Review of Nagasawa, Y. (2017) Maximal God: A New Defence of Perfect Being Theism Oxford: Oxford University Press, xiii+225

In the concluding section of his book, Nagasawa writes:

> As far as the modal ontological argument is concerned, perfect being theism wins. … The modal ontological argument is … formally valid … and all of the premises do seem to be true; I cannot think of any successful objection to them. Hence, it seems to me that the argument is no less compelling than many other philosophical arguments that are widely considered to be persuasive. … If [atheists] initially agree with the possibility premise but reject it after realising that it entails that God exists, then that would be an *ad hoc* move. I hope to have shown that the modal ontological argument is compelling enough … for those who are willing to avoid such an *ad hoc* move. (206)

The big idea in the book is that, if we stop thinking about God as a being that possesses the omni-attributes—omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence—and start thinking about God as a being that possesses the maximum possible combination of power, knowledge and benevolence, then we can transform Plantinga's unsuccessful modal ontological argument into something much better.

Plantinga's modal ontological argument is understood as follows:

Def^n 1: For any entity x, for any world w, x is *maximally excellent in w* iff x is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent in w.

Def^n 2: For any entity x, x is *maximally great* iff, for any world w, x is maximally excellent in w

1. There is a world w in which there is a maximally great being. (Premise)
2. (Therefore) There is, in the actual world, a maximally excellent being. (From 1)

Nagasawa's new modal ontological argument then looks like this:

Def^n 1: For any entity x, for any world w, x is *max (power, knowledge, benevolence)* in w iff x has the maximal combination of power, knowledge and goodness in w

Def^n 2: For any entity x, for any world w, x is *maximally excellent in w* iff x is max (power, knowledge, benevolence) in w

Def^n 3: For any entity x, x is *maximally great* iff, for any world w, x is maximally excellent in w

1. There is a world w in which there is a maximally great being. (Premise)
2. (Therefore) There is, in the actual world, a maximally excellent being. (From 1)

How should we understand the claim that x is max (power, knowledge, benevolence) in w? There are at least two options.

One thought is that x is max (power, knowledge, benevolence) in w just in case there is no being in w that betters x's combination of power, knowledge and benevolence in w. Another thought is that x is max (power, knowledge, benevolence) in w just in case there is no being in any world that betters x's combination of power, knowledge and benevolence in w.

On the first thought, the only way that there can fail to be maximally excellent beings in w is if, for any being in w, no matter how excellent, there is another being in w that is even more excellent. Setting this recherché thought aside, we are free to suppose that, in every world, there are maximally excellent beings. So, in particular, in our world, there are maximally excellent beings. But, of course, from the claim that, in any world, there are maximally excellent beings, it does not follow that there is even one maximally great being. Moreover, and importantly, while—ignoring the recherché thought—it is true by construction that it is possible that there are maximally excellent beings because we define them in terms of possible maximisation over power, knowledge and benevolence, there is nothing similar in the construction that guarantees that it is possible that there is a maximally great being. Whether considerations about maximal consistency suffice to establish that it is possible that there is a single being that is maximally excellent in every possible world depends upon more than considerations about maximally consistent power, goodness and benevolence within worlds.

On the second thought, there is another way that there can fail to be maximally excellent beings in w: it can be that, even though there is another world w' in which there are beings that are maximally excellent, all beings in w have combinations of power, knowledge and benevolence that are bettered by the maximally excellent beings in w'. Given this way of thinking about things—and setting aside the kinds of recherché thoughts mentioned near the beginning of the previous paragraph—while considerations about consistency guarantee that there are worlds where there are things that are max (power, knowledge, benevolence), considerations about consistency cannot guarantee there are things that have max (power, knowledge, benevolence) in the actual world. As on the first thought, it is just a mistake to think that considerations about the consistency of max (power, knowledge, benevolence) suffice to establish that there is a single thing that is max (power, knowledge, benevolence) in every world. At the very least, in order to get to this conclusion, we must assess a wider range of properties for joint consistency.

I think that the considerations advanced already suggest that Nagasawa's concluding claims are overstated. But there's more. Consider, for example, how this looks from the standpoint of someone who thinks—as I do—that it is a plausible conjecture that all metaphysically possible worlds share an initial history with the actual world, contain none but natural entities with none but natural properties, and have divergent histories only because chance plays out differently in different worlds. On this view—leaving aside recherché thoughts—it is true that (a) in every world w, there are things that are max (power, knowledge, benevolence) in w in the first of the senses distinguished

above: there are x's such that, for any distinct y's, the x's are better than the y's with respect to the combination of power, knowledge and benevolence; and (b) there are worlds w in which there are x's such that there are no worlds w' in which there are y's that have a better combination of power, knowledge and benevolence in w' than the x's have in w. But, obviously enough, on this view, it is massively implausible to suppose that there are things that are max (power, knowledge, benevolence) in all worlds. Moreover, and more importantly, the things that are max (power, knowledge, benevolence) are evolved biological creatures much like—and perhaps even identical to—us, hence not candidates for the god in which perfect being theists believe.

Is it *ad hoc* for naturalists to be attracted to the position I have mentioned to reject the possibility premise in Nagasawa's modal ontological argument? Surely not! To the contrary, what I have said is just what you should expect such naturalists to say. Moreover, given that we should expect division of cognitive labour—and appeal to the deliverances of those taken to be experts—among naturalists as among everyone else, we should expect that there are plenty of people who are confirmed naturalists, who have only the dimmest grasp of the intricacies of Nagasawa's argument, who don't yet see why they shouldn't suppose that it is possible that there are gods of the perfect being kind, and yet who are happy to take on trust that Sobel, or Mackie, or Fales, or Dawes, or someone else of similar standing has shown that it is perfectly acceptable to reject the key premise in that argument. Despite what Nagasawa says, I see no reason to suppose that it is *ad hoc* for people to reject the possibility premise when they learn that it is rejected by Sobel, Mackie, Fales, Dawes, and a host of other naturalists with relevant expertise, even though their reason for doing this is simply that Sobel et al. say that this is the best way to respond to the argument, escaping what would otherwise be a contradiction in their beliefs.

There are many other things that I would like to say in response to this rich and provocative book. However, those other things must be deferred to another time and place.