

An Ontological Argument against Agnosticism

Abstract: I argue that the modal ontological argument (MOA) can be used to formulate an argument against agnosticism. The MOA argues that God's possibility entails his existence and from this it can be argued that God either must exist (theism) or he must be incoherent and impossible (strong atheism). Thus agnosticism is eliminated as a tenable position with respect to God's existence. Either God must exist or he is impossible. This may have been the point of Anselm's original ontological argument, but as Anselm did not conceive of the possibility that God might be incoherent, he ended up formulating his argument poorly. Now an agnostic could still appeal to his own epistemic position. He might argue that while there are only two options available he is unable to choose between them. The distinction between what is ontologically and what he knows about epistemically seems to allow this. But this appeal has diminishing returns. The more the agnostic learns and knows, the more capable he should be of deciding between the two options. So the only way to continually maintain this epistemic objection is to purposefully remain in ignorance.

INTRODUCTION

If we put aside the question of if the ontological argument (OA) proves God's existence we find that hiding beneath the surface of the discussion on OAs and modal ontological arguments (MOAs) is the principle that the possibility of necessity entails actual necessity, and nearly everyone concedes this principal. With this principal we get the following argument;

1. It is either possible or impossible for God to exist.
2. If it is possible that God exists, then God must exist (per valid forms of the MOA).
3. If it is impossible for God to exist, then God cannot exist.
4. Therefore the only tenable positions with respect to God are theism (God exists) or strong atheism (God cannot exist).

I call this an ontological argument against agnosticism (OAAA).

1 and 3 should be uncontroversial. I am unaware of even the potential of categories other than the possible and the impossible. Likewise I cannot see how any reasonable person could seriously doubt that an impossible thing does not exist.¹

¹ Reasonable people may disagree about what actually is impossible, but they will not doubt that what is impossible does not exist.

All the weight of the OAAA falls to premise 2. And premise 2 is nothing more than a summary of the logic of valid forms of the MOA. So if the MOA is valid, then the OAAA works. The MOA doesn't need to be sound for premise 2 to work here, it only needs to be valid. The MOA can fail to prove the existence of God but still demonstrate the principal I am appealing to (the possibility of necessity entails necessity).²

THE VALIDITY OF THE MODEL ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

So is the MOA a valid argument? Briefly yes it is. To demonstrate this here is a brief summary of “one of the most intriguing and puzzling arguments of all time.”³ I am using Plantinga's version of the MOA as the modal versions are typically stronger than other versions of the OA and Plantinga's version is widely regarded as representative of the MOA.⁴

² The MOA could beg the question, use circular reasoning, or have a false premise and it would still be valid and work for premise 2 in an OAAA.

³ Paul Vincent Spade, “Medieval Philosophy,” in *The Oxford Illustrated History of Western Philosophy*, ed. Anthony Kenny (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 55-105, at 82.

⁴ William Hasker explains that Plantinga's version which is, “loosely based on *Proslogion 3*, that is unquestionably valid. (Similar arguments were devised by the Norman Malcolm... a Wittgensteinian, and by . . . Charles Hartshorne.” William Hasker, “Analytic Philosophy of Religion,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, ed. William J. Wainwright (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 429. Plantinga is credited with knocking down Malcolm's OA, proving, “clearly and conclusively, that it is fallacious.” Jonathan Barnes, *The Ontological Argument* (London: MacMillan, 1972), 19. The major problem with Malcolm's MOA is that it depends upon the idea that an eternally existing thing cannot come into or go out of existence and so is necessary. However Plantinga points out that an eternally existing thing can still be contingent; for example, if a dog has been sitting on a pillow from eternity past, the depression the dog causes in the pillow will be eternal, but it will still be contingent because it depends on the dog for its existence. This is my own example. Alvin Plantinga, “A Valid Ontological Argument?,” in *The Ontological Argument: From St. Anselm to Contemporary Philosophers*, ed. Alvin Plantinga (Garden City: NY: Anchor, 1965), 160-171. The recent collection of essays on ontological arguments, *Ontological Proofs Today*, listed Plantinga's version as representative of MOAs. Mirosław Szatkowski, introduction to *Ontological Proofs Today* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction, 2012), 25. Anthony C. Anderson says that OAs, “reach their most sophisticated forms in the works of Alvin Plantinga and Kurt Gödel.” Anthony C. Anderson, “Conceptual Modality and the Ontological Argument,” in *Ontological Proofs Today*, ed. Mirosław Szatkowski (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction, 2012), 295. And most general discussions about the OA list or cite Plantinga. Thus, Plantinga produced “a modal version of the ontological argument that may have produced more response than any version since Anselm's original offering.” James Sennett, “Plantinga, Alvin.” in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Robert Audi, 708-709. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 709.

In *God, Freedom, and Evil*, Plantinga offered a simplified version of his MOA;⁵

(29) There is a possible world in which maximal greatness is instantiated.

(30) Necessarily, a being is maximally great only if it has maximal excellence in every world and

(31) Necessarily, a being has maximal excellence in every world only if it has omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection in every world...

if (29) is true, then there is a possible world *W* such that if it had been actual, then there would have existed a being that was omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect; this being, furthermore, would have had these qualities in every possible world. So it follows that if *W* had been actual, it would be *impossible* that there is no such being.⁶

Thus, Plantinga argues, it is impossible that there not be a being that has omnipotence, omniscience, and moral perfection. So it is impossible that there is no God.

To understand this argument we need to have an understanding of the philosophical tool possible worlds. “A possible world is simply a way things could have been. . . We are just using “possible worlds” as a convenient way of talking about how things might have been.”⁷ So the idea behind (29) is just that it is possible that maximal greatness exists.

Maximal greatness can be fleshed out in different ways. Anselm was hitting on this idea when he called God, “something than which nothing greater can be thought.”⁸ Some philosophers prefer to speak in terms of “absolute perfection” instead of maximal greatness and

⁵ While Plantinga presents a strong and robust MOA in *The Nature of Necessity*, he does not do so in a concise manner. The argument is spread out over several pages with much of its necessary reasoning explained by Plantinga in prose rather than in the numbered premises. While this makes the argument compelling, it also makes it impractical for citation. The majority of authors who have engaged with Plantinga’s MOA have offered fair reconstructions and critiqued those reconstructions. So for space and ease I am using his simplified version from *God, Freedom, and Evil*. For Plantinga’s more complete MOA look at *The Nature of Necessity*. Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 213-217. Also Robert Maydole has produced a good reconstruction of this argument. Robert E Maydole, “The Ontological Argument,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, ed. William L. Craig and James P. Moreland (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 573.

⁶ Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 111.

⁷ J. P. Moreland, *Kingdom Triangle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 26.

⁸ Anselm, *Proslogion 2*, in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works (Oxford World’s Classics)*, trans. M. J. Charlesworth, eds. Brian Davies, and G. R. Evans (New York: Oxford University, 2008), 87.

some go the route of using ‘great-making’ properties.⁹ While there are reasons to prefer one of these methods over the others all of these are attempting to get at the same idea.¹⁰ That of the Ultimate thing, Being with a capital b, or as Anselm said, “that than which no greater can be conceived.”¹¹ And if there is a maximally great being (MGB), that being is God. Hence (29) can be reduced to “it is possible that God exists,” which seems to be a remarkably simple, easy, and unconvoluted statement. However in the MOA it is actually a complex and difficult statement.¹²

Now if it is possible that a MGB exists, then it exists in some possible world. But a being that only existed in one possible world would not be as great as one that existed in two possible worlds. This second being would not be as great as one that existed in three possible worlds, and so on. So to be an MGB, a being must exist in all possible worlds. Now, since the actual world (reality) is a possible world, then the MGB (God) really does exist.

At this point many people who hear this argument will suspect that they have been tricked. As Bertrand Russell put it, “The argument does not, to a modern mind, seem very convincing, but it is easier to feel convinced that it must be fallacious than it is to find out

⁹ The idea of a ‘great-making’ property, “is that, for some property *F*, if God would be greater if *F* than not *F*, then, given that God is the greatest possible being, God must be *F*.” Jeff Speaks, “Perfect Being Theology and Modal Truth,” *Faith and Philosophy* 33, no. 4 (2016), 465.

¹⁰ For example I think maximal greatness is an easier and less problematic concept than absolute perfection.

¹¹ However even Anselm’s variant is a little problematic as it seems to define God in relation to human conceptions and this seems to put too firm a limit on God’s perfection as God should certainly rise above human conception. Just because we cannot conceive something greater does not mean there is not something greater. Human conception does not limit what actually is. Conversely maximal greatness avoids this problem by attempting to appeal to what is actual instead of to human conceptions.

¹² This is because of how the MOA defines God and that the MOA rests on top of many metaphysical questions as Plantinga explains, “Is existence a property? Are existential propositions – propositions of the form *x exists* – ever necessarily true? Are existential propositions about what they seem to be about? Are there, in any respectable sense of “are,” some objects that do not exist? If so, do they have any properties? Can they be compared with things that do exist? These issues and a hundred others arise in connection with Anselm’s argument.” Alvin Plantinga, “The Ontological Argument,” in *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader*, ed. James F. Sennett (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 50.

precisely where the fallacy lies.”¹³ So what goes wrong? This has proven to be a very difficult question to answer. At first brush some will argue that there must be some error of logic in the argument.¹⁴ But in fact, “this argument has a long and illustrious line of defenders extending to the present.”¹⁵ For example, in addition to Plantinga in recent years Norman Malcolm, Charles Hartshorne, Kurt Gödel, Paul Oppenheimer, Edward Zalta, Alexander Pruss, Robert E Maydole, and E. J. Lowe have all proposed some type of OA.¹⁶ Still OAs have plenty of critics like Richard Swinburne who claims that, “the vast majority of philosophers have held that no such argument is sound,”¹⁷ and Richard Taylor agrees saying that, “few philosophers have considered this a very good argument.”¹⁸

But recall that we don’t need the MOA to be sound for the OAAA to work; we only need the MOA to be valid, and the logic of the MOA can be explained apart from any argument for God’s existence.

¹³ Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York, N.Y: Simon and Schuster, 2007), 586.

¹⁴ Despite his earlier claim Russell thought this. “It may be said quite decisively that, as a result of analysis of the concept “existence,” modern logic has proved this argument invalid. “Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, 787.

¹⁵ Plantinga, “The Ontological Argument,” 50.

¹⁶ Norman Malcolm, “Malcolm’s Statement of Anselm’s Ontological Arguments,” in *The Ontological Argument: From St. Anselm to Contemporary Philosophers*, ed. Alvin Plantinga (Garden City: NY: Anchor, 1965), 136-180. Charles Hartshorne, “The Necessarily Existent,” in *The Ontological Argument: From St. Anselm to Contemporary Philosophers*, ed. Alvin Plantinga (Garden City: NY: Anchor, 1965), 123-135. Kurt Gödel, *Collected works: Volume III Unpublished essays and lectures*, ed. Solomon Feferman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 403–404, 429–437. Paul E Oppenheimer and Edward N Zalta, “A Computationally-Discovered Simplification of the Ontological Argument,” *Australain Journal of Philosophy* 89, no. 2 (2011), 333-350. Alexander R. Pruss, “A Gödelian Ontological Argument Improved Even More,” in *Ontological Proofs Today*, ed. Mirosław Szatkowski (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction, 2012), 203-211. Maydole, “The Ontological Argument,” 553-592. E. J. Lowe “A New Modal Version of the Ontological Argument,” in *Ontological Proofs Today*, ed. Mirosław Szatkowski (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction, 2012), 179-191.

¹⁷ Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2016), 263.

¹⁸ Richard Taylor, introduction to *The Ontological Argument: From St. Anselm to Contemporary Philosophers* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1965), xii.

THE MODEL PRINCIPAL APART FROM AN ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

To illustrate, in the most basic sense of necessity, it is necessary that all physical things have what Aristotle called magnitude.¹⁹ It is impossible for a physical thing to exist without having magnitude or spatial extension.²⁰ So magnitude is necessary for physical things. We can say that these relations are necessary only because it is impossible that they be false, or that their negation is impossible. It is impossible for a physical thing not to have magnitude, as then it would not be a physical thing. If the negation of a thing is impossible, then it is necessary and “every proposition whose contradictory entails a contradiction likewise passes this test for absolute necessity.”²¹ The two aspects of this rule—it is impossible that x not be and the negation of x is impossible—are two ways of saying the same thing. The negation of x is non- x , so these two rules for finding necessity—it is impossible that x not be and the negation of x is impossible—are equivalent. But ultimately these two methods say the same thing. X is necessary if non- x is impossible.

These examples demonstrate that necessity is binary; it is an all-or-nothing affair, or “with the modality of *necessity*—if it can be admitted that there is such a status—only the existence, but not the nonexistence, is conceivable.”²² A physical object either has magnitude, or it does not. If a physical object lacks magnitude then it is not a physical object. It is impossible to

¹⁹ Aristotle, *Physics*, VI, 1-2, 231a21-233b32, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, trans. R. P. Hardie and R. K. Gaye, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 316-321.

²⁰ As Travis Dumsday explains, “Spatial extension is a necessary condition for the possession of spatial location, and anything lacking a spatial location... is *ipso facto* nonphysical.” Travis Dumsday, “Spatial Extension as a Necessary Condition for Being a Physical Object and Why It Matters for Philosophy of Religion,” *Philosophia Christi* 18, no. 1 (2016), 29.

²¹ Brian Leftow, *God and Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 33.

²² Charles Hartshorne, “What did Anselm Discover?,” in *The Many-faced Argument: Recent Studies on the Ontological Argument for the Existence of God*, ed. John Hick and Arthur S. McGill, (New York: MacMillan, 1967), 326.

have degrees of magnitude. This is what I mean when I say that necessity is binary. It either is or it is not, and there is no middle ground.

Now in order for something to be possible it must be coherent. It cannot be self-contradictory or self-refuting. It is the opposite of what it means to be impossible.

“Contradictions just cannot be true, period.”²³ There is the common example of a square circle. The definition of a circle and the definition of a square contradict each other, so nothing can be both a square and a circle at the same time. “With the modality of *impossibility*, existence is not (consistently) conceivable.”²⁴ These impossible things are not truly “things,” as their existence would violate basic laws of reasoning. So it would be more appropriate to refer to them as “non-things.” While the rules of grammar allow us to speak and write about non-things like square circles or “the sound of one hand clapping,” this is nothing more than a meaningless combination of words.²⁵ For a non-thing “it is not logically possible that it apply to anything.”²⁶

Now a possible thing may (but may not) exist. If a notion, idea, or thing is coherent, then it is possible. “Any sentence that . . . does not entail any contradiction, is a logically possible sentence and so expresses a logically possible proposition.”²⁷ It follows that there are plenty of possible things that do not exist. Hartshorne explains that “with the modality termed *contingency* [possibility], existence and non-existence are equally conceivable.”²⁸ Of course everything that does exist, or is actual, is also possible.²⁹ If it were not possible, it would not exist. Everything

²³ Leftow, *God and Necessity*, 33.

²⁴ Hartshorne, “What did Anselm Discover?,” 326.

²⁵ Clapping requires two or more hands, so it is impossible for one hand to clap, and thus there is no “sound of one hand clapping.”

²⁶ Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 65.

²⁷ Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 24.

²⁸ Hartshorne, “What did Anselm Discover?,” 326.

²⁹ There are also possibilities that describe things that are impossible in the sense that we simply cannot do them. Plantinga explains this by claiming that there are states of affairs (possibilities), “that do *not* obtain or are *not* actual.” This is what Plantinga means by causal or natural necessity. He gives the

that exists in the actual world is possible, and everything that is possible is not incoherent or self-contradictory (it is not impossible).

So how does this relate to necessity? Well, if we think of possibility, actuality, and necessity as concentric circles, necessity would be the smallest circle, and it would be contained within the other two. That is to say, a necessary thing is also possible and actual. We can use the previous example to help clarify this. It is possible, actual, and necessary that a physical object have magnitude. It is possible because there is nothing contradictory or incoherent about a physical object having magnitude. It is actual because all physical objects do have magnitude. And it is necessary because its negation, a physical object without magnitude, is impossible.

It follows from the above (x is necessary if non- x is impossible, necessity is an all-or-nothing affair, and necessity contains possibility) that if something is possibly necessary, then it is necessary.

This is an extraordinary claim with far-reaching consequences, and there are some knowledgeable people who dispute it. However, it follows from what we know about possibility and necessity so perfectly that a whole axiom of Modal Logic (axiom S5) is devoted to this idea, and “most metaphysicians accept S5 as the propositional modal logic of metaphysical modality.”³⁰ The possibility of necessity entails necessity. As Jason L. Megill and Amy Reagor explain;

example of Voltaire swimming across the Atlantic Ocean. “These things are impossible for us; but not in the broadly logical sense.” It is not incoherent or nonsensical that Voltaire swam across the Atlantic, but it is impossible in the sense that human beings are not capable of such things. Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 35, Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, 2.

³⁰ Timothy Williamson, *Modal Logic as Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 44. While attempting to argue that S5 is flawed, Ian Rumfitt agrees and conceded that it is a “widely accepted thesis that the logic of metaphysical necessity is S5.” Ian Rumfitt, “Logical Necessity,” in *Modality: Metaphysics, Logic, and Epistemology*, ed. Bob Hale and Aviv Hoffmann (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 61.

S5 follows straightforwardly from the definition of “possibility” and “necessity” used in possible worlds semantics: if something is possible, then there is a possible world in which it is the case, and if something is necessary, then it is the case in all possible worlds, so if there is a possible world that contains a necessary being, the being will be in all possible worlds, i.e., it will be necessary.³¹

If a necessary thing is even possible, then that thing is necessary. So either a necessary thing is, or it is impossible. This combined with the fact that necessity is binary demonstrates the claim, the possibility of necessity implies actual necessity.

Modal Axiom S5 represents this principle and generally speaking logicians and students of modal logic agree that it is valid.³² As Brian Leftow says there are, “strong intuitions favoring S4 or S5 as the logic of absolute modality.”³³

TACIT ACCEPTANCE OF THE ARGUMENT AGAINST AGNOSTICISM

Now by defining God as an MGB the MOA indicates that God is a necessary being and it follows that if God is possible then God is actual. And even critics of OAs concede this point. The premise of the MOA (God is possible) is controversial in the sense that many people have claimed that the concept of God is incoherent.³⁴

But all the objections to the idea that God is possible attempt to show that God is impossible. So if an objection is made to the premise that God is possible, it will follow

³¹ Jason L. Megill and Amy Reagor, “A Modal Theistic Argument,” in *Ontological Proofs Today*, ed. Mirosław Szatkowski (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction, 2012), 89.

³² Here is a brief list of some sources that regard S5 as valid, reasonable, or a standard part of modal logic. John P. Burgess, *Philosophical Logic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 50-66. Dov M. Gabbay and Franz Guenther (eds), *Handbook of Philosophical Logic* (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), 10. James W. Garson, *Modal Logic for Philosophers* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 42. G. E. Hughes and M. J. Cresswell, *A New Introduction to Modal Logic* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 60-61.

³³ Leftow, *God and Necessity*, 440.

³⁴ There are many arguments that attempt to demonstrate a contradiction is entailed when something is all-powerful, all-good, and all-knowing such as the Problem of Divine Foreknowledge, the Problem of Evil, and so on. They all attempt to demonstrate that God (as a maximally great being) is impossible.

(assuming the objection works) that God is impossible.³⁵ Denying the possibility of God is to claim that God is impossible, and this is a tacit admission of the validity of the MOA.

Someone could argue that God is omnibenevolent, but that He is not omnipotent. Say this is a ‘god’, but not ‘God’.³⁶ Or Swinburne denies that God is necessary arguing, “that it is not logically possible that it is metaphysically necessary that God exists.”³⁷ Now Richard Swinburne is no meaningful sense an atheist, much less a strong one. He has publicly professed to be a Christian and argued for God’s existence. But, as a critic of OAs, by denying God’s metaphysical necessity he is tacitly accepting the validity of the MOA and thus the OAAA. I argue that OAAA forces us to conclude that a necessary God either exists or is impossible, and Swinburne concedes this by arguing that a necessary God is impossible.³⁸ Likewise Peter Van Inwagen follows the objection of Thomas Aquinas by arguing that “there seems to be no *a priori* reason, or none accessible to the human intellect (perhaps none accessible to any finite intellect) to think that it is possible for there to be a necessarily existent being that has all perfections

³⁵ Perhaps per an argument from the Problem of Evil a God who is both omnipotent and omnibenevolent is not possible, this would make God impossible.

³⁶ In a certain sense this is part of the motivation for the claim that the OA defines its way to victory. No MOA will ever work for a god; it only works with God. Hence some critics of the MOA reject it on the grounds that it works only by a minor happenstance of definition. As I just explained, if you define God in a slightly different way (as a god) then the MOA does not work. The problem here is not whether the MOA’s premise can be denied; it is possible to find a way to deny nearly any premise in nearly any argument. Bertrand Russell famously (and I think foolishly) denied Descartes’s “I think, I am” by claiming that thoughts do not require a thinker. Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, 567. Now Russell’s claim is nonsense as Douglas Groothuis explains: “One wonders who wrote the book if there was no thinker to be its author. Thoughts are *thought* by someone or they are not *thoughts* at all. To affirm thoughts without a thinker is akin to affirming a triangle that does not have three sides or a husband who is not married. How could that be done? But in the realm of religion many jettison critical thinking.” Douglas Groothuis, *Philosophy in Seven Sentences: A Small Introduction to a Vast Topic* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 89

³⁷ Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 265. What Swinburne means by “metaphysically necessary” is much the same as what Plantinga means by “broadly logically necessary” as he indicates that the proposition “all squares have four sides” is metaphysically necessary. Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 3.

³⁸ Swinburne does make a distinction between a metaphysically necessary God and a logically necessary God and argues that God is logically necessary.

essentially.”³⁹ Van Inwagen isn’t arguing that the MOA is invalid, he’s arguing that we cannot know the first (and only) premise of the argument.

So if you think the MOA or OA is sound, then you accept the reasoning of the OAAA. If you think the MOA or OA fails because a necessary being is impossible (Swinburne’s objection), then you tacitly accept the reasoning of the OAAA. If you think the MOA or OA fails because we cannot start *a priori* from the idea that God is necessary and find God’s existence (Aquinas and Van Inwagen’s objection), then you have no in principal objection to the reasoning of the MOA, and thus the OAAA. The point is that informed and reasonable objections to the MOA tacitly accept the reasoning of the MOA as their objections are to the first (and only) premise of the argument, not the logic of the argument, and thus they grant the principal I am appealing to in premise 2.

As both critics and proponents of the MOA grant that it is valid and we can explain the principal at work (the possibility of necessity entails necessity) apart from the MOA then it seems premise 2 stands, the OAAA is sound.⁴⁰

So it follows that with respect to God one must either be a theist (i.e., believe that He is) or a strong atheist (i.e., believe that He cannot be). One cannot coherently be an agnostic with

³⁹ Peter Van Inwagen, “Three Versions of the Ontological Argument,” in *Ontological Proofs Today*, ed. Miroslaw Szatkowski (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction, 2012), 158.

⁴⁰ Even atheist, agnostic, and theist critics of OAs such as Jordan Sobel, Richard Gale, Peter Van Inwagen, and Jonathan Barnes agree that the OA is valid or that it is possible to make it valid as they have all criticized the OA and expressed at least some skepticism or doubt that it works. And yet they also all concede that there is some form of it that is valid. Richard M. Gale, “The Failure of Classical Theistic Arguments,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, ed. Michael Martin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 88-89. Barnes, *The Ontological Argument*, 80. Jordan H Sobel, *Logic and Theism: Arguments for and Against Beliefs in God* (Cambridge New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 97, 137-138. Van Inwagen, “Three Versions of the Ontological Argument,” 158-159.

respect to God. The OAAA makes it unreasonable to say of God, “maybe He exists or maybe He does not.” He either *must* exist or *must not* exist.⁴¹

THE AGNOSTICS WAY OUT?

Now the agnostic may have a way out if he draws a distinction between metaphysical certainty and epistemological certainty. William Lane Craig gives an explanation of this distinction. “It is crucial that we keep clear on the difference between metaphysical and merely epistemic possibility... if God is conceived as a maximally great being, then his existence is either necessary or impossible, regardless of our epistemic uncertainty.”⁴²

An agnostic could accept the OAAA as sound and still maintain agnosticism by claiming that he is epistemologically uncertain about which option is true. To help explain this distinction, suppose that there is a binary light switch (the switch can only be ‘on’ or ‘off’) located in an unknown room on the other side of the world. Granting the existence of the switch, we know it must be the case that the switch is either on or off, but we do not know which position the switch

⁴¹ This is close to what Charles Hartshorne claimed when he advanced his own variant of the MOA. Hartshorne claimed that there are three types of things, the impossible, the possible, and the possible and actual (i.e. the actual). He then argued that, “The ontological argument holds that with the idea of God only two of these three cases need to be considered, since one of the three... is meaningless. If, the argument holds, there exists no God, then there also can be no possibility of the existence of a God, and the concept is nonsense, like that of “round square.” Charles Hartshorne, “The Necessarily Existent,” in *The Ontological Argument: From St. Anselm to Contemporary Philosophers*, ed. Alvin Plantinga (Garden City: NY: Anchor, 1965), 124. However Hartshorne did not stop here. He went on to argue that the OA does prove the existence of God. “If, further, it can be shown that the idea of God is not nonsensical, that it must have an at least possible object, then it follows that it has an actual object, since a “merely possible” God is, if the argument is sound, inconceivable.” Hartshorne, “The Necessarily Existent,” 124. Here is reconstruction of Hartshorne’s MOA, “H1 It is possible that a perfect being exists. H2 Necessarily, if a perfect being exists, then a perfect being necessarily exists. (Anselm’s Principle) Therefore, H3 A perfect being exists.” Maydole, “The Ontological Argument,” 572-573. As with Hartshorne above in the literature on the OA often a proponent or critic will come very close to making a type of OAAA, but they either stop just short of it or go a bit further by arguing that some OA does prove the existence of God.

⁴² William Lane Craig, “The Ontological Argument,” in *To Everyone an Answer: A Case for the Christian Worldview*, eds. Francis J. Beckwith, William Lane Craig, and J. P. Moreland (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 128.

is in. Until someone makes an observation of the switch we have no way of determining if it is on or off. We are metaphysically certain that the switch must be either on or off, but we are epistemologically uncertain about which position it is in.

So an agnostic might make a similar move and accept that God must exist or must not exist, but claim that he is uncertain which one is the case. And this distinction between what is metaphysically certain, and epistemologically what we know about it, is a legitimate distinction to make.

Whether or not the agnostic can be justified by using this distinction almost entirely depends upon his reasons. For example, consider a 19-year-old college freshman who is just beginning his first philosophy class. He is only marginally aware of arguments for and against God, he has not read any authorities or experts on the subject, and he is only barely aware of the relevant data on the question of God's existence. If he hears the OAAA, it would seem legitimate and perhaps even wise for him to say, "I think I do not know enough to decide between the two." Recognizing the limits of his own knowledge and limiting his claims and decisions to what that knowledge justifies is a reasonable and good thing.

On the other hand consider a man in his mid-70s with PhDs in the Philosophy of Religion and Theoretical Physics. He has studied both subjects extensively and is considered an expert in these fields. If this man hears the OAAA, concedes that it is sound, but claims not to have enough information to decide between God's existence and God's impossibility, this hardly seems justified.⁴³

⁴³ This is without accounting for the fact that most theistic religions claim that God is in some way self-evident or has universally revealed himself. If any of these religious doctrines are true then no one can have epistemic uncertainty about God. I excluded discussion of these possibilities as an effort to give agnosticism its best chance and for space and simplicity.

So an OAAA may not completely eliminate all agnosticism, but it will require an agnostic to keep appealing to his own ignorance. The more he learns, the less agnostic he should be. So while the distinction between what is metaphysically and what we know epistemologically is reasonable, it is a distinction with diminishing returns.

CONCLUSIONS

I have argued that underneath the argumentation and discussion on the Ontological Argument is the principal that the possibility of necessity entails necessity. Both critics and proponents of OAs concede this principal.⁴⁴ Further this principal can be demonstrated apart from any ontological argument, Modal Axiom S5 was developed to represent this principal, and the general consensus seems to be that S5 is valid.

With this we can make an ontological argument against agnosticism as we now know that God necessarily exists or that God is impossible. The agnostic may still be able to appeal to his own epistemic ignorance, but this is a weak reply with diminishing returns.⁴⁵

Practically speaking the OAAA forces theists into demonstrating that God is possible, (that he is a coherent concept) and this is a difficult claim to defend as they must overcome things like the problem of evil, the problem of divine foreknowledge, the problem of divine hiddenness, and many other such challenges.

But it also forces atheists into demonstrating that God is impossible, and this also is a difficult claim to defend as they must demonstrate that there is something incoherent or self-contradictory about the concept of God and that all of the attempts of theists' to overcome those problems fail.

⁴⁴ By legitimate objections I mean objections that do not misunderstand, misconstrue, or misrepresent the argument. "Too often it has been criticized without actually looking carefully at what it says." Spade, "Medieval Philosophy," 79.

⁴⁵ As nearly all appeals to ignorance are.

I think that this idea that God necessarily exists or is impossible was Anselm's original insight, but he inadvertently obscured it by expressing it in a messy fashion.⁴⁶ Paul Vincent Spade thinks Anselm did not actually intend to prove the existence of God with the Ontological Argument, but instead he wanted, "simply to explore what he already firmly believed."⁴⁷ If Spade is right, it is hardly surprising that Anselm's insight was obscured. My goal in making an ontological argument against agnosticism is to help continue unobscuring Anselm's insight.

⁴⁶ The chief problem with Anselm's original formulation was that he did not consider if God could be impossible and given his context this is hardly surprising.

⁴⁷ "His attitude is summed up near the beginning of the *Proslogion* in the well-known line: 'I believe in order to understand' (*Credo ut intellegam*)." Spade, "Medieval Philosophy," 78.

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