

# MAYDOLE'S MODAL PERFECTION ARGUMENT (AGAIN)

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**Abstract:** In “On Oppy’s Objections to the Modal Perfection Argument,” *Philo* 8, 2, 2005, 123–30, Robert Maydole argues that his modal perfection argument—set out in his “The Modal Perfection Argument for a Supreme Being,” *Philo* 6, 2, 2003, 299–313—“remains arguably sound” in the face of the criticisms that I made of this argument in my “Maydole’s 2QS5 Argument,” *Philo* 7, 2, 2004, 203–11. I reply that Maydole is wrong: his argument is fatally flawed, and his attempts to avoid the criticisms that I have made of his argument are to no avail.

Maydole claims that the following argument—or, at any rate, a more sophisticated version of this argument, the further complexities of which will not be relevant to the following discussion—is sound:

M<sub>1</sub>: A property is a perfection only if its negation is not a perfection  
M<sub>2</sub>: Perfections entail only perfections.  
M<sub>3</sub>: *Supremity* is a perfection.  
(Therefore) A supreme being exists.

In this argument, perfections are taken to be properties that “it is better to have than not to have”; and *supremity* is the property of being greater than any other possible being.

## 1.

The main objection that I lodged against Maydole’s modal perfection argument is that it is obvious that M<sub>2</sub> is false. Suppose, for the sake of argument that M<sub>3</sub> is true; i.e. suppose that *supremity* is a perfection. Then, by M<sub>2</sub>, the property of *being either supreme or else a mass murderer* is a perfection. But—as the cases of Hitler and Stalin make clear—it is evident that the property of

## PHIJO

*being either supreme or else a mass murderer* is not a property that it is better to have than not to have: it would have been much better than not had Hitler and Stalin both lacked this property. Hence it is not true that perfections entail only perfections, at least granted that supremacy is a perfection.

In response to this objection, Maydole (2005:124f.) writes:

How then does Oppy support the claim that the property of *being either supreme or else a mass murderer* is not a perfection? His argument seems to be this:

1. If the property of *being supreme or else a mass murderer* were a perfection, then it would be better for Hitler and Stalin to have it than not.
2. It would be better for Hitler and Stalin to lack the property of *being supreme or else a mass murderer* than it is for them to possess this property.
3. (Therefore) The property of *being supreme or else a mass murderer* is not a perfection.

Why would it be better than not for Hitler and Stalin to lack the property of being supreme or else a mass murderer? Oppy never tells us, appealing only to what is he says clear and intuitive.

I disagree. While it would have been far better than not had Stalin and Hitler lacked the property of *being a mass murderer*, and while the property of *being a mass murderer* does entail the property of *being supreme or else a mass murderer*, it does not thereby follow that it would have been far better than not had Stalin and Hitler lacked the property of *being supreme or else a mass murderer*. It would also have to be assumed that properties entailed by properties that it is better to lack than not are themselves properties that it is better to lack than not. But that assumption is false. Many of the necessary conditions of properties that it is better to lack than not are either neutral or better to have than not.

I agree with Maydole that it is not true that properties entailed by properties that it is better to lack than not are necessarily themselves properties that it is better to lack than not. However, I disagree with his suggestion that one *needs* this assumption in order to defend the claim that the property of *being either supreme or else a mass murderer* is not a property that it is better to possess than not.

Let's begin with a warm-up exercise. Suppose we grant to Maydole—as I have already implicitly done, at least for the sake of the present discussion—that we can sort properties into three mutually exclusive classes: those that it is better to have than not to have, those that it is worse to have than not to have, and those that are neither better to have than not to have nor worse to have than not to have. (I take it that it is indeed obvious that it *cannot* be true of a single property that it is both better to have than not to have, and worse to have than not to have.) Now, suppose that B is one of the properties that it is better to have than not to have, and that W is one of the properties that it is worse to have than not to have. How should we classify the property *B* or *W*? I take it that symmetry considerations alone suggest that this can only be a property that it is neither better to have than not to have nor worse to have than not to have. But, of course, the point of my

## PHIJO

chosen example is that, while *supremity* belongs to the same class as B, *being a mass murderer* belongs to the same class as W; whence it surely follows that *being either supreme or else a mass murderer* is neither better to have than not to have nor worse to have than not to have.

If this argument is not found totally persuasive, there is another feature of the chosen example to which appeal can also be made. I take it that it is highly plausible to claim that it is simply *impossible* for any human being to possess the property of *supremity*. Hence, in particular, it is *impossible* for either Hitler or Stalin to possess the property of *supremity*, simply because of the fact that they are human beings. But, if that's right, then what sense are we to make of the claim that it is better than not for either of *them* to possess the property of *being either supreme or else a mass murderer*? They are the kinds of things that can only possess the property of *being either supreme or else a mass murderer* by being mass murderers. How, then, can it be better than not that *they* possess this disjunctive property?

Even if it is denied that it is impossible for either Hitler or Stalin to possess the property of *supremity*, it seems that one can also point out that disjunctive properties such as the property of being either supreme or else a mass murderer are bound to be "supervenient". That is: any being that possesses a disjunctive property of this kind does so only because it possesses one of the disjoined properties. In particular, in the case of Hitler or Stalin, he only possesses the property of *being either supreme or else a mass murderer* because he possesses the property of *being a mass murderer*. The relevant consideration is thus not that the property of *being a mass murderer* entails the property of *being either supreme or else a mass murderer*; rather, the relevant consideration is that, in many cases the property of *being either supreme or else a mass murderer* is only possessed or instantiated because the property of *being a mass murderer* is possessed or instantiated. In *those* cases, it is very hard to believe that it is better than not that the property of *being either supreme or else a mass murderer* is possessed or instantiated.

It may help to fix ideas to consider a different case. Suppose that—at least for the sake of argument—we grant that it is better than not to be wise, and that it is worse than not to be cowardly. How should we think about the property of *being either wise or cowardly*? At least *prima facie*, it seems plausible to say the following. It is better than not to be *either wise or cowardly* just in case one is wise and not cowardly; it is worse than not to be *either wise or cowardly* just in case one is cowardly and not wise; and it is hard to know what to say in the case that one is both wise and cowardly. If this is right, then it seems to me that the plausible conclusion to draw is that, *sans phrase*, the property of *being either wise or cowardly* is neither better to have than not to have, nor worse to have than not to have. Of course, I am not here supposing that a property is better to have than not to have *only if* it is necessarily true that, in every case, it is better that the property is instantiated than not instantiated. It *might* be—for example—that the property of *being intelligent* is better to have than not to have, even though there are cases in which it is not better that the property is instantiated than not instantiated,

## PHIJO

as, for example, in cases of extremely cruel and vindictive people. We do have an intuitive sense that some properties are *virtues*, even though there are cases in which the exemplification of a virtue makes matters worse rather than better. But, whereas *intelligence* is a plausible candidate for being a virtue, the property of *being either wise or cowardly* is not a plausible such candidate. (Plainly, some might be drawn to the conclusion that the case of intelligence shows that there are no—or very few—properties that are, *sans phrase*, better to have than not to have. If we go in this direction—perhaps even going so far as to question the intelligibility of the suggestion that there are properties that are, *sans phrase*, better to have than not to have—then, at the very least, we shall be drawn to the conclusion that intelligence is not a property that it is better to have than not to have. As we shall go on to note, *this* line of reasoning has interesting consequences for discussion of the claim that the set of properties that it is worse to have than not is closed under logical entailment.)

Before I close this section, let me try one more case. Consider the property of *being either slovenly or slothful or jealous or murderous or cowardly or stupid or venal or just*. (Strictly, this formulation can be taken to do duty for a far more complex disjunctive property in which each of the properties that it is worse to possess than not is a disjunct, and in which the property of *being just* is the sole further disjunct.) Maydole would say that it is obvious that, *sans phrase*, it is better than not to possess this property (because this property is entailed by justice, justice is one of the properties that, *sans phrase*, it is better to possess than not, and the set of properties that, *sans phrase*, it is better to possess than not is closed under logical entailment). I do not think that I will be alone in finding this claim to be a tiny bit implausible.

## 2.

There are a number of other issues that Maydole takes up in his paper, and upon which I would like to make some comments. The first issue concerns parodies of Maydole's argument that seek to establish the existence of a most imperfect being.

Maydole begins by objecting to the following argument:

N<sub>1</sub>: A property is an imperfection only if its negation is not an imperfection.

N<sub>2</sub>: Imperfections entail only imperfections.

N<sub>3</sub>: Being paltry is an imperfection

(Therefore) A paltry being exists

Taking it that a property is an imperfection if and only if it is not a perfection, Maydole (2003) points out that N<sub>1</sub> is plainly false under this assumption, since there are properties that are neither perfections nor imperfections, and whose negations are neither perfections nor imperfections. In response, I pointed out that this particular objection fails if we suppose that imperfections are properties that it is worse to have than not to have.

## PHIJO

Contra Maydole (2005), I did *not* suggest that the parody is successful under this interpretation. It is *obvious* that, if I suppose that the property of *being either supreme or else a mass murderer* refutes  $M_2$ , then I will suppose that that property will also refute  $N_2$  under this revised interpretation. My point was merely that there is a straightforward amendment to the above argument that evades the only objection that Maydole (2003) made against it.

Maydole (2005) makes a different objection to the argument on the revised interpretation. He says that, while some might suppose that the property of *being a McCarthyist* is an imperfection, that property entails the perfection of *being intelligent*. Setting aside the question whether the fact that some people might *suppose* that the property of *being a McCarthyist* is an imperfection provides any reason at all to suppose that the property of *being a McCarthyist* actually *is* an imperfection, the obvious point to make here is that there is a line of thought—noted at the end of the previous section—that would cast doubt on the idea that the property of *being intelligent* is itself a perfection. If perfections must be such that it is necessarily true that, in every case, it is better that the property is instantiated than not instantiated, then—as the example in question can be taken to make clear—it simply isn't true that intelligence is a perfection. (Of course, so long as we grant that there are some cases of perfections and imperfections, the kind of objection that I made in section 1 above will continue to suffice to refute both  $M_2$  and  $N_2$ . But it is not at all clear that, on the line of thought under consideration, we now have reason to say that the parody involving imperfection is notably worse than the argument that Maydole wishes to defend.)

Of course, it is worth pointing out that, since Maydole's argument has an evidently false premise, the question of whether that argument is susceptible of parody is of merely academic interest. In the case of Anselm's ontological argument, it is a live and interesting question whether it is susceptible of parody in the style of Gaunilo precisely because it is very difficult to make a decisive assessment of the exact failing—if there is one—that is to be found in Anselm's argument. A similar point applies to Gödel's ontological argument: it is a live and interesting question whether that argument is susceptible of parody precisely because it is no straightforward matter to make a decisive assessment of the exact failing—if there is one—that is to be found in that argument. (In Anselm's argument, it is also true that it is quite unclear exactly how the argument is best understood. That provides an additional reason for interest in parody, since we can match text to text without worrying about the details of formalization. Of course, this further consideration does not apply in the case of Maydole's argument.)

### 3.

Maydole (2005) also provides a critique of my attempt to show that there are successful parodies of Gödel's ontological argument.

For the purposes of this discussion, roughly following Maydole's lead, we may suppose that Gödel's ontological argument runs as follows:

## PHIJO

- A<sub>1</sub>: A property is positive only if its negation is not positive.  
A<sub>2</sub>: Positive properties entail only positive properties.  
A<sub>3</sub>: The property of being God-like—i.e. the property of possessing all the positive properties—is positive.  
A<sub>4</sub>: Positive properties are necessarily positive.  
A<sub>5</sub>: Necessary existence is a positive property.  
(Therefore, there exists a being whose *essential* properties are all and only the God-like properties.)

Here, we only *roughly* follow Maydole’s lead, because Maydole suggests that the property of being God-like is the property of possessing *all and only* the positive properties, and takes the conclusion of the argument to be the claim that there exists a God-like being. But this formulation does not do justice either to Gödel’s argument or to intuition, since it seems pretty clear that there are many properties for which it is true that neither those properties nor their negations are positive, even though it must be true in each case that either the property or its negation is possessed by a God-like being. (Consider, for example, the property of weighing at least two kilograms. It is hard to see any reason to suppose either that the property of *weighing at least two kilograms* is positive or that the property of *not weighing at least two kilograms* is positive. Certainly, neither of these properties is “simple and absolute,” nor “moral/aesthetic,” nor a “pure attribution”—cf. Maydole (2005:127).)

Elsewhere, I have argued that there are many successful parodies of the above argument, each having the following form:

- A1\*: A property is positive\* only if its negation is not positive\*.  
A2\*: Positive\* properties entail only positive\* properties.  
A3\*: The property of being God-like\*—i.e. of possessing all the positive\* properties—is positive\*.  
A4\*: Positive\* properties are necessarily positive\*.  
A5\*: Necessary existence is a positive\* property.  
(Therefore, there exists a being whose *essential* properties are all and only the positive\* properties.)

Here’s the guiding idea. Start by granting, as Gödel supposes, that there is a set P of positive properties. By hypothesis, P is closed under entailment and necessitation. Hence, there is a set of properties P’—each of which is of the form *necessarily A*, where A is not itself of the form *necessarily B*—that entails P. (Why? Because the underlying modal logic is supposed to be S5, which guarantees that *necessarily necessarily A* is in P if *necessarily A* is in P; and because A<sub>4</sub> guarantees that A belongs to P whenever *necessarily A* belongs to P.) Suppose we order the members of P’, starting with the property of *being necessarily existent* and the (impredicative) property of *necessarily having all of the properties in P*. Go through the remaining properties in the order in which they are listed, and, in each case, remove that property from the set exactly if it is entailed by the remaining properties in the set. At the end of this process, we shall have a set P” that (1) contains the property of *being nec-*

## PHIJO

essarily existent and the (impredicative) property of *necessarily having all of the properties in P*, (2) entails P, and (3) is such that none of the properties—except perhaps for the property of *being necessarily existent* and the (impredicative) property of *necessarily having all of the properties in P*—is entailed by the rest of the properties in the set.

Suppose that  $P''$  is the set  $\{\textit{being necessarily existent, necessarily having all of the properties in P, S}_1, \dots, S_n\}$ . Form the set  $P'''$  by removing some of the members, other than the property of *being necessarily existent* and the property of *necessarily having all of the properties in P*, from  $P''$ . Suppose, then, that  $P'''$  is the set  $\{\textit{being necessarily existent, necessarily having all of the properties in P, S}'_1, \dots, S'_m\}$ , where  $m < n$ . Let  $P^*$  be the set that is formed by taking the logical closure of the set  $\{\textit{being necessarily existent, necessarily having all of the properties in P}^*, S_1^*, \dots, S_n^*\}$ , where  $S_i^*$  is obtained from  $S_i$  by replacement of P with  $P^*$ . The property of being God-like\* just is the property of having all of the properties in  $P^*$ .

Now, if it were reasonable to conclude from Gödel's argument that there is a God-like being—i.e. a being whose essential properties are just the positive properties—then it would also be reasonable to conclude that each different version of the parody argument establishes the existence of a distinct God-like\* being—i.e. a being whose essential properties are just the positive\* properties. Of course, these beings are distinct because they differ in their essential properties; and, of course, no one should believe in all of these distinct “near-supreme” beings. (If we had allowed the initial formulation of Maydole's version of Gödel's argument—in which a being is God-like if and only if it possesses all and only the positive properties—then the parody argument certainly would *not* succeed in establishing the existence of a God-like\* being that possesses all and only the positive\* properties. But, as noted above, there are good reasons for not allowing *that* formulation of Gödel's argument.)

Against the argument that I have just outlined, Maydole (2005:127) makes the following objection:

Oppy effectively defines the positive\* properties as those properties that can be generated from the union of a certain proper subset of properties that generate the positive properties with the unit set of the property of being God-like.\* The circularity here is vicious enough to make it particularly difficult to understand just what properties Oppy has in mind when he uses the terms “positive”\* and “God-like.”\*

To ward of one possible confusion, I should emphasize that there is no *particular* property that is *denoted* or *expressed* by the term “positive\*” or the term “God-like\*”. What I have described is a *recipe* for producing parodies of Gödel's argument; and different particular properties are required for different applications of that recipe. If, then, Maydole has a serious objection here, it must be to the idea that the recipe provides enough information to ensure that there are properties of the kind that are required for the construction of arguments that conform to the recipe. It may help to begin with a simplified model, in order to try to fix some of the relevant considerations.

## PHIJO

Suppose, for the purposes of making a model, that, in a particular application of the recipe, P” consists of just five properties: *{being necessarily existent, necessarily having all of the properties in P, being omniscient, being omnipotent, being perfectly good}*. It seems plausible to claim that the property of *necessarily having all of the properties in P* is entailed jointly by the properties of *being necessarily existent, being omniscient, being omnipotent, and being perfectly good*. (Remember that, in Maydole’s system, necessarily coextensive properties are identified.) Consequently, it seems plausible to claim that the property of *necessarily having all of the properties in {being necessarily existent, being omniscient, being omnipotent}* will be a satisfactory candidate for the property of necessarily being P\*: P\* will be (necessarily co-extensive with) the set of properties obtained from the logical closure of the set: *{being necessarily existent, being necessarily omnipotent, being necessarily omniscient, necessarily having all of the properties in the set {being necessarily existent, being necessarily omniscient, being necessarily omnipotent}}*, and the property of being God-like\* will be the property of having as essential properties exactly the properties that are in this set. In this application of the model, the argument purports to establish the existence of a necessarily existent, necessarily omniscient, necessarily omnipotent but *not* necessarily perfectly good being—hence, a being distinct from the one whose existence is purportedly established by Gödel’s argument.

Maydole (2005:128) claims that Gödel’s argument is superior to my parodies because Gödel

suggests a way to arguably ground his axioms on his intuitions and insights . . . [whereas Oppy has no way to break] the circle with his own intuitions and insights about what being positive\* and being God-like\* really mean. Accordingly, [Oppy] does not have a way to arguably show that the axioms of his Gödel\* parody are true just in case those of Gödel’s argument are true.

I disagree with the first part of this claim. My “intuition and insight” is that, if there really is a property of God-likeness that is picked out by Gödel’s intuitions, then there will be a property of Godlikeness\* that is just like God-likeness except that perfect goodness (and everything that is bound up with perfect goodness) is absent; and there will be another property of Godlikeness\* that is just like God-likeness except that omnipotence (and everything that is bound up with omnipotence) is absent; and there will be another property of Godlikeness\* that is just like God-likeness except that both omnipotence and perfect goodness (and everything that is bound up with omnipotence and perfect goodness) is removed; and so on. So long as we allow that, say, omnipotence and perfect goodness are logically independent properties—i.e. so long as we allow that either *could* be possessed without the other—then it seems to me to be intuitively obvious that there are only technical difficulties that confront the description of a property that is like God-likeness but for considerations to do with, say, perfect goodness.

I also object to the second part of Maydole’s claim. The point of the parody is not—and cannot be—in any way dependent upon the claim that the axioms of the parody are true just in case the axioms of Gödel’s argument

## PHIJO

are true. I don't wish to deny the claim that, if there is a God-like being, then it is highly unlikely—and perhaps even impossible—that there are also God-like\* beings. But the point of the parody is that there is good reason to say that there is *something* wrong with Gödel's argument. If we grant that there is a property of God-likeness, then we should also grant that there are properties of God-likeness\*; but, if Gödel's argument shows that there is a God-like beings, then the parody arguments show that there are God-like\* beings. Since no-one should believe that there are God-like\* beings, we conclude either that there is no property of God-likeness, or else that at least one of the premises in Gödel's argument is false. (Why might there be no property of God-likeness? Because there is nothing that is picked out by the expression “positive property”! Even setting aside worries that one might have about the impredicativity of this property, the striking point is that neither Gödel nor anyone else has given a convincing account of what the positive properties might be. Except for the partial characterization that is provided by Gödel's axioms, we are entirely in the dark, Maydole's claims about Gödel's “intuitions and insights” notwithstanding.)

### 4.

The third of the issues that are raised in Maydole (2005) and that I wish to take up here concerns the standing of the claim that it is impossible for there to be a God-like being. As I noted in Oppy (2004), someone who rejects the claim that it is possible for there to be a God-like\* being can reject the corresponding Gödel-parody that seeks to establish the existence of that being. Those who accept that there is a God-like being will almost certainly insist that it is not possible for any of the God-like\* beings to exist; and I see no reason for saying that they are unreasonable in so judging *in the light of* their further judgment that there is a God-like being. But what of those who do not accept that there is a God-like being? Maydole (2005:129) writes:

The committed non-theist refuses to believe that a supreme being is possible, and then infers that MPA is not sound. This is like putting the cart before the horse. Since the premises of MPA logically imply that a supreme being is possible, we should first determine the truth value of those premises in a way that is epistemically independent of the proposition that a supreme being is possible, and then commit or not to the truth of that proposition. [In this passage, Maydole uses “MPA” to refer to *his* modal perfection argument. For the purposes of the subsequent discussion, I shall pretend that that argument is not defeated by the considerations advanced in Section 1 above. The general issues that Maydole raises also apply to other cases in which parodies of ontological arguments are invoked to challenge arguments that rest of assumptions about possibilities that are accepted only by believers; it is those general considerations that I am interested in pursuing.]

Here it seems to me that Maydole is just mistaken. The “committed non-theist”—say, John Mackie or Quentin Smith—has reasons for believing that there *is* no supreme being. But, of course, by a simple inference, if there is

no supreme being, that it is *impossible* for there to be a supreme being. So there is no “putting the cart before the horse” on the part of “committed non-theists”. Rather, the many reasons that the “committed non-theist” has for saying that there is no supreme being are all reasons for the “committed non-theist” to say that it is impossible for there to be a supreme being. Moreover, given that the “committed non-theist” has good reason to hold that it is impossible for there to be a supreme being, the “committed non-theist” has good reason to deny that arguments whose premises entail that it is possible that there is a supreme being are sound. If I have good reason for thinking that there is no supreme being, then I have good reason for saying that there must be something wrong with, say, Gödel's ontological argument—and it is absurd to suppose that I *must* “set aside” these reasons when I come to make that assessment. True enough, if I am sufficiently astute, I will also be able to make further pronouncements about the validity of the argument, the truth of each of its premises, and the question of whether the argument is somehow subtly question-begging; but there is no reason at all to suppose that my rationality is somehow impugned if I am not able to do any of this and yet remain a “committed non-theist”. (In asking that we “determine the truth value of those premises in a way that is epistemically independent of the proposition that a supreme being is possible,” Maydole is asking that we set aside any reasons that we might have for supposing that there is no supreme being; but it is absurd to advise people to try to determine the truth of propositions by first setting aside considerations that are relevant to the assessment of the truth of those propositions!)

Prior to making the remarks just commented upon, Maydole (2005:129) engages in a “protracted analysis” that is meant to establish that

[W]hether or not the many parallels to MPA are sound is surely irrelevant to the soundness of MPA itself, as well as to the reasonableness of either accepting or refusing to accept that MPA is sound. What is relevant ... is whether or not it is reasonable to believe that a supreme being is possible. The reference to the parallels is a red herring.

Here, again, it seems to me that Maydole is mistaken. I do not believe that the soundness of the parallels to MPA is irrelevant to the soundness of MPA itself. It is plausible to suppose that, if MPA is sound, then none of the parallels to MPA is sound; and it is plausible to suppose for at least some of the parallels to MPA, that if they are sound, then MPA is not sound. (Could there be more than one being that is necessarily omnipotent? Could there be more than one necessarily existent being that is the sole originating cause of the existence of all contingently existing things?) However, this is something of a side issue. The more important consideration, as I have already noted, is that the point of the parallels is not to try to persuade the proponent of MPA that MPA is *unsound*. Rather, the point of the parallels is to try to persuade the proponent of MPA that MPA is *unpersuasive*, i.e. that MPA is not capable of rationally persuading reasonable people who do not already accept that there is a supreme being to change their views.

From the standpoint of the non-believer, the dialectical situation is as

follows. The proponent of MPA supposes that there is a well-defined property of Godlikeness, and that it is possible that this property is instantiated. But, plausibly, if there is a well-defined property of Godlikeness, then there are also many different well-defined Godlikeness\* properties. However—and this is the key point—there is no evident *neutral* reason to favor the hypothesis that it is possible that there is a being that exemplifies Godlikeness over one or another of the hypotheses that it is possible that a being exemplifies some kind of Godlikeness\*. Even if we overlook the point that these hypotheses conflict with one another, we have the best of reasons to suppose that not all of these hypotheses are true: it is simply incredible to suppose that these arguments could establish the existence of so many different near-perfect beings. Since there is no evident neutral reason to favor some of these hypotheses over others, the reasonable course of action for non-believers to take is to reject them all. Consequently—*pace* Maydole—consideration of the many parallel arguments does make a contribution to the case that MPA is not a persuasive argument.

## 5.

The final issue upon which I wish to comment concerns the standards for assessment of alleged proofs of the existence of God. It seems to me that Maydole takes the view that his MPA argument is a successful argument unless opponents of the argument can convince him of the falsity of at least one of the premises. In his concluding remarks, he emphasizes that he continues to believe that his argument is “arguably sound”. Moreover, against my claim that his argument is plainly incapable of persuading reasonable non-theists to change their mind on the question of the existence of a supreme being, Maydole (2005:130) contents himself with the observation that “persuading a committed non-theist . . . to change his or her mind, even with reasonable persuasion, typically requires more than philosophy and logic can provide”. And, Maydole (2005: 124) adds:

MPA has premises that themselves must be supported by reasoning, and it is embedded in a strong modal logic that is hotly contested by some philosophers, rightly or wrongly, because of its metalogical and metaphysical presuppositions. But this is no cause for despair or reason to think that MPA is a bad argument, any more than it would be for most other substantive philosophical arguments that equally rest on metalogical and metaphysical presuppositions. In short, hardly anything in philosophy is ever settled.

I agree with Maydole that there are perennial philosophical disputes that turn on deep differences, some metalogical, some metaphysical, and some of other kinds. I agree, too, that it is implausible to suppose that there are, within our reach, arguments that are capable of settling these perennial disputes. Of course, we can—and do—produce arguments that decisively refute one or another formulation of a given position in perennial disputes; but showing that one formulation of, say, metaphysical dualism is logically inconsistent, or massively improbable in the light of well-established science,

or the like, creates no more than a minor ripple in the perennial dispute about the nature of mind. While the most exciting progress in philosophy comes when someone articulates a detailed formulation of a new position on some of the perennial philosophical questions, we typically—and, in my view, rightly—do not suppose that this kind of progress will ever bring debate about those perennial questions to a close.

Now, given this view about the nature of perennial philosophical dispute, what role should we see for the standard analytical philosophical technique of setting out an argument in standard form, with numbered premises and identified inferential rules? While it is uncontroversial that this technique has a place in the examination of the writings of other philosophers—in order, for example, to facilitate the assessment of the inferential moves that they make—it is an interesting question whether we should expect to see much value in the setting out of one's own *arguments* in this way, except in cases where one supposes that one's argument is utterly decisive. In particular, one should surely be given to wonder what could be the point of setting out an argument of your own with the conclusion, say, that God exists, if the only recommendation that you have to make of that argument is that it is “arguably sound”. Given the above view of the nature of perennial philosophical dispute, what possible interest attaches to the claim that a given argument of yours is “arguably sound,” i.e. is such that its conclusion is supported by its premises, and is such that you—and others who are of a like mind to you on the relevant perennial questions—accept its premises?

Given that—as I am prepared to allow—there are reasonable people who reasonably believe that God exists, as well as reasonable people who reasonably deny that God exists, it is bound to be the case that there are valid arguments with the conclusion that God exists that have premises all of which are accepted by some, or many, or most of those who believe that God exists, but belief in whose falsity comes naturally and reasonably to those who reasonably reject the conclusion that God exists. Moreover, under the same concession, it is bound to be the case that there are invalid arguments with the same conclusion that have premises all of which are accepted by some, or many, or most of those who believe that God exists, where it is an extraordinarily difficult matter to determine that those arguments are invalid. Finally, under the same concession, it is bound to be the case that there are valid arguments with the same conclusion that have one or more premises belief in whose falsity is required—but in a way that is utterly unobvious—by belief in the falsity of that conclusion (so that this belief would come naturally and reasonably to those who reasonably do not believe that God exists if only they had greater logical acumen). Given the recognition that the question of the existence of God is one of the perennial philosophical questions, I take it that it is quite clear that there is no *genuine* intellectual interest that attaches to the activity of formulating arguments that fall into any of the above categories. Unless you think that you've got an argument for the existence of God that *ought* to persuade non-believers

to change their minds on the question of God's existence, you don't really have something that's worth calling "an *argument* for the existence of God".

It is perhaps worth pointing out that philosophy of religion is just about the only area of philosophy where the activity of setting out one's *own* self-confessedly less-than-decisive arguments in standard form remains deeply entrenched. (Certainly, in other areas of philosophy, one rarely encounters this activity *coupled with* the move of claiming no more for one's premises than that they are consonant with one's own intuitions.) When one thinks about the major contributions to perennial philosophical debates in the past fifty years—by philosophers such as Quine, Davidson, Putnam, Kripke, and the like—one cannot help but be struck by the fact that they simply do not engage in the activity of setting out their *own* arguments in standard form, *except in* cases where they suppose that their arguments are utterly decisive. At the very least, it seems to me to be fair to end with a challenge: if Maydole thinks that there is some useful purpose that is served by his articulation of modal perfection arguments, it is surely incumbent upon him to let us know what that useful purpose might be. Merely saying that he does as others in philosophy of religion do is not enough; for, if I'm right, standard practice in philosophy of religion is simply indefensible.

At the beginning of his paper, Maydole (2005:123f.) makes some observations about the nature of philosophical argument:

A demonstration according to Aristotle is a sound argument with premises that are undemonstrated and immediate, self-evident or intuitively obvious—and not thereby eligible for being disputed by rational agents. I doubt that there are few if any interesting demonstrations in philosophy. Most proofs for and against the existence of God, including the MPA, are not demonstrations in this strong sense. . . . But this no cause for despair or reason to think that MPA is a bad argument, anymore than it would be for most other substantive philosophical arguments that equally rest on meta-logical and metaphysical presuppositions.

The clear implication of these remarks is to suggest that I am asking more of arguments for the existence of God than it is reasonable to seek. However, as the above observations in this section should make clear, my complaint *here* is not that (a suitably modified version of) MPA fails to measure up to Aristotle's standards of demonstration; rather, the basis of my complaint *here* is the observation that it is utterly implausible to suppose that MPA—or any of its ilk—could serve some useful purpose by way of its present introduction into the perennial philosophical dispute about the existence of God.