

Response to Maydole

At the conclusion to his response to Oppy (this volume), Maydole (this volume) claims: ‘I have parried [Oppy’s] critique by showing that my arguments do not beg the question, and are either immune to his parodies or mendable with a minor fix’. Perhaps unsurprisingly, I disagree with this assessment of the state of play. On the one hand, I do not think that he has successfully parried the critique set out in Oppy (this volume); on the other hand, I think that there are places where he misrepresents the nature of that critique. I shall take up these points in turn.

1. ‘Anselm’s Ontological Argument’

In response to the criticisms in Oppy (this volume), Maydole (this volume) amends his rendition of ‘Anselm’s Ontological Argument’ so that it reads as follows:

1. The definite description ‘that than which it is not conceivable for something to be greater’ is understood.
2. ‘That than which it is not conceivable for something to be greater’ refers to that than which it is not conceivable for something to be greater.
3. The concept of whatever a definite description that is understood refers to has existence in the understanding.
4. It is conceivable that something is greater than anything that lacks a great-making property that it conceivably has and that only has great making properties essentially.
5. Existence in reality is a great making property.
6. Anything the concept of which has existence in the understanding conceivably has existence in reality.
7. It is not conceivable that something is greater than that than which it is not conceivable for something to be greater.
8. All essential properties of that than which it is not conceivable for something to be greater are great making properties.
9. (Hence) That than which it is not conceivable for something to be greater exists in reality.

As he notes—subject to minor correction on my part—the corresponding island-parody for this argument then runs as follows:

1. The definite description ‘that island than which it is not conceivable for some island to be greater’ is understood.
2. ‘That island than which it is not conceivable for some island to be greater’ refers to that island than which it is not conceivable for some island to be greater.
3. The concept of whatever a definite description that is understood refers to has existence in the understanding.
4. It is conceivable that some island is greater than any island that lacks a great-making property for islands that it conceivably has and that only has great making properties for islands essentially.
5. Existence in reality is a great making property for islands.

6. Anything the concept of which has existence in the understanding conceivably has existence in reality.
7. It is not conceivable that some island is greater than that island than which it is not conceivable for some island to be greater.
8. All essential properties of that island than which it is not conceivable for some island to be greater are great making properties for islands.
9. (Hence) That island than which it is not conceivable for some island to be greater exists in reality.

Maydole (this volume) claims that premise 8 in this parody is false:

All islands ... however great ... have the property of being material, which is hardly a great making property for islands ... Islands are ... essentially limited by their very nature of being islands ... and they thereby have some properties essentially that could not even be construed as great making properties for islands.

It seems to me that Maydole is just wrong about this. A great making property for islands is a property that contributes to making something a great island. *A fortiori*, any property that is essential to islands is a great making property for islands: something that lacks a property that is essential to islands is not an island and therefore certainly not a great island. Hence, in particular, *contra* Maydole, *being material* is a great making property for islands.

Since Maydole has so far only advanced this one argument, Maydole has not yet produced *any* considerations that speak more strongly in favour of premise 8 in the target argument than in favour of premise 8 in the parody.

2. 'The Descartes-Leibniz Ontological Argument'

In response to the criticism of Oppy (this volume), Maydole (this volume) offers the following argument in favour of the falsity of the fourth premise of the proffered parody of 'The Descartes-Leibniz Argument':

1. Every essential property of a supremely Q-perfect being is a Q-perfection
2. Some perfection is not a Q-perfection
3. Every Q-perfection is a perfection
4. The negation of the necessitation of a perfection is not a perfection
5. (Therefore) Nothing is supremely Q-perfect.

The key premise in this argument is 4. About it, Maydole (this volume) says:

[It] seems to be contained in the notion of a perfection; and it is implied by the conjunction of '(Y)(P(Y)→P(□Y))' and '(Y)(P(□Y)→~P(~□Y))', both of which seem intuitively obvious and intrinsic to what it means to be a perfection.

While I am happy with the claim that $(Y)(P(\Box Y) \rightarrow \sim P(\sim \Box Y))$, it is not at all obvious to me that $(Y)(P(Y) \rightarrow P(\Box Y))$. I think that libertarians about freedom will say that, while always freely choosing the good is a perfection, necessarily always freely choosing the good is impossible—and so, *a fortiori*, not a perfection. I am also tempted by the thought that, while washing your hands before dinner is a perfection—cleanliness *is* next to godliness—necessarily washing your hands before dinner is a psychological pathology! Even if this latter point is just a trick of ordinary language, it may nonetheless make some contribution to the thought that it is not simply intuitively obvious and intrinsic to what it means to be a perfection that $(Y)(P(Y) \rightarrow P(\Box Y))$.

My conclusion here is somewhat circumspect: I think that the jury is out on the question whether $(Y)(P(Y) \rightarrow P(\Box Y))$. If $(Y)(P(Y) \rightarrow P(\Box Y))$, then, I think, Maydole does have a satisfactory response to the Q-perfection parody of the ‘Descartes-Leibniz Argument’. In case that turns out to be so, let me offer an alternative parody for the ‘Descartes-Leibniz Argument’.

1. For every X and Y, if the property of being a Y is contained in the concept or essence of being an X, then necessarily everything that is an X is a Y.
2. The property of necessarily obtaining if obtaining at all is contained in the concept or essence of an initial entirely natural state that obtains necessarily if it obtains at all
3. It is possible that an initial entirely natural state that obtains necessarily if it obtains at all obtains
4. Necessarily, initial entirely natural states that obtain necessarily if they obtain at all are necessarily initial entirely natural states that obtain necessarily if they obtain at all
5. (Therefore) An initial entirely natural state that obtains necessarily if it obtains at all obtains.

This parody is plainly valid just in case the ‘Descartes-Leibniz Argument’ is valid. The first premise is the same in each argument. If anything, the second premise is more obvious in the parody than it is in the original argument. It is hard to see any reason to prefer the fourth premise of the original argument to the fourth premise of the parody. And—though I think that Maydole will disagree—it is hard to see any non-question-begging reason to prefer the third premise of the original argument to the third premise of the parody.

3. ‘The Modal Perfection Argument’

In response to the criticism of the ‘Modal Perfection Argument’ in Oppy (this volume), Maydole (this volume) makes very heavy weather of the regimentation of the expression ‘x is island-supreme’. I doubt that anyone will be surprised to learn that I intended it to be regimented as: $\Box (Ix \& (y)((Iy \& x \neq y) \rightarrow G^i xy))$. Maydole (this volume) objects that this regimentation would be ‘odd’:

[S]omething could be island-supreme in some possible world only if it were an island in every possible world. Now some properties might indeed be necessitative ... such as the

property of being valid, or the property of being a logical truth, or the property of being supreme. Yet the property of being an island is hardly one of them. Islands are contingent things, because they exist in some worlds and not others. ... So either the property of being island-supreme cannot be defined by ' $\Box (Ix \& (y)((Iy \& x \neq y) \rightarrow G^i xy))$ ' or there cannot be anything that is island-supreme in that sense.

But this is no objection at all to the claim that the 'Supreme Island Parody' succeeds. On the one hand, we can define terms however we like: I insist that 'x is island-supreme' $=_{\text{def}} \Box (Ix \& (y)((Iy \& x \neq y) \rightarrow G^i xy))$. On the other hand, I agree that nothing *is* island-supreme—whence it follows that nothing *can be* island-supreme; this, after all, is what makes us confident that the 'Supreme Island Parody' is not a good argument! (Perhaps I should add here that I would not be so quick to dismiss the trivialising theory of modality that says that there is only one possible world: in my opinion, that theory is not unattractive if there are no objective chances.)

Since Maydole grants that the 'Supreme Island Parody' is valid—on my intended regimentation of 'x is island-supreme'—iff the 'Modal Perfection Argument' is valid, the only live question is whether the Fool has more reason to accept one of the premises of the 'Modal Perfection Argument' than he has to accept the corresponding premise of the 'Supreme Island Parody'.

I do not think that Maydole denies that the first premise of the 'Supreme Island Parody'—*a property is an island-perfection only if its negation is not an island-perfection*—is no less acceptable to the Fool than the first premise of the 'Modal Perfection Argument'—*a property is a perfection only if its negation is not a perfection*.

I do not think that Maydole denies that the second premise of the 'Supreme Island Parody'—*island-perfections entail only island-perfections*—is no less acceptable to the Fool than the second premise of the 'Modal Perfection Argument'—*perfections entail only perfections*.

And I do not think that Maydole denies that the third premise of the 'Supreme Island Parody'—*the property of being island-supreme is an island-perfection*—is no less acceptable to the Fool than the third premise of the 'Modal Perfection Argument'—*the property of being supreme is a perfection*.

Remember: the Fool denies that there is either a supreme being or a supreme island. Consequently, the Fool denies that there is a set of properties—the perfections—that is non-trivially closed under entailment and that includes the property of being supreme; and the Fool also denies that there is a set of properties—the island-perfections—that is non-trivially closed under entailment and that includes the property of being island-supreme. What the Fool requires—and what Maydole's 'Modal Perfection Argument' manifestly does not deliver—is a non-question-begging argument for the revision of his opinion concerning only one of these alleged sets of properties.

4. 'The Temporal-Contingency Argument'

In response to the criticism of the 'Temporal-Contingency Argument' in Oppy (this volume), Maydole (this volume) makes a series of numbered points. I think that these numbered points are all vitiated by misunderstanding of the nature of the criticism that I made of his argument. So let me try again.

Suppose that the Fool is a Naturalist. *Ex hypothesi*, the Fool supposes that there are none but natural causes. So, the Fool supposes, there are two live hypotheses about global causal reality: either there is an infinite regress of natural causes, or there is an uncaused initial natural cause. In the latter case, there are two live sub-hypotheses: either the uncaused initial natural cause is necessary, or it is contingent. In the latter case, again, there are two live sub-hypotheses: either the uncaused initial natural cause involves something that exists of necessity, or it does not.

There is a range of live hypotheses that we can frame about the beliefs that the Fool has about the extent of alethic possibility. At one extreme, the Fool may suppose that alethic possibility is limited only by contradiction—and, in this case, the Fool will suppose that (consistent) conceivability is a proper guide to alethic possibility. At the other extreme, the Fool may suppose that alethic possibility is so tightly constrained that all possible worlds evolve according to the same laws, share some initial history, and differ only because of the outworkings of objective chance.

It is evident that, if we suppose that alethic possibility is sufficiently tightly constrained, then we must also suppose that live hypotheses need not be alethic possibilities: given that we are imagining a dispute that may involve defence and denial of the existence of allegedly necessary beings, we cannot coherently suppose that both sides of the dispute are alethic possibilities. However, if we are then to make sense of the dispute—from the standpoint of disputants on either side—we have to suppose that we can assign some content to the views of those on either side. So, I think, we are led to the idea that there are doxastic possibilities that are not alethic possibilities: there are alethic impossibilities that nonetheless can be consistently defended.

A full treatment of responses that the Fool might make to the 'Temporal-Contingency Argument' requires the examination of all cases. In the discussion in Oppy (this volume), I considered only one. I claimed that, if the Fool supposes that there is a necessary uncaused initial natural cause, and if the Fool adopts the most tightly constrained view of alethic possibility, then the Fool will plainly deny that the conjunction of the fourteen premises in the 'Temporal-Contingency Argument' is even possibly true. I thought—and still think—that this is enough to show that the Fool can reasonably resist the 'Temporal-Contingency Argument'. However, I also think that there are other options open to the Fool that also yield reasonable lines of resistance. For instance, the Fool might adopt the most tightly constrained view of alethic possibility while also supposing that there is an infinite regress of natural causes: in

this case, too, the Fool will plainly deny the conjunction of the premises in the ‘Temporal-Contingency Argument’ is even possibly true. Etc.

Without pretending to offer a full account, let me add the following observations:

1. If the Fool adopts the most tightly constrained view of alethic possibility while also supposing that there is an infinite regress of natural causes, then the Fool will deny that the conjunction of the second and third premises is so much as possible.
2. If the Fool adopts the most tightly constrained view of alethic possibility while also supposing that there is a necessary uncaused initial natural cause, then—on the assumption that there have only been finitely many natural things to date—the Fool will deny that the fifth premise is possible (since it is necessary that time begins with the necessary uncaused initial natural cause). On the other hand, if we suppose that there have been infinitely many natural things to date—because there were infinitely many natural things in the initial natural causal state—then the Fool will deny that the second premise is possible (since it is necessary that there are infinitely many natural things in the initial natural causal state).
3. If the Fool adopts the most tightly constrained view of alethic possibility while also supposing that there is a necessary uncaused initial natural cause, then the Fool will surely deny the possibility of the conjunction of the eighth and eleventh premises. If the Fool accepts that whatever exists of necessity *ipso facto* has a sufficient reason for its own existence in its necessity, then the Fool will plainly deny that it is possible that whatever has a sufficient reason for its own existence is unlimited—because the Fool will plainly deny that it is possible that the uncaused initial natural causal state is unlimited—and so will deny the possibility of the eleventh premise. On the other hand, if the Fool does not accept that whatever exists of necessity *ipso facto* has a sufficient reason for its own existence in its necessity, then the Fool can surely deny that it is possible that everything has a sufficient reason for its existence—because the Fool can then deny that it is possible that the uncaused initial natural causal state has a sufficient reason for its existence—and so can deny the possibility of the eighth premise.
4. If the Fool adopts something like the view that alethic possibility is limited only by contradiction, then the Fool will need to follow Maydole in making bold claims about the presence and absence of contradictions. Maydole (this volume) asserts: ‘It is logically possible that every temporally-necessary being that is a sufficient reason for its own existence is a being without limitations because it is simply not contradictory to assume otherwise’. Suppose that the Fool asserts: ‘It is logically possible that every being is a natural being, because it is simply not contradictory to assume otherwise’. (Surely this is a ‘fairly modest modal claim’, since ‘there is no apparent reason to think that it is incoherent or contradictory to suppose that every being is a natural being’.) We have a disagreement: Maydole supposes that the assertion of the possibility of the conjunction of his fourteen claims is ‘modest’; and the Fool supposes that the assertion of the possibility of there being none but natural beings is ‘modest’. But at least one of these ‘modest’ claims is mistaken (since Maydole’s claim entails

that it is possible that there is a supreme being, and the claim that it is possible that there is a supreme being (plausibly) entails that it is not possible that there are none but natural beings). To resolve this disagreement by argument, further considerations must be introduced; it would be plainly question-begging to insist at this point, in the absence of the introduction of further considerations, that argument has come down on one side or the other. And yet this is precisely the kind of insistence that Maydole makes.

5. Further Comments

1. In his discussion of 'Anselm's Ontological Argument', Maydole (this volume) writes:

Oppy intimates that AOA begs the question because I allow the quantifiers to range over possibilities ... This means, according to Oppy, that Anselm's Fool would have to grant the existence of God if she accepted both modal logic S5 and the belief that God must have necessary existence. ... There is no reason to think that AOA involves or presupposes S5; and it is a straw man to charge that AOA begs the question on that account. ... Actually, neither ' $\Box E$ ' nor ' $(E \rightarrow \Box E)$ ' is included in the meaning of the term 'God' as it is used in AOA. 'God' there means only 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived'.

Oppy (this volume) 'intimates' no such thing. The discussion of 'Anselm's Ontological Argument' in Oppy (this volume) has three parts: (i) a discussion of difficulties that confront the theoretical framework upon which 'Anselm's Ontological Argument' is established; (ii) the presentation of a parody of Maydole's proof; and (iii) an argument for the conclusion that 'Anselm's Ontological Argument' is question-begging. The material to which Maydole refers in the above comments belongs to (i), and not to (iii).

Here is a different way of getting at some of the theoretical difficulties that were the focus of the first part of my discussion of 'Anselm's Ontological Argument'. Consider the description 'the merely possible tallest Martian'. Surely this description is understood; perhaps one might even venture that it is at least as well understood as the description 'that being than which it is not conceivable for some being to be greater'. But, on Maydole's account, given that it is understood, it refers to the merely possible tallest Martian. Further, on Maydole's account, this entails that the concept of the merely possible tallest Martian exists in the understanding. But it is a premise in 'Anselm's Ontological Argument' that anything that concept of which has existence in the understanding conceivably has existence in reality. So, on Maydole's account, it follows that it is conceivable that the merely possible tallest Martian exists in reality. But that is inconceivable, because absurd: no *merely possible* thing can exist in reality! (Perhaps it is also worth observing that the final remark that Maydole makes in the passage cited above is entirely gratuitous, since the word 'God' appears nowhere in 'Anselm's Ontological Argument'.)

2. Maydole (this volume) wavers on what exactly is required for successful parody. At the beginning of his discussion of 'Anselm's Ontological Argument' he gets it right: 'A parody refutes a valid argument just in case it has the same valid structure, an absurdly false

conclusion, and premises that are *at least as* justifiable as those of the argument parodied' (my italics). However, in his discussion of the 'Descartes-Leibniz Argument', there is a departure from grace: 'Given that the corresponding first three premises of the DLA and the parody stand or fall together, it follows that the parody refutes the DLA only if the fourth premise of the parody is *more plausible than* the fourth premise of the DLA' (again, my italics).

Maydole (this volume) makes other more serious missteps in his discussion of 'begging the question' in connection with the 'Modal Perfection Argument':

Oppy claims that there is no non-question-begging reason to prefer the MPA to [an] atheistic inversion. ... To show that there is no non-question-begging reason to prefer the MPA to the AMPA, Oppy would have to prove a negative, a well nigh impossible task. I am led to believe, then, that he asserts the proposition 'There is no non-question-begging reason to prefer the MPA to the AMPA' as a rhetorical ploy instead of a philosophical truth.

Here is the relevant part of what I wrote:

Is there a non-question-begging reason to prefer Maydole's Modal Perfection Argument to this alternative argument? I don't think so. Certainly, Maydole has not provided us with one. ... For all that Maydole says—in the article presently under examination and elsewhere—he has provided no non-question-begging reason to prefer the hypothesis that supremacy is a perfection to the hypothesis that island-supremacy is an island-perfection. He may think it obvious that it is not the case that island-supremacy is an island-perfection, but many of us suppose that it is no less obvious that it is not the case that supremacy is a perfection (given that supremacy is taken to entail necessary existence).

I'm not sure that I have here *asserted* that there is no non-question-begging reason to prefer the MPA to the AMPA; indeed, one might be given to think that the suggestion that I have *asserted* this should be deemed a rhetorical ploy on Maydole's part! More importantly, I think that Maydole has lost sight of the larger picture. If the MPA is to be *preferred* to the AMPA, then it must be that the MPA gives the Fool greater reason to accept the claim that there is a supreme being than the AMPA gives a believer in the existence of a supreme being reason to accept the claim that there is no supreme being. (Equivalently, if the MPA is to be preferred to the AMPA, then the MPA must give someone who is *completely undecided* between the claim that there is a supreme being and the claim that there is no supreme being more reason to accept the claim that there is a supreme being than the AMPA gives that one reason to accept the claim that there is no supreme being.) To repeat what I said above, I see no reason to think that this condition is satisfied.

Maydole (this volume) says:

To show that a particular reason or argument λ is a non-question-begging reason to prefer the MPA to the AMPA two things must be shown. First, λ must not beg the question. Second, λ must make a stronger case for ‘Supremity is a perfection’ than all or some other cases that are or might be made for ‘There is no supreme being’. ... The best that one could hope to accomplish would be to show that λ makes a stronger case for ‘Supremity is a perfection’ than some specific reason or argument provides for asserting ‘There is no supreme being’. Since Oppy does not provide any such reason or argument, I can only be reasonably expected to provide a ‘plausible’ non-question-begging reason or argument for why supremacy is a perfection, which I have already given.

This is, I think, confused. MPA and AMPA are *arguments*. When we ask whether there is reason to prefer one to another, we are asking whether there is reason to suppose that one is a *better argument* than the other. We should not confuse this question with the further question whether there are better arguments for the premises of one or other of MPA and AMPA. At the very least, it seems reasonable to insist that, if you think that there are better arguments for the premises of MPA than for the premises of AMPA, then you should explicitly set out the expanded version of MPA with those premises included, so that an assessment can be made of the merits of the expanded argument.

3. Maydole (this volume) writes:

It is a common criticism of many flawed ontological arguments that they ‘define God into existence’. Oppy strongly suggests that my MPA is similarly flawed when he says that my claim that something is supreme by virtue of its perfections ‘builds in the requirement that necessary existence is one of the requirements of supremacy’ and implies that something is supreme ‘only if that thing exists in every possible world’. ... What might and may be included in the concepts of some things is the conditional concept of the property of existing necessarily if at all. And, contrary to what Oppy intimates, this inclusion is perfectly innocuous: it neither defines a being into existence, nor underwrites a begging the question fallacy.

These remarks, too, seem to me to be based on misunderstanding. Maydole (2009:581) says the following: ‘M3 (‘the property of being supreme is a perfection’) is true because it is reasonable to assume that a thing is supreme iff it is necessarily greater than everything else solely by virtue of having some set of perfections’. In Oppy (this volume), I objected to *this justification for M3* on the grounds that, whereas it might be unobjectionable to suppose that being the greatest possible being is a perfection (which would arguably justify the claim that x is supreme in world w just in case for every possible world w' , for every possible thing x' , if x in w is distinct from x' in w' , then x in w is greater than x' in w'), it is not unobjectionable to suppose that being the greatest being in every possible world is a perfection (which is what would be needed to justify the claim that x is supreme in w just in case for every possible world w' and any x' distinct from x in w' , x in w is greater than x' in w').

It is important to note that this is *not* an objection to MPA; but it *is* an objection to the claim that Maydole has provided a non-question-begging reason to believe the key premise of MPA, or to prefer the key premise of MPA to the key premise of AMPA. The claim is not that Maydole is defining God into existence, or somehow formulating improper definitions; rather, the claim is that Maydole has provide no support at all for the claim that the Fool ought to be moved to amend his views upon consideration of Maydole's MPA (and hence no support at all for the claim that Maydole's MPA establishes that there is some inconsistency or incoherence in the beliefs of the Fool).

References

- Maydole, R. (2009) 'The Ontological Argument' in W. Craig and J. Moreland (eds.) *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology* Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 553-87
- Maydole, R. (this volume) 'Ontological Arguments Redux'
- Oppy, G. (this volume) 'Maydole on Ontological Arguments'