Modal Ontological Arguments

Abstract:

Inspired by the third chapter of Anselm's *Proslogion*, twentieth century philosophers including Charles Hartshorne and Alvin Plantinga developed "modal" ontological arguments for the existence of God. Such arguments use modal logic to infer God's existence from the premises that (i) God's existence is possible and (ii) if God exists, He exists necessarily. Like other ontological arguments, modal arguments have won few converts to theism; many commentators consider them question-begging or liable to parody. This article details how recent attempts to defend these arguments have tried to overcome these difficulties by drawing on modern accounts of the epistemology and metaphysics of modality.

1. Overview

Although their structure and premises may appear modest, ontological arguments for the existence of God raise a host of questions concerning the nature of existence and modality (Plantinga, 1974a, 196). Perhaps this explains their enduring interest amongst philosophers, despite the widespread verdict that such arguments are universally unpersuasive (e.g., Oppy, 2006; Goldschmidt, 2020).

In this article, I detail recent work on one *genus* of ontological argument: the modal ontological argument (hereafter, the MOA; plural MOAs) which has its modern roots in the work of Charles Hartshorne (1944; 1962), Norman Malcolm (1960) and Alvin Plantinga (1974a; 1974b). I first briefly introduce the MOA's historical development, before outlining one representative version of the MOA which serves as a springboard for my further analysis. I then discuss each contentious premise of this argument in turn, surveying recent attempts to support or undermine it. Notoriously, besides direct criticism of their premises, ontological arguments have been judged susceptible to parody. I therefore offer a further examination of contemporary commentary on such parodies. My discussion aims to highlight the increasing willingness of philosophers to explain and defend the argument by explicit appeal to controversial claims about modal epistemology and metaphysics.

2. The Modal Ontological Argument(s)

It is difficult to specify the defining characteristics of ontological arguments. As Oppy (2018) notes, one might suppose that ontological arguments have premises which can putatively be known *a priori* or without recourse to perceptual experience, but such claims are dubious concerning many historically influential ontological arguments. Oppy therefore proposes as the distinguishing feature of ontological arguments the fact that such arguments have "the right kind of connection to Anselm's argument". Here, I follow a similar approach in discussing MOAs: I consider MOAs to be arguments which adopt the argumentative strategy of Hartshorne, Malcolm and Plantinga, who were themselves inspired by the third chapter of Anselm's *Proslogion*. The common approach of Hartshorne et al. is to argue first that if God exists, His existence is metaphysically necessary and then to contend that since God's

existence is metaphysically possible, God actually exists. Because I am examining arguments which follow this strategy, I omit consideration of "higher-order" ontological arguments inspired by Kurt Gödel (Oppy, 2008; Maydole, 2009; Pruss, 2018) and E.J. Lowe's argument that God best explains the existence of *abstracta* (Lowe, 2012).

The MOA's development was partly motivated by its putative dialectical advantages over other ontological arguments. Firstly, MOAs appear valid in suitable modal logics and their premises seem unambiguous. By contrast, Anselm's arguments in *Proslogion* 2 and 3 are infamously difficult to reconstruct and invalid on some interpretations (e.g., Millican, 2004). Secondly, as Malcolm argued, MOAs do not assume (against Kant), that existence is a first-order predicate. Finally, historical ontological arguments may implicitly rely on auxiliary positions such as Meinongianism (Anselm) or the doctrine of innate ideas (Descartes) which many modern philosophers reject. MOAs assume in their place a metaphysical framework of modality– often explained using the language of "possible worlds" -- which is more familiar and congenial to analytic philosophers. However, my analysis will suggest that MOAs may need to assume equally controversial auxiliary positions about the epistemology or nature of modality to be rationally persuasive.

To better understand the MOA, we can consider a representative version which I dub the Token Modal Ontological Argument (TMOA):

1. Possibly, God exists. (Possibility Premise)
2. If God exists, then God necessarily exists. (Conditional Necessity)
3. So possibly, God necessarily exists.
4. If possibly, God necessarily exists, then God necessarily exists. (Necessary Inference)
5. So, God necessarily exists.
6. So, God exists. (Conclusion)

There are other ways of presenting MOAs. Notably, Plantinga (1974a) denies that there are any possible but non-existent individuals, and so his "Victorious Modal Argument" refers to the possible instantiation of "maximal greatness" rather than the existence of a "maximally great being" (i.e., God). Equally, TMOA deliberately does not supply any definition or characterisation of "God". Most MOAs echo Anselm and Descartes in describing God as a "perfect" or "maximally great" being (vel sim.). However, the structure of MOAs does not require such description, and some contemporary proponents develop arguments using alternative descriptions. For instance, Stacey (2021) characterises God as "Unlimited Being", whilst Sijuwade (2023) boldly asserts that God is a "maximal power trope", doubtless to the chagrin of any readers attracted to apophatic theologies. Finally, some MOAs contain fewer premises than TMOA. For instance, one can replace Necessary Inference and Conditional Necessity with the premise "Necessarily, if God exists, then, necessarily, God exists." But, for purposes of exposition, it is useful to examine the separate premises featured in TMOA.

Three premises of TMOA are controversial *in se*: the Possibility Premise, Conditional Necessity and Necessary Inference. Whilst the Possibility Premise is the most contested in modern literature, I discuss these premises in reverse order, to introduce background assumptions made by proponents of MOAs.

3. Necessary Inference

Premise (4) ("Necessary Inference") states that if it is possible that God necessarily exists, He necessarily exists. This premise relies on a widely accepted form of logical inference from the possible necessity of a proposition to its necessity. As Plantinga asserts, "what is necessarily true does not vary from world to world" (1974a, 213). Necessary Inference is valid in the S5 system of modal logic, which includes "$\Diamond A \rightarrow \Box \Diamond A$" as a distinctive axiom. According to S5, possibility is symmetrical and transitive between possible worlds, so that $\Diamond \Box A \rightarrow \Box A$. Equally, it has been shown that many MOAs are valid in the weaker Brouwer system of modal logic, which makes the weaker assumption that possibility is merely symmetrical between possible worlds (Leftow, 2005). Despite some controversy, most philosophers accept that S5 is the correct logic to describe modality (see Pruss and Rasmussen (2018), Hale (2020), and Leftow (2022)).

Additionally, as Andrzej Biłat (2021) shows, the comparatively weaker logical system T – which merely adds the assumption that $\Box A \rightarrow A$ to the weak logic K -- yields a valid MOA which features only the premises that (i) God's existence is either necessary or impossible and (ii) God's existence is possible. Marco Hausmann (2022) develops an ontological argument for the actual – but not, necessary -- existence of God which assumes the truth of neither S5 nor (i).

Given the popularity of the view that S5 accurately describes metaphysical possibility and necessity, most critics and proponents of MOAs accept Necessary Inference or else the validity of MOAs which do not employ it as a premise. Yet we should observe with Ted Parent (2016) that if those advancing MOAs wish to argue that God exists extra-mentally, they may need to assume the falsity of some forms of modal fictionalism.

4. Conditional Necessity

Premise (2) of TMOA ("Conditional Necessity") claims that if God exists, He necessarily exists. To support this premise, proponents of TMOA typically appeal to their preferred conception of God. Another option is simply to stipulate that God exists necessarily; compare Plantinga's argument, which has as a premise "the property has maximal greatness entails the property has maximal excellence in every possible world" (Plantinga, 1974a, 214). Yet this approach may incur dialectical costs when the MOA is confronted with parody objections. Accordingly, to show why many philosophers find Conditional Necessity plausible, I now consider attempts to argument that God's character means that He exists necessarily, if at all.

As noted previously, many proponents of MOAs take God to be a perfect or maximally great being, or a being "than which none greater can be conceived". There are many extant arguments to show that a perfect being exists necessarily. Firstly, one might follow Plantinga in thinking that a being's value in *any* possible world is partly determined by its value in other possible worlds. Yet if a being does not exist in some possible world, it has no properties and thus no greatness there. Accordingly, Plantinga suggests that a maximally great being would have maximal excellence (which he suggests includes omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection) in all possible worlds.

Secondly, Brian Leftow (2022, 285-303) has recently argued that if God does not exist necessarily, He possesses some "less-making attributes" (i.e., properties such that God would be better, if He did not possess them). For example, if God exists contingently, He relies on luck for His existence and is also vulnerable to having missed out on the joys of divine life. Conversely, God can only possess several plausibly "great-making properties" if He does exist necessarily. These include the properties of being the necessary source of all concrete entities (besides Himself) and being the ground of all necessary truth. (Leftow, 2002, 337-338). Whilst these arguments have considerable force, the broad strategy of "perfect being theology" has recently faced fierce criticism from Jeff Speaks (2019).

An alternative argument for Conditional Necessity was suggested by Norman Malcolm (1960), who argued that God exists necessarily (if at all), given his putatively "unlimited" nature and consequent aseity and timelessness. But although these properties might suffice for necessity in an Aristotelian sense, it does not seem obvious that a being which timelessly exists *a se* must exist without absolute metaphysical necessity (i.e., in all possible worlds). However, Malcolm's argument intimates a more plausible thought: that only God's actual existence can adequately ground His possible existence. Several authors have recently advanced this line of argument. Stephen Kearns (2022) appeals to a "Possibility Grounding Principle" which states that "Anything which grounds the possibility that there is an F is at least as fundamental as some possible F." But on many accounts, including characterisation of God as Unlimited Being or the being on which all others essentially depend, if God exists, He is the most fundamental entity. Accordingly, one can argue that God's possible existence cannot be grounded in anything besides His actual existence. Additional arguments for the claim that if God possibly exists, He actually exists (call it, "Conditional Actuality") are given by Stacey (2021) and Leftow (2022). Admittedly, Conditional Actuality is not logically equivalent to Condition Necessity (i.e., that if God exists, He necessarily exists). However, one can follow Stacey (2021) and Kearns (2022) in constructing MOAs for God's actual existence which rely on Conditional Actuality rather than Conditional Necessity.

On the other hand, there are influential arguments that no entity exists necessarily. One objection following Hume urges that only propositions which entail a contradiction are absolutely impossible, but further alleges that no proposition which denies the existence of any entity entails a contradiction (Swinburne, 2016, 261–83). A related objection holds that all conceivable states of affairs are possible, but that one can conceive of states of affairs in which there are no necessary beings, including God. (Pruss and Rasmussen, 2018, 173–5).

Such arguments are presently unfashionable. Following Kripke and Putnam, many philosophers are content to allow that some propositions are necessarily true, even though their falsehood does entail any contradiction. Besides Kripkean propositions concerning identity, examples can be adduced including "if an act exactly duplicates one of Jack the Ripper's killings in all non-moral ways, it is wrong" and "no region of a single visual field appears both red and green at once" (Leftow, 2022, 82–9). With regards to the second argument, many proponents and critics of MOAs alike hold that conceivability is no guarantee of possibility. But regardless, if one can conceive of a state of affairs in which no concrete objects exist, one can plausibly likewise conceive of a state of affairs in which God or other objects necessarily exist. (Pruss and Rasmussen, 2018, 176–9). Perhaps for these

reasons, many modern secular philosophers countenance the necessary existence of non-divine *abstracta*.

5. Possibility Premise

Although philosophers are often prepared to accept Necessary Inference and Conditional Necessity, many nevertheless regard MOAs as unpersuasive. This is principally because they consider that proponents cannot provide adequate rational motivation for the Possibility Premise, given the truth of Conditional Necessity. Without jointly affirming the Possibility Premise and Conditional necessity, one cannot further infer (3) of TMOA, or its conclusion. Two arguments are given to show that the Possibility Premise lacks motivation: the charge that MOAs beg the question (which I examine in this section) and arguments that MOAs are susceptible to parody (which I consider in the following section).

The first argument holds that that one cannot have adequate reason to jointly accept (1) and (2) of TMOA – and so also, (3) -- unless one has independent reason to accept (5) and/or (6) (Adams, 1988; Sobel, 2003; Oppy, 2006; Rowe, 2012; van Inwagen, 2018). As an argument for God's existence, TMOA is naturally addressed to non-theists who doubt its conclusion. Like any argument, it cannot persuasively motivate its premises by appealing to the latter. But since those who doubt God's existence *a fortiori* also doubt (5) -- i.e., that God necessarily exists -- unless they have independent reason to accept (1) and (2), TMOA should not persuade them that God in fact exists. This objection to MOAs is therefore often phrased as the charge that they "beg the question": i.e., that one cannot rationally embrace their premises unless one already believes their conclusions.

Admittedly, one can follow some commentators in arguing that since non-theists have persuasive reason to embrace premises (5) and (6) (or alternatively, (2) and (6)) independently of premise (1), they should nevertheless believe that God necessarily exists (e.g., Burns, 2017). But such reason would render TMOA dialectically otiose, because it would provide a distinct argument for God's existence.

To grasp the objection that MOAs beg the question, it is important to note that the Possibility Premise makes a *metaphysical* rather than an *epistemic* claim. It holds that God's existence is metaphysically possible; not that God may exist for all we know. But it is hard to see how one can demonstrate to someone who accepts Conditional Necessity that God's existence is metaphysically possible, if that person otherwise doubts His existence. Certainly, it is not enough to convince them (e.g., by appeal to the conceivable truth or logical consistency of theism) that a being exists with divine qualities in some possible world, unless one can also show them that in that possible world, that being exists necessarily. For otherwise, one will only have provided evidence for the possible existence of a contingent near-divine being, and not for the possible existence of God Himself.

In this vein, Peter van Inwagen (2018, 242) suggests that "there seems to be no a priori reason … to think that it is possible for there to be a necessarily existent being that has all perfections essentially." He appeals to the following general principle:

"If a proposition p is non-contingent, and is known to be non-contingent by a certain person or certain population at a certain time, and if p is epistemically neutral for that person or population at that time, then the proposition that p is possibly true is also epistemically neutral for that person or population at that time". (van Inwagen, 2018, 244).

Van Inwagen support his principle by appealing to examples where it plausibly holds. For instance, one cannot know that Goldbach's conjecture is possibly necessarily true without knowing that it is true. However, this hardly shows that van Inwagen's principle holds generally, or in regard to premise (3) of TMOA.

When Plantinga (1974a) advanced his own MOA, he noted that whilst there may not be a compelling argument that "possibly, maximal greatness is exemplified", one might rationally believe this without further evidence just as one can rationally hold "basic" belief in other philosophical principles such as the Indiscernibility of Identicals. Perhaps, as William Wainwright (2012) argues, someone could find the Possibility Premise or premise (3) intuitively plausible even if they do not find premises (5) or (6) immediately intuitive. Still, anecdotally, I report that the intuitive appeal of the Possibility Premise is considerably diminished once one accepts Conditional Necessity and Necessary Inference. Accordingly, if one can only rationally believe the Possibility Premise and/or (3) through immediate intuition, the persuasive power of TMOA may be severely limited.

Seeking to improve on Plantinga's defence of (3), recent proponents of MOAs have developed arguments that God possibly exists (or, that He possibly necessarily exists), which do not constitute independent evidence that He necessarily or actually exists. There are three broad approaches to this task in the current literature. Some philosophers try to argue that God possibly (necessarily) exists without invoking any assumptions about metaphysics or modality, others invoke contentious doctrines about how we can recognise that entities possibly exist, whilst still others base their arguments on detailed assumptions about the metaphysics of modality itself.

Yujin Nagasawa's recent defence of the MOA (Nagasawa, 2017) exemplifies the first approach. Nagasawa proposes that God should be understood as the Maximal God, i.e. "the being than which no greater is metaphysically possible". Since the Maximal God is the greatest metaphysically possible being, it is trivially true that it possibly exists. But *contra* Nagasawa, it is not obvious that the Maximal God exists necessarily (if at all), *per* (2) of TMOA. Perhaps no being exists necessarily, yet some entity is the greatest metaphysically possible being given its relative superiority to other beings in those possible worlds in which it does exist. Alternatively, perhaps the greatest metaphysically possible being is not impressive enough to be an object of worship of the kind typically posited by theists.

A similar problem faces attempts to argue that some being must be able to possess all perfections – and hence, that the existence of a perfect being is possible -- because a perfection cannot prevent the possession of another perfection (Bernstein, 2014). As Goldschmidt (2020, 67) argues, if one's definition of perfection stipulates that properties which are perfections can be jointly exemplified by some entity, it is epistemically possible that properties which philosophers typically characterise as great-making properties (e.g.

omniscience, omnipotence, necessary existence) are not perfections since they cannot be co-exemplified. The moral, perhaps, is that merely defining "God" or "perfection" in a way which entails that a perfect being is metaphysically possible does not suffice to demonstrate the possibility of the type of entity worshipped by theists.

The second avenue of argument for the Possibility Premise draws upon the epistemology of modality, seeking to argue that general principles which allow us to discern which entities possibly exist indicate that God possibly exists. One important contribution comes from Alexander Pruss (2001), who argues that God's existence is possible on the basis the of a principle found in the eighth centure Indian philosopher Śaṃkara that "whatever really seems to a subject, could be". More precisely, x really seems to some subject "if and only if s would be correctly identifying the content of a single phenomenal experience of hers if she were identifying it to be an x". Pruss then suggests that because some mystics have had experiences of a maximally great being, which exists necessarily if at all, there is substantial reason to think that God (thus understood) possibly necessarily exists.

Both Śaṃkara's principle and Pruss' application of it have been challenged. Ryan Byerly (2010) argues that the principle faces persuasive counterexamples. For instance, some people experience the world as though God does not exist, and others have experienced causes as necessitating their effects, even though present philosophical orthodoxy holds that (most) causes do not necessitate their effects. Pruss might reply that such people have not had a phenomenal experience of a relevant object, or that they have mischaracterised the content of their experience. Yet Pruss does not give a definition of phenomenal experience to underpin such a response. Further, Yujin Nagasawa (2017) contends that it is implausible that mystics can precisely discern God's modal properties in their putative experiences of Him. But unless mystics can confidently claim that they are experiencing the appearance of a being which exists in *all* possible worlds – as opposed to, say, many possible worlds – then they cannot know that they are experiencing a perfect being which exists necessarily (if at all) as opposed to a less-than-perfect being which exists in most but not all possible worlds. Accordingly, even if Śaṃkara's principle holds, it is unclear that it "really seems" to mystics that a maximally great being exists, and thus it is also unclear that such a being possibly (necessarily) exists.

More recently, Pruss (2010) has suggested that if belief in a proposition is motivationally central to a flourishing and intellectually sophisticated life of significant length, then that proposition is likely possible. Since belief that a maximally great being exists is motivationally central to the flourishing of the lives of many theists, it is probable that a maximally great being possibly exists and thus that it possibly necessarily exists. As Pruss himself notes, this argument is open to critique on two counts. Firstly, one might doubt that propositions which are motivationally central to flourishing lives are thereby more likely to be possibly true. Secondly, one might wonder whether belief in the existence of God *qua* necessary being is really motivationally central to the lives of theists; maybe it is merely belief in the existence of an entity with other divine properties (e.g., omnipotence and omnibenevolence) which motivates their behaviour.

Lastly, Joshua Rasmussen (2018) contends that it is probable that maximal greatness is possibly instantiated -- i.e. that possibly, a maximally excellent being necessarily exists -- by

appeal to a principle of "modality continuity" which holds that "that classes of properties that differ merely in degree tend to be modally uniform – either all possible or all impossible" (Rasmussen, 2014). Rasmussen uses this principle to argue that since some degrees of value are actually instantiated, it is probable that all degrees of value are possibly instantiated. Since maximal greatness is a degree of value, it is thereby also likely that maximal greatness is possibly instantiated. Nevertheless, Rasmussen admits that his principle of modal continuity only provides defeasible evidence for premises (1) and (3) of TMOA and considers various objections to his argument, including the worry that if maximal greatness is a degree of value, every degree of value cannot be instantiable because some degrees of value entail that maximal greatness is not instantiated (see Erasmus, 2022).

The final species of argument for the possibility premise appeals to a particular metaphysics of modality and argues that given that metaphysics, God possibly (necessarily) exists. Sometimes such appeal is tacit, as in E.J. Lowe's (2013) defence of the MOA. Lowe suggests that one can rationally believe that God possibly exists – and therefore, that He necessarily exists – by understanding God as a perfect being (vel sim.) and so plausibly grasping something of His real definition or essence. Dan Eklund (2019) shows that Lowe's argument likely draws on his broader metaphysics and epistemology of modality, according to which an entity's essence determines its modal properties because "essence precedes existence" both ontologically and epistemically (Lowe, 2008). Perhaps Lowe judges that *all* essences which do not contain logically incompatible properties are possible and that God essence (perhaps, uniquely) determines that He exists necessarily. Lowe's views on modality are somewhat idiosyncratic, and Eklund argues that they are implausible since their application in the MOA is subject to various parodies of the types discussed in the next section.

By contrast, some current attempts to support the Possibility Premise (or similar premises in different species of MOA) explicitly rest on detailed assumptions about the metaphysics of modality, which I can only sketch here. Stacey (2021) argues that philosophers who endorse Modal Meinongianism (the thesis that any meaningful noun-phrase has a reference in some possible or impossible world) who hold that the noun-phrase "Unlimited Being" is meaningful have reason to believe that such a being exists in some possible or impossible world. Since the existence of an Unlimited Being in any possible or impossible world must plausibly be grounded in its actual existence, it follows an Unlimited Being actually (and necessarily) exists. A similar argumentative strategy is pursued by Kearns (2022), although the latter tries to avoid commitment to God's necessary existence.

Joshua Sijuwade (2023) offers a lengthy defence of a "Modal Realist Ontological Argument", which relies upon a particular modal metaphysics ("Leibnizian Realism with Overlap") which combines elements of Alvin Plantinga's Abstractionism and David Lewis' Modal Realism. Sijuwade suggests that on this modal framework, the existence of a maximally great being is possible unless its properties are logically inconsistent. He then further shows how, given Leibnizian Realism with Overlap, the existence of a maximally great being in one possible world guarantees its existence in every possible world given its "immensity".

As this brief survey of recent literature indicates, analysis of the Possibility Premise (and/or premise (3)) of TMOA is ongoing. Many modern defences of MOAs motivate these premises by appeal to controversial positions in modal epistemology or metaphysics, which

opponents can and do criticise. Yet defenders of MOAs are aware of the objection that they are question-begging. Consequently, they present arguments for the truth of the Possibility Premise which do not obviously assume belief in God's existence. Accordingly, van Inwagen's contention that "no version of the modal ontological argument can serve as a vehicle from which one can pass from epistemic neutrality as regards its conclusion to justification or warrant" (van Inwagen, 2018, 245) may appear hasty.

6. Parody

The second objection to the Possibility Premise – or, to MOAs generally – holds that they are susceptible to parody (Oppy, 1995, 162–185; Nagasawa, 2017, 152–179). That is, one can construct parallel and equally plausible ontological arguments for the existence of beings which evidently do not exist, or whose existence is incompatible with theism. It is not always obvious what parodies of MOAs intend to demonstrate. Perhaps some parodies are advanced to show that since their conclusions are absurd, MOAs must somehow rely on dubious premises or forms of inference, even if their precise error is hard to diagnose. But one might also think of parodies as efforts to undermine rational support for the Possibility Premise in particular, by showing that similar premises in parody arguments have just as much evidence in their favour as the Possibility Premise of MOAs.

There are three types of parody typically advanced in recent literature. I here show how they can be formulated as replies to TMOA, although they can be adapted to parody other MOAs.

Firstly, one species of parody replaces (1) in TMOA with a rival Possibility Premise: that possibly, God does not exist (Plantinga, 1974a, 219; Collin (2022)). Given Conditional Necessity, one can infer that possibly, God necessarily does not exist and thence (if S5 or Brouwer is the correct modal logic) that God does not exist.

Secondly, other parodies replace "God" in TMOA with some non-divine entity which does not plausibly exist or necessarily exist. The *locus classicus* for such an objection is the work of Anselm's contemporary Gaunilo of Marmoutiers, who suggested that by adapting Anselm's argument in *Proslogion* 2, one could argue that an island than which none greater can be thought exists (Garrett, 2013). The implication of such parodies is that if ontological arguments for theism are rationally persuasive, one can devise parallel arguments to "demonstrate" the existence of some token of almost any type of entity, if one specifies that the token is "perfect" or otherwise defines it such that it exists necessarily if at all. Naturally, this is absurd.

Lastly, subtle parodies substitute descriptions of particular entities which are inconsistent with theism for "God" in TMOA. Such parodies do not imply that one can devise plausible MOAs for the existence of *any* kind of entity. One such parody argues for the existence of a being like God in every way except that it is morally vicious (Tooley, 1981, 425; Millican, 2004).

How persuasive are such parodies as responses to MOAs? To be successful, they must carefully copy the structure of their target MOAs and show that their premises have similar

plausibility to the premises of MOAs. As such, it is difficult to offer a concise discussion of parodies which abstracts from (i) the structure of particular MOAs and (ii) the evidence which proponents of those MOAs supply for their premises. Many recent defences of MOAs allege that there is not equal motivation to embrace the controversial premises of parodies and the controversial premises of MOAs (e.g., Pruss, 2010, 238-246 Rasmussen, 2018, 185-7; Stacey, 2021, 455).

However, we can briefly survey strategies to show that various parodies fail. Against the first type of parody, one might argue that the reasons for holding that God possibly exists do not equally support the judgement that God's non-existence is possible. For instance, it is not evident how to defend belief in the possibility of God's non-existence by appeal to Rasmussen's continuity principle or Lowe's epistemology of modality. Collin (2022) argues that attempts to infer the possibility of God's non-existence from the apparent logical consistency of the proposition "God does not exist" face an undermining defeater, which does not threaten the original possibility premise; for a response see Schmid (forthcoming). Related treatments of the entitlement to accept the Possibility Premise of MOA's and/or parody argument on the grounds that God's existence or non-existence is conceivably or apparently possible are given by Spencer (2018) and McIntosh (2021).

Against the second type of parody, Lowe (2012, 392) argues that it is implausible that any material entity exists necessarily. Indeed, it is not clear that there can be "perfect" tokens of many material kinds such as islands because, as Plantinga (1974b, 90-91) suggests, such entities are universally improvable by the addition of more or superior material parts. Finally, Thomas Ward (2019) urges that entities are perfect *qua* beings, not *qua* material kinds such as islands, and so suggests that one can only construct successful ontological arguments for the existence of perfect entities if those arguments aim to demonstrate the existence of a perfect being (i.e., God).

Responses to the third kind of parody are necessarily especially sensitive to the parody in question. Against the suggestion that a morally evil being otherwise like God might necessarily exist, one might contend that it is not obvious that Conditional Necessity holds for an evil deity in virtue of its evil nature. This may give ontological arguments for God a dialectical advantage over parallel arguments for an evil deity (Nagasawa, 2017). Additionally, Swinburne (2009) has argued that omnipotence entails omniscience and perfect moral goodness, so that it is logically impossible that an evil being shares God's other properties.

In sum, one's evaluation of parody objections may depend -- like one's evaluation of the Possibility Premise -- on one's broader epistemological and metaphysical commitments and their considered application.

7. Conclusion

At first glance, it is tempting to regard MOAs as philosophical conjuring tricks: impossible attempts to adduce significant metaphysical conclusions from trivial premises. Yet as commentators increasingly recognise, MOAs depend upon substantive assumptions about the epistemology and metaphysics of modality. These arguments continue to face

objections that they beg the question and are subject to vicious parody. But MOAs are widely regarded as valid and recent years have witnessed a proliferation of creative efforts to defend their contentious premises. The search for a maximally convincing ontological argument continues.

References

Adams, R. (1988). Presumption and the Necessary Existence of God. *Noûs*, 22(1), 19–32. https://doi.org/10.2307/2215545

Bernstein, C. (2014). Giving the Ontological Argument its Due. *Philosophia*, 42(3), 665–679. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11406-014-9529-7

Biłat, A. (2021). The Correctness and Relevance of the Modal Ontological Argument. *Synthese*, 199(1), 2727–2743. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-020-02908-5

Burns, E. (2018). The Ontological Argument: Patching Plantinga's Ontological Argument by Making the Murdoch Move. In Walls and Dougherty (Ed.) *Two Dozen (or so) Arguments for God: The Plantinga Project* (pp. 124–134). New York: Oxford University Press.

Byerly, R. (2010). The Ontomystical Argument Revisited. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 67(2), 95–105. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11153-009-9219-8

Collin, J. H. (2022). Reverse Ontological Argument. *Analysis*, 82(3), 410–416. https://doi.org/10.1093/analys/anab077

Eklund, D. (2020). E.J. Lowe on the Modal Ontological Argument. *Religious Studies*, 56, 611–612. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412519000131

Erasmus, J. (2022). Why it is Difficult to Defend the Plantinga-Type Ontological Argument. *The Heythrop Journal* 63(2), 196–209.

Garrett, B. (2013). On Behalf of Gaunilo. *Analysis*, 73(3), 411–412. https://doi.org/10.1093/analys/ant040

Goldschmidt, T. (2020). *Ontological Arguments*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hale, B. (2020). *S5* as the Logic of Metaphysical Modality: Two Arguments For and Two Arguments Against. In Hale and Leech (Ed.), *Essence and Existence* (pp. 141–148). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hartshorne, C. (1944). The Formal Validity and Real Significance of the Ontological Argument. *The Philosophical Review* 53(3), 225–245.

Hartshorne, C. (1962). *The Logic of Perfection.* La Salle: Open Court.

Hausmann, M. (2022). The Actual Challenge for the Ontological Argument. *Analysis* 83(2), 222–230. https://doi.org/10.1093/analys/anab075

Kearns, S. (2022). A Modified Meditation: Exploring a Grounding Modal Ontological Argument. *Religious Studies* 58, 801–813. https://doi:10.1017/S0034412521000421

Leftow, B. (2002). Anslem's Neglected Argument. *Philosophy* 77(3), 331–347. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0031819102000335

Leftow, B. (2005). The Ontological Argument. In Wainwright (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion* (pp. 80–115). New York: Oxford University Press.

Leftow, B. (2022). *Anselm's Argument: Divine Necessity*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Lowe, E.J. (2008). Two Notions of Being: Entity and Essence. *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 62, 23–48.

Lowe, E.J. (2012). 'A New Modal Version of the Ontological Argument. In Szatkowski (Ed.), *Ontological Proofs Today* (pp. 179–91). Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag.

Lowe, E.J. (2013). The Ontological Argument. In Meister and Copan (Ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Religion* (pp. 391–400). New York: Routledge.

Malcolm, N. (1960). Anselm's Ontological Arguments. *Philosophical Review*, 69(1), 41–62. https://doi.org/10.2307/2182266

Maydole, R. (2009). The Ontological Argument. In Craig and Moreland (Ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology* (pp. 553–592). Malden, MA: Blackwell.

McIntosh, C. (2021) A Defense of Modal Appearances. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 89(3), 243–261. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11153-020-09779-3

Millican, P. (2004). The One Fatal Flaw in Anselm's Argument. *Mind*, 113(451), 437–476. https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/113.451.437

Nagasawa, Y. (2017). *Maximal God*. Oxford University Press.

Oppy, G. (1995). *Ontological Arguments and Belief in God*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Oppy, G. (2005). *Arguing About Gods*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Oppy, G. (2018). Introduction. In Oppy (Ed.), *Ontological Arguments* (pp. 1–18). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Parent, T. (2016). The Modal Ontological Argument Meets Modal Fictionalism. *Analytic Philosophy* 57(4), 228–252. https://doi.org/10.1111/phib.12088

Plantinga, A. (1974a). *The Nature of Necessity*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Plantinga, A. (1974b). *God, Freedom and Evil.* New York: Harper and Row.

Pruss, A. (2001). Śaṃkara's Principle and Two Ontomystical Arguments. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 49(2), 111–120. https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1017582721225

Pruss, A. (2010). The Ontological Argument and the Motivational Centers of Lives. *Religious Studies*, 46(2), 233–249. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0034412509990400

Pruss, A. (2018). Gödel. In Oppy (Ed.), *Ontological Arguments* (pp. 139–154). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pruss, A., & Rasmussen, J. (2018). *Necessary Existence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rasmussen, J. (2014). Continuity as a Guide to Possibility. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 92(3), 525–553. https://doi.org/10.1080/00048402.2013.860608

Rasmussen, J. (2018). Plantinga. In Oppy (Ed.), *Ontological Arguments* (pp. 176–194). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rowe, W. (2009). Plantinga on the Ontological Argument. *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 65(2), 87–92. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-009-5223-2_8

Schmid, J. (forthcoming). Symmetry's revenge. Analysis.

Sobel, J.H. (2003). *Logic and Theism: Arguments for and Against Beliefs in God*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Speaks, J. (2018). *The Greatest Possible Being*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Spencer, J. (2018). Conceivability and Possibility. In Oppy (Ed.), *Ontological Arguments* (pp. 214–237). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Stacey, G. (2021). Simply the Best? Ontological Arguments, Meinongianism, and Classical Theism. *Faith and Philosophy* 38(4), 431–459. https://doi.org/10.37977/faithphil.2021.38.4.2

Sijuwade, J. (2022). The Modal (Realist) Ontological Argument. *Philosophy and Theology* 34(1), 203–264. https://doi.org/10.5840/philtheol2023321155

Swinburne, R. (2009). How the Divine Properties Fit Together: Reply to Gwiazda. *Religious Studies*, 45(4), 495–498. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0034412509990229

Swinburne, R. (2016). *The Coherence of Theism,* 3rd Edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tooley, M. (1981). Plantinga's Defence of the Ontological Argument. *Mind*, 90(359), 422–427. https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/xc.359.422

Van Inwagen, P. (2018). Begging the Question. In Oppy (Ed.), *Ontological Arguments* (pp. 238–249). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Ward T. (2018). Losing the Lost Island. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 83(1), 127–134. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11153-016-9582-1

Wainwright, W. (2012). Assessing Ontological Arguments. *European Journal of Philosophy of Religion* 4(2), 19–39. https://doi.org/10.24204/ejpr.v4i2.294