Plantinga's Ontological Argument

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1. Introduction

One of the most intriguing contemporary defences of an ontological argument is Alvin Plantinga's modal ontological argument. He begins with a premise he thinks can be plausible to someone *a priori*: that maximal greatness (worthiness or value) is *possible*. He then brings the resources of contemporary logic and metaphysics to deduce that maximal greatness is actually instantiated in our world. From maximal greatness, he unpacks the traditional "worthy-making" attributes of God: maximal knowledge, maximal power, and moral perfection. Astonishingly, Plantinga labels his argument "victorious," and he suggests that one can rational accept its conclusion on the basis of the argument.[1]

I shall examine the potential merits of Plantinga's ontological argument. I will begin by reviewing Plantinga's assessment of previous ontological arguments, which lead him to his own formulation. I will then present Plantinga's ontological argument and show how it fits within his larger metaphysical framework. Next, I will pose a pressing and popular type of objection: the problem of "reverse" parallel arguments *against* the existence of God. I will consider Plantinga's general remarks about this objection, and then I'll explore a new strategy for potentially breaking symmetry. In closing, I'll consider whether, or in what sense, someone could consider Plantinga's ontological argument to be successful.

2. Arguments That Went Before

Plantinga searches for an ontological argument that avoids the pitfalls of previous ontological arguments. He starts by examining Anselm's ontological argument and then turns to a contemporary formulation. In this section, we will review Plantinga's assessment of these ontological arguments as they prepare the stage for Plantinga's version.

Here is a formulation of Anselm's argument:

A1. Assume God exists in the understanding but not in reality.

A2. Existence in reality is greater than existence in the understanding alone.

A3. Therefore, if God did exist in reality, then he would be greater than he is.

A4. God's existence in reality is conceivable.

A5. Therefore, it is conceivable that there be a being greater than God is ((A3) and (A4)).

[1] *The Nature of Necessity*, Oxford University Press (1978), p. 221.

A6. Therefore, it is conceivable that there be a being greater than the being than which nothing greater can be conceived ((5), by the definition of 'God').

A6. It is false that it is conceivable that there be a being greater than the being than which none greater can be conceived.

A7. Therefore, it is false that God exists in the understanding but not in reality.

Plantinga adds, "So, if God exists in the understanding, he also exists in reality; but clearly enough he does exist in the understanding, as even the fool will testify; therefore he exists in reality as well."[2]

Does Anselm's argument, as stated above, succeed? Plantinga thinks not. He draws out two problems. First, there is the problem of seeing how to make sense of premise A2—that *existence in reality is greater than existence in the understanding alone*. What does that even mean? Plantinga offers the following translation:

A2*. For any worlds W and W* and any object x, if x exists in W and x does not exist in W*, then the greatness of x in W exceeds the greatness of x in W*.

This translation has the advantage of taking a standard logical form. It has a serious disadvantage, however: premise (A2*) implies that things can have features in worlds where those things don't even exist. For example, a horse could have legs in a world where that horse doesn't exist. The result is that things can *be* in worlds where they *don't exist*. Plantinga rejects this distinction between *being* and *existence* (with an argument), and so he is committed to rejecting (A2).[3]

Nevertheless, Plantinga thinks that Anselm's argument also fails for another reason, even if we grant (A2*). The reason is that the rest of the argument must be rewritten to fit with (A2*), yet Plantinga finds no way to do that successfully. He explores a few possible ways of rewriting the argument. His first attempt leaves him with a premise that explicitly presupposes that God exists in the actual world. Clearly, that won't work. Plantinga then considers whether we might develop Anselm's core strategy using a more modest premise: that God *could* exists. But the same two problems reemerge: (i) the resulting argument involves the idea that there are or could have been non-existent things, and (ii) it requires a premise which, when properly understood, explicitly presupposes God's existence. It seems Anselm's argument is doomed.

Plantinga then turns his attention to a more contemporary version of the Ontological Argument given by Hartshorne and Malcom.[4] He summarizes their argument as follows:

B1. There is a world W in which there exists a being with maximal greatness.
B2. A being has maximal greatness in a world only if it exists in every world.
B3. Therefore, there is a being with maximal greatness in the actual world.

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[2] Ibid., p. 197.
[3] Ibid., pp 145-163.
[4] Ibid., p. 212ff.

This argument has two advantages over Anselm's argument. First, it doesn't require that there are, or could have been, non-existent things. Second, it doesn't have a premise which, when properly understood, explicitly presupposes God's existence.

But Plantinga finds a fatal flaw in this little argument. He points out that just because a being may be maximally great in some world W, it doesn't strictly follow that this being is maximally great in *every* world at which it exists. Thus, even if a being which is maximally great in W exists in our world, it doesn't follow that this being is maximally great in our world. In short, their argument fails to be formally valid.

3. A "Victorious" Version

Plantinga proposes a way to fix Hartshorne and Malcom's argument. He begins with the observation that one's greatness in a world depends upon which features one has in other worlds. For example, a being that is wise in a single world is not as great, other things being equal, as a being that is wise in every possible world. From this observation, Plantinga develops his own ontological argument.

We may summarize the Plantingian Ontological Argument (POA) as follows:

> C1. There is a possible world W in which there exists a being with maximal greatness.
> C2. A being has maximal greatness in a possible world only if it has maximal greatness in every possible world, including the actual world.
> C3. Therefore, there is a being with maximal greatness in the actual world.

Is this argument sound? Plantinga thinks so. Regarding (C1), Plantinga thinks it is true that maximal greatness is possibly instantiated. He takes this premise to be equivalent to the premise that there is some *essence* which includes maximal greatness. Plantinga suggests that someone could find that premise reasonable without presupposing that God exists.

What about C2? This premise is largely motivated by Plantinga's understanding of *greatness*. Plantinga suggests that, in general, a being is greater if its greatness spans more worlds. So, for example, suppose there is a being which has the great-making features of wisdom and power in some, but not all, worlds. Such a being would not be as great, other things being equal, as a being which has wisdom and power in all worlds. If that is correct, then a *maximally* great being—a being with the highest conceivable degree of greatness—would have great-making features in every world. It would thus be maximally great in every world. To use Anselm's terminology, a being *than which none greater can be conceived* would be great in every possible world, if it were great in any.

Implicit in the argument is a technical assumption about the logic of possibility. In particular, the argument requires that the actual world would still be *possible* (i.e. logically consistent with the metaphysically necessary facts) were any of the possible worlds actual. To illustrate this principle, suppose unicorns are possible creatures. We observe that foxes are actual creatures. So the principle predicts that the foxes of our world would be possible creatures if unicorns were

actual creatures. Here is how the principle applies to POA. Suppose a maximally great being exists in a possible world W. Then given the premise that such a being would span all possible worlds, it follows that a maximally great being exists in all worlds that are possible *relative to W*. The actual world is possible relative to W (per assumption). Therefore, a maximally great being exists in W.

Although this understanding of possibility is not uncontestable, one could perhaps sidestep worries about the correct logic of possibility by treating the logic as part of an implicit definition of the term "possible".[5] The idea here is that one may focus on just those possible worlds relative to which the actual world is also possible. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that there is a sense of "possible" on which there are possible worlds relative to which the actual world is *not* possible. Put those worlds aside. There remains a vast array of possible worlds relative to which the actual world is possible. If we define "possible" in terms of those worlds, then the second premise is true by definition. Meanwhile, the first premise amounts to the claim that a maximally great being exists in one of the relevant possible worlds—that is, in a possible world relative to which the actual world is also possible.

I should note that my talk of possible worlds here is merely heuristic. We need not assume that there *really are* possible worlds in order develop POA. Instead, we may make use of twentieth century developments in the logic of possibility and necessity. Specifically, can show that "X is necessary" follows from "possibly, X is necessary" using standard modal logic.[6] Reference to worlds is not required.

Let us recap the argument. Suppose maximal greatness is possibly instantiated (premise 1). And suppose that *if* maximal greatness is possibly instantiated, *then* maximal greatness is instantiated in every possible world (premise 2). Then it follows that maximal greatness is instantiated in

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[5] More precisely, we may treat 'it is necessary that' as a modal operator '□' that obeys the following axiom schemas of S5 modal logic:

M: □p → p
K: □(p → q) → (□p → □q)
4: □p → □□p
5: ◊p → □◊p

[6] Here is one way to show the inference:
Let 'N' abbreviate '∃x (N(x)', where 'N(x)' reads '□ (∃!(x))'.
1. Assume <>N.
2. Then: <>□N. (□(N → □N), by axioms 4 & 5)
3. Now suppose (for the sake of argument) that <>~N.
4. Then: □<>~N. (by axiom 5)
5. Then: ~<>~<>~N. (by substituting '~<>~' for '□')
6. Then: ~<>~~□~~N. (by substituting '~□~' for the second '<>')
7. Then: ~<>□N. (because '~~X' is equivalent to 'X')
8. But (7) contradicts (2).
9. So: (3) is not true. ((3) → (7))
10. So: ~<>~N.
11. So: □N. (by substituting '□' for '~<>~')
12. So: N. (□X → X, by axiom M)
13: So: if <>N, then N.

every possible world. The actual world is among the possible worlds. Therefore, maximal greatness is instantiated in the actual world. For the sake of neutrality, let "being" stand for whatever reality or realities instantiate maximal greatness in our world, and we reach the conclusion that there is a maximally great being.

4. The Problem of Parallel Arguments

In my estimation, the most serious and significant objection to POA is that it is plagued by the problem of parallel arguments which have an *opposite* conclusion. (We will consider other sorts of objections in section 6.)

Consider, for example, the following argument:

> D1. There is a possible world W in which there is *no* being with maximal greatness.
> D2. A being has maximal greatness in a possible world only if it has maximal greatness in every world.
> D3. Therefore, there is no being with maximal greatness in the actual world.

The parallel argument's conclusion contradicts the conclusion of Plantinga's ontological argument. So it can't be that *both* arguments are sound. Yet the two arguments are strikingly similar. Both arguments have the same valid structure, and both rely on the inference from *a maximally great being is possible* to *a maximally great being is actual*. The only salient difference is the first premise: C1 invites us to imagine that there *could be* a maximally great being, whereas D1 invites us to imagine that there *could fail to be* a maximally great being. Does a non-theist have a reason to favor the possibility of a maximally great being over the possibility of no maximally great being? If not, then it seems the intellectually respectable thing for the non-theist to do is to withhold judgment about both possibilities. In this situation, the epistemic force of the parallel argument *cancels* the epistemic force of Plantinga's argument. The arguments are awash.

Plantinga is aware of the problem of parallel arguments, and he offers a few considerations. First, he suggests that a parallel argument need not *automatically* defeat his argument. For it could be that someone is perfectly rational in accepting the "possibility" premise in POA while rejecting the "possibility" premise in the parallel argument. To motivate this point, Plantinga mentions other contested philosophical propositions, such as Leibniz's law of identity. He observes that one can certainly be within one's epistemic rights in accepting a proposition that others contest; otherwise, no one could rightfully accept any philosophical proposition. Plantinga proposes, then, that someone who thinks the "possibility" premise in POA argument is true could in principle be within their rights in thinking so.

On the other hand, Plantinga does not show, or attempt to show, that the "possibility" premise in POA actually is more credible than the parallel premise. His proposal appears to be more modest. I take him to be suggesting that someone who is aware of the parallel argument can—at least in principle—still be rational in accepting the salient premise of POA. Although not explicit, he may be thinking something like this:

> I personally find the premises in my argument quite plausible, and, indeed, I think they rise to the estimable status of being *true*. My argument doesn't seem to presuppose the existence of God in my own mind: I do not see that *my* acceptance of these premises depends, explicitly or implicitly, on my prior belief in God. So, I don't see that my argument is circular (explicitly or implicitly). Also, I seem to be perfectly within my rights, as far as I see, to think the premises are true. I assume others could be like me in this respect. Thus, even though there can certainly be rational disagreement here, it seems clear enough that it is at least *rational* to accept these premises. Thus, it is rational to accept the conclusion."

A question remains: should someone who doesn't already think God exists find the "possibility" premise in POA to be more credible (or probable or plausible) than the parallel premise?

Speaking for myself, I find it difficult to *just see* that the possibility of God's existence is more credible (or probable or plausible) than the possibility of God's non-existence. Sure, it may be tempting to think that God's existence is at least *possible*. But when I consider whether God's *non-existence* is at least possible, I find it difficult to *just see* that the one possibility is more plausible than the other. Perhaps I simply cannot see well enough into these scenarios to tell whether either one is genuinely possible.

Here is a little anecdote suggesting that even Plantinga may be sympathetic with the difficulty of seeing such possibilities. When I was Plantinga's student at the University of Notre Dame, he advised me to be careful not to confuse *seeing that something is possible* with *failing to see that it is impossible*. He added that in his younger days he hadn't fully distinguished these two epistemic states in his own mind. Is it possible that he hadn't fully distinguished these epistemic states when considering POA? The distinction is clearly relevant to POA. For when one is tempted to think that God's existence is possible, it could be that one doesn't actually *see* that such a situation is possible. Rather, perhaps one merely *fails to see* that God's existence is impossible. Failing to see that God can't exist is not the same as seeing that God genuinely can exist.

Suppose one's temptation to think that God can exist rests merely on one's failure to see that God can't exist. Then one should resist the temptation to think that God's existence is possible. Similarly, if one's temptation to think that God can fail to exist rests merely on one's failure to see that God can exist, then one should resist that temptation, too. The conclusion is this: in the absence of an *independent* reason to think that God's existence (or non-existence) is genuinely possible, the proper response is to withhold judgement about such a possibility.

5. The Prospect of an Unparalleled Path

One morning as I was pondering the value of a greatest conceivable being, a new "ontological-type" argument sprang into my mind. The argument is about value. It begins with the premise that some value is possible concludes that the greatest conceivable value is possible. I call the argument "The Value Argument."

The conclusion of the Value Argument is relevant to Plantinga's argument. For if maximal greatness is itself a conceivable degree of value, then the conclusion of my argument entails the crucial "possibility" premise in Plantinga's argument. In other words, the Value Argument in mind suggests a potential way to break the stalemate between POA and the reverse, parallel argument. In this section, then, I will get the Value Argument on the table and consider whether it might stand any stronger against the general problem of parallel arguments.

Here is an outline of the Value Argument:

> E1. Some degree of value can be instantiated.
>
> E2. If *some* degree of value can be instantiated, then *each* degree of value can be instantiated.
>
> E3. Therefore, each degree of value can be instantiated (E1, E2).
>
> E4. Maximal greatness is a degree of value.
>
> E5. Therefore, maximal greatness can be instantiated.

If this argument is sound, then it breaks the stalemate in the battle over Plantinga's "possibility" premise. So let us consider what reasons there may be in support of its premises.

Start with E1: some value can be instantiated. Perhaps the strongest reason to accept E1 is that some value *is* instantiated. For example, you exist, and you instantiate great value. If you agree, then you have reason to infer that value *can* be instantiated. (Note that by appealing to *actual* value, the Value Argument may stray from typical ontological arguments, whose premises are normally not based on what *actually* exists. On the other hand, one could argue that value judgements are themselves ultimately justified *a priori* (rather than from sensory experience), and perhaps that is enough for us to classify the Value Argument as an ontological argument.)

To be clear, I make no assumptions here about the *nature* or *source* of value. Maybe the constructivists are right: value depends in a certain way upon idealized thinking. Or maybe value is a basic and unanalyzable feature of certain states or things. Or perhaps value is analyzable in terms of thoughts or emotions. There are a many options on the market. If you think any of them are "worthy" of attention, then you may accept that there is real value in our world.

Not everyone will accept value realism, of course. Some philosophers deny that anything has real value. I respect these philosophers, and in fact, I value their thinking. Rather than enter the trenches with value nihilists, I'll mention two reasons I think the Value Argument could still be of interest to philosophers despite the nihilist escape. First, most philosophers, whether theist or atheist, do not accept value nihilism (they reject it), and so the nihilist escape is not open to most philosophers.[7] Second, value nihilists are already committed to denying that Plantinga's God exists, since such a God would be *worthy* of worship—and so have value. It remains open at the outset, then, that the Value Argument could appeal to someone who is a neutral agnostic or who

[7] According to Phil Surveys (2013), 56.4% of philosophers accept or lean toward moral realism.

thinks the existence of God is unlikely due to lack of evidence. In the next section, I will return to the question of who, if anyone, the Value Argument may appeal to.

Consider, next, E2: if *some* degree of value can be instantiated, then *each* degree of value can be instantiated. Why might someone think that is true? Here is one reason. You might think that mere differences in degree of value are *irrelevant* to a difference with respect to exemplifiability. If some particular degree of value is possible, then why isn't any other? What difference could there be between one degree of value and another that could explain why the one is possible but the other is impossible? It seems none.

This reasoning could be based upon a more general principle of *modal continuity*, which says that classes of properties that differ merely in degree tend to be modally uniform—either all possible or all impossible.[8] To be clear, there can be breaks in modal continuity. For example, there can be a *three*-sided triangle, but there cannot be a *two*-sided triangle. Nevertheless, where modal breaks occur, there is some *relevant difference* between the respective properties accounting for the break. In the case at hand, the idea is that a mere difference in *degree of value* is doesn't account the possibility or impossibility of a value of that degree, as far as we can see.

We may express the principle of modal continuity in terms of defeasible reasoning. Modal continuity is a defeasible default position. So, for example, given any degrees of value one considers, one has a defeasible reason to consider those degrees of value to be modally uniform. If that is right, then one may enjoy a defeasible reason to think the class of all degrees of value are modally uniform. In the next section I will consider whether there may be defeaters, which suggest that degrees of value are *not* modally uniform.

Let us consider now the final premise: maximal greatness is a degree of value. My argument for this premise is simple. Maximal greatness is a determinate of value—it is a *maximal* value. Every determinate of value is a degree of value. Therefore, maximal greatness is a degree of value.

The above argument falls out of my understanding of a degree of value. In the most general terms, I am thinking of a degree of value as any *determinate* of the property, *being valuable*. Here are some examples: *being somewhat valuable*, *being tremendously valuable*, and *being valuable to degree N*, where *N* is some arbitrary unit. We can grasp different degrees of value by comparison with each other. For example, let us say Timothy is valuable to degree *N*. Then we may define other degrees of value relative to Timothy's value. Perhaps, for instance, a certain crowd of people is valuable to degree 14 × N. (In case someone worries that not all degrees of value are comparable to each other, we may limit our scope to those determinates of value that are less than or equal to maximal value.)

Here, then, is how someone might use the Value Argument as a means of justifying the key "possibility" premise in POA. One starts by seeing (a priori) that there is value in the world. One then recognizes that mere differences in *degree* of value don't apparently make a difference with respect to possible instantiation. One thereby gains a reason to infer that each degree of value

[8] Rasmussen, "Continuity as a Guide to Possibility," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 92:3, pp. 525-38.

can be instantiated. Maximal greatness is a degree of value. Therefore, one has reason to infer that maximal greatness can be instantiated. Therefore, one has reason to think there can be a maximally great being.

We have so far considered possible reasons in support of the Value Argument. Let us now consider whether there may be parallel reasons in support of a *reverse* value argument. Two reverse arguments come to my mind.[9] Here is the first:

F1. Some degree of value can fail to be instantiated.

F2. If some degree of value can fail to be instantiated, then each degree of value can fail to be instantiated.

F3. Therefore, each degree of value can fail to be instantiated (F1, F2).

F4. Maximal greatness is a degree of value.

F5. Therefore, maximal greatness can fail to be instantiated.

This argument has a conclusion that is incompatible with the conclusion of POA. Yet the premises of this argument may seem to be no less plausible than the premises in The Value Argument. So why favor the Value Argument over this reverse argument?

There is an important difference between F1 (from the parallel argument) and E1 (from the Value Argument), however. The justification I offered for E1 is based upon one's experience of *actual* value. The idea is that one infers that some degree of value *can* be instantiated from the experience-based premise that some degree of value *is* instantiated. Consider, by contrast, that one cannot support F1 merely by appealing to one's experience of the *lack* of some value. For even while one may *fail to experience* the presence of some degree of value around them, one doesn't thereby experience the complete absence of that degree of value in all places. Perhaps every degree of value is instantiated somewhere.

In fact, one could theorize that the greatest conceivable value *entails* every degree of value. This proposal is an instance of the general theory that greater degrees include lower degrees, where the lower degrees are positive, modally continuous degrees. A ten dollar bill, for example, *includes* the value of nine dollars: after all, you could use a ten dollar bill to buy something that cost nine dollars. Similarly, a ball that has mass of 1kg also has mass of 0.5kg. The greater mass includes the lesser mass values. Suppose this "greater includes lesser" theory is correct. Then the value of the greatest conceivable being would include the values of all lesser conceivable beings.

[9] I will concentrate on reverse arguments about *value*. Yet, there may be other reverse argument that are less parallel but which follow the same basic reasoning as the Value Argument. One example that comes to mind is the Subtraction Argument, which has a premise that for any given number of concrete things there could be, there could be fewer. The conclusion of this argument is that there could have been *no* concrete things—hence, there is no maximally great concrete being which spans all worlds. In the end, I don't think the Subtraction Argument is sufficiently parallel, for it seems to me that best explanation for why there are some concrete things rather than none is that there couldn't be none. This explanation provides me with an independent reason to think there couldn't be no concrete things. That said, others may have a different assessment or bring to light better reverse arguments.

In other words, God would have *all* conceivable value. The result is that if there were a greatest conceivable being, then all values would be instantiated, regardless of the *lack* of values you and I may experience.

My purpose here is not to provide an unassailable defense of the "greater includes lesser" theory. My point is merely that the experience-based consideration in support of the first premise in the Value Argument is *not parallel* to the sort of considerations that would be required to support the first premise in the parallel argument. I conclude, therefore, that the Value Argument enjoys a kind of support which is missing from the reverse value argument. The arguments are not alike.

Here is a second reverse argument:

> G1. Some degree of value can be instantiated.
>
> G2. If *some* degree of value can be instantiated, then *each* degree of value can be instantiated.
>
> G3. Therefore, each degree of value can be instantiated (G1, G2).
>
> G4. Some degrees of value preclude maximal greatness.
>
> G5. Therefore, maximal greatness can fail to be instantiated.

This argument hinges upon premise E4. Are there degrees of value that preclude maximal greatness? Plantinga considers two candidates. First, he uses the term 'near-maximality' to refer to a property that, by stipulation, could only be instantiated by a nearly maximal being whose greatness is not exceeded by any being. Second, 'no-maximality' is his name for the property of being such that there is no maximally great being (p. 218). If either of these properties could be instantiated by something, then maximal greatness couldn't be instantiated by anything. So, if either of these properties are degrees of value, then G4 is true.

The properties just mentioned are not degrees of value, however—or at least they are not "degrees" in any ordinary sense. Degrees are differentiated by a quantity or magnitude. For example, such properties as *being four feet tall*, *being five feet tall*, and *being six feet tall* differ by a quantity of feet. By contrast, the property of *being four feet tall, such that there are no pigs*, adds a non-quantitative, propositional element. The non-quantitative, propositional add-on disqualifies this property from being a genuine degree of height. After all, there is no way to *compare* the add-on with other degrees of height: is *being four feet tall, such that there are no pigs* a greater or lesser height than *being four feet tall*? The question is nonsense. Similarly, there isn't a genuine *value* comparison between *being such that there is no maximally great being* and ordinary degrees of value. The propositional add-on—*such that there is no maximally great being*—disqualifies the properties Plantinga considers from being genuine degrees of value. I conclude, then, that Plantinga's examples do not reveal that G4 is true.

Note that even if G4 is justifiable, G4 isn't really *parallel* to any premise in the Value Argument. It is not as though G4 is simply an obvious, uncontroversial truth. In fact, the Value Argument is itself a reason to doubt G4. Consider that the Value Argument includes every premise of the parallel argument minus G4. In place of G4, the Value Argument has the premise that *maximal*

greatness is a degree value. So, if you think maximal greatness is a degree of value, and if you accept the rest of the premises in the *parallel* argument, then you have a reason to reject G4.

To recap, the Value Argument is an auxiliary argument, which is designed to provide an independent reason in support of the crucial "possibility" premise in POA. If the Value Argument is sound, then maximal greatness is *possibly* instantiated. And if POA is sound, then maximal greatness is actually instantiated. So, the arguments fit together to produce an extended version of POA. Let us call the combination of (POA) together with the Value Argument 'Plantinga's Ontological Argument Extended' (POA_E).

6. Objections

Let us begin to test POA_E with the instrument of objections.

Objection 1: There is a significant difference between *finite* degrees of value and *infinite* value. POA_E requires that every degree of value can be instantiated. Maybe each finite degree of value can indeed be instantiated, but why think *infinite* value is possible?

Reply. The objection rightfully inspires caution. We want to avoid hasty generalization from familiar cases to the unfamiliar, infinite case. On the other hand, there are cluster of considerations which lead me to be cautious about being too cautious. Here they are:

- The difference between finite and infinite isn't *automatically* modally relevant. For example, suppose co-location of any finitely massive objects is impossible. Then surely co-location of any infinitely massive objects would also be impossible. The difference between finite and infinite mass is plainly irrelevant to the possibility of co-location.

- It is far from obvious that the difference between finite value and infinite value could be relevant to modal continuity. According to the general principle of modal continuity, the default position is that mere differences in degrees are not modally relevant. So, unless one has reason to think that infinite value is impossible, there is a presumption to think that infinite value, like any other value, is possible.

- Infinite value is (arguably) implied by a conceptually simple feature: *absolute perfection*. Consider that any finitely valuable being could be surpassed by a more perfect being—a being with greater knowledge or power. If so, then a perfect being would not be a finitely valuable being; it would have infinite value. The simplicity of perfection counts in favor of its exemplifiability. (Can you think of any simple feature that *can't* be exemplified?)

Objection 2: There is a tradition of arguments designed to show that the notion of a maximally great being is incoherent. For example, there are arguments that purport to expose conceptual problems with features—such as omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection—that have been traditionally thought to be entailed by maximal greatness. If any of those arguments are sound, then Plantinga's "possibility" premise—*that maximal greatness is possible*—is false.

Reply. Right: if there are sound arguments against the coherence of maximal greatness, then Plantinga's argument is unsound. Nevertheless, we can bracket the arguments against the

existence of God and see how strong POA_E is in its own right. In general, there are potentially infinitely many arguments against every philosophical proposition P. If one had to rebut every argument against P in order to successfully defend an argument *for* P, then one could never successfully defend any argument. Fortunately, we can evaluate an argument according to its own merits. Maybe POA_E provides some weight in support of its conclusion, while other arguments provide overwhelming counter-weights against it. In the final section, we will return to the question how much weight, if any, POA_E carries.

Moreover, it is worth highlighting that the arguments against this or that divine attribute do not directly target the coherence of maximal greatness. Even if particular attributes are incoherent, it doesn't follow that maximal greatness itself is incoherent. Perhaps the arguments for the incoherence of various divine attributes help us to navigate past incoherent conceptions of God. For example, perhaps a being than which none greater can be *coherently* conceived would lack the power to create unliftable rocks; perhaps it couldn't know a future that doesn't exist; perhaps it wouldn't automatically have reflective knowledge of its own knowledge (to avoid set-paradoxes); and so on. Rather than show that there cannot be a maximally great being, perhaps these various arguments helpfully rule out faulty concepts of what such a being would be if there were one.

Objection 3: Many bad events appear to be gratuitous—permitted for no good reason. (More carefully: many bad events are such that there does *not* appear to be a reason for their allowance.) Now putting aside whether any of the bad events are in fact gratuitous, it is at least *conceivable* that some bad event is gratuitous. Conceivability is evidence for possibility. So, we have evidence that possibly some bad event is gratuitous. Yet POA_E presses against that possibility. For if POA_E is sound, then there is a maximally great being in every possible world. Surely a maximally great being *would* and *could* prevent all gratuitously bad events. So, if there were a maximally great being in every possible world, then gratuitously bad events would exist in no possible world. In other words, if POA_E is sound, then gratuitous bad is not even possible. Gratuitous bad is possible. Therefore, POA_E is not sound.

Reply. It is useful to consider again the distinction between *seeing that something is possible* and *failing to see that something is impossible*. When we conceive of a bad event that is permitted for no reason, do we actually *see* that such an event is possible? Or do we merely fail to see the factors that would make it impossible?

Consider parallel reasoning with respect to H20. You think water is H20. But Jeb objects, "It is surely *possible* this watery stuff in lakes and rivers is not H20. And, given the necessity of identity, if water *were* really H20, then it would not be possible that this watery stuff is not H20. Therefore, water is no H20." Jeb is wrong, of course. The problem is that Jeb is not *seeing* into the nature of water. He is therefore unable to tell that water is possibly not H20. Similarly, when one imagines a bad event happening without any good reason, one fails to see that the event *must* have a good reason. It doesn't follow that one thereby *sees* that the bad event possibly doesn't

have a good reason. One merely fails to see into the factors, if there are any, that would make it impossible for a bad event to be gratuitous. As far as anyone sees, there *might* be factors that would prevent the event from being gratuitous. In particular, there might be a maximally great being. Unless we beg the question at issue and assume that there is no maximally great being, it doesn't seem we are in a position to *just see* that there could be gratuitously bad events.

It is also worth noting that the argument from gratuitous evil doesn't specifically target any *premise* of the POA_E. Rather, it targets the conclusion of Plantinga's Ontological Argument. So, even if the argument from gratuitous evil is sound, that argument doesn't show that POA_E carries no weight in its own right.

Objection 4: POA_E proves too much. We can use the same reasoning to show that there is a perfect island (a la Gaunilo). First, we show that a perfect island *can* exist:

> H1. Some degree of valuable island can be instantiated.
>
> H2. If *some* degree of valuable island can be instantiated, then *each* degree of valuable island can be instantiated.
>
> H3. Therefore, each degree of valuable island can be instantiated (H1, H2).
>
> H4. Maximally great island is a degree of valuable island.
>
> H5. Therefore, a maximally great island can be instantiated.

Then we add a Plantingian ontological argument to deduce that a perfect island actually exists:

> H6. There is a possible world W in which there exists a maximally great island.
>
> H7. An island is maximally great in a possible world only if it is maximally great in every world.
>
> H8. Therefore, there is an island that is maximally great in the actual world.

It gets worse. By similar reasoning we can deduce that there are maximally great *fairies*, *unicorns*, and *spaghetti monsters*. These results are absurd. Therefore, the reasoning that delivers them is problematic.

Reply. I'll offer two replies. The first is from Plantinga. He suggests that the "island" argument isn't parallel because we have independent reason to think there can't be a maximally great island. The reason is that for every island one can imagine, one can imagine a *greater* island—one with more fruit trees or exotic animals. So the concept of an island fails to admit of an *intrinsic maximum*. It follows that *maximally great island* is either not a genuine degree of valuable island (contra H4) or not a degree which can be exemplified (contra H2).

In response, someone might think POA_E is in the same boat. For they might have independent reason to think *maximal greatness* is either not a genuine degree of value (contra E4) or not a degree which can be exemplified (contra E2). This reason would then defeat POA_E.

On the other hand, someone could lack adequate reasons to think maximal greatness is not a genuine property or that it is a degree of value which cannot be exemplified. Speaking for myself, maximal greatness seems to be a genuine property, if anything is. And, I have deep reservations about the usual arguments against the exemplifiability of maximal greatness; none are decisive to my mind. So although both arguments could in principle be defeated, it is equally possible for a person to have reasons which defeat the "maximal island" argument but not the "maximal being" argument.

There is a second reason one might think the arguments are importantly different. The "island" argument requires that necessary existence contributes to the greatness of an *island*, whereas the Value Argument requires that necessary existence contributes to the greatness of a being. Is an island a greater *island* in virtue of existing in more worlds? It seems clear to my mind that necessary existence makes a thing greater with respect to being a *being*, not with respect to being some specific sort of being. If my mind is not misleading me here, then being a maximally great island doesn't by itself entail necessary existence. (In view of the above distinction, one might try modifying the "island" argument so that "maximally great island" is short for "maximally great *being* that happens to be an island." But this modification doesn't deliver a counterargument because being maximally great *and an island* is not a degree of anything.)[10]

It is worth adding that greatness with respect to *being* is a simpler, more natural concept than greatness with respect to *island*. Consider that one way in which a concept is incoherent is that it has multiple parts that can't go together. For example, the concept of a square-circle is built from two simpler concepts which can't go together (except perhaps in one's mind). Sometimes it is less obvious that concepts can't go together (such as when one combines extension with partlessness, for example, to form the concept of an *extended simple*), but the greater the complexity of a concept the greater the potential for incoherence. Likewise, the simpler the concept the lesser the potential for incoherence. The concept of maximal greatness with respect to being is not nearly as complex in terms of the number of concepts it combines as the concept of a maximally great island. For that reason it has less "opportunity" to be impossible.

7. Assessment

What shall we make of POA_E? Is it successful?

In order to assess whether a given argument is successful, it would help if we had some *standard of success* by which to measure the argument. What makes an argument successful?

[10] I owe this consideration to Rachel Rasmussen.

John Keller has proposed that an argument's success is *relative* to different people.[11] Building on his ideas, I'll suggest one measure of "success" based upon an argument's ability to lead people to increase confidence in its conclusion.

I begin by noticing that the success or failure of a given argument depends upon the *purpose* or *purposes* for which the argument is given. My sense is that most of us philosophers are interested in (among other things) increasing our stock of true beliefs, while minimizing our stock of false beliefs. Our purpose as *philosophers* is not primarily to persuade someone. Rather, we wish to expand our understanding of reality. We are truth-seekers. Thus, we deliver arguments in order to *test* their soundness, not in order to win converts. Although we may become invested in an argument, we value peer review because we realize how easily our own biases prevent us from seeing accurately. One central purpose, then, of a philosophical argument is to help people see reality more accurately.

In view of the truth-seeking purpose of arguments, we could say that an argument is successful to the extent that it helps people see more truth. On this account, there are two ingredients to the success of an argument. First, there is *persuasive power*: the argument is such that one who understands it may reasonably become more confident in its conclusion or come to believe its conclusion for the first time. Second, there is *soundness*: the premises are true, and a true conclusion follows from them.

Since persuasive power is easier to measure, I will restrict my attention to the success of an argument at persuading reasonable people. I'll therefore give a "persuasive power" account of success. There are three salient features of my account:

- First, an argument's success comes in *degrees*. An argument is more successful if it can move more people more. On this account, every argument probably has at least *some* minimal degree of success.

- Second, persuasive power comes in different degrees relative to different people. The argument for the Pythagorian theorem has high persuasive power; and we call it a "proof". Some arguments are highly persuasive to some people but not to others. For example, here is an argument that is highly persuasive to me but which probably won't persuade many others:

    1. Joshua Rasmussen has never gone fishing.
    2. If Joshua Rasmussen has never gone fishing, then he has never caught any fish as a result of having gone fishing.
    3. Therefore, Joshua Rasmussen has never caught any fish as a result of having gone fishing.

[11] "Philosophical Individualism," in *Being, Freedom, and Method: Themes from van Inwagen*, John A. Keller ed., Oxford University Press, forthcoming in 2016

This argument is highly successful relative to *me*. The first premise strikes me as obvious given my particular memories, and the second is analytically true. Meanwhile, those who don't have *my* memories will not have my reason for accepting (1). I could testify to my memories, but unless I do that, most people would have no good reason at all to accept premise (1). So, as much as I personally like the argument, its success is quite limited.

- Third, an argument's persuasive power depends upon a person's *state of mind*. For example, someone who is in a hurry may consider the premises of an argument quickly without much thought or reflection. Some arguments may be more (or less) persuasive relative to a hurried state of mind. Similarly, if you examine an argument while you are in a state of depression, the argument may appeal differently to you than if you consider it while feeling jovial. So, the persuasive power of an argument is not merely relative to people. It is more generally relative to states of people.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that "persuasive power" is the only feature that contributes to the success of an argument. I'm simply stipulating one "success"-contributing feature of arguments. My thought here is that an argument that has a high degree of persuasive power is successful in an important respect.

So, is POA_E successful in the above sense? Like any argument, there is probably someone somewhere who *could* be moved somewhat by considering its premises. So, the argument probably has at least miniscule success. But does it have more than miniscule success? Could POA_E appeal to reasonable people who don't already accept its conclusion?

These are empirical questions which, unfortunately, I cannot answer from my favorite armchair. Plantinga's argument is a pathway of reason that, for all I know, might appeal to some people. I confess that when we supplement his argument with the Value Argument, the resulting pathway presently appeals to me to some extent. On the other hand, there may be unforeseen problems with the argument; it's rather new. My biggest worry is that there may be an equally appealing parallel argument for an opposite conclusion. Perhaps someone will spot a reverse argument which is no less plausible than POA_E. Alternatively, people will find parallel arguments which are no less likely *to them* but which will, for various reasons, strike others as importantly different. In that case, POA_E will be discovered to be successful to *some* extent, even if it lacks the power to distribute knowledge of God to all who consider it. Or: perhaps a parallel argument will indeed be brought to light which virtually everyone would—or should—consider no less plausible than POA_E. If that happens, then the argument will continue to be a relic of history. Time will tell.