

John Baggaley

baggaley@mac.com

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## The Ontological Argument for the Existence of God

### I. Introduction

In the 11<sup>th</sup> century, St. Anselm developed a controversial *a priori* argument for the existence of God. Having receded from the forefront of intellectual thought after being refuted by St. Thomas Aquinas in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, it was revived in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by René Descartes, only to be refuted once more by Immanuel Kant in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Kant named Anselm's argument the Ontological Argument, but was unable to have the last word due to the evolution of modal logic. Contemporary philosophers such as Charles Hartshorne, Norman Malcolm, and Alvin Plantinga, have utilized modal logic to develop new versions of the Ontological Argument. Thus, keeping the Ontological Argument alive for 900 years.

I believe that there are two reasons the argument has received so much attention for so long. First of all, the answer to the question of theism is relevant to everyone, and the answer is undeniably important. Secondly, the dialectic of the argument is significant, because the argument purports to prove the existence of something not only *a priori*, but by definition. George Boolos was well known for using a version of the liar's paradox to prove the existence of Santa Clause. Could the Ontological Argument be like Boolos' proof of Santa Clause, or is it actually a good proof of the existence of God? Many different philosophers have responded to this question in many different ways. In this paper, I am going to take a

look at some of the major arguments for and against the Ontological Argument. If by proving the Ontological Argument false, I do not prove the conclusion false, just the means of reaching the conclusion.

## II. The Various Arguments

### A. *St. Anselm's Ontological Argument*

St. Anselm, first in a work called *Fides Quaerense Intellectum* (Faith in Search of Understanding), and later in his treatise titled *Proslogion*, attempted to prove 'by necessary reasons' and 'without the authority of Scripture' that certain Christian beliefs were true (Barnes 6). He tries to do this with the Ontological Argument. His inspiration reportedly comes from Psalm 14, where the Fool "hath said in his heart "There is no God"" (Mackie 50).

Anselm begins his proof by characterizing God as "something than which nothing greater can be imagined." The Fool, according to Anselm, grasps this understanding of the concept of God, only the Fool just denies that God exists. Anselm then claims that "it is one thing for a thing to be in the understanding and another to understand that a thing is." He parallels this concept with what the painter has in their understanding before creating a painting, and what the painter has in their understanding after the painting has been created. The first is an image that is understood but not conceded to exist, while the second is likewise an image understood, but conceded to exist. Furthermore, before the creation of the painting, the painter can imagine the image to exist. Paralleling the painter metaphor, Anselm claims that when the Fool has the understanding of God, he can also imagine God to exist. Next, Anselm claims that God cannot be in the understanding alone, since that which exists is greater than that which does not, and God is that which is greater than anything else.

“And certainly that than which a greater cannot be imagined cannot be in the understanding alone. For if it is at least in the understanding alone, it can be imagined to be in reality too, which is greater.” Thus the Fool is self-contradictory when claiming to understand that God is that which nothing greater can be imagined, but at the same time claiming that God is only in the understanding, because the Fool can also imagine that God does exist, which is greater.

Therefore if that than which a greater cannot be imagined is in the understanding alone, that very thing than which a greater cannot be imagined is something than which a greater can be imagined. But certainly this cannot be. There exists, therefore, beyond doubt something than which a greater cannot be imagined, both in the understanding and in reality. (Barnes 3)

St. Anselm then moves to claim that it follows that God exists.

Anselm’s argument can be laid out like the following:

- (1) God is something than which a greater cannot be imagined. (Barnes 4-7)
  - (2) Something than which a greater cannot be imagined exists. (Barnes 4)
- therefore (3) God exists (Barnes 4)

where (2) is derived from a complicated piece of reasoning in the form of a *reductio ad absurdum* (Barnes 8) which has these 5 premises (Barnes 12):

(P1) The Fool understands (the phrase) ‘something than which a greater cannot be imagined’.

(P2) If anyone understands a word or phrase for *X*, then *X* is in his understanding.

(P3) If *X* is in someone’s understanding, then he can imagine that *X* exists in reality.

(P4) If  $X$  is in someone's understanding and does not exist in reality, then if anything exists in reality, it is greater than  $X$ .

(P5) If if  $P$  then  $Q$ , then anyone who can imagine that  $P$  can imagine that  $Q$ .

The negation of the assumed conclusion which the *reductio* is designed to prove is:

(NC) The thing than which a greater cannot be imagined does not exist in reality.

From these 5 premises, we can conclude that the Fool can imagine something greater than the thing than which a greater cannot be imagined, and then that something greater than the thing than which a greater cannot be imagined can be imagined. This deduction can be read as an instance of the formula 'The not- $F$  is  $F$ ' which Anselm clearly thinks is absurd. Thus NC is false, and Anselm infers the negation of NC, *viz.* the thing than which a greater cannot be imagined exists in reality. (Barnes 13-15)

The negation of NC entails (2), and thus with the *reductio*, the final conclusion (3) follows from the premises (1) and (2). Hence Anselm has given what seems to be a valid *a priori* argument for the existence of God. (A formalized version of the *reductio* is located in the appendix)

### B. Descartes's Ontological Argument

Descartes also has his own version of the Ontological Argument, where like Anselm, he focuses on a characterization of God, and then moves to show how this characterization entails God's existence. Rather than focus on characterizing God as that which nothing greater can be imagined, Descartes focuses on characterizing God as the being with all perfections.

Descartes claims that God is a “supremely perfect being” (Descartes p106, sec 65), meaning that “he has all perfections” (Descartes p108, sec 67). This characterization is essential to an understanding of the term ‘God’. To deny any perfection to God, would be to admit to a misunderstanding of the term, or to misusing the term. Descartes also claims that “existence is one of the perfections” (Descartes 108). He then moves to say that ascription of the property of existence is essential to the understanding.

But when I concentrate more carefully, it is quite evident that existence can no more be separated from the essence of God than the fact that its three angles equal two right angles can be separated from the essence of a triangle, or than the idea of a mountain can be separated from the idea of a valley. Hence it is just as much of a contradiction to think of God (that is, a supremely perfect being) lacking existence (that is, lacking a perfection), as it is to think of a mountain without a valley. (Descartes p107, sec 66).

Descartes claims that it follows from this, that God must exist. The argument is fairly simple, and summed up, it looks like this:

(4) Necessarily, a God has all perfections.

(5) Existence is a perfection.

Therefore: (6) God exists. (Barnes 16)

Descartes is quick to qualify the argument.

From the fact that I cannot think of a mountain without a valley, it does not follow that a mountain and valley exist anywhere, but simply that a mountain and a valley, whether they exist or not, are mutually inseparable. But from the fact that I cannot think of God except as existing, it follows that existence is

inseparable from God, and hence that he really exists. (Descartes p107, sec 67)

The case of proving God's existence is special. The inseparableness of valleys from mountains does not show that mountains exist, but the inseparableness of existence from God does.

### *C. Modal Ontological Argument*

The development and application of modal logic has had a profound impact upon the Ontological Argument. Several contemporary philosophers have modalised the Ontological Argument in different ways, but all centering their modifications on the concept of metaphysical necessity. The three major modal Ontological Arguments have been proposed by Norman Malcolm, Charles Hartshorne, and Alvin Plantinga.

#### 1. Malcolm's Ontological Argument

Malcolm begins by arguing that a perfect being cannot just 'happen' to come into, or go out of existence; if he could, Malcolm says, "he would have mere duration and not eternity. It would make sense to ask 'How long has he existed?', 'Will he still exist next week?', 'He was in existence yesterday, but how about today?', and so on. It seems absurd to make God the subject of such questions." (Barnes 19) I take it on good authority, that when Barnes says he thinks Plantinga has adequately disproved Malcolm's argument, the argument really has been disproved. Barnes offers an altered rendition of Malcolm's argument, which he thinks much more appropriate. The modified version looks like:

(7) God is a perfect being.

(8) Every perfect being is eternal.

(9) Everything that is eternal necessarily exists always.

Therefore: (10) God necessarily exists always. (Barnes 19)

The application of modality occurs in premise (9), but it is not clear how the application of modal logic has strengthened the argument.

## 2. Hartshorne's Ontological Argument

Hartshorne offers the second major modal version of the Ontological Argument. His version of the Ontological Argument starts with what he calls 'Anselm's Principle'. Anselm's principle is the principle that

(11) If there is a God, then necessarily there is a God.

Then, Hartshorne claims that

(12) Either necessarily there is a God or necessarily there is not a God.

(12) is justified, given

(MI) If (if P then Q) then (if necessarily not-P then necessarily not-Q).

and

(BP) If not necessarily not-P, then necessarily not necessarily not-P.

thus

(13) If it is possible that there is a God, then it is necessary that there is a

God. (Barnes 20)

Hartshorne then maintains that most reasonable people are willing to concede that it is possible that God could exist. Then, given the conclusion in (13), God does exist. What Hartshorne has really done to the Ontological Argument, was to recognize an attached 'necessary existence' to our conception of God. This makes way for the third version of the modalised Ontological Argument.

### 3. Plantinga's Ontological Argument

The third modalised version of the Ontological Argument was advanced in 1974 by Alvin Plantinga in his book *The Nature of Necessity*. He wants to show that “if it is even possible that God, so thought of, exists, then it is true and necessarily true that he does.” (Plantinga 216) (This should sound somewhat like Hartshorne.) Plantinga's motivation for such a claim actually comes from Findlay, who thought he was putting forth an argument against the existence of God:

Not only is it contrary to the demands and claims inherent in religious attitudes that their object should *exist* “accidentally”; it is also contrary to these demands that it should *possess its various excellences* in some merely adventitious manner. It would be quite unsatisfactory from the religious stand point, if an object merely *happened* to be wise, good, powerful, and so forth, even to a superlative degree. ... And so we are led on irresistibly, by the demands inherent in religious reverence, to hold that an adequate object of our worship must possess its various excellence in some necessary manner. (Findlay qtd. in Plantinga 214)

Plantinga thinks Findlay's argument can be transposed into the possible worlds story. Accordingly, the claim is that the greatness of a being in a world  $W$  does not depend merely upon its qualities and attributes in  $W$ . Theists do not see God as all powerful just in the actual world, and then a weakling in other possible worlds. To make such a claim would mean that characteristics such as omniscience and omnipotence are accidental rather than essential qualities. Most theists claim that if a being is not omniscient and omnipotent, then the being is not God, thus the characteristics of omnipotence and omniscience are necessarily cojoined with God.



Plantinga takes Findlay's position, and forms two modal Ontological Arguments for the existence of God. The second argument is just a simpler version of the first. I will look at the second argument. First off, he defines some terminology and says that *maximal excellence* entails *omniscience*, *omnipotence*, and *moral perfection*. He then claims that *unsurpassable greatness* is equivalent to *maximal excellence in every possible world*. Next, he states the premises:

(14) There is a possible world in which unsurpassable greatness is exemplified.

[ $\exists x \exists W^* (UG(x, W^*))$ ]

(15) The proposition *a thing has unsurpassable greatness if and only if it has maximal excellence in every possible world* is necessarily true.

(16) The proposition *whatever has maximal excellence is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect* is necessarily true.

From (14) and (15), it follows that

(17) *Possesses unsurpassable greatness* is instantiated in every world. (Plantinga

216)

Thus, Plantinga completes his second Ontological Argument for the existence of God. The argument is valid, and the conclusion follows from the premises.

#### *D. A General Form for a Modal Ontological Argument*

One of the most crucial aspects of Plantinga's argument, is the system of modal logic which he uses to support his argument. Plantinga uses system  $S_5$ , which has the axioms K, T, B, 4, and 5, or the principles of distribution, reflexivity, symmetry, transitivity, and the euclidean principle respectively. The second most critical aspect of Plantinga's argument, is its use of necessity to show existence. By paying attention to these two critical aspects, and

using the more general premise Hartshorne calls ‘Anselm’s Principle’, we can develop a more general form of the modal Ontological Argument.

First off, let me use some abbreviations. I use standard modal operators, particularly the ‘ $\Diamond$ ’ to mean logical possibility, and the ‘ $\Box$ ’ to mean logical necessity. Additionally, ‘G’ is to stand for “God exists”. The axioms of  $S_5$  are:

K: $\Box(A \rightarrow B) \rightarrow (\Box A \rightarrow \Box B)$	principle of distribution
T: $\Box A \rightarrow A$	reflexivity
B: $A \rightarrow \Box \Diamond A$	symmetry
4: $\Box A \rightarrow \Box \Box A$	transitivity
5: $\Diamond A \rightarrow \Box \Diamond A$	euclidean (if $wRv$ & $wRu \rightarrow vRu$ )

The general form of the modal Ontological Argument is thus<sup>1</sup>:

(18)	$\Diamond G$	Given
(19)	$\Box (G \rightarrow \Box G)$	Given
(20)	$\Box (A \rightarrow B) \rightarrow (\Diamond A \rightarrow \Diamond B)$	proved in K
(21)	$\Box (G \rightarrow \Box G) \rightarrow (\Diamond G \rightarrow \Diamond \Box G)$	substitute G for A, and $\Box G$ for B
(22)	$\Diamond G \rightarrow \Diamond \Box G$	follows from (19) and (21)
(23)	$\Diamond \Box G \rightarrow G$	proved in B (see proof below)
(24)	$\therefore G$	follows from (22) and (23)

Premise (18),  $\Diamond G$ , is assumed, and (19) is a revision of what Hartshorne calls ‘Anselm’s Principle’. The premise ‘If there is a God, then necessarily there is a God’ has been changed to ‘If God exists, then necessarily God exists’. Premise (23) is proved in B by the following:

(i)	$A \rightarrow \Box \Diamond A$
(ii)	$\neg A \rightarrow \Box \Diamond \neg A$
(iii)	$\neg \Box \Diamond \neg A \rightarrow A$
(iv)	$\Diamond \neg \Diamond \neg A \rightarrow A$
(v)	$\therefore \Diamond \Box A \rightarrow A$

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Richard Heck for the basic form of the generalized modal Ontological Argument.

That the conclusion follows from the premises, and thus the general modal Ontological Argument is valid. The general form is also more straightforward than the other modal versions.

### *E. Wrap-up For the Arguments*

In this section, I briefly covered three major versions of the Ontological Argument. Both of Barnes' renditions of St. Anselm's and Descartes' arguments are logically valid. My generalized modal Ontological Argument is also logically valid, given system  $S_5$ . Thus I have three valid Ontological Arguments for the existence of God. Yet, we do not just want logically valid arguments for the existence of God. The typical aim of the Ontological Argument, is to develop a piece of Natural Theology. If logical validity were all that we wanted, then as Plantinga has pointed out, the following argument for the existence of God would be enough.

(25) Either  $7 + 5 = 13$  or God exists.

(26)  $7 + 5 \neq 13$

therefore (27) God exists.

But this argument is uninteresting for our purposes, because the same argument could be used to prove just about anything, "it is in some way question begging, or at least dialectically deficient" (Plantinga 218). For the Ontological Argument to be accepted as a piece of Natural Theology, then it must stand up to the challenges, and there are plenty of them.

### **III. The Objections**

There are a lot of objections to the Ontological Argument, coming both from theists who think the Ontological Argument is too good to be true, and atheists who are almost of-

fended by the argument. Many of the objections not only fail, but are uninteresting. On the other hand, some of the objections, are very clever, and answering the challenge involves deep philosophical inspection into various areas of philosophy. In this section, I am going to take a look at a lot of different objections. First I am going to go over some of the objections that apply to specific Ontological Arguments, and then I am going to go over some of the objections that can apply to the Ontological Argument in general.

*A. Gaunilo's Lost Island*

Since St. Anselm offered the first Ontological Argument, his argument was the first to receive an objection. The first critic of the Ontological Argument was a monk named Gaunilo, who wrote a response to St. Anselm “on behalf of the fool.” His response, which can be applied to both St. Anselm’s argument, and to Descartes’ argument, tries to prove the existence of a perfect island. Accordingly, there is a myth about a lost island that is “blessed with an inestimable wealth of riches and delights, far beyond what is said of the Blessed Islands, and, having no owner or inhabitant, is in every way superior in abundance of goods to all other lands which men inhabit” (Gaunilo qtd. in Barnes 26). The parallel argument to St. Anselm’s argument, looks like this:

(28) Lost Island is an island to which a superior cannot be imagined.

(29) An island to which a superior cannot be imagine exists.

Therefore: (30) Lost Island exists.

The first premise (28) will be assumed to be true by definition, and the second premise (29) will supposed to follow by a *reductio* much like the one given for St. Anselm’s argument (see appendix). The parallel argument to Descartes’ proof looks like:

(31) Lost Island has all perfections.

(32) Existence is a perfection.

Therefore: (33) Lost Island exists.

Like the Anselmian version, the first premise (31) is supposed to be true by definition. The second premise (32) is identical with Descartes' second premise (5). (Barnes 27)

St. Anselm replied to Gaunilo, but his response was not a good rebuttal. "Anselm in effect asks Gaunilo to do exactly what Gaunilo claims to have done — to provide an adequate parallel to God. He makes no attempt to show why Gaunilo's island is not so parallel" (Barnes 28). Obviously, Anselm's weak response to Gaunilo's objection did not spell the end of the Ontological Argument, otherwise I would not be writing this paper. St. Bonaventure responds for Anselm with the reply: "when I talk of an island than which no better can be imagined, there is a repugnancy between the subject and the predicate; for island means a defective being (*ens defectivum*)" (Barnes 28). Contrary to Barnes, I think this defense is very effective. The idea, is that it is a mistake to parallel an island with God, because whereas God can and is both perfect and greater than anything else, while an island by definition is defective. By defective, I take St. Bonaventure to mean something along the lines of the following argument:

(34) All islands are corporeal.

(35) All corporeal things are limited or finite.

(36) All limited or finite things are flawed.

(37) All islands are flawed.

(38) The Lost Island is an island.

therefore: (39) The Lost Island is flawed.

Now it is not quite clear how the conclusion that the Lost Island is flawed is going to help Anselm, but it clearly helps Descartes. If the Lost Island is flawed, then it cannot have all

perfections, and thus we cannot conclude that the Lost Island exists. This argument can defend Descartes' argument against any parallel attack, such as Caterus' attempt to prove the existence of a perfect lion. If a thing is to be supposed perfect, then that thing must be equal to God. Thus all posited perfect things are God, and then it follows that there is only one God.<sup>2</sup> Since there is only one thing that is perfect, and that is God, then the Ontological Argument in Descartes' form can be used only to demonstrate the existence of God, and nothing else, because a perfect bowl of clam chowder would presumably be flawed too.

Descartes does not rely on St. Bonaventure's argument. According to Barnes, his reply is "merely to state that he can imagine a lion that does not exist, whereas he cannot imagine a non-existent God. This entirely misses Caterus's point" (Barnes 28). Unfortunately, Barnes does not explain why he thinks that Descartes has missed Caterus's point. I disagree with Barnes, and I do think that Descartes does address Caterus's objection. Descartes is trying to say that it is an essential characteristic of the concept 'God' that we ascribe all perfections to the subject. If we were to talk about God as not having one of these perfections, then we are no longer talking about God, but something else. Similarly, if I want to talk about a triangle and assert that the sum of the interior angles of the subject do not add up to the sum of two right angles, then I am not talking about a triangle, but some other subject. The concept 'lion' is not the same. I may talk about a lion as not existing, say a fictitious lion, and still be using the term 'lion' properly. Thus Caterus' argument fails to achieve a parallel, and thus has no affect upon Descartes' Ontological Argument. The same defense may be applied to similar attacks against Descartes' argument, such as Gaunilo's Lost Island.

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<sup>2</sup> Barnes' primary objection to the Ontological Argument stemmed from his claim that Descartes and Anselm cannot show that there can only be one God. Clearly Barnes is wrong.

Now why we must accept existence as a perfection, and as an essential property of God is not completely clear. Descartes claims that it is clear and distinct that existence is a perfection. I am inclined to agree and think existence is a perfection, but I would be hard pressed to explicitly say why. On the other hand, I think it would be even harder to explain why existence is not a perfection, and thus I believe the burden of proof lies with the objector.

Clearly, objections of the form offered by Gaulino and Caterus are not serious threats to the major forms of the Ontological Argument.

### B. Mackie & the Remartian

J. L. Mackie in his book *The Miracle of Theism*, offers a creative objection to Descartes' Ontological Argument. His objection pivots on a logical curiosity posited by Russell. Mackie thinks that statements that affirm the existence of God, are somewhat like the statement "The present king of France is not bald." But there is not a current king of France so the statement is true and false. In fact, the statement is completely meaningless. Mackie would like to say that characterizations about God are also meaningless, and thus the Ontological Argument fails. But Mackie can't do this, because such a move (disregarding religious statements as meaningless) presupposes that God does not exist. In a sense the discussion about the Ontological Argument is outside of religious language.

#### 1. The Attack

Mackie objects to Descartes' Ontological Argument by saying: "God does not exist" would mean "The existing such and such does not exist"; since the latter is plainly self-

contradictory, so is the former; we must, then, reject them both, and therefore deny ‘God does not exist’; that is, we must affirm ‘God exists’. But if this were all there was to it, the argument would have to be fallacious; for otherwise it would be all too easy to prove the existence of anything one cares to imagine.” (Mackie 42) How different is this objection to Gaunilo’s and Caterus’s argument? If Mackie’s objection is no different than either of these two, then Descartes’ objection “First of all, there is the fact that, apart from God, there is nothing else of which I am capable of thinking such that existence belongs to its essence.” (Descartes p108, sec 68) applies to Mackie also.

Mackie tries to prove the existence of an intelligent being on the planet Mars, and in the process he reveals an interesting examination of the statement ‘God does not exist.’ He looks at the statement ‘the existing such and such, does not exist’ and sees whether the statement is really as contradictory as it first appears.

He begins by taking the term ‘Martian’, and defining it as ‘an intelligent creature native to the planet Mars’. It makes sense, he says, to say that ‘the Martian does not exist’, but what if we pack a little bit more into the definition? He defines the term ‘Remartian’ (short for ‘real Martian’) as a Martian, and includes existence as part of its meaning. Thus the statement ‘The Remartian does not exist’ will be self-contradictory, and we will have to accept that a Remartian really does exist (Mackie 43). Clearly, when we say the (really existing) Martian doesn’t exist, we’re just gratuitously tacking on the ‘really existing’ part, and Descartes’s objection applies. But let us not be so quick to discount Mackie, and continue looking into his argument further.

Can we do as Kant suggests, and rather than accept the subject and reject the predicate, we reject both the subject and predicate (Mackie 43)? Perhaps we can throw out the entire statement ‘The Remartian does not exist’ or the statement ‘God does not exist’ in the



same manner that we threw out Russell's statement about the bald king? No, because we presumably mean something when we say 'God exists', or 'God does not exist.'

Let us expand the phrase 'the Remartion does not exist' to 'the really existing Martian does not exist'. If we suppose that 'a exists  $\equiv \exists x (x = a)$ ' then we can have two different possible readings for 'the really existing Martian does not exist'. The first reading is:

$$(1) \exists x (RM(x) \ \& \ \forall y (RM(y) \rightarrow y=x) \ \& \ \neg \exists z (z = x))$$

which is clearly a contradiction. The second or alternative reading could look like this:

$$(2) \neg \exists z \exists x (RM(x) \ \& \ x=z)$$

which is clearly not a contradiction. Since we can now assert that a Remartion, or God, does not exist, then Descartes's argument is rendered ineffective. We can also apply this framework to Anselm's argument, and defeat it also.

## 2. Existence, Predication or Existential Quantifier?

But this objection presupposes that we can treat existence as an existential quantifier rather than as a predicate. Descartes it is apparent, is using existence as a predicate, not an existential quantifier. For if Descartes were using existence as an existential quantifier rather than as a predicate, he could not make the claim that existence is an essential characteristic of God. This is the root of one of Kant's most powerful arguments against the Ontological Argument; "Kant's fourth, and most influential, contribution to the debate attacks this part of Descartes's position. 'Being' is obviously not a real predicate" (Mackie 45).

Yet it is not entirely clear that existence is an existential quantifier.

It seems to me that the existential stipulation [as quantification] does violence to the nature of quantification, and should be rejected. ... The existential quantifier should not be stipulatively tied to existence; for if it is, predicate

logic will not formalise the sort of argument it is designed for. ... If we want to know how to represent existence in quantificational logic, we must first decide how the verb to exist functions in the contexts we want to formalise; the structure of predicate logic cannot in itself answer our question: it may provide a useful notation in which to pose our philosophical problems, but it cannot by itself solve them. And this is, after all, no more than a truism: a question is not answered by asking it in a new symbolism. (Barnes 57, 58, 59)

In classical logic, if something has a real property, it exists:  $Fa \rightarrow (\exists y) a=y$ . The same goes for predicates. Take for example, the sentence ‘Theaetetus exists.’ Let us suppose the sentence is in the subject-predicate form, and that ‘exists’ is its predicate. “Now it is in general true that if a predicate P is applied to **a**, **a** must exist: for otherwise there would be nothing for P to be applied to. But then the proposition that Theaetetus exists cannot be false... Its form guarantees truth.” (Barnes 41) Similarly, the sentence ‘Theaetetus does not exist’ must be false. This analysis pivots on “father Parmenides’ ancient dogma that whatever can be spoken of exists” (Barnes 42)

(40) If a predicate is applied to **a**, then **a** exists.

(41) If **a** is identified, then **a** exists.

(42) If **a** is referred to, then **a** exists.

(43) If a proposition is about **a**, then **a** exists.

All four of these assertions are false because we commonly refer to things that do not exist in the strictest sense, such as: dead people, fiction, sketchy ontological subjects such as numbers, propositions, properties, states, and etc. Therefore, since existence is not simply an existential quantifier, and the reliance upon father Parmenides’ ancient dogma is misguided, we really have no reason to think that existence is not a predicate. The Ontological Argument is

once more spared. Even Quine's thesis that everything exists falls prey to this defense. Quine's thesis is false (Barnes 50).

### C. *Necessary Existence*

#### 1. Findlay and Hume's thesis

So what about the modal versions of the Ontological Argument? In 1948 J. N. Findlay advanced an argument for atheism that paralleled some of the Ontological Arguments (Barnes 29). The argument looked basically like:

(44) A thing is a God if and only if it is an adequate object of religious attitudes.

(45) If a thing is an adequate object of religious attitudes then it necessarily exists.

(46) It is not possible that anything necessarily exists.

Therefore: (47) It is not possible that anything is a God.

The pivotal premise of the argument is premise (46), that it is not possible that anything necessarily exists. If premise (46) is correct, not only does it lend weight to Findlay's argument, but more importantly, it directly conflicts with the modal Ontological Argument, viz. premises (18) and (19) of the general argument, ' $\Diamond G$ ' and ' $\Box (G \rightarrow \Box G)$ ' respectively.

Barnes calls premise (46) Hume's thesis. Premise (46) is attributed to Hume, because Hume argued that "Whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent" (Barnes 32). From this statement, we are supposed to deduce that there is no being that necessarily exists, and thus God does not exist. It seems that Hume is conflating conceivability with logical possibility. For if Hume meant just psychological conceivability, he would

achieve nothing. For he needs to take the step that “Nothing, that is distinctly conceivable, implies a contradiction”, which is patently false, since most people have at least some contradictory beliefs. On the other hand, if Hume really does mean logical possibility, then his statement is much too strong metaphysically. Clearly, it has been shown by Flew that some mathematical statements are existential and necessary. One might also be inclined to think that existential statements in logic are also necessarily true. (Barnes 32-38)

## 2. Plantinga

Yet, this discussion is not in vain, for deciding what is possible, and what is not possible is crucial to many of these Ontological Arguments. In fact, one of the most serious arguments against the modalised Ontological Argument comes from Alvin Plantinga. Recall his version of the Ontological Argument and his definition of *unsurpassable greatness*. Plantinga posits the definition of *no-maximality*, which entails being such that there is no maximally great being in a particular possible world. Using no-maximality, Plantinga gives the following argument (D):

(48) No-maximality is possibly exemplified

(49) If no-maximality is possibly exemplified, then maximal greatness is impossible.

Therefore: (50) Maximal greatness is impossible.

Accordingly, “Logic tells us that A [Plantinga’s Ontological Argument] and D cannot both be sound; but it also tells us they cannot both be *unsound*; one is sound and the other is not” (Plantinga 219). We must either take the stance that it is possible that God necessarily exists, and hence Plantinga’s argument proves the existence of God, or we must take the stance that it is possible that there is a world where God is not, and then we must accept that God

does not exist anywhere. This discussion certainly applies to more than just Plantinga's version of the Ontological Argument, but to the general form as well.

What Plantinga's speculation does here, is to widen the gap between the theist and the atheist. Plantinga has eliminated the middle ground the agnostic may wish to stand upon, *viz.* that possibly God exists, and the agnostic does not know whether God exists or not. The dispute boils down to an argument over what is possible, and what is not. We tend to think that anything is possible which does not entail a contradiction (Mackie 59), but in this case neither of the two premises entail contradictions, and both should be possible. Plantinga's stance then is to say that his Ontological Proof is not a piece of Natural Theology, because it "draws its premises from the stock of propositions accepted by nearly every sane man, or perhaps nearly every rational man" (Plantinga 219). But we do not *have* to accept the premises to be rational. Thus I am inclined to agree with Plantinga when he says "They [the Ontological Arguments] cannot, perhaps, be said to *prove* or establish their conclusion. But since it is rational to accept their central premise, they do show that it is rational to *accept* that conclusion. And perhaps that is all that can be expected of any such argument" (Plantinga 221).

### 3. Deny $S_3$ ?

Plantinga does not seem to be on the offensive. In fact, he is part of a contemporary religious philosophy mainstream, which renouncing Natural Theology, has adopted a more 'apologetic' role. Today apologetics is more concerned with justifying belief, or showing that belief can be rational, and taking a defensive stance, rather than the offensive. Mackie has no intention of letting Plantinga have even this much. He attacks Plantinga's argument by going after what he considers the jugular, the system of modal logic Plantinga relies on,  $S_5$ .

Mackie asks why we can't have 'nested' sets of possible worlds. With nested sets of possible worlds, each possible world has its own distinct set of possible worlds. Nested sets of possible worlds allows for "iterated modalities - statements of such forms as 'It is possible that it is necessary that it is possible that  $p$ ' which retain their complexity". In  $S_5$ , such a statement could be reduced to just 'It is possible that  $p$ ' (Mackie 57). In a nutshell, Mackie wants to challenge T, the principal of reflexivity, *viz.*  $\Box A \rightarrow A$ . Thus if there is a world where something has 'unsurpassable greatness', or 'maximal excellence in every possible world', then we can only make conclusions about that possible world. If we say that  $\Box p$  in world  $W$ , then  $p$  is true in all of  $W$ 's possible worlds, but that does not include the actual world, so we may not make any conclusions from this about the actual world. If Mackie's objection were sound, then the ontological argument would be doomed, at precisely the second to last step (23), *viz.*  $\Diamond \Box G \rightarrow G$ .

Fortunately for Mackie, he decides to give Plantinga the benefit of the doubt that  $S_5$  is the correct system of modal logic to use, because Mackie's objection to  $S_5$  is unsound. His proposal to use nested worlds would render modal logic useless, since we would never be able to make conclusions about the actual world, given information about possibilities, which is in some sense one of the most compelling reasons to use modal logic. Such a move would be very unpalatable, and entirely *ad hoc*. Mackie offers only two reasons for rejecting  $S_5$ . The first, is the claim that having world-indexed properties does not allow for the full range of logical possibilities to be accounted for. Particularly, Mackie thinks that nested worlds would allow for both of Plantinga's conclusions to be found true in separate possible worlds. Which I think is an excellent reason to reject the model of nesting worlds. The second reason, is that world-indexed properties and  $S_5$  leads precisely to Plantinga's conclusion that we could have a rational justification for belief. Mackie simply does not like this conclu-

sion. He rejects  $S_5$  on the basis that it doesn't give him the conclusion he wants. I think both of Mackie's reasons for rejecting  $S_5$  are obviously hollow.

Mackie continues on another strain, attacking the premise that maximal greatness, or unsurpassable greatness is possibly exemplified. As an argument against the general form of the modal Ontological Argument, this translates into an objection centered around the first (18) and second (19) premises. Whereas Plantinga thinks that it is rational to either accept or deny the premises, Mackie wants to say that it is only rational to deny the premises. His argument looks like:

if we choose between these premises, in default of any other reason, we must ask which is the more modest and which the more extravagant, which can be accused of multiplying entities beyond what is necessary. And surely the more extravagant is that which asserts that maximal greatness is realized in some possible world. For this one carries with it the requirement that a maximally excellent being—and, indeed, a maximally great one—should exist in every possible world, whereas the rival premiss that no-maximality is realised in some possible world, still allows maximal excellence to be realized in some possible worlds though not in others. The latter, then, is less restrictive, less extravagant, and so on very general grounds the more acceptable.

(Mackie 61)

Mackie is wielding Ockham's Razor, *entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem* (entities are not to be multiplied beyond necessity, Blackburn 268). Yet, Ockham's Razor should only be used in this case, if the scale is perfectly balanced. Presumably, the scale is not perfectly balanced, and everyone has inclinations toward theism or atheism. If the theist has strong incli-

nations for accepting the possibility that God exists, then Plantinga's argument is a nice justification for belief. Giving reason to surpass Ockham's Razor.

Furthermore, Mackie's usage of Ockham's Razor may seem inappropriate in the case of the general form of the modal Ontological Argument. The choice in the case of the general form, is between asserting that it is possible that God exists, and asserting that it is not possible that God exists. Mackie essentially wants us to default to the premise that it is not possible for God to exist, simply because a negative assumption is better than a positive assumption. I think this reasoning is absurd. I think rational people are more inclined to think that it is more fair to assent to the possibility of God's existence than not. In this sense, I agree with Plantinga when he refers to the premise that God possibly exists is "from the stock of propositions accepted by nearly every sane man, or perhaps nearly every rational man" (Plantinga 219).

#### *D. Kant and Analytic vs. Synthetic Statements*

Kant vigorously attacked Descartes' Ontological Argument. He had many objections, the strongest of which was that existential statements are always synthetic and never analytic. This objection would be an effective argument against the Ontological Argument, which relies on the claim that the existence of God is analytic, but we can demonstrate the falsity of his claim. Primarily, we can prove the existence of numbers analytically. For example, a proof of the existence of the number zero might look like:

assume: a exists  $\equiv (\exists y) a=y$

Then we can posit the formula:

(number x)  $F(x)=0 \equiv_{df} \neg(\exists x)F(x)$

Next, let  $F(x)$  be  $x \neq x$ , and then we achieve:



$$(\exists y) y=0$$

Thus Kant was wrong, because the existence of the number zero is analytic. There is something ‘=’ to zero, namely the number of non-self-identical objects.

#### *E. Concepts*

The last objection to the Ontological Arguments, is one that was posited by Mackie. Mackie has several objections to the Ontological Argument, some of which I have already discussed in this paper, but the most serious objection he posits, is an objection that was inspired by Kant: “Whatever, therefore, and however much, our concept of an object may contain, we must go outside it, if we are to ascribe existence to the object” (Kant qtd. in Mackie 49). The objection is that no matter how much the concept contains, you have to go outside the concept in order to ascribe existence to it. Mackie claims that the ‘really existing Martian’ is a concept, and not a complete thought. Thus having the concept “is F and not-F” does not make one a fool, because one does not have to believe that there is anything that exists that this concept applies to.

I do not know how to reply to this argument. Unfortunately Mackie is not entirely clear as to why one must go outside a concept in order to ascribe existence in a manner not already done by the Ontological Arguments.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

In this paper, I have explored each of the major Ontological Arguments, and the major objections to them. I have shown, that none of the objections are satisfactory *disproofs* of the Ontological Argument. However, there is still a lot of controversy pertaining to the Ontological Argument. To accept any of the Ontological Arguments, would require a leap of

faith. A leap of this sort will require motivation that comes from outside the argument. Thus the argument fails for Anselm and Descartes, because it cannot convince. On the other hand, the argument succeeds for Plantinga, because it can supply rational justification.

## V. Appendix

### A. Anselm's Reductio

This proof closely follows Barnes' formalization of the *reductio*.

#### Abbreviations:

- 'b' for 'The Fool'
- 'xUy' for 'x understands "y"'
- 'xMy' for 'y is in x's understanding'
- 'xI:P' for 'x can imagine that P'
- 'Ex' for 'x exists in reality'
- 'xGy' for 'x is greater than y'
- 'xI:Fy' for 'x can imagine something F'

#### Rules:

*Rimag*: From 'xI:Fb' deduce 'xI:Fx'. (If someone can imagine that b is F, he can imagine something F)

*RAAAns*: If B is absurd and is deduced from  $A_1, A_2, \dots, A_n$ , infer  $\neg A_i$  (for any  $i, 1 \leq i \leq n$ ) on assumptions  $A_1, \dots, A_{i-1}, \dots, A_n$ .

#### Definitions:

(D1)  $Aa =df(y) yI:zGa$ .

(D2)  $\alpha =df(tx) \neg Ax$ .

In the proof that follows, (1)-(5) answer to (P1)-(P5) and (6) answers to the negation of the conclusion which the *reductio* is designed to prove (ie the thing than which a greater cannot be imagined does not exist in reality)

1	(1)	$bU\alpha$	A
2	(2)	$(\forall x) (\forall y) (xUy \rightarrow xMy)$	A
3	(3)	$(\forall x) (\forall y) (xMy \rightarrow xI:Ey)$	A
4	(4)	$(\forall y) (((\exists x) xMy \ \& \ \neg Ey) \rightarrow (\forall z) (Ez \rightarrow zGy))$	A
5	(5)	$(\forall P) (\forall Q) ((P \rightarrow Q) \rightarrow (\forall x) (xI:P \rightarrow xI:Q))$	A
6	(6)	$\neg E\alpha$	A
2	(7)	$(\forall y) (bUy \rightarrow bMy)$	2 UE
2	(8)	$bU\alpha \rightarrow bM\alpha$	7 UE
1, 2	(9)	$bM\alpha$	1, 8 MPP
3	(10)	$(\forall y) (bMy \rightarrow bI:Ey)$	3 UE
3	(11)	$bM\alpha \rightarrow bI:Ey$	3 UE
1, 2, 3	(12)	$bI:E\alpha$	9, 11 MPP
4	(13)	$((\exists x) xM\alpha \ \& \ \neg E\alpha) \rightarrow (\forall z) (Ez \rightarrow zG\alpha)$	4 UE
1, 2	(14)	$(\exists x) xM\alpha$	9 EI

1, 2, 6	(15)	$(\exists x) xM\alpha \ \& \ \neg E\alpha$	6, 14 & I
1, 2, 4, 6	(16)	$(\forall z) (Ez \rightarrow zG\alpha)$	16 UE
5	(18)	$(\forall Q) ((E\alpha \rightarrow) \rightarrow (\forall x) (xI:E\alpha \rightarrow xI:Q))$	5 UE
5	(19)	$(E\alpha \rightarrow \alpha G\alpha) \rightarrow (\forall x) (xI:E\alpha \rightarrow xI:\alpha G\alpha)$	18 UE
1, 2, 4, 5, 6	(20)	$(\forall x) (xI:E\alpha \rightarrow xI:\alpha G\alpha)$	17, 19 MPP
1, 2, 4, 5, 6	(21)	$bI:E\alpha \rightarrow bI: \alpha G\alpha$	20 UE
1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6	(22)	$bI:\alpha G\alpha$	12, 12 MPP
1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6	(23)	$bI:zG\alpha$	22 Rimag
1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6	(24)	$(\exists y) (yI:zG\alpha)$	23 EI
1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6	(25)	$A\alpha$	24 D1
1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6	(26)	$[(\forall x) \neg Ax]A[(\forall x) \neg Ax]$	25 D2
1, 2, 3, 4, 5	(27)	$\neg \neg E\alpha$	6, 26 RAAAns
1, 2, 3, 4, 5	(28)	$E\alpha$	27 DN

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