

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT, ITS CRITICISMS AND CONSEQUENCES

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# CHAPTER 1

## NEOCLASSICAL METAPHYSICS FOR THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

### 1.1 Overview

This project examines the requirements for a coherent ontological argument. It is not a neutral examination of an argument, as it is ultimately my considered position that there is a successful ontological argument.<sup>1</sup> On my lights, this judgment does not, however, undermine the project – since (as we will see in a later chapter) full neutrality is in the end neither possible nor desirable.

There have been centuries worth of responses – both critical toward and corrective on behalf of the argument. While it would be irresponsible of any project with roots dating so far back to ignore this discussion altogether, the present enterprise is not historical in scope vis-à-vis the ontological argument (whence the “absurd” brevity of the historical discussion in the second chapter). Nor is it historical vis-à-vis the tradition of neoclassical thought in which this project stands. Rather, this project is constructive. I will present what I take to be features of a metaphysics capable of supporting an ontological argument, followed by a characterization of ontological arguments, and a formulation of one such argument which I in turn examine. Finally, I will offer a concluding word about further potential implications of the line of reasoning that proceeds from the metaphysics I enlist for the project.

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1. Here, “coherent” means something slightly stronger than “logically valid,” though without (necessarily) implying soundness. I say stronger, because there are objections beyond mere validity that enter into the discussion. In later chapters, I will deal with meta-logical issues such as which modal logic is appropriate for discussing metaphysical necessity. A “coherent” argument as I intend it to mean here is not merely logically valid, but valid according to a logic that makes (at least intuitive) sense, whether or not one accepts the logic in question as appropriate. By “successful ontological argument” I mean that I am convinced of its soundness.

## 1.2 The Appeal of the Ontological Argument

There is a lovely simplicity to the ontological argument. Versions of it can be presented in a single page; some (given sufficient logical apparatus already running in the background) even in a single premise.<sup>2</sup> But the simplicity of which the statement of the argument admits does not imply that it is easily grasped. Despite what may have been wished by the one who discovered it, the intervening centuries have shown this to be the case. The simplicity of the ontological argument masks the complex architecture of reasoning which undergirds it.

Of the reasons the ontological argument is a fruitful avenue of inquiry, two motivate this dissertation in a fundamental way. The first of these, while important, remains implicit throughout the project, and so bears mention here. This is the fact that the conclusion of the argument under consideration – the existence of God – falls under the category of “important if true.”<sup>3</sup> When a claim falls into this category, it would also seem to be important to determine whether it is true. Independent of this importance, however, is the relative ease in answering such a question. An important answer is not the same as an important question. By itself the former is insufficient to justify centuries’ worth of examination. One can imagine claims that fall into the important-if-true category that are too far-fetched, or have too few adherents to demand that any substantial effort be put into investigating their veracity.

It is the second salient feature of the ontological argument that makes the question of a theistic argument’s status an important one. Unlike far-fetched claims, the status of the ontological argument is genuinely controversial. It has been the topic of centuries worth of debate. Despite the argument’s apparent simplicity, it is not easy to evaluate its status. Even the argument’s detractors will agree that while simple, it is not simplistic so as to

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2. I have in mind Peter van Inwagen’s argument from his article “Ontological Arguments” in *Noûs* (1977).

3. This seems uncontroversial to me. However, as Hobbes observed, “there can be nothing so absurd, but may be found in the books of Philosophers.” (*Leviathan*, part I, chapter 5 (p. 113)). He is referring, to Cicero’s *De Divinatione*, book II, 119, but Cicero’s meaning is not quite what I intend by the phrase. This volume will be of little use to a reader who is unwilling to agree that the existence of God would be an important truth.

be dismissed out of hand.<sup>4</sup> The second bit of motivation, then is this: grappling with the ontological argument is instructive about important metaphysical and epistemological issues. Should the argument prove to be a failure, it still offers insight about the limits of our understanding, or about the nature of reality. Denying or accepting the argument will dictate the availability, necessity, or prohibition on certain philosophical positions. This is especially the case when it comes to the details of how the critic opts to offer her rejection. A certain kind of materialist could accept the logic of the argument, while maintaining that the understanding of God it requires is nonsensical. Theists may find themselves opposed to the argument on different grounds. Pursuing the consequences of one's respective position is itself an instructive (and so worthwhile) exercise.

This project engages with one such line of reasoning in particular – neoclassical metaphysics. At this juncture, I should mention that the term “neoclassical metaphysics” is one of many that describes a tradition of thought often associated with Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne. Other terms that may be more or less familiar to the reader include process philosophy, the philosophy of organism, and panentheism. I will eschew this latter term, because it threatens to spark a number of debates beyond our present scope (e.g., whether it is simply another term for pantheism, and subsequent debates about the religious adequacy of such an understanding of the deity in question, or whether it is possible to have a non-theistic neoclassical system of thought). The second term, “philosophy of organism,” is Whitehead's coining, and is mostly associated with him – as opposed to subsequent proponents of the school of thought. Rather than delving into interpretations, comparisons, and

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4. Like all such generalizations, this is an overstatement. There are detractors who hold the argument in low esteem. This is especially true among those who seek to present the argument for popular audiences, where a best-selling author summarizes the argument with the words, “Nur Nurny Nur Nur” (Dawkins, p. 80). But this level of contempt for the argument is the exception rather than the rule. Hick and Oppy (below) think it is worthy at least of debunking in serious fashion. If their objections offer valuable philosophical instruction, as I take them to, it suggests that even if the argument fails, at least it does so in interesting ways. Scott Aikin and Robert Talisse, in their work *Reasonable Atheism* have gone so far as to use respectful understanding of the nuances of the ontological argument – which both authors reject – as a litmus test for credibility of atheists.

arbitration between various thinkers within the broader camp, I am interested in addressing a more general version of this school of thought. I will therefore prefer the (somewhat clunky) term “neoclassical metaphysics,” opting on occasion to use term “process thought” or some variant. Through caprices of history beyond my ken, the modifier “process” has come to be affiliated primarily with the discipline of theology. Again there are debates to be had (e.g., about the difference between theology and philosophy of religion, again about whether process thought is necessarily theistic, or whether the term theology is appropriately applied only in terms of a particular religious tradition). And again, such debates exceed our scope. In this project, the term “process” will be used to modify “philosophy” or “thought” in general, and will avoid the term “theology.”<sup>5</sup> The terms involving “process” are intended as strict synonyms to “neoclassical metaphysics” – to be used out of stylistic concerns. It is a working assumption of mine that this school of thought in particular offers the conceptual tools to address important concerns voiced about ontological arguments. By attempting to understand and evaluate an ontological argument, it is my hope that the usefulness of neoclassical metaphysics will shine through – offering an invitation to consider (and perhaps to accept) it as a valuable, even viable philosophical position.<sup>6</sup>

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5. There is an etymological sense according to which discussion of God or gods is *theo-logical*. It is this sense in which we speak of natural theology, and we could certainly say that some strands of process thought qualify under this meaning. In this sense, David Hume’s work is theological. But this sense of theology is distinct from the school of thought called process theology.

6. It bears mention that the neoclassical position remains a minority report among metaphysicians generally, including those who endorse a version of the ontological argument. The larger contingent of analytic metaphysicians, including thinkers such as Plantinga and van Inwagen (discussed throughout), are in substantial disagreement with process thought on issues which both sides hold dear. For the purpose of the present discussion, however, my interest in supporting ontological arguments outpaces that of arguing against this larger camp over other issues. On the discussion of the operation of ontological arguments, the two camps have more in common than not. And so, in the interest of recruiting them as allies, I have opted to err on the side of deflating rather than exaggerating our differences.

### 1.3 On the Nature of Argument

There are various ways to understand the nature of arguments – to imagine the nature of the relationship between premise and conclusion, and how the argument initiates our assent (or fails to do so).

I maintain that there is reciprocity between the position from which an argument begins, and that of its conclusion. Here, as so often, a passage from Whitehead offers an illustrative image:

The true method of discovery is like the flight of an aeroplane. It starts from the ground of particular observation; it makes a flight in the thin air of imaginative generalization; and it again lands for renewed observation rendered acute by rational interpretation.<sup>7</sup>

I find two metaphors particularly appealing – they guide the understanding of argument under which I will operate throughout this discussion. The first metaphor is economic. According to this metaphor, arguments reveal to us what is at stake in the relation between premises and conclusions. There is a transactional relation between the two sides of an argument, where to accept or reject a conclusion comes at the price of a relation to the premises of an argument. A second important metaphor of argument is of an invitation. If one finds a set of base assumptions appealing, one pursues the consequences of accepting these premises. Counter-positionally, should one wish to deny a conclusion, she is invited to come up with an argument that would entitle her to this position.<sup>8</sup>

### 1.4 The Appeal of Neoclassical Metaphysics

Among the virtues we would desire of any metaphysics, the most ideal would be that it is correct. But according to what metric shall we judge a metaphysics? It is not clear to

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7. *Process and Reality*, p. 5

8. The ‘price’ metaphor is based on a remark by Charles Hartshorne, which I develop further in the section “Parameters for Successful Arguments” in the following chapter.

me whether there are criteria for metaphysical adequacy beyond stipulation. If there are non-stipulative criteria, I cannot see how one could present an argument for them without having some means of transcendental argumentation already up and running.<sup>9</sup> Supposing that there were such criteria that would admit of argumentation, either the bases for such an argument would be unarguable, or else would fall into infinite regress. But the stipulative nature of such argument should not deter us from presenting them. We must place reasonable expectations on the limits of argument, such as I have already mentioned and will return to later.

In this project, the objectives I hold for evaluating metaphysics are those put forward by Whitehead as the endeavor of speculative philosophy generally: “. . . to frame a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted.”<sup>10</sup> Whitehead expects that the scheme, in offering terms of interpretation for our experience,

“should be . . . applicable and adequate, [where] ‘applicable’ means that some items of experience are thus interpretable [i.e., by means of the speculative scheme], and ‘adequate’ means that there are no items incapable of such interpretation . . . The adequacy of the scheme over every item does not mean adequacy over such items as happen to have been considered. It means that the texture of observed experience, as illustrating the philosophic scheme, is such that all related experience must exhibit the same texture.”<sup>11</sup>

According to this rubric, we should expect of an adequate metaphysics that it can account for any possible experience of the world such as it is or might possibly be.<sup>12</sup> This is of course

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9. Readers will recognize that I am appealing to a principle observed by Aristotle in *Metaphysics* Book IV, part 4: 1006a. Namely, there must be some principles of which one cannot demand demonstration. This appeal will be repeated throughout this work.

10. *Process and Reality*, p. 3. Note that this does not imply that the work of metaphysical theories is limited only to the kinds of claims that can be known through experience. What it does mean is that any experience must be interpretable in terms of the metaphysical theory on offer. This is sometimes referred to as the adequacy criterion (discussed below).

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

12. Important to note is that the term *experience* is not to be conflated with *conscious* experience, but rather applies much more broadly. For those who follow Whitehead’s position, conscious experience is a

rather difficult to achieve, and would likely be at least as difficult to recognize. Moreover, Whitehead cautions us against expecting the task to ever be completed. “Metaphysical categories,” he tells us, “are not dogmatic statements of the obvious; they are *tentative* formulations of the ultimate generalities.”<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, a number of conceptual tools are made available by neoclassical metaphysics. I will briefly gesture to three of these in the following sections. They are accounts of modality, of maximal greatness, and of existential statements. But before continuing with this discussion, it is important to adumbrate just what such a gesture is and is not intended to do. This is not a defense of neoclassical metaphysics as such. As Whitehead’s understanding suggests, such a defense would require a fully adequate account of the system, which is far beyond our present scope. Moreover, it would involve much unnecessary repetition of efforts. Clearer thinkers and writers have put a good deal of time into explicating such systems. The reader who is interested in this topic is encouraged to refer to the primary writings of these thinkers who are mentioned throughout this work. They are more up to the task than I am.

Neither will this discussion serve as an adequate primer on the topic of neoclassical metaphysics. While it is intended to be accessible to the reader who is unfamiliar with the seminal contemporary works on the subject, the issues discussed here are not the only – or even the most important – aspects of this system of thought. Rather they are features that are central to presenting, evaluating, and ultimately defending a version of the ontological argument.

The discussion of these concepts is intended to provide a sense of how this school of thought approaches issues in the ontological argument. As such, it is not a defense of the neoclassical view so much as a cursory presentation for the sake of investigating a single,

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subset of the more general category of experience. Consciousness applies only to certain kinds of societies, while the general term is applicable to all entities. A gloss on these terms will be given later in this chapter.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 8 (emphasis mine).

though important question. They are starting points rather than conclusions. However, it bears mention that the usefulness of these positions vis-a-vis the ontological argument does not in the direction of the sufficiency of neoclassical metaphysics for making sense of philosophical problems.

At this point the reader may have concerns with issues of circularity. Does it not vitiate our discussion to say that the ontological argument demonstrates the truth of the neoclassical view that is used to demonstrate the soundness of the ontological argument? The response is that we should recall Whitehead's 'aeroplane' metaphor above. This is meant to persuade us that the appeal of neoclassical metaphysics is as a starting point, rather than a conclusion to be somehow demonstrated with deductive certainty. If the terms and conceptual apparatus of neoclassical metaphysics are useful in thinking through an argument, this seems to speak in support of these tools. A desire for a *demonstration* of a metaphysical system seems to me to be misplaced.

The use to which I put neoclassical metaphysics is what could be called the "broccoli casserole" approach: try it; you'll like it. I wish to invite consideration of process philosophical thought. One reason for doing so (and there are certainly others) would be an interest in conducting ontological arguments. Upon consideration of its tenets, if it appears coherent – and appears to account for our experience in a useful way, the reader is invited to adopt the neoclassical view. I maintain that the process account of our experiences (and in particular, the experience of our modal intuitions) is persuasive, and if readers accept this, I would invite them to consider that the ontological argument constructed on its scaffolding is successful. This construction will require that we outline three concepts – divine greatness, modality, and existential statements. These concepts, as present in neoclassical metaphysics will inform our discussion of the ontological argument.

## 1.5 How to Think About Divine Greatness

I will now sketch the relevant neoclassical understanding of God, according to which we will present the case for an ontological argument. To this end, it is necessary to have on hand four concepts: the ontological principle, actual entities, societies, and eternal objects.

### 1.5.1 *The Ontological Principle*

Whitehead proposes something he dubs the “ontological principle” – according to which, “. . . there is nothing which floats into the world from nowhere.”<sup>14</sup> Every fact of the matter, all reasons or causes are to be found in one or more of the entities which his ontology comprises. If you continue to ask, “why” for long enough, the only acceptable termination of inquiry will be in one or more of the finally-real, concrete existents – dubbed *actual entities*.

### 1.5.2 *Actual Entities*

Whitehead will use the term “actual entity” to refer to the fundamental building blocks that are constitutive of reality. It may be helpful to understand this term – at least initially – as a placeholder which will apply to whatever those finally real things turn out to be. The originality of Whitehead’s thought is seen in his characterization of these actual entities, of which I offer only partial (even meager) picture.

The actual entities, as conceived by process philosophy and with which we are concerned, can be characterized as both subjects and objects (though not in the sense of an eternal object mentioned above). This dual nature is akin to (though not to be confused with) Dewey’s notion of an “agent patient” in that they both act upon and are acted upon by other entities.<sup>15</sup> In its capacity as a subject, an actual entity is acted upon: it inherits a

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14. *Process and Reality*, p. 373; cf. Sherburne’s *A Key to Whitehead’s Process and Reality*, p. 233.

15. For Dewey’s presentation of this characterization, see “The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy” in *Creative Intelligence: Essays in the Pragmatic Attitude*, especially p. 14.

world of data, composed of other actual entities. It receives the data of these other entities in a more or less limited fashion, and unifies them into a concrete whole. The vital point of this ontology is that the manner in which all of these data are unified by the subject is not fully determinate ahead of time. The subject is *influenced* by its relata, but it is *caused* by itself. When the unification is complete, it is said to be concrete and actual – never to change again. This moment does not endure – it is the atomic unit of “moments.” But the entity is now an object which influences – though only passively – entirely new entities which are now subjects.

If all of this is a bit of a blur, it has helped me to use the (oversimplified) analogy of turns between partners in a conversation. What someone says to me influences me, I consider it as best I can understand it, and then I speak. Neither my words nor their meaning or importance endure in time or space, but in my partner’s understanding of them. Until I speak the words, they are not fully realized or actual, but only an abstract idea – a possibility. Once spoken, they perish on the air. But they can never be unspoken. My interlocutor receives these words as objects of data – as a part of her world, and proceeds as I have done, and on, and on.<sup>16</sup>

### 1.5.3 *Societies*

The final concept important for our discussion is a society. Donald Sherburne offers this helpful note: “An actual entity is a microcosmic entity; the macrocosmic entities of everyday experience – men, trees, houses – are groupings of entities . . .”<sup>17</sup> Where there is a unifying form that orders such a grouping – i.e., when the group is not arbitrary – it is said to be a

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16. A word of caution is in order. This is *only* an analogy, and is far from perfect at that. Conscious human beings who are capable of having a conversation are not actual entities. On Whitehead’s terminology, humans are complex, conscious societies (a term for which a gloss will be provided in a subsequent section). Nor is the conversation itself an entity. Rather the conversation is meant to analogize how entities inform one another. It is a macrocosm of the way in which an actual entity “prehends” (or receives) its input and unifies it, as when we mull over what our interlocutor has said and then present a new statement.

17. *A Key to Whitehead’s Process and Reality*, p. 230.

society or to have social order.<sup>18</sup> This order is necessarily temporal – as in the case of human consciousness. And for physical objects, it is spatial as well – much as the body comprises many organs working in concert. In our metaphor above, if each person’s turn in speaking is like unto an actual entity, a society is the kind of thing we would call the entire conversation. Societies are real – that is actual – in a sense that eternal objects are not. But while actual entities are atomic, societies are composite.

There is a rich and complex mereological theory here, but it will suffice to understand that the category of society solves what would otherwise be a problem for actual entities. As they are here conceived, actual entities do not endure subjectively; they occur. Societies are collections of actual entities that continue beyond the perishing of their individual members. How is it that Socrates is born a wailing infant, becomes strong, grows old, and dies? The answer is that the Socrates who does all of this is not *one* thing – or at least not one *simple* thing, but a collection of moments extending across the life of the man.<sup>19</sup>

#### 1.5.4 *Eternal Objects*

Upon initially encountering process thought, there is a temptation to equate the concept of eternal objects with platonic forms. While this parallel is not entirely without its uses, there is a potential for confusion which we should dispel as early as possible in our discussion. Whereas the Platonic view holds that forms are the most ultimately real things, Whitehead and his successors do not hold this to be the case for eternal objects.

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18. Note that the term “social” is not used in an anthropological or cultural sense here. Rather, it is meant to imply simply that there are multiple entities that have a non-arbitrary reason for being grouped together. In this sense, the atoms which make up a grain of sand are “social” – not because they are having tea together, but rather because they have an organizing principle (i.e., constituting this particular grain of sand).

19. NB: This also provides a potential response to the dispute between mereological nihilists who maintain that there are no composite entities, but only indivisible “simples” and mereological universalists who maintain that between any number of simples there is a composite object comprising them, and there are composites of composites, and so on to arbitrary sums. Understanding societies as having a kind of order which defines them allows us to speak of something like “simples” (actual entities in Whiteheadian terms) and of macro objects by separating meaningful composites from arbitrary ones.

For now, it is important to keep in mind that eternal objects are not finally real in the sense of being *actual* or concrete. Rather, eternal objects are potentials. They represent possibilities, and so are only ever the abstract potential or character that some concrete entity or other could actualize. The ontological principle dictates that eternal objects have their reality in something actual (i.e., in one or more actual entities).

### 1.5.5 *God*

The distinction between an actual entity and a society is important for a discussion of God because in process circles, there is debate over the nature of God according to this schema. Whitehead's philosophy has been influential among theologians, and philosophers who are interested in what once went by the name of "natural theology." Thus, there are a significant number of Whiteheadians, or process philosophers more generally, who are interested in talking about God. On our lights, one reason God is important for this system is the nature of possibilities. I have already said that possibilities are abstract, and are examples of what are known as "eternal objects." But I have also noted that the ontological principle states that the only reason for anything is to be found in some or other actual entity (or entities). If we demand reasons for something's being possible, and think that the only reasons are to be found in finally real things, then we need to look for the finally real things which are the source and ground of – the reasons for – possibilities. Moreover, possibilities seem to be eternal: I'm here so I must be possible. I have come about sometime since the big bang, so it would seem that from at least sometime around the time of the big bang, it was possible for things to turn out such that here we are. Where did this possibility come from such that it was always around? Within process circles, theists would locate this possibility in God.<sup>20</sup>

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20. Readers would be correct to note a strong resemblance between this idea and Kant's argument in his pre-critical work *The One Possible Basis*. There, Kant maintains that without some necessary existent (i.e., "God"), the grounds of possibility are annihilated (see observation two). The annihilation of every conceivable possibility entails a contradiction, which means that there must be some grounds of possibility, i.e., some necessary existent. This forms the titular basis of his demonstration.

Whitehead maintained that God is an actual entity.<sup>21</sup> Subsequent thinkers have noted that this would mean that there is an actual entity that endures forever, since possibilities are in the nature of God and possibilities are eternal. But this view makes God an exception to the rule about the temporal nature of actual entities. Such exceptions are anathema to Whitehead’s own system. For this reason subsequent thinkers, most especially Charles Hartshorne have rejected this concept of God as entity in favor of the “societal” conception.<sup>22</sup> On the latter view, God is a society of actual entities, just like any other enduring existent.

As careful readers may come to realize, I am partial to the societal conception. And, although I do not claim to be able to argue for it decisively, I maintain on its behalf that it has better claim to address the worry central to this project.

## 1.6 Neoclassical Metaphysics as a Modal Metaphysics

After Whitehead, the thinker most closely associated with process philosophy in the twentieth century is Charles Hartshorne, and it is with him that neoclassical thought explicitly intersects with the ontological argument. Hartshorne identifies a basis for a modal ontological argument in Anselm’s formulation, suggesting that this formulation has been overlooked in the standard treatments.<sup>23</sup> Hartshorne suggests that the stronger of the arguments found in Anselm is modal, and thus we should consider this version as primary.<sup>24</sup> In fact, in the

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21. See *Process and Reality*, p. 88. It should be noted that God is an exception to Whitehead’s usage of the otherwise synonymous term “actual occasion.” His reason for this seems to be a wish to distinguish God from temporal entities in the world.

22. Hartshorne’s *The Divine Relativity: A Social Conception of God* is an attempt to present such a conception (is subtitle is relevant here).

23. Norman Malcolm’s work on a modal argument was more or less contemporaneous with Hartshorne’s, and is alternately credited with re-initiating interest in a modal argument. His essay “Anselm’s Ontological Arguments” was published in 1960. My goal here is not to insist on whether Malcolm’s essay or Hartshorne’s “What Did Anselm Discover?” (originally published in 1962) deserves pride of place. Rather, our focus will remain on Hartshorne primarily because of his connection with neoclassical metaphysics.

24. In chapter three, I amend the reading of Anselm which suggests that he has two versions of the argument. For our present purpose of understanding how the modal formulation came into view, however, Hartshorne’s account suffices.

title of chapter two of *The Logic of Perfection* (and throughout the chapter), Hartshorne equates ontological proofs with modal proofs. We will take our cue from this, and the ontological argument we will consider will be modal. A cautious reader will wonder whether an ontological argument is necessarily modal (i.e., whether Hartshorne may be mistaken in conflating the two notions).

I am not sure whether any philosophical position that is up to the task of addressing the ontological argument must be able to account for the nature of possibility and necessity. Perhaps there are promising non-modal ontological arguments. But we will not consider them here. In any case, it does seem that under Whitehead's rubric of adequacy in accounting for experience, an adequate ontology must make sense of our modal intuitions. Given that our modal intuitions are a crucial part of our experience, it would make sense for Hartshorne to hold an understanding of ontology as fundamentally modal. Alert readers should begin to see why neoclassical metaphysics is useful for the ontological argument, and why its account of modality warrants our consideration.

## 1.7 Neoclassical Understandings of Existential Statements

In his essay "What Did Anselm Discover?" Hartshorne remarks: "*Modality of existence* is always a property (and is always deducible from the definition) of a thing."<sup>25</sup> This is important for understanding how there could be something like a necessary existent. In order to see how, we must break down the statement, to see why Hartshorne would endorse such a claim. When we discuss the nature of possibility and necessity in chapters five and six, we will want to know what it means to say that some (putative) existent is possible or necessary. We will need to remember that Hartshorne takes the modality of a thing's existence to be an innate property of a thing. It is analytic to the definition of a thing. To see why, I will refer to Eugene H. Peters's characterization of the neoclassical understanding

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25. *Insights and Oversights of Great Thinkers*, p. 95.

of existential statements:

Thus, the theory of facticity leads us to conclude that just as every positive state of affairs must have a negative side [i.e., what it is to be a fact is to exclude other possible alternatives], so every negative fact must have a positive side. The axiom of positivity – that no fact can be wholly negative, without positive bearing, but must be partly positive – is fundamental for Hartshorne. The axiom draws its force from the pairing of two points: (1) no fact, whether positive or negative, exists of necessity, and (2) alternative possibilities can be canceled only by a positive fact, not by a mere absence or privation.<sup>26</sup>

Note that point (1) is a tautology, based on the definition of Peters term “fact” (Page 17): “. . . in this work a fact will be construed as a state of affairs which excludes all conceivable alternatives.” That is, he distinguishes a “fact” such as “this sentence comprises thirty words” (where there may have been more or fewer) from a necessary truth such as those of arithmetic. By there being just that many words, it excludes the possibility of there being any other number of words, or of there being no words at all. Formally,  $p$  is a fact iff  $p \wedge \Diamond \neg p$ .<sup>27</sup>

This is a particularly salient characterization of facticity I take it to correspond to Hartshorne’s notion of a partially restrictive existential statements.<sup>28</sup> Such partially-restrictive statements are, of their nature, contingent. We can argue for this by showing that every such possible fact restricts other possible facts. If  $p$  is the case, but might not have been the case, this is what we mean by saying that  $p$  is contingent.

However, Hartshorne and those who follow his lead maintain that there is another category: the wholly non-restrictive existential statement. Such statements extend beyond “mere” fact, and are necessarily the case. As he puts it in his essay, such statements “exclude only nonsense.” This is because they preclude no (coherent) possibilities.

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26. p. 18.

27. This formula can be pronounced as “P is a fact if and only if p [is the case] and possibly-not-P [is also the case].”

28. See “Non-Restrictive Existential Statements” (chapter eight of *Creative Synthesis and Philosophic Method*).

Just as when we understand the definition of a triangle, we understand that it must have three sides, when we hear the definition of some putative existent, we understand whether it is a contingent or non-contingent thing. The existence of a unicorn precludes non-unicorn things existing in the same time and place.

Similarly, take a squircle (Euclidean square circle). Once the definition is understood, we should intuit that its modality is not one of factual non-existence, but of absolutely necessary non-existence. A claim that something-or-other exists necessarily is tantamount to a claim that it is wholly non-restrictive. There is no possible state of affairs that restricts or is restricted by the existence of this putative thing.<sup>29</sup>

It is a hypothesis operating throughout this project that the understanding of God (which I will later call “AQM”) must be as a non-restrictive existent.

## 1.8 Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to make explicit certain key points of the neoclassical position from which this examination of the ontological argument will operate. I further highlighted the importance of a metaphysics that can account for our modal intuitions, hinting at ways in which process ontology can do this (we will see more of this in our final chapter). I have also tried to think about how these topics help us to understand existential statements of the kind required by the argument under consideration.

The purpose of making these terms clear is not that this vocabulary will be used throughout this project. I will, to the best of my ability, avoid encumbering further chapters with the specialized jargon of process thinkers. My purpose in outlining this vocabulary is rather to reveal to the reader in advance of further argument, certain assumptions inherent to the metaphysics from which I operate. I will from time to time anticipate objections to the argument, my replies to which will refer to this line of thinking.

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29. I will examine potential objections to such a claim in the final chapter.

Moreover, it may help to present the vocabulary at the outset for the sake of indicating the (sometimes radically different) framework at play. The need for such indication of differences can perhaps be clarified by examples. When we speak of possibilities, it will help for the reader to keep in mind that my understanding of these comes from my conception of the relation between eternal objects and actual entities. So, “mere” possibilities (as distinct from concrete actualities) are not *finally* real but rather are abstractions. Another example will be when we speak of divine greatness in the final chapter. There, we must discuss positive predication. We will appeal to a distinction between partially restrictive statements (such as those of contingent facts) and wholly non-restrictive existential statements (such as will be necessary in order to make certain kinds of claims about God).

With this framework on the table, we are in a position to further develop the argument. The next chapter will consider the nature of arguments in general, and ontological arguments in particular. After this, we will formulate a version of the ontological argument (chapter three), which will be refined and defended. Chapters four, five and six will consider the argument in terms of its logical structure and the modal aspects of its premises. Finally, we will revisit some of the distinctive elements of neoclassical metaphysics to note how our initial commitments have evolved with the discussion.

## CHAPTER 2

### WHAT MAKES AN ARGUMENT ONTOLOGICAL?

#### 2.1 Overview

The central motivating question of this project is whether there is successful ontological argument for the existence of God. In order to answer this question coherently, it is first necessary to understand clearly what is being asked. If we want to know whether there are any successful ontological arguments, we should have in mind two issues of which we must give an account. We need a basis for identifying arguments as ontological, and we must state the parameters of success for arguments generally.<sup>1</sup> Only then could we go about asking whether any arguments are successful and ontological.

We will begin with an attempt to define an ontological argument. We will also offer assessments of some of the well-known arguments and their parodies, vis-à-vis whether or not they meet our criteria for counting as ontological arguments. Worth noting is that these two aspects of the project will substantially inter-oscuate. On one hand, it will be difficult to identify ontological arguments without a definition already up and running, yet canonical examples of the argument will necessarily inform the definition.<sup>2</sup> As we shall see, this latter enterprise proves quite challenging. There needs to be a definition of an ontological argument that does not immediately beg the question against counterarguments such as parodies. But

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1. Such parameters include an arguments validity, its soundness, and its ability to convince its hearers. I will suggest that failure to meet this last criterion should not cause us to judge the argument itself as failing. I hope to show at least the validity of the argument, although I maintain that it is sound. But models of argument according to which one can “pay for” a negative conclusion by retroactively rejecting premises entail that interlocutors may never finally agree on the issue of soundness.

2. For example, Anselm’s argument is generally taken to be the origin of this line of reasoning, and one might reasonably expect for an appropriate definition to include Anselm’s argument under its genus. It has been argued, for example in Jean-Luc Marion’s essay “Is the Argument Ontological?” from his *Cartesian Questions* (1999), that the Anselmian argument is *not* (or at least *not necessarily*) ontological. Still, a definition of an ontological argument that excludes Anselm’s should at least give us pause. In any event, this work treats of theistic arguments that are broadly speaking the intellectual heirs of Anselm’s *Proslogion*, and if the reader remains persuaded by Marion that the word “ontological” is not to be preferred, I am happy to allow the use of another term for this family of arguments.

if I am correct in my support of the argument, the parodies lack force precisely because they are not properly parallel – i.e., they are not ontological in the sense that the affirmative arguments are.<sup>3</sup>

This portion of the project will take us through a history of the argument in very broad strokes. We will examine a number of moments in the development of the argument and the criticisms leveled against it. I will not concern myself to present this history of ideas in purely chronological order. I will run through the statements of the argument first, and then proceed through the objections. That is, the account will be a conceptually organized typology, rather than a chronology of reception.<sup>4</sup>

With a tentative definition of an ontological argument in hand, we will turn to the project of establishing parameters for evaluating arguments in general. This step sets up the chapter to follow, on the various formulations of the argument and their respective strengths and weaknesses, where we will discuss whether various formulations of the argument meet our conditions as ontological and as successful.

## 2.2 Identifying Arguments as Ontological

Graham Oppy offers the following taxonomy comprising eight types of ontological argument: definitional, conceptual (or what he calls “hyperintensional”), modal, Meinongian, experiential, mereological, “higher-order” (such as that of Gödel) and Hegelian.<sup>5</sup> This project will

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3. This should not be taken to mean that the *only* arguments that could count as ontological are affirmative (with regard to theism or any existential question)– a terrible begging of the question. There may indeed be ontological arguments with negative conclusions. Rather I seek to highlight two things. The first is the asymmetry between theistic ontological arguments and the putatively ontological reasoning of their parodic counterparts. The second is the importance of this asymmetry, which I suggest disqualifies the second class of arguments from counting as proper objections to the former.

4. A significant reason for preferring this approach is the nature of the larger project as one of critical-constructive philosophy rather than history. A second reason is my position that the re-formulations with which I deal here are not so much differing arguments as they are clarifications of what was already largely present (if only implicitly) in Anselm’s original formulation.

5. This typology is taken directly from Oppy’s article in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2016 edition). This entry in turn parallels a list of chapters two through seven of his 1995 *Ontological*

deal exclusively with the first three kinds. The reception history has interpreted these as distinct arguments. In many cases one or more of these three have been dismissed as a failure, or outright ignored. I, however, maintain that the definitional and conceptual arguments should not be taken as independent wholes, but rather as steps in service to an overarching argument that is modal in nature.<sup>6</sup>

In an essay defending the ontological argument, Trent Dougherty offers his understanding of the argument as one, “to the existence of God from premises which are entirely a priori and at least one of which adverts to the definition of ‘God’ or God’s essence.”<sup>7</sup> The reservation I have with this understanding is that it tautologically excludes non-theistic attempts at ontological arguments. I have in mind here a range of objections to the classic theistic proof in the form of allegedly parallel arguments to the existence of dubious entities. The definition here has the potential to exclude parody arguments from the class by simply begging the question against them. As I wish to consider whether the parodies are properly ontological, I would like to consider a definition which does not obviously so beg the question. Another problem with this characterization is that it excludes negative arguments – by which I mean arguments *against* the existence of some entity or other. Some has been made of alleged ontological proofs of the non-existence of God. While I will argue against these objections, I would not wish to beg the question against them from the start. There is another kind of negative argument, noted by Yuval Steinitz, who contends that contradictions are ontological arguments. According to Steinitz, we make a priori arguments about what does not exist by pointing to contradictions.<sup>8</sup>

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*Arguments and Belief in God*, with the addition of the so-called “higher-order” arguments.

6. I will treat of this claim in more detail in the next chapter on the weak versus strong versions of the argument.

7. Dougherty, p. 1, fn. 2. This definition is based on William Rowe’s.

8. See Steinitz’s aptly named “Contradictions Are Ontological Arguments” (1994b). He concludes that ontological arguments, whether affirmative or negative, hold the same status in terms of their logical validity. Since we readily accept negative arguments, we should not *prima facie* rule out affirmative ones.

As mentioned above, Kant is cited as the source of the term “ontological argument” so perhaps we should turn to his definition. This can be found at A.590/B.618: “they abstract from all experience and argue completely a priori, from mere concepts, to the existence of a supreme cause.” Like Dougherty’s, this definition holds that ontological arguments are a priori. Kant’s term “mere concepts” is something like Dougherty’s “definition of ‘God’ or God’s essence.” And like Dougherty, Kant only discusses the argument in the form of a theistic demonstration. It is worth noting that Kant uses the idea of a “supreme cause,” which is not present in the versions we will consider from Anselm, Descartes, or Leibniz. It is true that most proponents of the theistic ontological argument take God to be the supreme cause. And they may also argue that God is the supreme cause. But the arguments offered by these thinkers are not immediately arguments for a cause *qua* cause.

Here then, I will propose an understanding of an ontological argument – subject to revision – that I hope would be acceptable, and also more general than those in question. I will call “ontological” an argument that proceeds entirely along a priori reasoning to make a claim about the existential status of some entity defined by the terms of the argument. It is now possible to imagine presenting a multitude (perhaps infinite!) of ontological arguments, both affirmative and negative. One might argue ontologically for the existence of God, or for the existence of Schmod, or against the existence of either. One can also argue against the existence of round squares, or of colorless yellow roses.<sup>9</sup>

Let us turn now to examine whether there are any arguments of this kind for the existence of God that are successful.

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9. This last object is borrowed from Gamwell. I include it here because I find the formulation both lovely and instructive, for the reason that it comes with an important caveat – namely, the terms yellow, rose, and colorless are not obtainable a priori. To be properly ontological, the argument against their existence must be made in a generalized form. There is no X that both has some property p and lacks said property in a univocal sense. Thus, whatever you chose as a replacement for X and p will work, and the general form can be adapted even for entities which require us to have experience of them in order to understand them.

## 2.3 An Absurdly Brief History of the Debate Surrounding the Argument

Anselm is usually credited as the originator of the ontological argument, which appears in his *Proslogion*, written from 1077 to 1078 while he served as Prior of the Benedictine monastery at Bec.<sup>10</sup> Anselm was Augustinian in his philosophy, and this argument draws heavily on Augustine.<sup>11</sup> It has even been claimed that Augustine has his own formulation of an ontological argument.<sup>12</sup> In any case, the Anselmian version has been the primary locus of debate since then.

The second chapter is usually presented as the entirety of the argument. As such, it merits quotation here:

Well then, Lord, You who give understanding to faith, grant me that I may understand, as much as You see fit, that You exist as we believe you to exist, and that You are what we believe You to be. Now we believe that You are something than which nothing greater can be thought. Or can it be that a thing of such a nature does not exist, since ‘the Fool has said in his heart, there is no God’? But surely, when this same Fool hears what I am speaking about, namely, ‘something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought’, he understands what he hears, and what he understands is in his mind, even if he does not understand that it actually exists. For it is one thing for an object to exist in the mind, and another thing to understand that an object actually exists. Thus, when a painter plans beforehand what he is going to execute, he has [the picture] in his mind, but he does not yet think that it actually exists because he has not yet executed it. However, when he has actually painted it, then he

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10. For those interested in a more thorough treatment of the thinker, M. J. Charlesworth (1979) has a helpful biographical essay on Anselm, as well as an overview of Anselm’s general theological system, and its relation to the *Proslogion* in particular. The introductory essay by Davies and Evens (1998) is also useful on the historical points.

11. See Charlesworth, especially pp. 26-30.

12. Trent Dougherty makes this claim in his unpublished essay, “A Defense of the Ontological Argument.” Dougherty identifies Book III of *On Free Choice of the Will* as containing such an argument. Unfortunately, he is not more specific than this, and I have been unable to find such an argument there. However, much of the language invoked by Anselm does appear in Book II, including the passages from Isaiah (“Unless you believe you shall not understand”) and the Psalms (“a fool says in his heart: There is no God”) and the characterization of God as “that to which none is superior” – and so I am inclined to conclude that this is a misprint for “Book II.”

both has it in his mind and understands that it exists because he has now made it. Even the Fool, then, is forced to agree that something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought exists in the mind, since he understands this when he hears it, and whatever is understood is in the mind. And surely that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought cannot exist in the mind alone. For if it exists solely in the mind even, it can be thought to exist in reality also, which is greater. If then that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought exists in the mind alone, this same that-than-which-a-greater-*cannot*-be-thought is that-than-which-a-greater-*can*-be-thought. but this is obviously impossible. Therefore there is absolutely no doubt that something-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought exists both in the mind and in reality.<sup>13</sup>

The common reception of the argument is syllogistically summarized in something like the following:

- 1 By God, we understand, “That-Thin-Which-Nothing-Greater-Can-Be-Thought” (*aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit*; hereafter abbreviated AQM).
- 2 I understand what is meant by AQM. Thus,
- 3 AQM exists in my mind.

From here, it is argued that:

- 4 Something which exists both in my mind and in reality is greater than something which exists only in my mind.
- 5 Something which exists only in my mind but not in reality cannot be AQM, since the thing existing in reality would be greater. Thus,
- 6 AQM must exist not only in my mind, but also in reality.

When presented with this argument most readers have a sneaking suspicion that something is amiss, even if they are at a loss to say what it is. I will say what it is. Proposition 6 is not the conclusion of the argument!<sup>14</sup> This proposition is generally assumed to be the (question begging) claim that God exists.<sup>15</sup> While I wish to maintain that this is not Anselm’s

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13. p. 117.

14. I will have more to say about this, including just what I take the conclusion to be in the next chapter when examining various formulations of the ontological argument

15. This is true even of proponents of the argument such as Charles Hartshorne. In his essay “What Did Anselm Discover?” Hartshorne refuses to defend this chapter, which he takes to be one ‘version’ of the argument, and focuses his efforts entirely on chapter three. One of my key contentions is that he is wrong to do this.

argument, for centuries, readers of the argument have stopped here, and something like this presentation has come under criticism. Surely I allow that the blame for so much confusion does not rest entirely on the critics. Later, when I discuss the structure of the argument, I contend that some of Anselm's difficulty arose from the fact that he did not have access to many of the more nuanced techniques in contemporary modal logics. For now, we will trace those critiques, and we will return later to the fuller examination of the argument in Anselm.

The criticism began almost immediately. Gaunilo offered the initial objection in his "on behalf of the fool," which initiated the practice of dealing with the argument by means of parody. While Gaunilo states that he is himself an orthodox Christian, the argument is anti-theistic, and something like it has been taken up by many atheists in centuries since. The parody famously centers around an island-than-which-nothing-greater-could-be-thought. Gaunilo's fool claims that if we allow Anselm's argument to go through, we must just as well be asked to believe in this island. Such an "IQM" seems foolish to believe it. But if belief in the IQM is foolish, why is it disbelief in AQM that we call foolish?

Anselm saw this as an occasion to clarify his argument, and Gaunilo's parody survives (at least in part) because of Anselm's insistence that it be published along with his *Proslogion* and the *Reply*.<sup>16</sup> Without the precise tools of contemporary logic however, the reply seems to have been poorly understood and, like the fact that the third chapter is also a part of his argument, has been underestimated.

An interesting observation, of which something has been made is the fact that Anselm replies not to the atheist for whom Gaunilo plays the devil's advocate, but to Gaunilo qua Christian. On one account, this is an instance of Christian fideism on the part of Anselm. Karl Barth is taken to be the exemplary proponent of this view.<sup>17</sup> But even Barth's analysis

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16. See Davies and Evans (1998), p. viii.

17. See his *Fides Quarens Intellectum*. Charlesworth also discusses Barth's reception of Anselm (see pp. 40-46 of his introduction to *St. Anselm's Proslogion*).

is apparently not fideistic enough for John Clayton (see *Religion, Reasons and Gods*, pp. 166-169). At points, Clayton sounds as if Anselm is not even a philosopher (or theologian), so much as an author of devotional literature:

... the *Proslogion* preserves a mode of cloistered reflection that predates the birth of academic theology and philosophy in Latin Europe and that is quite unsuited to the mode of learning that became established in the two centuries following Anselm's authorship. Anselm's *Proslogion* is a book that one should read complete, and in a prayerful mood with the heartfelt intention of finding one's way to God.<sup>18</sup>

I find this way of dismissing the argument (call it "the monastic objection") to be an ultimately unsatisfying approach. It seems to me to ignore first the fact that Anselm claims to have an argument (*argumentum*), and second the fact that he is engaging polemically with a fool. To be sure, his reply is to Gaunilo qua Christian, but the initial argument bears the mark of an argument – even if most (or even all) of its audience already agrees with the conclusion. Moreover – and this is the most important (and perhaps most often overlooked) thing to be said about the monastic objection – it is utterly beside the point. The religious nature of the cult of Pythagoras holds no bearing whatsoever upon any sane evaluation of the eponymous theorem. We would (rightly) ridicule one who argued against the treatment of hypotenuses as a proper bit of geometry on the basis that the demonstration originated as a mystery intended only for initiates. A demonstration stands or falls upon its own merits, and warrants reading as an argument, regardless of the intent we assign – rightly or wrongly – to the author. With this, I would like to have laid to rest the monastic objection to the philosophical reading of Anselm.

Gaunilo's (rhetorically) non-theistic objection stands in contrast to the objection of Thomas Aquinas that can be found in his *Summa Theologia*.<sup>19</sup> Whereas Gaunilo's objection is presented as one that an atheist might offer, Aquinas's objection is explicitly

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18. p. 164.

19. Aquinas's objection can be found at *Prima Pars*, Question 2, articles 1-2 (pp. 20-24 in the Pegis edition. See pp. 4-11 in McDermott's edition for the Latin text).

theistic. Aquinas takes the problem with the ontological argument to be the idea that the existence of God is self-evident, which he maintains is in opposition to the very verse cited by Anselm from the psalms. He distinguishes between self-evidence in itself and self-evidence to a knower (in this case, a finite human intellect). God's existence, "of itself is self-evident, for the predicate is the same as the subject, because God is His own existence . . ." <sup>20</sup> This would seem to imply that an intellect superior to that of humans (such as that of angels perhaps) might well have access to an ontological argument. That is, the objection against God's self-evidence to us is an epistemic objection, not to the argument itself, but to the capacity of someone to follow the argument.

The criticism leveled by Aquinas runs thus:

. . . granted that everyone understands that by this name *God* is signified something than which nothing greater can be thought, nevertheless, it does not therefore follow that he understands that what the name signifies exists actually, but only that it exists mentally. Nor can it be argued that it actually exists, unless it be admitted that there actually exists something than which nothing greater can be thought; and this precisely is not admitted by those who hold that God does not exist. <sup>21</sup>

Someone satisfied with this objection will maintain that all existence claims are a posteriori (or at least that they must be so argued). Later, Hume will do precisely that, taking advantage of the objection that Aquinas foresaw. Hume maintains that,

It is pretended [By the proponent of an ontological argument] that the deity is a necessarily existent being, and this necessity of his existence is attempted to be explained by asserting, that, if we knew his whole essence or nature, we should perceive it to be as impossible for him not to exist as for twice two not to be four. But it is evident that this can never happen, while our faculties remain the same as at present. It will still be possible for us, at any time, to conceive the non-existence of what we formerly conceived to exist; nor can the mind ever lie under a necessity of supposing any object to remain always in being . . . <sup>22</sup>

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20. "*quantum in se est per se nota est, quia prädicatum est idem subjecto; Deus enim est suum esse . . .*" (p. 6 in McDermott's edition). The English translation used can be found at p. 22 in the Pegis edition.

21. *Ibid.*, reply to objection 2.

22. *Dialogues* Part 9, pp. 64-65. In addition to the similarities with Aquinas, it is worth noting that

But this leaves open the question of whether the existence of God could be argued from experience, as Aquinas does in the articles that follow the objection just mentioned. Kant will disagree with this characterization of the relation between the two arguments, when he asserts the dependence of the cosmological argument upon the ontological argument:

... it is evident that we are here presupposing that the concept of the highest reality is completely adequate to the concept of absolute necessity of existence; that is, that the latter can be inferred from the former. Now this is the proposition maintained by the ontological proof; it is here being assumed in the cosmological proof, and indeed made the basis of the proof; and yet it is an assumption with which this latter proof has professed to dispense.<sup>23</sup>

But in either case, it is accepted that Aquinas's five ways are based on an experience and thus, as Kant would have it, not wholly a priori.<sup>24</sup> But it may be possible for the third way (on the basis of necessity and contingency) to be presented in an a priori fashion. If this were the case, the outline of an ontological argument is present in the *Summa* as well.<sup>25</sup>

The next central figure who appears in the discussion is Descartes.<sup>26</sup> As with Anselm, the Cartesian arguments come to us with a set of objections and subsequent replies. As is also the case with Anselm, the *Replies* of Descartes are a nuanced re-statement of an argument already present (at least implicitly) in the initial publication. The basis for the Cartesian argument is in his *Fifth Meditation*, and is elaborated in his first and fifth replies in particular.<sup>27</sup> A concise formulation of the Cartesian argument can be found in the first

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Hume recognizes something about the failure of a priori arguments to compel assent. Of course, he seems to take this to be a failure on the part of a priori arguments, rather than a general feature of the exchange of reasoning.

23. *Critique of Pure Reason*, A.607/B.635

24. Cf. A.605/B.633

25. To the best of my knowledge, no one has attempted to make this point. It would be interesting to see what such a case would look like, but beyond the scope of the present project

26. In the interests of absurd brevity, I will treat the Cartesian argument as largely in-step with that of Anselm. For our purposes here, it is important to mention Descartes as a voice in the discussion, but the subtleties of the differences will be addressed at greater length in the following chapter on the various formulations.

27. throughout this project, I will use the translation of Cottingham, Stoothoff, and Murdoch. Following

set of replies. I have broken the relevant passage into syllogistic form as follows:

[1] That which we clearly and distinctly understand to belong to the true and immutable nature, or essence, or form of something, can truly be asserted of that thing.

[2] Once we have made a sufficiently careful investigation of what God is, we clearly and distinctly understand that existence belongs to his true and immutable nature. Hence

[3] we can now truly assert of God that he does exist.<sup>28</sup>

The “true and immutable nature” of God includes all perfections, including – on Descartes’ accounting – existence. The idea of existence as a property is the point of controversy throughout virtually all objections to the argument. Descartes responds with a remark that I think has been under-appreciated in philosophy: “I do not see what sort of thing you want existence to be, nor why it cannot be said to be a property just like omnipotence ...”.<sup>29</sup> The continuation of the passage sheds important light on the connection of the argument with modal reasoning:

Moreover, in the case of God *necessary* existence is in fact a property in the strictest sense of the term, since it applies to him alone and forms a part of his essence as it does of no other thing ... I do not ... deny that *possible* existence is a perfection in the idea of a triangle, just as *necessary* existence is a perfection in the idea of God; for this fact makes the idea of a triangle superior to the ideas of chimeras, which cannot possibly be supposed to have existence.<sup>30</sup>

While Descartes also lacks access to the precisifications of S5 modal logic, at this point he has explicitly connected the argument to modality of existence. The property of God in question is not “mere” existence, but *necessary* existence. The germ of this is already present in Anselm’s third chapter, from its very title, “That God cannot be thought not to exist.”

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their convention, I will cite the page numbers from the Latin edition of Adam and Tannery (hereafter AT). The relevant passages from Meditation five can be found in AT, vol. VII, pp. 65-69. The passages from the replies are in AT, vol. VII, pp. 115-121 and pp. 382-384 respectively.

28. AT, vol. VII, pp. 115-116. I have added brackets for the enumeration of premises.

29. AT, vol. VII, p. 382.

30. AT, vol. VII, p. 383, emphasis mine.

But it is Leibniz who draws the connection between the modal characteristics of necessary existence and the possibility of conception. In his *New Essays on Human Understanding*, Leibniz (recognizing the connection between Anselm and Descartes) tells us,

[The argument] is not fallacious, but it is an incomplete demonstration which assumes something which should also be proved in order to render the argument mathematically evident. The point is that it is tacitly assumed that this idea of a wholly great or wholly perfect being [i.e., Anselm's AQM] is possible and does not imply a contradiction. Even that remark enables us to prove something, namely that *If God is possible he exists . . .*<sup>31</sup>

We might be tempted to construct a simplified formulation of the argument common to Anselm and Descartes in the following way:

- 1 God is understood to mean AQM.
  - 2 Necessary existence is a property of AQM.
- Therefore,
- 3 God has the property of necessary existence.

This is unlikely to satisfy anyone who is skeptical of the argument. And in fact, it should not. It begs the question as to whether there could be anything that is AQM in order to hold the property of necessary existence. It is with assistance from Leibniz that we can reformulate the argument.

- 1 God is understood to mean AQM
  - 2\* If anything is AQM, it would have the perfection or property of necessary existence.
- Thus,
- 3\* God would have the property of necessary existence

Note that 2\* and 3\* are now phrased as hypotheticals, conditional on there being any AQM to have the property of necessary existence. To this we add Leibniz's observation (in terms of AQM),

L: If AQM is possible, AQM exists

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31. *New Essays*, Book IV, Chapter X, pp. 437-438

And we are now prepared to argue:

4 AQM is possible, and therefore,

5 AQM exists

I labeled the formulation of Leibniz’s statement in terms of AQM “L” rather than as a premise because it is unclear whether we should treat it as a proposition in the argument, or as a modal axiom. There are a number of modal logics. S5, perhaps the most well known modal logic, is the one required for the contemporary formalization of the ontological argument. S5 is interesting because of its characteristic axiom:  $(\Diamond\Box p \rightarrow \Box p)$ , which is given the interpretation “possibly necessarily p implies necessarily p.” Since Leibniz understands by God (or AQM) something which would have the property of necessary existence if it were so much as possible, Leibniz seems to accept something like this axiom. But L seems to be saying more than this axiom. It depends on this axiom, and it also depends on 1, 2\*, and 3\* to make the case that anything fitting the bill for AQM would require the property of necessary existence.<sup>32</sup> Along these lines, if AQM would have the property of necessary existence, then if AQM possibly exists, it possibly has the property of necessary existence. Thus, it necessarily has the property of necessary existence, and thus necessarily exists.

The very idea of necessary existence is rejected by Hume in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, and this point is taken up by Kant in his critical period. Hume, in the person of *Cleanthes* states,

I shall begin with observing, that there is an evident absurdity in pretending to demonstrate a matter of fact, or to prove it by any arguments a priori. Nothing is demonstrable, unless the contrary implies a contradiction. Nothing, that is distinctly conceivable, implies a contradiction. Whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent. There is no being, therefore, whose

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32. The axioms of S5 were not worked out until long after Leibniz’s death. There is much to say about necessity being a property of propositions rather than of things, and the problem this causes for the claim Leibniz wishes to make. I do not wish to say that Leibniz is using our contemporary understanding of modal logic for his argument (he could not). Rather, I am suggesting that he is grappling with important issues that motivate our exploration of logic, and that with the proper tools in hand, we could make a more robust argument out of the claims he makes.

non-existence implies a contradiction. Consequently, there is no being, whose existence is demonstrable. I propose this argument as entirely decisive, and am willing to rest the whole controversy upon it.<sup>33</sup>

And it has been taken as decisive by those who reject the argument ever since. As we have already noted, something like this objection is already present at least as far back as Aquinas (characterized as the difference between existing actually and only mentally, and the ability to accept one while rejecting the other). Kant makes a similar pronouncement in his first *Critique*:

A concept is always possible if it is not self-contradictory . . . But it may none the less be an empty concept, unless the objective reality of the synthesis through which the concept is generated has been specifically proved; and such proof . . . rests on principles of possible experience, and not on the principles of analysis (the law of contradiction). This is a warning against arguing directly from the logical possibility of concepts to the real possibility of things.<sup>34</sup>

and further on,

. . . if . . . we admit, as every reasonable person must, that all existential propositions are synthetic, how can we profess to maintain that the predicate of existence cannot be rejected without contradiction? This is a feature which is found only in analytic propositions, and is indeed precisely what constitutes their analytic character.<sup>35</sup>

Kant and Hume take all (affirmative) existential claims to be determinable only a posteriori, and so any attempt at an a priori argument with an existential conclusion is a fool's errand. If Hume is right, and anything that can be conceived as existing can equally well be conceived as not existing, then there is nothing that is conceivable as a necessary existent. Presumably, therefore, nothing is a necessary existent.

As it appears to me, this is an argument about what does not exist – i.e., that there are no necessary existents – based on what can be conceived. Against the ontological argument

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33. *Dialogues*, Part 9, p. 64

34. A.596/B.624, footnote a.

35. A.598/B.626

for a necessary existent is offered an argument that proceeds from an appeal to conceivability (for any X, a state of affairs in which X does not exist is conceivable). The appeal to concepts is used to generate claims about the existential status of something (in this case a negative existential status).

Here we arrive at a problem for critics of the argument. Is this reasoning based on a priori reasoning and concepts alone, or does this argument contain some further synthetic claim that is non-tautological? If it is the former, the critique itself should count as an ontological argument, and thus we have an ontological argument that there are no ontological arguments. If it is the latter, it seems to beg the question against the ontological argument, because it draws from the observation of contingent existents the conclusion that this is universally the case. The critic might wish to maintain that negative ontological arguments (arguments about what cannot exist) are different from affirmative ontological arguments. The argument drawing on Hume's assertion is purely negative: it tells us nothing about what does, might, or must exist; rather it merely tells us of what cannot exist. The proponent of the ontological argument for the existence of God does not think that just anything can be argued for ontologically. In fact, as Anselm has noted, there might be only one thing that can be argued for in this way.<sup>36</sup> The objection to the ontological argument seems to be that because we assume that everything that exists does so contingently, we can reject the existence of a necessary Divine Existent. But this assumption about universal contingency is an assertion, not an argument.

Critics who believe that all existential claims are conceivably false can point to the denial of any particular (contingent) thing you like as evidence. What sort of existential claim might not be conceivably false? Putting aside the issue of God for a moment to avoid cries of begging the question, I propose the claim, "something exists." This is not my own idea.<sup>37</sup>

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36. Steinitz will show (*passim*) that we can argue against things ontologically, but this by itself does not entail that there are other positive ontological arguments.

37. In addition to the following discussion, see Gamwell's *The Divine Good*, pp. 110-111, where he proposes

In the chapters on the modal premises, we will go through several treatments of an argument to this end in detail. For now, I will point to a thinker who had a major disagreement with Kant: Immanuel Kant.

In his oft-overlooked pre-critical work, *The One Possible Basis for a Demonstration of the Existence of God*, Kant argues that utter non-existence would abolish all possibility. He then goes on to argue that anything which abolishes possibility is impossible, and thus it is absolutely impossible for nothing whatsoever to exist: something (not necessarily some thing) must exist.<sup>38</sup> I am persuaded that this is an important point, and I will take it up again near the conclusion of the work. For now, I will say that I do not find satisfying Kant's later argument that this initial position was altogether mistaken.

If we could construct an argument that there could be such a thing as a necessary existent, we would have an ontological argument (though the question, "an argument *for what?*" would remain open for us). It would also remain to be seen whether this argument, or one sufficiently similar could be adapted for a demonstration of the existence of God. Even in such an event, what would the argument accomplish?

## 2.4 Parameters for Successful Arguments, or What Can We Expect an Argument to Do?

Having highlighted the central moments in the development of a modal ontological argument, we are almost in a position to evaluate the current state of argument. What remains is to determine the criteria of success for an ontological argument. I submit that a successful ontological argument is nothing more than an ontological argument that is successful, or what

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an argument that the proposition "something exists" is necessarily true.

38. See Observation Two, "On Internal Possibility Insofar as it Presupposes an Existence," especially remarks two and three.

is the same thing, a successful argument that is ontological.<sup>39</sup> Thus we should not expect anything more (or less) from an ontological argument than we would from any philosophical argument.

There is a notion held by many (if only implicitly) that the hallmark of a good argument is to be found in the conviction it produces in its audience. On this rubric, the ontological argument is possibly one of the worst failures in the history of philosophy. But should we so evaluate an argument?

In the introduction to his *Philosophical Explanations*, Robert Nozick points to the common understanding of arguments as a kind of force, or power to be wielded at an audience. Rigorous argument is akin to Judo or brain surgery. But this is an unhelpful way of thinking about an argument in general, because it ignores an obvious empirical fact about the way we deal with arguments:

As Nozick observes,

No philosophical argument forces us to accept its (unpleasant) conclusions; instead, we always can pursue the philosophical task of uncovering the argument's defects . . . Or we can try to find a route (believing it exists although it has not yet been found) to something almost as good as what the argument seemed to eliminate . . . When a philosopher sees that premises he accepts logically imply a conclusion he has rejected until now, he faces a choice: he may accept this conclusion, or reject one of the previously accepted premises, or even postpone the decision about which to do.<sup>40</sup>

The (mistaken) view that an argument should be compelling in the sense that no one

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39. For all appearances, this is an entirely uninteresting tautology. But it is surprising how often this fact is ignored. Books are written and courses are taught about whether the existence of God needs to be proved. The ontological argument is treated with a kind of reverence, as though it were capable of doing something any other argument could not do. Thus, on several occasions I have been asked why, if the ontological argument is sound, everyone does not believe in God. In the *Stanford Encyclopedia* entry on the topic, Graham Oppy calls its failure to persuade a general criticism of Ontological Arguments. My best guess is that this criticism stems from what I will call the summoning interpretation of the argument. The critic assumes that the argument is intended to summon an entity into existence, and thus that ontological argument has some special nature. When an audience is not convinced, we see that the summoning interpretation fails. In the following chapter I will discuss the summoning interpretation, and offer an alternative.

40. p. 2.

could reject it and survive has been dubbed the discursive error.<sup>41</sup> Nor is Nozick alone in identifying this understanding of an argument as erroneous. Charles Hartshorne says of deductive argument, “what it does is to establish a price for rejecting its conclusions.”<sup>42</sup> I propose that this is the most any argument can hope to accomplish. By virtue of entering into the argumentative sphere, by engaging others in the quest to give and receive reasons, we agree in principle to a certain exchange. We are now merely haggling over the price.

One of the prices one might pay has already been mentioned by Nozick: to have a change of mind and accept the argument’s conclusion after all. The idea of searching for the defects of an argument entails two other potential premiums. One might find fault with the argument’s line of reasoning (for example, if one were to show that it is fallacious). Or one might return to the premises, prepared to give up one or more of them. These three are the live options for someone willing to abide by the conventions of reasoned argument.<sup>43</sup> In the interests of thoroughness, it should be noted that there is a fourth price that could (in theory) be paid: to be unwilling to be reasonable. It is to be hoped that for a philosopher, that cost is too high.

This way of presenting arguments conceives of them as inviting their recipients to agree. Some hearers of the argument may be attracted to the conclusion itself, in which case they are invited to adopt the premises in the form of commitments, collateral to their accepting of the conclusion. Conceivably, we may be attracted to the conclusion, while for whatever reason finding the premises unattractive. In this case, we adopt the commitment to argue against the structure of the argument. Alternatively, someone who does not see the initial attraction of the conclusion may feel commitment to the premises. Because they hold to

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41. I draw this term and much of my consideration of it from Meyer’s *Metaphysics and the Future of Theology* (especially pp. 95-109), where he develops this idea at some length. I will return to the question of compulsory assent when we address the question of validity in the ontological argument.

42. *A Natural Theology for Our Time*, p. 30.

43. Nozick’s option to postpone the decision is (on our metaphor of transaction) a layaway purchase. You set your belief off to the side, and you are welcome to hold it for now, but you get to take it home when you make the final payment in the form of adequate reasons.

the premises, we can encourage them to see how the conclusion in question is a consequence of the positions to which they have already committed. In any event, the point is to think of the argument as operating on the reader in terms of attracting assent voluntarily rather than demanding compliance as though through force.

## 2.5 What Does a Parody Do?

The understanding of argument as “price-negotiation” over a line of thinking is helpful when it comes to the use of parody arguments. The three rational options when confronted with an argument – denying premises, denying validity, or accepting that a conclusion logically follows – are available for any argument. But parody functions in a peculiar way – to the point that I wish to examine just what it is that a parody does.

Given that it is intended as a criticism, the parody does not affirm the conclusion as a logical consequence of the argument being discussed. Note that this does not strictly entail the rejection of the argument’s conclusion, but rather of its conclusion as a logical consequence of a valid argument. Someone may very well accept the conclusion that God exists while rejecting the ontological argument as faulty. The fact that an argument is faulty leaves us agnostic as to the truth of its conclusion. So it is that Gaunilo can simultaneously profess Christianity, yet offer a defense that the fool might use against Anselm.<sup>44</sup>

We will consider the two remaining rational options in turn. If the premises were obviously false, that should suffice as grounds for rejecting the argument. But it is not always obvious when premises are false (or true), and in such cases, a valid argument can nev-

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44. While the two monks here discuss the argument in terms of Christianity, there is no reason I can tell that it could not be generalized for theism. There is room for debate on important questions from here. For example, does a successful ontological argument vitiate polytheism? Is an ontological argument prejudiced toward or against a particular monotheistic faith? Is the object of this argument adequate as an object of religious devotion? I will have a few remarks some of these questions in the chapter on neoclassical metaphysics. In brief my respective answers are: I honestly haven’t given enough consideration to polytheism to be sure, but if pressed I would probably say yes; I don’t think so, although I think there are other (at least rational if not a priori) reasons for having a preference; and absolutely yes – since, if the argument succeeds, AQM exists whether we like it or not.

ertheless be controversial. One use of parody is in such an instance, in order to suggest that the premises are indeed false. This is a common approach in discussions about ethical theories.<sup>45</sup> Two points present themselves here. First, in order for a parody to attack an argument's premise, it must share that premise with the initial argument, and show that this premise leads to the unacceptable conclusion. In the case of the inhospitable hospital, the shared premise is that an action which preserves a greater number of lives is ethically preferable to the alternative. If the intent is to argue against the premise of an ontological argument, a parody must share that premise. As we will see in the next section, this is not the case for any of the parody arguments. The second point to keep in mind is the (putative) a priori status of the major premise in the ontological argument: the definition of God as that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought. This is the basis on which Anselm rejected the parody of Gaunilo, promising to find the lost island if it could be shown that the premise of the parody were properly analogous to the original.<sup>46</sup> Although it does appear to conflate the entire argument with the second chapter of the *Proslogion*, Kant's characterization of an ontological argument as proceeding solely from concepts (above) also recognizes this a priori status. If the original argument proceeds from a priori premises, so must a parody intended to undermine those premises.

A parody argument that does not share premises with the original argument might nevertheless be employed to challenge its validity. What then of this line of attack against the ontological argument? A common way to challenge an argument's validity is on the grounds that it commits one or more of the canonical formal or informal fallacies.<sup>47</sup> Among

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45. A famous example is a thought experiment known as the "inhospitable hospital" which is used as a criticism of consequentialism. When Jones comes to the hospital for his annual checkup, he is determined to be perfectly healthy. Unfortunately for him, there are four patients respectively in mortal need of heart, lung, liver, and kidney transplants. The doctors decide that the moral thing to do is to save as many lives as they can, and so they harvest the healthy organs from Jones. A bargain trade by the numbers! Given that most non-philosophers find it disturbing to even discuss, let alone entertain such proposals, they are inclined to reject the theory that leads to so repugnant a conclusion.

46. See Anselm's *Reply to Gaunilo* III, pp. 175-176.

47. It is also common to look for a counter-example to the argument, which is what parody purports to

philosophers with sufficient training, it should suffice to point out that an argument commits such-and-such fallacy, and thus fails to produce the desired conclusion as its logical consequence. The identification of a fallacy can be tricky business, and anyone who has taught logic or rhetoric will attest to how challenging it can be to show students how (or even that) the reasoning is indeed faulty. Parody arguments are a useful way of achieving this (think of ways we convince unwary undergraduates that denying the antecedent is fallacious).

Here then is the nerve of the issue: the ontological argument is suspected to be fallacious in one way or another. Which fallacy does the ontological argument commit? I would like to note that there is no real agreement on what the alleged fallacy is.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, there is a common suspicion held by critics of the argument that it does commit some fallacy or other. The intended use of the parody is to illustrate how the line of reasoning is fallacious.

To so illustrate, the author of the parody constructs an analogous argument that is obviously wrong, in the hopes that the proponent of the ontological argument will see the error in her ways. To draw argumentative force, such a parody must meet two criteria. One is that it must be sufficiently parallel to the original argument. The other is that the conclusion must be unacceptable.

As it is constructed in order to have an unacceptable conclusion, the parody is thus akin to (or perhaps a species of) the *reductio ad absurdum* argument. But where a standard *reductio* argument moves to a conclusion that entails a *logical* absurdity (i.e., a contradiction, and thus an impossibility), the conclusion of a parody may well be logically possible. There is no logical contradiction entailed by the organ donor program from *Monty Python's The Meaning of Life*, but we still take the conclusion to be absurd, and so we come to have

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do. This would serve to show that something is amiss in the argument, though it does not by itself tell us what. But, philosophers being busy people, the critic can calmly leave the burden of specifics on the people who are searching for a way to resuscitate the argument.

48. There is a well known anecdote about Bertrand Russell admitting that it is much easier to convince oneself that there is something amiss with the ontological argument than it is to precisely identify the problem. While this story makes its rounds in conversation, I have not found any written source for this outside of Oppy's *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article.

qualms about certain forms of consequentialism. Still, the arguer may be willing to bite the bullet offered by the conclusion.<sup>49</sup> I am uncertain in such cases what the appeal to parody could hope to achieve, or how one could settle the argument.

Fortunately, one need not be willing to accept the absurd in order to maintain the validity of the ontological argument. Instead, we will take up the position that the parodies fail to meet the criterion of parallelism.

## 2.6 Are the Parodies Ontological?

Gaunilo began with a greatest-possible-island. Catus, a lion. Less capable minds have suggested flying pigs, and so forth.<sup>50</sup> Critics familiar with the distinction between “greatest-possible” and the modal formulation “necessary” are happy to adapt their example. I have heard jokes about a “necessary tomato,” a “necessary cheeseburger” and all manner of sundries and foodstuffs to which the prefix, “necessary” is casually attached, as though it were sufficient to establish someone’s point.

We have already noted that the parody arguments do not share premises with the original argument(s). Gaunilo’s island-than-which-none-greater-can-be-thought is not the same as Anselm’s characterization of God as that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought. Nor is a necessary cheeseburger.

But haven’t we also said that the sharing of premises is only a necessity if one is using the parody to challenge the truth of those premises? Since these parodies are meant to challenge the logical structure (i.e., the validity) of the argument, rather than the veracity of its premises, there is no obligation for those premises to be the same. All that is needed is a sufficient parallel to the original argument to have a legitimate grievance against it.

To claim that the parodies fail to meet the criteria for paralleling the original because they

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49. See the entry for “outsmart” in *The Philosophical Lexicon*.

50. See p. 84 of Richard Dawkins’s *God Delusion* if you must.

have different premises would be a mistake. The issue of parallelism is not about the premises themselves, but about the *kinds* of premises used in the respective arguments. Specifically, the issue surrounds premises about the idea of a necessary X, or the possibility of a necessary X. In the case of the original argument, the X is AQM, a concept that is purported to be understandable a priori. Since AQM putatively entails its own logical necessity, if AQM is a priori understandable, we can know it to be logically necessary.<sup>51</sup>

But the parodies use items such as islands or unicorns. Part of the understanding of these entities is that their existential status is contingent – that is, knowable only through experience of them, and thus only a posteriori.<sup>52</sup> If the parody appeals to entities knowable only a posteriori, they are not ontological on our understanding of the term. The a priori nature of the concept AQM is important for the argument, and the parodies fail to recognize this, and thus fail to establish sufficient parallels to count as objections.

A parody might be altered in order to adopt entities that are understandable a priori.<sup>53</sup> Here, I have in mind so-called ontological arguments about the devil (who has every imperfection necessarily and to the utmost degree, and thus does not exist).<sup>54</sup> The first response to the devil objection is to say that “necessary imperfection” is far more problematic than “necessary perfection.” I will have more to say on this in the final chapter. Moreover, the point that Hartshorne wishes to make again and again is that the imperfection lies in *contingent*

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51. This claim may seem controversial, but it is important to note what is being said and what is not. The question at hand is not whether AQM does successfully entail its existence, but whether parodies are relevantly like “ordinary” ontological arguments. The opponent of the argument may think that it obviously fails, but what is not obvious is how AQM is like other things we encounter in parodies.

52. The clever critic will object that we have affixed “necessary” to these concepts, and by doing so we can know their status. But there is an important distinction between existential statements which restrict other such statement and existential statements which do not so restrict. This was mentioned in chapter one, and we will return to it in chapters five and seven.

53. Or that allegedly are so.

54. See C. K. Grant’s short article, and the later reconsideration by Timothy Chambers. The objection is that this parody purports to demonstrate the non-existence of the devil, and that this would be sufficiently heterodox to the theist that she should reject the ontological argument.

existence.<sup>55</sup> I do not know what it could mean for something to possess all imperfections, as it strikes me as a contradiction in terms. It should not surprise us at all, then, when a contradictory ‘concept’ fails to exist.<sup>56</sup>

My reply to such alleged parodies is to say that the turn away from a posteriori entities is a turn away from the more ridiculous conclusions. The loss of the ridiculous (and thus unacceptable) conclusion comes at the price of the argumentative force behind the parody. Most things that are understandable a priori are not ridiculous, or if they are, entail an obvious contradiction, and thus we need not worry about the argument proving. The truly ridiculous things, the ones a parody can use to achieve a ridiculous conclusion, cost a parody its parallel to the original.

## 2.7 From Parody to Parity

If the quality that lends a ridiculous nature to a parody is what causes it to fail, might there nevertheless be some entities which do not suffer this fate? If it should turn out that there are such entities, and that there are in turn arguments for these, let us call such arguments *parities*.<sup>57</sup> Our initial understanding of the ontological argument for the divine existence stipulated deductive reasoning from a priori premises. If there are arguments for (or against) the existence of other entities, the parity of these arguments may help to illuminate something about our theistic argument.

Arguments with parity to the theistic ontological argument can perhaps be used to argue for other necessary existents. For example, in the final chapter we will look at Whitehead’s

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55. See, e.g., his introduction to *St. Anselm: Basic Writings*, though this is a common theme throughout any of his discussions on the topic of modality or perfections. There is more to say about non-existence as an imperfection. I will briefly touch on it again in the final chapter.

56. The originator of this “objection” claims to be concerned that the non-existence of the Devil is heterodox. But the heterodox position is to ascribe non-contingent modal status to the devil. The devil religious types worry about is a contingent creature, which has *some*, but *not all* imperfections.

57. Apologies to the reviewer from *The New Englander*, who called this “a wretched philosophical pun [in lieu of] a sound argument” When George Henry Lewes made it (*The New Englander*, p. 557).

claim that the world is necessary. Similarly, there may be parity arguments involving necessary relations, such as those Descartes makes in his *Meditations* and *Replies* regarding the relation between mountains and valleys. If a parody argument seeks to undermine its analogue, a parity argument may offer support to an analogous argument. It need not show that the argument for theism is sound. But it could prime our intuitions about ways ontological arguments already exist as licit lines of thought within our canon of reasoning.

## 2.8 Conclusion

We have presented through its history several versions of ontological arguments for the existence of God, and shown how they are related as instances of earlier modal reasoning. We have looked at the parody as one means of objection, and seen that it is not properly ontological in the same sense that the theistic arguments are. In the next chapter, we will further examine the differences between versions of the argument, and how their respective criticisms could be met.

# CHAPTER 3

## ON FORMULATIONS OF ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS

### 3.1 Overview

In the previous chapter, we examined some general criteria for successful arguments. We then looked for a way to identify arguments as ontological, and we tested the genre of ontological parody against these two sets of requirements. This hinted at a limit on the expectations we can reasonably have for an argument. It sought to show that we should not rule out on the basis of parody the possibility of arguing ontologically. If we have successfully reopened this possibility, we must now make good on offering an argument that will meet the criteria, and scrutinize it for weaknesses.

We summarized in syllogistic form an argument presented by Anselm, and a version of an argument presented by Descartes. We then developed, based on insights from Leibniz, a version based on premises that I take all three thinkers to hold in common. In this chapter, I will examine multiple formulations of the argument and present version of the shared argument for scrutiny. I will argue that the criticisms leveled against it warrant revision of this argument in more precise and nuanced terms. This appropriately refined version – based on the shared ontological argument can be rescued from the traditional criticisms that have been taken as decisive. I will conclude this chapter by offering a modal statement of an ontological argument for the existence of God, which will be further examined in subsequent chapters. The remainder of the dissertation will comprise in large part the assessment of this presentation.

### 3.2 From Parody to Caricature

As we have seen, the common parodies fail to meet the criteria for ontological arguments. Why would it be that they nevertheless have held sway over generations of the argument's

critics? One reason might be that even if the parodies are not properly ontological as we have discussed above, they do resemble a caricature of the argument that is often given as a summary of Anselm.

This alleged summary is so familiar that one might mistake it for the genuine article. Hartshorne once scoffed, “Here is a man everyone thinks worth refuting, but almost no one thinks worth studying.”<sup>1</sup> I will not speculate on whether the alleged summary of Anselm is deliberately ham-handed, or whether it represents poor reading, or has some other origin. In any case, the result is a caricature of the careful work done by the argument’s proponents. Such caricature in lieu of an adequate summary lends itself to easy parody. And when the only version known to an audience is the poor summary, the weaknesses of the parody appear to belong to the original as well.

But if not from a proper summary of the original, where would such a caricature arise, and why should it be taken seriously? Part of the reason is something I take to be a confusion about the structure of the *Proslogion*. There are multiple chapters devoted to showing that God exists, or that God necessarily exists, or that God cannot be thought not to exist. These chapters appear to repeat or resemble one another, and so they are taken as redundant. The critics, seizing upon the second chapter, take it to be the ontological argument as such. Thus a rough summary of this chapter exaggerates features of the argument and invites ridicule.

Proponents of the ontological argument recognize something of this exaggeration. But they often seek to resist it while accepting the interpretation that chapters two and three are distinct formulations. Whereas critics had seen them as repetitive (and thus redundant), these proponents saw the two chapters as distinct. According to this reading, one chapter failed while the other may be salvageable. But with this, proponents are ceding interpretation of the second chapter to the critics. While these advocates do not see the two chapters as redundant, the earlier chapter is nevertheless relinquished as a failure. It was a wasted effort

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1. *The Logic of Perfection*, p. 32

on the part of Anselm.

The proponents push to focus on the third chapter shares with the critics the interpretation of chapter two as an independent argument. I maintain that it is not the only such interpretation that is available. I wish to make suggestions about why we might reconsider the value of chapter two.

### 3.3 Two Interpretations

I have already summarized in syllogistic form the best known portion of Anselm's *Proslogion*. I suggested that while it is usually taken to be an unsatisfactory version of the ontological argument, it is better read as a necessary step in a larger argument. I will repeat the summary, and extend the argument now to include *Proslogion III*.

Recall our summary of the argument from *Proslogion II*:

- 1 By "God", we understand, "That-Than-Which-Nothing-Greater-Can-Be-Thought" (hereafter, AQM).
- 2 I understand what is meant by AQM.<sup>2</sup> Thus,
- 3 AQM exists in my mind.
- 4 Something which exists both in my mind and in reality is greater than something which exists only in my mind.
- 5 Something which exists only in my mind but not in reality cannot be AQM, since the thing existing in reality would be greater. Thus,
- 6 AQM must exist not only in my mind, but also in reality.

Anselm's words that I have rendered as proposition (6) are "Therefore there is absolutely no doubt that [AQM] exists both in the mind and in reality."<sup>3</sup> The use of the word "must" reflects an ambiguity similar to what is present in the original. Unless we are clear at the

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2. This understanding is taken as a requisite for the denial of the existence of AQM. In order to reject the existence of something, I must know what is meant by the term, so in order to reject it, I must at least understand what is meant by AQM. See the example of "Grik" in the discussion of the possibility premise below.

3. *Existit ergo procul dubio aliquid quo maius cogitari non valet, et intellectu et in re.* (pp. 116-117).

outset that there are multiple candidate interpretations, we can make a good deal of mischief with this formulation. The interpretation that is most often given appears to be that (6) is a claim about AQM's real (extra-mental) existence, which propositions (1) through (5) have summoned into being. That is, the intended function of *Proslogion II* is to summon the actual (extra-mental) existence of AQM out of a (mere) concept. The received understanding of *Proslogion II* as an independent argument finds its basis in this summoning interpretation. Criticisms of the second chapter of the *Proslogion* based on this understanding will maintain that the argument fails because it begs its own question.

The summoning interpretation can be found at work in many of the argument's critics

Consider the following example, taken from Gaunilo's *On Behalf of the Fool* (section two):

... perhaps it is manifest that this being is such that it can be entertained in the mind in a different way from unreal or doubtfully real things, so that I am not said to think of or have in thought what is heard, but to understand and have it in mind, in that I cannot really think of this being in any other way save by understanding it ... But if this is the case, first, there will be no difference between having an object in mind (taken as preceding in time), and understanding that the object actually exists (taken as following in time) ...<sup>4</sup>

Here, Gaunilo (correctly) identifies a problem with the summoning interpretation, which he (mis-)attributes to Anselm. In section five, he again shows that he holds to the summoning interpretation of the argument:

... if something that cannot even be thought in the true and real sense must be said to exist in the mind, then I do not deny that this also exists in my mind in the same way. But since from this one cannot in any way conclude that it exists also in reality, I certainly do not yet concede that it actually exists, until this is proved to me by an indubitable argument ... I do not concede that it exists in a different way from that – if one ought to speak of 'existence' here – when the mind tries to imagine a completely unknown thing on the basis of the spoken words alone. How then can it be proved to me on that basis that that which is greater [than everything] is either in my mind or thought, not even in

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4. pp. 158-159.

the sense in which many doubtfully real and unreal things are? It must first of all be proved to me then that this same greater than everything truly exists in reality somewhere, and then only will the fact that it is greater than everything make clear that it also subsists in itself.<sup>5</sup>

In these passages, Gaunilo understands the argument as an attempt to transmute mental existence into extra-mental existence, and will not allow it. While Anselm begins section five of his reply to Gaunilo with too much salt, he also provides there an elegant response:

... what does not exist can possibly not exist, and what can not exist [*quod non esse potest*, i.e., what is capable of not existing] can be thought of as not existing. However, whatever can be thought of as not existing, if it actually exists, is not that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought. But if it does not exist, even if it should exist, it would not be that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought.<sup>6</sup>

This passage shows, as succinctly as anything, the crux of Anselm's argument, the modal nature of that argument, and the fact that the summoning interpretation is not a fair characterization of it.

A similar interpretation and response can be found in the first set of the *Objections* to the Cartesian version of the ontological argument from *Meditation Five*. There, Johannes Caterus writes:

My own answer to M. Descartes, which is based on this passage [Aquinas's *Summa Theologia*, Pars 1, Q. 2, art. 1], is briefly this. Even if it is granted that a supremely perfect being carries the implication of existence in virtue of its very title, it still does not follow that the existence in question is anything actual in the real world; all that follows is that the concept of existence is inseparably linked to the concept of a supreme being.<sup>7</sup>

Caterus correctly sees what can be concluded from the argument so far. But he continues:

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5. p. 163. The bracketed text is from Charlesworth, and reflects what I take to be an accurate characterization of Gaunilo's failure to note the difference between "greater than everything" and Anselm's "than which nothing greater can be thought." Anselm calls attention to this discrepancy and clarifies the distinction in the *Reply to Gaunilo* (section five). It is also worth mention that in addition to the summoning interpretation, in demanding "indubitable argument," Gaunilo appears to subscribe to the discursive error mentioned in our previous chapter.

6. pp. 180-181.

7. AT, vol. VII, p. 99.

... So you cannot infer that the existence of God is anything actual unless you suppose that the supreme being actually exists; for then it will actually contain all perfections, including the perfection of real existence.<sup>8</sup>

As with Anselm, we have the benefit of reading Descartes's *Replies* to his interlocutors. And as with Anselm, Descartes offers a clarifying response that adds depth to the argument.

... we must distinguish between possible and necessary existence. It must be noted that possible existence is contained in the concept or idea of everything that we clearly and distinctly understand [i.e., everything that does not contain an internal contradiction]; but in no case is necessary existence so contained, except in the case of the idea of God. Those who carefully attend to this difference between the idea of God and every other idea will undoubtedly perceive that even though our understanding of other things always involves understanding them as if they were existing things, it does follow that they do exist, but merely that they are capable of existing. For our understanding does not show us that it is necessary for actual existence to be conjoined with their other properties ...<sup>9</sup>

He shows us that the purpose of the argument is not to conjure existence, but to do as Caterus has already acknowledged the argument to have done, and connect the concept of existence inseparably to AQM – that is, to show that only non-contingency can apply to AQM.

While these instances of the summoning interpretation belong to detractors of the argument, the detractors do not hold the monopoly on this understanding of chapter two. While he resists the summoning interpretation of his own argument, Descartes offers a formulation that appears to be based on *Proslogion II*, which he calls “manifestly invalid.”<sup>10</sup> It is not clear whether he is attributing this formulation to Anselm or not. But it does appear that he understands this to be a distinct version of the argument, and that he is adopting a summoning interpretation of it. Even in his defense of the ontological argument, Charles Hartshorne assumes this interpretation:

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8. Ibid.

9. Descartes' *First Set of Replies* in AT, vol. VII, pp. 116-117.

10. AT, vol. VII, p. 115.

Anselm made two principal attempts to formulate his insight . . . The first of the two formulations is now generally admitted to be a failure. Nor shall I defend it . . . Here is a crude paraphrase of the first or weaker formula: Existence is good, hence the best conceivable thing must have it, and hence must exist. (Existence here means *extra mentem*, as more than a mere object of our thought.)<sup>11</sup>

I would like to offer an alternative interpretation in place of the “summoning” reading.<sup>12</sup> Call this alternative the “credentialing” interpretation. On this understanding, (6) does not offer a conclusion about AQM’s existential status, but about a credential (namely real extra-mental existence) that any candidate for AQM would need to have in order to qualify as such. Put slightly differently, (1) - (5) argue that necessary extra-mental existence is a great-making property.

We know that if P is a great-making property then AQM (if such there be) would need to possess P, but this fact does not offer anything in the way of a conclusion about the actuality of AQM. That the great-making property is instantiated by something which is AQM awaits further argument. Note that this interpretation is consistent with the view that *Proslogion II*, taken independently, is inadequate as a demonstration of the existence of AQM. Since we have merely stated something that must be true of AQM if there were such a thing, we have not successfully shown that there is an AQM which has the credential mentioned in (6). The difference is that critics of *Proslogion II* who adopt the summoning interpretation take the chapter to stand (or rather to fall) alone as an independent failure.

In contrast, the credentialing view maintains that *Proslogion II* is inadequate because it is incomplete. It supplies only a portion of the single, larger argument (*unum argumentum*) that Anselm promised. The credentialing interpretation has the further virtue of being consistent with the understanding that Anselm’s argument is not simply a confusion on his

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11. “What Did Anselm Discover?” in *Insights and Oversights*, p. 93.

12. This alternative is intended as a constructive rather than a hermeneutic offering. I make no interpretive claims about what Anselm intends, or about how the text *ought* to be read. Rather, I claim (merely) that the argument that is present in Anselm is compatible with my interpretation. The goal here is to present an argument that is attributable to an Anselmian (if not Anselm himself).

part.<sup>13</sup> The credentialing interpretation has the virtue of recognizing the insights of both proponents and detractors of the ontological argument, and from these insights it is able to glean wisdom.

Taking (6) as a credential for AQM, we are now ready to summarize chapter three of the *Proslogion*. The relevant section reads:

And certainly this being<sup>14</sup> so truly exists that it cannot be even thought not to exist. For something can be thought to exist that cannot be thought not to exist, [*quod non possit cogitari non esse*, hereafter NPC] and this is greater than that which can be thought not to exist [*quod non esse cogitari potest*, hereafter QNE]. Hence, 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 the same as that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought, which is absurd. Something-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought exists so truly then, that it cannot be even thought not to exist.

And You, Lord our God, are this being. You exist so truly, Lord my God, that You cannot even be thought not to exist. And this is as it should be, for if some intelligence could think of something better than You, the creature would be above its creator and would judge its creator – and that is completely absurd. In fact, everything else there is, except You alone, can be thought of as not existing. You alone, then, of all things most truly exist and therefore of all things possess existence to the highest degree; for anything else does not exist as truly, and so possesses existence to a lesser degree. Why then did ‘the Fool say in his heart, there is no God’ [Psalm xiii. 1, lii.1] when it is so evident to any rational mind that You of all things exist to the highest degree? Why indeed, unless because he was stupid and a fool?<sup>15</sup>

We might read this in the following way:

7 There is something that is NPC.

8 NPC is greater than QNE.

therefore,

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13. A less charitable understanding of Anselm’s critics would be to say that they seem to think that Anselm not only erroneously believes in the muddled argument of chapter two, but that he either did not correctly identify his next chapter as a new argument, or perhaps could not count past one in enumerating his arguments.

14. From context, AQM

15. p. 119.

9 If AQM is QNE, it is not AQM.

therefore,

10 AQM is NPC.

An immediate objection might be that (7) seems highly contentious: it is in fact the claim under debate. If this is the best version of the argument, the rescue of chapter II has simply moved the question begging premise from (6) to (7). One could further ask why one should accept (8). But in fact neither (7) nor (8) can even be contended over until we understand what they are intended to mean, and this is a muddle.

The muddle arises from the ambiguity of the copula in each of these statements. On one hand, it could be interpreted as the a statement of identity. According to this interpretation there is a thing called NPC, and this thing is identical with some X under discussion. The conclusion of (10) is then that the thing that is AQM is identical to the thing that is NPC. Alternatively, NPC might refer to a property that is posited of some X, so that the statement should read X has the property of being NPC.

If NPC is to be understood as referring to an entity rather than a property, (7) is indeed a question-begging existential statement. Let us suppose then that NPC and QNE refer to properties, and the existential question is whether these properties are instantiated.

### **3.4 Is the Argument Just for Theists?**

There is another account of the ontological argument which bears consideration now. It is really more of a cluster of accounts all of which orbit around a common (or relevantly similar) hermeneutic key. The focal point of such accounts is a kind of fideism, according to which the value of ontological arguments is primarily for theists. While some who hold this view may be neutral toward ontological arguments, or even proponents, there is cause for concern.

My hesitance to endorse the fideistic view arises from the fact that to opponents of

the argument, it will likely appear as though the epistemic standards for theism are being lowered. Thus (according to my concern), theism appears less rationally justified than other claims, and thus less worthy of rational consideration.<sup>16</sup> The worry is that the outsider will see this as a reason to remain outside. If being religiously devout is a prerequisite for engaging Anselm critically, there is no reason (let alone possibility) for the academy to read Anselm – at least inasmuch as the contemporary academy is an institution distinct from its medieval monastic roots.

If the fideistic view is correct, it would seem that, whatever the esteem one holds for the epistemic standards of the argument, it is a waste of the skeptic’s time to dwell upon the matter. From the perspective of the devout, this may have an air of austere nobleness. But as far as anyone else is concerned, the ontological argument can be dismissed – at least in the sense one ordinarily takes an argument to aim at convincing someone.

An alternative concern could be called “softer fideism.” According to this view, the purpose of such an argument as Anselm’s is not to convince the non-believer, but rather to reassure the believer that her belief is rational (or at least not entirely irrational).<sup>17</sup> This view is not merely a tempered version of the stark fideism – since the starker version actively rules out the possibility of the softer version. Whereas the softer version admits a desire to justify one’s beliefs (if only to oneself), the starker version rejects such justification outright. I will grant that the soft view could be offered in good faith. However, part of my worry is that (intentionally or otherwise) it serves to weaken the argument. While the stark fideist might maintain that the standards of evidence for theists and non-theists form non-overlapping magisteria, the position of the soft-fideist does seem much more like a lowering of standards.

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16. To be sure, there are thinkers who are proponents of the fideistic reading of the argument, but who do not seem to think the standard is a lesser one. Karl Barth comes readily to mind here. But the mere existence of such thinkers does not vindicate the standard, and the very claim of fideism disinclines skeptics from engaging with them.

17. This view may be familiar to some readers. John Clayton’s “The Otherness of Anselm” could be considered an example of such a view.

It is as if the argument is inadequate to actually convince any new people, but it pacifies the justificatory conscience of believers. Recall the claim from chapter two that arguments invite assent rather than compelling submission. This is distinct from and does not entail a fideistic view. Rather, the notion that an interlocutor might change her mind is precisely the rejection of belief as a precondition for assenting to a line of reasoning. If all the argument could do – or all we need to expect of it – were to reassure those who are already sure of it, the non-believer can again ignore it without being negligent in her consideration of theism.

If we are to expect the argument to work on nonbelievers, does this not mean that it must begin with terms they are ready to accept? Recall that what it means for an argument to work on someone is not that it necessarily convinces them of its conclusions. Nor should we evaluate an argument based on its success in changing minds.<sup>18</sup>

### 3.5 Ontologically Neutral Formulations

Graham Oppy asserts that ontological arguments should be formulated without “ontologically committing vocabulary.”<sup>19</sup> Elsewhere, Oppy characterizes his project as “a thoroughly general treatment of ontological arguments” that “should, if possible, remain neutral between the various ontological positions”<sup>20</sup> The normative claim here is interesting, because it would apply (presumably) not just to Oppy’s own work, but to any such treatment of ontological arguments.

I want to suggest that there is a problem with this requirement, namely that it runs contrary to the operation of our intuitions in navigating our day-to-day experience. Our experience is fundamentally modal, in that it is shot through with recognition of our own contingency in the form of Whitehead’s affirmation-negation contrast. Part of what it is

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18. This last point is especially evident when one considers that conversely, part of philosophical training involves judging minds based on whether they are changed by certain arguments.

19. See Oppy’s entry for “Ontological Arguments” in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

20. *Ontological Arguments and Belief in God*, p. 160.

to be conscious is to recognize what is present (or absent) merely contingently, and what necessarily is (or cannot be) the case. In the second chapter of *The Logic of Perfection*, Hartshorne takes “modal argument” as an equivalent term to “ontological argument.” For hints as to why this would make sense, recall the section in the first chapter about neoclassical metaphysics as a modal metaphysics. I take Hartshorne’s identification of these two terms to be a product of his commitment to neoclassical metaphysics. Because any proper ontology – according to this metaphysics – must account for what is possible as well as what is necessary, any ontological argument must be modal.

### *3.5.1 Is Neutrality Really Desirable?*

Graham Oppy has said that questions into the soundness and validity of ontological arguments need to remain neutral with regard to their ontological commitments. This means that before we see the argument on its merits, we are not permitted to have decided whether or not God exists. I would pose two questions related to this assertion (and it is an assertion). One is whether neutrality is actually desirable, and the second is whether it is possible. I answer no to both.

To the question of desirability I answer no, because this is not a standard to which we would hold just any other argument. Prior non-neutrality happens all the time. Consider an abstract argument concerned not with existential statements, but simply with making true mathematical statements. In such a proof, one does not merely run through all of the axioms she can think of, but actively looks for a proof of the theorem that she believes to be true. Note that this may not be true of all mathematical proofs. For some statements the mathematician may be genuinely unsure until she has puzzled through an argument. Note that the claim being argued is not that we are non-neutral all of the time, but rather merely that we are not always neutral. And without a specific reason for distinguishing it from such questions in which non-neutrality is acceptable, the theistic investigation is – it would seem

– being held to an arbitrary standard.

Furthermore, we might consider empirical investigations into whether something exists. For example, the search for a so-called missing link between humans and our evolutionary progenitors. We do not hold such investigations to some standard of prior neutrality. Scientists go into the investigation with certain assumptions that such a thing exists, and intend to encounter this thing. Before Lucy was discovered, we assumed that we would find something like it in the fossil record. While we may in fact investigate according to a null hypothesis, we often are able to do this because we already have an idea about what is the case. Again, we are sometimes neutral beforehand, but its not simply a normative standard for all investigation.

What reasons are there for holding this standard specifically for God? Perhaps there are such reasons. We might see that since theistic claims are more questionable, they should be held to a more rigorous standard. But there is an irony in the fact that with regard to modal status, the skeptical objections, such as those of Hume, demand treating God in the same way as other existential questions. It would be obviously fallacious to say that the question of whether to treat theistic claims in the same manner as other existential questions depends on which treatment best suits the case against the argument, or against the existence of God. I am unconvinced that theistic arguments require a higher standard of neutrality than anti-theistic or non-theistic arguments.

### *3.5.2 Is Neutrality Really Possible?*

Perhaps some people looking into ontological arguments are genuinely agnostic. But this does not entail a normative case for neutrality. And we certainly do not see such normativity as ubiquitous across all abstract arguments, nor across existential arguments. So it is not clear to me that such neutrality is actively to be desired. Perhaps, one maintains that the ideal target for an argument (and thus our ideal status as audience to such arguments) is the

‘ideal agnostic observer’ of van Inwagen.<sup>21</sup> Van Inwagen himself notes that such a position is not actually possible – and it seems that even under such imperfect conditions, we have been able to produce at least the entirety of human knowledge. I have been suggesting very sternly that the absence of perfect neutrality is not sufficient to invalidate attempts to gain such knowledge, and that this includes knowledge about the existence of God. This is for the good, as it is the case that many people enter investigations into the ontological argument with commitments about God – both positive and negative.

Graham Oppy is an atheist. He seems to me to enter into the question of God's existence with the assumption that God does not exist. He would, I think, say that he is capable of bracketing off this question for the duration of our investigation, and so is well within his rights in expecting theists to do the same. This brings us to the second question: is it possible to be neutral to conclusions prior to investigation. My answer is no – at least for theists, atheists, and most agnostics. It may be possible for someone who is encountering the very concept of God for the first time as a reasoning adult, but otherwise, prior neutrality is probably impossible.

To see why, we need to think about how the question of whether God exists is substantially different from questions about the existence of black swans or black holes in our galaxy, or other manner of things besides just black ones.

I have just spent some time deriding opponents of the ontological argument for waffling as to whether to hold the argument to the same or different standards. Is this not hypocritical to now excuse theism as a different kind of commitment? I submit that my judgment is different here than is the judgment of the atheistic position one finds in Oppy. I have very good reasons, which I will now share for thinking that the theistic question is fundamentally different regarding its neutrality.

We should very quickly see that the theistic question is important: it has consequences

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21. See *The Problem of Evil*, lecture three, especially his characterization of an ideal debate on pp. 42-49.

for our lives. The world looks very, very different if there is a God than it does if there is no God. For a good number of theists, their belief in God is at the very deepest level of their commitments. This is what Gamwell calls a comprehensive commitment. It fundamentally informs a worldview in an identity-constructing fashion. According to this understanding of the theistic question, whether one does or does not believe in God is constitutive of the person holding that belief.<sup>22</sup>

A theist may look at some arguments in a way that is fundamentally different than the way in which an atheist will look at it. While we may be able to conceptually bracket off certain commitments, at days end, this is not possible with all of our commitments.<sup>23</sup>

The assertion that it is so much as possible to bracket off one's metaphysical commitments is already begging the question against the comprehensive nature of theistic commitment (not to mention the modal claims of the proponent of a modal argument). The very request to bracket supposes that the comprehensively theist position is incorrect. The comprehensive theist maintains that her theism is constitutive. By assuming that bracketing this question is possible, one assumes that it is not so comprehensive nor so constitutive. The bracketer assumes a metaphysical view of the person such that she can do without or ignore these comprehensive commitments at will, and thus that these commitments are non-constitutive. Inasmuch as they might be constitutive of the person, they would also be potentially constitutive of that person's reasoning. This itself is an ontological question, and thus is subject to debate. Are such commitments constitutive of one's reasoning? If in fact they are comprehensive, as Gamwell would maintain and I would follow, then it seems reasonable to expect

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22. My position on ontological commitments parallels Gamwell's position vis-a-vis Rawls. While political philosophy is outside the scope (though not the implications!) of this project, I owe most of my thoughts on the question at hand to his overall argument in *Democracy on Purpose*, and to the privilege of discussing these matters with him.

23. Whether theism "ought to count" as such a commitment is a further question for another occasion. Note carefully that my pointing to the constitutive nature of theistic commitment is not intended to halt argument about theism, lest I endorse a version of the very fideism I have been objecting to. Rather, it is intended to uphold the value of entering such arguments from positions other than neutrality or the pretense thereto.

they would be constitutive of one's thinking. The claim that they are not assumes that there are no such comprehensive, constitutive commitments. Thus there is no such thing as neutrality toward one's metaphysical commitments.

### 3.6 A Paradigm and Formulation of the Argument

We are now in a position to offer the following paradigm for a formulation of the ontological argument:

From chapters one and two, we see that

- i because it is ontological, our argument will proceed a priori to an existential claim.  
And because it is neoclassical,
- ii it will do so by means of a modal argument. Thus, a successful ontological argument
- iii will have a valid structure according to some modal logic, and
- iv it should be plausible that this logic is appropriately applicable to metaphysical modality.

Chapter four will make a case for the ontological argument on these last two criteria. As a modal argument, it will need to account for notions of possibility and necessity. This means arguing that

- v both modal concepts can be coherently predicated a priori of some putative existent.  
That a necessary being can be conceived, and that its possibility can both be argued for a priori are the goals at which chapters five and six aim.

This paradigm lists the criteria we would expect from an ontological argument. Ultimately, many formulations according to this paradigm may be possible. An outline of such an argument may run thus:

1. From an understanding of AQM, we know that AQM exists if and only if it is necessarily the case that AQM exists. That is, the existence of AQM is not a contingent question, but is either necessary or impossible.
2. It is possibly the case that AQM exists (It is possible for AQM to exist). Thus,
3. it is possibly the case that it is necessarily the case that AQM exists.
4. According to the logic of S5 (see chapter four), we know that if it is possibly necessarily the case that p, it is necessarily the case that p, and thus it is the case that p. And so,
5. it is necessarily the case that (i.e., it is the case that) AQM exists.

### 3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has sought to bridge two sections of this project. On one side is the ground for arguing ontologically – the issue of the possibility the argument. After outlining the metaphysics underpinning the argument, we made the case that ontological arguments cannot be ruled out through parody, or as *prima facie* illicit.

Despite the case that we need not rule out ontological arguments at the outset, we have seen how the argument came to be represented (or perhaps misrepresented) when the summoning interpretation was applied to the reading of the *Proslogion*. We saw that the argument is neither an exercise in fideism, nor is it entirely neutral about its ontological commitments. But since this neutrality is neither desirable nor possible, such commitments do not vitiate the argument.

We offered a paradigm for formulating ontological arguments, and with this formulation on hand, we can now proceed to the second part of the project. In this stage, we will evaluate each part of our outline for formulating an ontological argument, beginning with the structural concerns, moving then to the concepts of necessity and possibility in turn. It is to this division that we now turn our attention.

## CHAPTER 4

### STRUCTURAL CONCERNS OF THE ARGUMENT

#### 4.1 Overview

In the second chapter, I characterized an argument as ontological if its conclusion is an existential claim, whether affirmative or negative, and its argument proceeds by means of *a priori* reasoning alone, without reference to contingent facts about the world (about the collective state of affairs). I focused on a limited selection of allegedly ontological arguments, and showed that the well known parody arguments do not meet these criteria, while the theistic proof offered by Hartshorne (following the trajectory initiated by Anselm and followed later by Descartes) does. Thus the line of reasoning maintained by the theistic arguments offered by these thinkers does not serve to demonstrate the existence of ridiculous entities to which the prefix “necessary” has been attached willy nilly, and (I have argued) we can dismiss these parodies as irrelevant to the arguments *actually being offered* by these thinkers. Still, although one may be willing to take the argument seriously, there are concerns about even the strongest formulations that deserve our attention, which this and the two subsequent chapters will seek to address. I have arranged these chapters as treating of first the structural concerns of the argument, and then the issues of necessity and possibility respectively.

In this chapter, I want to distinguish three *kinds* of objections to the formal structure of ontological arguments. The first is the idea that arguing *a priori* for an existential claim is generally illicit (that no existential claim is analytic). Second, I will consider the objection that S5 – the modal logic necessary for the ontological argument to succeed – is to be rejected for some reason. Finally we will consider objections that a fallacy is committed in the argument.<sup>1</sup>

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1. As I explain below, I will focus on three major fallacies which the argument is commonly accused of committing

## 4.2 Is the Argument Licit? (A Funny Thing About Ontological Arguments)

There is something peculiar to the debate over whether the ontological argument is licit: the question of its potential for success is bound up with the question of its actual success. It is difficult to say whether such an argument *could in principle* succeed without knowing whether it *actually does* succeed. Hume maintained that anything one can imagine as existing, one can imagine as not existing.<sup>2</sup> On the assumption that the conceivability of a state of affairs implies its possibility, this would mean that every existent is contingent (that there is no *de re* necessity).<sup>3</sup>

The problem here is that the Humean claim simply begs the question against the ontological argument. The proponent of the ontological argument maintains that there is at least one thing that cannot be imagined (or cannot be imagined without contradiction) not to exist – namely God.<sup>4</sup> The Humean claim merely stipulates against the premise of the modal argument that maintains that the modal status of God’s existence is not one of contingency. Whether there could be a non-contingent existent is precisely what is at issue, and what the ontological argument seeks to defend. Leibniz notes this very problem in his “Proof of the existence of God from his essence” from January, 1678:

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2. See *Dialogues*, p. 65.

3. Serious objections have been raised to the claim that conceivability implies possibility, which I examine in chapter five. For now it is worth noting that if we reject this claim, Hume’s point loses its ontological force. If the conceivability of a thing’s existence cannot tell us that it is possible for such a thing to exist, the conceivability of its nonexistence cannot necessarily tell us that its nonexistence is possible (where we are not talking about things such as four-sided triangles that are internally contradictory or obviously impossible). If conceivability is insufficient to confirm possibility, Hume’s objection can no longer act as an ontological claim against *de re* necessity. Nevertheless, it may still strike a blow to our confidence in the possibility of a necessary existent, or to our confidence about epistemic access to such a possibility. Since I want to argue for the possibility of a necessary existent, it is important to address the Humean objection in its ontological capacity here. After such a treatment, the Humean will still have the option of falling back to the epistemic front. I will further address this concern below.

4. This point is made by Hartshorne in *A Natural Theology for our time*, p. 77. Similarly, in *The Logic of Perfection*, Hartshorne notes, “To reason, ‘if the metaphysically perfect could be necessary, anything could be so,’ would be silly . . . The metaphysically perfect is a radically exceptional case, on any analysis,” p. 56.

This argument has found it very hard to get assent among men, because it is without an example, which is not surprising since *only the essence of God* has this privilege that its existence can be deduced from itself *a priori* without supposing any actuality or experience . . .<sup>5</sup>

But God's existence cannot be offered as a counterexample to Hume's principle without similar charges of circularity. Nor is the proponent of the ontological argument *prima facie* committed, so far as I can tell, to maintaining that there are any *other* non-contingent existents which could falsify such a claim. In fact, we have good reason to suspect that there may not be any such non-contingent existents. In section three of his reply to Gaunilo, Anselm quite clearly states that the logic of his argument applies only to that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought (AQM) – going so far as to promise to deliver magnificent islands if he should prove wrong. Furthermore, even if additional candidates were offered, what reason would we have to think that the skeptic would find them any less controversial than the first?

In sum, if the Humean dictum is true, ontological arguments are unsound, whereas if the ontological argument is sound after all, the Humean dictum is false. But we seem at a loss about how to decide between the two assertions. Here, the key worry for the proponent of the ontological argument is that its non-contingency premise seems at worst to beg the question *for* such an existent, while at best merely leaving us in a state of total ignorance about its real possibility. We are in a pickle.

### 4.3 Is Hume Correct?

While there are objections against necessary existents that stand on Humean grounds, we generally do not believe that the truth value of strictly *every* existential claim is contingent. There are existential claims which *must* be false (e.g., “there is a colorless yellow rose in my garden”). So it is possible that we know the existential status of some putative things

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5. *The Shorter Leibniz Texts*, p. 184.

a priori, and that this status cannot be contingent – namely when those “things” involve contradictions. This is the force behind Steinitz’s claim (above) that “contradictions are ontological arguments.” But all of these claims of which we are certain seem to be negative existential claims. So with a very little effort, we could clarify our statement to read that any affirmative existential statement is contingent.<sup>6</sup>

I bring up necessary nonexistence to highlight an interesting asymmetry between affirmative and negative existential statements. In my first and final chapters, on neoclassical metaphysics, we see that the actual ontological arguments are phrased in the negative (as when we assume something for the purposes of generating a proof by contradiction). This is not accidental and it is important. It is, I think, intended to show us that the claim made by the ontological argument is more like the negative existential statements that we can know a priori than it is like positive statements that must be decided empirically.

Again, whether one agrees to the similarity of the ontological argument’s conclusion to the analyticity of logical contradictions, or whether one thinks it is closer to other existential claims – and thus empirical – will most likely depend on whether one accepts the ontological argument itself. But we are back to the impasse between the Humean and the Anselmian, and the accompanying issues of circularity. Neither side appears to have a warrant that would convince the other. Hume is right to recognize that the entire question of the argument rests upon this issue.<sup>7</sup> He is wrong, however, to think that he has undermined the argument. The proponent wants to claim that AQM is unique in that its non-existence is inconceivable. The attack maintains that AQM is like every other existent that has been observed. I propose that we can break this impasse via appeal to Humean skepticism. We first ask: “what reason would we have for thinking AQM is like every other contingent existent so far observed?”

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6. This has the added virtue of being a much fairer reading of Hume. His claim begins with statements in the affirmative (“anything that can be imagined as existing ...”), and posits contingency (... “can be imagined not to exist”). Hume would have no problem with denying the existence of things whose existence is not conceivable, and presumably no problem with denying the possibility of such things existing.

7. *Dialogues*, p. 64.

A principle that all putative existents are contingent is question begging if merely asserted. Either some other principle is needed, or universal contingency must be demonstrated. If another principle were offered, we should take it up here. Absent some other principle, how might we make a show that all existents are contingent? Again, I am perfectly willing to accept that all other (non-AQM) existents so far observed have proven to be contingent. But by Hume's own lights, the process of drawing an inference from these contingent items A, B, C, etc. to the contingency of AQM is unwarranted.

I intend to return in my final chapter to the question of whether and what other existential propositions we might be able to infer a priori. For now, it is worth noting that concerns over the possibility of such inferences may occasion an objection to the logic of the argument itself. It is to this objection that we will now turn.

#### 4.4 Objecting to S5 Modal Logic

A potentially powerful objection to the argument on a structural level is to call into question the modal logic of the argument. This is not meant in the sense of an accusation of fallacious reasoning on the part of the argument. Rather, the objector in this case can readily accept the validity of a modal ontological argument according to the axioms in S5 modal logic. But that validity is irrelevant for the person making this objection, because she rejects S5 outright. The force of this objection comes from the fact that in order for a modal ontological argument to go through, a special kind of modal logic, known as S5 is needed. Less formally, we need to be able to posit that if something is possibly necessary, it is necessary.<sup>8</sup> As I will elaborate upon shortly, this relation between possibility and necessity is precisely what our special modal logic does posit. If we cannot posit this relation, S5 is undermined, and with

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8. Here, and this is a vital point, the modal terms "necessary" and "possible" must refer metaphysically. This is not necessity in a deontic sense of what "must be" in an ought sense. Nor is this necessity in a physical sense, operating under what we know as the laws of physics (where it is necessary for the speed of light in a vacuum to remain a constant than which nothing is faster).

it, the modal ontological argument fails. I should comment that many philosophers (though certainly not all) take this axiom to be the case. However, on the lines of our metaphor of exchange, permission to reject the ontological argument's conclusion can be bought at the price of giving up on this axiom.

In attempting to talk about this objection, we encounter the challenge of how to characterize it in the first place. Is the claim that S5 is not a valid logic? This locution is infelicitous. Validity is usually understood as applicable to *arguments* – sanctioning the move from premises to a conclusion.<sup>9</sup> To say that an argument is valid is to say that its conclusion is drawn licitly according to the rules of a given logical system. A system must already be in place in order to evaluate claims being made *according to the system*. To say that the system itself is invalid would be a category error – to speak as though one were at once both within and outside a system.

It is similarly confused (or at least imprecise), on my lights, to speak of a logic as “incorrect.” There are no factual claims being made such that they could admit of inaccuracy. Again, a logic is a set of rules which – as a precondition of any argument – parties must be agreed upon in advance. In this way, there is a somewhat transcendental character to logic.<sup>10</sup> In order to have a good-faith disagreement about logic, we first have to agree upon certain rules of logic.

I confess that from this observation I am tempted to conclude that the rejection of a modal logic cannot proceed without some level of question begging. Or rather, the temptation is to treat the quasi-transcendental nature of logic as though it could form the basis of a

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9. I do not wish to enter debate over the “correct understanding” of validity. Perhaps it is simply a feature of playing according to a set of structural rules. Perhaps instead it is that any attempt at an interpretation that would serve as a counterexample (i.e., with true premises and a false conclusion) will fail. I have said that I prefer Hartshorne's metaphor of establishing a price for the conclusion. If there is a difference between these, I do not see what difference it makes for the present consideration.

10. I suspect, though I can do little more than suggest, that this character accounts for logicians and mathematicians who speak of the “beauty” of certain proofs and formulae. It is certainly responsible for my attraction to the ontological proof.

transcendental argument for S5. But if there is such an argument to be made, it evades me. I am inclined to think that there can be no such transcendental magic trick that could show S5 to be the appropriate logic behind the metaphysics of the universe. To see why it would be a mistake to look for such a justification, we must first present an account of S5. This will help us to see how one could conceivably reject a particular modal logic without the self-contradiction of rejecting logic altogether.<sup>11</sup>

## 4.5 An Abbreviated Primer on Modal Logic

Some minimal understanding of issues in modal logic will be required for the rest of the chapter to make sense. This sub-section is intended as a help to a reader who has little to no such familiarity with modal logic, though some background (e.g. an understanding of truth-functional connectives and operators) is assumed. Those already acquainted with modal logic can freely skip this discussion without loss.<sup>12</sup>

S5 is a “normal” modal logic. In normal modal logics, everything that holds true in propositional logic is stipulated to also hold true. To all of the workings of propositional logic are added two new operators:  $\Box$  and  $\Diamond$ , the box and the diamond. We will read these operators as “it is necessarily the case that” and “it is possibly the case that” respectively.<sup>13</sup>

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11. To be sure, in presenting this account, I will be making a kind of argument on behalf of S5. I do think that there are very good justifications to recommend S5 as the appropriate modal logic for metaphysics. I simply mean that they are not, and cannot be of a transcendental-magic variety. I will offer these reasons by explaining alternatives to S5, and suggesting how they appear unsatisfying.

12. While this section and the accompanying diagrams are my own, they are based on Graham Priest’s *Introduction to Non-Classical Logic*, which served as my textbook while learning the subject. This section and the following, which discusses how we want to choose the best logic for metaphysical modality, are heavily indebted to this text, especially chapters two and three.

13. For brevity’s sake, I may render these as “necessarily” or “possibly,” but these phrasings are intended as a shorthand for the longer formulation. In the interest of greater precision, it should be noted that some prefer to pronounce these symbols as “box” and “diamond” (or “lozenge”) when reading formulas aloud. This is helpful when the discussion is about which interpretation of the operators to give, inasmuch as the question revolves around which accessibility relations should be given in order to capture what we mean by “possibly” and “necessarily” Ultimately, it is a fool’s errand to find “the” correct interpretation, since we use these terms differently in different situations. There is a sense in which it is “possible” for me to paint every surface in my home green: I can imagine painting things green, and so I simply extend this to all the

These two operators are interdefinable:  $\Box P$  (necessarily P) can be translated into  $\neg\Diamond\neg P$  (not-possibly not-P). Similarly,  $\Diamond P$  (possibly P) can be translated as  $\neg\Box\neg P$  (not-necessarily not-P). This interdefinability seems to accord with common intuitions about modal terms as we ordinarily use them.

Modal operators do not function in the same way that standard connectives function in propositional logic. The truth value of propositions using these operators will depend on the truth values of propositions in given possible worlds. Before we discuss how this works, it may be worth noting that there is a lack of consensus on how to interpret such “worlds” in ontological terms. For our purposes, we can think of possible worlds as maximally inclusive states of affairs.<sup>14</sup>

When thinking about possible worlds, and how their relations determine the truth value of modal propositions, I have found it helpful to use diagrams, which I will include throughout this text. Possible worlds will be represented by a circle with a label ( $w_i, w_j, etc.$ ). Where it is important, I will include the truth value of propositions ( $p, q, etc.$ ) inside the circle representing the relevant world. So, in the following diagram, there are two worlds; in  $w_i$ ,  $p$  is true, and in  $w_j$  the truth value is not specified.



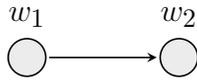
Possible worlds can be related to one another by what is called an “accessibility relation.” These relations will be important for determining possibility and necessity of propositions in various worlds. If a world  $w_i$  has access to a world  $w_j$ , we will draw an arrow from  $w_i$

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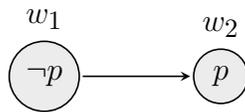
surfaces of my domicile There is a different sense in which it is not possible: I cannot afford the time or green paint or familial strife this might cause.

14. If I understand correctly, this is something like a Wittgensteinian notion of the world as the totality of facts, where (as I understand it) “fact” can refer to any true proposition, not only the “mere facts” that require observation, or that might have been otherwise. See his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, statements 1-1.21.

to  $w_j$ . In the diagram below,  $w_1$  relates to (i.e., has an accessibility relation to)  $w_2$ ; note, however that the reverse is not true ( $w_2$  does not relate to  $w_1$ ).



We will say that  $\Diamond p$  is true, or  $p$  is possibly true, in  $w_i$ , just in the event that  $p$  is true in some other world  $w_j$  to which  $w_i$  has access. Consider the following diagram:



Here, in  $w_1$ ,  $p$  is false, but  $\Diamond p$  is true, since it has access to  $w_2$ , where  $p$  is true. This resembles what we mean when say that something isn't the case, but it might have been the case. We will return to this model in the next section, where I will note some of its implications that seem strange. For the moment, we will proceed to the next operator.

We will say that  $\Box p$  is true, or  $p$  is necessarily true, in world  $w_i$  just in the event that there is no world to which  $w_i$  relates in which  $p$  is not true. This is simply another way of stating the interdefinability of our two operators. It means that a proposition  $p$  is necessarily true if it is not possibly false.

Now consider another diagram:

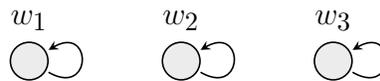


Here,  $p$  is true in  $w_1$  and  $w_1$  has access only to  $w_2$ , where  $p$  is also true. Since there is no world to which  $w_1$  relates where  $p$  is not true,  $\Box p$  is true in  $w_1$ .

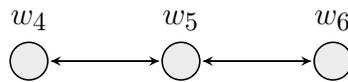
These rules give us the simplest version of a normal modal logic, called  $K$  (after Saul Kripke). The variety of normal modal logics come from adding to  $K$  in the form of stipulating

certain accessibility relations between worlds ( $K$  does not stipulate any such relations). Examples of the relations that can be stipulated in order to add to  $K$  are *reflexivity* ( $\rho$ ), *symmetry* ( $\sigma$ ), *transitivity* ( $\tau$ ), and *extendability* ( $\eta$ ). We will define and illustrate each of these relations in this order.<sup>15</sup>

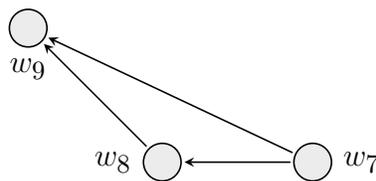
*Reflexivity* (written as  $K_\rho$ ) means that every world relates to itself. This diagram illustrates a set of worlds which satisfies the reflexivity relation:



*Symmetry* (written as  $K_\sigma$ ) means that if  $w_i$  relates to  $w_j$ , then  $w_j$  relates to  $w_i$ . The following illustrates a set of worlds satisfying the symmetry relation:



*Transitivity* (written as  $K_\tau$ ) means that if  $w_i$  relates to  $w_j$  and  $w_j$  relates to  $w_k$ , then  $w_i$  relates to  $w_k$ . This diagram is an example of a set of worlds satisfying the transitivity relation:



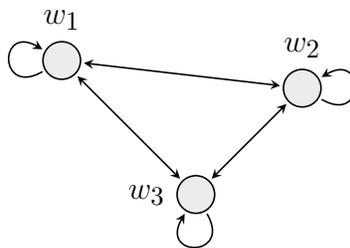

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15. There are other relations beyond those I specify here. For our purposes, these relations will suffice.

*Extendability* (written as  $K_\eta$ ) means that every world relates to some world. It should be clear that the extendability constraint is implied by reflexivity. But what may not be as immediately obvious is that none of the other relations imply extendability. Without  $\eta$ , a single isolated world (or multiple worlds which do not relate to one another) will satisfy both  $\sigma$  and  $\tau$ .

These relations come in various combinations – you can mix and match, and some combinations produce interesting results in terms of what can be proven in these interpretations.<sup>16</sup>

The combination important for us now is known as *universality* ( $\nu$ ). This is a combination of all of the relations mentioned above. It just means that every possible world relates to every other possible world, including itself, as illustrated in this diagram:



When we add the universality relation to  $K$ , we arrive at  $K_\nu$ , also known as S5. This is the strongest modal logic we have, and it is to S5 that our ontological argument will appeal.

## 4.6 ... And Now, Back to Our Regularly Scheduled Argument

We see now that the S5 system is the result of additions to classical propositional logic, rather than an altering of it. Since (like all normal modal logics) it builds in this way, we are free to accept or reject constraints on accessibility relations as we see fit without upsetting

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16. Note that these stipulations do not preclude further relations. They tell us what relations the possible worlds must bear to one another at minimum. Some (or all) worlds in a set of worlds that abides by the  $K_\tau$  stipulation might also exhibit reflexivity, for example.

our agreement to abide by standard constraints of basic propositional logic. Even if the basic rules of inference found in formal logic self-assert on a meta-level, we can debate the modal additions without violating the fundamental rules of inference.

Given that the nay-sayer remains entitled to the rules of inference from propositional logic, what sort of argument could be put forward on behalf of one logic versus another? What reason would we have for accepting S5 over  $K$ , or any of its other extensions? And what is at stake in doing so? Without a reason to prefer one modal logic over the other, it would seem that neither the critic nor the proponent of the argument can do better than to fall back on assertion.

The stakes are straightforward. The key axiom of S5 states that if a proposition is possibly necessary, it is necessary. The modal ontological argument requires this axiom, and requires it moreover to be a truth about metaphysical modality.<sup>17</sup>

The question of what reasons there might be for preferring one logic over another is more complex. Understanding the motivations behind one's choice of modal logic will be important for dealing with flat rejections of S5 as a system. As already noted, defining the modal operators as above gives us the rules which constitute  $K$ . At first it may have seemed like an intuitive formalization for tracking possibility and necessity. There are, however, certain intuitive conclusions that we would like to be able to draw based upon other modal statements, but which the system  $K$  is inadequate to give us. To show this, we will construct a model set of possible worlds and their relations which obey the rules of  $K$ .<sup>18</sup> We will see that in these models, we cannot validly make the inference we would

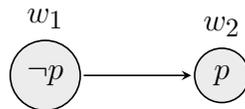
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17. A key version of the objection to S5 is the claim that there is no single, unified concept of metaphysical modality. According to this objection, there is no "logic" of such a modality, because there is no one thing answering to this name. In response to this, I will present a section later in this chapter on the issue of modal conflation, and in the next chapter on the concept of necessity. Suffice it for now to say that I take metaphysical necessity to work according to the characteristic axiom of S5. Given which, the modal argument would be logically valid, though not necessarily exempt from the further criticisms I discuss in this project.

18. It is possible to offer a precise notation for such a collection of worlds that does not depend on diagrams. In the interest of brevity and theme (this is not intended as a logic textbook), I have omitted discussion of

like (or, in some cases, the models will entail conclusions we expressly wish to deny). These models thus serve as counterexamples to claims that  $K$  is the modal logic we are looking for. Such counterexamples should, I think, incline us to move beyond  $K$  in our search for the appropriate logic for modeling our modal notions.

Our first set of counterexamples starts with the following diagram, from our initial discussion above:



It made sense to us that  $\Diamond p$  is true in  $w_1$ . But note that  $w_2$  does not relate to itself (in fact, it relates to no worlds at all). From our definitions and the accessibility relations given in this diagram,  $w_2$  does not relate to any world in which  $p$  is true. Thus  $\Diamond p$  is false in  $w_2$ , despite  $p$  itself being true there. It seems strange for there to be a world in which something is the case, but in which it is not possible for that same thing to be the case. Intuitively, we would like to say that  $p$  implies  $\Diamond p$ . This means that we want to stipulate the reflexivity constraint on our logic.

There are further strange implications in this model without reflexivity:  $\Box p$  is true in  $w_1$ , despite the fact that  $p$  is false. This too appears to run contrary to our intuitions – we don't want to be able to say this. But, since  $w_1$  relates only to  $w_2$ , where  $p$  is true, we can draw this strange conclusion. Once again, reflexivity would run closer to our workaday thinking about possibility.

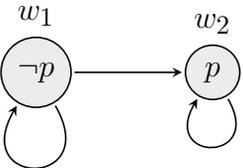
It seems less problematic that  $\Box p$  is true in  $w_2$  (although still somewhat strange in light of the observation that  $\Diamond p$  is not true). Because  $w_2$  does not relate to any world, there is a fortiori no world to which it relates in which  $p$  is not true. Thus,  $\Box p$  is true, but strangely, it is also the case that  $\Box \neg p$  is true in  $w_2$ . Someone first encountering modal logic will likely

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this formalization.

resist such conclusions, as it runs contrary to our ordinary intuitions for there to be a world in which both “necessarily  $p$ ” and “necessarily not- $p$ ” are true. Extendability would eliminate such instances of contrary-necessities. But the instances above show that we want something stronger. We want an analyticity to modal operators, so that  $p$  implies  $\Diamond p$ , and  $\Box p$  implies  $p$ . In order to get this we need reflexivity (which would also satisfy the desire for extendability). This means that our logic should at least have the  $\rho$  constraint on accessibility relations.<sup>19</sup>

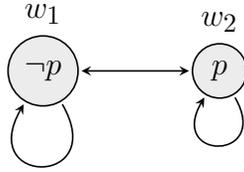
Now we must ask, are we done? Does reflexivity satisfy our modal needs? By adding the reflexivity constraint to our diagram, we get the following:



In this example, all of the strange conclusions mentioned above are gone: there are no contrary-necessities in  $w_2$ , in  $w_1$   $\Diamond \neg p$  is true. But now look at the differences in modal statuses between the two worlds. In  $w_1$ ,  $p$  is contingent – it happens to be false (and fortunately, this is also *possible*), but it is possibly true, as in  $w_2$ . Now consider the status of  $p$  in  $w_2$ . With reflexivity in place, in this world  $p$  is true, as is  $\Diamond p$ , and (thankfully)  $\Box \neg p$  is false. However, unlike in  $w_1$ , in  $w_2$   $\Box p$  is true. What is contingent in one world becomes necessary in another. If it strikes us that what is contingent in one world should not be necessary in a related world, we need the constraint of symmetry, which would give us a diagram that looks like this:

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19. Deontic modal logic is usually constructed without the reflexivity constraint, so there may be arguments on behalf of omitting  $\rho$  from our list of desired relations. However, the purpose of deontic logic is to model permission and obligation rather than possibility and necessity as we ordinarily use the terms. In any case, the notion we want our logic to model here does seem to warrant reflexivity.



Whether this is something that we want from our modal logic depends on what sense of possibility and necessity we want to model with it. There are senses of possibility for which the symmetry constraint may not be desirable. Consider the intuition that the future is open in terms of possibility, whereas the past is set, and so necessary in a sense.<sup>20</sup> On this view, temporal modality would seem very much non-symmetric.

At this point, the reader will recall the claim from our first chapter that for Hartshorne, whose thought underpins much of this project, time is the model for metaphysical modality. If this were true, and if it were also the case that time is asymmetric in the above sense – as Hartshorne elsewhere suggests, would this not undermine the claim S5 holds upon metaphysics?<sup>21</sup>

I would suggest that there are two different issues at stake here, and any confusion is a result of imprecision in the workaday language we use to discuss them. Symmetry may be inappropriate for one issue, while it is exactly what the other requires, and when we break the issues down as such, we will see that this is the case. Inasmuch as we want to model the unidirectionality of time as it unfolds, the symmetry constraint is undesirable. Our experience of time is of its foreclosing on various possibilities.<sup>22</sup> Once a decision is made,

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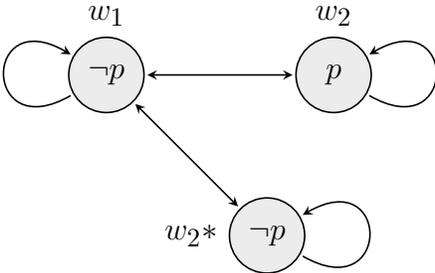
20. The purpose of this remark is not to take a stance on issues in the metaphysics of time. While such discussion is ultimately important, it is outside of our purview here. While I will mention this again in the final chapter, here I simply intend this remark to suggest ways in which one’s model for modality would be important.

21. Hartshorne anticipates this issue in *The Divine Relativity*, for instance pp. 98-115. He also addresses the issue in two essays, giving a more thorough and explicit treatment than can be reviewed here. First, we find a discussion in “Causal Necessities: An Alternative to Hume” in *The Philosophical Review* (1954), especially pp. 482-485. He returns again in “The Meaning of ‘Is Going to Be’,” in *Mind* (1965).

22. Within the world of neoclassical metaphysics, some thinkers claim that there are emergent possibilities. Those affirming this notion will maintain that decisions open new possibilities. By this I take them to mean that the possibilities are becoming live options, rather than (merely) hypothetical.

there is no undoing it. But in another sense, its possibility (as a hypothetical, rather than a living option) does not disappear just because a different course of events unfolded. It seems to me that the logical issue of possibility should maintain symmetry. The appeal here is very much like that of reflexivity. Just as we intuit that  $p$  being true implies the possibility of  $p$ , we would want to say that  $p$  having been true entails its (metaphysical) possibility: how did we get here, if not from there?

But, if these are our intuitions about logical possibility, does adding symmetry suffice to capture them? Consider a branching model of possibilities as in the following diagram:



This model obeys all of the constraints so far recommended in this section, including symmetry. Let  $p$  stand for the proposition “Smith is a graduate student at State.” This picture represents Smith’s decision about whether to accept the offer of admission into a graduate program. In  $w_1$ , Smith has been offered admission, but has not responded with her decision. It is not the case that Smith is a graduate student at State, but it is possibly the case, if Smith were to accept the offer. In  $w_2$ , Smith has decided to attend State, and it is the case that she is a graduate student there. In  $w_{2^*}$ , she declines the offer in favor of other pursuits. With the symmetry constraint, the past retains its possibility, but the alternatives need not do so. In  $w_{2^*}$ ,  $\Diamond p$  is not the case.

When we consider how we understand possibility, however, it would seem that we want to say  $w_2$  should be accessible from  $w_{2^*}$ . This is what I mean when I say things like, “I could have stayed in California and become a baker.” Thus, it would seem that we would

like to add transitivity to our list of desired constraints. This brings us to the use of S5 as the appropriate logic for capturing these modal intuitions as I have presented them.

## 4.7 Refusal

In the above sections, we discussed the reasons one might wish to accept various stipulations on accessibility relations. Taken together, their combination results in the logic in which valid modal ontological arguments are possible. But, as I have suggested, such an argument cannot be decisive, if by this we mean cutting off all other options from our interlocutors. Some things must be assumed in order for any argument to take place. Those assumptions can in turn be challenged, and defended, but only on the basis of further assumptions.<sup>23</sup>

If no argument can compel assent from the unwilling, the unwilling will always have the option of retreating from a conclusion. We should expect arguments about logic itself to be no different. If there can be no compulsory modal logic for metaphysics, there will always be the opportunity to abandon one system, and search for a replacement. The great virtue of Hartshorne's characterization of argument is its recognition of this fact.

But if the possibility of abandoning and replacing systems with undesired consequences is unavoidable, this does not mean that all systems stand on equal ground. More important, not all moves to retreat from an argument are intellectually honest.

When I was formally introduced to modal logic, the instructor presented the rules of  $K$ , as I did above. He went on, much as I have, to prime our intuitions against it, each time motivating the introduction of new rules. The process repeated, progressing through the various constraints, until we arrived at  $K_v$  (S5). At this point there was virtual consensus among the students in the class in favor of S5. We agreed that it was able to draw the modal conclusions we more or less intuited as valid. It therefore seemed better suited than the alternatives to characterize the kind of modality we mean when we intuit these conclusions.

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23. Here, as so often, Aristotle has observed this for us long ago in *Metaphysics*, 1006a.

The instructor then proceeded to show the class that if we accept S5, it follows that the modal ontological argument is valid. Almost immediately the other students decided that  $K_o$  should be rejected – surely no one wants to accept the ontological argument, so something *must* be wrong with S5.

Of course, here we are back to questions being begged. If one’s reason for rejecting S5 is that it allows for the ontological argument, I will insist that it is kept in mind that this is a stipulation against the argument, not evidence against it. The nay-sayer is free to reject the argument on grounds that she does not accept S5, and is free to reject S5 because it opens the door to ontological arguments. But (absent other objections to S5), this response amounts to little more than a hardness of heart.<sup>24</sup>

It may be that parody arguments, such as those I reject in the second chapter could serve as less controversial alternatives when asking for questionable consequences of S5. That is, rather than suggesting an outright *fallacy*, parodies of the ontological argument may give us reason to reject S5. On such a view, the critic of the argument recognizes the hardness of heart involved in rejecting S5 purely because it allows us to draw the conclusion that God exists. But God is not the (only) problem with S5.<sup>25</sup> The worry that S5 would allow all of the parody entities to creep into our ontology through ridiculous ontological arguments would also give us reason for wanting to weaken our modal logic by dropping some axiomatic assumptions.

However, I have already noted that parodies fail to properly parallel the theistic argument. If there *were* a genuinely ontological parody of this sort, it would show that S5 allows us

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24. When Anselm admonishes us to “believe that we may understand” he is sometimes accused of circular reasoning. I struggle with what to make of this apparent circularity. But it does seem that Anselm is at least in no worse a position than our imagined interlocutor here. Moreover, Anselm recognizes his fideism, while it is an open question whether this is true of our critic. And perhaps most important, on behalf of his view Anselm can offer reasons beyond stubbornness.

25. In the section on the nature of parodies, I noted that one could accept parodies as definitive refutations, while nevertheless remaining a theist. In the same vein, clearly theism by itself need not commit one to accepting S5. A theist who does not accept S5 could easily claim that the parody arguments, rather than God, show the problems associated with the logic.

to conclude the necessary existence of such ridiculous objects. This kind of argument might serve as non-circular grounds for rejecting S5. But it would not show – in the sense of offering demonstrative proof – that S5 is bad. Rather, on the Hartshornean “price” model of proof, it would show us that by accepting S5 we also would be committed to accepting that the necessary existence of some other (presumably ridiculous) thing could be demonstrated. The price of accepting the theistic proof would be to accept the proof of this thing. Again, I maintain that any such thing that is properly ridiculous enough to dissuade me from my view of metaphysical modality would not admit of an a priori demonstration needed to parallel a demonstration of AQM. Were it to admit of such a priori demonstration, I would be less inclined to think it so ridiculous. In fact, my current commitment to S5 is such that I am willing to bite any such bullet that I can foresee coming my way. Until further notice (at which time I may change my view of the ontological argument), I am prepared to accept the existence of anything that can be demonstrated a priori on the basis of S5 modal logic.

This is not, in the final analysis, a conclusive argument on behalf of S5. I am not sure what could count as such an argument, nor am I convinced that one is necessary. Rather, this is a rough and ready attempt to render it plausible. I am inclined to think that all logical rules are stipulative – and thus can be consistently applied to derive conclusions that are valid according to the stipulated system. Accordingly, when the S5 system is stipulated, a valid modal ontological argument can be made. But the fact that I cannot give an argument on behalf of S5 with the same degree of certainty is not grounds for rejecting S5; nor again is it to say that all stipulated systems stand on equal footing.

This latter point is terribly important. All logical systems certify the validity of certain conclusions. But whether we accept the authority of that system is not entailed by the mere system itself, or by any conclusion that it could authorize. Insofar as the critic of the ontological argument recognizes the nature of this reservation, she has valuable insight – for the question of equal footing applies to all parties – though perhaps not equally. There are

reasons to motivate applying each of the constraints ( $\rho$ ,  $\sigma$ , and  $\tau$ ) which compose S5. Any subsequent debate over the appropriate modal logic for metaphysics must take place in terms of a conversation that is far beyond the scope of this project. It is unclear whether it could fall within the scope of any philosophical project. I will be happy if this brief discussion can make clearer what is at stake in a debate about whether to accept S5.

In sum, an axiom of a logical system does not strike me as the sort of thing to which one can claim entitlement (at least not in the sense of its being demonstrated – though having a reason to prefer the axiom is another thing). Rather, one *posits* an axiom – an assumption from which other propositions follow as conclusions. Every argument that uses modal terms must posit some modal logic. I am positing S5 as the appropriate modal logic for metaphysics, and I have given my reasons for doing so.

## 4.8 On Begging Existential Questions

Even if the critic grants the appropriateness of S5, there remains the possibility that within that system, the argument is fallacious. Begging the question was in fact the first fallacy of which the argument was accused. These charges originated with the tradition of interpreters who considered the second chapter of the *Proslogion*, taken alone, to be an adequately representative summary of the argument.<sup>26</sup> In the previous chapter, I called the reading of Anselm associated with this tradition the “summoning interpretation” of the argument, which I will now recount. It begins with the following summary of *Proslogion II*:

1 By “God”, we understand, “That-Than-Which-Nothing-Greater-Can-Be-Thought”  
(hereafter, AQM).

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26. It is one of the aims of this dissertation to suggest that this is a misinterpretation of Anselm. I maintain that we should instead understand the second and third chapters of the *Proslogion* not as distinct arguments, nor as alternative formulations of the same argument, but as two steps in a larger argument comprising (at least) the two chapters in question.

2 I understand what is meant by AQM.<sup>27</sup> Thus,

3 AQM exists in my mind.

4 Something which exists both in my mind and in reality is greater than something which exists only in my mind.

5 Something which exists only in my mind but not in reality cannot be AQM, since the thing existing in reality would be greater. Thus,

6 AQM must exist not only in my mind, but also in reality.

The interpretation that is most often given appears to be that (6) is a claim about AQM's real (extra-mental) existence, which propositions (1) through (5) have summoned into being. That is, the intended function of *Proslogion II* is to summon the actual (extra-mental) existence of AQM out of a (mere) concept. The received understanding of *Proslogion II* as an independent argument finds its basis in this summoning interpretation. Criticisms of chapter two based on this understanding will maintain that the argument fails because it begs its own question.

When Kant so famously quipped that “existence is not a real predicate” he is alleged to have driven the final nail in the coffin of this argument.<sup>28</sup> Anyone who has read Anselm once knows that the way to refute this argument is to affix the word “existing” to something absurd, and to then claim to have “ontologically” proven its existence. A second glance at Anselm will reveal more nuance. Still, so much influence has the summoning interpretation held that even supporters of the argument are willing to ascribe it to Anselm. As mentioned above, in his excellent essay “What Did Anselm Discover?” the otherwise deliciously polemical Hartshorne cedes this ground to his adversaries.

But this ground should only be ceded if the summoning interpretation is correct. Since it

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27. This understanding is taken as a requisite for the denial of the existence of AQM. In order to reject the existence of something, I must know what is meant by the term, so in order to reject it, I must at least understand what is meant by AQM. See the example of “Grik” in the discussion of the possibility premise below.

28. *Critique of Pure Reason*, A.598/B.626.

is no longer the only understanding of the passage available to us, we should consider whether the passage is in fact guilty of question begging. While I maintain, against Hartshorne, that chapter two of the *Proslogion* is best understood according to the credentialing interpretation, and that this interpretation lends support to the third chapter, I affirm Hartshorne’s modal reading. On this account, the question of whether existence is a predicate is left aside, because what is really at stake is the issue of *necessary* existence.<sup>29</sup> Necessary existence may have helped move the argument along, but it has raised a new concern to which critics of the argument can point. As it may be clear from our discussion of modal logic, there are numerous ways to understand necessity. The problem for the argument now revolves around whether these modal notions are being conflated with one another.

## 4.9 Modal Conflation

Hartshorne, along with his rough contemporary Norman Malcolm, was influential in shifting discussion of the *Proslogion* toward the third chapter. This shift is important for understanding the new tack that criticisms began to take. As understanding of the ontological argument has moved from reading exclusively chapter two of the *Proslogion* to a reconsideration of chapter three as a modal argument, the stock-objection has followed along, changing where it must. To deride the argument, one must now substitute “necessary” for what once was “existing.” The parody of an “existing unicorn” becomes a “necessary unicorn” and so forth, but the objection is otherwise strikingly similar.

One thing that *has* changed is that the argument itself no longer so obviously begs the question of existence. Any fallacy now at work would seem to be much more subtle. The proponent of the ontological argument is not – at least not so obviously – smuggling existence

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29. Hartshorne maintains that *Modality* of existence is a property, which is the crux of his argument (see “What Did Anselm Discover?” p. 95 ff.) Descartes makes a similar remark that, “. . . it is only necessary existence at issue here . . .” (see AT, vol. VII, p. 118). His discussion indicates that the question of modality is primary, and should not be overlooked amid disagreements over whether or is not proper to speak of existence as a property.

into the formulation. If the term “necessary existent” appears to beg the question, we might opt instead for “non-contingent.” *If* there were to be an AQM, AQM would be necessary, and if there were not, there necessarily would not be – AQM would be impossible.<sup>30</sup>

If proponents are correct about the argument, so long as contingent non-existence is excluded, the mere possibility of AQM will give the argument what it needs. Of course, Humeans may still repudiate any non-contingent existent. But while “existing” is question-begging, the qualification “non-contingent” seems, at least on the face of things, not to be. And against the backdrop of this less controversial formulation, the Humean assertion loses some of what made it initially attractive. To simply deny non-contingent status to everything at the outset appears less reasonable than entertaining its possibility.

Still, the proponent of the modal argument has problems, according to John Hick, in the form of the fallacy of equivocation. The alleged problem can be called “modal conflation.” This objection is identified and discussed throughout chapter six of Hick’s *Arguments for the Existence of God*.<sup>31</sup> The claim is that in the ontological argument, ‘logical modality’ is being conflated with ‘ontological modality.’<sup>32</sup>

We see this problem in Hartshorne’s rendering of Anselm, as well as Norman Malcolm’s.

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30. Here I anticipate an objector who might insist on a further caveat that “non-contingency” should be understood as only conceptually speaking. If AQM were to (necessarily) not exist, any discussion of it would be counter-factual – and thus in a sense could *only* be spoken of conceptually. This point holds the unfortunate potential for confusion, since to speak in a way that is consistent with our other discussions of conceivability, we would not have a proper “conception” of an impossible object. We could try substituting “hypothetically speaking” or understanding “conceptual” as applying to the modal qualifier rather than AQM. But of course, if something conceptually cannot exist, then I am inclined to think that it actually cannot exist (I would need substantial help in order to be convinced otherwise). In terms of (merely?) conceptual necessity, it is not clear to me that reservations fare any better. If it means that something is necessarily conceived as existing, but the conceiver doubts its existence, she would seem to be embroiled in a pragmatic self-contradiction, and to reserve the right to deny what she must conceive as existing is to reserve the right for one’s beliefs to be contradictory. On the other hand, it might mean that the objector chooses to remain uncommitted to any answer, or to reject the answer I give to the existential question, while accepting that whatever answer given must necessarily be the case. In this case, we are agreed. And, I would urge, this is precisely the reason we ought to consider the case to be made for an affirmative answer.

31. e.g., p. 87, and pp. 95 ff.

32. It is worth noting that Hick levels this objection against the notion of necessity, but it could also be leveled against the possibility premise. In the latter case, the objection relates closely to a discussion I will have in chapter six about Sobel’s claim that there are no a priori possibilities.

According to Hick, Anselm's understanding of "necessary being, in the case of God, is equivalent to eternal being" – one which (would) never come to be nor cease to be.<sup>33</sup> In contrast, "possible" refers to (mere) logical possibility. The proponents of the ontological argument wish to set the debate in terms of logical modality. They argue that it is absurd to say that it is logically possible for a logically necessary being to fail to exist. But the necessity Hick derives from Anselm is eternality. Thus, "It is not *logically* impossible for there to be no *eternal* being."<sup>34</sup>

Hick translates Hartshorne's modal argument from his *Logic of Perfection* into the temporal modality of an eternal being.<sup>35</sup> This argument proceeds, on Hick's judgment successfully, to its sixth proposition:

6. Either God exists eternally or it is eternally the case that he does not exist (eternally).

Hartshorne's next proposition is:

7. [The proposition] 'God does not exist' is not logically necessary.

which we think of as intuitively true: there is no obvious logical contradiction in denying the proposition 'God does not exist' (i.e., in asserting 'God does exist'). And so we would seem entitled to maintain that 'God exists' is possible (at least logically).

But Hartshorne's proof needs to be able to move from an interpretation of premise 7 in terms of logical modality to one of ontological (temporal) modality (of an eternal being). We would want to see a way from the logical possibility of God to the show that it is not eternally the case that God does not exist. One reply might be something like the following:

An eternal being would have no beginning and no end. If we maintain the (logical) possibility of such a One, what could we say about it? It could not be conditioned. There

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33. Hick, p. 93

34. p. 92, emphasis mine.

35. See p. 96. The passages being referenced are from *The Logic of Perfection*, pp. 50-51 and *Anselm's Discovery*, pp. 16-17.

could be no facts of the matter which caused it to be, or which failing to obtain would have failed to cause the eternal being to exist. There can be no counterfactuals which, had they obtained would have caused the eternal being not to be. The proposition “an eternal being exists” would be what Hartshorne calls, “a wholly non-restrictive existential statement,” such statements that exclude only nonsense.<sup>36</sup>

But now consider the proposition “No such being exists.” Can this proposition be true? Rejecting the a priori necessity of God would seem to commit one to the affirmative. But can this proposition be a *fact*? I say that it cannot. Here, I follow Eugene H. Peters in making two characterizations of facts. “(1) no fact, whether positive or negative, exists of necessity, and (2) alternative possibilities can be canceled only by a positive fact, not by a mere absence or privation.”<sup>37</sup>

The argument is this: Suppose it were a fact that “No eternal being exists.” This would mean that there is a fact of the matter by virtue of which an eternal being does not exist. If only this pesky fact would go away, there would be an eternal being. This putative fact would thus be a condition for the existence of the unconditioned being. But an eternal being is one whose existence is by definition unconditioned by any facts. Such a fact would be absurd.

Rather, we should say that the proposition “No such eternal being exists” cannot be a fact, but if it is true, must be *necessarily so*. In what sense necessarily? The only sense which could preclude a non-restrictive existential statement: the logical sense. In order to be true, the proposition “No eternal being exists” would need to be *logically necessary*. But the logical possibility of the existence of such a being precludes the logical necessity of

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36. An extended argument for the necessary truth of non-restrictive existential statements occurs in chapter eight of *Creative Synthesis* (pp. 159-172), the title of which is, appropriately, “Non-restrictive Existential Statements.”

37. See *Hartshorne and Neoclassical Metaphysics*, p. 18, where Peters provides an analysis of Hartshorne’s distinction (above). The term “fact” as Peters uses it is roughly synonymous with “contingently true statement” – in contrast to something that is a logical necessity.

its nonexistence. And if logical necessity is the only thing which could preclude its *actual* existence, then its logical possibility implies its actual existence.

I take the foregoing response to be in line with what Hick identifies as Anselm's "first argument."<sup>38</sup> This argument (on Hick's own lights validly) argues that "[AQM] does not fall in the class of things which do not exist but could possibly exist."<sup>39</sup> Hick's presentation of the second premise, "Every C is a B" implies that every non-B is a non-C. That is, if X is not something "which can be conceived to be through a beginning," it is also not something "which can be conceived to be and actually [is] not (i.e., which [does] not exist, but could possibly exist)."

From this, if AQM is something which cannot be conceived through a beginning, it cannot be that it can be conceived yet actually does not exist. Note that Hick takes this to be equivalent to 'could possibly exist, but actually does not.' In the chapter on possibility, I will give some consideration to the equating of these two claims. Suffice it to say that Anselm seems to accept it, and Hick follows suit. This just means that, according to this premise which Hick does not dispute, conceivable possibility allows us to infer eternal necessity.<sup>40</sup>

## 4.10 Existential Statements

Should this reply prove satisfactory, there remains nonetheless another problem at which Hick hints, but which he does not name, and which vitiates both formulations traced by Hick. Thus he writes, "It is not hereby proved that he [God] is a non-contingent being who does exist ..." and again, "it is not proved that it [AQM] is a non-contingent which does

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38. Hick, pp. 87-89, from Anselm's *Reply to Gaunilo*, p. 168.

39. Hick, p. 88.

40. When we address the relation of conceivability to possibility, we will see that it is potentially problematic. It may be that we do not have access to knowledge about the possibility of AQM by means of its conceivability. This would mean that this assumption that Hick grants is an error. But I take the issue here to be possibility, not how we acquire knowledge of possibility. I will argue that even if conceivability does not tell us about possibility, we can know that AQM is possible because of the inconceivability of the alternative. So long as the possibility of AQM can be known, I take the case made here to be successful.

exist.”<sup>41</sup>

In both cases, Anselm has proved that any AQM would be non-contingent, but has failed to show that there is some non-contingent AQM. That is, Anselm is perpetrating the existential fallacy.

The existential fallacy is the unwarranted shift from universal premises to particular conclusions. We are forbidden from drawing conclusions of the form “some S are P” or “some S are not P” from premises of the form “all S are P” or “no S are P.” In the first form Anselm has shown that No A is C, and in the second he has shown that no A is B. But, according to Hick’s objection, he has failed to show that *some* A is not C, or that *some* A is not B.

This is in fact a fallacy in Boolean quantifier logic. And a moment’s reflection shows precisely why we want to reject conclusions of this form.

Consider the following (invalid) syllogism:

All S is P.

All P is Q.

∴ Some S is Q.

following this form, we can show:

All unicorns are horse-like creatures.

All horse-like creatures can be fitted with saddles.

∴ Some unicorns can be fitted with saddles.

Sadly, unicorn saddles end up doing little more than wasting space in the tack room. The problem with this line of reasoning becomes more obvious when drawing the following (fallacious) conclusion:

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41. Hick, pp. 88-89.

No S is P

∴ Some S is not P

which is the form for:

No unicorns are flowers.

∴ Some unicorns are not flowers.

With the recognition of the fallacy, we might imagine a Boolean fool responding:

You have said that “No A is C”, and I concur: any A’s that there might be would of course not be C’s. But this is not sufficient to establish that there is an A that is not C. While any member of the class A could not fall within the class of C as well, the intersection of A and not-C might nevertheless be empty. If I deny that there are any A’s, Then there are no A’s to be non-C’s, and there is no contradiction here.

How then, does someone as clever as Anselm make such an error? The answer is that the logic available to Anselm was Aristotelian, and would not have recognized these conclusions as fallacious. But surely someone as clever as Aristotle would not go around trying to saddle up unicorns! How is the fallacy not recognized earlier?

We must remember that Aristotle was an empiricist. So while we moderns may be plenty willing to say that the proposition “All unicorns are horse-like” is true, Aristotle would not grant such a statement in the first place. There are no unicorns, and so the proposition is not true. In order for us to entertain the proposition as true, we import the silent qualifier, “conceptually speaking” and when we want to make arguments about God, the critic insists that we once again speak it out loud.

But this is not the claim Anselm is making in his argument! He does not need to speak aloud the tacit assumption that this is merely “conceptually speaking” as the Kantian

critique and several replies to the Cartesian formulations maintain. To borrow a phrase from a teacher of mine, Anselm may be confusing but I do not think that he was confused. The problem is not that Anselm has made an error in reasoning, so much as the limited formal apparatus of the logic used in his day.<sup>42</sup>

Anselm thinks that the class *is occupied* and so he is entitled to draw an existential conclusion from general premises. Properly understood, the argument is not a non sequiter, but an enthymeme – an argument with a suppressed premise. That premise is that the class of AQM is non-empty. But, now it would seem that we are back to begging an existential question! It is not enough to simply assert that class is non-empty. What *reason* might one have for accepting this suppressed premise?

To see how Anselm argues this, I will need to point out a few things that I find strange about Hick’s characterization of this passage. Both of Hick’s formulations contain compound classes (see class C in the first form, and B in the second). In both cases, the class is equivalent to “the class of things which can be conceived and yet do not exist.” Call this class C. It is odd that Hick treats C as though it were a simple unit within the argument.

But when we examine the parts of the compound, we see the way for an argument:

V: The class of things that are conceivable

N: The class of things which do not exist

C: The class of things that are both V and N

No A [i.e., AQM] is C, thus

No A is both V and N

Some A is V

∴ AQM is not N

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42. As Charlesworth puts it, “In any event, the formal scholastic method of argument had, for good or ill, not yet been invented, nor did St. Anselm have a full-blown technical philosophical vocabulary at his disposal. For the most part he made do with everyday language. This no doubt had its disadvantages, for one often feels while reading St. Anselm that he did not have a sufficient arsenal of concepts and distinctions to express precisely what he meant to say” (Charlesworth, p. 12).

Anselm appears to spend a good bit of time trying to make the case that there is a step in his argument that hinges on each of the parts of the compound class, as can be seen in his use of the conditional preface to the very passages Hick Quotes. However, Hick completely ignores these conditional statements:

“...if this [AQM] can at least be conceived to be ...”

“...further, if it can be conceived in any way at all ...”

These conditional qualifiers are not here for the sake of Anselm’s health. They are very important, and wholly absent from Hick’s analysis so far as I can see here.

Anselm has shown that if A is conceivable, it is not N, or that if A is in any way conceivable, it is impossible that it not exist. This is the conclusion for which Anselm argues. It remains to be shown that A is possible or conceivable at all, else the premise on Aristotelian use of existential propositions is false. But the implicit assumption is that the fool has already done this for Anselm, since the fool knows what he denies, that is he understands what the concept is, or that he conceives of it. Thus, Some A is conceivable, which is to say that there is some possible A. Recall that for Anselm, as Hick allows, the realm of the conceivable is equivalent to the possible. Thus, since the fool acknowledges that some A is conceivable, he is committed to the proposition that there is some A.

## 4.11 Conclusion

The objections so far have dealt with the structure of the argument on the whole. This began with the Humean assertion of the universal contingency of existential statements. I have argued that such objections are themselves question begging, and that we may have reason to believe them false (if, as I maintain non-restrictive existential statements are possible).

We also dealt with potential objections against the logic itself, and provided an account of S5. In the process, while I conceded that no argument on behalf of a modal logic will be

inescapably convincing, I offered reasons to think S5 is correct, according to our common intuitions about necessity and possibility.

Finally, we addressed two concerns about fallacious moves in the argument. We saw that objections about question begging depend on a particular interpretation, but there is an alternative which does not beg these questions. To Hick's accusation of modal conflation, we saw that Hick's own understanding of the relation of conceivability to possibility offers a response. But While Hick is willing to grant Anselm's claims about possibility based upon conceivability, we will see this challenged in the next chapters, dealing with the modal premises of the argument.

# CHAPTER 5

## THE NECESSITY PREMISE

### 5.1 Overview

This chapter and the next will deal with modal concepts that inform our ontological argument: necessity and possibility respectively. The treatment of necessity in this chapter will defend three positions. I will maintain first that contingency is inapplicable to God (understood as AQM) and then that God's existence is necessary, after which I will argue that standard objections to the coherence of divine necessity fail because they are in the end misguided.

To understand the importance of non-contingency, we will turn to the steps in the theistic argument. In its modal form, the ontological argument proceeds from something like the following premises:

- (1) God's existence is either necessary or impossible.<sup>1</sup>
- (2) God's existence is possible.

The modal argument thus concludes:

- (3) God's existence is necessary

and hence,

- (4) God exists.

As I have mentioned repeatedly, I am convinced of Hartshorne's claim that the effect of an argument is to establish a price for rejecting its conclusion.<sup>2</sup> One means of coping with

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1. Whatever else it may be taken to mean, "God" as here used will mean something which meets the condition identified by Anselm in his *Proslogion*, from chapter two onward: That-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought.

2. Hartshorne also gives a view into his notion of proof in *The Logic of Perfection* (cf. p. 31). There he observes, "if 'prove' means achieve absolute cogency and clarity by means of a single brief course of reasoning," then the argument cannot be said to "prove God" [sic]. Rather, Hartshorne takes the argument to have discovered something – in this case "concerning the relation of [the statement] 'divine perfection exists' to ordinary existential statements."

the ontological argument (if one does not wish to accept its conclusion) is to reject premise (1). This chapter will examine the possible bases for doing so and seek to defend this first premise. It is a survey of the issues that are bound up with accepting or rejecting the first premise. Our job is to answer the question, “On what basis do we maintain the truth of premise (1)?” It is also our job to make clear what is at stake in rejecting it.

## 5.2 Trichotomy

The claim made by premise (1) – that God’s existence is either necessary or impossible – is based on two logically prior premises:

(1.a) For any putative being, X, exactly one of the following obtains:

The existence of X is necessary

The existence of X contingent

The existence of X is impossible

(1.b) There is a putative being, God, such that it is not the case that God is contingent.

I will refer to (1.a) as the trichotomy principle and to (1.b) as the contingency exclusion claim.

Recall that in chapter four I examined John Hick’s objection that the appeal to necessity involves a modal conflation between the ontological and the “merely” logical kinds. I am here using the term in the former sense.

The trichotomy of (1.a) is, by my lights, exhaustive, but I should make at least two observations on what one could say about the options. First, certain apophatic theologians, motivated by a stated desire to exalt God above all other beings, might be inclined to exclude God from this trichotomy. According to this position, however appropriately the trichotomy may categorize “ordinary” things, God is for whatever reason granted an exemption. A thorough treatment of this view will have to wait for another essay. For now, I will simply state my own prejudice against views that try to make God exempt from metaphysical

principles. I stand stubbornly in Whitehead's camp that one ought not pay "metaphysical compliments" to God in this way.<sup>3</sup>

The move to exempt God from the trichotomy may be motivated by a view of God as somehow supra-rational. This view can be seen in Anselm's *Proslogion XV*, when he says of God, "not only are You that than which a greater cannot be thought, but You are also something greater than can be thought."<sup>4</sup> Anselm's view, like that of many apophatic theologians, seems to be that a religiously adequate God must be outside the realm of the thinkable. My position is that Anselm's conception of God is incorrect, but that this does not invalidate the argument formally. It does mean that we will need a different conception of God if we wish to defend the possibility of God's existence, as in premise (2).

Still, the only reason I can find for making God an exemption to modality as such is a prior commitment to God's being supra-rational – that is, a commitment to the existence of a God that is supra-rational. Note that this view is reserved for people with a belief in God. I see no reason to reject the trichotomy in this way other than a desire (however misplaced) for a kind of piety when talking about some allegedly ineffable being. But this rejection of the trichotomy will give neither aid nor comfort to one who disbelieves in God. It is either the case that one is willing to claim that God is supra-rational, or else that one is willing to expect God to play by the same logical rules as everything else. In the former case, I can see no reason to reject theism, and in the latter I see no reason not to move forward with the discussion of God in modal terms.<sup>5</sup>

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3. See *Science and the Modern World*, p. 179. See also *Process and Reality*, p. 343.

4. "quiddam maius quam cogitari possit," p. 137).

5. I recognize that this most likely will not satisfy anyone in the apophatic camp. In fact, I cannot see what would satisfy them. We may both call ourselves "theists," but to some extent this seems less like our agreeing than like our respective self-descriptions employing homonyms. Any satisfying discussion we might have about God would wait on a fuller account of the way language works – which is beyond our present scope. My principle target in this observation is someone who tries to have both sides. I can imagine a clever student who has already been taught the orthodoxy which holds that she must not accept the argument. Such a student might point to apophatic approaches as a ground for rejecting my application of modal terms to the Divine. This much happens often. But then one may not take this feigned piety as grounds for rejecting the conclusion to otherwise rational arguments. It is duplicitous to insist on a supra-rational deity,

The second observation I will make involves a position I will take up in later sections of this chapter. This position questions the applicability of necessity to the existence of entities in general. This view is, in a sense, a rejection of trichotomy in favor of the dichotomy between impossible and (contingently) possible.<sup>6</sup> But this dichotomous view is also a proper subset of the trichotomy: one which maintains that the set of necessary objects is empty. The point of contention is over why the set is empty. It will not work to say that the set is accidentally empty – as though there might be some necessarily existent things, but there happen not to be. This would beg the question against the ontological argument. Rather, the proponent of a strict dichotomy must hold that there is some principled reason for the set to be empty.<sup>7</sup> I have given my reasons for rejecting any such principle in the chapter on the validity of the argument. Whether or not this argument is persuasive, the trichotomy is still exhaustive, since if there is only a dichotomy, adding a third category will not change this fact. Assuming then that the trichotomy is exhaustive of all putative entities, I wish to spend the rest of this chapter asking about whether (1.b) is an acceptable position to hold.

### 5.3 Non-Contingency

Suppose someone were to object to (1.b), claiming that the theistic question may have an answer that is contingent. I would want to know whether the objector maintains that there are any entities of whose existence we can predicate the mode of necessity. Call the view

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and then reject theism for want of rational arguments. I will not tolerate apophatic atheists.

6. I am assuming that impossibility is still an acceptable modal descriptor, and is applicable to entities.

7. Hume is often given credit for this position as though he had discovered something, when in fact as far as I can tell he has merely asserted it. If Hume is to be given credit for something, it should be that his assertion seems to have won the day over any assertion that God is necessary. The relevant passage is in his *Dialogues*, part 9, p. 65. In fact, while Hume is no doubt responsible for directing to this claim much of the attention it has received, he cites Samuel Clarke's *Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God* as its source. Clarke's claim is not about God – whom he appears to regard as a necessary being, but about matter as such. This is in service to a cosmological argument that the world cannot be eternal, and so must have been created. The novelty of Hume's approach lies in his assertion that whatever is true of the material world must also apply to God.

that the mode of necessity is generally inapplicable to the existence of any entity (I), and its negation (A).

The (I) position maintains that there is no entity whose existence is necessary. This is recognizable as Hume's view, and has a rich history of adherents, including Kant in his critical period (though not at the time of *The One Possible Basis*) The (A) position might be held by someone unfamiliar with Hume's claim, such as the pre-critical Kant, or someone who has heard it and rejects it, whether on principle or in fact. In terms of the trichotomy/dichotomy question above, (I) is associated with the version of dichotomy which claims the set of necessary entities is empty, and could not be otherwise. In contrast, though it need not by definition, (A) might acknowledge some necessary entities. Someone could maintain that there is no principled reason for the emptiness of the set of necessary entities while also maintaining that as a simple matter of fact, it happens to be empty. That is, the position I have designated as "(A)" is (at least in principle) agnostic with respect to the reality of any entities with necessary existence. The point of (A) is not necessarily to claim that there are any such entities, but simply to note that there is no principled reason that the modal predicate is inapplicable.

I am inclined to say that (I) is certainly the stronger objection, and that to reject (1.b) while maintaining (A) is naive. I call this position naive because it misses the point of the ontological argument. The adoption of (A) means that there could in principle be necessary beings. The denial of (1.b) means that God need not be a necessary being. If necessity of existence is a perfection or a "great making predicate" then a being than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-conceived would (theoretically) possess it. This last point is not without its detractors. While I have already argued that parodies fail because they do not adequately parallel the argument, one might still insist that they cast doubt on whether necessary existence is analytic to the concept of perfection.<sup>8</sup>

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8. In the final chapter, on neoclassical metaphysics, I will distinguish between notions of static perfection and dynamic perfection, a distinction that is important for adequately understanding necessity as belong to

This motivation for excluding contingency comes from a tradition tracing back (at least) as far as Anselm’s formulation of God as that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought. In his *Reply to Gaunilo*, Anselm offers the following justification of the connection with necessary existence:

Now, one element [of the denial] is that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought. Whoever, therefore, denies this understands and thinks of ‘that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought.’ It is evident, moreover, that in the same way one can think of and understand that which cannot not exist. And one who thinks of this thinks of something greater than one who thinks of what can not exist. When, therefore, one thinks of that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought, if one thinks of what can not exist, one does not think of that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought.<sup>9</sup>

A contingent “God” lacks a perfection that a necessary God would have. If the term “God” applies at all, it must be a necessary being to which it refers. The possibility of a thing’s nonexistence is a kind of deficiency, which is not appropriate given the necessary condition that God is that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought. God’s existence cannot be a fact that happens to be true though it might have been otherwise, as this would imply a contingency that is excluded *ex hypothesi* from what it would mean to be God. Descartes claims that necessary existence is a property, and a perfection that God has, just as possible existence can be a perfection of other objects thus making them superior to Chimeras.<sup>10</sup>

Necessary existence might be denied with more strength by virtue of adopting (I). Note that this would also deny that necessary existence is a perfection or a great making property, since nothing has this putative property. If the modality of necessity is generally inapplicable to beings, then (given my stated prejudice against metaphysical exceptions) it would be inapplicable to God.

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the perfection associated with AQM. For now, I will highlight that by “perfection” I do not mean something which is incompatible with change.

9. Chapter 9, p. 121.

10. See AT, vol. VII, pp. 382-383. Also see p. 118.

## 5.4 (I) Versus (A)

What reason might one have for thinking that the modality of necessity might not be applicable to things? Let there be a class of objects which have in common the predicate *Ridiculously-Obvious-That-It-Cannot-Be-A-Necessary-Thing*. This class includes, though is by no means limited to: islands<sup>11</sup>, thirty Thalers<sup>12</sup>, mountains and horses,<sup>13</sup> handshakes and fingernails and unicorns<sup>14</sup> and the list goes on. If these examples are familiar enough even without the citations, it is because the class is not my invention. Graham Oppy offers the less cumbersome formulation “beings of kind K ...”.<sup>15</sup> This class is important because when any member is named, followed by “than which no greater beings of kind K can be conceived” (*ibid.*), or preceded by “necessary”, “perfect”, or “greatest”, it joins a rich tradition of hilarious parodies of the ontological argument.

If these parodies succeed in raising doubts about ontological arguments, it is because they give us reason to question the (A) position. If the modality of necessity is applicable to the existence of concrete things generally, then we might be able to talk about necessary tomatoes, and thus “prove” that one must exist. But most of us would rather not say that there are any necessary objects of this ridiculous class, or beings of kind K that necessarily exist. Assuming a proponent of the ontological argument wants to avoid bloating her ontology with all sorts of “necessary” beings, she will have to find a way to determine when, if at all, necessity obtains.

It seems obvious that *impossibility* obtains, as some of its candidates are uncontroversial. All “objects” that are self-contradictory in nature are generally included – stock examples being square circles and colorless yellow roses. Hence, objects that do not involve such

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11. Gaunillo of Marmoutiers.

12. Immanuel Kant.

13. Pierre Gassendi.

14. Graham Oppy.

15. *Ontological Arguments and Belief in God*, p. 162.

contradiction are generally deemed possible. When it comes to necessity, however, there is significantly less accord to be found. J. J. C. Smart maintains that “the concept of a logically necessary being is a self-contradictory concept, like the concept of a round square. For in the first place ‘necessary’ is a predicate of propositions, not of things.”<sup>16</sup> Others such as Peter van Inwagen are more sympathetic to the notion of necessity. While Smart says that he cannot so much as imagine what it would mean for there to be a necessary being, van Inwagen gives what on my lights is a perfectly sensible gloss:

Now consider the property an object has just in the case that it exists at every possible world, or (what is the same thing) would have existed no matter what had been the case. I shall call this property ‘necessary existence’, ‘N’ for short.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, van Inwagen notes that “many abstract [e.g., mathematical] objects seem to have N”<sup>18</sup>

But even granting the hypothesis that abstract objects could be necessary, it is not clear that we are entitled to draw from this the conclusion that there could be non-abstract necessary objects. Consider what it would mean for X to exist in every possible world, or to exist regardless of what might have been the case. This must mean that there are no necessary conditions for X that vary from world to world. If there were specific conditions necessary for the existence of X, X could only exist in worlds in which those conditions apply. Thus the conditions would be as necessary as X, for otherwise X would somehow exist irrespective of its own conditions.

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16. See his essay, “Can God’s Existence be Disproved?” in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, p. 38. Hick cites this passage on p. 85 of his book.

17. “Ontological Arguments” in *Noûs* p. 376. Van Inwagen further distinguishes this idea of necessary existence, which he calls Leibnizian, from the Thomistic sense “in the case that there is no world at which it is generated or corrupted” (*ibid.*). It is not clear to me whether there is a difference here, or if there is what its significance is. If there is a world at which X is generated or corrupted, then there seems also to be a world at which there is no such thing as X – namely the world such as it was before the generation or after the corruption of X.

18. *Ibid.* Van Inwagen nevertheless has grounds for thinking ontological arguments are problematic, which we will have occasion to discuss in a later section. For now, I introduce van Inwagen for the purpose of putting the question of the necessity of any being, concrete or abstract, on the table.

In order for there to be a necessary island, there would need to be a necessary sea. But it seems as though there are possible worlds in which the galaxies as we know them never formed - in which the only matter is diffused throughout space rather than coalesced into planets with oceans and land masses. Or perhaps there are possible worlds in which all planets are uniformly covered in water, or have no water whatsoever. Any one of these apparent possibilities would make it rather difficult for islands to exist. And it would appear that similar arguments could be made regarding any parody objects that obviously cannot be necessary, which is why any argument for the necessity of one of them seems so ridiculous.

## 5.5 Concrete Necessities

It looks like the source of the problem with ascribing necessity to the existence of something is in the application of the term to concrete existents. It is difficult to see how something concrete can have necessary existence as one of its predicates.

The concreteness of a thing requires there to be some objects to which that thing bears internal relations. In order to discuss concreteness, it is important to have on the table what is meant by internal relations – which I will explore by drawing on Hartshorne. Internal relations are helpfully exemplified by the knowledge relation. Consider the asymmetry between a knower – a subject who bears a relation to an object of knowledge – and the known – the object of that knowledge. There is a way in which the known acts upon the knower, that is non-reciprocal. I do not change the writings of Shakespeare by reading them or memorizing them. I, on the other hand, am changed by my encounter with the Bard. Shakespeare is thus internal to me – in that he has acted (indirectly through his writing) upon me. I however have had no such effect, and so can be said to be externally related to him. Another way to put this is that Shakespeare would be Shakespeare had I never been born, while without Shakespeare, my life would have been different.

Hartshorne's observation regarding a subject's experience of its object was that, "A

different object means a different subject, if by subject we mean a concrete cognitive state.”<sup>19</sup> While He uses cognition, any example in which the object is constitutive of the *particular* identity of the subject will serve.<sup>20</sup>

When we affirm the necessary existence of X, if what we are asserting is the necessity of X-being-just-what-it-is, then anything to which X relates internally would need to be necessary. If the concrete, particular reality of God is construed as necessary, then the necessary existents begin to proliferate. If God is necessary, and God knows everything about some state of affairs, then it may begin to look like everything about that state of affairs is necessary.<sup>21</sup> We may be comfortable with the necessary existence of certain abstract entities, but this does not translate to the necessary existence of myriad concrete entities.<sup>22</sup>

## 5.6 God as Abstract / Concrete

Given this potential for proliferation, the possibility for abstract objects to have necessary existence may not suffice to make an argument for the (necessary) existence of God. The proliferation of concrete particulars that would need to have necessary existence would suggest that there are objections to the notion that God is abstract. Van Inwagen offers an ontological argument that we will consider shortly. But – according to van Inwagen – in

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19. *The Divine Relativity* p. 64.

20. Also note his qualification “if by subject we mean a concrete [...] state.” There is a sense in which a subject might nevertheless be said to exist, though with different particulars than would otherwise have been the case. I might exist despite a variety of experiences that may befall me today (though eventually one of my experiences will rule out future existence), though those experiences will determine just how my existence is actualized. We will address this important distinction below.

21. I maintain that this is of course not the case, since there are plenty of things which seem quite contingent to me (I am not an actualist). The important distinction is between the abstract and the concrete character of God, which I will introduce later in the chapter.

22. As an aside, there are those who think that necessity is problematic even with regard to some *abstract* objects – who would take issue with van Inwagen’s appeal to mathematical objects as a rejoinder to Smart. In his essay, “A Study in Modal Deviance,” Gideon Rosen presents what might be a case against the necessity of mathematical objects such as numbers (see *Conceivability and Possibility*, pp. 283-307.). I have been troubled by this because while the argument Rosen presents is specifically about numbers, it may be that arguments along the same lines could be put forward against any putatively necessary abstract object. I find this discussion fascinating, and worth responding to, though it is beyond the scope of our discussion.

order for it to work, God *must be concrete*.<sup>23</sup> The good news is that van Inwagen gives us reason to think that if necessity and concreteness are compatible, there may be a sound ontological argument.

A brief summary of Van Inwagen's version of such an argument unfolds as follows: An ontological argument is a special case of what he calls "ontic arguments." Ontic arguments begin by noting a set of properties, one of which is N (necessary existence), and the other is some property P. The set is written {N,P}, and this notation is used as a shorthand for naming the argument. The premise of an ontic argument is "that the set of properties {N, P} is ontic", and its conclusion is that the set is instantiated.<sup>24</sup> The term "ontic" in the premise is applied when a set of properties meets two conditions:

(a) it contains N [i.e., it exists in all possible worlds]

(b) it is possible that there be something that has all the members of the set of properties essentially [i.e., in every world in which it exists – which because of N, means every possible world].<sup>25</sup>

Van Inwagen shows all arguments of this form to be valid, and thus, any set that is genuinely ontic is instantiated. Van Inwagen states his argument in the form of the single premise "{N,P} is ontic", rather than the two modal premises with which we began. But note that the conditions for ontic status correspond to premises (1) and (2) of the modal argument. If there were a reason to prefer van Inwagen's formulation, it may be that it lists explicitly the set of properties which the object in question must have essentially. What we mean when we affirm the possibility of God can be clarified as the compatibility of the properties in this set.

The distinguishing feature of ontological arguments is that "whatever instantiates its set

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23. "Ontological Arguments," *Noûs*, p. 380.

24. p. 378.

25. p. 377.

is concrete.”<sup>26</sup> The most familiar versions of ontological arguments are theistic, but they need not be.<sup>27</sup> The most modest form of an ontological argument is {N, Concrete}, which van Inwagen claims “is ontic if it is consistent.” And therefore, “if necessity and concreteness are compatible, there exists a necessary concrete being.”<sup>28</sup>

The bad news is that van Inwagen thinks that the appropriate stance to take on the issue of the compatibility of necessity and concreteness is agnosticism. In the terms we have been using up to this point, this means not deciding between (A) and (I). But there seem to be strong reasons (given the restriction of the domain to concrete objects) to lean toward (I). Consider that if we are talking about concrete objects as I characterize them above, we are talking about objects with determinate internal relations – since to be concrete is to bear some internal relations. But the concrete particularity of any entity that bears an internal relation to another is contingent upon the content of that relata. Inasmuch as any of the relata internal to an entity are contingent, is not the concrete relating entity also contingent? Is it the case that an entity with contingent relata which constitute it is contingent. Since all concrete entities have some contingent relata constituting their concrete particularity, all concrete entities would – according to this view – appear to be contingent. Thus, the mode of necessity would be inapplicable to any concrete entity.<sup>29</sup>

If this is correct, the news is even worse than van Inwagen would have it: an ontological

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26. p. 381.

27. Cf. note 13, p. 394. On this definition of ontological argument, there may arguments with the same ontological character for “a lesser but nonetheless necessary being.” Were there such a being in addition to a “greatest possible being” (granting this formulation for now), this lesser being would also be liable to an a priori proof of its existence. In the case that it could be shown that there were such a lesser necessary being, its ontological argument would not qualify as a parody, however. The purpose of the parody is to repudiate the ontological argument. It does this by claiming to prove that something which cannot be necessary is necessary, not merely that something we didn’t think was necessary is necessary. Whitehead thinks that the world is as necessary as God (see *Process and Reality* Part V, especially p. 348.). Perhaps this claim could be bolstered by such an ontological argument for the existence of the world. I take up this question briefly when I examine some entailments of Whiteheads ontology in chapter six.

28. “Ontological Arguments,” p. 382.

29. I do not hold this view, as I will explain anon. The careful reader may have anticipated my explanation: there is an ambiguity in the contingency of relations, and the argument shifts from one meaning to the other.

argument which requires God to be concrete might be in grave peril.

*Might.* Earlier I noted that claims of necessary existence run into problems when one tries to apply necessity to concrete things. This is due to the nature of internal relations, which are what seem to inform concreteness. I noted that “Anything to which X relates internally must be necessary *if we construe X’s being-just-what-it-is as the thing which is necessary.*” But is God’s haecceity what is alleged to be necessary in this argument’s pair of predicates? Is saying that the existence of X is necessary the same as saying that all of the concrete particulars that are predicated of X are necessary? If the *existence* of X is dependent on its internal relations – the things which are constitutive of its particularity – then the answer is yes. If X would not exist without some concrete particular, then that particular will have to be necessary if X is necessary. But there are two concepts involved here. First there is the concreteness which must be compatible with God’s necessity. Next, there is the idea of something’s (in our case, God’s) “being-just-what-it-is.” It seems to me that these do not mean the same thing. There is a difference between something concrete and concreteness.

The key to understanding the difference as it applies to the case of God can be found in Hartshorne’s distinction between divine *existence* and divine *actuality*.<sup>30</sup> The former is an abstraction, the latter is a richer reality – one with specific content. The general (abstract) character of God is necessary. But the specifics of God’s actuality, whatever they might be, are not necessary. This should not worry us because they need not be – indeed neither could they be. Only God’s existence is knowable a priori as a necessary truth, and it is only thus knowable because it is abstract. But this does not mean that God is purely abstract. Far from it: some instantiation of God’s concrete actuality is *required* by God’s abstract character, even if it is not thereby specified.

Consider three possible properties of water: being in a solid state, being in a liquid state, being in a gaseous state. Water occurring naturally on earth is in one of these states. Now

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30. See, for example, “What did Anselm Discover?” pp. 98-99, and *The Divine Relativity*, p. 156.

suppose that there is some person who knows everything about a given sample of water. The concrete state of the water sample will determine something about this person: what she is a knower of will be determined by what there is to be known. She will be  $p$  if the water is solid, if the water is a liquid she will be  $q$ , and if the water is a gas she will be  $r$ . Being  $p$ , being  $q$ , and being  $r$  are all concrete properties, and our water-sample-knowing subject will have one of these properties – by virtue of which she will be concrete. In order to be a concrete water-sample-knower however, being  $p$  in particular is not necessary, nor is being  $q$ , nor is being  $r$ . But being  $p, q$ , or  $r$  is necessary. This is not an amazing fact, but it is an important one: if one knows about the water sample,  $(p \vee q \vee r)$  is not a disjunction of necessities, but a necessary disjunction.<sup>31</sup>

I submit that if there is an individual who is both necessary and concrete, there will be similarly necessary disjunctions for each relational predicate which this individual bears in the absolute degree. So, the Divine predicate “*is omniscient*” will involve the necessary disjunction of all possible contingent facts that could be known.<sup>32</sup> This tells us nothing about which disjuncts obtain – that is an empirical question. Nor does it give us a list of the disjuncts (and while for many predicates we could try to come up with a list of the disjuncts, we could never know whether such lists are exhaustive).

Hartshorne maintains that “God is the only individual uniquely identifiable by abstractions alone.”<sup>33</sup> Yet at the same time, “. . . God is not supposed to be a *mere* abstraction.”<sup>34</sup> An explanation occurs earlier in the previous section of his essay, where he states,

The necessity of the divine existence need not mean that every quality of God is necessary, but only that the identifying essence, what makes God God and not another being, is necessarily, or in every possible world actualized in some

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31. Hartshorne: Causal Necessities, p. 481. Also see, for example, *Creative Synthesis*, pp. 246-247.

32. See the third chapter of *The Divine Relativity*, in which Hartshorne spells out divine relations in terms of a theory of types

33. *Creative Synthesis and Philosophic Method* p. 246.

34. *Insights and Oversights* p. 98, emphasis mine.

concrete form or other, just what concrete form being contingent.<sup>35</sup>

An example that Hartshorne uses repeatedly to clarify the existence/actuality contrast is Divine knowledge.<sup>36</sup> Hartshorne observes, “It is one thing to know perfectly such and such a world, and it is another thing to know perfectly a different world.”<sup>37</sup> And again, “what knowledge the divine has must be one thing if it creates (or if there exists) *this* world, and another thing if it creates *that* world.”<sup>38</sup> Note, however that the abstract predicates *knower* and *creator* apply regardless of which state of affairs in the world happens to obtain.

I take this distinction to compliment van Inwagen’s gloss of necessary existence as existing regardless of what might have been the case. Usually, one particular existential state of affairs restricts other existential states of affairs. When I fill a box with books, the presence of the books keeps me from putting other things in the box. Statements about such states of affairs are what Hartshorne calls “restrictive existential statements.” If I say, “there are books in that box” that means that there cannot be other things where the books are. This is a restrictive statement. But such statements are only partially restrictive, as are statements of the form “*X* does not exist” or “there are no *X*s.” The statement “There are no books in this box” is a restriction on what is in the box. But it is only restrictive in terms of books (There may be photographs or pencils), and more importantly it implies a positive existential claim about the box.

Note that if the existence of *X* restricts the existence of some *Y*, then the existence of *X* is also *restricted by Y*. If *Y* cannot exist so long as *X* exists, then the existence of *Y* entails

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35. *Insights and Oversights*, p. 98.

36. See *The Divine Relativity*, pp. 11-15. It has been questioned, for example by Ogden and Gamwell, whether psychical terms like “knower” should be applied literally to God. However, the case being made here does not depend on knowledge as a literal psychical term, though it serves as a helpfully intuitive example. If the reader insists, she may substitute any kind of relation one might say that God has with the world such that the *content* of the relation (as opposed to the mere fact of there being a relation) is dependent on what is the case in the world.

37. *Insights and Oversights*, p. 98.

38. *The Divine Relativity*, p. 11.

the non-existence of  $X$ . Those of us who accept the ontological argument are inclined to believe that  $(Y \rightarrow \neg X)$  entails a kind of deficiency in  $X$  - namely the inability to co-exist with  $Y$ . On this view, insofar as  $X$ 's existence is ruled out by  $Y$ ,  $X$  it is not as great as it would be if its existence were not ruled out by  $Y$ .<sup>39</sup>

Hartshorne also maintains that, just as there are restrictive statements, there are non-restrictive statements.<sup>40</sup> An example of a non-restrictive existential statement is "something exists." This statement restricts no possible state of affairs. If "nothing exists" were a possibility, then the statement "something exists" would restrict it. But like the example of a world without discrete objects, such wholly restrictive existential statements strike me as a merely putative possibilities that, upon reflection, are actually inconceivable. Hartshorne thought this. Kant thought this before he abandoned this insight in his critical period, maintaining that if nothing existed, then possibility could not exist, and that "That through which all possibility is altogether abolished is absolutely impossible."<sup>41</sup>

If it is possible for something to exist without restricting the existence of any other thing, then it is possible for that thing to exist non-competitively, no matter what might be or might have been the case. If it is possible for something to exist necessarily, then the fact of its existence must not restrict anything else that might have been the case. The claim "God exists" must be a non-restrictive existential statement. But it seems that necessary existence restricts a great number of things: if  $X$  is necessary, all worlds without  $X$  are restricted. This should not worry us, however. If  $X$  is necessary, the notion of "a world without  $X$ " is

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39. When I explain my views on the ontological argument to my colleagues, they eventually question whether existence, or necessary existence is in fact a "great making predicate." The claim being made here is actually that being prevented by  $Y$  should be called a "less making predicate." If, given  $Y$ , the being in question is less than it would be given not  $Y$ , then we are no longer talking about that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought. Note that there are other great making predicates, and the restriction of  $X$  by  $Y$  is less-making only in terms of mere existence. This should not be generalized as a claim that because the existence of  $Z$  is not restricted by  $Y$ ,  $Z$  is greater than  $X$ .

40. See chapter eight of *Creative Synthesis*, pp. 159-172.

41. "Wodurch alle Möglichkeit überhaupt aufgehoben wird, das ist schlechterdings unmöglich." (*The One Possible Basis for a Demonstration of the Existence of God*, Part I, Observation Two, Section 3, pp. 70-71.)

nonsense.<sup>42</sup>

## 5.7 The Conceivability of Necessity

Now it might be objected that conceivability is not a perfect guide (or even a very good guide) to possibility. In this case, one could concede the point that an abstractly knowable disjunction of concrete states is conceivable. But this would still not imply that we know whether this alleged necessity is *possible*. This is the source of van Inwagen's problems with the ontological argument as he presents it: "the 'try-to-imagine-it' test for possibility is quite useless." Thus, we have no means of determining whether necessity is compatible with other properties that would suffice for a sound ontological argument.<sup>43</sup> I am of the view that there may be reason to question van Inwagen's dismissal of the conceivability test. For one thing, as Chalmers notes, there are several kinds of conceivability, some of which are better guides to possibility than are others.<sup>44</sup> The example van Inwagen supplies is that he can conceive of discovering either of two contradictory mathematical claims to be true. Since mathematical issues are on the line, one of the contradictory claims is necessary and the other impossible. The force of this is to show that imagining a state of affairs can produce a false positive for possibility, since I may be able to imagine something that is impossible.

There are a few things to take note of. First, if conceivability fails on all fronts to test

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42. It seems that the burden of proof lies with whoever asserts the necessity of  $X$  to show the contradiction entailed by "a world without  $X$ ." In the case of the ontological argument, we will need to make the case that a putative world without that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought entails a contradiction. If it is possible that there be a conjunction of relations to which one and only one Being must answer, then a world without such a Being would be a contradiction.

43. See his "Ontological Arguments," p. 385.

44. See "Does Conceivability Entail Possibility?" Chalmers maintains that conceivability can be distinguished along multiple lines of contrast: *prima facie* vs. ideal, positive vs. negative, and primary vs. secondary. These contrasts are then conjoined into types such as ideal positive secondary conceivability, and so on. Van Inwagen is objecting (rightly) that what Chalmers would call *prima facie* primary negative conceivability is not a good guide to what is metaphysically possible (see Chalmers, p. 159-165). What I am driving at is that (at least *some*) possibilities may be open to a type of conceivability beyond the imperfect type proposed by van Inwagen.

possibility, the result would be that without reason to believe in any necessary things, the very validity of van Inwagen's ontic arguments is up for debate.

Second, it is not clear to me that to imagine oneself discovering X to be the case is the same as imagining X. Strictly speaking, discovering X entails X being the case. But there seems to me to be a sufficient gap between the two imaginative acts to allow confusion. Consider a similar question of conceivability: it is not possible to trisect an angle with a compass and straight edge. But can I *imagine* doing it? I can surely imagine bisecting an angle with these tools. And I can imagine things that are cut into halves being cut into thirds. So, perhaps I *can* imagine doing the impossible. Or is this confused? Perhaps I can only "imagine" accomplishing this feat by means of imagining two separate (and as it turns out, incompatible) feats, and drawing imperfect inductions from these two acts of imagining.<sup>45</sup> I can imagine being a botanist, and discovering a new species of yellow rose. I can also imagine discovering colorless things (e.g., sound waves, electrons, the laws of inertia). So from these two acts, am I entitled to conclude that I can imagine discovering a colorless yellow rose? The tension I am poking at roughly parallels the distinction Chalmers carves between *prima facie* conceivability and *ideal* conceivability.<sup>46</sup> At first blush it may *seem to me* that something is conceivable, but when I have all the implications on the table (inasmuch as this is ever possible), it may turn out that it is not conceivable after all.

I recognize that the point I am trying to make may be decried for being of minimal help. One might rejoin, "well, while I cannot properly conceive of X, I can conceive of conceiving (or believe that I can conceive) of X. In this case I can imagine imagining the impossible, so

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45. I have in mind the distinction between the acquisition of ideas by admixture and simple ideas that can be found in *Mediation V*. Descartes notes (AT, vol. VII, pp. 66-67) that one is free to think of a horse with or without wings. We arrive at a notion of a winged horse by combining the notion of a horse with winged things. When wondering whether something is possible because we can conceive it, he cautions us strongly against the application beyond what is simple, clear, and distinct: "But we ought not to use this rule heedlessly, because it is easy for someone to imagine that he properly understands something when in fact he is blinded by some preconception and does not understand it at all." ("Comments on a Certain Broadsheet," in vol. I of Murdoch et al.; AT, vol. VIII B, pp. 351-352.)

46. See Chalmers, section 1, pp. 147-149.

imagination is still of no help, because it is always subject to second guessing.” So perhaps I have only moved a bump in the rug. Perhaps this bump needed moving. Fallibility should not be elided with falsity. There is an important distinction between the epistemic status of a claim as fallible or infallible, and the claims modal status as necessary, possible, or impossible. We should always keep in mind that modal claims are made by epistemically fallible persons.<sup>47</sup> But it is one thing to always keep in mind that whatever one imagines to be possible may turn out to entail a contradiction that was not immediately evident. This is just what it means to be cautious in the face of fallibility. It is another thing altogether to conclude from this fact of fallibility that one is forever hopelessly lost.

Nevertheless, let us grant that it turns out that imagination tests for possibility return false positives (and let us also grant that this happens often enough not merely to make us cautious, but to cast doubt on claims to possibility). If we wanted to say that an inconceivable world is possible, we need to say that imagination tests return *false negatives*. There would need to be worlds that are possible despite their being unimaginable. On what basis could we ever draw the conclusion that an unimaginable state of affairs is possible? If something is unimaginable, I have the intuitive reaction of doubting its possibility. What could count as evidence that such a world might be possible after all?

The only thing I can think of is that I am being asked to *imagine* that this unimaginable world is a possible state of affairs. But weve already agreed that the imagination test is dubious because it produces false positives. Even if I *could* imagine that this inconceivable world is possible, this is no guarantee that it is possible. I cannot see how I am to succeed in making myself believe that the unimaginable is possible, if I do not trust my imagination that it might be possible. The more I am called upon to believe that imagination might return false negatives, the more I must doubt that it returns false positives. And the more I

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47. For discussions of this see Gamwell’s *Divine good*, p. 89, and Mourad, p. 72. This point is also addressed in Meyer’s discussion of the role of the “epistemological error” in frustrating many attempts at metaphysics (pp. 109 ff). I return to the importance of distinguishing logical and epistemic fallibility or certainty in the section on confusions over conceivability and the conceived in chapter six.

believe that imagination does return false positives, the less reason I can think of to believe that such false negatives are possible.<sup>48</sup>

## 5.8 Conclusion

If – on top of necessary existence – God must also exist as concrete, then non-restrictive existence must be compatible with concrete actuality. The way to reconcile these requirements is to realize that God’s abstract character must be defined in terms of divine relations which are non-restrictive of any possible thing to which they might relate. The nature of God’s concreteness will necessarily be an absolute relation to all the concrete objects which (eventually) come into being. It is a kind of pledge to the future. Whatever will be will be related to by God. But the future does not comprise concrete objects, because it is the realm of possibility, not of actuality. Until it is actualized in some or other entities – i.e. until it becomes concrete, and thus the past, the future remains abstract.<sup>49</sup> This is unusual to be sure. In fact, those of us who support this view maintain that such a being is unique.<sup>50</sup> There is an overlooked passage from Anselm’s *Reply to Gaunilo*, to this effect:

Now, I truly promise that if anyone should discover for me something existing either in reality or in the mind alone – except ‘that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought’ – to which the logic of my argument would apply, then I shall find that Lost Island and give it, never more to be lost, to that person.<sup>51</sup>

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48. This point is related to (though distinct from) the point Hartshorne makes in *Creative Synthesis*, pp. 159 ff. The proposition “nothing exists” cannot possibly be verified. A putative world in which nothing exists would be a special case of a world in which there are no distinct objects, if it were possible. My claim here is a more generalized version: namely that even *non-empty* worlds without distinct objects are problematic.

49. It is also the case that God is related to the future as a disjunction of all possibilities – but related to them qua possibilities. It is important to note that possibilities are not yet concrete, but rather have the potential to become concrete objects to which God will relate qua actualities.

50. In chapter seven, I mention the question of whether the maximal relations I want to attribute to the divine might entail one another. I would answer in the affirmative. If they do entail one another, they therefore could not be divided among an arbitrary number of beings each allegedly possessing a perfection.

51. p. 175.

If an *abstract* being can be necessary, and if it is possible for some abstractions to require concrete actuality (i.e., the relation to a necessary disjunction of relata), then there is no reason to deny that this notion of necessity should apply to the idea of that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought. It remains to be seen whether we can develop a coherent notion of God while accepting this view of necessity as viable. That will involve a discussion of premise (2). For now, we have seen that there is no reason that necessity should not be applicable to God – provided the understanding of God according to which God has concrete relations. We also have a better view of what a commitment to divine necessity, or the rejection thereof, entails.

# CHAPTER 6

## THE POSSIBILITY PREMISE

### 6.1 Overview

The primary concerns of the chapter on the necessity premise were ontological. It considered the question “What sort of things can be necessary?” There, I tried to show that concrete existence and necessary existence are logically compatible; that is, it is conceivable that a necessary existent could also be concrete (or rather, “concretely actualized”).<sup>1</sup> Historically, the question of the possibility of a state of affairs has focused on the question of whether that state of affairs is conceivable without contradiction. For example, in Hume’s *Dialogues*, Cleanthes quotes Samuel Clarke:

“Any particle of matter,” it is said, “may be *conceived* to be annihilated; and any form may be *conceived* to be altered. Such an annihilation or alteration, therefore, is not impossible.”<sup>2</sup>

In his pre-critical phase, Kant writes, “the predicates of possibility can be found in the concept of a thing.”<sup>3</sup> Anselm, Decartes, Leibniz, and Locke all take this as a principle as well. But more recently, thinkers have questioned whether conceivability can be marshaled into reliable service for determining possibility.<sup>4</sup> If their criticisms manage to deflate claims of knowledge about the possibility of a necessary existent, the ontological argument I put

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1. Based on the discussion at the end of the previous chapter, we should keep in mind that the parenthetical term is an important clarification of, and so not entirely interchangeable with the initial phrasing, which is liable to an ambiguity in interpretation. See chapter seven, “The Promise of Neoclassical Metaphysics” for elaboration on this point.

2. Hume, p. 65.

3. *The One Possible Basis*, Part 1, Observation 1, section 1

4. See van Inwagen’s remark, previously noted in chapter five, that “the ‘try-to-imagine-it’ test for possibility is quite useless.” In this chapter, as in the previous one, I discuss Chalmers’s contention about the varieties of conceivability and how they stack up as guides to the varieties of possibility. Later in this chapter, I will take up an argument from Jordan H. Sobel that there are no a priori possibilities.

forward cannot succeed as a demonstration. What is needed in order to defend the ontological argument is a reliable guide to possibility.

Worth noting at this point is the fact that the search for a reliable guide to what is possible is not an ontological issue but an epistemological one. The objection to the reliability of conceivability does not claim to undermine the possibility of the existent in question (i.e., they do not demonstrate that a necessary being is *not possible*). Rather, they (only) serve to undermine our *confidence* in its possibility – or our confidence in determining its modal status.<sup>5</sup>

If chapter four was concerned with ontological issues, the primary concerns of this chapter will be epistemological. We need to answer the question, “How could we know whether a necessary being is possible?” That is, how we could know whether the possibility premise of the argument (which we understand as being about *metaphysical* possibility) is true. Objections can be made to the effect that we cannot know whether conceivability tracks possibility, or (more strongly) to the effect that conceivability does not reliably track possibility (i.e., there are conceivable states of affairs that are nevertheless impossible). The latter is an ontological claim, about what sorts of things there are or are not, that could or could not be. In this case, the claim is that some things are conceivable but simply cannot be. Its use is as a counterexample to the tracking of possibility by conceivability. It thus bolsters an epistemological objection. If there are conceivable impossibilities, we cannot know whether a putative necessary existent (which we presumably have conceived of) is really possible, or

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5. I am inclined to find this in keeping with Aquinas’s position on the ontological argument found in the *Summa*, question 2, article 2. He posits that God’s existence is not self-evident to us – owing to the fallible nature of human reasoning. Aquinas rejects the ontological argument. But this is not because of a problem inherent in a priori knowledge of God’s existence. Rather he maintains that our imperfect intellect is the source of troubles. I recognize that this is an unorthodox reading of Aquinas, but I am not claiming to offer a reading that Aquinas himself would condone. Rather, I wish to recognize an insight on the part of a brilliant thinker with whom I disagree on this point, and to suggest a way of presenting this disagreement as less severe than one might otherwise see it. A similar, albeit nascent form of this intuition could be attributed to Anselm (again, an unorthodox reading). His recognition of our epistemic limits led him to conclude in *Proslogion XV* that God is beyond human ability to conceive. This is also suggested by the motto with which the work opens – that unless one believes, one will not understand.

whether it is an instance of failed tracking.

The epistemological work here will not venture too far into technical territory. We want to investigate simply how we would know whether a given state of affairs is possible. If the premise that God's existence is possible (or equivalent variants) can be called into question, proponents of the ontological argument should be prepared to defend it. While we should be willing to examine premises, the simple fact that one can question certain premises should not lead us to reject an argument. Nor should the complaint that a premise has not been argued for. It was at the very latest Aristotle who noticed that arguments must begin somewhere.<sup>6</sup>

## 6.2 Conceivability and Possibility

Anselm seems to take for granted that we know that the idea of God is conceivable and that even a fool, who denies God's existence, agrees to this.<sup>7</sup> The underlying thesis is that we must know what is meant by a term in order to deny the existence of such a thing. To get a sense of the plausibility of this thesis, take the example of Grik. If what is meant (or what might be meant) by Grik is left unspecified, is the existence or possibility of Grik really *debatable*? Unless the opponent of the ontological argument already has an idea (however coarse-grained) of what is meant by "God," the correct response would not be atheism, or

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6. See *Metaphysics*, 1006a. If we are to argue for premises, we must build such arguments upon premises, and so on. Surely arguments ought to be built on premises less controversial than their conclusions. But I do not believe there can be an argument that will compel assent from all who encounter it. I have seen the fact that some have doubted these premises raised as an objection to the ontological argument, but I find this utterly unconvincing.

As in chapter one, I maintain with Hartshorne that the achievement of a deductive argument "is to establish a price for rejecting its conclusions" (*Natural Theology* p. 30). That is, if one does not wish to accept a conclusion, one must show where the reasoning of the argument went off the rails, or else be prepared to reject one or more of the premises. Van Inwagen also has something to say about the issue of the (so-called) failure of philosophical arguments to convince their audiences. For his treatment of the topic, see *The Problem of Evil*, Lecture three, "Philosophical Failure" pp. 37-55. Summarily, he makes an effort to "lower [the bar for deeming arguments successful] by relativizing success in philosophical argument to context."

7. See *Proslogion II*. Anselm is, of course taking this statement from the Psalms.

even agnosticism, but confusion.<sup>8</sup>

As I outline formulations of the ontological argument in chapter two, the simplest version of the possibility premise states that the existence of God is possible. The sense of possibility in play here is said to be metaphysical – but what does that mean? Is metaphysical possibility the same as logical possibility (i.e., anything that does not entail a logical contradiction)? Or is there an “ontological possibility” that may pick out different items from those picked out by the logical sense?

This objection – which I have called “modal conflation” was addressed in chapter three. Recall that John Hick identifies and discusses it throughout chapter six of his *Arguments for the Existence of God*.<sup>9</sup> While the objection can be leveled against the necessity premise (as Hick does), it could also be leveled against the possibility premise. I mention the objection again at this point because I take the notion of modal conflation as applied to possibility to relate closely to Sobel’s claim (discussed below) that there are no a priori possibilities.<sup>10</sup>

Leibniz formulated his claim about possibility in the following way: “that which does not imply [logical] contradiction” is to be taken as possible.<sup>11</sup> The modal ontological argument is often construed as maintaining the possibility of the existence of God based on the conceivability of the existence of God. The principle assumed here is that if  $X$  is conceivable,  $X$  is possible – that conceivability implies (or tracks) possibility. Call this thesis CTP.<sup>12</sup>

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8. I take the principle here to be akin to Donald Davidson’s observation that disagreement still requires a background of massive agreement, without which not even so much as the terms of debate could be intelligible to both parties. In this case, according to Anselm, both he and his fool understand and agree on what he means by God (namely AQM). They moreover agree on relevant points regarding existence (i.e., merely mental existence is not the same as – and is inferior to – extra mental existence). Without this agreement, the idea that they are arguing is unintelligible. In contrast, since neither party has an understanding (much less an understanding in common) about the meaning of Grik, the idea of an “argument” breaks down.

9. e.g., p. 87, and pp. 95 ff.

10. Also worth mentioning is that this issue, like the question of the appropriateness of S5 for metaphysical necessity, is meta-logical. Both objections involve something beyond the flat-out rejection of a premise.

11. *Textes Inédits*, p. 390. It seems that Leibniz intends logical contradiction here, since the contradiction to which we would have *epistemic* access would be logical.

12. Recalling Steinitz’s observation mentioned in chapter two, logical contradiction *would* imply ontological impossibility. While it would be a mistake to treat Steinitz’s thesis as logically equivalent to Leibniz’s claim,

In recent thought, CTP has come under increasing scrutiny. As mentioned above, van Inwagen has voiced his doubts about CTP. David Chalmers, as we will see, has his own objections. And Jordan H. Sobel maintains that the problem of conceivability and possibility is *the* problem with Hartshorne’s formulation of the ontological argument (which he takes to be the strongest version).

On this line of argument, the objector can say, “yes, I know what you mean by ‘God’ – I understand the term. And yes, I can conceive it without obvious *prima facie* contradiction. But I am not thereby committed to acknowledging the possibility of the existence of God.”

Sobel offers what he takes to be a decisive counterexample to the CTP thesis. On this account, there is something quite conceivable with no apparent contradiction, but which is nevertheless obviously impossible. Sobel relates a thought experiment proposed by William Rowe. The counterexample is the *magican* (sic), a putative entity defined in the following way:

$X$  is a magican in some world,  $w_n$  if and only if it is a magician in  $w_{@}$ .<sup>13</sup>

This definition appears straightforward enough. I can conceive of a magican without any immediately obvious internal contradiction. There is nothing in the definition or the concept of a magican that renders it incoherent (in contrast with a square circle, for example). But does this mean that a magican is *possible*? Sobel thinks not. Suppose that in  $w_{@}$ , there are no *magicians*. In this case, there are no magicans either – since the existence of the latter requires the existence of the former. But it is not the case that magicans fail to exist in only a handful of worlds; they do not exist in *any* world. Something that is not the case in

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it is possible to argue from Steinitz’s position to that of Leibniz, based on certain (seemingly reasonable) assumptions. If logical contradiction implies ontological impossibility, and (*ceteris paribus*) if there is no logical contradiction to some existential statement, there is no implication of ontological impossibility of that statement (where the sense of possibility would be metaphysical). If there is no implication of impossibility, something should be given the benefit of the doubt, and held to be possible until shown otherwise.

13. Sobel p. 92 ff. I have rendered the definition into subscript notation. Sobel uses the symbol “@” to refer to the particular world which we call “the actual world.” He uses this as a proper name, rigidly designating our world, rather than what someone in  $w_n$  would call  $w_n$ .

any possible world (in this instance, the existence of magicans) is by definition impossible. Thus a magican can be said to be an impossible object. As we now have an example of a putative object that is conceivable without contradiction but is not possible, we have a failure of conceivability to track possibility, thus falsifying CTP.

I confess that as soon as I thought I understood the argument, I was troubled by its conclusion – enough so that I constructed a case for an alternative relation between possibility and conceivability, which I call PIC. In the next section, I propose this alternative and suggest that the argument in Anselm, and those from Hartshorne and Gamwell in turn, do not require CTP to succeed. Willing though I am to move the argument forward without CTP, I do hold at least two reservations regarding this argument against CTP, and diligence compels me to reconsider the thesis before the conclusion of this chapter.

First, I am suspicious of the dependence of Sobel's argument on rigid designation. For one thing, *worlds* are not the sort of thing one can rigidly designate uncontroversially: when one thinks of rigid designation as it is usually understood, it pertains to *contents* of worlds, rather than the worlds themselves. But more important for me is the second reservation. Sobel takes this argument to be a reason for rejecting *any* claim of a priori knowledge of possibility. This seems to go to far. To show that the possibility of some putative objects is unknowable a priori is not the same as showing that all possibility claims are unknowable a priori. It is one thing to taste a bitter cherry and to declare that not all cherries are sweet. It is quite another thing to proclaim that there are no sweet cherries. Sobel may have given us cause to ask whether we have successfully determined the modal status of an alleged possibility. But might it nevertheless be possible to know the difference between a claim to possibility that is unknowable a priori and one that is knowable?

We should recognize that the magican is a carefully constructed *kind* of thing. Magican-type entities are indexed to a particular world.<sup>14</sup> When put in purely abstract terms, the

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14. There is a sticking point that I will gloss over here. As I will explain in my final chapter, I am sympathetic to Hartshorne's thinking that possible worlds are not fully concrete in the sense that the actual

problem with magican-type things is not obvious. But pure abstraction is not enough to identify magican-type objects, only to classify them. In abstract terms, these objects seem fine, but the contradiction shows through when we specify things about the world to which they are indexed. It is less obvious that something which is a-magician-in-a-world-that-has-no-magicians (as the world  $w_{@}$  is by stipulation) is self-consistent as a concept.

Their world-indexed nature means that while their definitions can be structured a priori, their modal statuses depend on “mere facts” – facts which are world-indexed. This means that their modal statuses can only be discovered by a posteriori means – by reference to the world containing the facts on which that status depends. If the magican-type objects have an air of familiarity to them, it is because they resemble the class of objects that are appealed to in parodies of the ontological argument. They also have the same problem – in that they are constructed in such a way that they fail to achieve parity with the a-priori form of the ontological argument.<sup>15</sup>

### 6.3 Possibility and Conceivability

The problem for the proponent of the ontological argument then is, “if CTP fails, how (if at all) can we argue for the possibility of a necessary existent?” I will propose an answer that does not depend on CTP, and thus is not vulnerable to Sobel’s criticisms. I will then discuss the historical presence of the alternative (which goes back to Anselm, at least implicitly, and remains alive in Gamwell’s work on transcendental arguments).

Giving the objection the benefit of the doubt, we will drop the traditional view identifying conceivability with possibility. We allow that CTP might be undermined by a counterex-

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world is. Thus Hartshorne might well have rejected the idea of any putative thing indexed to particular facts about a non actual (and thus neither concrete nor fully particular) world.

15. It is worth noting that while the modal status of magican-type objects is only knowable a posteriori, the fact that an object is of this type can be seen by its definition. That is, the fact that it belongs to this class is analytic to the thing in question. I maintain that this is significant for the failure of magican-type objects to properly parallel AQM in the ontological argument.

ample which shows that there are some conceivable “things” that are not possible. Even if Sobel has successfully attacked the biconditional “something is possible if and only if it is conceivable” ( $P \leftrightarrow C$ ) he has done so only from one direction. According to Sobel, we cannot maintain that if something is conceivable it is possible ( $C \rightarrow P$ ), but he has done nothing to argue against the other side of the biconditional: if something is possible it is conceivable ( $P \rightarrow C$ ). The other side of the biconditional can be formulated as the following thesis:

Possibility implies conceivability (PIC).

The failure of CTP would show that conceivability is not a *sufficient* condition to establish possibility, but PIC maintains that conceivability is nonetheless a *necessary* condition.<sup>16</sup> It is this side of the biconditional that we will use to defend the ontological argument. Here is a quick preview of this defense: If PIC is true, then so is its contrapositive: the inconceivable is impossible ( $(\neg C) \rightarrow (\neg P)$ ). From this it follows straightforwardly that if

(1) The nonexistence of God is inconceivable.<sup>17</sup>

Then so is

(2) The nonexistence of God is impossible.

According to the argument from PIC, the question is not whether the conceivable is possible, but whether the inconceivable is impossible. Are there reasons to accept this thesis?

At this point, I should reiterate that the argument against CTP does nothing to undermine PIC. While there may be something that is conceivable but is not possible, this need not concern us. Rather, our claim is that for every thing that is possible, it is conceivable.

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16. PIC is the converse of CTP. Were the biconditional to hold, both CTP and PIC would have the same truth values. But a conditional and its converse do not have the same truth functions. Thus, we should keep in mind that a statement may be true while its converse false, and vice-versa.

17. Of course, (1) is a claim of its own. to make a full case for this would be too much, but I will return to this point in my discussion of neoclassical metaphysics in chapter seven.

To make a slogan of it, a surplus of conceivability does not imply a surplus of possibility.<sup>18</sup>

## 6.4 A Quest for Xurps

The position might be criticized here for merely assuming that all possibilities are conceivable. How could one know that there are no inconceivable possibilities? But there is a peculiar fork in this line of thinking: where does the burden of proof fall, and which side receives the benefit of the doubt? Given an alleged possibility, should we assume it to be possible until shown otherwise, or should we ask for evidence that it is truly possible? If we are asked to assume that there might be something which is inconceivable yet possible, are we entitled to ask for a similar benefit of the doubt to be afforded to the AQM of the ontological argument? Similarly, if we are not permitted to assume *prima facie* the possibility of AQM, why must we assume it of something inconceivable?

My reply to this is to say that while I will happily abandon PIC in the face of counterarguments, I maintain that the thesis is plausibly true.<sup>19</sup>

To get a sense of what such a counterargument against PIC would need to look like, we should spell out the different options for arranging the epistemic categories of conceivability (C) and inconceivability (X) with the modal categories of possibility (P) and impossibility (I). We have four logically exhaustive pairs:

CP – conceivable and possible

CI – conceivable but impossible

XI – inconceivable and impossible

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18. This is simply another way to phrase the point about conceivability vis-a-vis possibility that was made in the previous chapter. Hobbes makes a statement that sounds like the inverse of PIC in *Leviathan*, part I, chapter 5 (p. 113). His formulation is that “when we make a generall assertion, unlesse it be a true one, the possibility of it is unconceivable” [sic]. This appears in a discussion of absurdity, but the lack of modal language (he uses “true” instead of “possible”) makes it difficult to understand just what he means, let alone to evaluate it.

19. In addition to the standard proscription of self-contradiction, I will expect those who reject CTP to abide by the consequences of this rejection in the course of their arguments against PIC.

XP – inconceivable yet possible

The view that conceivability is the same as, or reliably tracks, possibility (i.e., the CTP thesis) acknowledges two arrangements: CP and XI. As the idea of a magican purports to fall into the category of CI, if successful it would show that this is an option as well. The PIC thesis is compatible with the potential for CI objects, but it rejects the viability of the XP arrangement.

The argument then is over whether XP entities (call them “xurps”) exist.<sup>20</sup> The affirmative answer has a problem to overcome. Suppose one party to a discussion posits (at least the potential for) the existence of a xurp. Suppose further than an interlocutor denies that there is (or so much as could be) a xurp.<sup>21</sup> The first speaker insists on the possibility of xurps, and the second presses her for justification. How does she know xurps are possible? The first speaker will find it very difficult to respond by “showing” her interlocutor a xurp, since any xurp is by definition inconceivable.<sup>22</sup> If the first party offers up a putative xurp that she describes as “inconceivable,” the skeptical second party should reply by citing the oft-overlooked philosopher Inigo Montoya: “You keep using that word! I do not think it means what you think it means.”<sup>23</sup>

Any putative xurp that could be put forth would fall into one of two categories. On one hand, if it were genuinely inconceivable, it would be unrecognizable, and thus not an uncontroversial example for the skeptic. On the other hand, were it to be recognizable, this would seem to demonstrate that it is conceivable, thus contradicting its own claim to be a

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20. It presses somewhat at the boundaries of language to speak of xurps as “entities” or to speak of them as “existing,” since a xurp needn’t be more than a possibility.

21. I should emphasize that since the point of the positing of xurps is presumably to call PIC into question, the defender of xurps would be successful should she succeed in showing that they are so much as *possible*. It is unnecessary to produce an *actual* xurp. However, I maintain that the issue is moot, since the defender of xurps will necessarily fail on either count.

22. Recall: a xurp is not merely something that one party or another fails to conceive. Rather it is something that is *inconceivable*. The inconceivable would be unrecognizable to either party, more so than any “colour out of space” – a genuine xurp would be something beyond Lovecraftian.

23. See Goldman, p. 102.

xurp.

But is this not merely an argument from lack of imagination?<sup>24</sup> The defender of xurps points out that *of course* they are inconceivable, but this does not rule out their possibility. However, when I try to come up with a positive reason that I should accept the possibility of an inconceivable entity, rather than a mere request that I not rule it out, the best I can do is something like the following:

Because the xurps themselves are inconceivable, we could never expect to be given a sensible example of one. But it is not an example of a xurp that is needed. Rather, the mere *possibility* of a xurp is what is at issue. That we cannot make sense of the xurps themselves should not worry us, since we *can* at least make sense of their *possibility*.

At best, I think this request merely moves the bump further down the rug. Without knowing how to make sense of a (putative) possibility, I cannot see how to make sense of the possibility of that possibility. In order to make sense of the possibility of a xurp, one would need to conceive of that possibility.<sup>25</sup> But suppose that we *could* conceive of the possibility of xurps, if not of xurps themselves. Even in such an event, we are no closer to the conclusion that a xurp is really possible. Without recourse to CTP, the fact of a xurp's conceivable possibility provides no support for a claim about its real possibility. If conceivability gets us nowhere toward the possibility of a (putatively) necessary existent, why should it get us

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24. No. And I will show why it is not in the following section. Until I do, I will for the sake of argument assume that the Montoya gambit does not convince. For the remainder of this section, I will make the case that even if I grant that the *inconceivability* of xurps is not a problem for them, there is no reason to accept the claim that xurps are *possible*

25. The careful reader will have picked up on the shift from talk of "conceiving of" to the expression "make sense of" and then back to "conceiving of" a possibility. If we had used the language of "conceiving of" the entire time, the problem might have been even more obvious from the outset. The language of "making sense of" creates the potential to overlook the problem being pointed out here. This shift can be used to make the claim about the possibility of xurps seem more reasonable than I take it actually to be. But I stand with Kant in terms of the importance of the work concepts do for the understanding (see *Critique of Pure Reason*, A.50-51/B.74-76). At the end of the day, any "making sense" of a possibility will require us to conceive of (form a concept of) the alleged possibility.

somewhere toward the possibility of an (equally putative) inconceivable existent? Without the CTP thesis, it becomes difficult to come up with counterexamples to the claims of the PIC thesis. But if CTP is granted, the ontological argument recovers conceivability as a foothold for advancing the claim that God is possible.

Might there nevertheless be reasons not to rule out the possibility of xurps? One response could be that we ought to follow Leibniz and say that possibility should receive the benefit of the doubt:

We have the right to presume the possibility of every being [...] until some one proves the contrary ...<sup>26</sup>

Maintaining that xurps are possible should, on this assumption, be accepted until proven otherwise. Asking for the benefit of the doubt according to a Leibnizian principle has two problems, however. First, it does not provide the counterexample that the advocate of PIC is requesting. It is merely asking her to accept on faith that xurps might exist, and to therefore reject her own view. The proponent of PIC is being told, in effect, “you should abandon your belief because if you were to assume that there are counterexamples, they would undermine your belief.” The request for the benefit of the doubt does not respond to the question about a xurp’s possibility, but simply begs it. Second, the magican thought experiment – if it is powerful enough to undercut CTP as it claims to do – should worry us about applying the Leibnizian benefit of the doubt to anything. With magicans running amok, we have reason to mistrust the alleged (a priori) possibility of any conceivable entity, unless we can distinguish a priori the problematic magican-type entities from genuine possibilities. It is not clear how a xurp stands on any better footing than a magican.<sup>27</sup>

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26. *New Essays on Human Understanding*: Book IV, chapter X, p. 438. See also Dougherty’s “Defense of the Ontological Argument”. Those familiar with the content of the ellipsis in this passage will perhaps delight as I do in the irony of the rhetorical use to which I put it here.

27. Further, as I discussed above, in the case that we are able to distinguish the magican-type concepts from their contrasting counterparts (such as as xurps would need to be), couldn’t this be put to use investigating the a priori possibility of God?

Again, if the critic of the argument nevertheless persists in demanding the benefit of the doubt for xurps, what reason do we have for denying the same benefit of the doubt to AQM? Unless a principled means of distinguishing the modal status of xurps from that of AQM is offered, the case for the possibility premise is reopened. And without a reliable guide for determining a (putative) entity's modal status, it is not at all clear what it would mean to "prove the contrary" of the claim that it is possible. Any means of advocating for the possibility of a xurp will in turn be made available to advocate for the possibility of AQM.

## 6.5 Imagine . . .

I mentioned the possible critique that my argument is built on nothing more than a failure of imagination. This criticism is partly an attack on the argument on behalf of PIC. Perhaps I am too unimaginative to understand the possibility of xurps. Thus someone or something else with a more powerful imagination or intellect could understand the possibility of a xurp, so my inability to conceive of it does not constitute an adequate defense of PIC. The criticism can extend beyond my defense of PIC, however. Another point for potential failure is the use to which PIC will eventually be put: the thesis that the nonexistence of God is inconceivable, and thus impossible. Perhaps it is not at all inconceivable that God should not exist, but rather that my imagination fails *here*. In both cases the principle on which the objection hinges remains the same, as does my response to it. The objection is built upon a failure of understanding. The most difficult part of this discussion will be to present the contrary position in such a way that it is not immediately obvious that the deck is stacked against it.<sup>28</sup>

The response to the first concern – that the rejection of xurps fails to imagine them – is straightforward. It is not proper to speak of the inability to imagine xurps as a *failure* of imagination, since the inability to be imagined is a *sine qua non* of having a xurp on one's

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28. In point of fact, the deck *is* stacked, because the objection fails.

hands. And so (to restate the argument) any counterexample to PIC will either fail to be inconceivable, or else have no defense of its claim to be possible.

Let us turn to the second concern – the use to which I will put the PIC thesis. I will use the contrapositive of PIC to argue that the nonexistence of God and the utter absence of existence are both inconceivable, and thus impossible. If someone could in fact conceive of this nonexistence, then we would need to revise our claims to reflect this. But I am not arguing from my own personal inability to conceive of these states of affairs. Rather, I am arguing that they are inconceivable as such. I readily admit that the only notion of conceivability to which I have access is my own. But as I have knowledge of my own fallibility, I am willing to have claims to inconceivability falsified. Of course should this occur, it would not mean that such states of affairs were inconceivable, but only that they were not conceived. That is, it “confuses what a given philosopher or given philosophers *thought* was conceivable with what was *in truth* conceivable”.<sup>29</sup>

## 6.6 Confusions Over The Conceivable and The Conceived

But how are we to tell the difference between the conceivable and the (merely) conceived? From the first person perspective, the two are difficult to distinguish *prima facie*. Once one has been made aware of a mistake, one can see that something thought to be inconceivable was merely not conceived. A failure to conceive something could be local (I lack the ability to conceive of something, despite its being conceivable as such) or general (it is in fact *not* conceivable as such). But whether the failure is local or general, the experience is always local. The two are thus only distinguishable after the fact when the failure is local and the conceiver has been persuaded that they have erred. Someone constructing an argument from PIC could be mistaken in her belief that the nonexistence of God is inconceivable, and fail to realize her error because of her own fallible nature. But, as Ronney Mourad rightly notes,

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29. See Gamwell’s *The Divine Good* pp. 105-106

...epistemic fallibility does not discredit the transcendental belief forming process any more than it discredits any other type of belief formation. The fact that transcendental arguments are fallible is no reason to suggest that their conclusions are necessarily false, unjustified, or unwarranted. Fallibility would only count against the success of transcendental arguments if their goal was epistemic certainty ...<sup>30</sup>

Surely *any* argument offered by a finite intellect is subject to a proviso that it is fallible. Recognizing this, modal arguments including transcendental arguments regarding the impossibility of inconceivable states of affairs should not be treated with contempt because they occur within the space of the finite power of human reason. But with this proviso in place, the ontological argument loses some of its luster. Is not the purpose of an a priori argument to provide a kind of certainty? How, if we cannot be epistemically certain, does the ontological argument get us anything more than any other a posteriori theistic argument? What is the virtue of the ontological argument if it is not certainty?

I maintain that this kind of worry misunderstands the nature of arguments. As I have mentioned repeatedly, beginning in chapter one, there are limits to what we might expect *any* argument to do. To think that an argument is weak because it cannot provide absolute certainty is only an objection if that kind of certainty is something achievable by arguments generally. But this worry also misunderstands the nature of the relation between certainty and fallibility. Gamwell recognizes two senses of certainty: logical and epistemological.<sup>31</sup> Owing to the finitude of our abilities to reason and know, we are epistemologically fallible. Certainty here – in the epistemic realm – is not possible. Within the confines of our epistemic limits (i.e., with the constant caveat of epistemic fallibility), we might nevertheless achieve *logical* certainty. If I understand Gamwell correctly, this distinction applies to all human knowledge. So the things of which we are the most certain – including our understanding of

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30. *Transcendental Arguments and Justified Christian Belief*, p. 84. Mourad is summarizing Gamwell's point about transcendental arguments in *The Divine Good*. I cite Mourad here because I think he is helpful for understanding Gamwell's insight about the distinction between logical and epistemic certainty on which this apology for fallibility hangs.

31. See *The Divine Good*, p. 93 ff.

mathematical and other logically necessary truths – still fall under the umbra of epistemic fallibility. I am certain that the measure of the angles of a euclidean triangle equal two right angles. This certainty is logical. But it is not epistemologically certain – as I always must hold the reservation that we may have made an error. The ontological argument is not able to deliver its conclusion with epistemic certainty. But if this is the bar we set for arguments, there will be no arguments at all.

## 6.7 Conclusion

In sum: While traditionally the claim that AQM is possible has been defended by CTP, this thesis is now under attack by critics of the ontological argument. If CTP is defeated, a defense of the possibility premise may still be available by means of PIC. To call PIC into question requires the possibility of xurps, which at the very least turns out to be a controversial assertion. Any putative example of a xurp would either be unrecognizable or else contradict its own claim to exemplify inconceivability. The possibility of xurps can only be argued for conceptually. The argument on behalf of the possibility of xurps requires either the benefit of the doubt or an epistemically available guide to modal status. If the benefit of the doubt is given to xurps, it should be extended to AQM – thus reviving the possibility premise – unless a reason for withholding it from AQM in particular can be offered. Such a reason would also require a way of knowing the modal status of these putative entities. Thus, any attack on PIC requires a guide to knowing a thing's modal status. This guide can rely neither on PIC (for obvious reasons), nor on CTP (which allegedly has already been defeated). But any such guide should also be available for evaluating AQM, thus reopening the question of the possibility premise. While we await the critic's alternative proposal, I will claim (at least plausible) authority for PIC, which can then be used to defend the ontological argument.

# CHAPTER 7

## THE PROMISE OF NEOCLASSICAL METAPHYSICS

### 7.1 Overview

By way of conclusion, we now revisit a number of issues and promissory notes that informed earlier chapters. In this project, we have worked through one way in which neoclassical metaphysics can prove important – namely to allow a more nuanced understanding of the ontological argument, its structure and premises. We have seen some ways in which neoclassical metaphysics gives us purchase on this argument and tools for responding to critics.

Beyond this point, there are other topics about which neoclassical metaphysics can speak fruitfully. In order to see how our endorsement of neoclassical metaphysics has evolved, we will now consider a few such topics.

### 7.2 What Can We Hope to Have Achieved?

In chapter one I said that I would make use of neoclassical metaphysics in order to present and defend a version of the ontological argument. But I have not set out to demonstrate the truth of this metaphysical understanding, or to defend it against detractors. I am tempted to demur on grounds that such a defense would require a greater elaboration of metaphysics than the scope of this project allows. But those who recall Whitehead’s rubric for speculative philosophy presented in the first chapter will know this to be an understatement. To adequately show “once and for all” the truth of this metaphysics would, on its own account, require a complete metaphysics. Against hubris in the face of such a task, the humility of Whitehead’s philosophy cautions us about its magnitude:

Whatever is found in ‘practice’ must lie within the scope of the metaphysical description. When the description fails to include the ‘practice’ the metaphysics is inadequate and requires revision . . . Metaphysics is nothing but the description of the generalities which apply to all the details of practice. No metaphysical system

can hope entirely to satisfy these pragmatic tests. At the best such a system will remain only an approximation to the general truths which are sought.<sup>1</sup>

Rather, I said that I hoped to suggest that one feature which makes neoclassical metaphysics attractive is the way in which it can serve to clarify other issues in the philosophy of religion. In this case, by putting it to use in advancing the ontological argument, I hoped to show that there are important ways in which neoclassical metaphysics offers promise. Since I do not take arguments to be coercive, but rather to invite assent, I do not take them to be finally settled, but to be decided upon in terms of an ever evolving cost-benefit analysis of the conclusions. Thus, if appeal to neoclassical metaphysics can advance discussion in the philosophy of religion, such a success would be to its great credit.

While one may wonder whether neoclassical metaphysics has more to offer beyond this argument on behalf of AQM, I would reiterate that the larger project of describing this system has been undertaken by my betters. Still, after an examination of our ontological argument, some points mentioned in the chapter one bear reconsideration.

The first point I mentioned there was the nature of argument, which was addressed in more depth in chapter two, and with special reference to ontological arguments in chapters three and four. I noted that arguments serve to invite an audience, and that there is a reflective exchange between premises and conclusion throughout the process.

Next came the topic of modal metaphysics. I made an overture to this in the first chapter, and elaborated to some extent in chapters four through six. Chapter four explored the question of which logic best fits our intuitions about metaphysical modality. Chapters five and six dealt with our two modal operators, and how to make sense of these with regard to the notion of AQM. In this final chapter, I will return to further consider the modal nature of metaphysics according to process thought. Now that we understand the importance of S5

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1. *Process and Reality*, p. 13. I take “practice” here to mean something like “our workaday encounters and interactions with the givens of the world.” Also see p. 12, where Whitehead remarks that, “A precise language must await a completed metaphysical knowledge.”

modal logic for the argument, there are important considerations about how Hartshorne's temporal view of modality can be compatible with the universal accessibility relations needed for the modal ontological argument to go through.

The treatment of modality, especially that of necessity, is bound up with an additional consideration of neoclassical metaphysics: its account of the so-called "maximal greatness" of AQM.

### 7.3 What Is it Like to Be AQM?

It may not be immediately obvious that the argument thus far presented in characteristically neoclassical in nature.<sup>2</sup> However, in presenting this argument, I am following Hartshorne's characterization in this regard: That the success of this argument depends upon the ability to coherently conceive of AQM.<sup>3</sup> If we cannot provide a coherent account of something than which a greater cannot be thought, the argument is lost. If there is something characteristically neoclassical in the argument, or a way in which the neoclassical incarnation of this argument is distinctive among other versions, it is in the way it presents AQM.

Hartshorne departs rather starkly from the Anselmian conception of AQM. And so, final judgment of the argument must wait on an adequate conception. I do not intend this project to culminate with a complete characterization of the divine. What I would hope to achieve is a gesture in the direction of some characteristics that would necessarily apply to AQM,

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2. I take the argument I am advancing to be of a piece with my commitments to neoclassical metaphysics. However, it may turn out that the argument presented so far is not so of necessity. In any case, the need for things like an account of possibility and its relation to necessity is clear. I take process thought, as I will suggest it, to lend itself particularly well here.

3. This line of thinking is suggested by the conclusion of Hartshorne's "What Did Anselm Discover?" There, he observes the importance of a coherent understanding of the divine: "this and this alone is the issue. *Someone* fails to understand his attitude toward faith. Who is it?" (p. 102). We can see similar sentiments in his introduction to *The Writings of Saint Anselm*, p. 9. Compare this to *The Divine Relativity* where Hartshorne says, "if the ontological argument is valid in some form, an affirmative answer to the question Is there a God? follows logically from an affirmative answer to the question Is a God conceivable?" (p. 3). He is alleging that God is conceivable in terms of neoclassical metaphysics, as detailed in his work, and *only* so conceivable.

such that they can lend credence to its possibility. This concluding chapter of our project will now outline ways in which the neoclassical view departs from the classical, and some of the consequences for other aspects of metaphysics.

If there is to be a successful argument, we must ask and answer this question that is central to the demonstration: *What does a ‘maximally great being’ look like?* Note that both Descartes and Anselm noted that AQM, as they respectively understood it, is not the same as ‘the greatest conceivable’ or ‘the greatest possible’ beings. This is important for Anselm because he does not take AQM to be conceivable (cf. *Proslogion XV*, in which he says of God that “you are a being greater than can be conceived”). Descartes will make a similar statement, in carefully distinguishing between something of which we can have *no* idea and something of which we cannot “have a fully adequate grasp.”<sup>4</sup> So we must revise the question as, *What could count as AQM?* To answer this, we must address questions hinted at in the form of promissory notes throughout the earlier chapters. First, there are the questions of whether AQM must have all great-making-properties, and what this would look like. Next, we must ask whether AQM must have only great-making-properties, and what the consequences to an affirmative answer are.<sup>5</sup> Some readers will find it safe to assume the appropriateness of such a formulation when speaking of the Divine. But in the interest of better offering explication, we should distinguish the two sub-claims. This will also help us to consider whether each of these claims is a coherent notion. Third, we will want to know whether there could be more than one being that counts as AQM.

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4. See Descartes’s reply to the third set of objections, objection eleven, found in AT, vol. VII, p. 189

5. The questions regarding all-and-only great-making-properties may be familiar to readers from the Gödelian argument, though I do not intend to rehearse that argument here. The issue of great-making-properties (or all-and-only positive predicates) is important if we adopt the Hartshornean commitment to ineligibility mentioned above.

## 7.4 Positive Predication About AQM

First we consider whether AQM has only great-making-properties. This question involves which predicates count as imperfections, and just what that means for greatness. For our purposes, an imperfection is either a negative property or predicate (such that it makes its subject less-great than it would be without this predicate), or else it is an absence of a positive predicate (such that it could have that predicate to a higher degree, thus making its subject greater).<sup>6</sup>

Anselm made a distinction between kinds of things a being is incapable of. In chapter seven of the *Proslogion*, he uses as an example the claim that God is incapable of lying, since lying is evil. But this is not a deficiency on the part of God: Inability to do evil is not a deficiency, but a sufficiency of goodness. Adopting this view serves to answer objections such as, “Does God have the ability to cease existing?” and the like. The view I am advocating would follow Anselm’s view on this point.

Thus presented, it is hopefully clearer that anything that could count as AQM must not have such imperfections. To see this, suppose for the sake of reductio that something alleged to be AQM were to have one or more imperfections. In this case, something else would be conceivable such that it did not have such imperfection(s). Without this imperfection, that something else would be greater than the alleged AQM. In this case our initial candidate would not qualify as AQM.

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6. I am trying to avoid becoming overburdened with specific example here. It seems to me that we can agree on the rough shape of imperfections. Namely, imperfections can be something it is bad to be – e.g., Sam is murderous, or else less-than-perfectly good – e.g., Sam is partially-loving (Where it is possible to be more benevolent than Sam). To agree on the general form of imperfection, we do not need extensive debate over which predicates are actually good and which are bad, nor do we need a list of such predicates.

## 7.5 Are there necessary imperfections?

At this point, we might anticipate an objection to the effect that certain imperfections are somehow necessary. This objection could take several forms, which we will now address. The neoclassical view is, I hope to suggest, particularly well equipped to answer the strongest forms of this objection.

Take some property  $f$ , which is allegedly an imperfection that is necessary for an existent to possess. Because  $f$  is an imperfection, anything which is  $f$  cannot be AQM. If any candidate AQM would necessarily be  $f$ , then the very concept of AQM would prove incoherent, or in other words, impossible. But if I encounter something which is  $f$ , I could try to simply dismiss the thing which is  $f$  as failing to be AQM, and that I am speaking rather of something else besides this thing which is  $f$ . Something I formerly thought to be AQM turning out to be  $f$  does not indicate that the very idea of AQM is incoherent. To undermine the argument, one would need to show that the imperfection  $f$  follows necessarily from some other part of the idea of AQM.

We will consider two reasons an alleged AQM might be said to be  $f$ . First, if the property  $f$  were a necessary consequence of possessing some perfection,  $p$ , that would be necessary for any thing to count as AQM. That is, if any AQM would need to be  $p$ , and anything that is  $p$  is also  $f$ , any AQM would be  $f$ . Another reason to say an alleged AQM must be  $f$  would be if any existent must actually be  $f$  – that there is nothing that can actually exist unless it is also  $f$ .

### *7.5.1 Is Imperfection a Consequence of Existence?*

If it turns out that being  $f$  is a necessary property of all existents, it should give us cause to wonder whether it really makes sense to say that  $f$  is an imperfection. This is at least the case for our understanding of imperfection (from above) as a property or predicate that might conceivably obtain or not obtain to a subject.

If there is no existent whatsoever that could fail to instantiate  $f$ , it makes little sense to say that by being  $f$  something is less great than it would be if it were not  $f$ . If there can be no otherwise, what is the case cannot be any worse than it would be otherwise. We are fine with asserting that anything which *must* possess some property *does* possess that property. Neoclassical thinkers are happy to further assert that when a property must obtain to *strictly every thing actually in existence*, we have no business calling such a property an imperfection. This extension renders common objections into easier bullets to bite.

An example of such bullets would be contingent aspects of the Divine – or ways in which the Divine is influenced by contingent aspects of the world. If any existent is necessarily the subject of influence, then being-susceptible-to-influence is not (on this understanding) an imperfection. This is a radical departure from classical conceptions of God as completely impassive or unchanging. The neoclassical view on actual entities and societies which comprise them holds that strictly everything that exists is subject to some influence. This is the Whiteheadian understanding of what it is to be a subject. If this is the case, then it is no insult to God, and does not disqualify something from claim to be AQM to say that it is influenced by other things.<sup>7</sup> Many classical theists hold that such passivity would count as an imperfection. Following this lead, contemporary participants in discussions with process thinkers have questioned whether the neoclassical conception of the Divine is in fact religiously adequate.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, if we discover a property which every conceivable existent must exemplify, we

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7. This very quickly becomes a thorny theological debate. Much has been written by way of both objection and defense of this issue. This is, on my lights, a worthy discussion – though beyond the intended scope of our present project. I can direct interested parties to the corpus of Hartshorne – especially *The Divine Relativity*, *The Logic of Perfection*, and *A Natural Theology for Our Time*. I would caution however that Hartshorne sometimes shows an unfortunate dearth of sympathy for the more classical view. Nevertheless he warrants attention.

8. This is a standard objection that one hears from many religious believers who encounter the neoclassical conception of the Divine for the first time. Stephen Lee Ely's *The Religious Availability of Whitehead's God: a Critical Analysis* argues that, for a number of reasons, the neoclassical conception of the divine is an inappropriate object of worship.

are no longer quite speaking about a property of particular existents, but about a characteristic of what it is to exist. That is, we have found not a predicate but rather a metaphysical principle.<sup>9</sup>

### 7.5.2 *Is Imperfection a Consequence of Some Other Perfection?*

The next question is whether all perfections are *compossible*? Might it be the case that given some perfection, there is an imperfection that is somehow implied? If we take actual, extra-conceptual existence to be a kind of perfection, we can see this as a modified version of the first objection. I confess that I can anticipate this objection, though I cannot conceive of examples (beyond the case of existence which we dealt with above).<sup>10</sup> We can, however anticipate the form of the objection (as stated above): There is some perfection  $p$  which entails an imperfection  $f$  as its consequence. Thus there can be no true AQM, because any AQM must be  $p$ , but this would entail its also being  $f$ .<sup>11</sup>

If  $p$  entails an imperfection, what would cause us to think that  $p$  is actually a perfection? Would not something be greater without  $p$ , if that means that it thereby avoids having  $f$ ? But then  $p$  is both a perfection and an imperfection, which seems strange. If we maintain that it is an imperfection, then we have no reason to worry, because we would not assert it of AQM. If it is a perfection, we can return to the line of reasoning above. This would cause us to observe that if  $f$  is necessarily entailed by  $p$ , it seems more like a feature that is associated with anything that could be  $p$  than an imperfection. It makes little sense to say

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9. A potential step toward the reconciliation of the neoclassical view with the classical from which it departs could begin here. We might understand the argument between the two conceptions of the Divine as not about divine *predicates* at all, but about what counts as perfection or imperfection.

10. I do not take this to be simply a failure of imagination on my part, but rather because no such examples exist. I am happy to entertain such examples should they be presented

11. Technically, if it were possible to order perfections according to some objective priority, we could formulate a list of perfections for AQM according to which there is the optimal list of perfections with minimal consequent imperfections. The notion of such a list, prioritizing criteria, and algorithm for optimizing greatness beggars belief. Fortunately, such things are not needed to conceptualize AQM, or else the cause would be lost.

that something that has perfection  $p$  is less perfect than it would be if it lacked  $f$  if there is no coherent way for it to lack  $f$ .

Against the possible objection that some imperfection would necessarily follow from some other perfection, it might be asserted that all perfections mutually imply one another.<sup>12</sup> It is not clear to me that this it is necessary to prove this position (because I am not sure that it is necessary to hold it). I mention it to get a better view of the conceptual landscape. We should keep in mind two points about such an argument. First, if we were to succeed in showing this, we would see, a fortiori, that all perfections are compossible. Second, such an argument would present a response to the question of the uniqueness of AQM mentioned in chapter five (I will offer other reasons to consider the uniqueness of AQM below).

## 7.6 On the Positive Predicates of AQM

Whether we see perfections as mutually implicative or no, it is important to know that they are mutually compatible. We now consider whether AQM has (or whether anything *could* have) all of the great-making-properties.<sup>13</sup> Along the same lines of reasoning above, regarding certain perfections entailing imperfections, it would be strange if a perfection precluded another. It may simply be that only a certain degree of perfection is attainable, such that one must pick which perfections we want to affirm. But as with the earlier objection, apart from particular examples of conflict between perfections, it is hard to do more than anticipate the objection and admit that it would be worthy of address – if a worthy version of it were to show up.

Answering the question about the compatibility of perfections requires us to return to

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12. To be clear: the claim is not that positive predicates are mutually implicative (which a moment's reflection will reveal to be not the case). Rather, the claim is that for each positive predicate, to have it to the maximal degree (whatever that might mean) implies and is implied by the maximal degree of each other positive predicate.

13. Again, this is not an attempt to exhaustively list these properties. I am here asking instead about whether it is possible and what it would look like for something (AQM) to have all of the great-making-properties, whatever those properties turn out to be.

the question of just what a divine perfection is. As elsewhere, I look to Hartshorne's *Divine Relativity*, especially the third chapter, in which he presents a theory of types to discuss Divine attributes. According to this view, Divine perfections are types of relations, rather than statements about particulars.

Because the perfections affirmed of AQM are taken as types, we must keep in mind their abstract nature. Note: this does not mean that Divine predicates exist only as abstract, as this would mean that they could never be actual. Rather, Divine *perfections* are abstract statements about *how* AQM instantiates particulars. "All knowing" is often used as an example of a divine perfection. Hartshorne will speak of "contemplative adequacy" rather than "omniscience." He uses the term "adequacy" in glossing the Divine attributes to avoid ambiguity with regard to modal issues. In terms of knowledge, God knows what is actual as actual, and what is possible as (merely) possible. The attribute of cognitive adequacy is abstract, telling us nothing about the content of Divine knowledge which, when it comes to particulars, must itself be particular. The proposition "God knows that my son's eyes are blue" is a particular.<sup>14</sup>

Hartshorne's term "adequacy" is helpful because it draws our attention to at least three necessary features of Divine predicates. First, God does not simply have positive predicates, but has them to the highest degree that is coherently possible. This is the only degree that is adequate for predicating of AQM. Second, note that like the formulation AQM itself, the formulation "highest degree that is coherently possible" leaves open for revision our previously held conceptions. We might turn out to have been mistaken about what we thought was (or was not) possible or coherent.<sup>15</sup> Language of adequacy is similarly open to

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14. To be more precise, this statement is *more particular* than the statement "God is all knowing." To speak of the absolutely particular without any abstraction would involve two problems. First, it would require a degree of detail knowable only to God. Second, at the utmost level of particularity are the actual entities and their comprising societies. By its nature, language involves abstraction. The only way to precisely designate particulars is through pointing, and it is difficult to imagine a yad with a fine enough point for the task.

15. This is, I take it, a consequence of the asymptotic approach to understanding we found in Whitehead's

revision in light of further understanding. Third, any such perfections must be predicated at a level of abstraction such that they do not preclude any possible particularity (i.e., the qualifier “adequate” is sufficiently abstract to be non-restrictive in scope).

Taken together, these points to which adequacy directs our attention offer a revision to the concept of perfection. The traditional formulation of perfection has been as static – that which nothing can surpass. A unique aspect of the process-philosophical view is that the divine is able to self-surpass. In *The Divine Relativity*, Hartshorne characterizes God as the “self-surpassing surpasser of all.”<sup>16</sup> He points out that there is an ambiguity in the question of whether the perfection of AQM can be surpassed. Does this mean can be “surpassed by nothing whatsoever” or “surpassable only by a future instance of the Divine”? This represents a departure from a more classical understanding of change as necessarily from better to worse or from worse to better.<sup>17</sup> According to the neoclassical view, something can change from ‘the best possible’ to ‘something even better’, as new actualities come into beings, from which new possibilities emerge. On the understanding of emergent possibilities, perfection can increase. We will refer to this with the term dynamic perfection, in contrast with the static view which assumes an upper limit to perfection (which has already been achieved by AQM).

## 7.7 Static and Dynamic Perfection

Let us consider Anselm’s characterization of AQM as something greater than can be thought. It may be the case that Hartshorne is right and this is a absurd conception. However, it

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account, mentioned in our first chapter. On this point, Whitehead and C. S. Pierce are in substantial agreement.

16. p. 20.

17. In his Reply to Objection 2, Q. 2, A.3, Aquinas speaks of “things that are changeable and capable of defect” as though the two are synonymous (p. 27). He draws on an Aristotelian understanding of change, although he explicitly rejects some of the latter’s conclusion from these assumptions. This aspect of Aristotle’s account of change can be seen in *Physics*, especially Book III, pp. 200b ff., and *On Generation and Corruption*, especially Book II, chapter 10, pp. 336a ff.

might be more charitable to suggest that, as was the case with his logical apparatus, Anselm's *ontological* categories were limited by the vocabulary available to him at the time. With the vocabulary of dynamic perfection, we can formulate consistency where only contradiction was apparent before. If we hold perfection to be dynamic, there is a sense in which God's perfection is beyond conceivability.<sup>18</sup>

As an example, we might take Divine love. AQM is maximally loving, and loves everything there is in the world to be loved. Given that the contents of our world change, the things which there are to love change, which means that the particulars of God's love change (while the abstract character of Divine omni-benevolence remains unchanged throughout). If I had had a sister, God would have loved her. But God does not love my sister – not because of any deficiency on the part of God's love, but because I have no sister. It would be strange indeed to say that God loves a sister who does not exist.<sup>19</sup> In some alternate possibility in which I had a sister, God would certainly love her. This would not be strange at all, and would present no contradiction. Without the ability to appeal to a dynamic perfection, categories such as divine love do present contradictions, and so seem to be beyond our ken. However, if we adopt the neoclassical vocabulary, we can achieve this kind of predication univocally and coherently. We gain a more coherent picture of the compatibility of perfections.

The acute reader will have noted that this appears to entail something like passivity in the divine. I would hold qualifications about the term “passive” since the process view holds that the beings which undergo change are societies. The actual entities which compose these societies self-direct (at least in part) their relations, and so it just as appropriate to call this

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18. It should be noted that, as with my discussion of his logic, I am not attempting an exegesis of Anselm here. I am offering instead a charitable understanding of what he might have been able to say, if the language of process thought were available to him.

19. More strongly, if we understand Divine love to mean ‘loving as actual’ – i.e., entailing all the same level of detail and particularity with which God loves all there is, it would be not merely strange but contradictory to say God loves my sister.

“active change.”

Perhaps adherents to the classical position will have serious objections to the notion of passivity. The response to this is to recall our admonition from earlier that if it is a necessary feature of any existent, a property such as being subject to change is not an imperfection.

In “What Did Anselm Discover?” Hartshorne mentions the chapters of the *Proslogion* in which Anselm discusses the nature of God. There, Hartshorne calls this conception “absurd.”<sup>20</sup> But within this essay, there is little by way of specifics regarding a replacement for Anselm’s conception. Hartshorne realizes this, and his interest in this argument is an important motivation for *The Divine Relativity* which offers a more thorough account of his conception. Recall from our discussion of Whitehead’s distinction between actual entities and eternal objects that there is an important distinction between what is actual and what is formally possible. The phrase ‘make God actual’ should not be confused with a notion that Humans somehow construct the Divine. Rather, we should understand this as rendering our conceptual understanding of God in terms of what is actual. That is, to have a better, explicit understanding of AQM that is logically coherent rather than some quasi-mystical claim solely in terms of the eternal aspects of God. I would endorse the interpretation of Hartshorne’s *Divine Relativity* as his attempt at making good on this promissory note.<sup>21</sup> I have not attempted to offer an adequate summary of the book here, though I am happy to encourage interested readers to examine this work at length. For our purposes, it will serve merely to have highlighted certain points that prove germane to our present discussion.

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20. p. 97. He continues “...so that for *this* idea positivism is actually valid.” Later (p. 102), he says “Anselm’s own view of God *was*, I think, confused. One can see this on page after page.”

21. In defense of this reading, I would point the reader to, for example “What Did Anselm Discover?” in *Insights and Oversights*. There, Hartshorne says of the argument, “it is a proof of necessary *existence* not of necessary actuality. We need a new type of theism to take this distinction into account” (p. 102, Hartshorne’s italics).

### 7.7.1 *Schmod – or, How Many Perfect Beings Could There Be?*

I have said, with Hartshorne that any successful concept of AQM must be maximally non-restrictive, so that the statement “AQM exists” is a wholly non-restrictive existential statement. Accordingly, AQM cannot preclude the existence of any other possibility, ruling out only nonsense. But it appears possible to trivially formulate an existent (or rather, a putative existent) that is ruled out by the existence of AQM. Consider *Schmod*.<sup>22</sup> The concept of *Schmod* is formulated as, “the being which exists if and only if God [AQM] does not exist.” Given this formulation, it would seem that there cannot be a wholly non-restrictive AQM.

But wholly non-restrictive existential statements do exclude certain entities from their ontology – namely those things which cannot exist, not because some thing or other has precluded their possibility, but because they are nonsensical.

*Schmod* only precludes the non-restrictiveness of AQM if *Schmod* itself is a coherent concept. To understand the upshot, consider first *Schmod*\*. Which is almost like *Schmod*, except that it is also known to be self-contradictory. The proponent of AQM’s non-restrictiveness need not be concerned in the least about *Schmod*\*. Because it does not (because it indeed cannot) exist, the condition of existing iff AQM doesn’t exist is trivially fulfilled. It is an example of nonsense, which can be excluded without violating non-restrictiveness.

If we are not troubled by *Schmod*\*, should we be troubled by plain, old-fashioned *Schmod*? I answer no. Either *Schmod* entails a contradiction, or it does not. If it does, then we can dismiss it as easily as we did *Schmod*\*. The only version we must worry about is one without contradiction. But it would not be enough for *Schmod* to simply *happen* not to involve a contradiction. *Schmod* itself must have the same modal status as “God.” Why is this? Because God (as we have said) must have non-contingent modal status. If *Schmod*

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22. This objection was put to me by Robbie Hirsch in a brief conversation on this topic. This version of *Schmod* is not to be confused for the notion discussed in O’Leary-Hawthorne & Howard-Snyder (1993).

were contingent, there would be some fact or other to preclude or induce the existence of Schmod.<sup>23</sup> But as we have formulated it, the only thing which could preclude it is the existence of AQM. AQM has non-contingent modal status. The question of the existence of Schmod is indexed to AQM and only to AQM, Schmod must share its modal status.

What sort of (putative) existent could have the same modal status of AQM? It would need to be such as is otherwise identical to AQM. Initially, it may be difficult to see the reason for this, but I hope to clarify it here. The only way an existent can be non-contingent is if all of its characteristics are necessarily instantiated regardless of the (contingent) facts of the world. No contingent fact can contradict a necessary existent. Thus, because Schmod is non-contingent, being indexed to the non-contingent AQM, Schmod must otherwise have all of the same characteristics of AQM. Schmod would thus be otherwise indistinguishable from God. The only difference would be the terms used to describe the other.

The only thing which could preclude putative necessities are real necessities which show the putative ones to be impossible.

On this understanding, if God were to exist, Schmod would be nonsense. If this seems question-begging, I will allow that Schmod (otherwise identifiable as AQM) exists.

According to this line of thought, we should take Schmod as either a bit of silliness to be dismissed, or an alternate, less dignified name for AQM. Any concern about Schmod is revealed to be simply a confusion over what name to call the putative existent AQM. Thus, I would hope to convince the reader that this is an objection worth considering, though not worrying too much about.<sup>24</sup>

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23. Here “fact” is used in the sense that Peters means (cf. chapter one).

24. My colleague Erik Dreff has informed me of a similarity between my argument here and that of Ibn Sina to the end that there could be only one necessary being. Unfortunately, no full English translation is currently available for some of the relevant works. On the argument, the *Stanford Encyclopedia* has this summary: “the necessary has no ‘homologue’: there is nothing that – even if equivalent to it as regards its definition – could exist together with it and thus occupy the same rank of existence, without being either its cause or its effect. Two necessary beings would in fact either both be caused (and therefore both non-necessary), or refer to a cause that would make only one of them exist; but in the latter case, they could no longer be defined as equivalent or homologous: one would be possible and caused, while the other in the

## 7.8 What Existential Propositions Are We Entitled to Infer?

In chapter one, we highlighted the importance of the neoclassical understanding of existential statements for our presentation of the ontological argument. I offered an account of process thought as an invitation to consider its implications – in what I called the broccoli casserole approach. Having presented the argument up to this point, I will mention three further implications of this philosophical position: that a world without AQM is inconceivable, that the existence of *some* world is as necessary as God, and that a conception of time can be used to understand alternate possibilities (and vice-versa).

## 7.9 The Inconceivability of the Absence of God

In earlier chapters, I maintained that what is possible is conceivable (PIC). Many summaries of the ontological argument phrase this in terms of the conceivable as tracking possibility (CTP). CTP means that we proceed to ask whether AQM is conceivable in order to show that AQM can satisfy the possibility premise. But I have shown these to be non-equivalent, and argued that despite reasons to question CTP, PIC is tenable. Moreover, I argued that the ontological argument can succeed on the basis of PIC, without appeal to CTP.

After suggesting that PIC is enough to produce an ontological argument, I tried to show that the PIC thesis is what is actually at work in the argument that Anselm presents. This is also true of subsequent versions offered by Hartshorne and his followers. Gamwell has an argument based on PIC which proceeds from the inconceivability of utter non-existence to the claim that necessarily, something exists.<sup>25</sup> This should be recognizable as drawing from Kant's pre-critical argument in his *One Possible Basis*, Observation two (discussed above).

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absence of another external cause would be its cause . . ." (Lizzini). This argument will be familiar to other readers in terms of Aquinas's third way in Pars 1, Q. 2, art. 3 (p. 26), which draws on this very line of reasoning for a demonstration of the existence of God "from possibility and necessity." Samuel Clarke's proposition VII is dedicated to this objection as well, treating of it in a similar way.

25. See *The Divine Good*, pp. 110-111.

Steinitz makes his case along the lines of PIC as well. He observes that some thing's inconceivability leads us to draw the conclusion that it cannot exist.<sup>26</sup> For Gamwell, as for the pre-critical Kant, from the putative notion of utter nothingness there flows a contradiction. From this contradiction, the necessary existence of something (in theistic forms of the argument, God) is then demonstrated. The opponent of the ontological argument must show that sheer nothing is a conceivable state of affairs (since, according to PIC, it would have to be at least conceivable in order to be possible). And there are, I think good reasons to think that this putative state of affairs (if there were anything to be called a state-of-affairs) is not coherently conceivable. But even if it were shown to be conceivable, the possibility of utter nothingness is not demonstrable without CTP.

This section is not intended as a brute-force argument that some sufficient list of Divine perfections can be shown to be compatible, and thus a coherent theism is necessary. As so often, I will refer the reader to the many works of thinkers who have already presented accounts of Divine predicates and argued for their coherence.<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps a critic will object (in Humean fashion) that anything which is conceivable as existing is also conceivable as not-existing. But we have noted that this is question begging, and those with theistic commitments are under no obligation to accept this claim, though they are free to do so without sacrificing their theistic commitments. Note that I mean this in the sense that it is observably the case that there are theists who do not accept the ontological argument on something like Humean grounds. It may be the case that these theists hold commitments that are incompatible with one another. Thought to its full conclusion, theism may entail the necessary existence of God. In this case, someone who rejects the notion of any necessary existent may not be entitled to believe in God (or to believe that God is AQM,

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26. See his "Contradictions are Ontological Arguments."

27. Of course, I have in mind Hartshorne's continual work to distinguish the abstract nature of relation from particular instantiations of those relations. But he sees himself as one part of a stream of thinkers whose work takes this distinction into account.

or that AQM is a coherent notion).

I maintain that if it is possible to form a coherent concept (however partial) of AQM, the non-existence of AQM is inconceivable.<sup>28</sup> If I am correct on this matter, not only does the acceptance of the ontological argument commit one to theism, but acceptance of the claim that theism is coherent commits one to the ontological argument.<sup>29</sup>

We must address an important point here. I take the onus to be on the non-theistic view to show that incoherence between theistic commitments and opposition to the ontological argument are reasons to object to theism. A Humean view would be an especially weak position from which to argue for such objections. In our earlier discussion, I maintained that necessary features of any conceivable existent should not be held as imperfections. If it were to be the case that all conceivable existents can be conceived as non-existing, this would not count as an imperfection – and so one who maintained across-the-board contingency could argue that this is not a strike against the perfection of God. It is silly to object to theism on the basis that AQM is imperfect because it does not possess a non-property than cannot be a perfection because it cannot obtain anywhere. No one should hold this view. Instead, on the assertion of across-the-board contingency, the objection must come down to what is contingently the case. That is, by allegedly stripping away the possibility of a priori arguments, the Humean is necessarily opening the door to consideration of a posteriori arguments.<sup>30</sup>

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28. The qualifier of incomplete conception is an important insight, drawn from Descartes who, in his Letter to Mersenne, 27 May, 1630 (AT, vol. I, pp. 151-154) notes, “To grasp something is to embrace it in one’s thought; to know something, it suffices to touch it with one’s thought.” It is not necessary to maintain that we have a *complete* concept of AQM in order to maintain that it is *consistent* – provided that we understand this consistency to exist within the realm of our epistemic fallibility.

29. This is, of course, barring structural objections of the kind we addressed in chapter four. One could accept the premise of God’s necessary existence, as well as the conclusion of theism, while holding out against ontological arguments on grounds of such structural objections. This is, as mentioned, the position that Aquinas holds.

30. This insight was pointed out to me by Yoaav Isaacs, first in conversation, and later through sharing an unpublished paper with me in 2009. While we disagree on the soundness of the ontological argument, I fully concur with him on this point.

## 7.10 The World and Time

The final chapter of Whitehead's *Process and Reality* is called "God and the World." There, he lists a set of oppositions between God and the world, which offer points on which the neo-classical view stands in sharp contrast with its alternatives. Of these oppositions, Whitehead tells us,

In each antithesis there is a shift of meaning which converts the opposition into a contrast.

It is as true to say that God is permanent and the World fluent, as that the World is permanent and God is fluent.

...

It is as true to say that the World is immanent in God, as that God is immanent in the World.

It is as true to say that God transcends the World, as that the World transcends God.

It is as true to say that God creates the World, as that the World creates God.<sup>31</sup>

Unfortunately these points are liable to confusion, because they could be misread as implying that the world is necessary. To be sure, *a world* is necessary according to the neoclassical view (since what it is for an actual entity to exist is to be a constituent part of, and bear relation to a world). But this should not be taken to mean that *any particular* world is necessary.<sup>32</sup>

Still, process thought understands the constituent entities of its ontology as necessarily being in relation to (though not as being in a necessary relation with) a world. Thus, it might seem to be an implication of neoclassical thought that the existence of a world (in general) can be arrived at (at the very least indirectly) by means of ontological argument. This may seem strange, given that we want to affirm something like the contingent nature of the world.

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31. *Process and Reality*, p. 348.

32. The word "particular" should be approached carefully here. I will gesture toward a problem with understanding alternate possibilities as concretely particular. Properly speaking, there is no particular world other than the actual. The point of saying that not any particular world is necessary is just that the world may have actually been otherwise.

There do seem, after all, to be other possibilities. How are we to understand them as real? We might be tempted to understand them in terms of a robust modal realism, according to which all possibilities are real in some possible world. This approach creates potential problems for the modal ontological argument when we consider two principles which can be derived from process thought.

The first principle is that no entity is governed by strict determinism. Since all actual entities are subjects in the relevant sense, there is a principle of general freedom (call this GF), which applies in some degree (however small) to every actual entity in the universe. According to GF, every single entity might have been otherwise in some degree, however small.<sup>33</sup> Given GF, each of these differences marks an alternative possibility.

The second principle I will call unique actuality (hereafter UA). Every subject is constitutively related to objects of its experience. Thus, the way the entity *actually is* depends upon the relations it bears to the objects of its relations. This means that a different set of objects would result in a different actuality. This is to say that every entity which is *actual* – everything in the actual world – is somehow distinct (albeit minutely) from every other possible way that entity may have been actualized. If we accept the distinction between internal and external relations, unique actuality follows from there being internal relations.

The problem arises when GF, our principle of general freedom, runs into UA, the principle of unique actuality. Suppose subject S is a simple actual entity coming into existence as we speak: a ‘trivial puff of existence’ as Whitehead might say. Under GF, a subject has a degree of freedom in the way it will unify the data it receives as it becomes actual. For simplicity of thinking, we could imagine that the subject’s only options for so unifying are to do A or to do B.

GF states that the S can possibly do A or B. Thus, from our intuition of otherwise worlds

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33. Note that this does not mean that the freedom of the subjects – the actual entities – is without *any* constraint whatsoever. Some entities have far less freedom than others. The point is simply that everything has *some* degree of freedom beyond mere determinism.

and an understanding of GF, we will say that there is a possible world in which S does A, and a possible world in which S does B. Now, UA states that the actual case in which our subject S does A – the actual entity  $S_A$  – is distinct from an alternate case in which S does B – which would be an actual entity  $S_B$ . If, as Leibniz maintains, discernibles are non-identical, then  $S_A$  is not identical with  $S_B$ .<sup>34</sup>

To the over simplified model with which we started, we can add all of the complexity we like. Give S option C as well; add options D,E, F and on and on. No matter how many iterations, no two of the entities in any of these worlds will be identical. The result of this is that, given UA, the following argument can be made:

1. No possible worlds have any actual entities in common.

Add to this the following:

2. There is more than one possible world. (consequence of GF and the meaning of possible world)

Taking Whitehead's ontological principle, we can construct the following attack on the modal ontological argument:

3. No actual entity can exist in more than one possible world. (consequence of 1; restatement of UA)
4. No actual entity can exist in all possible worlds. (consequence of 2 and 3)
5. No actual entity can be necessary. (consequence of 4 and the definition of necessity)
6. God is an actual entity. (assertion by Whitehead on the basis of his ontological principle)

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34. He denies that there are substances or individuals "differing only in number." See his *Discourse on Metaphysics*, Section 9 (*Philosophical Texts*, p. 60. Also see his *Letter to Arnauld*, p. 110).

7. God cannot be necessary. (consequence of 5 and 6).
8. God exists iff God is necessary. (necessity premise of modal ontological argument)

Therefore:

9. God does not exist. (consequence of 7 and 8)

It should be noted that when engaging in modal arguments, it may be tempting to take (2) for granted. But it is possible to construct a model with only one possible world. Given the reflexivity constraint – i.e., that this world bears the accessibility relation to itself – whatever is true in this world is necessary. On this model, (3) does not imply (4), since every entity would exist in only one world (thus satisfying (3)), while at the same time existing in every possible world – i.e., the *only* possible world. However, GF requires that there is more than one possibility, and thus more than one possible world. In this event, that (2) obtains, the process ontology commits us to (4).

In his defense of Alvin Plantinga’s treatment of trans-world identity, Peter van Inwagen argues that there is in fact, no such problem. Their response is to claim that the debate is among those who have fallen victim to “the grip of confusions.”<sup>35</sup>

Their response is not to think of alternate possibilities (e.g., Socrates as snub-nosed or non-snub-nosed) as two objects with distinct labels, but as a single object, “labeled twice.” We should not give in to the picture of multiple possible objects with distinct properties. Instead we should conceive of a single object with multiple possible properties. In this case, God (or AQM) may have property  $P_1$  in the actual world, and would have had  $P_2$  if an alternate world had been actual. That is, AQM is “that which is  $P_1$  in  $W_1$  and would have been  $P_2$  had  $W_2$  obtained. On the Plantingian picture, (1) would presumably be suspect.

But the kind of identity offered is identity of macro-objects – what our process lexicon calls societies. Actual entities, by their nature as unique in their actuality are non-identical

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35. *Ontology, Identity, and Modality*, p. 189.

across worlds. If there were to be two worlds with the same actual entity in them, that entity could not have been otherwise, whichever of the two worlds might have obtained. This would mean that the entity would not be free to be otherwise that it is, which is an unacceptable conclusion according to process ontology.

Moreover, Van Inwagen states that the solution he offers does not apply for the extreme case of modal realism offered by David Lewis.<sup>36</sup> The process view of actual entities as unique in their actuality would likely point to a Lewisian understanding in which all entities, by dint of UA, are world-bound.

The worry is now this: Plantinga and Van Inwagen have a way to preserve identity across worlds, which could save an ontological argument from our worry. But this move works for macro-objects only, not for the simple, actual entities, and not for Lewisian interpretations of worlds and their occupants. Actual entities seem to fit with the Lewisian picture better than the Plantinga/Van Inwagen picture.

It would seem that on the process view, even the macro-objects (i.e., societies) are different from world to world, since they are composed of different actual entities. If the entities which compose society  $C_i$  are different from the entities composing the society  $C_j$ , how could  $C_i$  be the same as  $C_j$ ? This would imply that the macro objects, contrary to the Plantingian response, are not identical across worlds. This seems to cause problems for our solution. So our worry becomes: can both Plantinga and process ontology be correct?

I answer that the worry, so stated, arises from the fallacy of composition. Actual entities are unique in each possible world. But Societies *can* be *identified* with one another – though they may not be *identical*. The expression “identical” is a numerical property and only numerical. In contrast, “identifiable” is what societies share across possible worlds. We don’t think entities are identical in the same way that  $1 = 1$ , and it shouldn’t worry us at all. What we care about is that the societies are identifiably the same. When a building is

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36. *Ontology, Identity, and Modality*, pp. 203-204.

tuck-pointed, it may have all new bricks, but there is a real and important way in which it is still the same house.

The important notion is to make sure that however many alterations of possibilities one might imagine, identifying characteristics will hold.<sup>37</sup> George L. Goodwin interprets Hartshorne to propose a relation that, on my lights, will do quite well. This relation is temporal successorship. On Goodwin's view, time is "objective modality" – that is, all questions of metaphysical possibility or necessity are decided by appeal to a future (or once future) possibility<sup>38</sup> If you wonder, "Is  $P$  possible?" you should ask, "Could future events unfold such that  $P$  would obtain?" If the answer is no, you should ask, "Was there ever a time at which future events could have produced  $P$ ?" If the answer to both of these questions is negative, what does it mean to say that  $P$  is possible, since it *never* could have been *actual*?

Temporal succession can help us to identify societies in alternate possible worlds as relevantly the same. If we want to know whether two societies are identifiable as the same in our sense, we can follow their lineage of constitutive actual entities conceptually back in time, and ask whether they share a common ancestor.<sup>39</sup> If there is no such ancestor in common, then they are not the same.

In the tradition of the argument, anything that would be identifiable as AQM would be temporally infinite. Thus, an actual entity which AQM comprises at any moment would share a predecessor with other entities (though differently actual), and thus would be identifiably part of 'the same' society (i.e., AQM).

Here we see a way in which time helps with thinking through problems regarding identity. Two possible worlds can share entities prior to the moment of decision that distinguishes

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37. The notion of an identifying characteristic is one that applies here to *societies* – i.e., the macro-objects such as persons or dry-goods.

38. See Goodwin, section 4.1, pp. 44 ff.

39. This is a bit of an oversimplification, but precision would wait on more explication of neoclassical metaphysics than our scope allows. Moreover, it is not necessary for our purposes here.

them. Within the process camp, there is disagreement on whether we should think of time as creating emergent possibilities or think of all possibilities as eternal.<sup>40</sup> Thinking in terms of emergence, one might say that until a subject decides between option A or B, there was only *one* world.<sup>41</sup> At each moment of decision, the world undergoes a kind of modal mitosis, in which it branches into various possibilities.

The purpose of the discussions in this section was not to offer concrete conclusions on the issues of possible worlds, emergent possibilities, or the ontological necessity of the world. It was rather to point to the fact that there are implications of adopting neoclassical metaphysics which extend beyond (though they are also bound up within) the discussion of the ontological argument, and to mention a few of them. The hope of this (somewhat lengthy) aside was to indicate some of the topics on which neoclassical thought has something to offer. In turn, I hope that a view of the entailments of this line of thinking extend their invitation to readers for their further consideration.

## 7.11 Conclusion

Now – with our understanding of the nature and formulation of ontological arguments, of the modal premises, and the concepts provided by process philosophy, we are prepared to make the ontological argument about which this project has been concerned.

Recalling our formulation from chapter three, I will proceed through the argument, noting where in the current project I have argued on behalf of each point.

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40. For much of my thinking, I have considered the latter view to be correct. But of late, I have come to think more seriously about the notion of emergent possibilities. This notion of temporal identification has provided a way for me to better understand the emergent view.

41. Here “subject” and “decision” are technically terms of art for process thought. However, the more common uses of the terms are macro-examples of the technical use. Every actual entity is a subject. This is not to be thought of as implying conscious subjectivity. Every subject “decides” from a range of possibilities. The range is very limited for most subjects, and the decision is not necessarily conscious. Electrons cannot decide to be astronauts when they grow up. But as conscious subjects who do make such evaluative decisions, humans are an example of the activity at a larger scale. The principle that applies it the scale of actual entities also holds at the level of a conscious society such as a person.

1. From an understanding of AQM, we know that AQM exists if and only if it is necessarily the case that AQM exists. That is, the existence of AQM is not a contingent question, but is either necessary or impossible.
2. It is possibly the case that AQM exists (It is possible for AQM to exist). Thus,
3. it is possibly the case that it is necessarily the case that AQM exists.
4. According to the logic of S5 (see chapter four), we know that if it is possibly necessarily the case that p, it is necessarily the case that p, and thus it is the case that p. And so,
5. it is necessarily the case that (i.e., it is the case that) AQM exists.

In concurrence with Hartshorne, I do not take this argument to have demonstrated *with epistemic certainty* the existence of God. Nor do I take such certainty, or anything approaching it, to be a prerequisite for the religious adequacy of theism (a longer discussion for another time with another thinker).<sup>42</sup> The credit for the initial discovery belongs to Anselm, and the version of the defense I have offered is indebted in large part to Hartshorne. If the argument is a little clearer, or a little stronger for what I have lent it, I count my aims as fulfilled. Should the reader deem this project a failure, I invite her to shelve it alongside where Hume would have all other volumes in metaphysics. In either case, I am happy to have thrown my lot with the supporters, especially of the neoclassical bent, and to be counted among their number.

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42. It is fortunate for those who hold religious commitments that epistemic certainty is not necessary for an adequate theism. In the “Conceivability of Necessity” section of chapter five, I mention Gamwell and Mourad as maintaining that epistemic certainty is not possible, and I am persuaded by them. If epistemic certainty were demanded, no believer whatsoever could be religiously adequate.

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