



**MASTER THESIS**

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## **God and Necessity**

### **The Ontological Argument and Plantinga's Modal Argument**

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**Abstract:** This essay purports to criticize the modal version of the ontological argument, a classical argument that pretends to be a *proof* for the existence of God, put forward by Alvin Plantinga in his book *The Nature of Necessity*, which tries to prove God's *necessary existence*. The essay first considers the ontological argument in its classical form, as it was formulated by Anselm of Canterbury in his *Proslogion*. Then it considers other versions of the argument (such as those of Descartes and Leibniz) and criticisms directed to it (by, for example, Gaunilo and Kant). Finally, Plantinga's argument is analyzed and considered, followed by some criticisms, that purport to show the circular and question-begging nature of the argument. The conclusions arrived at in this paper may shed light to the fact that, to some extent, this is a problem that all versions of the argument face, so that the ontological argument, independently of whether one believes in the existence of God, will stand as a failed piece of natural theology.

**Keywords:** God, Necessity, Necessary Existence, Ontological Argument, Possible worlds.

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*For I do not seek to understand in order to believe; I believe in order to understand.*

*For I also believe that "Unless I believe, I shall not understand" [Isaiah 7:9].*

**-Proslogion, Anselm of Canterbury**

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# **1. Introduction**

The history of philosophy is full of questions and arguments that have constantly been central to important philosophical inquiries and fundamental for the development of philosophy itself. Such questions have constantly arisen, and have been repeated and reformulated generation after generation. Amongst such questions, we find one that has played a primary role due to its deep connection with religious beliefs and experiences, so important for many people all around the world; we are talking about a question that can be formulated in two different ways: “Is there a God?” or “Does God exist?”

Of course, all through different historical periods and in different societies and cultures different conceptions of God (or of gods, in the plural) have existed; but what interests us in answering this question is the conception of God usually held by monotheistic religions, what some call **traditional theistic belief**: «a 'person without a body (i.e. a spirit) who is eternal, free, able to do anything, knows everything, is perfectly good, is the proper object of human worship and obedience, the creator and sustainer of the universe'»<sup>1</sup>. This is the conception of God held by, for example, Jews, Christians, and Muslims, despite the existing differences between these religions.

Now, it may seem that the issue here consists simply in answering affirmatively or negatively to that question. But, in philosophy, things tend not to be so easy. Even if some religious people may believe in God by force of sheer faith, when seriously discussing the question here at stake philosophically, arguments, proofs, and demonstrations, if any, are required not only to defend the answer (“Yes, God does exist” or “No, God does not exist”) but sometimes even to make it coherent, intelligible, and convincing to others. In other words, we should not only answer the question, but also *argue for* our own answer. And it is an interesting feature of the question here at stake, such as with many other philosophical questions, that many different kinds of arguments have been given to argue for (and against) the *existence of God*.

In general, we can divide arguments for the existence of God in two kinds: evidential arguments for God’s existence and logical (or conceptual) arguments for God’s existence<sup>2</sup>. The first kind of arguments, amongst which we can find, for example, the cosmological

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1. Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, p. 1.

2. This mirrors the distinction made between arguments for the improbability of God and arguments for the impossibility of God by Martin & Monnier in the introduction of their *The Impossibility of God* (and *The Improbability of God*), p. 14. Arguments for the improbability of God are, more or less, evidential arguments against God’s existence, and arguments for the impossibility of God are logical (conceptual) arguments against God’s existence.

and teleological arguments, try to derive God's existence from the overall evidence we have of, for example, the way the world is constituted (the preexisting harmony of the interplay between the physical forces that operate in our own universe), or of how the world may have come into being (because, to some, it seems implausible that *something* could come into being out of *nothing*, so the universe must have a *cause*). What interests us in this paper, however, is what we take to be the main representative of the second kind of arguments, which try to derive God's existence from mere logical or conceptual grounds. We are talking about the **ontological argument**.

Ontological arguments for God's existence «are arguments from what are typically alleged to be none but analytic, a priori and necessary premises to the conclusion that God exists»<sup>3</sup>; that is, contrary to evidential arguments, which have as the main source from which they derive their premises the observation of the world, the ontological argument purports to derive the existence of God from premises coming from *reason alone*. The first well-known version of the Ontological Argument was formulated by St. Anselm of Canterbury in his *Proslogion*. We will discuss the Anselmian Argument in section 2.1., along with some other versions and criticisms in section 2.2, followed by a discussion of the so-called second *modal* version Anselm gives of his argument in section 2.3. The most fundamental and central part of the paper will be the discussion, in part 3, of Plantinga's modal version of the Ontological argument, which he presented in Chapter X of his book *The Nature of Necessity*. We will try to criticize his argument and our reasons for rejecting it in section 4, which will be followed by some conclusions in section 5. In general, the aim of our paper is to show how, even in this new, revised, modal version of the argument (of which Plantinga's is the most notable), the Ontological Arguments fails, both in being able to convince anyone and in proving the existence of God (even less, as Plantinga tries to do, His *necessary existence*).

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3. Graham Oppy, "Ontological Arguments".

## **2. The Ontological Argument**

### **2.1. The Anselmian Ontological Argument**

The first well-known version of the Ontological Argument is due to Saint Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109), a philosopher and theologian considered by some to be the father of scholasticism. Anselm purported to find a way to better understand God and to convince others of His very existence, not by mere faith alone, but with the helping power of reason. In the Prologue<sup>4</sup> of his *Proslogion*, he explains how he struggled with this hard and enduring task, until he finally found, maybe with the help of some kind of divine inspiration, a definitive *proof* of God's existence.

But what is this great *discovery*, this *marvelous proof* that Anselm was so eager to immediately embrace once he found it? It is in Chapter 2 of the *Proslogion* where he formulates the argument, in the following way:

Now we believe that you [God] are something than which nothing greater can be thought. So can it be that no such nature exists, since "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God'" [Psalms 14:1 and 53:1]? But when this same fool hears me say "something than which nothing greater can be thought", he surely understands what he hears; and what he understands exists in his understanding [*intellectus*], even if he does not understand that it exists [in reality]. For it is one thing for an object to exist in the understanding and quite another to understand that the object exists [in reality]. [...]. So even the fool must admit that something than which nothing greater can be thought exists at least in his understanding, since he understands this when he hears it, and whatever is understood exists in the understanding. And surely that than which a greater cannot be thought cannot exist only in the understanding. For if it exists only in the understanding, it can be thought to exist in reality as well, which is greater. So if that than which a greater cannot be thought exists only in the understanding, then the very thing than which a greater *cannot* be thought is something than which a greater *can* be thought. But that is clearly impossible. Therefore, there is no doubt that something than which a greater cannot be thought exists both in the understanding and in reality.<sup>5</sup>

To better understand what is at stake in this argument, and see how Anselm proceeds, from the premises (and presuppositions) to the conclusion, we can reformulate the argument in the following way:

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4. Anselm, *Proslogion*, p. 75.

5. Anselm, *Proslogion*, pp. 81-82



- 1) A being than which nothing greater can be thought is conceivable
- 2) A being than which nothing greater can be thought exists in the understanding (this follows, presumably, from (1))
- 3) Existence in reality is greater than existence in the understanding alone (or, real existence is a great-making property)
- 4) The being than which nothing greater can be thought exists in the understanding alone (hypothesis of the *reductio*)
- 5) A being greater than the being than which nothing greater can be thought is conceivable, (because, (3) existence in reality is greater than existence in the understanding alone)
- 6) But there can be no being greater than the being than which nothing greater can be thought (that is, from (3), (4) and (5) a contradiction follows)
- 7) Therefore, the being than which nothing greater can be thought (God) does not only exist in the understanding alone, but in reality as well (because, if it did not exist in reality as well, a being greater than the being than which nothing greater can be thought would be conceivable, and that is contradictory)
- 8) Therefore, God exists (not only in the understanding alone, but in reality as well)<sup>6</sup>.

We can see that the argument proceeds as a *reductio ad absurdum*: it purports to show that an *absurdity*, and, even more, a *contradiction* follows from (4), once we have accepted (1), (2) and (3). One fundamental thing in the argument is premise (3), which amounts to an interesting (if true) metaphysical principle: existence in reality is a great-making property, such that existence in reality is greater than existence in the understanding. Anselm pretends to show that God actually exists by showing that it is absurd to assume that God exists in the understanding alone. When confronting the fool, which is how he calls those that have denied God's existence, he tries to show that when he says "a being than which nothing greater can be thought", the fool is clearly able to conceive it, so that (1) seems to be valid. And it trivially follows that if that being is conceivable, then it exists in the understanding, so that (2) follows from (1). But then... can this being exist in the understanding alone? That is: as plausible as (4) may seem to be, is it really? If we accept (3) and (4), it would seem that (5) follows quite clearly, because, if existence in reality is greater than existence in the understanding ((3)), and the being than which nothing greater can be thought exists in the understanding alone ((4)),

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6. This (re)formulation follows, to some extent, Plantinga's reconstruction of the Anselmian argument; see Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, pp. 198-202.

then a being greater than the being than which nothing greater can be thought is conceivable. But that, as (6) claims, is a contradiction: the being than which nothing greater can be thought would *be and not be* the being than which nothing greater can be thought (*contradiction*), because, on the one hand, He will be the being than which nothing greater can be thought, but, on the other hand, a being greater than Him would be thought (it would be predicated of that being that *p* and *not-p* at the same time). So, (4) must be false, and then (7) will follow: that the being than which nothing greater can be thought exists not only in the understanding, but in reality as well. So, we arrive at the conclusion, (8), that God actually exists (in reality, not only in the understanding).

## 2.2. Other versions and criticisms

After Anselm formulated his argument, some other versions of the ontological argument appeared, along with criticisms directed to them. We need not go deep in their structure and precise formulation, but will comment them briefly and give an overview of them.

Gaunilo, a contemporary to Anselm, tried to show that the kind of argument Anselm put forward could be used to prove the existence of almost any object. His argument consists in postulating an island greater than any other island, which he calls the lost island, an island «blessed with an indescribable abundance of riches and delights»<sup>7</sup>; then, because one understands what he says when he talks about such island, it surely exists in the understanding, and, because it is an island greater than any other island or place on earth, it must surely exist, because, if that were not the case, the island would not be the greater island or place on earth. Gaunilo tries to show that this is an absurd way of reasoning, and that from the mere existence in the understanding of a being “greater than all things” it does not follow the existence of reality of that being.

St. Thomas Aquinas also commented about Anselm’s argument<sup>8</sup>, which he considered to be deficient for a reason similar to Gaunilo’s. He considered that understanding God to be a being than which nothing greater can be thought is not the same as understanding it to exist in reality. Those who do not believe in God understand what “a being than which nothing greater can be thought” means, but they deny such a being to exist. In the end, Aquinas says, even if existence is necessarily attached to the essence or nature of

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7. Gaunilo, “In behalf of the fool”, p. 102.

8. The fragments were Aquinas talks about the Ontological Argument can be found in Plantinga (ed.), *The Ontological Argument*, pp. 28-30.

God, this is not evident to us, and so we must demonstrate His existence through things that are better known and more accessible to us. That is why Aquinas's preferred argument was a kind of cosmological or teleological argument.

Some centuries later, french philosopher René Descartes revived the ontological argument under a new version. In his *Meditations on First Philosophy*<sup>9</sup>, he put forward an argument for God's existence based on his conception of Him as a supremely perfect being. He argued that because he had a clear and distinct idea of God's properties as this being possessing all kinds of perfection, and since existence is a perfection (in a similar way in which, according to Anselm, existence in reality is a great-making property), we must necessarily attach the property of existence to our concept of God, and, thus, God must exist.

Leibnitz considered the ontological argument, both in its Anselmian and Cartesian version, to be valid, but lacking an extra step that needed to be filled. According to him, what the argument showed at most is that «assuming that God is possible, he exists»<sup>10</sup>, or, as Yujin Nagasawa clearly puts it, the ontological argument does not prove (i) God exists, but the less impressive (ii) If it is *possible* for God to exist, then He exists<sup>11</sup>. Leibnitz goes on “filling the gap” by providing an argument based on the idea that perfections are unanalyzable, from which it would follow that a being possessing all perfections (included, remember, existence) is possible, thus God (a supremely perfect being) exists. Leibnitz's observation was fundamental, precisely because many contemporary arguments against God's existence would purport to show that the antecedent of (ii) is false, or, in other words, that it is not possible for God to exist, and, thus, He does not exist.

The strongest and better-known criticisms to the ontological argument come from Kant<sup>12</sup>. He in fact gave various criticisms as reasons to reject the argument<sup>13</sup>. The first has to do with the possibility, already commented, of rejecting the existence of an object no matter what properties we ascribe to it through unconditional judgements; even if existence seems to be an essential property of God, there is no contradiction in rejecting that there is a being (God) amongst whose essential/necessary properties we find that of

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9. Particularly, in the Third and Fifth Meditations; see Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, pp. 24-36 and pp. 44-49.

10. Leibnitz, *New Essays Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 504.

11. Nagasawa, *The Existence of God*, p. 20.

12. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, pp. 563-569.

13. These different criticisms are clearly distinguished, exposed, and commented by Mackie in *The Miracle of Theism*, pp. 43-49.

existence. The second has to do with the supposed contradiction that arises when one already assumes existence in the concept of the very thing whose existence one is trying to prove, or, at least, in the fallacious nature of such kind of argument; or, in other words, in the absurdity of presupposing existence (*conceptually*) to prove an object's (real) existence. The third is related to Kant's distinction between analytic and synthetic judgements (propositions). He tries to argue that no existential proposition is ever analytic<sup>14</sup>; and, if the proposition "God exists" is synthetic, a purely logical proof of God's existence is impossible, and, even more, there is no contradiction in rejecting God's existence. But the most influential of Kant's criticisms is the fourth, the one which came to be known as Kant's dictum: that existence (*being*) is not a real predicate, but just the mere positing of a thing; in other words, one cannot count amongst the predicated properties of a thing that of existence. In the end, what follows from the analysis Kant gives of existence, and that others after him have followed, is that existence (being) is, in fact, *just* the existential quantifier. So that, what "God exists" really means is "There is an x such that x is God". And no contradiction follows from rejecting this proposition, so the ontological argument would fail at proving God's existence (even more, following this analysis, even if we accept that existence *can* be a property, and a property that God has in some fundamental way, we can still reject the proposition asserting "There is an x such that x is God and x has the property of existence", and say that *there is no such an object/being*).

### 2.3. The second Anselmian argument

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the ontological argument gained renewed attention, especially in the "reformulated form" it received under Charles Hartshorne<sup>15</sup> and Norman Malcolm. Both authors seem to have made the same interesting *discovery*: according to them, Anselm puts forward not only one, but *two* different arguments for God's existence. These two arguments would be different in a way such that the *mode* of existence they would prove God to have would be different. The first argument, found in Chapter 2 of the *Proslogion*, and that we already dealt with, would (purport to) prove the (merely) actual existence of God. The second argument would try to prove the *necessary existence* of

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14. Although some have tried to argue against this claim that, for example, some arithmetical truths about the existence of certain numbers are, in fact, analytic (necessary?) existential judgements. But Kant would probably say that they are, in fact, *synthetic a priori judgements*.

15. See Hartshorne, *Man's Vision of God*, specially Chapter IX, pp. 299-341.

God, His existence as a *necessary being*. Hartshorne and Malcolm both agree that the first argument is fallacious, and that some of the criticisms directed to it are completely valid; but that that is not the case with the second version of argument.

What is this second version of the Ontological Argument, this *modal version*, from which God's necessary existence is proved? It is in Chapter 3 of his *Proslogion*, according to Malcolm, that Anselm gives this second version of the argument, where he writes that the being than which nothing greater can be thought,

exists so truly that it cannot even be thought not to exist. For it is possible to think that something exists that cannot be thought not to exist, and such a being is greater than one that can be thought not to exist. Therefore, if that than which a greater cannot be thought can be thought not to exist, then that than which a greater cannot be thought is *not* that than which a greater cannot be thought; and this is a contradiction. So that than which a greater cannot be thought exists so truly that it cannot even be thought not to exist.<sup>16</sup>

Let's see how this argument proceeds. Again, here God is to be identified with (or described as) "a being than which nothing greater can be thought", or also, which comes to be almost the same, "a being than which a greater cannot be thought". We can reformulate the argument in the following way:

- (1) A being which cannot be thought not to exist is conceivable.
- (2) A being which cannot be thought not to exist is greater than a being which can be thought not to exist (or, necessary existence is a great-making property).
- (3) The being than which a greater cannot be thought can be thought not to exist (hypothesis of the *reductio*).
- (4) The being than which a greater cannot be thought is *not* the being than which a greater cannot be thought (this follows from (2) and (3))
- (5) But (4) is contradictory. The being than which a greater cannot be thought *cannot* fail to exist (cannot be thought not to exist), since, if it did, it would not be the being than which a greater cannot be thought.
- (6) Therefore, the being than which a greater cannot be thought cannot be thought not to exist (it necessarily exists)
- (7) Therefore, God *necessarily exists* (is a *necessary being*).

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16. Anselm, *Proslogion*, p. 83.

This second version of the argument also proceeds as a *reductio ad absurdum*, which purports to derive God's necessary existence, (7), from a contradiction, (4), that arises when one assumes (3) to be true; but, as in the former argument, this depends on the acceptance, along with premise (1), of a metaphysical principle, (2), which postulates *necessary existence* as a great-making property. A being than which a greater cannot be thought cannot fail to exist, it cannot be thought not to exist, because, if it were *possible* that it does not exist, it would not be a being than which a greater cannot be thought. Anselm could add that if the being than which a greater cannot be thought could be thought not to exist, then a being greater than the being than which a greater cannot be thought could be conceived (this would follow from (2)), which would be absurd (a contradiction would follow from (2), (3) and this added premise).

Even though, in our opinion, both arguments in Anselm are deeply related<sup>17</sup>, some have rejected the first *kind* of argument, while embracing the second, the *modal* kind of ontological argument<sup>18</sup>. Different versions, apart from that by Malcolm and Hartshorne, of the modal ontological argument have been put forward. In the rest of this paper, we will center our attention to the version put forward by philosopher and theologian Alvin Plantinga, who, after first rejecting Malcolm and Hartshorne's version<sup>19</sup>, along with other versions of the argument, made his own Modal Argument for the existence of God, as we can find it in Chapter X of his *The Nature of Necessity*.

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17. Because the second argument presupposes the first one; or, to prove God's necessary existence, Anselm presupposes that he has already established a definitive proof for God's (mere actual) existence.

18. Malcolm, for example, rejects the metaphysical principle that (mere actual) existence is a great-making property, while accepting the principle that *necessary existence* is a great-making property, thus preferring the modal version of the argument and rejecting the first one. See Malcolm, "Anselm's Ontological Arguments", p. 46; for a summary of Malcolm's own argument, pp. 49-50.

19. See Plantinga's criticism of Malcolm's argument in Plantinga, "A Valid Ontological Argument?", p.101; see also his general criticism to the Harthorne-Malcolm kind of argument in Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, p. 212-213

### **3. Plantinga's Modal Argument**

#### **3.1. Some preliminary presuppositions**

In *The Nature of Necessity*, Plantinga makes some substantial claims about issues concerning modality, possible worlds and the nature of possibility, necessity, and essence (essential properties) that are fundamental to understand his argument. We will not discuss or argue for (or against) any of these points, but, instead, we will accept them as *presuppositions*, and we will mention those that we consider to be fundamental in order to understand Plantinga's version of the modal ontological argument:

- (a) **Modality *de re* and essential properties:** According to Plantinga, there are properties that objects have essentially: an object has a property *essentially*, following him, if it has that property in all possible worlds in which it exists. These properties are *essential properties*, properties an object has in all possible worlds (in which it exists), properties that the object *necessarily* (essentially) *has* (modality *de re*). Also, every object has an *essence*, *E*, a property or set of properties such that (i) an object has *E* essentially (has *E* in all possible worlds in which it exists) and (ii) there is no other object in any possible world that has *E*.<sup>20</sup>
  
- (b) **No relative possibility/necessity:** all possible worlds are *accessible* from any possible world, so that what is possible and, more importantly, what is *necessary*, does not change from world to world.<sup>21</sup>
  
- (c) There are **world-indexed properties**, which can be characterized in the following way: If an object *x* exists in *W* and it has property *P* in *W*, then *x* has *P-in-W*. And the proposition *x has P-in-W* is necessary, because, in every world *W\**, it will be true that *x* has *P-in-W* (regardless of whether *x* lacks *P* in *W\**). All world-indexed properties are also *essential properties* of an object, because if an object *x* has *P* in *W*, then *x* will have *P-in-W* as a property in all possible worlds in which *x* exists. It will be necessarily both the dicto and the re true that *x has P-in-W*.<sup>22</sup>

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20. Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, pp. 9-13; pp.55-56; p. 72.

21. Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, p. 54.

22. Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, pp. 55; pp. 62-65; p. 77.

(d) **An object does not have properties in those worlds in which it does not exist.**

Against theories that accept the existence of nonactual objects, which have such properties as nonexistence in those worlds in which they do not exist, Plantinga claims that if an object does not exist in some possible world, then it has no properties in that possible world.<sup>23</sup>

Once we keep all of them in mind, accepting them as premises or presuppositions, even if only for the sake of the argument, we will be fully able to understand Plantinga's Modal Argument and the criticisms we will put forward later on.

### 3.2. God, a maximally great being

Plantinga, from the very start also accepts, just like Malcolm, the metaphysical principle that necessary existence is a great-making property, because, according to him «the greatness of a being in a world  $W$  depends not merely upon the qualities it has in  $W$ ; what it is like in other worlds is also relevant»<sup>24</sup>; he thus establishes a difference between *excellence* (which depends on the properties an object has in a particular possible world in which it exists) and *greatness* (which, as we already said, depends on the excellence an object has in all possible worlds in which it exists), and defining the two following different properties: *maximal greatness* (or, *unsurpassable greatness*) and *maximal excellence*. He conceives God as a maximally great being, and the aim of his argument is to show that *maximal greatness* is possibly exemplified, and, from this, that God, the object exemplifying maximal greatness, *exists necessarily*. He gives two different statements of the argument, a long one and a shorter one. The first one proceeds in the following way:

- 1) The property *has maximal greatness* entails the property *has maximal excellence in all possible worlds*
- 2) *Maximal excellence* entails *omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection*
- 3) *Maximal greatness* is possibly exemplified
- 4) There is a world  $W^*$  and an essence  $E^*$  such that  $E^*$  is exemplified in  $W^*$  and  $E^*$  entails *has maximal greatness in  $W^*$*  (or, there is some possible world  $W^*$  in which

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23. Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, pp. 152; the full development can be found through Chapters VII and VIII, specially this last one, pp. 121-148; pp. 149-163.

24. Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, p. 213.



the essence  $E^*$  is exemplified, and, since  $E^*$  entails *has maximal greatness in  $W^*$* , there is some possible world in which *maximal greatness* is exemplified, as established by premise (3))

- 5) For any object  $x$ , if  $x$  exemplifies  $E^*$ , then  $x$  exemplifies the property *has maximal excellence in every possible world* (because, if as established by premise (1), *maximal greatness* entails *maximal excellence in every possible world*, and, as established by (4), the essence  $E^*$  entails *has maximal greatness in  $W^*$* , then an object exemplifying  $E^*$  would exemplify the property *has maximal excellence in every possible world*).
- 6)  $E^*$  entails the property *has maximal excellence in every possible world* (which follows from (1), (4) and (5))
- 7) If  $W^*$  had been actual, it would have been impossible that  $E^*$  fail to be exemplified (because  $E^*$  is exemplified in  $W^*$  and  $E^*$  entails the property *has maximal excellence in all possible worlds*, a property an object has only if it exists in all possible worlds and has *omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection* in all worlds in which it exists ).
- 8) There exists a being that has maximal excellence in every world (the being exemplifying  $E^*$ )<sup>25</sup>

And the second one:

- 1) There is a possible world in which unsurpassable greatness [=maximal greatness] is exemplified
- 2) The proposition *a thing has unsurpassable greatness if and only if it has maximal excellence in every possible world* is necessarily true
- 3) The proposition *whatever has maximal excellence is omnipotent, omniscient and morally perfect* is necessarily true
- 4) *Possesses unsurpassable greatness* is instantiated in every world<sup>26</sup>.

We will focus on this second, shorter statement of the argument, as we think that it already conveys and expresses in a more direct and straightforward way what Plantinga intends with his argument. In premise (1), Plantinga is simply trying to establish the possibility of a property such as maximal greatness (or unsurpassable greatness) to be instantiated or exemplified, that is, it is true that, for some object  $x$  and possible world  $W$  it is true that *possibly  $x$  has maximal greatness in  $W$*  (which is what premises (3) and (4)

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25. Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, pp. 214-215.

26. Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, p. 216.

of the longer version try to establish). But, it so happens that, according to premise (2), if an object has maximal greatness in a possible world, then it has maximal excellence in all possible worlds (which is established through premises (1), (5) and (6) of the longer version). Premise (3) just serves as a definition, or, more precisely, as a clarification, of what it is for an object to have *maximal excellence*: an object  $x$  has maximal excellence in a world  $W$  if it is true that  $x$  has *omnipotence, omniscience, and moral perfection in  $W$*  (premise (2) of the longer version). The final move, that gives us (4), the conclusion of the argument (premise (7) and conclusion (8) of the longer version), may seem a bit tricky: if there is an object  $x$  that has maximal greatness in a possible world  $W$ , then that object must also have maximal excellence in all possible worlds; if the object has maximal excellence in all possible worlds, then it will surely have maximal greatness in  $W$ ... but not only in  $W$ , since, no matter what world we choose, if it is true in  $W$  that  $x$  has maximal excellence in all possible worlds, it will be true in  $W^*$  too that  $x$  has maximal excellence in all possible worlds; so, in  $W^*$  it will be also true that  $x$  has maximal greatness, and it will also be true that  $x$  has maximal greatness in all possible worlds. Thus, maximal greatness will be instantiated in every world, as (4) claims. Therefore, God, a maximally great being, is a being that has maximal excellence in all possible worlds, and, thus, exists in all possible worlds, or, in other words, God *exists necessarily* (is a *necessary being*).

## **4. A failed Ontological Argument?**

Once we have seen how Plantinga's argument proceeds and how he arrives at the pretended conclusion (that God *exists necessarily*, that He is a *necessary being*), all we have left to do is to see if the argument stands as a good *proof* and *demonstration* of God's (necessary) existence. We think that it is not, and, in this section, we will put forward some criticisms that justify our rejection of Plantinga's argument.

### **4.1. Maximal greatness, possibly exemplified?**

It seems that what the argument really pretends is to derive the necessary existence of God from the possibility of the necessary existence of God. But the inference of what is necessary from what is possibly necessary is a trivial one (in the S5 system of modal logic). Something possible is something that is true in some possible world. And, if in some possible world it is true that something is necessary, then it is true that it is necessary *simpliciter*; because what is (logically? metaphysically?) necessary does not change from world to world (presupposition (b) of this paper's section 3.1.). So, what the argument basically does is:

$$(1) \ \diamond \Box p$$

$$(2) \ \Box p$$

$$(\text{If } \diamond \Box p, \text{ then } \Box p, \text{ or } \diamond \Box p \text{ entails } \Box p)$$

Or, in other words, *it is possible that it is necessary that p* entails *it is necessary that p* (*p* being the proposition *God exists*). The argument is valid in a trivial way (as trivial as it would be, for example, to deduce the truth of *p* from the truth of *p*∧*q*), so it is not clear that the argument is really *proving* anything. No additional argument whatsoever is given to prove that maximal greatness is possibly exemplified, it is just *presupposed*. And this, we believe, is what the argument should try to establish (in a non-trivial way). Recall Leibniz's claim that what Anselm's and Descartes's arguments really proved was the truth of *If God is possible, then He exists*, and that an additional argument would be needed to prove that *God is possible* is true. Following him, we can say that what Plantinga really proves (if anything at all) is the truth of the following proposition: *If maximal greatness is possibly exemplified, then God exists necessarily*. But then an additional argument will be needed to prove that, in fact, maximal greatness is indeed possibly exemplified. And this is something Plantinga does not do at all.

Precisely, some way to answer to the argument is to argue against the possibility of *maximal excellence*, and, thus, of *maximal greatness*, being exemplified at all; this would be done by showing the inner contradictory nature of that very property, its own *impossibility*. In fact, many atheist philosophers have tried to argue that omnipotence, omniscience, and moral perfection are actually inherently contradictory properties, properties that are *impossible* in some sense or other (both *by and of* themselves and/or when mutually conjoined together). But, for the sake of the argument, we will consider that these properties, which traditional theistic belief ascribe to God, are not contradictory at all and that are, in fact, coherent<sup>27</sup>.

Someone could try to understand Plantinga's argument in a different way, so that his argument does not already presuppose (indirectly) what it already tries to establish (the *necessary* existence of God). It seems that Plantinga wants to derive God's necessary existence from God's own properties, more precisely, from his *essential properties*, which are, in fact, *indexical properties* —properties of the kind *x has  $\alpha$ -in- $\mathcal{W}$*  (presupposition (c) in section 3.1.). God has the property of being a *maximally great being*, a property which entails the property *having maximal excellence in all possible worlds*. As Plantinga defends earlier in his book (and as claimed by presupposition (d) in section 3.1. of this paper) an object *x* only has properties in those worlds in which it exists. Even if a proposition such as *x has  $P$ -in- $\mathcal{W}$*  is true in all possible worlds (it is a necessary truth), this does not imply that *x* exists in all worlds (nor that it has properties in all worlds).

So, the argument could be reformulated in the following way: maybe, what we really could say (and, we think, that is all we can say) is that *x exemplifies maximal greatness if and only if x exemplifies maximal excellence in all possible worlds in which it exists*. In other words: *x is a maximally great being if and only if x has maximal excellence (omnipotence, omniscience and moral perfection) in  $\mathcal{W}$* , where  $\mathcal{W} = \{W^1, \dots, W^m\}$  is the set of all possible worlds in which *x* exists.

Let *x* be God, *P* be maximal greatness, *Q* maximal excellence,  $\mathcal{W}$  the set of all possible worlds in which *x* exists<sup>28</sup>:

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27. For an account of the concept of God, with all of His alleged attributes, seen as internally coherent, see Richard Swinburne's *The Coherence of Theism*. For arguments against the coherence of the concept of God, based primarily on the contradictory nature of His own attributes (the attributes theism claims He possesses), see *The Impossibility of God*, specially Part 4 and Part 5.

28. Here, for the sake of simplicity we will use, for example, “*x* has *Q*-in- $\mathcal{W}$ ” and other similar constructions to mean “*x* has *Q* in all members of  $\mathcal{W}$ ” (*x* has *Q* in all possible worlds in which *x* exists).

- 1)  $P$  is possibly exemplified
- 2) The proposition *a thing has  $P$  if and only if it has  $Q$ -in- $\mathcal{W}$*  is necessarily true
- 3)  $x$  exemplifies  $P$  (and so  $x$  has  $Q$ -in- $\mathcal{W}$ )

But then, it does not follow that

- 4)  $P$  is instantiated in every world

But instead...

- 5)  $P$  is instantiated in  $\mathcal{W}$  ( $P$  is instantiated in every world in which  $x$  exists;  $P$ —and, thus,  $Q$ — is an essential property of  $x$ )

And...

- 6)  $x$  exists in  $\mathcal{W}$  ( $x$  exists in all worlds in which  $x$  exists)

And  $\mathcal{W}$  is just a subset of the set of all possible worlds. So, in this revised form, what the argument establishes is, again, only a triviality: that God's essential properties (omnipotence, omniscience, moral perfection) are instantiated in all possible worlds in which He exists, or, even, the more trivial one that God exists in all possible worlds in which his essential properties are instantiated (which is almost the same as saying that God exists in all possible worlds in which He exists).

Of course, it could be argued that for God to be a maximally great being, all we need is actually this: that he exemplifies *omnipotence, omniscience, and moral perfection* (=maximal excellence) in all worlds in which He exists. If, in some of the worlds in which He existed, God did not exemplify one or any of these properties, thus existing as a being of a lesser degree of greatness, He would not be a maximally great being and, then, He would not be God<sup>29</sup>. As attractive as this conception may be to some theists, it does not serve at all to prove that God exists necessarily. It is not proved that it is a necessary being. It is just proved that, if it exists, it will essentially possess these properties, and it will possess them in all possible worlds in which He exists; but this does not mean that He exists in all possible worlds (and, maybe, he does not even exist in the actual world).

## 4.2. *Presupposing God's necessary existence.*

The most important objection we can make to Plantinga's argument, though, is that *it already presupposes God's necessary existence to prove that God exists necessarily*: if a maximally great being is defined as that being which *in every possible world* has the

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<sup>29</sup>. And this is completely coherent with Plantinga's claim that the greatness of a being depends on the properties it has in all possible worlds in which it exists.

property of having maximal excellence (= being omniscient, omnipotent, and morally perfect), we are already presupposing that a maximally great being, if it exists, exists in all possible worlds, and is thus a necessary being. Recall that according to Plantinga (presupposition (d) in section 3.1. of this paper) some object  $x$  has a property  $P$  in a possible world  $W$  only if it exists in  $W$ . So, if we take any property  $Q^*$  and we define  $P^*$  as the property *has  $Q^*$  in all possible worlds*, and say that the object  $x$  exemplifies  $P^*$ , then we will be supposing already not only that  $x$  exists (is actual) but that  $x$  exists necessarily (is actual and could not have failed to be actual). We are presupposing that  $Q^*$  is exemplified in every possible world, and thus that the object<sup>30</sup> exemplifying it exists in all possible worlds. We have not proven  $x$ 's existence, we have just *presupposed* and *assumed* it; the argument is, in this sense, circular and question-begging.

Plantinga establishes some definitions and concepts (God as a maximally great being, Maximal excellence, Omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection) and some entailments between them to construct his argument.

He says that:

(1) Maximal greatness is possibly exemplified.

Then he goes on saying that

(2) Maximal excellence entails omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection

And, finally, that

(3) Maximal greatness entails maximal excellence in all possible worlds

God is (would be) a maximally great being because it is a being which has maximal excellence in all possible worlds, or, in other words, a being that has omniscience, omnipotence and moral perfection in all possible worlds.

What this means is basically that God's maximal greatness depends on the truth of these two propositions:

(1) God has omnipotence, omniscience, and moral perfection in all possible worlds in which he exists (omnipotence, omniscience and moral perfection are amongst God's essential properties)

(2) God exists in all possible worlds (his essential properties are instantiated in all possible worlds)

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**30.** Here we are supposing that this property is, in fact, a *unique and exclusive* property, in the sense that it can only be exemplified *at most* by one and the same object in all possible worlds. This is common, in fact, in traditional theist conceptions, where omniscience, omnipotence and moral perfection are only exemplified by God himself, and no other object can exemplify them; in other words, that there can be only at most one God. But, of course, someone could reasonably deny this presupposition.

Earlier we have said that Plantinga seems to want to derive *necessarily maximal greatness is exemplified* from *it is possible that it is necessary that maximal greatness is exemplified*. But from the point of view now under consideration, it seems to us that he is doing something different, or, at least, that what he should try to do for his argument to be a good *proof* is something quite different. Plantinga wants to derive God's existence from God's essential properties, from God's very essence; but he cannot just suppose that God's essence entails *maximal greatness in W\** (because in doing that, as we have already said, he would be assuming *necessary existence* to be an essential property of God, thus not proving that God exists through his argument, but already presupposing His necessary existence to construct the argument). We think, on the other hand, that God's essence can only possibly be said to entail *maximal excellence (=omnipotence, omniscience, and moral perfection)*. It indeed seems that God, in order to be God, as we already said, must *essentially* possess these properties in all worlds in which He exists. But then what Plantinga has to show, in order to prove God's necessary existence, is that maximal excellence (omnipotence, omniscience and moral perfection) is instantiated in every possible world. If maximal excellence is instantiated in every possible world (if it is necessary that maximal excellence be instantiated), then maximal greatness will be exemplified, and, even more, it will be *necessarily* exemplified.

Put in a different way, If  $p$  = maximal greatness is exemplified, and  $q$  = maximal excellence is exemplified, then

$$(1) \diamond p \leftrightarrow \Box q$$

$$(2) \Box q$$

$$(3) \diamond p$$

(If  $\diamond p \leftrightarrow \Box q$  and  $\Box q$ , then  $\diamond p$ , or,  $\diamond p \leftrightarrow \Box q$  and  $\Box q$  entail  $\diamond p$ )

Maximal greatness is only possibly exemplified if maximal excellence is necessarily exemplified (it is exemplified in all possible worlds). To establish the possibility of maximal greatness one has first to establish the necessity of maximal excellence (omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection).

But Plantinga does not show, in fact, that maximal excellence is necessarily exemplified (is exemplified in all possible worlds). He just *claims*, without further demonstration, that *maximal excellence in every possible world (= maximal greatness or unsurpassable greatness)* is exemplified in a possible world. But we want to insist that to show that maximal excellence is instantiated in every possible world, it is not as simple as just postulating a property called *maximal greatness*, say that *maximal greatness*

implies/entails *maximal excellence in every possible world*, and then assume that *maximal greatness is possibly exemplified*. This is to derive the necessary existence of the being instantiating maximal greatness from its own necessary existence. This is, at the end, just to beg the question in a sophisticated and surreptitious way. Why so? Because, as we have seen earlier, if a thing has unsurpassable greatness (maximal greatness) if and only if it has maximal excellence in every possible world, then *x has maximal greatness* means: 1) *x has maximal excellence* (in all worlds in which it exists, so that this proposition is necessarily true *de re*, or, *maximal excellence* is an essential property of *x*, *x has maximal excellence essentially*) and 2) *x exists in all possible worlds* (so that *x exists* is necessarily true *de dicto*, or *x is a necessary being*, *x necessarily exists*). When saying that God is a maximally great being, we are already presupposing and assuming not only His existence, but even more, His *necessary existence*. We are not proving anything. We are moving ourselves in the constant circularity of an argument that cannot establish anything by itself, but that only “works” by assuming and presupposing what it aims to prove. It is in this very sense, and for everything we said in this section, that Plantinga’s argument fails as a piece of natural theology (if natural theology is possible at all), and is, in our own opinion, a circular and question-begging argument, a *failed proof* of God’s necessary existence.



## **5. Conclusion**

In this paper, we have investigated the Ontological Argument for God's existence, and we aimed to criticize the modal version of the argument put forward by Alvin Plantinga in Chapter X of *The Nature of Necessity*. The Ontological Argument has a long and rich history, and, all through the centuries, it has been received both with amazement and distrust, because, on the one hand, it appears as a spectacular discovery, opening the possibility of a purely conceptual and rational proof of God's existence, while, on the other hand, it seems to be a misleading argument, one that arrives at its own conclusion by way of pure postulation, one that *defines God into existence*; it has been said that even if it seems difficult to say what it is, something seems to be wrong with the Ontological Argument. But we have clearly exposed what is wrong with Plantinga's argument: firstly, he just assumes and/or presupposes that maximal greatness is possibly exemplified, without further argument in favor of this thesis (though, we contend, in order for his argument to be valid he would need an additional argument that proved or showed that maximal greatness is possibly exemplified). Secondly, his argument already presupposes God's necessary existence to prove that God necessarily exists, so that, in the end, his argument is circular and question-begging; he already presupposes what he is trying to prove. And, we contend, all versions of the ontological argument, modal or not, are guilty of committing these very same sins.

But Plantinga, in the end of *The Nature of Necessity*, makes the following comment regarding his version of the Ontological Argument:

Hence our verdict on these reformulated versions of St. Anselm's argument must be as follows. They 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.<sup>31</sup>

But why, as reasonable as it may be, should we accept the central premise, and thus the conclusion of the argument? Maybe, and only maybe, by way of pure faith? That seems to be what Anselm believed, for, even though he claimed to have discovered a *proof* for God's existence, in the beginning of his *Proslogion*, he claims «For I do not seek to understand in order to believe; I believe in order to understand. For I also believe that “Unless I believe, I shall not understand” [Isaiah 7:9]»<sup>32</sup>. And, in this very sense, the Ontological Argument seems not to prove nor be able to convince anyone of God's

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31. Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, p. 221.

32. Anselm, *Proslogion*, p. 81.

existence. Only those that already *believe* in God, those that already have *faith*, could see in the Ontological Argument an attractive piece of philosophy and natural theology. But, as we have also seen, even some theist philosophers (like Aquinas and Kant) have rejected the Ontological Argument. Whether this rejection is made from a theistic or an atheistic point of view, we believe there are many reasons, as has been shown all through this paper, to abandon the Ontological Argument, in all its diverse forms and its different reformulations.

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