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## Plantinga's Ontological Argument

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The ontological argument for the existence of God has enjoyed a recent renaissance among philosophers of religion. Alvin Plantinga's modal version is perhaps the most notable example. This essay critically examines Plantinga's rendition, uncovering both its strengths and weaknesses. The author concludes that while the argument is probably formally valid, it is ultimately unsound. Nonetheless, Plantinga's version has generated much interest and discussion. The author spends some time uncovering the reasons for the argument's powerful intuitive appeal. He concludes his essay by appraising Pruss's recent defence of Plantinga's argument.

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## 1. Recent Developments in the Ontological Argument

The ontological argument has proved to be a constant source of fascination for philosophers, all the way down through the ages since its first statement by Saint Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury, in the eleventh century. Countless words have been written on this most perplexing and confounding of theistic arguments, with new vigour being attended to it in contemporary times by such philosophers as Malcolm, Findlay and Plantinga. This constant flurry of words is an inevitable result of its totally unique nature, for it claims to be, to the antipathy of both empiricists and atheists, a completely *a priori*, analytic proof of God's existence.

Anselm [1078a: chs 3–5] presented his original argument in his [Proslogion](#). His argument can be characterized briefly as this: if God is a being than which none greater can be thought and to exist in reality is greater than to exist in the understanding alone, then God must exist in reality, for if he existed in the understanding alone, he would not be a being than which none greater can be thought. Gaunilo, a contemporary of Anselm's, objected to Anselm's argument by means of analogy. As the objection is retold by Anselm [1078b], Gaunilo likened Anselm's God to a most perfect island and proceeded to prove its existence in the style of Anselm's treatise.

In the eighteenth century, Kant [1872] provided a most damaging criticism in his seminal work, [Critique of Pure Reason](#). In this book, he argued that Anselm's treatment of existence as a property is mistaken and that only synthetic propositions are justifiably existential. (Kant's argument was developed further by Russell's [1919: ch. 16] logical analysis of the term 'exists' in his [Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy](#).)

In his seminal paper, Findlay [1955] struck upon a most controversial ontological disproof of God's existence. After first rejecting Anselm's argument, he argued that the proper object of religious worship must be a necessary and not a contingent being. Since all existential propositions are not logically necessary, he argued, then it is impossible for God to exist. In turn, Malcolm [1964] sought to obviate Findlay's conclusion. After questioning Anselm's assumption that existence is a perfection, Malcolm reconstructed his argument in an attempt to show that the logical necessity of God's existence can be derived from his independence and eternity alone.

Hick is a contemporary theist who agrees with Hume's dictum that existential claims can only have an empirical basis. As such, he was faced with a dilemma. He cannot accept either Malcolm's or Findlay's conclusion. As a saving grace, Hick [1973] contends that the object of religious worship is a factually and not logically necessary being. Ironically, Hick derives this factual necessity from the same attributes of God that Malcolm derived God's logical necessity.

Since a substantial amount of material has already been written on the arguments cited above, I now wish to leave this historical perspective to examine in some detail the most contemporary version of the ontological argument. This latest version is advanced by philosopher of religion, Alvin Plantinga. I will assume, with him, that all of the previous versions have failed.

## 2. Plantinga's Modal Version Ontological Argument

Plantinga developed his modal version of the ontological argument for the existence of God in his two controversial books, [\*The Nature of Necessity\*](#) [1974: ch. 10] and [\*God, Freedom, and Evil\*](#) [1975: part 2 c]. Here, Plantinga attempted to use the philosophical concept of possible worlds to show the necessary nature of God's existence. Since Leibniz first coined the term, 'possible world', in the seventeenth century, it has gained widespread attention. Debate about the meaning and significance of possible worlds to the discipline of modal logic remains current among philosophers. I will avoid discussion of controversial problems, such as transworld identity, because I do not think this is necessary for the purpose of this critique. I will rest content if I succeed in showing that Plantinga's attempt to appraise an existential proposition about what exists through the use of 'possible world' semantics cannot hope to succeed. For the purposes of this essay, I will focus on Plantinga's formulation of his argument in his [\*God, Freedom, and Evil\*](#). (For a substantive critique of Plantinga's more technically stated version given in his [\*The Nature of Necessity\*](#), see Mackie [1982].)

Plantinga progressed through a number of versions of his ontological argument. He examined each in succession, discarding them as he proceeded while repairing the weaknesses of each until he arrived at what, he claimed, is the final triumphant version. The last Achilles' heel he had designed to avoid was the argument's reliance on the concept of possible beings. He believed that there were too many inherent problems with this concept. As Plantinga [1975: 110] admitted, 'I am inclined to think the supposition that there are such things—things that are possible but don't in fact exist—is either unintelligible or necessarily false.' I will try to show below that even with the expunction of this ontologically questionable entity, Plantinga's final, revised argument fails.

Plantinga stated his final argument thus:

(29) There is a possible world in which maximal greatness is instantiated.

And the analogues of (27) and (28) spell out what is involved in maximal greatness:

(30) Necessarily, a being is maximally great only if it has maximal excellence in every world.

and

(31) Necessarily, a being has maximal excellence in every world only if it has omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection in every world.

. . . But if (29) is true, then there is a possible world *W* such that if it had been actual, then there would have existed a being that was omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect; this being furthermore, would have had these qualities in every possible world. So it follows that if *W* had been actual, it would have been *impossible* that there be no such being. That is, if *W* had been actual,

(33) There is no omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect being

would have been an impossible proposition. But if a proposition is impossible in at least one possible world, then it is impossible in every possible world; what is impossible does not vary from world to world. Accordingly (33) is impossible in the *actual* world, i.e., impossible *simpliciter*. But if it is impossible that there be no such being, then there actually exists a being that is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect; this being, furthermore, has these qualities essentially and exists in every possible world.

[Plantinga 1975: 111–12]

Plantinga's argument here is very clever, displaying a high degree of intuitive plausibility. Nonetheless, it seems to have a bad smell about it. Isn't Plantinga simply defining God into existence, as Anselm did? Tooley immediately recognized this when he wrote:

The natural response to this is to ask Gaunilo fashion, what is special about maximal greatness. Let  $P$  be any property, and define the property of being maximally  $P$  as that property possessed by something if and only if it exists, and has  $P$ , in every possible world. If it is then granted that the property of being maximally  $P$  is possibly exemplified, it follows that it is exemplified. This will lead to a rather overpopulated world. It will also lead to contradictions, since one will be able to prove, for example, both that there is something that is a universal solvent, and that there is something that cannot be dissolved by anything. Or, more theologically, both that there is an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good person, and that there is an omnipotent, omniscient, and completely evil person. Plantinga wisely refrains from discussing this obvious objection.

[Tooley 1977: 102]

### 3. Plantinga's Ontological Argument Restated

Analogies aside, what is specifically wrong with Plantinga's modal argument for the existence of God? Where is the mistake? The persuasiveness of Plantinga's argument rests on two key factors. Firstly, Plantinga very skilfully defined God's attributes in terms of possible worlds that were self-referential. Secondly, he capitalized on the intuitive notion that necessary truths are true in every possible world. His genius lay in his ability to weave inextricably these two components together so that his conclusion seemed to follow inexorably.

In order to untangle Plantinga's ontological argument and uncover its confusions, let me begin by stating his argument in a more structured fashion. The final version of Plantinga's [1975: 111–12] ontological argument can be put more clearly as follows:

- (29) There is a possible world [*W*] in which maximal greatness is instantiated.
- (30) Necessarily, a being is maximally great only if it has maximal excellence in every world.
- (31) Necessarily, a being has maximal excellence in every world only if it has omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection in every world.
- (31') If *W* had been actual, then there would have existed a being that was omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect in every possible world.
- (33') If *W* had been actual, it would have been impossible that (33) 'There is no omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect being'.
- (C1) It is impossible that (33) 'There is no omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect being'.
- (C2) Necessarily, there is an omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect being.

Plantinga [1975: 111] claimed propositions (31') and (33') followed from his (29), (30) and (31). Conclusion (C1), he argued, followed from (33') while (C2) followed from (C1). Note that the labels (31'), (33'), (C1) and (C2) did not form part of Plantinga's argument. I have added them here for clarity.

Was Plantinga right in thinking that this argument is valid? For Plantinga [1975: 109, 111], propositions (30) and (31) are true by definition. Both propositions (31') and (33') are indeed entailed by (29), (30) and (31). The leap from (33') to (C1) relies on Plantinga's informally stated axiom of transworld impossibility; that what is impossible in at least one possible world is impossible in every possible world. Let's grant that if this axiom were included as an explicit premise in Plantinga's argument, the inference to (C1) would be valid. However, we would still need to conclude that Plantinga's argument was not sound. (Here, I take a 'sound' argument to be one that is both valid and contains true premises.) It remains unsound because its key premise (29) is false. Moreover, I will try to show that this premise is necessarily false.

This weakness in Plantinga's argument is fatal, as anything and everything follows from a contradictory premise. The subtle confusion in Plantinga's argument is camouflaged by the recursive nature of Plantinga's definitions of his key terms and also by their reflexive reference to possible worlds. As Plantinga's definition of 'maximal excellence' is doubly iterative, I will illustrate my counterargument using a simpler example.

Consider the following argument for the necessary existence of an invincible wizard.

- (29A)  $\diamond Qa$             There is a possible world  $[M]$  in which exists an unbeatable sorcerer.
- (31A)  $Qa =_{df} \Box Ra$       By definition, an unbeatable sorcerer is an invincible wizard in every possible world.
- (31'A)                      If possible world  $[M]$  had been actual, then there would have existed an invincible wizard in every possible world.
- (33'A)                      If possible world  $[M]$  had been actual, then it would have been impossible that no invincible wizard exists.
- (C1A)  $\Box \neg \neg Ra$         It is impossible that no invincible wizard exists.
- (C2A)  $\Box Ra$                 It is necessary that there exists an invincible wizard.

where  $Qa$  = 'Entity  $a$  is an unbeatable sorcerer'

$Ra$  = 'Entity  $a$  is an invincible wizard'

For ease of comparison, I have mirrored here the premise numbering with the numbering of the premises in Plantinga's argument above. Once again, let's grant that with the addition of the axiom of transworld impossibility (i.e., that what is impossible in at least one possible world is impossible in every possible world) the argument to conclusions (C1A) and (C2A) is valid.

My aim here is to show that (29A) is false, and necessarily so. Let's assume for the moment that (29A) true. If (29A) is true, by substitution using definition (31A), the following proposition is true:

- (29A')  $\diamond \Box Ra$             There is a possible world  $[M]$  in which exists an invincible wizard in every possible world.

If an invincible wizard exists in every possible world, then it's not possible for there to be a possible world in which an invincible wizard does not exist.

However, there is no self-contradiction expressed in the proposition:

- (34A)  $\neg Ra$                 There is no invincible wizard.

Therefore, it is possible for there to be a possible world in which an invincible wizard does not exist. Therefore, it is impossible that an invincible wizard exists in every possible world.

Therefore, (29A') is false. This falsity can be expressed formally as:

$$(35A) \quad \Box \neg \Box Ra$$

By substitution using definition (31A), it is impossible that there exists an unbeatable sorcerer. Expressed formally:

$$(36A) \quad \Box \neg \Box Qa$$

The existence of an unbeatable sorcerer is not only false, it is necessarily false. We can conclude, then, that premise (29A) is necessarily false. It is logically impossible that there is an unbeatable sorcerer in the sense defined here. Now, the structure of the above argument is essentially the same as that in Plantinga's ontological argument. By the same token, then, premise (29) in Plantinga's argument, that maximal greatness is possibly instantiated, is necessarily false.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Mackie [1982: 59] also argues specifically for the rational inadmissibility of this crucial premise on the grounds that other premises contradictory with this one are equally logically possible. His criticism here is independent of his other criticism of Plantinga's adoption of  $S_5$  as the appropriate system of modal logic in which to express his ontological argument. Oppy [2016: §7] also rejects Plantinga's (29) along similar lines.

## 4. Why Plantinga's Ontological Argument Is Persuasive

The interesting question is, What is it about Plantinga's modal formulation of the ontological argument that gives it its intuitive plausibility? To answer this question, first note that the only difference between the structure of my 'invincible wizard' argument in the previous section and Plantinga's ontological argument is that in my version of the argument, the meaning of 'unbeatable sorcerer' is given using only one level of recursion. (Hence, there is no proposition (30A) in my version). Plantinga, on the other hand, used two levels of recursion to define 'maximal greatness'; viz., his propositions (30) and (31). This added complexity is one reason why Plantinga's ontological argument seems so persuasive. His proposition (29) looks innocent enough to warrant our initial assent. Ordinarily, we don't think of our everyday concepts of 'maximum' and 'greatness' as leaning on the theoretical buttress of possible worlds. Not even professional philosophers.

This dependence of the meaning of 'maximal greatness' on possible world semantics is kept covert by Plantinga in his (29). The double recursion from the initial premise (29) to God's all important characteristics of omnipotence, omniscience and moral perfection in (31) provides the psychological distance needed to blur this critical reliance on possible worlds. The intermediate term 'maximal excellence' in Plantinga's (31), in effect, provides this psychological buffer zone. But once we spell out explicitly what (29) means, Plantinga's tying of ordinary-seeming language to an ontology of possible worlds become clear. Once this semantic connection is uncovered, the possibility of the instantiation of God's 'maximal greatness' amounts to:

There is a possible world [*W*] in which there exists a being that is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect in every possible world.

It is this explicit formulation of (29) that deserves close logical scrutiny. But how does Plantinga's originally stated recursive formulation of the semantic connection lead to his logical muddle? Note how the supposed possible world [*W*] in the explicitly stated proposition above is uniquely identified. It is identified as the possible world in which a particular being exists in that possible world, amongst others. The self-referential nature of this world description ought to give us reason to pause. The long history of solving the semantic problems of self-reference, such as the well-known liar paradox, teach us to be very wary of thinking we know at first glance what these kinds of sentences mean. As the logical analysis in the previous section demonstrates, placing confidence in the seeming innocuousness of (29) is misplaced.

The second feature of Plantinga's ontological argument that makes it seem so compelling is his conscription of the crucial, but informally stated, modal axiom about transworld impossibility: what is impossible in at least one possible world is impossible in every possible world. Once we accept (29) as being true (i.e., that there is a possible world [*W*]), the leap from premise (33') to conclusion (C1) appears intuitively as logically conclusive.

Prior to writing this essay, I considered that the inference from (33') to (C1) was invalid as Plantinga presented (33') as a counterfactual conditional. The state of affairs described in the antecedent of a counterfactual conditional is always false (otherwise it



wouldn't be counterfactual). In this case, then, I thought that possible world [W] is never actualized. I reasoned that, *ipso facto*, maximal greatness is also never actualized. However, this line of reasoning is wrong. Plantinga's argument does not depend on possible world [W] in particular being actualized. It depends only on some possible world in which maximal greatness is instantiated is actualized.

A second possible line of attack is on Plantinga's assertion that the non-existence of an omnipotent, omniscient and morally perfect being is impossible *simpliciter*. This assertion seems mistaken because the impossibility of such a being not existing is conditional on possible world [W] being actualized. The conditional nature of (33') seems to make this clear. *Contra* Plantinga, the non-existence of such a being seems to be a conditional impossibility. But herein lays the genius of Plantinga's argument. Premise (33') is no ordinary subjunctive conditional. Its antecedent has as its object a possible world, allowing Plantinga to call into service the full armoury of possible world logic. From these considerations of the validity of Plantinga's ontological argument, it appears the only, and fatal, objection to Plantinga's argument is that his premise (29) is necessarily false.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>For a general critique of the concept of maximal greatness, see C. D. Broad [1973] and Penelhum [1971: ch. 2]. For a specific criticism of Plantinga's premise (29), see Mackie [1982: 61].

## 5. Rational Acceptability of Plantinga's Ontological Argument

The *reductio ad absurdum* of Plantinga's ontological argument is that if it were sound, it would be possible to define virtually anything into existence. All a philosopher need do to grant existence to a being is simply define it in premise (29) and predicate its attributes in premises (30) and (31). Plantinga's urge to grant existence to an omniscient, omnipotent and morally perfect being, as opposed to any other kind of being, results, it seems, from the particular religious tradition in which he is embedded and not from any rational constraint. As other critics, such as Mackie [1982: 59] and Oppy [2016: §7], have noted, there is nothing special about maximal greatness.

What did Plantinga conclude for his ontological argument for the existence of God? He summed up his assessment on the final page of his [God, Freedom, and Evil](#) [1975: 112]. He claimed of his argument, 'It is certainly valid; given its premise, the conclusion follows.' Furthermore, he also considered his argument sound as he accepted the only non-analytic premise (29) as being true.

In this essay, I have tried to show otherwise, arguing instead that even if we grant that his argument is valid, it remains unsound. Perhaps if Plantinga had formulated his entire argument in numbered premise form, as I have done here, his mistake may have been more obvious. Even he may have seen the difficulty faced by his final argument. Why he chose to not do this with the most critical section of his argument, I cannot say. Perhaps an unfortunate consequence of this omission was to divert critical attention away from this informally stated section of his argument and focus it instead on his three main premises, two of which are analytic and therefore beyond dispute.

Plantinga's only defence in his [God, Freedom, and Evil](#) [1975: 112] of his solitary non-analytic premise (29) was to opine that 'I think it *is* true'. He conceded that 'not everyone who understands and reflects on its central premise—that the existence of a maximally great being is *possible*—will accept it'. So the argument, for him, is not a proof of God's existence. He [1975: 112] maintained, though, that the argument establishes the 'rational acceptability' of theism because 'there is nothing *contrary* to *reason* or *irrational* in accepting this premise.' Here, Plantinga referred us to his fuller defense of (29) in his [The Nature of Necessity](#) [1974: ch. 10, §8].

In order to tease out Plantinga's reasoning, let's grant Plantinga's view that (29) is not known to be false. Does Plantinga's ontological argument, then, give a person a rational reason to believe that God exists. The answer has to be 'No'. Plantinga [1974: 218] readily admitted that there are an infinite number of parallel arguments, all equally valid, that demonstrate the necessary non-existence of a maximally great being. It is on this basis that Plantinga [1974: 219; 1975: 112] conceded that his ontological argument is *not* 'a successful piece of natural theology'. But it remains 'rational' to accept (29), Plantinga asserted, for the same reason that we accept other contested premises.

Here, Plantinga advanced three analogous, equally contested propositions for which it is not irrational to accept as true. First, he appealed to the rationality of abandoning the Distributive Law in logic in the face of quantum uncertainty. Second, he used as illustration

the alternative modal logic in which possible but unactualized objects exist. Third, he cited the denying of Leibniz's Law in the face of counterexamples.

However, for each of these three examples, the advocates for each thesis advance reasons for accepting the premise; reasons that are independent of the premise being advocated. Plantinga did not do this for his premise (29). At one point, Plantinga [1974: 220] advocated accepting (29) on the grounds that treating it as true simplifies Theology. Clearly, this reason presupposes the very the existence of the being whose reality is in dispute. Given Plantinga's parenthetical request for us to take his other examples '[M]ore seriously', perhaps he intended for us to take this suggestion with a grain of salt.

On the other hand, Plantinga could push this defence for all it is worth. He could object that at least in some cases, it is allowable for a supporting reason to presuppose the thesis being supported. By way of example, Plantinga [1974: 221] did point to philosophers' acceptance of Leibniz's Law. The arguments in favour of this Law, Plantinga noted, at 'some point invoke that very principle'.

However, even if this were the case with Leibniz's Law, the situation is not analogous to Plantinga's premise (29) stating that maximal greatness is possibly instantiated. Leibniz's Law is a foundation principle in metaphysics that underpins many philosophical arguments. Premise (29), on the other hand, is not such a common principle, requiring agreement by both theists and non-theists. Secondly, unlike the advocates for Leibniz's Law, Plantinga does not advance any arguments for the truth of (29) in the face of counterexamples (i.e., the infinite number of parallel arguments mentioned above).

Plantinga [1974: 221] concluded with this analogy to his acceptance of (29):

So if we carefully ponder Leibniz's Law and the alleged objections, if we consider its connections with other propositions we accept or reject and still find it compelling, we are within our rights in accepting it—and this whether or not we can convince others.

This is precisely what Plantinga did not do with his premise (29). Sure, he could contend that he had considered its connections with his other theistic beliefs he accepts as true. However, this activity is worthless in raising the epistemic probability that God exists independently of a prior acceptance of this proposition. Seen in this light, his ontological argument is self-serving, simply bolstering confidence in a pre-existing belief. It adds nothing to the effort to convince a non-theist and, at best, lulls some theists into thinking that the argument does some actual intellectual work in raising the possibility that God exists.

All of this may be conceded by Plantinga while clinging to the notion that in the absence of a reason for rejecting (29), it is not irrational to accept it. I think this is also a mistake. There are many propositions for which we have equal reason for either accepting or rejecting their truth. Using their best efforts, scientists have calculated the weight of our Earth to be  $5.972 \times 10^{24}$  kg. Now, it may be the case that our Earth weighs more than this amount or it may be the case that it weighs less. Either proposition may be true, but not both. We have no reason for rejecting the proposition that the Earth weighs less than  $5.972 \times 10^{24}$  kg. But we readily concede that that is not a reason for believing that it does, in

fact, weigh less than this. It is just as probable that it weighs more. The rational thing to do in this instance is to suspend judgement.

Take another case that is more akin to the *a priori* nature of Plantinga's ontological argument. Mathematicians know a lot about prime numbers. However, as yet, there exists no proof for there being an infinite number of twin prime pairs (i.e., prime number pairs separated by just one other number). There is no reason for rejecting the proposition that there is an infinite number of twin prime pairs. As per the reasoning above, this fact alone does not make it reasonable to believe that this is the case. Once again, reason dictates that we neither believe nor disbelieve this proposition. The same applies in kind to the contrary proposition; that there is a finite number of twin prime pairs. Likewise, in response to Plantinga's ontological argument, a reasonable person ought to suspend judgement on the truth or otherwise of premise (29).<sup>3</sup> I think we can safely conclude that Plantinga was being exuberantly overconfident in announcing his final version as 'The Argument Triumphant' [1975: 111] and 'A Victorious Modal Version' [1974: 213].

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<sup>3</sup>van Inwagen [1977: 387–92] mounts a similar case against the rationality of accepting Plantinga's premise.

## 6. Pruss on Possibility of Maximally Great Being

I argued in section §3 above that Plantinga's premise (29), that it's possible that maximal greatness is instantiated, is necessarily false. In §5, I tried to show that even if (29) is not known to be false, it is not rational to accept it as true. Pruss [2010] has put up a valiant argument for increasing the epistemic probability that (29) is true above even chances. Basically, Pruss [2010: 233f] argues that if a proposition, such as that there is a maximally great being, centrally motivates individuals or communities to lead flourishing and intellectually sophisticated lives, then that proposition is probably true.

There is much to disagree with in his development of his argument. However, here I want to focus on a core difficulty as it touches Plantinga's version of the ontological argument. Pruss devotes the final section of his essay to the objection that what motivates theists in particular is not the modal aspect of the concept of a maximally great being. If this objection is valid, it seriously undercuts the essay's relevance to and support of Plantinga's thesis. As Pruss [2010: 246] states the objection:

. . . while the belief that there *actually* is a maximally excellent being is central to the lives of flourishing theists, the belief that there is a maximally excellent being *in all worlds* is not central to the lives of flourishing theists.

Pruss argues that this objection is based on a misreading of Plantinga's argument. He [2010: 246] claims that Plantinga was not '*stipulating* that a maximally great being is one that exists in all worlds and is maximally excellent in them all'. Plantinga, Pruss [2010: 247] asserts, only argued that maximal greatness, as a matter of fact, logically entails maximal excellence in all possible worlds. This avoidance of definitional equivalence, according to Pruss [2010: 247], then leaves the 'intellectually sophisticated' theist to 'believe that there is a maximally great being—say, a being that has all perfections—without believing that there is a being that has maximal excellence in every world'.

Firstly, I think Pruss, himself, has misunderstood Plantinga. In his [The Nature of Necessity](#), Plantinga early on [1974: 205] prescribed that 'the term "God" simply abbreviates the longer phrase "the being whose greatness in some world or other is nowhere exceeded"'. As 'world' is meant here in the sense of 'possible world', Plantinga had already semantically tied the concept of 'God' as a maximally great being to a modal framework. This semantic cementing is continued a little later where, in discussing Anselm, Plantinga [1974: 212] declares that 'necessary existence . . . must be considered in comparing a pair of beings with respect to greatness'. This 'must' for Plantinga arises not from an empirical investigation of maximally great beings we might find, but from reflection on what it means to be 'great'. Following some more reflection on the quality of greatness, Plantinga [1974: 214] goes on to stipulate thus:

. . . we might say that the *excellence* of a being in a given world *W* depends only upon its (non world-indexed) properties in *W*, while its greatness in *W* depends not merely upon its excellence in *W*, but also upon its excellence in other worlds.

In constructing a simpler version of his ontological argument, Plantinga [1974: 216] made clear what he meant by 'greatness': 'Let us say that *unsurpassable greatness* is equivalent to *maximal excellence in every possible world*.' Plantinga continued his semantic

coupling of the two notions of 'greatness' and 'necessary existence' in his later [God, Freedom, and Evil](#). Here again, Plantinga [1975: 107] stipulated unequivocally what he meant by 'greatness':

A being's excellence in a given world *W*, let us say, depends only upon the properties it has in *W*; its *greatness* in *W* depends upon those properties but also upon what it is like in other worlds.

Further, Plantinga [1975: 109] regarded his two analytic premises concerning maximal greatness and maximal excellence as '*consequences* of a definition—a definition of maximal greatness'.

So, I think a fair reading of Plantinga shows that for Plantinga, the twin properties of necessary existence and maximal excellence in every possible world are not surprising logical entailments from the concept of maximal greatness. The latter entails the two former properties because of what Plantinga makes 'maximal greatness' mean. The situation here is akin to how the proposition, 'John is a bachelor', entails 'John is not married to Jane or Kate'. Now, 'bachelor' does not mean 'not married to Jane or Kate'. However, the former proposition entails the latter precisely because of what the word 'bachelor' means. If someone accepted the former proposition but rejected the latter, we would say that they are assuming a different meaning of the word 'bachelor'.

The same can be said for Pruss's intellectually sophisticated theistic community. For Pruss [2010: 247], a member of this community 'can believe that there is a maximally great being—say, a being that has all perfections—without believing that there is a being that has maximal excellence in every world'. Sure, but then that theist is using the term 'maximally great being' with a different sense than what Plantinga articulated in his modal version of the ontological argument.<sup>4</sup>

Recall, Pruss intended his essay to be a defence of Plantinga's modal version of the ontological argument in particular. Pruss [2010: 233] writes unequivocally of Plantinga's modal version:

The main controversial premise is the possibility premise (2). I will now offer a new way to make the possibility premise epistemically probable. If it is epistemically probable, then the conclusion of the argument is also epistemically probable, and hence probably there is a maximally great being.

By then shifting the meaning of 'maximally great being' away from Plantinga's intended meaning, Pruss's argument fails to hit the mark. In the place of Plantinga's meaning, Pruss [2010: 247] substituted 'a being than which a greater cannot be conceived or one that has all perfections'. It is precisely these kinds of highly philosophically problematic definitions that Plantinga [1974: §2, 3, 6 and 7] explicitly rejected. Plantinga's

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<sup>4</sup>That Pruss has misconstrued Plantinga's argument is also evidenced by his casting doubt on Plantinga's [1974: 214] premises (34) and (35); two premises that are not seriously in contention in the philosophical literature. Pruss [2010: 247] writes: 'Thus, while I initially said that it is the possibility premise (2) that is the main controversial premise, nonetheless premise (1) is a genuinely substantive though plausible claim about what maximal greatness in fact entails, a premise that can also be disputed.'

modal version of the ontological argument was supposed to avoid the fatal flaws of earlier renditions of the ontological argument that relied on these definitions.

Pruss's semantic decoupling of the term, 'maximal greatness', from 'maximal excellence in every possible world' has robbed his argument of any potency it might have had. By disowning the modal properties of Plantinga's term, 'maximal greatness', Pruss's argument bears no relevance to Plantinga's modal version of the ontological argument. In trying to increase the probability of the possibility of Pruss's kinds of 'maximally great being', Pruss has left the possibility of Plantinga's God untouched.

## 7. Conclusion

Spurred on by recent developments in modal logic, the ontological argument for the existence of God has received renewed interest over the last few decades. In this essay, I considered perhaps the most serious advocate of modal versions of this theistic argument. In critiquing Plantinga's effort, I first laid out a more formal statement of his final version. To help identify the source of possible problems with his argument, I constructed a simpler, yet structurally faithful, rendition of it. After conceding that Plantinga's argument is probably valid, I sought to show that, ultimately, it did not pass the test of soundness. The problem lay in his non-analytic premise (29) stating the possibility of the instantiation of maximal greatness. I attempted to show how this premise is not only false, but necessarily false.

Plantinga's modal version of the argument is highly seductive. I was keen, therefore, to uncover where its powers of persuasion lay. I concluded that two important features of his argument lead to its intuitive appeal. First is its self-referential and recursive definition of 'maximal greatness'. Second is Plantinga's conscription of the incontestable modal axiom of transworld impossibility.

Although Plantinga freely admitted that his modal version of the ontological argument is not proof of the existence of God, he nonetheless advocated that it established the rational acceptability of theism. His plea hinged on the rational acceptability of the non-analytic premise that it's possible that maximal greatness is instantiated. I argued that the three examples from the history of philosophy he mustered in his defence of this controversial premise were not analogous to the theist's epistemic situation. I concluded that even if we grant the possibility of the truth of this premise, it is not rational to accept it as so.

In the final section of my essay, I considered the recent attempt by Pruss to bolster the epistemic probability of the truth of this premise. Here I argued that Pruss shifted the meaning of 'maximally great being' to something substantively different from Plantinga's stipulated meaning. As Plantinga's definition of maximal greatness is crucially central to the success of his modal version of the ontological argument, I concluded that Pruss's essay fails as a defence of Plantinga's argument for the existence of God.



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