Sympathy for the Fool

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Alvin Plantinga addresses the classic ontological argument in two books published in 1974: *The Nature of Necessity* and *God, Freedom, and Evil*. In each of these books, he analyzes the classical ontological argument and eventually formulates his own contemporary modal version. In *The Nature of Necessity*, the argument is presented in a technical form, using many of the concepts Plantinga developed throughout the book. *God, Freedom, and Evil* contains a streamlined, more easily read version of the argument, but it omits some of the underlying subtle technicalities that explain Plantinga's formulation. However, *God, Freedom, and Evil* contains a more thorough analysis of objections to the ontological argument, namely those of Gaunilo and Kant. In this paper, I will discuss Plantinga's contemporary modal version of the ontological argument and will draw from the sources discussed above. I will then argue that Plantinga must simultaneously avoid two conflicting problems in order to formulate a successful argument. Specifically, Plantinga must formulate his argument to avoid both his own criticism of St. Anselm's original argument and his own criticism of Guanilo's objection from "On Behalf of the Fool." However, since Plantinga cannot simultaneously avoid both these problems, his contemporary modal version of the ontological argument is unsuccessful.

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I. Background

1.1 ST. ANSELM

Let us begin with Plantinga's take on St. Anselm's classic argument:

(1) God exists in the understanding but not in reality.

(2) Existence in reality is greater than existence in the understanding alone.

(3) God's existence in reality is conceivable.

(4) If God did exist in reality, then he would be greater than he is [from (1) and (2)].

(5) It is conceivable that there be a being greater than God [(3) and (4)].

(6) 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"] (Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* 198).[1]

But surely

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

Because statements (6) and (7) contradict each other, we may conclude that

(8) It is false that God exists in the understanding but not in reality.

It seems that we can conclude that since God clearly exists in the understanding, then he must also exist in reality. There are at least two objections to this argument, namely those of Gaunilo and Kant.

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[1] All future references to works by Plantinga will use the name of the work followed by the page number.

1.2 GAUNILO'S OBJECTION

On Plantinga's reading, Gaunilo held that absurd objects can be formulated as objects "than which none greater can be conceived"; therefore, if existence is a great-making property, this type of argument proves that these absurd objects must exist (*God, Freedom, and Evil* 89–90). Specifically, Gaunilo claimed to be able to prove the existence of an island than which none greater can be conceived (*God, Freedom, and Evil* 89–90).[2] He could do this simply by replacing "God" with "the greatest island" and "being greater than which none greater can be conceived" with "island greater than which none greater can be conceived." Then, if existence is a great-making property for islands, there must exist an island than which none greater can be conceived. But the existence of such an island is absurd. Gaunilo's point is that this method of argument is not valid since it clearly produces false conclusions from premises Anselm should accept.

Plantinga discredits this objection by noting that islands (and things of this nature) are qualified as great according to properties that have no *intrinsic maxima* (*God, Freedom, and Evil* 91).[3] Properties that do not exhibit intrinsic maxima cannot ever be had to a maximum degree; so, things that have great-making properties that do not exhibit intrinsic maxima cannot ever be maximally great. Therefore, "the idea of a greatest possible island is an inconsistent or incoherent idea; it's not possible that there be such a thing" (*God, Freedom, and Evil* 91). Thus, if an object x has a great-making property P that does not have an intrinsic maximum, we cannot coherently conceive of the greatest possible x since there is no maximum of P that x may have. Plantinga then concludes that premise (3) cannot be formulated in terms of Gaunilo's island or anything that has a great-making property without an intrinsic maximum. However, he does not think that this criticism applies to Anselm's argument (*God, Freedom, and Evil* 90–91).

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[2] Plantinga notes that Gaunilo's original objection does not follow St. Anselm's argument exactly. Instead, he speaks of an island that is in fact greater than any other; however, to be parallel Guanilo should have spoken of an island *than which none greater can be conceived*. I have transformed his following objection accordingly.

[3] Plantinga does not give a formal definition for the term "intrinsic maximum" when he introduces it here, even though it is an essential concept in his eventual argument. For the time being, it will suffice to know that Plantinga is using "intrinsic maximum" in the following way. A property P has and intrinsic maximum if and only if there is a degree of P such that it is impossible to have more of P. I give a formal definition section 3.2 of this paper.

Plantinga reasons that great-making properties of the greatest possible being do have intrinsic maxima. Specifically, Plantinga considers knowledge, power, and moral excellence as great-making properties. He thinks that all of these properties have intrinsic maxima, but Plantinga also believes that there may be other great-making properties (for example, love) where it is unclear whether or not they have *intrinsic maxima* (*God, Freedom, and Evil* 91). So, Plantinga concedes that the argument may have a weakness insofar as the greatest possible being might have great-making properties that do not have intrinsic maxima (*God, Freedom, and Evil* 91). If this was true, then the ontological argument would be subject to Plantinga's criticism of Gaunilo's objection. That is, if the greatest possible being had great-making properties without intrinsic maxima, then the greatest possible being would be inconsistent or incoherent, just like Gaunilo's island. So, Plantinga concludes that the argument needs further attention (*God, Freedom, and Evil* 91).[4] Plantinga leaves us with the impression, though, that the ontological argument can escape Gaunilo's objection.

1.3 KANT'S OBJECTION

Kant gave two famous objections to the ontological argument in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. Plantinga thinks that Kant's first objection is that "no *existential* proposition—one that asserts the existence of something or other—is necessarily true; the reason, he says, is that no contra-existential (the denial of an existential) is contradictory or inconsistent" (*God, Freedom, and Evil* 92–93). Plantinga dismisses this objection since, in his opinion, Kant gives no argument to support it and since Plantinga cannot think of a reason to accept it (*God, Freedom, and Evil* 93–94). In fact, Plantinga argues that denials of existentials (singular negative existentials) are sometimes true (*The Nature of Necessity* 151). For example, note that (1) may be

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[4] Plantinga says we should note this weak point but does not want to discuss it and suggests we move on. This point deserves more attention. For example, Patrick Grim has argued that knowledge has no intrinsic maximum since there is no set of all truths. This claim is based upon the idea that if there was a set of all truths then the power set of all truths will have as its members subsets of the set of all truths, which will have corresponding truths. But by Cantor's power set theorem, the power set of any set is larger than the original set. Thus, there is no set of all truths. Therefore, there cannot be an omniscient being. This topic may have some interesting connections to what I bring up in this paper. For more information, please see Grim's works "The Being that Knew Too Much" and "Truth, Omniscience, and Cantorian Arguments: An Exchange" (hereafter cited by title).

construed as: "It is possible that ~(God does exist)." That is, (1) is asserting that that a singular negative existential proposition "~(God does exist)" is possibly true. However, this negation may be interpreted in two different ways. Consider the *predicative* proposition:

(a) God has the property of nonexistence

versus the *impredicative* proposition

(b) God does not have the property of existence.

There is a clear difference here (*The Nature of Necessity* 149–152).[5] According to Plantinga, we may sensibly assert impredicative singular negative existential propositions but not predicative singular negative existential propositions (*The Nature of Necessity* 151). This is because if we take (1) as (a), then we are predicating a property (nonexistence) of something that does not exist. But it is absurd to assign properties to objects that do not exist (*The Nature of Necessity* 152). On the other hand, (b) is just a variant of "It is false that God has the property of existence" (*The Nature of Necessity* 151). Thus, according to Plantinga, the correct (and only sensible) way of taking (1), which is the negation of a singular existential proposition, is the impredicative (b). This means that existence is an essential property of any *object* of which we may predicate properties (*The Nature of Necessity* 152).[6] So, it is possible to construe (1) as (b) and not predicate any properties.

Kant's second objection is that existence is not a real predicate; that is, one cannot predicate the existence (or nonexistence) of any object in any sensible way (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 567).[7] Kant thought that the predicate "exists" is already contained within the subject of a proposition. If this is true, then it doesn't make sense to claim that "existence is a great-making property" (Kant 567–68). Plantinga interprets this objection: "Perhaps Kant means to make a point that we could put saying that it's not possible to *define things into existence*" (*God, Freedom, and Evil* 95). This seems

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[5] This is the section where Plantinga introduces and discusses the difference between *predicative* and *impredicative* statements and how this distinction applies to singular negative existential propositions.

[6] This is not to say that any object of which we may predicate properties necessarily exists. This is explained in the following paragraph.

[7] This work will be cited by author's last name only. For discussion of the ontological argument, see Kant 563–69. For discussion of conceptual existence in general, see Kant 325–26. See also *God, Freedom, and Evil* 93–97 for discussion of specific passages from *Critique of Pure Reason*.

like a reasonable claim; any procedure that "defines things into existence" must be flawed. Plantinga gives an example of the kind of argument he takes Kant to be criticizing: suppose we define two terms, "bachelors" and "superbachelors":

> x is a bachelor if and only if x has $P_1, P_2, P_3, \ldots, P_n$

> x is a superbachelor if and only if x has $P_1, P_2, P_3, \ldots, P_n$, and x exists (*God, Freedom, and Evil* 96).

In these definitions, $P_1, P_2, P_3, \ldots, P_n$ are essential properties of a bachelor such as "*being unmarried, being male, being over the age of twenty-five*, and the like" (*God, Freedom, and Evil* 95). Note that superbachelors have all the essential properties of the bachelors plus the essential property of existence (*God, Freedom, and Evil* 95). It is tempting to say "Necessarily superbachelors exist" (*God, Freedom, and Evil* 95). But this is incorrect. Instead, what we should say is "Superbachelors exist necessarily or essentially." From this it does not follow that there *must be superbachelors*, but that *if there are superbachelors, then they exist*. However, this latter conclusion yields little cognitive significance. In fact, adding the predicate of existence does not affect our definition of bachelors since all bachelors are necessarily superbachelors and vice versa (*God, Freedom, and Evil* 97). Therefore, Plantinga accepts that one cannot define things into existence. He does not, however, think this claim has any affect on the ontological argument (*God, Freedom, and Evil* 97–98).

1.4 Plantinga's Objection

Plantinga himself objects to St. Anselm's version of the argument. Specifically, he sees a problem with (6). He thinks that it is *not* necessarily false, as (7) asserts (*The Nature of Necessity* 202–213). The argument is stated in terms of possible worlds in the following (flawed) way:

> (9) God does not exist in the actual world.

> (10) For any worlds W and W^* and 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^*.

(11) It is possible that God exists.

(12) So there is a possible world *W* such that God exists in *W* [from (11)].

(13) God exists in *W* and God does not exist in the actual world [from (9) and (12)].

(14) If God exists in *W* and God does not exist in the actual world, then the greatness of God in *W* exceeds the greatness of God in the actual world [from (10)].

(15) So the greatness of God in *W* exceeds the greatness of God in the actual world [(13) and (14)].

(16) So there is a possible being *x* and a world *W* such that the greatness of *x* in *W* exceeds the greatness of God in actuality [(15)].

(17) So it is possible that there be a being greater than God is [(16)].

(18) Hence it is possible that there be a being greater than the being than which it is not possible that there be a greater [from (17) by definition of "God"].

(19) It is not possible that there be a being greater than which it is not possible that there be a greater (*The Nature of Necessity* 202).

Thus, (9) is reduced to a contradiction. However, let us look more closely at the supposed contradiction. Plantinga claims that we should take (12), (18), and (19) differently since it is unclear which greatness (relative to a world) that we are referring to in these propositions. Thus, he claims the correct way is as follows:

(12*) There is a possible world W such that the being whose
       greatness in some world is nowhere exceeded, exists in W.

(18*) There is a possible world W and a possible being x such
       that the greatness of x in W exceeds the greatness of x in
       the actual world.

(19*) There is no possible world W^* and being x such that the
       greatness of x in W^* exceeds the greatness of God in W
       (*The Nature of Necessity* 203–5).

Note that (19*) does not contradict (18*) the way that (19) contradicts (18).
What this amounts to is that (18) should correctly claim that there exists a
being that is greater than God in the actual world. And (19) should cor-
rectly claim that "It's not possible that there be a being whose greatness sur-
passes that enjoyed by the unsurpassably great being *in the worlds where its
greatness is at a maximum*" (*God, Freedom, and Evil* 103). Since the greatness
of this being varies from world to world, the apparent contradiction of
"there exists a being greater than the being than which it is not possible
that there be a greater" is only a surface contradiction. Thus, this *reductio*
version of the argument fails since it does not produce a formal contradic-
tion. But all is not lost. The argument does allow us to conclude that this
being exists in *at least one possible world*; however, we have no reason to think
this world is the actual world (*God, Freedom, and Evil* 103–4).

II. Plantinga's Modern Modal Ontological Argument

Plantinga has now dealt with Gaunilo's objection and tentatively
with Kant's. However, he needs to formulate his argument so that it is not
subject to his criticism of St. Anselm's argument. Plantinga's first step is to
draw a distinction between greatness that is *world-dependent* and greatness
that is *universal*. These are defined as "excellence" and "greatness," respec-
tively (*The Nature of Necessity* 214). In this manner, excellence is calculated
by the great-making properties a being has in a particular world, while
greatness is calculated from the world-dependent property of excellence.
Plantinga defines and uses these terms as follows:

> Those who are fond of the calculus might put it by saying that there is a function assigning to each being in each world a degree of excellence; and a being's greatness is to be computed (by someone unusually well informed) by integrating its excellence over all possible worlds. Then it is plausible to suppose that the maximal degree of greatness entails maximal excellence in every world. A being, then, has the maximal degree of greatness in a given world *W* only if it has maximal excellence in every possible world. But maximal excellence entails omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection (*God, Freedom, and Evil* 107–8).

All this greatly affects the definition of God as the greatest possible being. From the above passage it is clear that for God to be maximally great he must have maximal excellence in every possible world, which entails that he exists in every possible world. So, according to this definition, *necessary existence* is an essential property of God. That is, if God exists then he *necessarily exists*, necessarily or essentially. Plantinga can now reformulate the argument:

(25) It is possible that there be a being that has maximal greatness.

(26) So, there is a possible being that in some world *W* has maximal greatness.

(27) A being has maximal greatness in a given world only if it has maximal excellence in every world.

(28) A being has maximal excellence in a given world only if it has omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection in that world (*God, Freedom, and Evil* 108).

From (26)–(28), we can conclude that there is a being that enjoys maximal excellence (i.e., has omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection) in every possible world, including the actual world. But a being cannot enjoy maximal excellence in a world if it does not exist in that world (*God, Freedom, and Evil* 108). Therefore, a being that is maximally excellent in every possible world, i.e., the being that is maximally great, exists in every

possible world, including the actual world. This argument essentially differs from previous versions in that it is not a *reductio*. It may be construed as one if we add the *reductio* hypothesis that God does not exist in the actual world, but this extra step is unnecessary. All that is required here is the first premise (25) and the definition of God as the greatest possible being (*God, Freedom, and Evil* 109).

Plantinga's argument is almost complete at this point. The last issue is that of *possible but unactual objects*, such as the object in (25). Plantinga writes that he is "inclined to think the supposition that there are such things—things that are possible but don't in fact exist—is either unintelligible or necessarily false" (*God, Freedom, and Evil* 110).[8] That said, he reformulates the argument in terms of properties being "exemplified" or "instantiated" in a world.[9] Consider:

(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.

(31) Necessarily, a being has maximal excellence in every world only if it has omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection in every world (*God, Freedom, and Evil* 111).

So, if the property of maximal greatness is possible, then it is impossible that a being that exemplifies maximal greatness (which entails maximal excellence in every possible world) fails to exist necessarily.

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[8] See also Chapter VIII of *The Nature of Necessity* for arguments defending this position.

[9] Plantinga seems to think that this makes Kant's objection completely irrelevant. However, (30) may still raise some suspicion. He supports himself by saying that we should not be any more concerned about (30) than we are about "Necessarily, a thing is a unicorn only if it has one horn." See *God, Freedom, and Evil* 111.

III. Preliminary Concerns

3.1 Existence and greatness

This argument essentially contains three pieces:

(a) The definition of the property "maximal greatness"

(b) The possibility that maximal greatness is instantiated

(c) " Possibly (necessarily *p*)" is equivalent to "necessarily *p*."

It is important to note that most of the machinery of this argument is contained within (a), Plantinga's definition of the property of maximal greatness. Appropriately, most of the reasoning behind the argument was about (a). Observe that (c) is simply a rule of modal logic that allows an inference from (a) and (b); however, arguments for or against (c) should not be dependent on our current debate.[10] At this point, I am willing to accept (c) and think that Plantinga is correct in his use of it. Unlike (c) however, whether or not I am willing to accept (b) is entirely dependent on what I think about (a).

What exactly does the concept of maximal greatness entail? What makes something great?[11] Recall that at one point Plantinga claimed existence was a great-making property (*God, Freedom, and Evil* 98–100).[12] Suppose that *x* exists in *W* and *x* does not exist in *W**. Then, Plantinga claims that the greatness of *x* in *W* exceeds the greatness of *x* in *W**. Greatness is measured in degrees and so is expressed in values of degree. Therefore, a comparison of two beings' greatnesses is a comparison of two values. Now, I agree with Plantinga that an object *x* does not have any properties in worlds in which it does not exist; so that if *x* does not exist in *W** then *x* does not have a property of greatness (of any value) in *W** (*The Nature of Necessity* 152). Suppose there is a function that computes the value of an object's greatness in a world; let *f* be such a function. If *f* is a

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[10] This is an axiom in the S5 system of quantified modal logic that is often a topic of debate.

[11] During the following, greatness is used as it was before the distinction between "excellence" and "greatness" was made.

[12] This is also mentioned in (10) above.

function, then $f(x$ in $W) =$ some value. However, $f(x$ in $W^*)$ doesn't have *any* value, even a value of zero. The x in W^* that we are trying to use in function f is non-referring. If we were to assign any value to $f(x$ in $W^*)$, then we would be assigning a property to x in W^*, namely the property of having a certain value of greatness. But x does not exist in W^*. Now, what Plantinga wants to be able to say is that $[f(x$ in $W)] > [f(x$ in $W^*)]$. But this requires a comparison. Attempting to do this comparison is akin to giving a person two pieces of paper, one with a number on it and one without a number on it, and asking "Which piece of paper has a greater number on it?" This is not a legitimate question to ask since it presupposes that there are two numbers to compare. The proposition "The greatness of x in W^* is 0" is false in the same way that "The present king of France is bald" is false (Russell 167–180). However, what we are dealing with here is not the ability to evaluate the truth value of some proposition but rather the ability to make a sensible comparison between two (numerical, or at least order-able) values. Note that $[f(x$ in $W)] > [f(x$ in $W^*)]$ entails that $f(x$ in $W^*) = n$ is true for some n; but for any value of n, "$f(x$ in $W^*) = n$" is false. So the claim made by the consequent of (10) rests on a comparison that is impossible to make if the antecedent conditions of (10) are met.

Soon after introducing (10) above in *The Nature of Necessity*, Plantinga amends it to:

(10*) For any world W and object x, if x does not exist in W, then there is a world W^* such that the greatness of x in W^* exceeds the greatness of x in W (*The Nature of Necessity* 203).[13]

Plantinga claims that this weaker premise will serve the same function in his argument. This is true. Nonetheless, this weaker premise is also flawed. Suppose that x does not exist in any world. Then x would not exist in W. It does not follow that there is a world W^* in which the greatness of x exceeds the greatness of x in W, since x does not exist in any world.[14] The phrase

[13] Note that there is a switch of convention here: now x does not exist in W but x does exist in W^*. I do this to stay true to the convention Plantinga uses in the section that I am discussing so that any reference to the section will reflect the convention I use while discussing it.

[14] This is an example where it seems that the antecedent conditions of (10*) are met, but the consequent does not follow. But, there may be a subtlety in the antecedent such that to call x an "object" it must be the case that x exists in at least one world, namely W^*.

"the greatness of x in W" is non-referring as it is used in (10*). Also, it is not clear whether "the greatness of x in W^*" is referring or not. However, the question arises as to whether Plantinga was implying that x must exist in at least one world (W^*) by naming x as an object. If so, then x does exist in W^*, but this turns (10*) into (10). Now, having criticized these claims, we should observe that Plantinga does not end up using them explicitly in his final argument. But is one of them wrapped up in the definition of "maximal greatness"? No, at least not in his eventual definition that is used. Maximal greatness is maximal excellence in every world. But maximal excellence in any world requires (entails) existence in that world. It is *not* the case that existence is a great-making property but rather is a necessary condition of maximal greatness (*The Nature of Necessity* 214). So, neither (10) nor (10*) are essential to the final argument.

3.2 CONCEPT OF INTRINSIC MAXIMUM

Plantinga introduces the concept of an "intrinsic maximum" in order to refute Gaunilo's original objection. He never offered a formal definition; however, he did write:

> The qualities that make for greatness in islands—number of palm trees, amount and quality of coconuts, for example—most of these qualities have no *intrinsic maximum*. That is, there is no degree of productivity or number of palm trees (or of dancing girls) such that it is impossible that an island display more of that quality (*God, Freedom, and Evil* 91).

So, intrinsic maxima are properties of qualities (or properties) of an object.[15] What Plantinga seems to be suggesting is a definition of "intrinsic maximum" as follows:

> A property P has an intrinsic maximum if and only if there exists a degree (or number) m of P such that for any degree (or number) n of p, $n < m$ or $n = m$.

Considering how central this concept is to Plantinga's argument—he uses it to both reject Gaunilo's objection and validate (b)—a formal definition is

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[15] The qualities that are of specific interest to us are great-making qualities.

long overdue. An important distinction needs to be made here between a *maximum* and a *limit*. Consider [0, 10) and [0, 10], sets of real numbers.[16] Note that while [0,10) has an upper limit of 10, it does not exhibit a maximum since for any number n on the interval there exists a number y on the interval such that $y > n$. On the other hand, [0, 10] does exhibit a maximum: let $m = 10$; note that for any n on [0, 10], $n < m$ or $n = m$.

How does this apply to properties and intrinsic maxima? Keep in mind that not all properties, such as the property of being taller than six feet, admit of degrees; however, of those that do there are two kinds: those with intrinsic maxima and those without intrinsic maxima. Suppose property P is a property that does admit a degree (i.e., property P can be had by an object in quantifiable degrees). Now for an object x, if x has P, then x has a certain value of P. That is to say, if an object x has property P, then x has some value of P that is a member of some certain interval of possible values of P. The nature of this interval determines whether or not P has an intrinsic maximum. Let's take the property of mass as an example. Suppose an object x has the property of mass. If so, then x is a physical object. This implies that x has a positive value of mass. So, the value of mass that x has is a member of a set that has a lower limit of zero and does not have zero as a member. Furthermore, for the sake of the example let's assume that there is no limit to the amount of mass an object may have. Then the value of mass x has falls somewhere between 0 and infinity. For this example, the set of possible values of mass does not have an upper bound, so we may infer that mass does not have an intrinsic maximum.[17] Note that if a property has an intrinsic maximum, then it has an upper limit. However, the converse of this is not true. Furthermore, note that if a property P has an intrinsic maximum m, then it is impossible for any object x to have more than m of P. So, if a property has an intrinsic maximum, then it has that intrinsic maximum necessarily or essentially. This means that the property of having an intrinsic maximum is not world-dependent property.

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[16] The difference between [0,10) and [0,10] is that 10 is not a member of the former, but 10 is a member of the latter set. Note that 0 is a member of both.

[17] As used here, upper bound is just another way of saying upper limit.

3.3 CALCULATION OF GREATNESS

Greatness is "to be computed (by someone unusually well informed) by integrating [a being's] excellence over all possible worlds" (*God, Freedom, and Evil* 107–8). Let's not push Plantinga's calculus analogy; indeed, I don't think it can be pushed at all without falling apart (Fitzpatrick, *Advanced Calculus* 118).[18] Rather, what I think we should concern ourselves with is what Plantinga intended to suggest by this statement. If I understand him correctly, we could calculate the greatness of a being by a simple addition of its excellence in each world.[19] Thus, let h be the excellence function such that

$h(B_i)$ = excellence of being B in world W_i.

Let g be the greatness function such that

$g(B) = h(B_1) + h(B_2) + h(B_3) + \ldots + h(B_n)$ as n approaches infinity.[20]

Greatness has now been properly defined as a calculation (by addition) of a being's excellence in all worlds in which that being exists.

IV. Criticism of Plantinga's Argument

4.1 TWO CONFLICTING REQUIREMENTS FOR A SUCCESSFUL ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

Recall that Plantinga remedies his own objection (section 1.4) by building necessary existence into the definition of maximal greatness. That is to say, he defined the property of maximal greatness such that if maximal greatness is possibly instantiated, then it is necessarily instantiated.

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[18] Hereafter simply "Fitzpatrick" followed by the page number. Whether or not it is possible to integrate this function depends how we would technically formulate the function of excellence. Any attempt at this procedure would be troublesome to say the least. For example, suppose that a being B exists in only one world. It seems, then, that there would only be one point representing the being's excellence on the graph of this being's greatness. But if this is so, then the being in question would not have any greatness according to the integration analogy. For a criterion of integrability, see Fitzpatrick.

[19] Note that this procedure does not run into any problems in worlds in which the being does not exist. In such worlds, the being does not have excellence, thus not adding to the being's greatness.

[20] Here and throughout the rest of my paper I am using the word "function" non-technically.

Plantinga was forced to do this to avoid his own criticism of St. Anselm's argument. However, before he offered his criticism he considered Gaunilo's objection, "On Behalf of the Fool." In response, Plantinga claimed that objects that have as their great-making properties those which do not have intrinsic maxima cannot ever attain a maximal degree of greatness. Thus, the idea of a greatest possible island or, more correctly, the property of a maximally great island, is inconsistent or incoherent. Since these properties are inconsistent or incoherent, they are *not possible* and thus not possibly instantiated. This conclusion allows Plantinga to avoid accepting the existence of absurd objects like Gaunilo's island. The reason is that (b) above cannot be formulated in terms of the property of the greatest island or in terms of any property that does not have an intrinsic maximum. The property of maximal greatness (as seen in (b)) is safe from Plantinga's reply to Gaunilo since *maximal greatness has an intrinsic maximum*. Is this true? Does maximal greatness have an intrinsic maximum? Plantinga wrote:

> Anselm clearly has in mind such properties as wisdom, knowledge, power, and moral excellence or moral perfection. And certainly knowledge, for example, does have an intrinsic maximum: if for every proposition p, a being B knows whether or not p is true, then B has a degree of knowledge that is utterly unsurpassable. So a greatest possible being would have to have this level of knowledge: it would have to be omniscient. Similarly for power; omnipotence is a degree of power that can't possibly be excelled. Moral perfection or moral excellence is perhaps not quite so clear; still a being could perhaps always do what is morally right, so that it would not be possible for it to be exceeded along those lines. . . . And what about the relevant qualities here—love, or acting out of love: do they have intrinsic maxima? The answer isn't very clear either way. Rather than pause to discuss this question, let's note simply that there may be a weak point here in Anselm's argument and move on (*God, Freedom, and Evil* 91).[21]

Plantinga is claiming that his argument is not subject to his own criticism of Gaunilo's objection since knowledge, power, moral perfection, etc., have

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[21] I don't think he ever returns to this point, and he never gives justification for moving on. So this is a weak point in his final argument as well. See footnote 12 for why this point may also be reason to reject Plantinga's argument.

intrinsic maxima. That is to say, greatness has an intrinsic maximum so that it is consistent or coherent to assert (b), which is about *maximal greatness*. But these virtues (knowledge, power, moral perfection, etc.) are qualities of *excellence*. So, what we can infer from the above argument (if it is indeed correct) is that *excellence has an intrinsic maximum*.[22] What this means, according to our definition of "intrinsic maximum," is that the set of possible values of excellence has a closed upper bound—that is, the upper limit is a member of the set. This implies that there is a possible value of excellence e such that for any value of excellence n, $n < e$ or $n = e$. Now, I think it is safe to assume that Plantinga would agree e is positive.[23] What we *cannot* infer, at least directly, is that greatness has an intrinsic maximum. The being that exemplifies maximal greatness will have maximal excellence in all worlds. This excellence, although undoubtedly very great, has a value of e that is a finite positive value. However, when we add this constant positive value from all possible worlds (an infinite amount), we cannot possibly be left with a finite value, *thus implying that there is no intrinsic maximum of greatness*. What Plantinga did establish is that excellence has an intrinsic maximum, but he never established that greatness has an intrinsic maximum *after* he defined "greatness" as an addition (or less accurately, as an integration) of excellence in all possible worlds.

Here Plantinga may very well say that greatness does have an intrinsic maximum since "The *limiting degree of greatness*, therefore, would be enjoyed in a given world W only by a being who had maximal excellence in W and in every other possible world as well" (*The Nature of Necessity* 214, my emphasis). Admittedly, this seems reasonable. However, it appeals to confusion between what constitutes a limit and what constitutes a maximum. Let's grant Plantinga that the "limiting degree of greatness" entails maximal excellence in every world.[24] Does there exist some value m of greatness such that for any value n of greatness, $n < m$ or $n = m$? The correct response is no. An answer of yes would be equivalent to making the mistake of saying that since [0,10) has a limit of 10, there exists a number of [0,10) that is

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[22] See footnote 12 for Patrick Grim's related argument.

[23] Whether or not excellence has a lower bound and, if it does, whether or not it is zero or a negative value may be debated. But we need not enter this debate here since the being we are interested in (the greatest possible being) has the maximal level of excellence, e, in every possible world.

[24] I am not ready to accept that there is even a limiting degree of greatness; however, failing to exhibit an intrinsic maximum is sufficient to reject the argument.

the greatest. However, I claim that greatness does not even have an upper bound (or a limiting degree). Consider the greatness function of the greatest possible being B:

$g(B) = h(B_1) + h(B_2) + h(B_3) + \ldots + h(B_n)$ as n approaches infinity, where $h(B_i)$ is the excellence of being B in world W_i.

Note that $h(B_i) = e$, where e is the intrinsic maximum value of excellence and i is any natural number. The greatness function of the greatest possible being, $g(B)$, is an infinite series starting at one and summing the value of excellence in every possible world. Since $h(B_i) = e$, for all i that are natural numbers, $g(B)$ is an infinite summation of the constant positive value e.[25] Note that $g(B)$ is not bounded since there is no number m such that $g(B) < m$ or $g(B) = m$ for every natural number. Thus, the infinite series $g(B)$ diverges (Fitzpatrick 27). This implies that there is no maximum value of greatness. So asserting (b) above is akin to asserting "It is possible that there is a natural number greater than all other natural numbers."

There is something curious about the greatest possible being having the maximal degree of excellence, e, in every possible world. Excellence is a world-dependent property. However, the maximal degree of excellence is not world-dependent. But it seems that there might be a limit to how excellent a being could be in some world that is less that the maximal degree of excellence e. Suppose that we take Plantinga's example of moral excellence as an excellence-making property. It seems that in a world in which no other beings exist, the greatest possible being could not have much in terms of moral excellence. Could it be that it is impossible for any (even the greatest possible) being to achieve the maximal degree of excellence in every possible world? This may or may not be true, but we need not settle the issue here. Note that, according to Plantinga, two other excellence-making properties, knowledge and power, have values for the greatest possible being in every possible world. That is to say, even in a world in which the greatest possible being is the only thing that exists, the greatest possible being will attain a level of excellence corresponding to knowledge of all necessary truths and will have certain powers. What I am claiming here is that

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[25] Recall my remarks at the end of section 3.2. The intrinsic maximum of a property is the same in every possible world. So, the maximum degree of excellence that Plantinga claims the greatest possible being has in every world is a constant finite positive value. I discuss this further in the next paragraph.

the greatest possible being is going to be as maximally excellent as possible in every world. Thus, I claim that there is a lower bound on $h(B_i)$, where B is the greatest possible being, as follows:

> For any natural number i, there exists some positive real number k such that $h(B_i) > k$ or $h(B_i) = k$.

That is to say, for any natural number i, each $h(B_i)$ in the infinite series $g(B)$ will be greater than or equal to some positive value of excellence k. The same argument I gave for $g(B)$ being unbounded above applies *mutatis mutandis* to this new qualification of the greatest possible being's excellence. We may conclude that the property of greatness (as Plantinga has defined it) does *not* exhibit an intrinsic maximum. Therefore, the property of maximal greatness is impossible; in other words, Plantinga's first premise, (29) above, is false.

V. Conclusion

So, where does this leave Plantinga? It seems to me that he is caught between two conflicting requirements for a successful argument. These two are:

(a) Necessary existence must be a quality of the property of maximal greatness; and

(b) maximal greatness must have an intrinsic maximum to be consistent and coherent; that is, so that (2) above may be held as a premise.

If Plantinga fails to satisfy (a), then he is subject to his own criticism of Anselm's arguments (see section 1.4). If he fails to satisfy (b), then his argument is subject to a version of his response to Gaunilo's original objection (section 1.2 above). That is to say, failing to satisfy one gives only the conclusion that God exists in a maximally excellent way in *some world or other*.[26] But, by satisfying (a), Plantinga has made the property of "maximal greatness" conceivable only by a fool who deserves our sympathy.[27]

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