaces that are somehow maxed out in value. But it is important to note that, *just like our 3-space*, the 4-space that Hudson describes would be highly diverse with respect to the goods that it realizes, but not at all maxed out with respect to such diversity. More diversity could be obtained, for example, if God were to create every creatable 4-space and embed them all in some overarching 5-space. And more diversity still could be obtained if God were to create every creatable 5-space, embedding all of them in an overarching 6-space. And so on. Plenitude indeed!

But do we really want to be pushed in this direction? For my part, I'm inclined to think that if this is the direction in which the Hyperspace Hypothesis takes us, then so much the worse for the Hyperspace Hypothesis. Of course, I have no argument for the conclusion that God hasn't created (say) every creatable 5-space and embedded it in an overarching 6-space. But my point is that (a) I am not at all inclined to think that attention to the Best World Problem provides any reason to believe that God has, and (b) there seems to be no more reason to think that Hudson's version of the Hyperspace Hypothesis is true than to think that this one is.

More importantly, the fact (just noted) that our 3-space shares in common with Hudson's 4-space the feature of being diverse but not maximally so casts doubt on the idea that diversity of goods can fruitfully be appealed to as a reason for thinking our 4-space (if Hudson's hypothesis is true) is the best possible. For, after all, every reason we have for thinking that our 3-space isn't the best possible will also be a reason for thinking that our 4-space isn't the best possible. Our 3-space includes Rowe's fawn dying in the forest; so does our 4-space. Our 3-space includes Ivan Karamazov's Turkish soldiers; so does our 4-space. Our 3-space includes the holocaust; so does our 4-space. And so on. The presence of these evils in our 4-space counts as much, or not, against the claim that our 4-space is best, therefore, as against the claim that our 3-space is best. And if we can't plausibly respond on behalf of our 3-space by saying that perhaps the great diversity of goods in a 3-space that includes such evils somehow compensates for them, then why think that we are on any surer footing in saying that the great diversity of goods in a 4-space that includes such evils would somehow compensate for them? So far as I can tell, we aren't on surer footing (no matter how many extra dimensions we posit); and so the Hyperspace Hypothesis hasn't really helped us.

At this point we might be tempted just to give up on the claim that there is a best modally relevant object. (That is my inclination in any case.) But if we do, then it seems that our best options for responding to the Best World Problem are either to deny that modally relevant objects are commensurable with respect to overall goodness (a move Hudson seems not to favor), or to embrace the 'infinite hierarchy' response. But if we go for the latter option, we must contend with the argument for atheism mentioned earlier. The Hyperspace Hypothesis helps us with that argument if 'world' is understood to mean '3-space' (or '4-space' or whatever). But it is of no help if 'world' means—as it must at this point in our discussion—'modally relevant object'. For (Lewisian modal realism aside) God really is limited to actualizing just

one modally relevant object; and so the Hyperspace Hypothesis no longer offers any resources for denying the second premise.

I suppose that one might try to argue at this point that, contrary to what I said earlier, all that *really* matters for divine perfection is that God actualize the best possible 3-space, not that God actualize the best possible modally relevant object. In other words, one might try to argue that, really, an affirmative answer to BWQ1 is all we need. An affirmative answer to BWQ2 would be nice but, one might think, not necessary. But it is hard to take this sort of move very seriously. The claim that divine perfection requires only that God actualize the best possible 3-space, not that God actualize the best possible modally relevant object, comes, in the present context, just to the claim that divine perfection requires only that God maximize goodness in some *sub-region* of the actual world rather than in the actual world taken as a whole. But why think this? More importantly, if this is all that matters, why doubt that God has done this in our very own 3-space? Perhaps, unbeknownst to us, some small region on a far away planet is about as good as a region of that sort can possibly get. Is that all we need in order to claim that God is justified in actualizing an overall less-than-perfect modally relevant object? Hardly. But if that response is inadequate to solve the Best World Problem, it is hard to see how an affirmative answer to BWQ1 all by itself would do much better.

Of course, what I have said here leaves untouched Hudson's other religious reasons for believing in hyperspace. For all I have said, the arguments backing those reasons might be sound, and so theists might reap substantial theoretical benefits from believing in hyperspace after all. What I have argued here has just been that help with the Best World Problem is not among those benefits; and even if it were, we would not thereby have been given reason to believe specifically in hyperspace.