



Making Great-Making Properties Great Again

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ABSTRACT: Proponents of the ontological argument for the existence of God typically argue for the existence of a being that has all compossible great-making properties. One such property is necessary existence. If necessary existence cannot be shown to be a great-making property then various modal ontological arguments will fail. Malcom (1960) argues that necessary existence is a great-making property as it entails existing *a se* which makes it a superior property to contingent existence. I maintain that Malcom's argument does not succeed since there is nothing that rules out a contingent being, in this case a factually necessary being, from existing *a se*. Utilizing the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR), Bernstein (2014) has argued that necessary existence is a great-making property. I argue that necessary existence is a great-making property whether or not the Principle of Sufficient Reason is true.

Keywords: Modal Ontological Argument • Great-Making Properties • Compossible • Aseity • Intrinsic Maxima • Necessary Existence • Factually Necessary

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1 Background

Ontological arguments are *a priori* arguments that seek to establish the existence of a perfect God. According to perfect being theology, God is to be defined as the greatest conceivable being, a maximally great being, or a being with all perfections. These definitions describe a being that possesses all compossible great-making properties. A being is said to have compossible properties when all of that being's properties can coexist together in the same world without a contradiction arising. Moreover, this being's properties must also be consistent with all of the other properties that exist in the world, or possible worlds, that this being resides in. Take for instance two beings *x* and *y*. If being *x* has the property of being immovable and being *y* has the property of being unstoppable then, presumably, these beings could not exist in the same world at the same time without the possibility of a contradiction arising.¹ Thus, immovability and unstoppableness cannot be compossible properties and are not found in the same world. Many arguments against the existence of God attack the compossibility of God's traditionally ascribed properties. For example, some argue that omniscience and omnipotence are not compossible properties (Dawkins 2006, 78). Others argue that an omniscient, omnipotent, and morally perfect being could not exist simultaneously in a world containing gratuitous evil (Sobel 2004, 436-37).

A perfect being then is a being containing all and only those great-making properties that are compossible. Properties such as simplicity, eternity, aseity, atemporality, immutability, necessity, and impassibility have traditionally been ascribed to the western theistic concept of God. Most theists see omnipotence, omniscience, and moral perfection as the most important and essential attributes of God. It seems that at least since biblical times, God has been ascribed these attributes.² Yujin Nagasawa, philosopher of religion at the University of Birmingham, explains that many ancient philosophers including Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero also believed that God should be thought of as a perfect being. Of Aristotle, Nagasawa writes "... [Aristotle] thinks that a god is a substance of 'supreme excellence', which is akin to the perfect being thesis that God is the being than which no greater is metaphysically possible" (Nagasawa 2017, 18). Furthermore, major early church fathers also believed in God's omni-attributes. One such church father is Tertullian of Carthage who was the first significant Christian author to write in Latin (Lefebure 2015, 31). It seems then that God has been characterized by the omni-attributes for thousands of years. These properties have become the defining characteristics of God in the western tradition.

¹ Try to imagine what would happen if these two beings collided.

² See Coogan et al (2010), specifically 1 John 3:20 for omniscience, Job 42:1-2 for omnipotence, and Psalm 145:17 for moral perfection.

2 Anselm's Argument and Gaunilo's Reply

Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury in the early 1000's AD, is one of the most important thinkers with regards to God's attributes and existence. Anselm, in his work titled the *Proslogion*, quotes Psalm 14:1 which says "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God.'" In this work, Anselm sought to refute the fool by developing an undeniable *a priori* argument for God's existence which has come to be known as the ontological argument. Anselm argued that upon grasping the very idea of God, one could know that God exists. He preferred to understand God as the greatest conceivable being. His conceptual ontological argument depends on an understanding of two different types of existences: (i) existence in the understanding and (ii) existence in reality. Anselm explains what these existences look like as follows: (i) describes the existence of a painting in a painter's mind and (ii) describes the finished painting in reality. With this distinction made, Anselm formulates the following ontological argument:

1. God, in the understanding, is the greatest conceivable being.
2. A being that exists in reality is greater than one that exists in the understanding alone.
3. If God, the greatest conceivable being, existed in the understanding alone, then He would not be the greatest conceivable being.
4. But it is absurd to say that the greatest conceivable being is not the greatest conceivable being.
5. Therefore, God exists in reality.³

Anselm believed that once we grasp the concept of God as the greatest conceivable being, we then have this idea in the understanding. But once we have this idea in the understanding it then follows via a *reductio ad absurdum* that God must exist in reality. Of premise 1 Anselm writes:

But, at any rate, this very fool, when he hears of this being of which I speak - a being than which nothing greater can be conceived - understands what he hears, and what he understands is in his understanding; although he does not understand it to exist (Anselm 1926, 7).

Thus, Anselm believed that the fool should assent to premise 1 and that his conclusion logically follows from it.

³ You can find Anselm's original ontological argument in chapters 2 and 3 of the *Proslogion*.

Gaunilo, a monk who lived during the time of Anselm, believed that Anselm's ontological argument did not work since it could be used to prove a multitude of superfluous things. In a letter titled "In Behalf of the Fool", Gaunilo objects to Anselm's argument with the following parody syllogism:

1. There is an island, in the understanding, which is the greatest conceivable island.
2. Things that exist in reality are greater than things that exist in the understanding alone.
3. If this island existed in the understanding alone, then it would not be the greatest conceivable island.
4. But it is absurd to say that the greatest conceivable island is not the greatest conceivable island.
5. Therefore, the greatest conceivable island exists in reality (Anselm 1926, 150-53).

Gaunilo reasons that since Anselm's argument proves too much, it does not give the "fool" a good reason to believe that the greatest conceivable being exists in reality.

It has been argued that premise 1 of Gaunilo's argument is false. It is difficult to think about what properties could make an island the greatest possible island. If we say that something like "palm tree quantity" contributes to an island's greatness, it seems then that we could always imagine an island with one more palm tree on it. There appears to be no degree of palm trees, or anything material for that matter, that would contribute to an island's greatness. Thus, the greatest conceivable island is an incoherent notion since it is always possible to conceive of a greater island.

3 Degreed Properties, Intrinsic Maxima, and Great-Making Properties

More specifically, it is said that "palm tree quantity" lacks an *intrinsic maximum* or upper limit. This is a quality that some degreed properties have. A degreed property F is that in which, if it is the case that beings x and y both have property F , then it is *sensible* to say of x that it is more or less F than y (Mann 1975, 151-52). Examples of degreed properties include being healthy, being clear, and being afraid. Some examples of properties that are degreeless include: "being a human being, being an aardvark, being a parent, being on fire, being triangular, being pregnant, [and] being less than or equal to 1" (Mann 1975, 151). Take for instance the degreeless property "being a human being". You either are a human being or you are not. There are no degrees to humanness.

Philosopher of religion, William E. Mann, defines an intrinsic maximum in the following way: "degreed property F has an intrinsic maximum if and only if there is

some possible being, x , such that x is F , and for any other possible being, y , if y is F then it is not the case that y is more F than x " (Mann 1975, 152). Not all degreed properties have an intrinsic maximum but all properties with an intrinsic maximum are degreed. An example of a degreed property that lacks an intrinsic maximum is being large since a large object can always be larger (Wainwright 1988, 8). Being knowledgeable, powerful, and moral all seem to be degreed properties, but do they each have an intrinsic maximum?

Consider the definition of what it means for some person S to be omniscient: "...for every proposition p , if p is true then S knows p " (Wierenga 2018). To be omniscient would require one to know all true propositions. Once one acquires knowledge of all true propositions, one could not know anything more than this. Therefore, being knowledgeable has an intrinsic maximum. Similarly, an omnipotent being can do all things that are possibly able to be done. It is not possible for a being to be able to do anything more than all things that are possibly doable. Therefore, being powerful also has an upper limit or intrinsic maximum.

The intrinsic maximum of being moral is moral perfection. If God is morally perfect, then he will always act in the most morally appropriate way in any given circumstance. No one can be more faithful, truthful, or just than someone with moral perfection. God's omnibenevolence, or loving nature, is derived from his moral perfection. Etymologically, the term omnibenevolent means "...all,' *bene*, meaning 'well,' and *volentis*, meaning to wish or to will. An omnibenevolent being, then, is one that wills the well-being of all" (Hudson 1991, 57). If God is morally perfect, then he is genuinely concerned with the *true* flourishing of every created agent. Some philosophers believe that God's morally perfect and loving nature serves as the grounds for moral values and obligations.⁴

Having an intrinsic maximum is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for a property to be considered great-making. A property P is great-making if and only if

- (1) P has an intrinsic maximum, and
- (2) it is inherently superior to possess P than to lack P .

Condition (2) can be determined by inductive and deductive means but it is mainly determined by intuition. For example, it seems intuitively obvious that it is better to possess knowledge over ignorance, power over impotence, and moral goodness over badness. Overall, it seems that God's three essential *omni*-attributes meet conditions (1) and (2). Since God's properties each have an intrinsic maximum and the properties that comprise the greatest conceivable island do not, Guanilo's parody argument does not work. Great-making properties, as defined above, allow the proponent of the ontological argument to sidestep Gaunilo style parodies.

⁴ For more on God as the metaphysical grounds of morality, see Adams (2002).

4 Immanuel Kant's Rebuttal

Immanuel Kant, however, had no problem with premise 1 of Anselm's argument but thought that premise 2, *things that exists in reality are greater than things that exist in the understanding alone*, was flawed. It is said that Kant refuted Anselm's ontological argument by arguing that existence is not a predicate. In symbolic notation, existence \exists is merely a quantifier that functions on some object, with a certain property or properties, to denote that object's quantity. For example, $\exists xFx$ reads:

There exists at least one thing x such that x has property F.

According to Kant, existence is not inherent in the concept of anything and it does not entail any special properties that we could point to as being greater to possess than not to possess.

For Kant, existence does not alter the concept of a being. Conceptually, an existent God is not greater than a non-existent God. The two are conceptually equal in greatness as they share the exact same properties and are thus identical in accordance with Leibniz's Law. Leibniz's Law, or the Indiscernability of Identicals, states:

$$\forall x\forall y[(x=y) \rightarrow \forall F (F x \leftrightarrow F y)]$$

or,

For all things x and y, If x is identical to y, then, for every property F, x has F if and only if y has F.

Since, on Kant's account, existence cannot be a property it therefore follows that existent God and non-existent God must be conceptually identical.

Existence can be thought of as similar to location. For example, Mark can be in Glassboro, New Jersey today and in Las Vegas, Nevada tomorrow. Mark's location would change, but Mark himself, and the properties that make Mark who he is, would not change. It might be argued that if Mark were to cease to exist then he would change. Still, however, the *concept* of Mark would not change even if he were to cease existing. Kant provided an example of one-hundred imaginary dollars and one-hundred real dollars. Both have the same properties conceptually, and as such, neither can conceptually be more valuable than the other. In summary, if there is no concept changing difference between existence in the understanding and existence in reality, then Anselm's ontological argument fails.

5 Necessary Existence and the Modal Ontological Argument

With this critique, Kant seemed to have defeated Anselm's ontological argument for God's existence until modal versions of the argument emerged during the 1940's. Proponents of modal ontological arguments usually seek to establish (a) the metaphysical possibility of a perfect being and (b) that necessary existence is a great-making property or perfection. Consider a simple modal ontological argument, developed by C'zar Bernstein of Oxford University:

1. Possibly, there exists a being that is perfect.
2. Necessary existence is a perfection.
3. There exists a being that is perfect (Bernstein 2014, 666).

This modal version of the ontological argument sidesteps Kant's criticism by implementing the notion of necessary existence. To have the property necessary existence is to exist eternally in all possible worlds. Existence simpliciter might not be a predicate but necessary existence *is* a predicate. In order for necessary existence to be considered a great-making property it must meet the two conditions laid out earlier. Does necessary existence fulfill condition (1) for being a great-making property? Since a being cannot exist anywhere else than in all possible worlds, presumably then, necessary existence fulfills condition (1). But does necessary existence fulfill condition (2) for being a great-making property? It is not immediately obvious that eternally existing in all possible worlds makes one greater.

A being that has the property necessary existence is called a necessary being. A being that has the property contingent existence is called a contingent being. For modal versions of the ontological argument to work, it must be shown that it is greater for a being to exist necessarily than contingently. Why think that a necessary being—all other properties considered equal—is greater than a being that is contingent? Norman Malcolm, American philosopher and Harvard University graduate, argues that necessary existence entails existing *a se*, or metaphysically/aetiologically independent, and is therefore greater than contingent existence which lacks this entailed property. Consider the following:

If a housewife has a set of extremely fragile dishes, then as dishes they are *inferior* to those of another set like them in all respects except that they are *not* fragile. Those of the first set are *dependent* for their continued existence on gentle handling; those of the second set are not. There is a definite connection in common language between the notions of dependency and

inferiority, and independence and superiority (Malcolm 1960, 47)
[Malcolm's italics].

Malcolm is correct to point out that independence, or divine aseity, seems superior to dependence. Trinitarian philosophers and theologians rely on the notion of aseity when arguing for the superiority of the Trinity over Unitarian conceptions of God, as seen in Islam, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism among others.⁵

So although Malcolm is correct about his judgments on divine aseity, his argument for the superiority of a necessary being over a contingent being fails. To summarize Malcolm's point, he wants to say that divine aseity is guaranteed if a being exists by necessity and not if a being exists contingently. But if a contingent being can exist eternally, how is aseity lost? There is nothing that rules out a contingent being existing eternally and if this is so then a contingent being can be wholly self-sustaining just like a necessary being.

One might argue that a necessary being is greater than a contingent being in another manner. Since a necessary being exists eternally, it does not have a temporal beginning nor is it destructible like a contingent being. It is greater to be uncaused and indestructible than causally dependent and destructible. Therefore, it is greater to be a necessary being than a contingent being. This argument would work but it runs into the same problem as the previous argument. There is nothing ruling out the existence of an eternally existing/indestructible contingent being. Still one might try to make the argument that being indestructible in all possible worlds, which is what you get with a necessary being, is better than only being indestructible in some possible worlds (as would be the case for a contingent being). Kenneth Himma in the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy writes the following with regards to this type of argument:

Suppose that an omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent, eternal (and hence, so to speak, indestructible), personal God exists in this world but not in some other worlds. It is very hard to make sense of the claim that such a God is deficient in some relevant respect. God's indestructibility in this world means that God exists eternally in all logically possible worlds that resemble this one in certain salient respects. It is simply unclear how existence in these other worlds that bear no resemblance to this one would make God greater and hence more worthy of worship. From our perspective, necessary existence adds nothing in value to eternal existence (Himma 2015).

⁵ For an argument for the Trinity, see Davis (2006, p. 65-68).

If Himma is correct, which I think he is, then this argument also fails to show the superiority of necessary existence over contingent existence. The hopes of preserving premise (2) of the modal ontological argument seem dim.

6 The Superiority of Necessary Existence over Contingent Existence

There is one last argument that may prove successful in showing that necessary existence is greater than contingent existence. First, let us distinguish between two types of necessities. A being is said to exist of *metaphysical necessity* if that being cannot fail to exist in all possible worlds. A contingent being is said to exist of *factual necessity* if it exists eternally and is not causally dependent on anything for its existence in any of the possible worlds in which it resides in (Bernstein 2014, 672). Contingent beings can only be factually necessary and cannot be metaphysically necessary. It is tough to show that a necessary being is greater than a contingent being because of factual necessity.

With this distinction made, let us turn to an argument by C'zar Bernstein for the superiority of a necessary being over a contingent being. Consider a modest version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR):

Necessarily, for all things x, possibly x has a sufficient explanation of its existence.

If a being is necessary then its sufficient explanation will be found in the necessity of its own nature. If a being is contingent then its sufficient explanation will *possibly* be found in an external cause. Abstract objects (like numbers and sets), if they exist, could be said to exist by the necessity of their own nature in all possible worlds, whereas a cat owes its existence to an external cause (its feline parents). This modest PSR necessitates not that there exists a sufficient explanation for every being's existence in the actual world but rather that there is a possible world in which each being's existence is sufficiently explained.

Recall the definition of a factually necessary being: *A contingent being is said to exist of factual necessity if it exists eternally and is not causally dependent on anything for its existence in any of the possible worlds in which it resides in.* But given this PSR, all beings, including contingent beings, have a sufficient explanation for their existence in some possible world by either another contingent being or a necessary being. If this is the case then in the world where a contingent being is sufficiently explained, it follows that this being "has the property *being dependent on another being*" (Bernstein 2014, 674). This means that no contingent being can fail to be causally dependent on something for its existence which directly contradicts the above definition of a factually necessary being. If factual necessity is incoherent, then contingent beings are beings which lack perfections. Consider the following argument for this conclusion:

1. Necessarily, for all things ϕ , if ϕ is an imperfection then being possibly ϕ is an imperfection.
2. Necessarily, *being dependent on another being's existence*, *being caused to exist*, and *being not eternal* are all imperfections that all contingent beings possibly have (given the above PSR).
3. Therefore, necessarily, all contingent beings are imperfect (Bernstein 2014, 674).

Is premise 1 a plausibly true principle? In defense of this premise, C'zar Bernstein writes:

Say that ϕ is any imperfection, and that S lacks ϕ contingently. Then S has the property of being possibly ϕ . The reason why this is an imperfection is that S is merely accidentally perfect in respect to lacking ϕ , which is less great than essentially lacking ϕ ; a being who essentially lacked ϕ would be perfect in that respect, not merely by accident, but of necessity, which is obviously better than merely happening to lack ϕ (Bernstein 2014, 674).

It therefore follows that if the PSR and the above principle are sound, then factual necessity is not a coherent notion and all contingent beings necessarily have imperfections. Therefore, one can reasonably say that necessary existence is a perfection.

As brilliant as Bernstein's argument is in arguing for the superiority of necessary existence, premise 2 of his argument depends upon the controversial Principle of Sufficient Reason. Below I supplement premise 2 with a premise that does not rely on the PSR, yet, gets us to the same conclusion.

1. Necessarily, for all things ϕ , if ϕ is an imperfection then being possibly ϕ is an imperfection.
2. Necessarily, *lacking complete sovereignty* is an imperfection that all contingent beings possibly have.
3. Therefore, necessarily, all contingent beings are imperfect.

In order for God to be sovereign over a world, he must exist in that world. It would be strange to say that the greatest conceivable being lacks providential control over even a single possible world. It is greater for God to be the creator and sustainer of all possible worlds as opposed to a finite amount of worlds. Since a factually necessary being fails to exist in every possible world, it follows that it lacks complete

sovereignty. A being with necessary existence can be completely sovereign over all actual and possible state of affairs. If this argument is correct, then necessary existence is a perfection with or without the Principle of Sufficient Reason.

A final concern regarding premise 2 of Bernstein's modal ontological argument concerns Guanilo style parodies again. Can one not just assign necessary existence to whatever being or idea of a being that one wants to exist, like Gaunilo's greatest possible island? Viney and Shields, authors of the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on Charles Hartshorne's ontological argument, write:

Attaching necessary existence to a being that is properly conceived as contingent is the reverse of the error of attaching contingent existence to a being that is properly conceived as necessary.... It is no accident that it was J. S. Mill, an empiricist, who made famous the question, 'Who made God?' If 'God' signifies a being unsurpassable by all others, then asking for the cause of God's existence is on a par with asking what is north of the North Pole. Both questions are grammatical, but both are also nonsensical (Viney & Shields 2015).

What this means is that necessary existence can only be applied to those beings in which it is natural to assign such a property. For example, it would be wholly appropriate to consider platonic or mathematical objects, and God as necessarily existing things. It would not however be appropriate to consider material things, like Guanilo's island, as necessarily existing. One would be hard pressed to find many philosophers or physicists who defend the idea that material things exist of metaphysical necessity.

Conclusion

To conclude, I hope to have given a useful definition of a great-making property. I also hope that I have sufficiently motivated premise 2 of the modal ontological argument. If my arguments are successful, then it appears that premise 2 of the modal ontological argument is more plausibly true than false. Examining premise 1 of the modal ontological argument, which concerns the metaphysical possibility of God, is beyond the scope of this paper.⁶ I end with a quote from an ontological argument specialist, Robert Maydole "Some ontological arguments are sound, do not beg the question, and are insulated from extant parodies. Yet good logic does convince sometimes. Other times, something else is needed" (Maydole 2009, 586).

⁶ For a defense of the first premise of the modal ontological argument, see Bernstein (2018).

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