

A Brief Introduction to and Defence of the Modern Ontological Argument

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The Greek word *ontos* means ‘being’, and the ontological argument for God (OA for short hereafter) begins with thinking about what sort of being God is supposed to be, particularly what manner of being or existence he’s supposed to have if he exists. The OA was first given in 1078 by a Benedictine monk named Anselm. Philosophers have critiqued and defended many versions of the OA, but Anselm’s central insight was that ‘God’ can be defined as ‘a being than which nothing greater can be conceived’. If one could think of a being greater than ‘God’, then that greater being, rather than the lesser being, would deserve the title ‘God’. Hence *if* God exists *then* he is *by definition* ‘the greatest possible being’ or ‘the maximally great being’; that is, God is by definition that being with the greatest possible set of great-making properties, where a ‘great-making property’ is any objective property that:

- (a) it is intrinsically good to have (‘which endows its bearer with some measure of value, or greatness, or metaphysical stature, regardless of external circumstances’¹)
- (b) admits of a logical maximum

Christian philosopher of religion Alvin Plantinga kick-started a philosophical re-evaluation of the traditional arguments for God in his 1974 book *The Nature of Necessity* by laying out a logically valid version of the OA. Plantinga’s OA drew

on Leibnitz’s insight that the OA implicitly assumes that the concept of God (of ‘that than which nothing greater can be conceived’) is logically coherent. Defining God as a ‘maximally great being’ (a being who possesses the greatest possible set of great making properties), Plantinga argued that a maximally great being *must exist if its existence is possible*, because ‘necessary existence is a great making property.’² Given the additional premise that ‘the existence of a maximally great being is *possible*’³, it follows that a maximally great being therefore ‘exists, and exists necessarily.’⁴

Plantinga used the philosophical vocabulary of ‘possible worlds’ (logically self-consistent descriptions of reality as a whole) and symbolic logic to lay out his argument in technical detail, but his OA can be summarised in ordinary language as follows:

- 1) It is possible that a maximally great being exists
- 2) If it is possible that a maximally great being exists, then a maximally great being exists in at least one ‘possible world’
- 3) If a maximally great being exists in one ‘possible world’, then it exists in every ‘possible world’
- 4) If a maximally great being exists in every ‘possible world’, then it exists in the actual world (since the actual

world is by definition a ‘possible world’)

- 5) Therefore, a maximally great being exists⁵

Indeed, the OA can be further condensed into a single logically valid syllogism as follows:

- 1) If it is possible that God (a ‘maximally great being’) exists, then God exists
- 2) It is possible that God exists
- 3) Therefore, God exists

As the ‘greatest possible being’, God is *by definition* a necessary being (since it is clearly ontologically greater to exist necessarily rather than contingently). A necessary being is *by definition* a being that must exist (i.e. which cannot not exist) if its existence is possible. Thus most philosophers agree that *if* God’s existence is possible, *then*, as a necessary being, He must exist. Hence ‘the person who wishes to deny that God exists must claim that God’s existence is impossible.’⁶ ‘God’ is by definition a being whose existence is *either actual or impossible*. Therefore, *if* ‘God’ is not impossible, *then* he must be actual.

In Defence of the Ontological Argument

Starting with Gaunilo of Marmoutiers in the eleventh century philosophers have critiqued the OA by suggesting that if it were logically valid then one could use it to prove the existence of all sorts of patently ridiculous things, such as ‘the most perfect island conceivable’ (Gaunilo’s example). The thought is that since these results are patently absurd, the OA must be invalid. Such parodies of the OA are an attempt at a *reductio ad absurdum* of the argument. However, these parodies fail to attend to the crucial role played by great-making properties (especially necessary existence), and/or the uniqueness of

the concept of the greatest possible being, in the OA. As William Lane Craig observes:

The properties that go to make up maximal excellence . . . have intrinsic maximum values, whereas the excellent-making properties of things like islands do not . . . Thus there cannot be a most perfect or greatest conceivable island.⁷

And Atheist philosopher Yujin Nagasawa agrees:

For any island I it is always possible to make I greater by adding, for example, one more beautiful palm tree or one more pleasant beach. The island objection is, therefore, unsuccessful.⁸

To appreciate the OA it is crucial to understand the concept of a ‘great-making property’ and the crucial role in the OA of the great-making property known as ‘necessary existence’. A great-making property is any property that a) endows its bearer with some measure of objective value and which b) admits of a logical maximum. A whale isn’t more valuable than you because it’s bigger than you; and however big a whale we imagine, it’s always possible to imagine a bigger one. Thus size isn’t a great-making property. On the other hand, *power* is a great-making property, one that has a logical maximum in the quality of being omnipotent. Likewise, *necessary being* is the maximal instantiation of the great-making property of necessary being (this just happens to be a great-making property the logical maximum degree of which is also its only possible degree). Hence, even if Immanuel Kant was right to argue that saying something exists doesn’t add to our knowledge of its properties, to say that something ‘exists necessarily’ certainly *does* add to our knowledge of its proper-

ties. Thus God couldn't just happen not to exist *despite His existence being possible*. To deny the existence of the Loch Ness Monster, one needn't claim that its existence is impossible. However, to deny the existence of God one *must* make the *metaphysically stronger claim* that God's existence is *impossible*. But the claim that God exists clearly isn't on a par with the claim that there exists a round square (this claim is obviously incoherent). Many atheists acknowledge that the idea of God is coherent. Indeed, atheist Richard Carrier warns that arguments for thinking otherwise are:

not valid, since any definition of god (or his properties) that is illogical can just be revised to be logical. So in effect, Arguments from Incoherence aren't really arguments for atheism, but for the reform of theology.⁹

Indeed, it might be argued that at least some of God's great-making properties are in a sense identical:

When we speak of different perfections, such as omniscience or omnipotence, we connote different things, and so the assertions have different meanings. Nevertheless, perhaps all of these different meanings have the same denotation; that is, perhaps they refer to some single capacity in God. This does not seem implausible. After all... perhaps being omnipotent entails being omniscient, perhaps being perfectly loving entails being perfectly just, and so forth.¹⁰

Nagasawa argues that

"a statement about divine omniscience can be restated in terms of a divine epistemic power. This principle reveals a connection between divine omniscience and omnipotence . . . omniscience can be understood as God's exercising a particular part –

the epistemic part – of His omnipotence."¹¹

If correct, this analysis of great-making properties decreases the atheists' opportunities for claiming that 'God' has incompatible properties (although it still leaves open questions about the internal coherence of those properties). For example, this analysis entails that *if* necessary existence is compatible with omnipotence *then* it is necessarily compatible with omniscience, etc.

Moreover, humans exhibit non-maximal degrees of great making properties (such as power, cognitive excellence and goodness), and this supports the hypothesis that *maximal degrees* of great-making properties can co-exist over the hypothesis that they cannot.

What if the atheist grants that *some* great-making properties can coexist in the same being, but makes a crucial exception for necessary existence? We might ask what reason the atheist has to think that the former great-making properties are compatible with one another but incompatible with necessary existence? It wouldn't do to answer by stating that whilst, for example, omniscience is in a sense identical to omnipotence, neither quality is identical with necessary existence. After all, properties can coexist in the same being without being identical. Given that no principled answer to our question is forthcoming, Occam's razor rules against making the atheist's proposed distinction. That is, to draw a distinction between great-making properties that can and can't coexist, and to insist without sufficient justification that necessary existence just happens to fall into the latter category, so that the OA is unsound, is an *ad hoc* leap of blind faith on the part of the atheist.

Josef Seifert argues that great-making properties

Must be all compatible with each other, for it contradicts the nature of that, which it is absolutely speaking, better to possess than not to possess to exclude any other such perfection. Otherwise a logical contradiction would arise in that it would be simultaneously better to possess perfection A (a pure perfection) and not to possess it (because it would exclude another pure perfection B).¹²

The concept of the greatest possible being is of course the concept of the greatest possible set of great-making properties *that can coexist*. Seifert defines great-making properties as properties that it is, absolutely speaking, better to possess than not to possess. Then he argues that it is self-contradictory to make a distinction between ‘the set of great-making properties that *can* coexist’ and ‘the set of great-making properties that *cannot* coexist’, since drawing this distinction means affirming the existence of properties that are *greater* than properties that it is absolutely

speaking, better to possess than not to possess.

Then again, one might support the claim that God’s existence is possible by arguing negatively against the coherence and/or possibility of alternative conceptions of ultimate reality (such as pantheism¹³ and metaphysical naturalism¹⁴), and/or by supporting the theistic hypothesis via other arguments of natural theology. Both approaches provide independent grounds for thinking that the crucial second premise of the ontological argument is more plausibly true than its denial.

None of this implies that the OA provides us with an entirely perspicuous concept of divinity, let alone a knock-down argument for His existence. Nevertheless, for the OA to be a sound argument all that’s required of its crucial second premise is that it be *more plausibly true than its denial in the light of our total available evidence*. The ontological argument thus ties together the thrust of the cumulative case for God and has something to contribute to the project of natural theology.

Recommended Resources

Watch:

Peter S. Williams YouTube Playlist: ‘The Ontological Argument for God’
www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQhh3qcwVEWjE7hqAz3D6jp7MWjChVYKn

Listen:

Peter S. Williams, ‘The Ontological Argument vs. Peter Millican’
<http://podcast.peterswilliams.com/e/the-ontological-argument-vs-peter-millican/?token=e8e300611274723344b858740750d838>

- ‘Ontological Class’ <http://podcast.peterswilliams.com/e/ontological-class-1413287386/?token=059cfa91b4e83e71b1f96e6508913176>

On-Line Papers:

Craig, William Lane. ‘The Ontological Argument’
www.reasonablefaith.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=6155.

- ‘Does the Ontological Argument Beg the Question?’

- www.reasonablefaith.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=8139.
- 'Two Questions on the Ontological Argument'
www.reasonablefaith.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=8715.
- 'Dawkins' Critique of the Ontological Argument'
www.reasonablefaith.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=6831.
- 'God's Necessity' www.reasonablefaith.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=7301.
- Dougherty, Trent. 'Conceivability, Defeasibility, and Possibility: A Defense of the Modal Ontological Argument' www.lastseminary.com/ontological-argument/A%20Defense%20of%20the%20Modal%20Ontological%20Argument.pdf.
- Drew, Messianic. 'The Ontological Argument for the Triune God'
<http://messianicdrew.blogspot.com/2011/03/ontological-argument-for-triune-god.html>.
- 'The Ontological Argument and the S5 Objection'
<http://messianicdrew.blogspot.com/2011/06/ontological-argument-and-s5-objection.html>.
- Maydole, Robert E. 'The Ontological Argument' <http://commonsenseatheism.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/Maydole-The-Ontological-Argument.pdf>.
- Nagasawa, Yujin. 'The Ontological Argument and the Devil'
www.yujinnagasawa.com/resources/devil.pdf.
- Plantinga, Alvin. 'The Ontological Argument' www.lastseminary.com/ontological-argument/Plantinga%20-%20The%20Ontological%20Argument.pdf.

Books:

- Craig, William Lane. 'The Ontological Argument' in Francis J. Beckwith, William Lane Craig & J.P. Moreland (eds.) *To Everyone An Answer: A Case For The Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004).
- *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, third edition (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008).
- Davies, Brian. *Philosophy of Religion: a guide and anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- *An Introduction to The Philosophy of Religion*, third edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
- Davis, Stephen T. 'The ontological argument' in Paul Copan & Paul K. Moser (eds.) *The Rationality of Theism* (London: Routledge, 2003).
- Inwagen, Peter van. 'Ontological arguments' in Brian Davies (ed.), *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide to the Subject* (Basingstoke: Continuum, 1998).
- Lowe, E.J. 'The ontological argument' in Chad Meister & Paul Copan (eds.) *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2010).
- Morris, Thomas V. *Our Idea of God* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1991).
- Nagasawa, Yujin. *The Existence of God: A Philosophical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2011).
- Williams, Peter S. *A Faithful Guide to Philosophy: A Christian Introduction to the Love of Wisdom* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2013).

Notes

1. Thomas V. Morris, *Our Idea of God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 35.
2. Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), from Michael Peterson *et al*, *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 158.
3. *Ibid*, 163.
4. *Ibid*, 159.
5. cf. William Lane Craig, "The Ontological Argument" in Francis J. Beckwith, William Lane Craig & J.P. Moreland (eds.), *To Everyone An Answer: A Case For The Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 128.
6. C. Stephen Evans, *Philosophy of Religion* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001), 50.
7. William Lane Craig, 'The Ontological Argument' in Francis J. Beckwith, William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland (eds.) *To Everyone an Answer: A Case for the Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 129–30.
8. Yujin Nagasawa, *The Existence of God: A Philosophical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2011), 31.
9. Richard Carrier, *Sense & Goodness Without God* (Bloomington: Author House, 2005), p. 276.
10. Jay Wesley Richards, "Divine Simplicity: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly" in James K. Beilby (ed.) *For Faith and Clarity: Philosophical Contributions to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 169.
11. Yujin Nagasawa, "Divine Omniscience and Knowledge De Se" at www.thedivineconspiracy.org/Z3214A.pdf.
12. Josef Seifert in Roy Abraham Varghese (ed.) *Great Thinkers on Great Questions* (Oxford: OneWorld, 1998), 131.
13. cf. Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 580–83; Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2011), 326–9.
14. cf. William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland (eds.) *Naturalism: A Critical Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2000); Stewart Goetz and Charles Taliaferro, *Naturalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); Angus Menuge, *Agents under Fire* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2004); Victor Reppert, *C.S. Lewis' Dangerous Idea: In Defense of the Argument from Reason* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003).