Greatness and Necessity: A Defense of St. Anselm’s Modal Ontological Argument

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Preface

I first encountered St. Anselm’s ontological argument over forty years ago in an introductory philosophy class at the University of North Dakota. Taught by Duane Voskuil, the class created in me an itch that had to be scratched over the decades. This book is the result.

Not having much of a formal education in philosophy meant that I was constantly battling my ignorance as I tried to understand this beguiling argument and objections to it. A breakthrough occurred when I reconnected with Duane Voskuil. After leaving Grand Forks, he landed in Bismarck, only a couple hours away from my small town of Mott. At the time I wrote him, he was fully retired, both from teaching and his later career as a violinmaker. He offered me encouragement and directed me to his unpublished introductory philosophy book.

Also of great help to me in recent years were the many excellent philosophical resources available on the internet. I am particularly fond of the lectures of the venerable Arthur Holmes from Wheaton College and the Closer to Truth series by Robert Lawrence Kuhn.

Voskuil was a student of Charles Hartshorne, considered by many as the last of the great metaphysicians, and so my initial exposure to St. Anselm’s ontological argument was through Hartshorne. A proponent of process philosophy, Hartshorne provides a unique perspective on the subject, which continues to be neglected, in my humble opinion. Of particular importance is his critique of positivism.

I would have liked to engage Thomas Aquinas in this work in a significant way, but that would have required more time, many more pages, and a lot more reading. Aquinas was the most thorough and incisive of Anselm’s early critics, and early on in my investigations I sought a way
to reconcile these two great saints. In an earlier draft, when I was still trying to integrate Aquinas into this book, I concluded that Anselm has to concede to Thomas that a purely a priori argument is not possible. Of course, that leaves a lot more to argue about, and I can imagine they had a lot to say to each other when they met in heaven!

A significant part of my education occurred during internet discussions on philosophy and theology. The work of Graham Oppy, the Australian analytic philosopher, was often invoked to make the skeptical/atheistic case. Oppy is regarded by William Lane Craig, the noted Christian apologist, as the “leading torch bearer for atheism” (Fradd, "Pints with Aquinas"). Oppy’s bold claim that all ontological arguments are dialectically worthless presented a challenge. What if I could construct a version of the ontological argument that would prove Oppy wrong, at least in some significant respects?

Along the way, I stumbled upon a very engaging lecture by Luciano Floridi, which alerted me to the value of finding a metaphor suited to my project (Floridi, “Is God Possible”). Floridi speaks of the mimetic and poetic branches of knowledge. The mimetic is primarily comprised of the scientific disciplines, such as biology and chemistry, which try to take a picture of reality. The poetic, including philosophy, tries to build its subject matter with words. Floridi takes the poetic path and likens his Leibnizian ontological argument to a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat. However, after finding Bertrand Russell’s famous quote about Anselm’s argument, which made use of a bridge-building metaphor, I decided to use it instead. This proved to be a fruitful device for understanding what I was trying to do.

Taking on the torchbearer for atheism may seem like a quixotic endeavor, especially for a layman. For many, Graham Oppy’s case for skepticism is iron-clad and obvious. To challenge this orthodoxy and argue that a case can be made for the ontological argument might seem like the crank claiming to have found a way to square the circle, even though the definitive proof of its impossibility was found in 1882. Nevertheless, I remain convinced that my research recovers something important for the debate over God’s existence.

I: Introduction
A. The Bridge from Pure Thought

Bertrand Russell writes the following about the ontological argument:
The real question is: Is there anything we can think of which, by the mere fact that we can think of it, is shown to exist outside our thought? Every philosopher would like to say yes, because a philosopher’s job is to find out things about the world by thinking rather than observing. If yes is the right answer, there is a bridge from pure thought to things. If not, not. (Russell, History 417)

Is there a bridge from pure thought to existing things? This seems dubious. Just because I can think of a unicorn does not mean that one must exist. This appears to be true no matter the subject, but, as with all things, God could be the exception. In other words, is it possible to form an idea of God that will guarantee, before and independent of experience, that God exists in the world outside my mind? Being true to his logical empiricism, Russell went to his grave thinking God just did not provide enough evidence.

A monk named Anselm thought differently. In 1078, Anselm proposed an argument for God’s existence, later to be known as the ontological argument, which proceeded from the idea of God and, many have thought, successfully built that bridge.

St. Anselm’s ontological argument for God’s existence is unique among theistic arguments in that it is an a priori argument that tries to deduce God’s existence from an idea of God. In contrast, a posteriori arguments try to deduce God’s existence from our experience of the world. I will try to make a case for an a priori argument for God’s existence.

Richard Dawkins, one of the “Four Horseman” of the New Atheism, derisively rejects the ontological argument (Dawkins 80). However, if the argument is so obviously wrong, why did many great minds waste any time on it over the centuries? Bonaventure, Descartes, Leibniz, and Hegel were among its supporters. Aquinas, Hume, and Kant spilled ink opposing it. The great mathematician Kurt Gödel constructed his own version. The brilliant Bertrand Russell thought the argument was sound, if only for a brief time early in his career.¹ In fact, the ontological argument may be the single most discussed argument in the history of philosophy.² So it cannot be casually dismissed.

Unlike Dawkins, a biologist, professional philosophers continue to take the argument seriously. Prominent among them is Graham Oppy, an Australian analytic philosopher. Although a skeptic, Oppy’s book, Ontological Arguments and Belief in God, provides a useful framework to discuss ontological arguments.
**B. St. Anselm**

First, the man himself: Anselm was born in Aosta, a Burgundian town, in 1033. He died on April 21, 1109.

He grew up very close to his mother, Ermenberga, who instilled in him both piety and a love of learning. His desire for the monastic life began early, but his admission to a monastery was thwarted by his father, Gunderulf. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* reports that after this disappointment and the death of his mother, Anselm “was drawn away by the pleasures of youth and lost his first ardour and his love of learning” (Kent, "Anselm"). Becoming estranged from his father, Anselm left Aosta and set upon a journey that eventually brought him to the monastery at Bec in Normandy.

At Bec, Anselm was taught and mentored by Abbot Lanfranc, a renowned scholar. Anselm thrived at Bec and eventually succeeded Lanfranc as Abbot, Lanfranc having been promoted to the office of archbishop of Canterbury. Anselm was abbot for 15 years, during which time he came to have a reputation as a scholar, counselor, and adviser. In his final years at Bec, he wrote his philosophical works, *Monologion* and *Proslogion*.

Anselm began spending time in England and, upon Lanfranc’s passing, eventually was named archbishop of Canterbury, a position he reluctantly assumed. Upon his installation, Anselm came into conflict with King William Rufus over the liberty of the Church to appoint her own bishops. Even though he was embroiled in Church-State controversies, Anselm wrote over half of his scholarly works while he was archbishop of Canterbury. He died in 1109 and was canonized in 1163.

The chief sources for Anselm’s life are his own letters and two biographical works of his friend, disciple, and secretary, Eadmer, a monk of Canterbury.

Anselm’s chief achievement was the ontological argument for the existence of God set forth in his work, *Proslogion*, which means “allocation.” In his prior work, *Monologion*, Anselm advanced a series of interlocking arguments for the existence of God from reason alone. However, Anselm became dissatisfied with the complexity of *Monologion* and sought a single and self-sufficient argument.

Anselm became obsessed with this project. Eadmer relates that while Anselm pondered the problem, he gave up food, drink, and sleep. He became so consumed by the task that it began to interfere with his religious duties. Anselm began to wonder whether the whole pursuit was a temptation of the Devil, and he eventually despaired of finding an answer. However,
to his great joy and jubilation, the solution came to him one evening between night offices. He immediately wrote the argument down on wax tablets, which he gave to one of the monks for safekeeping. However, the monk lost the tablets. Anselm managed to recall the argument and write it down on fresh tablets. He very trustingly put them in the care of the same monk, but when they were wanted, it was found that the tablets were broken to pieces. With some difficulty, Anselm put the fragments together and had the whole copied on parchment for greater security.

According to W. H. Kent:

The story sounds like an allegory of the fate which awaited this famous argument, which was lost and found again, pulled to pieces and restored in the course of controversy. Rejected by St. Thomas and his followers, it was revived in another form by Descartes. After being assailed by Kant, it was defended by Hegel, for whom it had a peculiar fascination.... Assailants of this argument should remember that all minds are not cast in one mould, and it is easy to understand how some can feel the force of arguments that are not felt by others. But if this proof were indeed, as some consider it, an absurd fallacy, how could it appeal to such minds as those of Anselm, Descartes, and Hegel? (Kent, "Anselm")

"Lost and found again, pulled to pieces and restored in the course of controversy" describes the history of Anselm's argument into the 20th and 21st centuries. Overall, Kant's judgment seems to have prevailed as the definitive refutation of the argument. But the argument enjoyed a revival, largely through the work of Norman Malcolm and Charles Hartshorne, who argued for a stronger modal version based on Chapter 3 of Prosligion (explained below). Alvin Plantinga, a contemporary Christian analytic philosopher, developed his own version, which has occupied much of recent scholarship.

Despite the resurgence in interest in the argument, most contemporary philosophers reject it. Noted among the skeptics is Graham Oppy, whose judgment is negative on the value of all ontological arguments. Oppy's book Ontological Arguments and Belief in God is frequently cited by skeptics, agnostics, and atheists. In his later work, Arguing for God, Oppy argues against all the other major theistic arguments.

Nevertheless, this effort will hopefully contribute to the restoration project. I will propose a modal version, and see whether it can withstand Oppy's critique. However, my modal version will more closely follow
Anselm’s original argument than more modern formulations, which tend to be in terms of possible worlds, a popular construct in analytic philosophy. In its defense, I will rely largely on the work of Charles Hartshorne.

To begin, we need to go back to Anselm’s Proslogion to see how his bridge was originally constructed.

C. Defining Greatness

In the Preface to Proslogion, Anselm explains his motivation:

After I had published, at the pressing entreaties of several of my brethren, a certain short tract [Monologion] as an example of meditation on the meaning of faith from the point of view of one seeking, through silent reasoning within himself, things he knows not—reflecting that this was made up of a connected chain of many arguments, I began to wonder if perhaps it might be possible to find one single argument that for its proof required no other save itself and that by itself would suffice to prove that God really exists, that He is the supreme good needing no other and is He whom all things have need of for their being and well-being, and also to prove whatever we believe about the Divine Being. (Anselm, Proslogion 103)

This is a tall order, and, as we have seen, Anselm’s search for a concept of God suited to the task was all-consuming. However, the formula he settled on, “that than which nothing greater can be thought,” did not arise in a vacuum. According to Charlesworth, precursors to it are found in Monologion and St. Augustine, Anselm’s primary theological source (Charlesworth, 56).

To help us understand the meaning of Greatness, we turn to Charles Hartshorne:

But what is the meaning? Anselm replied with great simplicity: to be God is to be such that “none greater can be conceived.” And if you ask about the import of “greater,” the reply is, x is greater than y insofar as x is, and y is not, something “which is better to be than not to be.” Greater thus means superior, more excellent, more worthy of admiration and respect. (Hartshorne, Anselm’s Discovery 24-25)

Therefore, Greatness is defined in terms of ultimate goodness or perfection. In Chapter Five, Anselm states, “God is whatever it is better to be than not to be” (Anselm, Proslogion 121). Hartshorne then asks:

Why does our Saint choose this definition? I suppose because he
takes it for granted that by “God” is the universal object of worship, and if God should have a superior, then only the ignorant or superstitious could worship Him—not all creatures nor any reasonable creatures. (Hartshorne, *Anselm’s Discovery* 26-27)

As far as the Christian is concerned, the definition is consistent with the Christian idea of worship and is “expressive of faith,” as Hartshorne puts it. In fact, Hartshorne, who himself was not a Christian, defines worship in a very biblical way. To worship something is to love it with all one’s heart, soul, mind, and strength (Hartshorne, *The Logic of Perfection* 40).

Certainly, all people do not identify God with Greatness. However, the logic of worship implicit in Greatness makes it crystal clear why they should. In general, theists should find Greatness acceptable. As for polytheists and all others who worship lesser gods, well, the logic of worship, which drives us to one universal object of worship, makes it evident why they are not rational.

Anselm took the adequacy of his definition for granted, influenced as he was by St. Augustine and immersed in the neo-Platonic worldview. However, we are in no position to do the same. As M. J. Charlesworth explains in his commentary on *Proslogion*, “For St. Anselm, this whole neo-Platonic notion of metaphysical ‘perfections’ was so familiar and so seemingly self-evident that it needed no justification. However, for the modern thinker, the notion of a ‘perfection’ is a puzzling one and not at all self-evident” (Charlesworth, 60).

**D. Anselm’s Two Arguments**

It is controversial whether Anselm, implicitly at least, allows the possibility of a rational approach to God as independent of a faith-based theological approach. The celebrated Swiss theologian, Karl Barth, denied such a possibility (Charlesworth, 40-46). It must be acknowledged that Anselm, first and foremost, was a person of faith: he begins Chapter One of *Proslogion* with a prayer. He also gives this work the title *Faith in Search of Understanding* (*fides quarens intellectum*). However, acknowledging this does not preclude an intention on Anselm’s part to address both believers and unbelievers. Anselm’s arguments allow believers to penetrate more deeply into the mystery of God and understand what they believe by faith. For unbelievers, the arguments may convince them of the existence of God so that they may come to believe.

Arthur C. McGill observes that the literature reveals a rationalistic
side to Anselm’s thought in addition to believing and mystical aspects. Each view appeals to certain statements within Anselm’s works for justification. Regardless of how one reconciles and weighs these views, the diversity of these views should not be ignored. Therefore, I will not follow Barth in maintaining Anselm’s motive in writing Prosligion was only to illuminate what the Christian believes.

Notwithstanding Anselm’s desire to fashion a single argument, Prosligion arguably contains two versions. The first is set forth in Chapter II:

Now we believe that You are something than which nothing greater can be thought. Or can it be that a thing of such a nature does not exist, since “the Fool has said in his heart, there is no God” [Ps. xiii. 1; lii. 1]? But surely, when this same Fool hears what I am speaking about, namely, “something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought,” he understands what he hears, and what he understands is in his mind, even if he does not understand that it actually exists. For it is one thing for an object to exist in the mind and another thing to understand that an object actually exists. Thus, when a painter plans beforehand what he is going to execute, he has [the picture] in his mind, but he does not yet think that it actually exists because he not yet executed it. However, when he has actually painted it, then he both has it in his mind and understands that it exists because he has now made it. Even the Fool, then, is forced to agree that something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought exists in the mind, since he understands this when he hears it, and whatever is understood is in the mind. And surely that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought cannot exist in the mind alone. For if it exists solely in the mind even, it can be thought to exist in reality also, which is greater. If then that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought exists in the mind alone, this same that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought is that-than-which-a-greater-can-be-thought. But this is obviously impossible. Therefore, there is absolutely no doubt that something-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought exists both in the mind and in reality. (Anselm, Prosligion 117)

First, God is defined as “that than which nothing greater can be thought.” Anselm then supposes, along with the Fool from Psalm 13, that God defined as such does not exist. Anselm argues, even the Fool understands what is meant by that than which nothing greater can be thought. Given such understanding, the idea of God exists in his mind. Now, there are two possibilities: (1) that than which nothing greater can be thought exists in the mind alone, or (2) that than which nothing greater can be thought
exists in the mind and reality. Surely it is greater to exist both in the mind and reality than in the mind alone. From this, Anselm reasons that the Fool is then caught in a contradiction, for if that than which nothing greater can be thought exists in the mind alone, then one could still conceive of a greater, namely that which also exists in reality. Therefore, the Fool’s supposition that God exists in the mind alone cannot be true. God must exist in the mind and reality.

The argument from Chapter Three is as follows:

And certainly this being so truly exists that it cannot be even thought not to exist. For something can be thought to exist that cannot be thought not to exist, and this is greater than that which can be thought not to exist. Hence, if that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought can be thought not to exist, then that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought is not the same as that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought, which is absurd. Something-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought exists so truly then, that it cannot even be thought not to exist. (Anselm, Proslogion 119)

This is the so-called modal version, and it proceeds along the same lines as the first argument except that it utilizes a different great-making principle. Rather than using the principle that actual existence is greater than mere mental existence, Chapter Three uses the principle that necessary existence is greater than contingent existence. Something that cannot be thought not to exist is greater than that that can be thought not to exist.

Beginning with the first argument, let us construct the two arguments more formally. The term "Greatness" will refer to That Than Which Nothing Greater Can Be Thought.

Definition: God is That Than Which Nothing Greater Can Be Thought (Greatness).

1. Premise: Greatness can be thought.
2. Premise: Whatever can be thought exists in the mind.
3. Premise: Whatever exists in the mind either exists in the mind alone or both in the mind and in reality.
4. Premise: That which exists in the mind and reality is greater than that which exists in the mind alone.
5. Assumption for reductio ad absurdum argument: Greatness exists in the mind alone.
6. But 6 leads to a contradiction because one could then think of something
greater, namely that which exists both in the mind and reality.
7. Therefore 6 is false.
8. Therefore, Greatness exists in reality.
9. Therefore, God exists.

For Anselm, “existing in the mind” in Premise 2 means conceivable or thinkable without contradiction. Premise 3 proposes only two alternatives for something that is conceivable: either it exists in the mind alone or both in the mind and reality. Premise 4 establishes the great-making principle that the latter is greater. In Premise 5, we assume that which we want to disprove, namely that Greatness exists in the mind alone. But this leads to a contradiction that causes us to reject that assumption. There being no other possibility from Premise 3, we are led to the conclusion that Greatness exists necessarily and that God exists.

The argument from Chapter Three has the same basic structure:

1. Definition: God is That Than Which Nothing Greater Can Be Thought (Greatness).
2. Premise: One can conceive of Greatness.
3. Premise: One can conceive of something which cannot fail to exist (exists necessarily).
4. Premise: There are only two ways something can exist, either necessarily or contingently.
5. Premise: It is greater to exist necessarily than contingently.
6. Assumption for reductio ad absurdum argument: Greatness exists contingently.
7. But 6 leads to a contradiction because I could then think of something greater, namely that which exists necessarily.
8. Therefore 6 is false.
9. Therefore, Greatness exists necessarily (this being the only other possibility from 4).
10. Therefore, God exists.

Some commentators, such as Brian Davies, think that the two really comprise one argument and that the second is just a development of the first. After all, it was Anselm’s intention to construct a single, self-sufficient argument. However, we will follow Charles Hartshorne and others and maintain that the second argument is logically independent and stands
on its own (Hartshorne, *Anselm’s Discovery* 11).

The focus will be on the second argument because it offers the most potential to convince modern critics and skeptics who have imbibed deeply from the analytic tradition. Its first key premise is that God—defined as that than which nothing greater can be thought—is conceivable. The second is that necessary existence is conceivable. If both premises are accepted, the logic of the argument leads inexorably to the conclusion that God exists.

**E. Successful Bridge Building Defined**

Anyone proposing an argument for God’s existence hopes it will be judged to be sound. An argument is considered sound, first of all, if its reasoning is valid or makes no logical mistakes (e.g., begging the question, equivocation, false analogy). Second, all its premises must be true.

In reviewing the literature, one finds that critics generally grant the validity of arguments but challenge the truth of their premises. I hope to show the truth of my premises by refuting, or at least casting doubt on, the principal objections raised against the ontological argument over the centuries as they culminate in the work of Graham Oppy, Anselm’s most prominent modern critic.

We are attempting an a priori argument. An a priori argument for God’s existence attempts to deduce God’s existence from an idea of God. In contrast, an a posteriori argument argues from experience to the conclusion that God exists. However, this formulation of the argument does not amount to “I can think of God; therefore, God exists.” It is not an attempt to extract the existence of God directly from the idea of God. Rather, my bridge consists of various premises and a chain of reasoning leading to the conclusion that God exists.

Recall that Anselm wanted to craft a single argument that “should have no need of any other argument aside from itself to prove it, and might suffice by itself to demonstrate that God really exists and is the Supreme Good” (*Anselm, Proslogion* 103). If self-sufficiency is critical, then, first of all, the terms of its propositions must be clear and free of ambiguity. Second, its premises must be self-evidently true. This means that an a priori argument also should be evaluated in terms of the degree its premises themselves rest on empirical grounds. To the extent that one must have recourse to experience (e.g., use causal or a posteriori arguments) to buttress the premises, one will fail to construct a purely a priori argument.
The bridge must not only be *from* pure thought. It must be *of* pure thought. In Thomistic terms, a purely a priori argument is one the premises of which are either self-evident in themselves (and to us) or rest on further propositions that are also self-evident (Kreeft, 48). Its reasoning is also deductive throughout, not inductive. So, the bridge of pure thought has four pillars: Greatness, Necessity, a Great-Making Principle (necessity is greater than contingency), and the Logic of the argument (*reductio ad absurdum*—excluded middle). Below is a graphic depiction of a perfect a priori argument, with valid logic, all of its terms clear and consistent, and all the pillars (premises) true and self-evident.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 1:** A bridge from pure thought.

Of course, there can be no naïve expectations of a perfect demonstration or proof of God's existence. However, one can hope it will have some dialectical value in the perennial God debate. However, we will find that our critic does not grant this bridge-building project much chance for success in that respect.

**Chapter II: Graham Oppy**

**A. Oppy's Purpose and Agnosticism**

Oppy’s book, *Ontological Arguments and Belief in God*, attempts to be comprehensive in its coverage of the various forms of the ontological
argument. Claiming to operate from a position of agnosticism, Oppy finds that all forms of the ontological argument will be found to be either question-begging or invalid (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 198). In addition, they will be susceptible to parody arguments and, in some cases, reverse ontological arguments. Oppy’s ultimate conclusion is that all known versions of the ontological argument are dialectically impotent and worthless (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 198).

Oppy expresses this ambitious motivation for writing this book:

A passing remark in Plantinga...provided part of the motivation for the book, namely, “I do not believe that any philosopher has ever given a cogent and conclusive refutation of the ontological argument in its various forms.” One aim of this book is to provide such a “refutation”; how far it falls short of that aim I leave to the reader to judge. (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* xviii)

Although the quest to provide such a refutation may have been his initial motivation, he makes it clear at the outset that he intends to defend a more modest thesis, namely that ontological arguments do not provide agnostics with good reasons to give up their agnosticism (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* xi).

Oppy separates agnosticism into two types, strong and weak (Oppy, *Arguing About Gods* 16). Strong agnosticism holds that one must suspend judgment regarding God’s existence, while weak agnosticism holds that it is permissible for reasonable people to suspend judgment. Oppy ultimately adopts weak agnosticism (Oppy, *Arguing About Gods* 29).

Although he is a religious skeptic, his style of agnosticism approaches philosophical views with a *pro tem* presumption that they can be reasonably held. Ontological arguments, then, should be presumed innocent until convicted (Oppy, *Arguing About Gods* xiii). This epistemological conservatism allows theists, atheists, and agnostics alike to hold their respective views without presumptively being judged irrational.

**B. How Oppy Defines Success and Begging the Question**

Oppy claims that all known versions of the ontological argument clearly fail. But how does he judge success or failure? In his 1995 book, the test appears to be whether the argument “provides an agnostic with good reason to change her view—that is, to give up her agnosticism” (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* xi). What, then, does Oppy regard as a
good reason to give up one’s agnosticism? That Oppy sets the bar high for proponents of ontological arguments is seen by the way he sums up the success of parody arguments in their ability to discredit their original arguments. He doesn’t claim that everyone is obliged to believe they are just as good as the original arguments. Rather, he thinks one could reasonably regard them as just as good, which is sufficient to declare the ontological argument being parodied a failure (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 185).

Dombrowski argues that Oppy imposes an unreasonable standard for defenders of ontological arguments:

> We have seen that defenders of the ontological argument, assuming they are intellectually honest and possess a certain degree of epistemological modesty, are willing to admit that the argument falls short of indubitable proof....But to admit this much is not to claim, as Oppy mistakenly thinks, that the argument is dialectically impotent and worthless. As Oakes perceptively puts the point, to think that an argument is dialectically impotent and worthless because not all rational persons who are presented with the argument would accept it is to invite disaster for all philosophers: “by that austere a standard, of course, virtually all arguments with philosophically interesting conclusions—not just ontological arguments—would turn out to be ‘worthless.’” (Dombrowski, 91)

In his later work, Oppy attempts to provide a more reasonable definition of successful argumentation. Starting with the assumption that the proper function of arguments is to bring about belief revision, he offers this preliminary definition: “a good argument is one that succeeds—or perhaps would or ought to succeed—in bringing about reasonable belief revision in reasonable targets” (Oppy, *Arguing About Gods* 10).

He develops it further as follows:

If a reasonable person need not accept all of the premises of an argument, then that argument does not give all reasonable people a reason to accept its conclusion. If a reasonable person ought not to accept all of the premises of an argument, then that argument cannot give any reasonable people a reason to accept its conclusion. (Oppy, *Arguing About Gods* 11)

In other words, it is all or nothing. But, as William Lane Craig observes, “What one looks for in vain is any reason from Oppy to think that an argument is a failure unless it would or ought to persuade all reasonable
persons to accept its conclusion” (Craig, 435-42). Craig continues with respect to the above quote:

These are dark sayings. The first seems to assert that a person who is not rationally compelled to accept every premise of an argument has not been given any reason whatsoever to accept the conclusion, which assertion seems obviously false. The second is dreadfully ambiguous (is the person not obliged to accept every premise or is he obliged to withhold acceptance of some premise?), but in any case the assertion seems once more clearly false, not only for the foregoing reason but also because what is the case for one reasonable person need not be the case for all. (Craig, 435-42)

Craig justly concludes, “Oppy makes it too easy for himself, even given his account of successful argumentation, when he thinks to defeat arguments just by asserting that it is reasonable to withhold belief from the premises of the arguments he discusses” (Craig, 435-42).

Another way Oppy makes it too easy for himself is how he understands and applies the logical fallacy of begging the question. Begging the question can occur in a number of ways (Baggini and Fosl, 118-120, 84-87). First, an argument begs the question because the premise and conclusion are the very same proposition, although expressed in different words. Second, begging the question can occur in argumentation where there are unsettled questions about key terms, and the arguer smuggles in as settled a question that remains open. In other words, if the premise is accepted without further justification, the arguer is assuming the answer to a controversial question without argument. Third, some versions of begging the question are called circular reasoning. These involve two propositions that lead back and forth to each other, in a circle, each having only the support of the other.

Oppy makes it clear that he gives the term a dialectical and not a merely logical sense:

It is often objected against various forms of ontological argument that they “beg the question.” This complaint has a reasonable foundation…but is often poorly explained. The point is a dialectical, or dialogical, one, namely, that what an agnostic or atheist requires in an argument for the existence of God is a compelling reason to believe God exists, but that what the theist very often supplies is an argument whose alleged soundness can only be recognized by someone who already believes that God exists. It is not arguments—in the sense of sets of premises and conclusions—that can be
question-begging; rather, it is the dialectical, or dialogical, use to which the arguments can be put that can beg questions. (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 53)

After reviewing a number of different proposals for what begging the question should mean, he proposes this as an “adequate partial characterization”:

Suppose I am committed to a claim that \( p \) as part of my perhaps tacit reasonable commitment to a broader consistent set of claims \( C \). Suppose further that an opponent produces an argument of the form “\( Q_1, \ldots, Q_n; \) therefore, not \( p \),” where the negations of one or more of the \( Q_i \) are claims that belong to \( C \). Then that argument begs the question against me. Moreover, this is true even if I cannot provide a clear characterization of the set of claims \( C \). Of course, if one is to object to an opponent that he is begging the question, then one needs to have a firmer grip on the nature of the set of claims \( C \). But it is one thing to recognize that a question is being begged, and another for the begging of the question to take place. (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 56)

With this understanding, one wonders whether anyone can ever offer an argument that is not question-begging. All that is required for the fallacy to apply, apparently, is for the proponent to advance an argument that contradicts some claim or other of the opponent.

However, Oppy does allow that there can be non-question begging ontological arguments:

Note that this characterization does not entail all ontological arguments beg the question. Suppose we grant that an atheist is reasonably committed to a broader theory \( N \) that entails that God does not exist or that an agnostic is reasonably committed to a broader theory \( N \) that does not relevantly entail that God exists. It might still be the case (i) that \( N \) is logically inconsistent, or (ii) that \( N \{ p \} \) is inconsistent, where \( p \) is some proposition that any reasonable person—or perhaps any reasonable agnostic or atheist—must accept on a priori grounds. In either of these cases, there can be a non-question-begging ontological argument. (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 56-57)

Here, Oppy has done us a service, for he identifies how a proponent of an ontological argument can defeat the charge of begging the question as he understands it: Demonstrate that the opponent’s broader theory, which leads him to reject one’s argument, is logically inconsistent. This any reasonable person must accept on a priori grounds; otherwise, philosophical discourse is pointless.
Oppy would do better if he applied the fallacy in its more traditional senses. Aside from avoiding the logical forms of begging the question (i.e., assuming what one is trying to prove and circularity), proponents of proofs should transparently display their weaknesses and most controversial premises and defend them. This is simply everyone’s epistemic duty. But skeptics shouldn’t be licensed to reject an ontological argument as question-begging simply because of a proponent’s prior commitment to theism or the possible objections of a hypothetical “reasonable atheist and agnostic.” The upshot, then, is that whenever Oppy labels an argument as question-begging, one should always inquire further about which sense of the term he is using. If he is not using it in a traditional way, then the charge has no sting.

C. Oppy’s Treatment of Historical Objections to Ontological Arguments

To set the stage for what he calls his general objection to ontological arguments, Oppy undertakes a brief historical survey of objections raised by David Hume, Immanuel Kant, and the logical positivists (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 26-46).

**David Hume**

David Hume (1711-1776), the great Scottish philosopher, was an empiricist and skeptic whose theory of knowledge led him to reject the possibility of any proofs for God’s existence, whether a priori or a posteriori.

Hume divided all the objects of human reason or inquiry, including God, into two exclusive and exhaustive categories: relations of ideas and matters of fact. This division is known as “Hume’s fork.” According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*:

Propositions concerning relations of ideas are intuitively or demonstratively certain. They are known a priori—discoverable independently of experience by “the mere operation of thought,” so their truth does not depend on anything actually existing….That the interior angles of a Euclidean triangle sum to 180 degrees is true whether or not there are any Euclidean triangles to be found in nature. Denying that proposition is a contradiction, just as it is contradictory to say that $8 \times 7 = 57$.

In sharp contrast, the truth of propositions concerning matters of fact depends on the way the world is. Their contraries are always possible, their denials never imply contradictions, and they cannot be
established by demonstration. Asserting that Miami is north of Boston is false but not contradictory. We can understand what someone who asserts this is saying, even if we are puzzled about how he could have the facts so wrong.9

Hume had this to say about the ontological argument:

Nothing is demonstrable unless the contrary implies a contradiction....Whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as nonexistent. There is no being, therefore, whose non-existence implies a contradiction.

It is pretended that the Deity is a necessarily existent being...and that if we knew His whole essence or nature, we should perceive it to be as impossible for Him not to exist as for twice two not to be four. But it is evident that this can never happen, while our faculties remain the same as at present. It will still be possible for us, at any time, to conceive the nonexistence of what we formerly conceived to exist; nor can the mind lie under a necessity of supposing any object to remain always in being.10

Therefore, Hume believed that no a priori proof is possible because whatever we conceive of can be thought of as existing or not existing. This he elevated to a metaphysical principle that renders the idea of necessary existence meaningless. This he has to do if all objects of thought are either relations of ideas or matters of fact. Hume’s famous quote in this regard follows:

When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask Does it contain any abstract reasoning containing quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.11

Oppy finds Hume’s objections to be weak but highly influential, especially as they informed the work of Kant (Oppy, Ontological Arguments 28-29). However, Charles Hartshorne provides a more incisive critique of Hume:

Looking over Hume’s procedure as a whole, from the Anselmian point of view, we see the following. (1) Anselm showed that Greatness is inconceivable except as necessarily existing; from which it was a corollary that to deny the conceivability of ‘necessary existent’
is to affirm, “God is inconceivable.” Hence the universal contingency of existence affirmed by Hume as beyond all exception, is the down-right denial even of the thinkability of deity. The stark contradiction between such absolute empiricism and theism does not necessarily refute theism; perhaps it rather refutes absolute empiricism! Moreover, the unqualified validity of empiricism cannot itself be an empirical truth. So, Hume is simply appealing to his own a priori, against the religious a priori. It is his say so against that of (theistic-ally) religious mankind. (Hartshorne, Anselm’s Discovery 206)

Hartshorne goes on to identify absolute pluralism and absolute determinism as Hume’s other metaphysical assumptions and concludes:

Is it then surprising that the outcome of the Dialogues, resting as the whole discussion does on this triply dogmatic mechanistic and pluralistic positivism, should be “skeptical”? The result is built into the method. Absolute empiricism, absolute pluralism, absolute determinism, contradict the existential necessity, the unifying function, and the actual freedom, bountifully overflowing into lesser forms of freedom, which are the very meaning of “God.” One must choose, and Hume’s arguments for his choice merely reiterate the choice as already unwittingly made. On such an argument in a circle so much modern anti-metaphysical and skeptical philosophy is founded! (Hartshorne, Anselm’s Discovery 207)

Hume’s ideas were further advanced by the logical positivists of the Vienna School, who continued Hume’s attack on metaphysics. However, it should be clear that to attack the possibility of metaphysical truths, one must hold to certain metaphysical truths and thus advance one’s own “sophistry and illusion.” Hume argues that the ontological argument is pure nonsense, like trying to prove the existence of round squares. But Hartshorne correctly exposes that Hume is engaged in nonsense himself by “appealing to his own a priori, against the religious a priori.”

**Immanuel Kant**

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) sought to respond to David Hume’s radical empiricism. He wanted to give Hume’s empiricism its due but, at the same time, create room for religious belief. But to do so, he thought he had to create an impenetrable barrier between subjective experience and the external world.

In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant examined all knowledge to determine what is and what is not a priori or transcendental (that is before
and independent of experience). He found that certain categories of knowledge are transcendental (e.g., space, time, causation) but concluded that whatever is universal and necessary comes from the mind itself and not from the world of reality around us. The knowledge that we acquire by our understanding is confined to the appearances of things (phenomena) and does not extend to the noumenal reality, the *ding-an-sich* (the thing in itself) (Turner).

However, while Kant denied that metaphysics can expand our knowledge of the real world, he did not join Hume in consigning such knowledge to the flames.

Metaphysics is valid within the phenomenal realm and thus can inform our beliefs. Our judgments can be universal and necessary only within the narrow circle of knowledge covered by our sense-experience and do not add to our knowledge of external reality.

Kant’s theory of knowledge led him to reject both a priori and a posteriori arguments for God’s existence, which he organized under three categories: the ontological, the cosmological, and design (called “physico-theological”) (Turner). According to Hartshorne, Kant thought that the cosmological and design arguments depended on the ontological to establish the existence of God, the perfect being (Hartshorne, *Anselm’s Discovery* 84). Consequently, in refuting the ontological argument, Kant thought he defeated all theistic arguments.

Kant was the first to label the ontological argument as such, but he didn’t attack Anselm’s original argument. Rather, Kant most likely was reacting to the argument in its Cartesian form. Descartes argued that the idea of God as the most perfect being is innate. Having this idea of a most perfect being in my mind, I know that it exists because existence is a perfection. Therefore, one can no more deny the existence of God than one can deny that a triangle has three sides. In both cases, it is true by definition.

Against this, Oppy finds Kant advancing three objections.

1. No existence claims are analytic.
2. Existence is not a predicate.
3. No negative existentials are self-contradictory. (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 29)

1. No existence claims are analytic. Kant argued that existential propositions such as “God exists” are never analytic and necessary but always synthetic and contingent. The terms “synthetic” and “analytic”
correspond with Hume’s “matters of fact” and “relations of ideas” and have their origin in Aristotelian philosophy. Synthetic judgments result from a “putting together” (synthesis) of the data of experience. Analytic judgments involve a “taking-apart” (analysis) of the subject and predicate without reference to experience. “This table is round” is a synthetic judgment. “All the radii of a circle are equal” is an analytic judgment. Because they are dependent on experience, all synthetic judgments are a posteriori and thus only contingently true. In contrast, all analytic judgments are a priori and necessarily true because they are made without reference to experience and are true by definition (Turner).

But even modern opponents of the ontological argument, such as Mackie, think Kant is merely begging the question on this score, “for anyone who uses the ontological proof is claiming precisely that there is at least one analytically true existential proposition” (Mackie, 45). Oppy himself agrees and points out that some existential propositions, such as those in arithmetic, appear to be analytically true. Therefore, it is not obvious and indisputable that there cannot be analytic existential truths (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 30-31). So, according to Oppy, if one is looking for a conclusive refutation of ontological arguments, this is not it.

2. Existence is not a predicate. Kant’s most famous objection to the ontological argument is that existence is not a predicate; that is, it is not a concept that can be added to the concept of a thing. Therefore, “God exists” is not really a proposition, as it has a subject (God) but no predicate. This objection makes it clearer why Kant believed all existential propositions are synthetic. If “exists” is not a predicate that can be contained analytically in the idea of any subject, then a proposition asserting the existence of the subject can only be synthetic, that being the only other possibility.

Oppy finds that Kant does not adequately defend this objection (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 38). In a later chapter, he examines the issue more extensively but, in the end, finds the case inconclusive. He thinks it will be sufficient for his purposes if he has shown that it is “very difficult to decide whether or not existence is a predicate.” Again, he makes it clear that his purpose is “to defend the idea that it is sensible to try to provide compelling reasons for refusing to pay any more attention to ontological arguments” (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 161).

However, Oppy is wrong if he takes the existence is not a predicate objection to be troubling to the modal form of the ontological argument.
This objection may be problematic for Anselm’s first argument, which arguably treats existence as a predicate. However, it does not affect the modal argument, which uses the great-making principle that necessary existence is greater than contingent existence. It asks us to compare the relative greatness of two different modes of existence, not mere existence with nonexistence. How something exists can certainly be a predicate or attribute of that thing. This is seen in the example of annual and perennial plants. These terms are clear and intelligible and describe attributes that can meaningfully distinguish the two types of plants. So too is the distinction between contingently and necessarily existing things.

3. No negative existentials are self-contradictory. Kant admitted that a deductive argument, given its premises, requires its conclusion. For example, given what it means to be a triangle, such a figure will be three-sided. However, while one must accept the conclusion if one accepts the definition, one is not obligated to accept the definition.

As with triangles, so it is with God. Given what it means to be God (a being with all perfections, including existence), God must exist. But one can, without contradiction, refuse to accept Descartes’s definition of God. In other words, “God does not exist” would be self-contradictory if one holds to Descartes’ definition. However, “There is no god” would not involve a contradiction because both the subject and all its predicates are rejected.

Is Kant saying that any definition of God, even ones that do not include existence, can be rejected? His epistemology and particular form of conceptualism require this conclusion. Our thoughts are not legislative for reality. Even our a priori (universal and necessary) knowledge can have no contact with external things since such knowledge is produced only by the structures of our mind upon experiencing the external world. This being the case, our thoughts about God can never be more than “ideals” or mere unprovable proposals. But the Anselmian can rightly object that the impenetrable barrier erected by Kant between the phenomenal and noumenal realms is just another way to legislate the ontological argument out of contention as a sound argument.

In any case, Kant is saying that one can avoid the logical implications of any definition by “rejecting the subject.” Dealing with triangles, it is difficult to justify that one can reject the definition of a triangle as a three-sided figure. Three-sided figures will exist no matter what we call them. In his attempt to salvage Kant’s objection, Oppy uses the example of the
“largest triangle” to make Kant’s point (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 39). Someone who is agnostic about the existence of the largest triangle will concede that if it exists, it will have three sides. However, this falls short of affirming the existence of the largest triangle. For all the agnostic knows, there is no largest triangle. It is the same with God. According to the definition (e.g., greatest conceivable being), the agnostic could agree that God should exist. However, for all the agnostic can know, there still is no God.

It appears that Kant’s objections are related. In the third objection, he tells us that one can always defeat an a priori argument by rejecting the subject. One can always say, “There is no God as you have defined the term.” This is because an a priori argument attempts to make the denial of God contradictory; however, no negative existential proposition can be contradictory. This is because all existential propositions are synthetic, not analytic (Kant’s first objection). This is because “Exists” is not a predicate that can be contained analytically in the concept of any subject (Kant’s second objection).

Kant’s objections lead to his ultimate conclusion: “Whatever be the content of our conception of an object, it is necessary to go beyond it if we wish to predicate existence of the object” (Kant, 349) In the end, Oppy comes to the same overall judgment, despite his qualms about Kant’s three objections (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 109).

**Logical Positivism**

Logical positivism was a development within the analytic tradition. Its adherents attempted to apply the thought of Russell, Frege, and the early Wittgenstein in an attempt to purify the language of philosophy of unverifiable claims and assumptions. Graham Oppy introduces his discussion of the logical positivist critique of the ontological argument in this fashion:

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the logical positivists—Ayer, Carnap, Schlick, and others—mounted a concerted attack on the intelligibility, or meaningfulness, of “metaphysical” language. Since they included religious claims within the domain of the metaphysical, the logical positivists contended that the claim that God exists is, strictly speaking, meaningless. But if this is correct, then there cannot be a sound argument to the conclusion that God exists since no meaningless claim can be true. Hence, if the contention of
the logical positivists is correct, then no ontological argument can succeed. (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 39)

Oppy finds it *prima facie* implausible to claim that religious language is, strictly speaking, meaningless. He goes on to examine at length the positivist’s verification principle of meaning, which underlies that claim. The verification principle, simply stated, is that no statement is meaningful unless it is analytically (true by definition) or empirically falsifiable. He finds that the various formulations of the principle offered by the logical positivists are all problematic and concludes:

In sum, although there was a time when the logical positivist critique of the meaning of religious claims seemed to carry some force, I think it is now quite clear that the critique need not perturb theists at all. It is not really at all plausible to think that there is a generally acceptable criterion of meaningfulness that shows immediately and, finally, that no religious or metaphysical claims are meaningful. (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 45)

Therefore, Oppy does not join Hume and the logical positivists in rejecting all metaphysical claims as meaningless. Instead, he develops a Kantian or epistemological approach to rejecting ontological arguments.

**D. How Oppy Classifies and Evaluates Ontological Arguments**

Oppy’s book proposes this taxonomy of ontological arguments:

1. definitional ontological arguments;
2. conceptual (or hyperintensional) ontological arguments;
3. modal ontological arguments;
4. Meinongian ontological arguments;
5. experiential ontological arguments;
6. mereological ontological arguments;

An additional category, “higher-order ontological arguments,” is added by Oppy’s article written for the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, which both condenses and further develops the content of his book (Oppy, “Ontological Arguments”). Each category can be broken down further into sub-types. Oppy also finds that arguments can have traits of more
than one type. I will focus only on the first three types, as they encompass what Oppy calls the “historical” arguments of Anselm and Descartes.

**Definitional Arguments**

Definitional arguments introduce “ontologically committing vocabulary” in a definition. Descartes’s argument, which includes existence in the definition of Divine perfection, is a good example. Here are Oppy’s simplified formulations (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 47):

1. God is a being which has every perfection (Definition)
2. Existence is a perfection (Premise)
3. (Hence) God exists. (From 1, 2)

1. God is an existent supremely perfect being. (Definition)
2. (Hence) God exists. (From 1)

Oppy finds no good reason to be persuaded by these arguments. First, they can be paralleled or parodied to their detriment, and such parallels strongly suggest there is something wrong with the original argument. This is especially true of the second form, parallels of which purportedly prove the existence of existent unicorns, existent round squares, and so on.

The first argument is also susceptible to Kant’s objection that existence is not a predicate or defining property.

Oppy then comes to this conclusion about definitional arguments:

So what has gone wrong in the original argument? Well, in one sense, the answer is nothing. Consider the second argument. We begin with the claim that according to the relevant definition, God is an existent supremely perfect being. And the conclusion that we can draw from this claim is that, according to that definition, God exists. We only go wrong if we suppose that the conclusion that God exists can be detached from the scope of the original act of definition. (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 49)

Oppy would then have proponents of such arguments make the implicit operator explicit in this fashion: “By definition, God is a supremely perfect being.” This makes it clear that the conclusion that God exists is only definitional and says nothing about God’s actual existence. There is nothing here, then, which would compel an agnostic to accept the reality of God.
Conceptual Arguments

Conceptual arguments introduce ontologically committing vocabulary within the scope of operators (e.g., “believes that,” “conceives of”). Oppy gives the following interpretation of Anselm’s proof from Chapter 2 as an example of a conceptual argument:

1. I conceive of a being than which no greater can be conceived.
2. If a being than which no greater can be conceived does not exist, then I can conceive of a being greater than a being than which no greater can be conceived—namely, a being than which no greater can be conceived that exists.
3. I cannot conceive of a being greater than a being than which no greater can be conceived.
4. (Hence) A being than which no greater can be conceived exists. (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 59-60)

Regarding the first premise, Oppy correctly points out that the coherence of Greatness, a being than which no greater can be conceived, cannot be taken for granted. He also notes the ambiguity of “conceive of.” It can be taken in a referential or denotational sense, in which what is thought of is assumed to really exist, or in some neutral sense. Oppy thinks this ambiguity plagues all conceptual arguments and gives the agnostic no reason to accept the argument. If taken in a referential sense, the agnostic will simply reject the premise as question-begging because what the argument tries to prove in the conclusion is already assumed. If taken in a neutral sense, the agnostic will claim the conclusion of God’s existence cannot be reached. Oppy then concludes:

I suggest that it is quite clear that no conceptual ontological argument will be capable of convincing an agnostic. Aquinas and Hume were right: There is no argument of the form “I conceive of X, so X exists” that establishes the existence of X for one who is initially agnostic about the existence of X.

The point here is perfectly general. What is denied by the person who denies that is possible to build a priori bridges between the conceptual and real is that there are a priori considerations that will lead anyone who antecedently, and reasonably, is agnostic about the existence of nonmental entities of a certain kind to the conclusion that there really are entities of that sort. (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 64)
Modal Arguments

Modal arguments have premises involving claims about modes of existence. Anselm’s argument from Chapter Three is the prototype. Modern modal arguments are in terms of possibility and necessity, and Alvin Plantinga’s “possible worlds” formulation is an example. Oppy identifies four types of modal arguments. I will focus on modal arguments involving necessity. Here is Oppy’s simple version:

1. It is possible that it is necessarily the case that God exists. (Premise)
2. (Hence) God exists. (From 1) (Oppy, Ontological Arguments 70)

To understand the modal logic at work here, it is helpful to consider the more elaborate version offered by Brian Leftow, a proponent of perfect being theology (Leftow):

1. If God exists, he exists necessarily. (Premise)

This is because of the logic of perfection. If there are two modes of existence for any given thing, contingent existence or necessary existence, then Perfection (Greatness) requires the latter.

Leftow then introduces the following principle of logic: If P implies Q, then possibly P implies possibly Q. Applying this to the beginning premise, we get:

2. If possibly God exists, then possibly he exists necessarily. (Premise)

Leftow then posits the possibility of God’s existence.

3. It is possible that God exists. (Premise)

From 2 and 3 we get:

4. Possibly necessarily God exists.

Then via the reduction principle of modal logic (what is possibly necessary is necessary), we get:
5. God exists necessarily. (From 4)
6. Therefore, God exists.

Oppy acknowledges that these arguments are valid in propositional modal systems such as B and S5 (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 70). However, he provides two reasons for agnostics to reject them. First, these arguments can be paralleled negatively by arguments alleged to be equally plausible. For example, the simple argument can be countered with:

1. It is possible that it is necessarily the case that God does not exist. (Premise)
2. (Hence) God does not exist. (From 1)

Oppy assumes there is no reason for the agnostic to choose either the positive or negative modal arguments. That being the case, under his definition of successful argumentation, the positive argument fails. However, we will argue later that Oppy is wrong to proclaim a stalemate in the clash between the positive and negative arguments.

Second, Oppy argues that the choice of which logical system to operate within is an open question, further undermining the confidence one can have in modal arguments such as these. On this score, we will see later that Oppy runs counter to some significant authorities.

**E. Oppy’s General Objection**

Oppy claims that the historical arguments of Anselm and Descartes, encompassing the definitional and conceptual categories, have the following status: “No matter how they are interpreted, these arguments have one reading on which every reasonable person will agree that they are invalid and another reading on which those who are not antecedently convinced of the truth of the conclusion of the argument can reasonably reject one of the premises” (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 114).

Oppy then claims that the following general objection is applicable in advance to all possible reformulations of the historical arguments:

In any version of one of the historical arguments, it will be the case that the singular terms and quantifiers—names, definite descriptions,
indefinite descriptions, and so forth—used in the statement of the argument—to refer to, or to denote, or to range over a collection that is supposed to include, that divine object whose existence is to be established by the argument—either occur embedded in the scope of further sentential operators or do not occur thus embedded. If they do not occur thus embedded, then an opponent of the argument can reasonably object that the question has been begged. On the other hand, if they do thus occur, then there is a question about the detachment of the conclusion of the argument from the scope of the operators. If the operators are extensional—and hence permit the inference of the desired conclusion—then, as in the case of the modal arguments, an opponent of the argument can reasonably insist that the question has been begged. But, if the operators are intensional, then they won’t permit the inference of the desired conclusions. So, no matter how the argument is formulated, an opponent can always either (1) reasonably claim that the question has been begged or else (ii) object that the inference is simply invalid. (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 115)

A term’s intension is the definition that encompasses the list of attributes that a thing needs to be labeled a cow or a cat, say. The extension or denotation of a term is the set of things in the world to which the word or phrase refers. So, the intension of “the President of the United States” is the holder of supreme executive office created by the Constitution of the United States. The extension of this term is the class of all the presidents throughout history, starting with George Washington.

In propositional logic, a “sentential operator” or “logical operator” is any word or phrase used to modify one statement to make a different statement or join multiple statements to form a more complicated statement. In the context of Oppy’s general objection, consider the example of “Santa Claus lives at the North Pole,” which, by itself, could be taken to be extensional or committed to there being a referent in the real world satisfying the description of Santa Claus. But in the real world and in normal conversation, this sentence is implicitly embedded within an intensional operator in this fashion: “According to the popular fiction told by parents to their children at Christmas time, Santa Claus lives at the North Pole.” Insofar as living at the North Pole is a true attribute of this fictional character, this is a true statement telling us something about the idea of Santa Claus. However, it would be invalid to infer that there really is a Santa Claus.

Perhaps the following graphic will help apply Oppy’s general objection.
Figure 2: Oppy’s general objection to ontological arguments.

It should come as no surprise that some are skeptical that it is possible to tear down all versions, known or unknown (Dombrowski 95). The objections of Langtry, in particular, have caused Oppy to reevaluate his general objection. Whereas in his 1995 work he claims that his general objection provides “perfectly general grounds on which I can dismiss the possibility of a dialectically effective ontological argument” (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 198), in his later work Oppy concludes there are reasons to be suspicious of the general objection and that he cannot make a “watertight” case for it. However, this ends up not being much of a concession to proponents of ontological arguments because he still judges all known versions to clearly fail and, as a result, finds it “more or less inconceivable” that there is a successful ontological argument (Oppy, *Arguing About Gods* 57). Therefore, it seems safe to conclude that he would presume my argument guilty of either being question-begging or invalid.

F. Oppy’s Critique of My Argument

Here again is my version of Anselm’s ontological argument:
1. Definition: God is That Than Which Nothing Greater Can Be Thought (Greatness).

2. Premise: One can conceive of Greatness.

3. Premise: One can conceive of something which cannot fail to exist (exists necessarily).

4. Premise: There are only two ways something can exist, either necessarily or contingently.

5. Premise: It is greater to exist necessarily than contingently.

6. Assumption for *reductio ad absurdum* argument: Greatness exists contingently.

7. But 6 leads to a contradiction because I could then think of something greater, namely that which exists necessarily.

8. Therefore 6 is false.

9. Therefore, Greatness exists necessarily (this being the only other possibility from 4).

10. Therefore, God exists.

Oppy would find this to be a conceptual argument because it posits the conceivability of Greatness and, being derived from Chapter Three of *Proslogion*, the conceivability of necessary existence. This is Oppy’s simplistic conceptual interpretation of Anselm’s Chapter Three argument and his succinct summary of its defects:

1. One can conceive of a being than which no greater can be conceived, and that cannot even be conceived not to exist. (Premise)

2. (Hence) There really exists a being than which no greater can be conceived and that cannot even be conceived not to exist. (From 1)

In Premise 1, “conceive of” can be taken to be either ontologically committing or ontologically neutral. If it is taken to be ontologically neutral, then the argument is simply invalid. On the other hand, if it is taken to be ontologically committing, then no atheist or agnostic will accept the premise (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 112).

In other words, the operator “conceive of” can be extensional (ontologically committing) or intensional (ontologically neutral). If it is ontologically committing, then one assumes the simple existence of what one is trying to prove, in which case the argument, though valid, begs the
question. If it is ontologically neutral, then the argument is invalid.

Consider why Oppy thinks being ontologically neutral renders a conceptual argument invalid. Oppy thinks an agnostic can accept a concept of God as long as it is shorn of referential or denotational implications (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 61). This is the case even if the proposed concept of God requires that God exist. For no matter the concept of God, the agnostic can always say that God’s existence is only according to the proposed concept of God. Therefore, the inference to the real existence of God is invalid because one’s concept of any given thing, even God, has no implications for its existence (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 109).

Therefore, Oppy embraces Kant’s dogma: “Whatever be the content of our conception of an object, it is necessary to go beyond it, if we wish to predicate existence of the object” (Kant, 349). This judgment was carried forward in the last century by Bertrand Russell and philosophers such as J. L. Mackie. Mackie would apply the Kantian and Russelian thesis even to the modal argument, which, he thinks, allows him to concede the conceivability of Greatness and Necessity but still deny that God exists. Mackie says:

Let us then concede this. Let us grant there is a concept of a being than which nothing greater can be conceived and which cannot be conceived not to exist. But then, the discussion merely repeats itself at a higher level. It is still a further question whether this concept is realized or instantiated. (Mackie, 55)

Therefore, the most that our conceptual argument can prove is that the concept of God, Greatness, requires necessary existence. But the necessity involved is merely logical and imposes no requirements on reality. So the argument is defeated no matter how it is interpreted, it being impaled, as it were, by one or the other of the prongs of Oppy’s fork.

**Chapter III: Responding to the Oppy Challenge**

**A. Identifying Lines of Attack**

Oppy claims that all ontological arguments fail. This conclusion rests in part on how he defines success and failure. However, as argued in the previous chapter, his definition of success is unreasonable and makes it too easy for the skeptic.

His conclusion also derives from his skeptical epistemology, which
informs his general objection. Recall Oppy's concession that there can be non-question begging ontological arguments, provided one can demonstrate that Oppy's broader theory, which leads him to reject the ontological argument, is logically inconsistent (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 56-57). Therefore, the challenge will be to show inconsistencies lurking in the general objection and his broader theory, which will be the purpose of this chapter.

Finally, his evaluation of the various attacks on ontological arguments and the defenses offered in response leads him to conclude that the critics have gotten the better of the defenders in some instances and that, overall, defenders offer no compelling reasons for the critics to change their position. In no small part, this assessment is due to the credibility he accords parody arguments, so the challenge will be to undermine that credibility. The next chapter will address this and other objections.

**B. Oppy’s Broader Theory**

What is the “broader theory” behind Oppy’s skepticism? As noted in the previous chapter, a key assumption of his general objection is Kantian—namely that one's concept of any given thing, even God, has no implications for its existence. However, given his reservations about Kant’s objections to the ontological argument, Oppy must have come to the same conclusion by a different route.

Dombrowski finds that Oppy's views resemble those of W.V.O. Quine and characterizes Oppy's general orientation as "empirical theistic skepticism" (Dombrowski, 102; Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 96). Quine famously attacked the analytic-synthetic distinction and believed that all knowledge claims, even $2 \times 2 = 4$, are revisable in light of experience (Baggini and Fosl, 172). In support of placing Oppy somewhere in the Quinean camp, is the following quote:

> The atheist or agnostic does not need to hold that the concept of God is incoherent, or meaningless, or otiose, in order to reject ontological arguments; all she needs to deny is that there is anything that falls under the concept…. *It is a factual matter whether a given concept is coherent, just as it is a factual matter whether a given concept has application to anything.* (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 293) [italics added]

If the question of God’s existence is in every way a factual matter,
there is no path for success for our argument.

C. Finding Inconsistencies in the General Objection

The central assumption of the general objection is that one’s concept of any given thing, even God, can have no implications for its existence. It means one may grant that God defined in terms of Greatness makes sense. One may further grant that necessary existence is possible. But even granting these premises, for all we know, God may still not exist. At the end of a modal argument, the most one can conclude is “If God exists, He exists necessarily.” However, as Dombrowski observes, this is self-contradictory because “if” implies that God’s nonexistence is possible, but “necessary” implies that God’s nonexistence is impossible (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 103). Therefore, both premises cannot be granted. One or the other or both must be denied, or for the agnostic, one must be uncommitted to one or the other or both.

Another way to express the same thought comes from Hartshorne, who maintains that the modal ontological argument forces a choice between a priori theism and positivism (Hartshorne, *Anselm’s Discovery*). There is a forced choice because Anselm’s modal argument precludes treating God’s existence as contingent. If the argument’s premises are true, then God’s existence is necessary and not a contingent question of fact. If the atheist accepts the Greatness and the Necessity premises but does not conclude that God exists necessarily, then he indeed contradicts himself. If nothing else, Anselm’s modal argument demonstrates that factual atheism makes no sense—and, to be consistent, neither does factual theism. Therefore, if it is nonsensical to be a factual atheist and grant Anselm’s premises, then it also does not make any sense to be agnostic about factual atheism. Whether there is an ontologically necessary being cannot be a question of fact. As discussed later, positivists make this point as they argue from the other direction against theism.

Oppy recognizes the clash between his general objection and Hartshorne’s forced-choice argument (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 281). However, he thinks the latter only has plausibility because Hartshorne fails to make some important distinctions:

It is worth remarking on a curious irony in Hartshorne's work. Hartshorne contended that St. Anselm’s argument demonstrates that there are two viable options, namely (i) theism and (ii) positivism,
that is, the view that theism is unintelligible, meaningless, and necessarily false. But it is only the adoption of characteristic positivistic conflations—namely, (i) the failure to distinguish between the analytic, the necessary, and the a priori; and (ii) the failure to distinguish between the incoherent, the unintelligible, the meaningless, the repugnant to commonsense, the a priori false, the analytically false, and the various senses of the necessarily false—that lend any plausibility to this contention. (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 247)

Hartshorne does argue that God’s existence is analytic, necessary, and a priori. However, this does not mean he conflates these terms or treats them as the same. They quite clearly refer to different areas of inquiry. Instead, he claims they are co-extensive when applied to God. God is that individual whose existence is an analytic truth (given the meaning of Greatness and Necessity). If "God exists" is analytically true, it is logically necessary. Because it is a logically necessary existential proposition, God's ontological necessity is affirmed. Finally, "God exists" is true is knowable a priori just from the analysis of terms and the application of logic without recourse to experience.

For Hartshorne, positivism is the position that the concept of God "has no genuinely possible content" (Hartshorne, *Anselm's Discovery* 214). However, he would distinguish the different grounds for arriving at that conclusion (e.g., incoherence or meaningless).

Therefore, even though Hartshorne agrees with the positivists that factual atheism is not a viable option, he does not come to this conclusion by adopting positivistic presuppositions. He is driven to this by the logic of the ontological argument itself. God, if the term is meaningful, must exist. God’s existence or nonexistence cannot be a contingent proposition.

Hartshorne also would argue that Oppy’s general objection involves a vicious regress because it assumes a radical separation between the logical and the real. This disjunction means that what is logically consistent (and therefore logically possible) may yet be impossible.

In response, Hartshorne says:

However, real possibility or impossibility can only mean, on such and such existing conditions. If, then, the conditions required for a thing are themselves logically possible—and if not, neither is the thing itself—yet are really impossible, we have vicious regress of conditions on conditions. (Hartshorne, *Anselm's Discovery* 222)
To understand this vicious regress, assume God's existence depends on a condition (C1). This condition must be logically possible; otherwise, God would not exist, contrary to our assumption. However, if C1 is not existing, this can only be because some other condition, C2, is not met. If C2 does not exist, this must be because another condition, C3, is not met. Thus, the regress continues until we end up with a series of all the conditions (C1, C2, C3...Cn) which are necessary for God to exist. But Hartshorne asks, "And what about the entire regressive series? Is it really possible? If not, we seem to have a contradiction; for a new condition looms outside the series supposed to contain all conditions" (Hartshorne, Logic of Perfection 95).

Hartshorne thinks we must give up the alleged distinction between real and logical possibility as applied to God for this and other reasons. He goes on:

The distinction is quite valid with respect to localized items of reality; for what is logically possible somewhere may lack the required conditions just here, or here. But a nonlocalized reality such as deity cannot be treated in this way. It can have no special conditions whatever. If it were not really possible everywhere and always, it would be impossible absolutely and in its very meaning. All possible conditions must be compatible with its existence, and then either real and logical possibility coalesce, or else the idea is not possible at all, whether logically or really. (Hartshorne, Anselm's Discovery 222)

D. Pressing the Attack

Oppy's Philosophical Relativism

Because contradictions are evident in the general objection, it is natural to ask whether examining the broader theory behind it will discover more. We will argue here that Oppy's empirical theistic skepticism rests on the very shaky ground of philosophical relativism.

To reach that conclusion, we turn again to Hartshorne, who contends that Kant's attack on ontological arguments is positivistic. Because Oppy builds his general objection around the overall Kantian conclusion, Hartshorne's critique of Kant and positivism also applies to him.

Hartshorne argues that Kant’s attack on the ontological argument essentially is “on positivistic grounds (in the agnostic form: for all we know, ‘God’ has no genuinely possible content)” (Hartshorne, Anselm's Discovery 214).
There are two distinctly positivistic grounds for denying there is an idea of God. First, one can maintain that the concept of God is meaningless because it violates the verifiability principle of logical positivism. While Oppy does not think theists need to be perturbed by this, others may still think verificationism retains enough credibility to serve as a reasonable ground for skepticism. Second, one can claim the idea of God is meaningless because it entails ontological necessity, which itself is meaningless. Oppy does not endorse this position but finds no reason for an agnostic to grant the possibility of necessity (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 74). A third way to attack the concept of God is to maintain that the idea is nonsensical because analysis of its content reveals contradictions. Oppy is sympathetic to this position and offers some arguments to show this is reasonable (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 199). Discussion of alleged contradictions in the concept of God will be deferred until the next chapter.

There have been many critiques of logical positivism. We will follow one developed by Duane Voskuil, a student of Hartshorne. The focus will first be on logical positivism's verifiability principle of meaning. Voskuil explains the principle in this manner. The only propositions which are meaningful to a positivist are those:

1. whose truth or falsehood can be established by facts, or
2. whose meaning can be established by definition. (Voskuil, 23)

Voskuil calls the first category "merely empirical" and the second "merely rational." These we can take to correspond with Hume's "matters of fact" and "relations of ideas" and Kant's "synthetic" and "analytic" categories. Merely empirical propositions, the truth or falsity of which depends on facts, must be contingent. Facts always could have been otherwise. Merely rational propositions, the truth or falsity of which depends on definitions and conventions of language, are also contingent. Voskuil explains:

Not only must all facts be contingent, but all the rules defining rational propositions must also be contingent, according to a relativist. Though meaningful propositions will necessarily follow a given set of rules or definitions, the definitions themselves must also be given, that is, be arbitrary: Other definitions are always possible. "Necessary" to the positivist always means "necessary by definition."
"Necessary," to a relativist, never means "unavoidable under all possible circumstances." (Voskuil, 23)

Voskuil restates the principle as "All meaningful propositions are necessarily not necessary." He then comes to the obvious conclusion: "If this sentence is, as it seems, a self-contradiction, it cannot be a meaningful proposal." He explains further:

If the positivist's criterion for meaning (the verifiability principle) makes sense, it must be one of the two kinds of propositions that make sense according to its own criteria. Is the verifiability principle of meaning itself an example of a merely empirical or a merely rational proposition? Is the principle contingent?

The principle of meaning's own meaningfulness is established neither

(1) by its ability to be true or false depending on some fact or other, nor

(2) by definitions that could be set up in a different way.

The principle seems to be unqualified, unavoidable, and necessary. What could possibly be a meaningful alternative to the principle of verification in the positivist's mind?

But necessary propositions are meaningless according to positivists and relativists. Either the criterion for meaning is not meaningful, or there is an implicit appeal to a third kind of proposition.

If one starts by saying:

(A) "All meaningful propositions are contingent; they all have alternatives," then one is obligated to find an alternative to A. This alternative to A can only be:

(B) "At least one proposition is necessary" (or the even stronger contrary assertion, "All propositions are necessary"). So, in maintaining A, one is also logically committed to asserting B, or as Parmenides will say later...one is committed to maintaining A and not-A at the same time; and B (not-A) is the logical contradiction of A.

To employ a necessary proposition to deny necessary propositions are meaningful is a self-contradiction. Propositions that are necessary and not self-contradictory, that is, those the denial of which is impossible, are *metaphysical*. Metaphysical propositions are simply
necessary and must be carefully distinguished from those that are necessary by definition. (Voskuil, 24-25)

Voskuil reminds us that we are in the middle of a very ancient debate between relativism and metaphysics. Relativism holds that all propositions are contingent. Metaphysicians hold that some propositions are unconditionally necessary.

Following Whitehead, Voskuil goes on to explain that metaphysical propositions have both rational and empirical aspects. Concerning the rational, all metaphysical propositions are logical in that they are self-consistent (no round squares allowed). They also exhibit coherence, which “is a function of the interrelationships of propositions. No proposition, including an ultimate proposition, can be meaningful by itself; its meaning hinges upon the meaning of the rest of the system.” The empirical aspect encompasses applicability (some items in our experience must be drawn together or exhibit the common factor expressed by the concept) and adequacy (all actual and possible items of experience must be capable of explanation in terms of the principle) (Voskuil, 25-26).

The refutation of philosophical relativism, manifest in logical positivism and in the positivist tradition generally, leads us to conclude that there are some necessary truths. The ontological argument is an attempt to show that "God exists" is one of them.

Oppy's empirical theistic skepticism, being informed by Quine-like epistemology and ontology, is also grounded in self-refuting relativism. If all knowledge claims, even $2+2=4$, are revisable in light of experience, then they are necessarily all contingent. However, even if he is agnostic about this basic assumption, he is agnostic about a claim which is self-evidently nonsensical.

Oppy's empiricism and relativism also undermine his skepticism about the possibility of necessary existence. To set this up, we will now turn to Charlesworth, who also finds close kinship between Kant and the positivists. Charlesworth argues that Kant's arguments amount to a denial of necessary existence and, in that respect, are scarcely distinguishable from logical positivism.

But if Kant is right, the notion [of necessary existence] cannot be meaningful, for to assert that God is a necessary existent is equivalent to asserting that the proposition "God exists" is a logically necessary proposition, so that it would be self-contradictory to assert the proposition "God does not exist." But it is not self-contradictory
to assert the latter proposition, just as it is never self-contradictory to deny any existential propositions which, in Kant's terms, are always synthetic. Kant's criticism has been developed by certain modern thinkers and combined with the doctrine that all necessity is reducible to logical necessity, which in turn, it is claimed, is simply based upon the conventions of language. From this, it follows, so it is alleged, that the notion of a necessary existent is a self-contradictory one. (Charlesworth, 74-75)

Among the modern thinkers cited by Charlesworth is J. N. Findlay, who proposed a famous disproof of the existence of God (Findlay, 19-26).

Findlay begins his argument by making a good case for Greatness. Consistent with Hartshorne, Findlay argues that religious attitudes and the logic of worship lead us 'irresistibly to demand that our religious object should have an unsurpassable supremacy along all avenues, that it should tower infinitely above all other objects' (Findlay, 22). Much like Anselm, he then follows this thought to the conclusion that the unsurpassable object of worship requires necessary existence. But then Findlay asks:

What, however, are the consequences of these requirements upon the possibility of God's existence? Plainly (for all who share a contemporary outlook), they entail not only that there isn't a God but that the Divine existence is either senseless or impossible....Those who believe in necessary truths which aren't merely tautological, think that such truths merely connect the possible instances of various characteristics with each other: they do not expect such truths to tell them whether there will be instances of any characteristics. This is the outcome of the whole medieval and Kantian criticism of the ontological proof. And, on a yet more modern view of the matter, necessity in propositions merely reflects our use of words, the arbitrary conventions of our language....The religious frame of mind seems, in fact, to be in a quandary; it seems invincibly determined both to eat its cake and have it. It desires the Divine existence both to have that inescapable character which can, on modern views, only be found where truth reflects an arbitrary convention, and also the character of "making a real difference," which is only possible where truth does not have this merely linguistic basis. We may accordingly deny that modern approaches allow us to remain agnostically poised in regard to God: they force us to come down on the atheistic side. For if God is to satisfy religious claims and needs, he must be a being in every way inescapable, One whose existence and whose possession of certain excellences we cannot possibly conceive away. And modern views make it self-evidently absurd (if they do not make it
ungrammatical) to speak of such a Being and attribute existence to him. It was indeed an ill day for Anselm when he hit upon his famous proof. For on that day, he not only laid bare something that is of the essence of an adequate religious object, but also something that entails its necessary nonexistence. (Findlay, 24-25)

But Charlesworth counters:

Now Anselm might reply both to Kant and to his modern followers that their objections prove too much, for they do not simply assert that the existence of all the things within our experience is contingent (so that all existential propositions about things within our immediate experience are synthetic), but they go further and claim that it is logically necessary that all existential propositions are synthetic. Thus they are led to maintain paradoxically that it is logically impossible for the proposition "God exists" to be a logically necessary one, and they end by espousing an "ontological disproof" of the existence of God. (Charlesworth, 75)

Charlesworth does not explore the implications of the paradox he so deftly exposes. He concludes that merely logical analysis cannot decide whether the concept of necessary existence is meaningful and ultimately declares an impasse. But then “if there cannot be an a priori ‘ontological’ proof of the existence of God, equally there cannot be an a priori ‘ontological’ disproof” (Charlesworth, 75).

Oppy thinks that the arguments for Findlay’s disproof are “weak, since they rely on a conventionalist account of necessity” (Oppy, Ontological Arguments 265). Nevertheless, he finds it reasonable to grant the coherence of Greatness along with Findlay and still conclude that God's existence is impossible (Oppy, Ontological Arguments 199).

Oppy also seems to agree with Charlesworth that logical analysis will not resolve the impasse. Oppy recognizes that Hartshorne took Findlay’s disproof seriously and proposed a neo-classical response. However, Oppy proclaims the clash between their two arguments to be inconclusive and boils down to “a clash of intuitions” (Oppy, Ontological Arguments 265).

We will argue shortly that Charlesworth and Oppy are wrong in concluding logical analysis will not settle the argument. However, Oppy should at least take Findlay's point that one cannot hold to Kantian and positivist presuppositions and remain "agnostically poised in regard to God." If necessary existence is denied, the only possible conclusion is that God's existence is impossible. With both factual atheism and factual theism ruled out, the only question is which of the remaining options
is correct, a priori theism or positivism. Findlay, therefore, reinforces Hartshorne's forced-choice argument discussed earlier.

To begin breaking the impasse, recall Charlesworth's observation that modern thinkers such as Findlay have combined Kant's dictum that all existential propositions are synthetic with the idea that all necessity is reducible to logical necessity. But as Voskuil has observed, this limits meaningful propositions to the merely empirical (whose truth or falsehood can be established by facts) and the merely rational (whose meaning can be established by definition). If ontological necessity is not a possibility, then all existential propositions become contingent questions of fact. Merely rational propositions are only conditionally necessary, being dependent on the conventions of language, and therefore also are contingent. If the merely empirical and merely rational are the only meaningful kinds of propositions, we end up with relativism, the principle that all meaningful propositions are contingent.

As argued previously, Oppy's style of empiricism, even if it rejects the analytic/synthetic distinction, still amounts to relativism.

Now examine the proposition that all existential propositions are synthetic and therefore contingent. "All" in the proposition is categorical and admits no exceptions. It is, therefore, a necessary proposition. Restated, it is necessary that existential propositions are contingent. But according to the relativist principle, there are no necessary propositions. We therefore have a contradiction.

The relativist principle also collides with itself when applied reflexively. It is self-contradictory to maintain that all meaningful propositions are necessarily not necessary. Relativism is therefore nonsensical. There must be some propositions (at least one) that are necessary.

**Absolute Nothingness**

Hartshorne offers one last argument in favor of the conceivability of necessary existence. Hartshorne contends that to deny there are any necessary existential propositions leads to an absurd result. Reasoning in more modern terms, he says to deny necessary existence is to claim that there is no concept whose intension requires extension (Hartshorne, *Anselm’s Discovery* 272). However, concerning any concept’s intension and extension, there are these modes. First, the concept’s intension is neutral concerning whether it has an extension. Any contingent thing can
suffice for an example. Second, the concept's intension forbids such extension. An example would be a "round square" or any other idea whose instantiation is impossible. Third, the concept's intension "requires some extension or other, on pain of falling into mere absurdity." Greatness exemplifies this mode.

Hartshorne argues that to deny the third possibility, or to be agnostic on the issue as Oppy tries to be, leads to the absurd conclusion that the class of existents could be empty and that absolute nothingness is conceivable. Hartshorne then concludes that the necessary mode of existence seems to be a requirement of logic itself (Hartshorne, *Anselm's Discovery* 272).

Duane Voskuil develops this further. In *Proslogion* Chapter 3, Anselm states: "For something can be thought to exist that cannot fail to exist, and this is greater than that which can be thought not to exist" (Anselm, *Proslogion* 119). Can we conceive of that which cannot fail to exist? To say that something cannot fail to exist is to say that its existence is necessary. The necessity in view here is not mere conditional necessity ("Necessary if such and such is to occur"), but unconditional necessity ("Unavoidable under any conditions; occurring as an aspect of all possible circumstances and times") (Voskuil, 62-63).

To assert "God necessarily exists" is to say that "God exists" is a logically necessary proposition. Therefore, it would be self-contradictory to assert "God does not exist." However, Hume, Kant, and the positivists claim it is never self-contradictory to deny any existential propositions, which are always synthetic and contingent. But what about the existential proposition "Something exists" (Dombrowski, 94; Hartshorne, *Anselm's Discovery* 47)? Applying their rule, we would need to conclude that "Something exists" could be false. In other words, nothing may exist.

Is it even conceivable for nothing (no thing of any kind) to exist? We might here make an argument similar to Thomas Aquinas's third way, an argument from contingency. However, Thomas would remind us that employing a causal argument to buttress the Necessity pillar of our bridge destroys our claim to have made an a priori argument. So we will need to look for another way.

For help with this, Voskuil suggests we turn to a very ancient source, the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Parmenides. Parmenides thought that reality is one changeless being. While we can reject his radical monism, Voskuil urges us to preserve his insight that absolute nothingness is non-
sense. Voskuil writes:

Parmenides assumes, therefore, that reality can only be (one) being. A being is something that is.... But not-being (nonbeing) cannot be, that is, it cannot be something that exists—or better said, "nonbeing" or "nothingness" is a meaningless expression....

The last point about nothingness deserves further comment. We use the word "nothing," assuming it makes sense. But does it, or if so, in what way? Assume one has a container with nothing in it.

What's between the sides of the container? If one says "nothing," that means the sides of the container are touching each other, and the container cannot be a container. All attempted references to "nothing" (as attempts to mean: "no thing of any kind") are self-contradictory.

The only meaningful use of the word is in some relative sense. We go to the refrigerator and find nothing in it. But we mean the refrigerator is filled with racks and air and light and a moldy piece of cheese. "Nothing" always means something else, but something we are not now interested in.

The realization that all attempted references to nothing are self-contradictory is a major philosophical insight. We are forced to realize something or other is necessary or unavoidable. (Voskuil, 62-63)

Something or other must exist because absolute nothingness is impossible. Voskuil would argue that this is the case no matter what language or system of logic one uses. To those who stubbornly persist in the quest to think of absolute nothingness, Voskuil's message is "Good luck!"

To test Voskuil's claim, let us leave containers and refrigerators and talk in terms of possible worlds. The actual world is a description of all that is, a complete account of reality. A possible world is a possible variant of the actual world. If we begin with the actual world and start to subtract from it mentally, will we not end up with a possible world with absolutely nothing in it? No, because once you remove the very last thing, whatever that could be, you no longer have a world in any meaningful sense. Alternatively, think in terms of sets, which are collections of things. Now consider the set of all things. To say that this set is absolutely empty is to say that a collection of things has no thing of any kind, which is a contradiction. The set of all things cannot be a null set. A possible world or a set of all things with absolutely nothing in it is not a world or a set,
just as a refrigerator with absolutely nothing in it is not a refrigerator.

Does that settle the matter? Perhaps not. Philosopher Brian Leftow from Oxford makes this point:

If there necessarily is something or other, it does not follow that there necessarily is one particular thing. The first would be true if necessarily, there were some penguin or other. This could be true even if every penguin were a contingent being: it’s just that somehow, the moment you killed one, another would pop up, infallibly.

And I have nothing against penguins, just for the record. (Leftow)

Leftow may be correct. Parmenides only gets us so far. The most we can say with confidence, considering necessary existence by itself, is that *something or other* is necessary, not one particular thing. However, as we will learn in the discussion of the problem of quantity in the next chapter, there is a neoclassical solution. Process philosophers such as Hartshorne and Voskuil understand Deity as a being in process (i.e., as an infinite series of contingent entities). Also, Greatness intuitively seems to require that the necessarily existing reality, in some sense, must be one. This seems possible, and maybe that is all we need to make our ontological argument work.

Hartshorne pronounces final judgment on the matter. On the unthinkable nature of absolute nothingness, citing the work of other philosophers, Hartshorne asserts that logic itself “cannot deal with a simply empty universe. The widest class cannot be empty. The case for this contention, which Sholz himself accepts, seems to me conclusively made by two recent authors, Johnathan Cohen and William Kneale.... Secondly, necessary nonemptiness or instantiatedness is all that we need for necessary existence, even in the divine form” (Hartshorne, *Anselm’s Discovery* 283).

E. How We Bridge the Gap: De Re Necessity

If it is untenable to deny necessary existence, then it must be a real mode of existence for some thing. Necessity, therefore, can be a property of a proposition (*de dicto*) and some real individual or thing (*de re*) (Dombrowski, 97).

Again, even if one agrees with Kant that existence is not a predicate—something about which Oppy himself is undecided—this objection has no application to a modal argument, which treats modes of existence and not simple existence as a predicate. Further, Dombrowski observes
that *de re* modality is supported by the possible worlds semantics argument of Saul Kripke and the modal logic of Ruth Barcan. He also offers an intuitive argument: “Stephen Makin argues that because we can easily make sense of a concept that *cannot* be exemplified (an impossible being) we should also be able to make sense of a concept that *must* be exemplified (a necessary being). This is because all the modalities (i.e., impossibility, contingency, and necessity) are interdefinable” (Dombrowski, 96).

Dombrowski concludes:

Further, the way or mode of existence is a property of every thing and every concept. Every existent thing exists either contingently or necessarily. Of course, no existent thing exists impossibly. In a similar way, any concept can be seen in one of three modes: either it must be instantiated in reality, or it might or might not be instantiated in reality, or it necessarily could not be instantiated in reality. “Necessity, contingency, impossibility: one of these three modalities of existence is a property of every being and every concept.” (Goodwin, 176) (Dombrowski, 96)

Therefore, our modal ontological argument does not prove God's existence by adding or building existence into the concept of God, which would make it tautological and vulnerable to the Kantian critique. Instead, it clarifies the modes of existence for any concept and thing and then asks which modal category is appropriate for God. In this way, we bridge the gap between concept and reality.

As to the objection that this modal structure rigs the game in favor of theism, all one can do is agree. Some kind of existence, contingent or necessary, is assumed. But these modal choices are forced on us if necessity is an existential option. In contrast, Oppy’s general objection rigs the game in favor of agnosticism or positivism because it denies necessity is an existential option, or at least that this is knowable a priori. The reader must judge which ontology and epistemology are correct.

**Chapter IV: Responding to Other Objections**

**A. Parodies**

Anselm’s first critic was Gaunilo, Anselm’s contemporary and a fellow monk from Marmoutier. Gaunilo wrote a response to Anselm’s argument titled *Reply on Behalf of the Fool*, which contains his famous “Lost Island” parody:
For example: they say that there is in the ocean somewhere an island which, because of the difficulty (or rather the impossibility) of finding that which does not exist, some have called the “Lost Island.” And the story goes that it is blessed with all manner of priceless riches and delights in abundance, much more even than the Happy Isles, and, having no owner or inhabitant, it is superior everywhere in abundance of riches to all those other lands that men inhabit. Now, if anyone tells me that it is like this, I shall easily understand what is said, since nothing is difficult about it. But if he should then go on to say, as though it were a logical consequence of this: You cannot any more doubt that this island, that is more excellent than all other lands, truly exists somewhere in reality than you can doubt that it is in your mind; and since it is more excellent to exist not only in the mind alone but also in reality, therefore it must needs be that it exists. For if it did not exist, any other land existing in reality would be more excellent than it, and so this island, already conceived by you to be more excellent than others, will not be more excellent. If I say someone wishes thus to persuade me that this island really exists beyond all doubt, I should either think that he was joking, or I should find it hard to decide which of us I ought to judge the bigger fool—I, if I agreed with him, or he, if he thought that he had proved the existence of this island with any certainty. (Anselm, *Proslogion* 163-64)

Here Gaunilo claims one can conceive of an island that is more excellent or greater than all other lands. Following Anselm’s reasoning in Chapter 2, one must conclude that such an island exists, for if it did not actually exist, any land existing in reality would be more excellent or greater. In this fashion, one can prove the existence of anything as long as we ascribe to it the attribute of not conceivable having a greater and employ the principle that existing in the mind and reality is greater than existing in the mind alone. Because applying Anselm’s reasoning to objects such as lost islands yields such an absurd result, it must also be invalid.

In his reply to Gaunilo, Anselm objects that the logic of his argument only works in the singular and unique case of God defined in terms of Greatness, a response which Oppy finds “very disappointing” (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 17). Oppy maintains that Gaunilo’s Lost Island refutation is “certainly parallel in form to St. Anselm’s argument—that is, it is valid if St. Anselm’s argument is valid” (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 18):

In Chapter 11, he goes on to analyze various types of parody arguments:

1. Beings of kind $K$ than which no greater beings of kind $K$ can be conceived.
2. Most perfect beings of kind K.
3. Necessarily existent beings of kind K.
4. Actually existent beings of kind K.
5. Maximal beings of kind K...\(^{13}\)

He concludes that, while they do not conclusively refute their respective original versions of the ontological argument, they certainly cast doubt on their validity and “illustrate the dialectical impotence of the original arguments” (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 185). In effect, then, we are left with a stalemate in which the proponents of the dueling arguments are unable to offer their opponents a reason to change their position.

One quick observation that can be made is that all of the sorts of parodies identified by Oppy involve “beings of a kind K.” Therefore, the judgment to be made about greatness, perfection, etc., is only relative to kind K. The significance of this will become clear as we examine the first type of parody, which is closest to Anselm’s concept of Greatness.

Oppy finds Gaunilo’s Lost Island to be the paradigm of the type, “Beings of kind K than which no greater beings of kind K can be conceived.” He correctly recognizes that there is nothing special about Gaunilo’s use of “island” in his parody. “If he [Gaunilo] is right, it seems that St. Anselm’s argument can be paralleled by an argument that purports to establish the existence of a being of kind K than which no greater being of kind K can be conceived, for any kind of object K” (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 162).

However, one can challenge Oppy’s claim that the parody argument is really parallel to the original. If one wants to construct a parallel argument to show the absurdity of the original, then one should be strictly parallel in constructing it, beginning with the subject. In defining God as than which nothing greater can be thought, Anselm compares the subject to everything possible. It is an attempt to define something absolutely great (Charlesworth 94; Voskuil 160). So if Gaunilo’s parody is to strictly parallel Anselm’s proof, the lost island would also need to be compared to everything possible, as in “an island than which nothing greater can be thought.” But this is patently absurd because an island is, by definition, a bounded and finite entity (Cutting 7). At least in physical terms, we can readily think of many things greater than any island, say the entire planet. The only other way to make sense of Gaunilo’s island would be if its greatness is determined concerning other objects within the same
genus, as in an “island than which no greater island can be conceived.” Therefore, to be intelligible, Gaunilo’s Lost Island only defines something that is relatively great, not absolutely great.

Because there is no parity between Greatness and a lost island, Gaunilo’s parody loses credibility against Anselm’s Chapter 2 argument. However, it is quite clear that substituting the lost island for Greatness in the modal argument doesn’t work. Here is my modal argument and its Lost Island parody presented side-by-side for comparison.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Modal Ontological Argument</strong></th>
<th><strong>Lost Island Parody</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. That Than Which Nothing Greater Can Be Conceived (Greatness) is conceivable.</td>
<td>1. An island than which no greater island can be conceived (lost island) is conceivable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. It is possible to conceive of something that cannot fail to exist (i.e., exists necessarily).</td>
<td>2. It is possible to conceive of something that cannot fail to exist (i.e., exists necessarily).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. There are only two ways something can exist, either necessarily or contingently.</td>
<td>3. There are only two ways something can exist, either necessarily or contingently.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. It is greater to exist necessarily than contingently.</td>
<td>4. It is greater to exist necessarily than contingently.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Assumption for <em>reductio ad absurdum</em> argument: Greatness exists contingently.</td>
<td>5. Assumption for <em>reductio ad absurdum</em> argument: The lost island exists contingently.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. But 5 leads to a contradiction because I could then think of something greater, namely that which exists necessarily.</td>
<td>6. But 5 leads to a contradiction because I could then think of something greater, namely an island that exists necessarily.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Therefore, 5 is false.</td>
<td>7. Therefore, 5 is false.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Therefore, Greatness exists necessarily (this being the only other possibility from 3).</td>
<td>8. Therefore, the lost island exists necessarily (this being the only other possibility from 3).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Therefore, Greatness (God) exists.</td>
<td>9. Therefore, the lost island exists.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The modal form is designed to reach the conclusion of the necessary existence of God. By substituting an island (or any other finite and contingent thing) for Greatness, the parody attempts to prove the necessary existence of a contingent thing, which is absurd. For the *reductio* procedure to work, one must assume the contradictory of what one wants to prove. However, an island is inherently a contingent thing, so the parody argument in Step 5 assumes what can only be an island’s correct modal status (Hartshorne, *Anselm’s Discovery* 26). In Step 6, one is forced to claim that what is always and only contingent can be imagined as necessarily existing. This is permissible in comic books, perhaps, but not in rational discourse.

This, by itself, should be sufficient to refute parodies of the first type against my modal argument (Hartshorne, *Anselm’s Discovery* 29).

**B. Reverse Modal Arguments**

I noted earlier that Oppy claims that modal arguments involving necessity can be paralleled negatively by equally plausible arguments. Assuming my conceptual argument is translatable into a modal form in terms of necessity and possibility, it too may be susceptible to a reverse argument.

Here are Oppy’s simple positive argument and its negative counterpart:

| 1. It is possible that it is necessarily the case that God exists. (Premise) | 1. It is possible that it is necessarily the case that God does not exist. (Premise) |
| 2. (Hence) God exists. (From 1) | 2. (Hence) God does not exist. (From 1) |

In terms of possible worlds, what is true in all possible worlds is necessarily true. What is true in at least one possible world but not in all is contingently true. What is impossible is true in no possible world and thus is necessarily false.

What then does it mean to say that God possibly necessarily exists or possibly necessarily does not exist? Holding to Hartshorne’s theory of
modality, the possibility under consideration cannot be understood as involving existential contingency. The only contingency is one of conceivability. If God is conceivable, then God exists necessarily and in all possible worlds. If God is inconceivable, then God necessarily does not exist and exists in no possible worlds. Therefore, Oppy’s negative argument is really the claim that the concept of God could involve a contradiction, which, if that is the case, means God is inconceivable, and God’s existence would be impossible. Therefore, it is an epistemic claim. For all we know, the concept of God could be meaningless.

As with parody arguments, Oppy thinks the agnostic has no good reason to choose either the positive or negative argument. But consider the strong a priori arguments against two of the three principal attacks on the meaningfulness of the concept of God, logical positivism and the denial of necessary existence. Both of these positions involve fatal contradictions. Further, as we shall see next, there are cogent rebuttals to the third mode of attack. Therefore, it is not reasonable to proclaim an epistemic stalemate.

C. The Abstract-Concrete Dilemma

The abstract-concrete dilemma is another possible justification for Oppy's general objection, although he does not directly address it. For some, the argument seems to derive a concrete reality from an abstract definition. However, it is argued, the concrete and actual can never be deduced from the abstract, not even in the divine case. Because concreteness is contingent, the existence of a concrete God could never be necessary. Dombrowski finds that Oppy’s general objection embraces this principle as it “can be seen as a prohibition against moving from (embedded) abstract premises to a concrete (unembedded) conclusion” (Oppy, Ontological Arguments 166-67).

Hartshorne agrees that the abstract-concrete dilemma presents a serious objection to the modal argument but offers a neoclassical solution. Voskuil presents it in this manner. We must distinguish between essence, existence, and actuality. Something’s essence is what it is. Something’s actuality is how it exists. Something’s existence is that it is actualized in some way. Something's essence is abstract, and, Hartshorne argues, from an abstract proposition alone, only abstract propositions follow (Harris 19). So from the abstract definition of Greatness, the desired conclusion of "God exists" also must be abstract. But it cannot be understood as ab-
strict so long as existence and actuality are confused. If the conclusion is that God is actualized in a specific, definite manner, then that is to reason illicitly from the abstract to the concrete. But to argue from God’s essence (Greatness) to God’s existence (that God is actualized somehow or other) is to argue from the abstract to the abstract. The necessity involved in the ontological argument is not that God must be actualized in a specific concrete manner. Instead, the necessity is that God must be concretized in some way or other. In making this distinction, Hartshorne concludes that God has contingent aspects, something classical theists such as Anselm would not accept (Putnam, 145). But at least he offers a solution to the abstract-concrete paradox. Unfortunately, Oppy simply does not acknowledge this.

D. Other Problems with the Conceivability of Greatness

To defend the conceivability of Greatness, it is necessary but not sufficient to defend the conceivability of Necessity. This is because other objections to the concept of Greatness have been raised over the centuries, alleging that the concept is impossible, either because it involves a contradiction or because it is unfulfillable.

The Problem of Quantity

One objection surfaces in Oppy’s discussion of parody arguments where he discusses Alvin Plantinga’s much-discussed objection to parodies such as Gaunilo’s Lost Island. Plantinga argued that the expression “X than which no greater X can be conceived” only applies coherently in the case of properties that have a relevant limit. Just as there isn’t a greatest possible number (one can always add 1), there also is not a greatest possible island. No matter how well-endowed an island is with palm trees, beaches, etc., one can always conceive of a greater island with more palm trees, beaches, etc. (Oppy, Ontological Arguments 74.). However, Oppy concludes:

Plantinga’s case against the island than which no greater can be conceived is inconclusive. Moreover, following Grim, I note that Plantinga’s argument can readily be adapted to make a case against the being than which no greater being can be conceived. (Oppy, Ontological Arguments 74)

Here Oppy introduces what Charles Hartshorne calls the problem of
quantity (Hartshorne, "What Did Anselm Discover?" 330). If a greatest conceivable island is not coherent, then neither is a greatest conceivable being. As it is with numbers and islands, so it is with being in general. No matter how great is our conception of God, we can always think of something greater, say by adding another universe to creation. Oppy essentially is suggesting that if Plantinga’s objection holds concerning beings conceived in terms of relative greatness (any being of kind K than which no greater being of kind K can be conceived), it is equally effective against a being conceived in terms of absolute greatness (a being than which nothing greater can be conceived). This is a serious objection, for if Greatness is not conceivable, then Anselm’s argument cannot get started, there being no meaningful idea of God.

Anselm did not address the problem of quantity. Steeped as he was in the neo-Platonic worldview, Anselm most likely thought it the case that God simply transcends quantity. As Hartshorne explains, “Anselm takes this for granted. God is Great in that he is ‘whatever it is better to be than not to be.’ And better than any size or number of parts is being immaterial, simple, and immutable” (Hartshorne, Anselm’s 27). But modern thinkers do not find this compelling.

Hartshorne thinks Anselm must concede that for any given thing, a greater can always be thought. Hartshorne relates that Leibniz grappled with the problem of quantity: “The conclusion Leibniz drew was that ‘greatest’ must be taken to mean a purely qualitative, not a quantitative maximum. Or, as he put it, only those properties can be attributed to God, which (unlike quantity) admit a maximal case. The others simply do not apply. Hence, the ambiguity in ‘Great’ is to be resolved by the sheer exclusion of quantity” (Hartshorne, Anselm’s 27). But Hartshorne disagrees and argues, “quantity may, after all, have a value which is not attainable without it.” And this leaves us with a dilemma. The “greatest conceivable quantity” is impossible, and the greatest conceivable quality devoid of quantity is likewise impossible.

Hartshorne resolves this dilemma by noting an ambiguity in the definition. “None greater can be thought” can mean “no greater individual, including God Himself,” or “no greater individual, except God Himself.” The latter meaning allows for God to be surpassable, but only by God. As Hartshorne explains:

If God is surpassable, even though only by Himself, then He can
include quantity in His quality, without the quantity being that presumably impossible thing, an unsurpassable quantity. The divine quantity will be unsurpassable, but only by God Himself. Now we have none of the contradictions we have been worrying about. God need not be that apparent impossibility, a quality wholly independent of quantity, nor that other impossibility, an unsurpassable quantity. Nor need He actualize all possible value. Yet He can still fully deserve worship by surpassing all conceivable rivals to Himself. (Hartshorne, Anselm's Discovery 29)

This “neoclassical” resolution of the dilemma leads Hartshorne into panentheism and a process understanding of deity. However, Hartshorne at least shows modern critics a way to defend the concept of Greatness that does not depend on classical presuppositions. Oppy does not show any awareness of Hartshorne’s neoclassical response to the problem of quantity.

The Problem of Subjectivity

Oppy also raises the problem of subjectivity. Concerning lost islands (and any other being of kind K than which no greater being of kind K can be conceived), judgments about great-making properties seem “irreducibly subjective—that is, people can reasonably and irreconcilably disagree about the attributes of, for example, an island than which no greater island can be conceived... It is a big step to suppose that there is a—greatly idealized—limit in which the conceivings—and judgments about conceivableability—of all reasonable people converge” (Oppy, Ontological Arguments 194, 332).

In response, one can offer the attribute of necessary existence. Why would the judgments of all reasonable people not converge on this great-making property? It seems self-evident that that which exists necessarily is greater than that which exists contingently.

In suggesting that great-making properties seem irreducibly subjective, Oppy continues to labor under the assumption that God is a being of kind K than which no greater being of kind K can be conceived. Anselm claimed that God is the great exception. Unlike islands or any other created thing, God is God’s own kind. Even if judgments about great-making properties of ordinary things are irreducibly subjective, that does not mean judgments about God’s attributes must also be irreducibly subjective.

Value judgments certainly have a subjective component. However,
even judgments about the great-making properties of islands and other created objects are not irreducibly subjective. Robert A. Harris summarizes the critique of the fact/value dichotomy. Following Hilary Putnam and others, Harris argues: “Facts and values, instead of being utterly separate, are often entangled and inseparable.” He concludes that value judgments can be objective (Harris, 19).

Hilary Putnam calls the claim that value judgments are always subjective and relative to the individual the “last dogma of empiricism” (Putnam, 145). This dogma holds that it is necessarily true that nothing has inherent value. But this notion is rooted in logical positivism and ultimately philosophical relativism, which have been refuted, because, as we have already shown, their foundational claim involves a self-referential absurdity.

**Objections Alleging the Futility of Greatness**

Other objections can be generated by conceiving of versions of reality that render the definition of Greatness unfulfillable or impossible. For example, Oppy argues, “If God is taken to be ‘the greatest possible being,’ then it may be necessary that God does not exist” (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 74). This is because there may be “an unending sequence of possible beings, each one greater than the one before. Or perhaps there are a number of possible beings that are equally great, and than which no other is greater. In either case, it will be necessarily true that there is no greatest possible being.”

Oppy’s suggestion of an unending sequence of possible beings is actually worth considering because, as discussed above concerning the problem of quantity, it is quite compatible with Hartshorne’s neoclassical understanding of deity. Operating generally from within the Whiteheadian tradition of process metaphysics, God is conceived as a being in process, with each succeeding God-entity being genetically, but not strictly, identical with its predecessor. A succeeding state may be greater than its predecessor, but God, though surpassable by Godself, is still unsurpassable by any other. So the suggestion of an unending sequence of possible beings, with each one being greater than the one before, does not render Greatness impossible, at least from a neoclassical perspective.

However, Oppy’s second suggestion of a number of equally great beings is hard to take seriously. How could Greatness that than which nothing
greater be conceived be duplicated or multiplied? Also, if there were multiple entities each with the attribute of Greatness, wouldn’t there need to be something greater to account for them? In addition, Hartshorne argues that the divine nature cannot be shared: “The term ‘perfect’ is as abstract as is the term ‘imperfect’; but whereas there are innumerable possible kinds of imperfect individuals, there can be but one perfect individual. And so, although utterly abstract, the divine nature cannot be shared by several individuals. This shows that, among abstractions, it is in a class by itself” (Hartshorne, "What Did Anselm Discover" 330).

Just because one can spin logical possibilities such as these does not necessarily bolster the case against the conceivablebility of Greatness. If the suggestions are not patently nonsensical or repugnant to common sense, skeptics have a burden to why these versions of reality are more likely to be the case.

E. Conclusions About Other Objections

Oppy needs to reconsider his claim that all ontological arguments can be successfully parodied. At least with respect to our conceptual/modal version, the Lost Island type of parody clearly fails.

Reverse ontological arguments, typically directed at modal arguments involving necessity, lose credibility because of the strong a priori case for Necessity. Robust defenses of Greatness also diminish their force.

The abstract/concrete dilemma is a strong objection. However, there is a cogent neoclassical response advanced by Hartshorne.

The problem of quantity is one way to argue that Greatness is bedeviled with inconsistency. Again, there is a cogent response from within the neoclassical tradition.

The problem of subjectivity alleges that judgments about great-making properties are irreducibly subjective. If people can reasonably and irreconcilably disagree about what attributes are great-making, how can there be agreement on that than which nothing greater can be thought? But the Anselmian can attack the logical positivism behind this claim. He can also argue there is at least one great-making principle that seems self-evident (what exists necessarily is greater than what exists contingently).

Alleging the futility of Greatness does not bolster the case against the conceivablebility of Greatness. If the suggestions are not patently nonsensical or repugnant to common sense, skeptics have a burden regarding why
these versions of reality are more likely to be the case.

Even though the overall case for skepticism is more limited than Oppy believes, it must be conceded, as Hartshorne and Dombrowski do, that one can reasonably doubt that one can have an adequate concept of God (Dombrowski, 87). However, this concession does not justify Oppy’s conclusion that the ontological argument is worthless.

Chapter V: Preliminary Assessment

I set out to build a bridge of pure thought from an idea of God to the conclusion that God exists. The premises supporting this bridge (Greatness, Necessity, and Necessity being a great-making property) have been attacked by Graham Oppy in various ways. Are any of them still intact? If any are still supportable, are the grounds for their support sufficiently self-evident so that we can credibly claim to have an a priori argument? And, to meet the additional burden placed on us by Oppy, does the argument offer compelling a priori reasons to the reasonable agnostic to change his position?

A. Defending Greatness and its Conceivability

Anselm defines God as “that than which nothing greater can be thought.” Hartshorne believes that defining God in terms of God’s greatness has intuitive appeal to the religious person, as it is expressive of faith. God is the sole object worthy of worship. The logic of worship requires its object to be exalted above everything else. Concerning the Judeo-Christian tradition, Brian Davies states: “The idea that God is unsurpassably great seems to be part and parcel of Judeo-Christian theism, and to say that God is something than which nothing greater can be thought seems to be a succinct way of capturing what those in the Judeo-Christian tradition mean by ‘God’” (Davies, An Introduction 169).

Along with fair-minded critics such as Davies, one can go further and find that Greatness is “hardly unintelligible,” and one can readily make sense of it (Davies, An Introduction 169). As a rule of thought, Greatness allows us to entertain and reject any candidate for Deity if we can think of something greater. “If we can think of something greater than X, then X is not God” (Davies, An Introduction 167).

So, it is reasonable to grant a prima facie case for the meaningfulness of Greatness. But serious objections remain. Gaunilo, Anselm’s first critic,
argued that Greatness is too vague and indefinite to serve as the major premise in a deductive argument. It asks us to “think the unthinkable.” Aquinas believed that an a priori argument is possible only if it contains terms that we can define by knowing their essences. But, strictly speaking, God is undefinable because we cannot know God’s essence. Therefore, Anselm’s definition attempts to do the impossible.

Suffice it to say that Anselm knows that when we try to think about God, we are groping in the dark and cannot know God’s essence. However, we can discover God’s attributes of Greatness and Necessity and build a successful argument upon them.

As noted earlier, there are three principal ways from within modern philosophy to attack the conceivability of Greatness. As Oppy correctly concludes, logical positivism is a spent force and does not offer a serious challenge to the meaningfulness of Greatness. But because of the fatal contradiction inherent in verificationism, logical positivism can be decisively eliminated as a reasonable ground for one’s atheism. For that matter, it is not a reasonable ground for one’s agnosticism, for if a position is not rational, it is not rational to be agnostic about it. The same can be said about the denial of Necessity.

Finding contradictions in the concept of God, or alleging the futility of the concept, remain the only tenable ways to attack Greatness. Oppy raises the problem of quantity. However, while he certainly is aware of Hartshorne’s work, he ignores the neoclassical solution to the problem of quantity. He also cites the problem of subjectivity. However, subjectivity is only a problem for those who accept the presuppositions of the logical positivists and other philosophical relativists, which have been decisively discredited. That there are cogent responses to challenges such as these should not be regarded as insignificant. Nevertheless, this way of attacking Greatness remains viable, and the proponent of ontological arguments can only respond as objections of this type are raised.

Ultimately, it should be recognized that skeptics themselves are not uniform concerning the conceivability of Greatness. Certainly no advocate for the ontological argument, Bertrand Russell conceded that Greatness is thinkable. At times, Oppy himself concedes this as well (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 194, 332). Even J. N. Findlay, author of the famous disproof of Anselm’s argument, would find Greatness conceivable but for the fact that it requires necessary existence (Findlay, 176-83). Therefore, I conclude that our major premise is supportable, although not entirely through
self-evident premises (such as Aquinas would accept).

B. Defending Necessary Existence and Its Conceivability

Anselm claimed that one can conceive of “that which cannot be conceived not to exist.” Oppy’s Kantian skepticism would allow him to grant the possibility of necessary existence but still conclude that, for all we can know, God could still not exist. But, as Hartshorne and Dombrowski convincingly argue, without contradicting oneself, one cannot grant the possibility of necessary existence and still treat the question of God’s existence as a contingent proposition. Anselm’s modal argument precludes factual atheism and theism alike. The soundness of the ontological argument will then hinge on whether its terms are meaningful.

Oppy thinks that Hartshorne’s position, which forces a choice between a priori theism and positivism, is over-reaching: “The insistence that possession of the concept of God requires belief in God is a gratuitous piece of linguistic imperialism, designed to deny atheists the means of expressing their position” (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 335).

But Dombrowski replies:

Oppy would be on safer ground, however, if he denied that we can have an adequate concept of God. That is, both Hartshorne’s and my own defenses of the ontological argument are hardly imperialistic in that they involve hypothetical reasoning (cf. Plato’s anticipation of the ontological which moves beyond hypotheses): if we can get a coherent concept of the greatest being, of God, then we can know that this being exists necessarily. (Dombrowski, 87)

However, why is it not a piece of gratuitous linguistic imperialism for Oppy to deny, a priori, that God’s existence can be an a priori truth? Recalling Hartshorne’s critique of Hume, Oppy too is “simply appealing to his own a priori, against the religious a priori. It is his say so against that of (theistically) religious mankind” (Hartshorne, *Anselm’s Discovery* 206).

With regard to the possibility of necessary existence, Oppy goes against the opinions of some significant authorities (e.g., Kripke and Barcan). He also nowhere acknowledges the severe problems involved in denying there can be necessary existential propositions. Hartshorne and Voskuil make a powerful case that such denial implies the possibility of absolute nothingness, which is absurd. In addition, to deny there can be necessary existential propositions is to affirm philosophical relativism,
which is self-evidently nonsensical.

C. Defending Necessary Existence as a Great-Making Property

Oppy is not convinced that Kant makes a good case for his objection that existence is not a predicate, nor does he think later interpretations are decisive. But he does find it sufficient for his purposes that he has shown "that it is very difficult to decide whether or not existence is a predicate" (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 160).

However, at the end of his 1995 book he comes to a more definite, but still tentative, conclusion about whether existence is a perfection or great-making property. He finds that it "might be reasonably believed" that mere existence and even necessary existence are not great-making properties (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 199).

But it has been argued here that Kant’s objection does not apply to the modal ontological argument. While mere existence is arguably not a predicate, the mode of existence of a thing certainly is. And once the conceivability of necessary existence is granted, the essential modal nature of the ontological argument is clear.

Contra Oppy, that necessary existence is a property and is greater than contingent existence seems unproblematic and self-evidently true.

Given the truth of its premises, the logic of the argument requires the conclusion that God exists. Therefore, the nonexistent God is strictly inconceivable, and it is not legitimate to assert it because it cannot even be possibly true for God not to exist. The necessity involved is more than just *de dictu*; it is also *de re*. To put a finer point on it, the *de re* necessity under consideration is unconditional.

D. A Better Way to Build the Bridge?

Having run the gauntlet of Oppy’s objections, and others besides, it is now appropriate to ask whether there is a better way to frame my argument.

*Discard the Greatness Premise?*

Charlesworth suggests the argument might be improved as follows:

It is possible to reconstruct the Chapter III proof on Leibnizian lines to make it more economical, by doing away with the definition of God as “that than which nothing greater can be thought,” and more rigorous. Thus, God might be defined as “that being which cannot be
thought not to be.” Now, if that which cannot be thought not to be can be thought of, then it must actually be; or, to put it another way, if we can conceive of a necessary existent, then this means that it is possible, and, if it is possible, then it must actually be: if what-cannot-not-be can be, then it must actually be. (Charlesworth, 74)

Here, Charlesworth lays out the modal logic of the argument, but something is lost by discarding the Greatness premise. In his evaluation of Leibniz’s approach to the ontological argument, Hartshorne explains:

Here we have something a little like Prosl. III. Essential or self-existence is the unique existence of deity. But Anselm retains the advantage of having made it clear that one cannot “define” God as the necessarily existing being (which leads to the objection that one must then show what necessary existence has to do with divinity), but rather, having defined deity as the worshipful, hence Unsurpassable, one then from the definition derives the trait of necessary existence. Thus, it is the Unsurpassable which necessarily exists, not merely the necessarily existent which necessarily exists. Surely the former procedure is superior! (Hartshorne, Anselm’s Discovery 180)

So there does not appear to be any advantage in defining God in terms of Necessity rather than Greatness in the interest of making the argument more economical. In fact, at the risk of taking on a heavier load of assumptions, it seems that the argument requires more premises, not fewer. Or, at least, it now seems beneficial to make explicit that which is implicit in my argument.

*The Position Matrix*

Hartshorne and Dombrowski both employ the position matrix as an alternative presentation of the argument (Hartshorne, Anselm’s Discovery 92; Dombrowski, 106). A position matrix attempts to exhaustively identify the logical and mutually exclusive possibilities and then fashion arguments to eliminate all but the theistic option. Here is a version adapted from Dombrowski that employs three binary variables: whether the thing itself is objectively existent or nonexistent, whether the thing is conceived as existent or nonexistent, and whether the existence or nonexistence is conceivable or inconceivable. This yields the six logical possibilities. Any given thing can be categorized in only one of the following ways:

1. Nonexistent outside the thinker’s mind and its nonexistence is inconceivable;
2. Existent outside the thinker’s mind and its existence is inconceivable;
3. Existent outside the thinker’s mind and its nonexistence is conceivable;
4. Nonexistent outside the thinker’s mind and its existence is conceivable;
5. Nonexistent outside the thinker’s mind and its existence is inconceivable; or
6. Existent outside the thinker’s mind and its nonexistence is inconceivable.¹⁷

1 and 2 perhaps can be characterized as the Kantian options. 1 claims that something really does not exist and can only be conceived of existing necessarily. 2 claims that something really exists, yet is inconceivable and hence impossible. These claims reflect a belief in the radical distinction between logical and real possibility—that is, that our thoughts about things have no implications for their existence. I have been arguing they are inadmissible because they are contradictory.

3 and 4 capture the modes of contingency. Following Hartshorne’s terminology, the concept of a contingent thing has an intension that is neutral regarding whether the concept has extension. Concerning a contingent concept, whether it has extension is determined empirically or extralogically. 3 and 4 can be eliminated as applying to God because Greatness and contingency are not compatible.

5 is the mode of impossibility. The intension of an impossible concept forbids any extension. Therefore, the extension of an impossible concept can be denied a priori. Here the theist faces an open challenge, for, even though cogent responses to the various objections to the conceivability of Greatness have been made, all possible challenges have not been decisively rebutted.

6 is the mode of necessity, and the extension of a necessary concept can be affirmed a priori because its intension requires some extension or other. Strong arguments in favor of de re necessity have been made. Since nothing exists impossibly and contingency is a defect, necessity is the only remaining option compatible with Greatness.

The position matrix approach gives us a different look at ontological arguments. The preceding analysis does make explicit the conceptual and existential modes, and that is an advantage. It also seems to make more clear that there are epistemological assumptions at play here because, in the supporting analysis, it is alleged that the modal status of a concept is evident just from an examination of its meaning. However, I find that the same type of reasoning ends up being employed in a position matrix to eliminate the non-theistic options as in a formal argument.
with explicit premises, and it seems better to retain that approach and keep the premises sequential and visible.

**A Modal Argument in Terms of Possibility and Necessity?**

I also have considered following modern trends and arguing purely in terms of possibility and necessity or maybe in terms of possible worlds. Consider again the version suggested by Leftow:

1. If God exists, he exists necessarily. (Premise)
2. If it is possible that God exists, then it is possible he exists necessarily. (Premise)

In logic, if P implies Q (Premise 1), then possibly P implies possibly Q (Premise 2).

3. It is possible that God exists. (Premise)
4. Possibly God exists necessarily.

From 2 and 3. Then via the reduction principle of modal logic (what is possibly necessary is necessary), we get:

5. God exists necessarily. (From 4)
6. Therefore, God exists.

It first must be clarified that the only contingency involved in Premise 1 is one of conceivability; otherwise, there is an implied contradiction, as noted previously. This suggests restating the premise as follows: If there is an idea of God (i.e., it is logically possible), then God’s existence is only conceivable as necessary.

Premise 1 also needs unpacking to be intelligible. Implicit therein is not only the definition of God in terms of Greatness and also assumptions about the conceivability of Greatness and Necessity. In addition, the modes of existence (contingency and necessity) and the great-making principle (necessity exceeds contingency) need to be posited.

Leftow’s procedure makes the modal logic plain, and that is an advantage. However, there are critical suppressed premises that need to be set forth. In addition, as we learned when we dealt with Oppy’s reverse
modal argument, it is helpful to keep the conceivability premises in view.

**Lead with the Necessity Premise?**

John Hick concludes his summary of Kant and Russell in this fashion: “The basic Kantian and Russelian thesis stands that it is not possible to form the concept of x, or so define the term x, as to guarantee a priori that an x exists in the world outside our minds” (Hick, "A Critique" 215).

Kant and Russell are wrong if they assume that the problem is one of defining God into existence, as if the only way to bridge the gap between concept and reality is to pack existence somehow into the concept of God, whether in the fashion of Descartes or Leibniz. Rather, it is a matter of clarifying the existential modes for any concept and thing and then asking which mode is appropriate for God. This suggests reworking the Necessity premises (3 and 4) and presenting them first in the argument. The original Premise 3, expressed in more modern terms, is as follows:

1. Premise: One can conceive of something the intension of which requires some extension or other.

If necessity is conceivable, then there are three existential modes for any concept, not two.

2. Premise: There are three and only three conceivable existential modes of any concept:
   a. Contingent (those whose intension is neutral concerning whether the concept has extension).
   b. Impossible (those whose intension forbids such extension).
   c. Necessary (those whose intension requires some extension or other).

Here the three kinds of concepts are proposed, all defined in terms of their intension and extension. Contingency and impossibility are not controversial. Some skeptics would grant that one can conceive of (without contradiction) something the intension of which requires some extension or other. However, they will not grant that the conceivability of a necessarily existing thing (that which cannot fail to exist) means that such a thing exists. For all we know, it is argued, what we conceive as existing
necessarily might or might not exist. Our thoughts place no requirements on reality. To advance the argument, then, one needs to assert that the modes from Premise 2 are not only properties of concepts but also of things.

3. Premise: Modality of existence is always a property of things.

As with concepts, it is not controversial to grant that there are contingent things.\textsuperscript{18} However, Hume and his progeny, who maintain the universal contingency of existence, will deny necessary existence. But in this premise, we explicitly affirm that there is a necessarily existing thing. If this argument were in terms of possibility or necessity, or even possible worlds, this move is justified in some systems of modal logic. If it is granted that necessary existence is conceivable (possible), then it is possibly necessary, and what is possibly necessary is necessary by the reduction principle. I have argued for the \textit{de re} modality because to deny it generates contradictions. And if something must exist, necessary existence can also be a property of a thing.

4. Premise: There are two and only two ways any thing can exist, contingently or necessarily.

Of course, no thing exists impossible, so there are only two modalities for existing things.

But still, it is not sufficient to recognize that there is a necessarily existing thing. For the argument to reach its desired conclusion, we also need to claim, against Kant, that necessity in things is discernible from our concepts of them. After all, the argument claims to bridge the gap between idea and reality using only concepts.

Following Hartshorne, we then posit:

5. Modality of existence is always deducible from the definition of a thing.

Skeptics who challenge this already accept that, concerning the mode of impossibility, one can prove the \textit{necessary nonexistence} of something just by an analysis of its meaning. Why then cannot one prove the \textit{necessary existence} of something just by an analysis of its meaning? Hartshorne gives the following argument on behalf of this premise:
That ordinary predicates neither exist necessarily nor necessarily fail to exist is inherent in their meanings. For they describe a conceivable sort of world which excludes other sorts likewise conceivable, and to do this belongs to their very function as predicates of the usual type. Similarly, self-contradictory predicates, by their mere meanings, necessarily do not exist. In these two cases, modal status inheres in the predicate itself. What then is incongruous in there being a third form of predication which, by its very meaning, neither (1) excludes existence nor (2) is neutral to it (existing if this possibility, but not if that possibility, is actualized), but rather (3) requires existence (exists no matter what possibility is actualized)? No impartial person can, I think, deny that there is a certain completeness about this view which has an intellectual appeal. Modal status, it says, is always a priori or logical; but, of the three forms of modality, contingency makes existence a question of extralogical facts. The others make it an a priori necessity, positive or negative. (Hartshorne, *Anselm’s Discovery* 60)

Having stated our modal and epistemological premises, we then introduce our definition of God:

6. Definition: God is That Than Which Nothing Greater Can Be Thought.

The following premises are then intended to demonstrate which mode of existence is appropriate for Greatness, and this first requires eliminating impossibility. This involves recognizing that, superficially at least, Greatness is intelligible and then rebutting all the challenges to Greatness we have encountered, which claim it is impossible or involves a contradiction. Some also argue that one can also make a positive argument employing the various a posteriori arguments (see Dombrowski, 95). In modal arguments in terms of possibility and necessity, this premise would be expressed as “Greatness is possible.”

7. Premise: Greatness is conceivable, thus not impossible.

By Premise 2, only two remaining modes may be applicable to Greatness. Next, we apply Anselm’s *reductio* procedure to eliminate contingency as an option.

8. Premise: That which exists necessarily is greater than that which exists contingently.
10. But 8 leads to a contradiction because one could then think of something
greater, namely that which exists necessarily.
11. Therefore, 8 is false.
12. Therefore, Greatness exists necessarily (this being the only other pos-
sibility from 3).
13. Therefore “God exists” is true.

In conclusion, it is dialectically useful to lead with the Necessity
premises in this manner. It not only makes more explicit the premises on
which our conceptual/modal argument depends, but it also highlights our
opponents’ a priori assumptions.

It also clarifies for proponents of the argument that the only conti-
gency involved concerning Greatness is its conceivable. Under the
original formulation, pending final resolution of the full meaning of Great-
ess, it might seem we are pretending that Greatness, for all we know,
may or may not be instantiated. But this is to assume that Greatness is a
contingent concept and thus repeat the mistake in Anselm’s first argu-
ment from Chapter Two. Voskuil argues there is “no way to validly move
from ‘conceivable’ to ‘existing’ without questionable assumptions.” God
defined in terms of Greatness “is not meaningful as a reality that exists
but could possibly not exist. Contingent premises can only establish con-
tingent conclusions. The argument must use necessary premises, that is,
metaphysical propositions. Since all necessary propositions are on equal
footing, there is no deduction from one to another, only clarification”
(Voskuil, 160).

Granting all of our premises, it is unconditionally necessary that God
exists. Being a metaphysical truth, God’s existence is not merely a re-
quirement of logical or physical laws but of reality itself.

**Chapter VI: Conclusions and Reflections**

**Surviving the Oppy Challenge**

First of all, Anselm fails in this respect: Contrary to his own aspira-
tions, the argument does not suffice by itself to demonstrate that God
really exists. The Greatness premise is not self-evidently true and needs
additional clarification and argument. In part, it also depends on human
experience and empirical theistic arguments to be credible. Therefore, his
proof does not constitute a demonstration in the Thomistic sense, that is a “logically valid argument from premises that are true and evident, thus proving the conclusion with certainty” (Kreeft, 29).

But does this admission vindicate Oppy’s general objection? Only in a limited way. Underlying his general objection is the claim that “there is no ontological category about whose instantiation theists and their opponents must agree on a priori grounds, and that can serve as the basis for an ontological argument for the existence of a deity” (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 117). To say that the Greatness premise is not self-evidently true is to admit that opponents are not required to accept the Greatness premise on a priori grounds. However, a reasonable opponent should admit that Greatness has prima facie intelligibility. The Anselmian can also take comfort in the fact that even so formidable an opponent as Bertrand Russell thought Greatness was conceivable. Further, credible responses are available to the major challenges to the conceivability of Greatness, and this is not insignificant.

Therefore, Oppy is not justified in reaching his overall conclusion that this ontological argument is dialectically worthless because a completely a priori case cannot be made for its central premise. It is true that the Greatness pillar is not constructed of pure thought. However, relative to the experience which gives rise to the idea of Greatness, one can construct a sound a priori argument whose other premises are arguably self-evident. Further, the argument retains its a priori character because, once one has gained the idea of Greatness, one can reach the conclusion of God’s existence just by examining the concept and asking which existential mode it requires.

Arguably, I have advanced an argument whose soundness can be recognized by someone who does not already believe God exists, and, in this respect, I have succeeded on Oppy’s own terms. Specifically, I have made strong arguments that demonstrate that Oppy’s broader theory, which underlies his general objection (the Kantian form of positivism), is logically inconsistent. I have further shown that a major argument against my type of argument, the Gaunilo type of parody, is not valid. Of course, this relatively a priori argument is not unqualified proof of God’s existence, which rationally requires belief in God. But, on the other hand, Oppy is not reasonable in claiming that there “is not the slightest evidence” that belief in God is rationally required (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 157).
A bridge from pure thought—relatively.

A moderate stance concerning the success of the argument is taken by Charles Hartshorne. Hartshorne concludes that Anselm’s modal argument at least clears some ground in the great God debate in that it disproves both factual atheism and factual theism. “Neither the divine existence nor the divine nonexistence could be a mere fact, i.e., a contingent truth. The question is conceptual, not observational” (Hartshorne, Anselm’s Discovery 161). The argument is over the meaningfulness (or meaninglessness) of terms. If Greatness and the predicate of Necessity make sense, then God must exist. If not, the existence of God is impossible. There are no other possibilities.

Dombrowski takes a similar position:

Starting with this basis in modal logic, it can be said, minimally, that the ontological argument is not so much an unqualified proof that God exists, but rather that, of the three possible existential modalities [necessary, contingent, or impossible], one is flat out incompatible with the concept of a perfect being. “Contingently existing perfect being” is just as contradictory as “round square.” As we have seen, God’s existence is either impossible or necessary. In effect, the ontological argument is a meta-argument: it is an argument about the logic of theistic arguments. Oppy does not really acknowledge, must
less criticize, this point. (Dombrowski, 96)

Recall also Kant’s belief that the other theistic arguments are related to and dependent on the ontological so that if the ontological argument fails, they all fail. But, in this view, if the ontological argument is shown to be sound, then the others are strengthened. This inter-relatedness of the theistic arguments causes some to argue that there really is one complex or global theistic argument, with the ontological argument comprising one part. Together with the cosmological and teleological arguments, the ontological provides its own angle on God’s existence. For its part, the ontological argument refutes factual atheism, while the other arguments help refute positivism by making Greatness intelligible (Hartshorne, *Anselm’s Discovery* 84). Thus, the ontological and empirical arguments are mutually reinforcing “like Peircian strands in a cable” (Dombrowski, 77, 96).

Regarding my bridge-building metaphor, developing concepts and a chain of reasoning to bridge the gap between idea and reality seemed at the beginning to be what I was trying to do. However, what now seems equally true is that this was an exercise in finding a bridge that already was there. Putting the beginning emphasis on the Necessity premises makes it clear that a robust and complete understanding of the modalities of existence reveals the preexisting bridge to God’s reality. Repeating Voskuil’s earlier comment, this approach to the ontological argument is more of a clarification process than one of deduction.

Apart from affirming the dialectical value of the ontological argument, the experience of defending the argument produces the following insights.

As observed previously, Oppy either ignores or dismisses Hartshorne’s neoclassical contributions to the debate over ontological arguments. Regarding Hartshorne’s work, Oppy ultimately concludes “there is almost nothing that would not be of merely historical interest” (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments* 247). However, given Hartshorne’s prominence in this defense of the ontological argument, it seems fair to say Oppy sells him far short.

Hartshorne would also urge Oppy to recognize that the debates over ontological arguments implicate larger questions about philosophy. These debates are about more than whether a given argument is valid, sound, or successful. The central religious question is whether God exists. If, as Hartshorne maintains, this question is self-answering, then:
...our whole theory of knowledge must be affected by this truth. We can no longer assume that the only self-answering questions are triv-
al or merely linguistic. The general issue of the possibility of metaphysics is here involved. Metaphysical questions are those which, when properly put, are self-answering—and yet are not simply logical or mathematical....[T]o say that logical questions are “merely” logical, and therefore “not about existence,” is antimetaphysical dogma, not a self-evident truth. (Hartshorne, *Anselm’s Discovery* 24)

Oppy, given his embrace of the antimetaphysical dogma, has taken sides in the ancient debate between metaphysicians and relativists. Again recalling Hartshorne’s critique of Hume, it seems that Oppy is “simply appealing to his own a priori, against the religious a priori.” But his a pri-
ori, as Hartshorne has shown, is riddled with contradictions.

Regarding the more recent work of Dombrowski, Oppy says:

Dombrowski is a fan of Hartshorne: the aim of his book is to defend the claim that Hartshorne’s ontological argument is a success. While Dombrowski’s book is a useful addition to the literature because of the scope of its discussion of ontological arguments—for example, it contains a chapter on Rorty on ontological arguments, and another chapter on [Mark] Taylor on ontological arguments—even reviewers sympathetic to process theism have not been persuaded that it makes a strong case for its central thesis. (Oppy, “Ontological Arguments”)

However, Oppy fails to mention that Dombrowski devotes two chapters to Oppy’s book and makes some very pointed criticisms of Oppy’s ag-
nosticism and his general objection, which deserve a response.

Significantly, Anselm’s most trenchant early critic was a fellow be-
liever, Thomas Aquinas. Thomas was the first to provide a comprehensive critique, and his criticisms anticipated many of the later objections. This should give modern critics pause. Might there be something to be gained from a reexamination of the classical traditions? In this regard, the reader is directed to David Bentley Hart’s *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss*.

It appears that keeping Anselm’s original formulation of Greatness worked, overall, to our advantage. This is seen especially in the defense against Gaunilo’s Lost Island parody, highlighting the lack of parity between Greatness (something absolutely great) and an island (something only relatively great). However, it must be acknowledged that using the description of that than which nothing greater can be thought for our
definition makes it susceptible to challenges from Gaunilo and Aquinas. These will need to be dealt with another time. Suffice it to say that, after making necessary concessions to Aquinas, Anselm has the resources in *Proslogion* to defend the Greatness of God as the basis for a relatively a priori argument.

At least until the end, it was good to have resisted the temptation to reformulate Anselm’s argument in terms more amenable to modern philosophy, dominated as it is by the analytic tradition. Playing on the turf of one’s opponent and adopting his rules of engagement can be problematic. For example, Jan Berg presented Anselm’s argument from Chapter Two in a formal language based on Russell’s theory of descriptions (see Berg). But as William E. Mann shows, the attempt fails because “Russell’s theory of descriptions is particularly unsuitable for Anselm’s argument” because its presuppositions deny Anselm’s key premises (Mann, 175).

Another example is Alvin Plantinga’s modal argument, which uses the idea of possible worlds. According to David Bentley Hart, implicit in Plantinga’s possible worlds approach is an understanding of necessity, which he characterizes as a “happenstantial” metaphysical necessity, and thus, ultimately contingent or conditioned. Necessity, as we have learned, must be applied to God in an unconditional and absolute sense.

In general, Hart finds Anglo-American philosophy to be encumbered by the presuppositions of the analytic tradition.

I should probably note here that, in the analytic tradition of Anglo-American philosophy, the issue [i.e., the meaning of “God”] tends to be complicated on the one hand by the methods and conceptual rules generally preferred by analytic thinkers, and the other hand by the lack of historical perspective that those methods and rules often encourage. The analytic tradition is pervaded by the mythology of “pure” philosophical discourse, a propositional logic that somehow floats above the historical and cultural contingency of ideas and words, and that somehow can be applied to every epoch of philosophy without any proper attention to what the language and conceptual schemes of earlier thinkers mean in their own times and places. This is a pernicious error under the best of conditions, but it has worked arguably its greatest mischief in the realm of ontology, often as a result of principles that, truth be told, are almost entirely arbitrary (Hart, 123).

This “mythology of ‘pure’ philosophical discourse” is evident in many
popular discussions. This appears to be a legacy of logical positivism’s unfulfilled quest for an ideal language. In addition to promoting a lack of historical awareness, it also promotes a disdain for metaphysics and an inability to comprehend a metaphysics of being. Concerning the analytic approach to ontology, Hart says:

The most curious aspect of this approach to “existence, as should be obvious, is that it has absolutely nothing to do with real existence at all.” Frege’s rules regarding how an assertion of existence should be grammatically assigned are ways of talking about talking about existence as such. The possibility of actual existence is just blandly assumed, as though there were no mystery to ponder there at all: to say something “exists” means simply that some concept is instantiated, as opposed to not being instantiated, and nothing more; what causes or allows for this instantiation to be a real concrete event in the first place is not really considered. Seen thus, the difference between existence and nonexistence is not ontological but merely propositional. (Hart, 126-27)

Hart observes, “something like Frege’s approach, which has been qualified and disputed over the years, still exercises a strangely potent stricture on ontological reflection,” even for theistic philosophers. He says:

The results have often been unfortunate. For one thing, it has made it very hard for many of those philosophers to make much sense of the ancient and necessary premise, common to all classical theistic philosophies, that the words we use about God, to the extent we use them correctly, have meanings only remotely analogous to what those same words mean when we use them of created things. When we speak of the goodness and wisdom of God, for instance, we cannot imagine that he is good or wise in the same manner as a finite person, who naturally possesses such attributes in an inconstant and imperfect way. (Hart, 125)

In this regard, Hart criticizes certain Christian philosophers who have effectively broken with classical theistic tradition and embraced what Brian Davies calls “theistic personalism,” which denies God’s simplicity (Hart, 127).

Whether we are talking about theists or non-theists, however, the bottom line is that analytic philosophy, for all its positive features, leads to an impoverished and restricted philosophical worldview. Among non-theists, this promotes a blindness to other traditions, especially the classical; among theists, this ultimately undermines their very purpose.
Having engaged Anselm’s critics, the experience gives one an appreciation of Anselm’s accomplishment, which seems all the more amazing given the limited resources he had available. According to Brian Leftow, the library available to Anselm at any time probably consisted of only a few books of Aristotle and a commentary on Aristotle by Boethius in philosophy and the works of Augustine in theology. Yet, he was prodigious in his writings, quite original in his thinking, and profoundly influential in his time and on to the present. Speaking as a proponent of “perfect being theology” and inspired by Anselm, Leftow also claims that Anselm’s modal logic in Chapter Three is utterly unique in the history of philosophy and that it took until the 20th century for philosophy, when modal logic was better understood, to catch up to him (see Leftow).

Endnotes

1. Russell, Autobiography, 83. Russell relates: “For two or three years . . . I was a Hegelian. I remember the exact moment during my fourth year [in 1894] when I became one. I had gone out to buy a tin of tobacco, and was going back with it along Trinity Lane, when I suddenly threw it up in the air and exclaimed: ‘Great God in Boots!—the ontological argument is sound!’”
2. See, e.g., Rogers, 1; and Dombrowski, 18.
3. Monologium and Prosligion are also known in their latinized form as Monologium and Proslogium.
4. All quotations from St. Anselm’s Prosligion will be from M.J. Charlesworth’s translation.
5. See Malcolm, 301-320 and 321-333, respectively.
6. See Plantinga’s The Nature of Necessity.
8. See Davies and Leftow’s The Cambridge Companion to Anselm, 162.
10. David Hume, Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, quoted in Hartshorne, Anselm’s Discovery, 202-203.
11. David Hume, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, quoted in Frederick Copleston, 316.
12. The analytic (as opposed to the synthetic) relates to our use of words or semantics. The necessary (as opposed to the contingent) relates to the metaphysical or what is real. The a priori, as opposed to the a posteriori, relates to the epistemic dimension or how we know things. See, generally, Baggini and Fosl, 141-173.
13. Oppy considers a sixth category, “Devils and so on,” which is hard to
take seriously. An example is "a being than which no worse can be con-
ceived," which, when applied to Anselm’s logic, purportedly proves the
existence of the devil. However, devilishness is not a great-making property
(e.g., neither is stupidity, weakness).
14. See Hartshorne’s discussion of the hallmarks of contingency in The Logic
of Perfection.
15. See Dombrowski, 110-115. For a recent critique of parody arguments,
see also Nagasawa.
16. A classical response to the problem of quantity can be made if Anselm
joins forces with Thomas Aquinas and employs the latter’s analogy of being.
It is true that when we think of numbers, we can always add one, and when
we think of created things, such as the universe, we can always mentally add
one more galaxy. And it is true that our ideas about God, conditioned as they
are in dealing only with God’s effects, cannot capture God’s essence. We
therefore must not mistake for God what is only an effect of God. This, ar-
guably, is what proponents of the problem of quantity have done. They
erroneously assume that Greatness can be applied univocally to God (that
Greatness is not a mere nominal definition but a real definition). We have
this idea of God being unsurpassably great, but this idea is conditioned by
our experience of the relative greatness of creatures. God is certainly great,
but God is not great in exactly the same way creatures are great. Greatness,
like any other of God’s attributes, imperfectly captures God and is only ana-
logically true of God. Inevitably the analogy fails, and this becomes apparent
when we push the analogy too far and generate a paradox, such as the prob-
lem of quantity.
17. Generally following Dombrowski, 106.
18. Except, perhaps, for ultra-rationalists and extreme determinists. See
Voskuiil, 25.
19. Not to mention a process-oriented metaphysics!

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