An Ontological Redefinition

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Within the history of philosophy, the ontological argument for the existence of God has taken on many forms, iterations, and criticisms. It is an argument traditionally derived from the Anselmian premise that the conceptualization of God, that being than which nothing greater can be conceived, displays the necessity of God’s existence within its mere understanding. Since the time of Anselm, the ontological argument has undergone several permutations, which have expanded the diversity of the argument’s formulations. In a way, the ontological strategy is better understood not as a singular argument, but rather as a family of arguments that share a resemblance. However, Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* is the historical home-wrecker of this household of arguments. Kant’s repudiation of the ontological argument showed that, although existence may be a logical property of God, such a logical conclusion does not translate into proving that God exists within the actual world. To reject God is also to reject all of God’s properties, which would include God’s logical existence.

Many modern philosophers have conceded Kant’s conclusion, but there has been a resurgence of thinkers who have reasserted the credibility of the ontological argument. Alvin Plantinga is one of these advocates who, by further advancing the argument’s evolution, contend that the ontological argument still holds reasonable philosophical weight. In his “Contemporary Defense of Ontological Arguments,” Plantinga sets about reviewing the history and refutations of the proof, and concludes that the errors in past formulations lie in their disconnect in drawing implications of postulating God’s *being* in possible worlds. Plantinga recognizes the entanglement of the traditional ontological arguments in the circular logic of the conclusion of God’s existence in the actual world being contained within the premises of God’s existence in a possible world. To this Plantinga asks “must we settle [this knotty issue of circularity] in order to even consider the ontological argument?” He rhetorically responds, “No. for instead of speaking of possible beings and the worlds in which they do not exist, we can speak of properties and the worlds in which they do or don’t have instances....” Through this shift of focus to the instantiation of God’s properties, Plantinga seeks to redefine the original Anselmian premise of god as a *being* than which nothing greater can be conceived, into a statement of God’s *being maximally great*. From this account Plantinga pursues a line of argument that seeks to show how the possible property of God’s maximal greatness necessitates that God be maximally excellent in all possible worlds, and therefore that it is reasonable to believe that God necessarily exists in the real world.

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4 Ibid., 347–349.
In this paper I will argue that Plantinga’s formulative contention takes too many liberties with the epistemic nature of properties and their relations to their possible instantiations. In his predicative definition of maximal greatness, Plantinga fails to reconcile the contingent understanding of the property maximal greatness detached from any actual instantiation in possible worlds. This detachment carries metaphysical implications on the logical inference of God’s existence in the actual world due to the contingent nature of the detached property, which would violate the nature of God as a non-contingent being. Further, I argue that Plantinga’s attempt to address this issue by claiming that maximal greatness as a necessary property of God makes it so that any imagination of maximal greatness in possible worlds would also necessarily carry the instantiation of God into that world, and this would beg the question of God’s existence. In the end Plantinga is left with either the logic of God’s properties but not God’s existence, or a return to the circular logic of the original Anselmian argument.

Plantinga begins his contemporary defense with an assessment of Anselm’s argument within the framework of imagining possible worlds with possible beings that have possible properties. Possible worlds, according to Plantinga, are mentally conceived realities where a being, object, or property may or may not exist. Just as I can conceive of a certain basketball existing in one possible world, I can also conceive of a possible world where this basketball does not exist. The same can be said about objects possessing different properties, e.g. a basketball that is the size of a house in one world and the size of a thimble in another. Plantinga continues from these premises to assert that if an object may possess different properties in different worlds, then that object may have different degrees of greatness in different worlds. Therefore, if existence is a great-making property, then a world where an object does exist would be greater than the world where that object does not exist. Following such terms, Plantinga sketches Anselm’s original ontological argument for God’s existence as follows:

(1) God is a being than which nothing greater can be conceived
(2) God does not exist in the actual world
(3) For any being not to exist in the actual world, there must be a possible world wherein that being exists
(4) There is a possible world wherein God exists (from 1 & 2)
(5) If God does not exist in the actual world, then the God who exists in the possible world exceeds the greatness of God in the actual
(6) It is impossible in understanding (1) & (5) that there be a being greater than the being than which none greater can be conceived. The possible God cannot be greater than the actual
(7) It is impossible for God not to exist in the actual world

However, as Plantinga acknowledges, this traditional formulation of the ontological argument is plagued with question begging. The issue reveals itself in premise (3), which presupposes that God already exists as a being to be conceived within other possible worlds. Thus, the inference of (5) from (3), which reveals the contradiction, can only be made if it presupposes the argument’s conclusion that God is

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5 Ibid., 342–344.
6 Ibid., 344–346.
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a being that exists.⁷ As Plantinga states, “all we are really told, in being told that God is a possible being, is this: among the possible beings there is one that in some [possible] world or other has a degree of greatness that is nowhere excelled.”⁸ The existence of God thus only remains in the realm of the possible, and is not necessitated in the actual world.

To circumvent this issue of circularity, Plantinga turns his attention to the conception of God’s property of being maximally great, and to how this property can be conceptualized in possible worlds without having to be instantiated within them. Plantinga discusses the different circumstances of postulating a possible property in a possible world, as compared to postulating possible beings. In discussing possible beings, the instantiation of God’s being as possibly existing or not existing within possible worlds determines the nature of God’s relational greatness between all worlds. (For God to be maximally great, God must be maximally excellent within all possible worlds.) Thus, the nature (or greatness) of God’s instantiation in such possible constructions is contingent upon how God exists in other worlds, and hence the problem of question begging.⁹ To avoid this, Plantinga argues that properties, when being conceived as possibilities within possible worlds, still carry relational meaning in those worlds whether they are or are not instantiated.¹⁰ Plantinga uses the example of a “fat man in the corner” to illustrate this point: “Instead of speaking of the possible fat man in the corner...we may speak of the property being a fat man in the corner, noting that it isn’t instantiated (although it could have been).”¹¹ Instead of postulating a particular being that must be instantiated within a possible world, the property of being maximally great is imagined as possibly instantiated. In this sense, it would seem that Plantinga understands the possible instantiation of the property in terms of how the property would potentially relate to all things within those possible worlds, regardless of whether it actually existed or not.¹² Thus, the property of being maximally great is not altered, changed, or devalued in its relations by whether it is instantiated or not within possible worlds.

Plantinga concludes that the issue of question begging in the presupposition of God as a being does not occur in the conception of God’s properties, for properties can be extended into possible worlds without requiring a presumption of their being instantiated in other worlds.¹³ With this construction Plantinga diverges from the traditional formulation of the ontological argument, which speaks about possible beings with maximal greatness in possible worlds, speaking rather of the property of being maximally great and of the subsequent demands it places on our epistemologies as possibly being instantiated in possible worlds. With this understanding of the conceptualization of properties within possible worlds, Plantinga turns his attention to the ontological implications of the property of maximal greatness as a property being postulated in possible worlds.

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⁷ Kant, 339–340.
⁸ Plantinga, 345.
⁹ Ibid., 344.
¹⁰ Ibid., 348–349.
¹¹ Ibid., 350.
¹³ Plantinga, 344–345.
Plantinga understands maximal greatness as a cluster of properties that contain God’s omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection. In possessing these properties, God is a being than which nothing greater can be conceived in any possible world. Plantinga furthers his elaboration of the property of maximal greatness by describing the property’s relationship with the concept of maximal excellence in given worlds. For Plantinga, to have maximal excellence in a possible world is to not be excelled by any other being within that world. This excellence, however, is limited to that world and is not indicative of the being’s having maximal greatness in any other possible worlds. To have maximal greatness, however, is to possess the property of unsurpassable conceptual greatness, which cannot be excelled by any other property within any other world. This would mean that a being that possesses maximal greatness also possesses maximal excellence within all possible worlds.  

Thus, in the concept of not being excelled within any other world, maximal greatness is not only defined by properties within its own possible world, but also by how it exists in all possible worlds. If there is a possible world in which maximal greatness is instantiated, then necessarily a being that is maximally great must have maximal excellence in every possible world.

Following this analysis of the definition of maximal greatness, Plantinga asserts his own permutation of the ontological argument.

(8) For a being to be maximally excellent it must be omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect.
(9) For a being to be maximally great it must necessarily be maximally excellent in every possible world.
(10) There is a possible world where the property of possessing maximal greatness is conceptualized and instantiated in a possible being.
(11) The property of possessing maximal greatness is to be maximally excellent in every possible world.
(12) God exists in the actual world.

The key to the uniqueness of this argument is that Plantinga is starting from a definition of what it means for a being to be maximally great, which would require the possession of maximal excellence within all worlds, including the actual. Since a maximally great being cannot be excelled within any possible world, that being must therefore also be maximally excellent within all possible worlds. In following Plantinga’s formulation of maximal greatness, it would be impossible for maximal greatness to be instantiated in a possible world, and not have the instantiated being be maximally excellent within the actual world. Even though it is not directly the being of God that is being postulated in all possible worlds, God’s existence becomes necessitated through the possibility of maximal greatness dictating in its definition that such a being must exist within all possible worlds. Plantinga then concludes that in understanding the terms of possible maximal greatness, we must concede the reasonableness of believing in God’s existence in the actual world by the very definition of God’s nature of being maximally great.

14 Ibid., 348–349.
15 Ibid., 350–351.
However, in analyzing the details and construction of the property of maximal greatness, as well in reiterating some aspects of Kant’s critique, it can be shown that Plantinga oversteps the epistemic bounds in his formulation of maximal greatness, taking a false leap from the realm of possible into actual. It can be understood that the supposed strength of Plantinga’s argument hinges upon the property of maximal greatness, and more specifically, how Plantinga defines it in its relations. First and foremost, maximal greatness is categorized as a property of an instance: God. Thus, in being a property, maximal greatness is set to fulfill a certain explanatory role within the instantiation of God. This role would be described as being of an unsurpassable greatness, where no other being in any world excels it. This role can then be seen as being tied to the property’s capacity of “being greater,” which would entail that maximal greatness is defined in terms of its relations to deficient realities, for to be greater one has to be greater than something that is less great.

Plantinga would argue against this statement of maximal greatness being relatively defined, claiming that maximal greatness is itself a great-making property, and therefore one that can only be understood as a necessary property of God. However, how can the property of maximal greatness be considered a great-making property within the instantiation of God when Plantinga, in his formulation of maximal greatness in possible worlds, separates the very property from its instance? The entire premise of Plantinga’s evasion of question begging was to show how the property of maximal greatness could be postulated regardless of its instantiation in the actual world. He chooses to posit the property of maximal greatness in possible worlds for the very reason that it does not require instantiation within the actual world to do so. Thus, without a necessary instance to instantiate itself within possible worlds, the property of maximal greatness can only be understood and defined through its relations to deficient properties within other possible worlds, and therefore cannot be considered a great-making property of God, who could not possess such a contingency. Plantinga is committing the error of attempting to draw necessary conclusions about God from what he considers a necessary property of God by postulating that property in possible worlds without its supposedly necessary instantiation.

Without its necessary instantiation within the possible world, maximal greatness can only be understood in its necessary role of being unsurpassably greater, which is relationally defined by being greater than other deficient possibilities. If Plantinga wishes to claim that maximal greatness can only be understood as a necessary property of God, then when maximal greatness is imagined in possible worlds, it must necessarily carry the being of its instantiation along with it, which would beg the question. Plantinga is left with the dilemma of begging the question or committing a misappropriation of the contingency of maximal greatness’s metaphysical implications into the actual world.

With this understanding, a creative reapplication of Kant’s critique can clean up the rest of the inconclusiveness of Plantinga’s proof. Without necessary instantiation in possible worlds, maximal greatness can only be understood within its necessary relational role to other deficient worlds. If it is the role that is necessary and not the being within these possible worlds, then any attachment of that property to a being can only be understood as a logical connection and not a necessary metaphysical statement. Thus, the possible instantiation of maximal greatness necessitating a being that is maximally great in all possible worlds posits what can only be contained within the logical concept of that possible being.
already. Nothing is added beyond the realm of possibility, and in being defined strictly by relation to other deficient possible worlds, maximal greatness and its instantiation are restricted to this realm of logical possibility. Thus in rejecting God in the actual world, a person still does not make a contradictory statement, but rather still rejects the subject of God and all its properties together.

With the above critiques and considerations, it can be seen that Plantinga’s new version of the ontological argument does not achieve the ends it seeks. It should also be noted that it is not only Plantinga’s ontological argument falls victim to these problems. The above critiques can be seen as applicable to the entire ontological strategy, since the problem with ontological arguments is that their premise rests upon the contingent nature of some being or some property in some possible world, and that this puts demands on actual reality. The nature of this contingency makes it so that the issues of question begging or deficient relativity will forever plague the ontological strategy in its attempts to take requirements on the actual world from possible worlds.

REFERENCES


\[17\] Kant, 339.