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THE MODERN ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT: IN WHICH THE POSITION OF ALVIN  
PLANTINGA IS REFUTED

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of Philosophy and Religion  
The University of Mississippi

by

ZACHARY G. CROWNOVER

December 2012

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## ABSTRACT

In this work, I set out to accomplish three tasks. First, I hope to educate those who may be unfamiliar with the philosophy of religion, by presenting to them rough outlines of positions commonly assumed by logically minded spokespersons for atheism and theism, respectively. Second, I introduce and explicate the work of Alvin Plantinga—a prominent proponent of theistic belief—and in such a way that it may be clearly understood even by those without prior experience of modal logic. Finally, I adopt a polemical stance against Plantinga, and reach the following conclusion: Contrary to Plantinga’s assertions, and given the modal framework he adopts, we do not yet have reason to believe that one may rationally accept the existence of the Christian God.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## PREFACE

The ontological argument for the existence of God has astonished philosophers since it was first formulated by St. Anselm of Canterbury in the late 11<sup>th</sup> century. Those with Christian sympathies readily clung to it—so effortlessly did it seem to assuage any sneaking doubt they may have had concerning the existence of their divine benefactor—while those with agnostic or atheistic intuitions had no ready rebuttal. The argument was, of course, subject to the occasional libel which deemed it sophistical, but such designations rarely stuck, lacking as they did any concrete evidence for the truth of the claim. There are, of course, exceptions to the rule that all early attacks on Anselm’s formulation were unsubstantive, not the least of which is Gaunilo’s so-called *perfect island argument*, but they, at best, preserved an equal footing between the theist and the atheist.

This stalemate lasted for centuries, until some prominent modern philosophers (for instance, David Hume and, more specifically, Immanuel Kant<sup>1</sup>) seemed to tip the odds in the favor of the atheists. This trend, undoubtedly aided by discoveries in and reverence for science, has continued well into the contemporary period, in which intellectual circles are more typically characterized by their outspoken atheism or agnosticism than their Christian apologetics. In defiance of this trend, however, there are still those who recommend a reexamination of the ontological argument; they advocate the adaptation of Anselm’s original formulation to more

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<sup>1</sup> As you may know, Kant was not an atheist. He, in fact, propounded a belief in both a future state and God. Nevertheless, his rebuttal of the ontological argument is one of the preeminent modern refutations of the Anselmian position.



modern philosophical considerations, such as world-oriented modality. Chief among these philosophers and theologians that make up the Christian resurgence is the central subject of this work—Alvin Plantinga.

Seeing as many of us are not familiar with the debate in which Plantinga participates, this essay shall be divided into three distinct parts. Part one will focus on the debate as a whole, outlining Anselm's original formulation of the ontological argument before moving on to more modern positions held by the atheist and the theist, respectively. In part two, I will attempt to outline, in as much detail as is relevant, the position held by Plantinga, himself (specifically, as it relates to the positions outlined in part one). Finally, part three will see me adopting a stance against that assumed by Plantinga.

As you have most likely gathered from the title of this work, I do not pretend to be unbiased in my efforts. I harbor atheistic intuitions, and believe that there are a number of problems which the theist has yet to overcome, and likely never will. Nevertheless, I shall do my best to present the first two parts of this work in a purely neutral, exegetical light. Only in part three will I enter into the debate as a biased participant.

## I. THE DEBATE

### 1. THE ANSELMIAN ARGUMENT

The Anselmian argument has been given a number of interpretations throughout the years, but in the hopes of preserving accuracy, let us examine its first formulation in full, before picking out those premises and inferences whereby its conclusion is said to be justified.

*And so, Lord, do thou, who dost give understanding to faith, give me, so far as thou knowest it to be profitable, to understand that thou art as we believe; and that thou art that which we believe. And indeed, we believe that thou art a being than which nothing greater can be conceived. Or is there no such nature, since the fool hath said in his heart, there is no God?...But, at any rate, this very fool when he hears of this being of which I speak—a being than which nothing greater can be conceived—understands what he hears, and what he understands is in his understanding, although he does not understand it to exist.*

*For, it is one thing for any object to be in the understanding, and another to understand that the object exists. When a painter first conceives of what he will afterwards perform, he has it in his understanding, but he does not yet understand it to be, because he has not yet performed it. But after he has made the painting, he both has it in his understanding, and he understands that it exists, because he has made it.*

*Hence, even the fool is convinced that something exists in the understanding, at least, than which nothing greater can be conceived. For when he hears of this, he understands it. And whatever is understood, exists in the understanding. And assuredly that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, cannot exist in the understanding alone. For, suppose it exists in the understanding alone; then it can be conceived to exist in reality, which is greater.*

*Therefore, if that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, exists in the understanding alone, the very being, than which nothing greater can be conceived, is one, than which a greater can be conceived. But obviously this is*

*impossible. Hence, there is no doubt that there exists a being, than which nothing greater can be conceived, and it exists both in the understanding and in reality.*<sup>2</sup>

What, exactly, is Anselm saying here? What form does his argument take? It is, in fact, a relatively standard instantiation of *reductio ad absurdum*, the individual steps of which are as follows:

1. God is a being than which no greater can be conceived. (definition)
2. To exist in reality is greater than to exist solely in the understanding. (premise)
3. God exists in the understanding, but not in reality. (assumption for *reductio ad absurdum*)
4. It is conceivable that God exists in reality. (premise)
5. One may conceive of a being greater than that being than which no greater can be conceived. (from 3 and 4)
6. God exists in reality. (from 3 and 5)

Unfortunately for Anselm, this is an invalid argument. Its conclusion is not that God exists in reality, but only that God exists in reality *if He exists in the understanding*. Just because the argument, as outlined by Anselm, is invalid, however, does nothing to lessen the boldness of its *actual* conclusion. “Surely,” says the theist, “God *does* exist in the understanding, so the overall import of the Anselmian argument is unaffected.” The soundness of this argument, as it is now understood in its valid form, however, rests on the truth of premises 2 and 4, both of which have been vehemently contested from the modern period onward. Sadly, it is not within the purview of this section to debate the soundness of Anselm’s argument, but merely to outline its form and steps. Having succinctly succeeded in our present endeavor, let us move on to a discussion of one of the modern atheist’s most effective arguments against his/her Christian opponents.

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<sup>2</sup> St. Anselm, *Proslogium*, chap. 2, in *The Ontological Argument*, ed. A. Plantinga (New York: Doublday Anchor, 1965), 3-4.

## 2. THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

*When I'm sampling from your bosom  
Sometimes I suffer from distractions  
Like 'why does God cause things like tornadoes  
And train wrecks?'<sup>3</sup>*

The problem of evil is one with which the vast majority of Western culture is familiar, even if they have never heard it referred to as such. One of God's most commonly cited properties is His perfect, infinite benevolence. Given this, and God's omnipotence, one would not be faulted for initially feeling as if the world should logically be devoid of any hardship, suffering and ugliness. H. J. McCloskey describes the problem as follows:

*Evil is a problem for the theist in that a contradiction is involved in the fact of evil, on the one hand, and the belief in the omnipotence and perfection of God on the other.<sup>4</sup>*

J. L. Mackie continues this line of thought:

*I think, however, that a more telling criticism can be made by way of the traditional problem of evil. Here it can be shown, not that religious beliefs lack rational support, but that they are positively irrational, that the several parts of the essential theological doctrine are inconsistent with one another.<sup>5</sup>*

To relate this problem to the Anselmian argument as previously outlined, the atheist, here, seems to be disputing the very definition of God to which the theist typically subscribes. "If God truly is a being than which no greater can be conceived," says the atheist, "He would never

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<sup>3</sup> Crash Test Dummies, "Swimming in Your Ocean," *God Shuffled his Feet*, Arista.

<sup>4</sup> "God and Evil", *Philosophical Quarterly*, 10 (1960), 97.

<sup>5</sup> "Evil and Omnipotence", *Mind*, 64 (1955), 200.

allow evils such as starvation, torture, rape, natural disasters, war, etc. to plague us as they do. After all, what possible justification could God—to whom *no* act of the will is impossible—provide us, such that we would immediately recognize the good inherent in the abuse of children, or the particularly brutal loss of a loved one?” Before we continue this discussion, however, it would do us well to note an important distinction—that between *moral evil* and *natural evil*.

By *moral evil*, we mean any evil attributable to human action, be it intentional or unintentional. Evils falling under this category would be murder, manslaughter and rape. This is what we *tend* to mean when we speak of evil, for it is often seen as counterintuitive to attribute evil to any action committed by a non-(rational agent).

From this, we distinguish *natural evil*, or evil owing to causes beyond human control. Under this heading, we place evils such as earthquakes, tsunamis, tornadoes and disease. Though we are often reticent to speak of such events as “being evil, per se,” they are nevertheless “bad” circumstances we would rather do without.

However the theist sets out to respond to the problem of evil, he/she must account for both the moral and natural varieties, and in such a way that God’s omnipotence and moral perfection are preserved. This is, of course, no mean feat, but one that many theists believe themselves to have adequately tackled, nonetheless. And just what argument could the theist employ in such an endeavor? Let us turn to an examination of it now.

### 3. THE FREE WILL DEFENSE

Imagine a scenario in which you have been taken hostage by a bank robber. Given that the bank you are currently patronizing has just been surrounded by police officers, it is in the robber's best interests to use you as leverage to negotiate his safe escape. Should the police fail to comply with the robber's demands, he has made it clear that you will be executed with the most extreme of prejudice. Undoubtedly, your situation is one in which the vast majority of people would rather not find themselves, but could it be worse? Note that by "worse," I do not mean something along the lines of the robber's having access to a variety of henchmen who, when called upon, may help expedite your execution, or carry it out in a more imaginative manner. By "worse," I mean that the robber had never approached the bank in the first place, nor had any other bank been approached by any other robber at any time prior to the present; in fact, the term, "robber," had never even been added to the English language, nor its non-English analogues added to any other, for the very act of robbery had never been committed. At first glance, this certainly seems like a *better* state of affairs than that in which we find ourselves, but there is a catch. The reason no robbery ever has been, nor ever will be, committed is this: All rational beings have been pre-programmed by God to carry out a set of specific actions that, though all benevolent, are determined in no part by the respective wills of those performing them. In effect, all of humanity is spared from moral evil by being subjected to unwitting servitude to a set of laws enacted by the Creator. Now, would *this* state of affairs be worse than that in which we find ourselves? The theist tends to think so.

The example outlined above is a rough approximation of the *free will defense*, the most common means by which the theist attempts to resolve the problem of evil. A discussion of this theistic tactic, however, will do us little good until we explicate two important concepts which are central to it. *First*, we have the notion of *moral significance* with respect to an action. In defining this, we may say that an action X is morally significant to a rational agent Y, if and only if it is right for Y to perform X, and wrong for Y to refrain from performing X, or vice versa. In the case of the bank robbery, we may say that the action of robbing the bank is morally significant to the robber insofar as it is wrong for the robber to carry out his crime, and right for him to refrain from doing so. *Second*, we come to the notion of *significant freedom* with respect to an action. Here, we may say that a rational agent Y is significantly free with respect to an action X if and only if Y is free to perform X or to refrain from performing X, and X is morally significant to Y. Again recalling the case of the bank robbery, the robber is significantly free with respect to robbing the bank, for he is free to perform, and free to refrain from performing, a morally significant action, e.g. robbing the bank.<sup>6</sup> With an understanding of these two concepts in tow, we are now able to move on to what Alvin Plantinga believes to be the free will defense's most essential aspect:

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<sup>6</sup> The notions of moral significance and significant freedom may appear counterintuitive to some, if only because we may conceive of certain instances in which these concepts may, as defined, be applicable, yet where social norms dictate that the terms, "significant" or "significance," are not. For instance, consider the following case: Archibald, on his way home from class, notices a small piece of trash lying on the sidewalk across the street. Arch, who has been studying all day, wants only to go home and watch his favorite television show, so he ignores the litter, and continues on his way. Here, Plantinga would say that Arch was significantly free with respect to a morally significant action, e.g. crossing the street, picking up the trash, and placing it in the nearest refuse bin. Yet, the vast majority of us would say that there is nothing *significant* about this particular case, save perhaps the ratio of the energy Arch would have to expend to go right, to the amount of good that would be brought about by doing so. Note that in the cases of moral significance and significant freedom, "significance" is not to be equated with possessing a *great* degree of *practical* importance, but rather possessing *some* degree of *moral* importance, however miniscule it may be.

*The heart of the Free Will Defense is the claim that it is possible<sup>7</sup> that God could not have created a universe containing moral good (or as much moral good as this world contains) without creating one that also contained moral evil. And if so, then it is possible that God has a good reason for creating a world containing evil.<sup>8</sup>*

Why, you may ask, would it not be possible for an *omnipotent* deity, to whom seemingly nothing lies outside the realm of possibility, to allow for moral good without also allowing for moral evil? This is an understandable question, but one that is quite easily answered. When the theist speaks of God as being omnipotent, it is not the former's intention to suggest that the latter may do *anything* He wills, such as making " $7 + 5 = 13$ " a true proposition, or willing a being to be both colored and non-colored. A suggestion such as this would clearly be absurd, and the theist, therefore, tends to mean by "omnipotence," the ability to do anything, so long as it is not beyond the realm of *broadly logical possibility*.<sup>9</sup> What Plantinga (and, indeed, many other theists of his ilk) seems to be suggesting in the above excerpt, then, is the *possibility* of there being some sort of contradiction in the following proposition:

P: If God created W (where W is the world we inhabit), then W contains moral good (or as much moral good as our world contains), and W contains no moral evil.

Such a proposition does not (at least, to the atheist) *appear* to contain any outright contradiction, but the theist urges us to take a closer look at his/her position.

What the theist maintains, in advocating the free will defense, is put rather eloquently by Plantinga, himself:

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<sup>7</sup> We have yet to examine just what Plantinga means when he speaks of possibility, but at this point, any reasonable understanding of possibility, on the part of the reader, will serve our purposes just as well as any other.

<sup>8</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1977), 31.

<sup>9</sup> A proposition may be said to be possible in the broadly logical sense if and only if its truth does not conflict with the laws of logic. For instance, it is possible, in the broadly logical sense, to will a being to exist on Earth one second, and to exist on Mars the next (practical considerations be damned). It is not possible, in the broadly logical sense, to will " $2 + 2 = 5$ " into a true proposition, for logic dictates that such a proposition is incapable of being anything other than false.



*A world containing creatures who are significantly free (and freely perform more good than evil actions) is more valuable, all else being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all. Now God can create free creatures, but He can't cause or determine them to do only what is right. For if He does so, then they aren't significantly free after all; they do not do what is right freely. To create creatures capable of moral good, therefore, He must create creatures capable of moral evil; and He can't give these creatures the freedom to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so. As it turned out, sadly enough, some of the free creatures God created went wrong in the exercise of their freedom; this is the source of moral evil. The fact that free creatures sometimes go wrong, however, counts neither against God's omnipotence nor against His goodness; for He could have forestalled the occurrence of moral evil only by removing the possibility of moral good.*<sup>10</sup>

Herein lies the contradiction the theist believes to cripple P: By affording us the freedom to go right or wrong with respect to morally significant actions, *certain* individuals invariably go wrong with respect to *certain* actions. "Do not despair, though," cries the theist. "Were God to sacrifice our freedom for the sake of eternal, interpersonal benevolence, our world would be devoid of the greatest good with which He has seen fit to bless it: Freedom."<sup>11</sup>

More attentive readers may have picked up on a possible flaw within this framing of the free will defense: Though it seems to do an admirable job of accounting for the existence of moral evil in our world, it does not seem to even address the existence of natural evil, much less justify it. True, this is a definite problem for the free will defense qua free will defense, but rest assured that Plantinga (with whom, if you will recall, we are primarily interested) *does* avoid it. The particular strategy he employs to do so, and the success with which that strategy meets, will be discussed in parts two and three of this work, respectively.

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<sup>10</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (New York: Oxford, 1974), 166-167.

<sup>11</sup> The assumption believed to invalidate P is what Plantinga refers to as *Leibniz's lapse*. This apparent fallacy rests in one's assuming that God can create just any world He pleases. "Of course," says the theist, "God can set in motion, or actualize, any initial state of affairs, but it is not within His power to determine every subsequent action of every rational being that comes to inhabit that state of affairs *while* still preserving those beings' freedom. Logically, we may not be both determined *and* free.

Having outfitted ourselves with the concepts and vocabulary requisite to engage in a substantive discussion of the typical theist/atheist dichotomy, we shall now move on to an examination of the position assumed by Alvin Plantinga.

## II. PLANTINGA'S POSITION

Alvin Plantinga is known as much (if not more so) for his contributions to the field of modal logic as he is for his Christian apologetics, so it is only natural that his work in the latter category is highly informed by his work in the former. The purpose of this work's second part, therefore, is to outline the modal framework in which Plantinga operates, and to make apparent how it leads him to the conclusion that one may rationally believe in the existence of God. With our aim made explicit, let us now begin our discussion with an explication of two relatively simple concepts—worlds and books—that are essential to Plantinga's overarching mission.

## 1. WORLDS AND BOOKS

Whenever philosophers speak of possibility, necessity and contingency, it is common for them to do so by means of an appeal to *possible worlds*. What, though, do we *mean* by possible worlds? Are they concrete entities that we can (at least, theoretically) visit? Are they places that, although real and existent, are nevertheless spatiotemporally isolated from us? Are they, rather, abstract concepts we employ merely to *make sense of* modal talk? Like many questions in philosophy, this one is heavily divisive, and depending on whom you ask, you are likely to get any number of distinct answers, one of the most common of which is that employed by Alvin Plantinga:

*A possible world...is a possible state of affairs—one that is possible in the broadly logical sense.*<sup>12</sup>

This is to say that Plantinga's understanding of possible worlds is similar to the third one outlined earlier in this paragraph. On this account, possible worlds are not to be understood as existing as you, I or the Eiffel Tower do. Instead, they are ways in which things *could*, in a broadly logical sense, *be*; whether they represent the way in which *our world* operates is of no consequence. Being a possible state of affairs, however, though certainly necessary to a thing's being a possible world, is, as Plantinga attests, not sufficient:

*[N]ot every possible state of affairs is a possible world. To claim that honour, a state of affairs must be maximal or complete.*<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (New York: Oxford, 1974), 44.

<sup>13</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (New York: Oxford, 1974), 44.

To fully understand what Plantinga means by “possible worlds,” then, we must briefly acquaint ourselves with the concept of maximality, or completeness.

Completeness of a possible state of affairs is defined by Plantinga as follows:

*[A] state of affairs S is complete...if for every state of affairs S', S includes S' or S precludes S'. And a possible world is simply a possible state of affairs that is [complete].*<sup>14</sup>

So, a possible world W consists of states of affairs that are logically consistent, *and* for every possible state of affairs S, either S exists in W or S's complement exists in W. This is relatively straightforward at the moment, but there is yet another, perhaps more intuitive, way in which we may speak of possible worlds—in terms of *books*.

The distinction between speaking of worlds qua worlds and worlds qua books is the same as that between speaking of objects in terms of their properties, and speaking of objects in terms of those propositions that may truthfully be uttered regarding them. It is one thing, for instance, to say “Socrates is snubnosed”; it is quite another to say “‘Socrates is snubnosed’ is a true proposition.” The purpose of any possible world W's book, then, is simply to list all of those propositions that are true in W. Take our world, which, for the remainder of this work, we shall refer to as  $\alpha$ : The book on  $\alpha$  includes such propositions as “the Washington Monument's construction was completed in 1884,” and “‘the Washington Monument's construction was completed in 1877’ is false.” Expectedly, books, like those worlds they describe, must also be complete. In other words, for any intelligible<sup>15</sup> proposition P and world W, either P is in the book on W, or P's complement is in the book on W.

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<sup>14</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (New York: Oxford, 1974), 45.

<sup>15</sup> One may suppose a proposition P (let us say that P stands for “Smergel kunssz teez ol mlaybrech.”) such that P is neither true nor false in our world, but surely our world is a possible state of affairs! If it was not, it could not

The distinction between worlds' properties and books' propositions is a subtle one, to be sure, but one that Plantinga feels we are obligated to make, should we hope to grasp all that is implied when we speak of possible worlds.

We may now define a possible world as follows: A state of affairs *S* is a possible world if and only if the following four, interrelated criteria are met: 1) For any state of affairs *S'* in *S*, *S'* must be consistent with both the laws of logic, and every other state of affairs contained in *S*; 2) for any possible state of affairs *S'*, either *S'* or its complement must be contained in *S*; 3) Among those propositions that are true in *S*, there are none which contradict either each other or the laws of logic; and 4) *every* proposition, insofar as it is intelligible, must have a truth value of either true or false within *S*.

With this definition, we are now aware of just what Plantinga means when he speaks of possible worlds, but we are still burdened by some confusion—namely, the counterintuitiveness of speaking of objects as if they subsist in *multiple* worlds. When one says that Socrates exists in world  $\alpha$ , this surely means no more than that an individual existed in ancient Greece, was the teacher of Plato, was executed for corrupting the youth, etc. When one says that Socrates exists in world  $\beta$  (as those who engage in possible world talk are prone to do), however, the implications are not so clear. Enter sections two and three of this work's second part, which deal with essential properties and transworld identity, respectively.

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obtain. This is not a problem for Plantinga, however, as *P* is an unintelligible proposition—that is, the words and syntax which characterize it have not been christened to designate anything in our world. *P* is, in effect, a proposition that is neither true nor false, but utterly meaningless. Note that this is not to say that *P* does not have meaning in some possible world. There is, in fact, a possible world in which *P* means “my uncle just fell off of the jetty,” and another in which it means “burgers are iridescent on Tuesday.” Obviously, these propositions are capable of being either true or false. What is important is that *P* stands for something intelligible in the world in which it is uttered.

## 2. ESSENCES

Clearly, when we talk of something or someone existing in more than one world, there must be one or more properties had in common between the being as it exists in some world  $W$ , and the being as it exists in some world  $W'$ . Otherwise, we would simply be referring to two *entirely* distinct beings, each of which shares a name with the other *accidentally*. Therefore, when we say of Socrates that he exists in  $\beta$ , there must be some common properties between Socrates in  $\beta$  and Socrates in  $\alpha$  such that we are willing to grant that the two designations refer to the same individual, separated though they are by the abstract distance between possible worlds. These common properties are what Plantinga refers to as *essences*.

To start his discussion of these essential properties, Plantinga offers us a few obvious examples:

*Consider first such properties as self identity, being coloured if red, being something or other, and being either a prime number or else something else. Clearly every object whatever has these properties and has them in every world in which it exists. Let us call such properties trivially essential. Among them will be the property of existence—if...we momentarily concede that existence is a property.*<sup>16</sup>

This certainly makes the notion of essential properties clearer, but it does not help us to find those commonalities that are *specifically* shared between Socrates in  $\beta$  and Socrates in  $\alpha$ , for though Socrates obviously has the property of self identity in any world in which he exists, so do I, or you, or Kevin Klein, or the Grand Canyon, or that poodle whose incessant yelping kept you

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<sup>16</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (New York: Oxford, 1974), 60-61.

up every night from the years of 1994-1997. These particular essences are deemed trivial for a reason, as they tell us nothing about those objects that inhabit  $\alpha$  or any other world. It seems that if Plantinga hopes to explicate the concept of essence in any meaningful way, he must provide us examples of essential properties that are non-tautologous. He affords us such an example in the form of *world-indexed properties*.

To attribute a world-indexed property to some object  $x$  is, in short, to say that  $x$  has some property in some world. To incorporate the Socrates example yet again, we may say that, regardless of what world Socrates happens to inhabit, he *essentially* has the property of being *snubnosed in  $\alpha$* . That is all. This is a deceptively simple, highly elegant way of solving the present problem, but one that is best captured in Plantinga's own words:

*Where  $P$  is a property and  $W$  is a world, an object  $x$  has the property having  $P$  in  $W$  in a world  $W^*$  if and only if  $x$  exists in  $W^*$  and  $W$  includes  $x$ 's having  $P$ .*

*Being snubnosed in  $\alpha$  is a world-indexed property. We might characterize this notion as follows:*

*A property  $P$  is world-indexed if and only if either (1) there is a property  $Q$  and a world  $W$  such that for any object  $x$  and world  $W^*$ ,  $x$  has  $P$  in  $W^*$  if and only if  $x$  exists in  $W^*$  and  $W$  includes  $x$ 's having  $Q$ , or (2)  $P$  is the complement of a world-indexed property.<sup>17</sup>*

This definition of world-indexed properties appears, at first glance, to have decisively solved the problem of essences. After all, we now know just what sort of non-trivial property must be shared between Socrates in  $\beta$  and Socrates in  $\alpha$  if both beings are to be considered one and the same, albeit separated by an abstract distance between abstract states of affairs. Upon closer inspection, however, one finds that the problem has only been solved to a degree. Assuredly, being snubnosed in  $\alpha$  is a property of Socrates in any world in which Socrates exists, but

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<sup>17</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (New York: Oxford, 1974), 63.



shouldn't Socrates' essence consist of more than snubnosedness? Plantinga easily accounts for this slight oversight later in *The Nature of Necessity*.

The final definition of essence, and that which encompasses *all* of those non-trivial properties that are essential to an object, is defined by Plantinga as follows:

*S is an essence if and only if S is a complete and consistent set of world-indexed properties.*<sup>18</sup>

There you have it. The essence of any object  $x$  is simply that “complete and consistent” set of world-indexed properties whereby  $x$  may be designated “over six feet tall in  $W$ , the first person to climb Mt. Everest in  $W$ , the inventor of the calculus in  $W$ ,” and so on, ad infinitum (assuming, of course, that there is an infinite number of possible worlds in which  $x$  may subsist). Unfortunately for Plantinga, though, there are those who would append a further requirement to his definition of essence—that of identifiability. “Obviously,” says Plantinga’s detractor, “if Socrates is snubnosed in  $\alpha$ , he has the property of being snubnosed in  $\alpha$  in any world in which he exists, but that does not help us to *pick out* Socrates in any world other than  $\alpha$ . If essences are to be anything more than innocuous, they must provide us with a means of differentiating Socrates in  $\beta$  from any of  $\beta$ 's other inhabitants.” Thus, we come to the problem of *transworld identity*.

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<sup>18</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (New York: Oxford, 1974), 77.

### 3. TRANSWORLD IDENTITY

Plantinga sums up the problem of transworld identity as follows:

*[I]f it is intelligible to suppose that Socrates exists in more than one world, there must be some empirically manifest property that he and he alone has in each of the worlds in which he exists. Now obviously we do not know of any such property, or even that there is such a property. Indeed, it is hard to see how there could be such a property. But then the very idea of Transworld Identity is not really intelligible—in which case we must suppose that no object exists in more than one world.<sup>19</sup>*

In solving this problem, Plantinga draws our attention to Herbert Spiegelberg's *The Phenomenological Movement*. In this book, there are two pictures of Franz Brentano, one of which was taken when Brentano was twenty, and the other when he was seventy. Now, it appears certain that Brentano looks drastically different in the first picture than he does in the second, yet we are nonetheless willing to acknowledge an identity between the Brentano of picture one and the Brentano of picture two.

We may even take the analogy a bit further, and suppose that Brentano (or any other individual of whom we have pictures at twenty and seventy), in the interim between pictures one and two, departed from known society to live in the jungle. Perhaps in the span of fifty years, he fell victim to some horrible accident in an unexplored locale, and thus met with a number of drastic deformities (say, the loss of two limbs and an eye) that would render the second picture that much more dissimilar to the first. In a case such as this, we have recourse to no historical account of Brentano's life betwixt twenty and seventy, whereby we may say with some certainty

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<sup>19</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (New York: Oxford, 1974), 94.

that the man of seventy is one and the same with the man of twenty. These two figures, though identical, bear absolutely no physical resemblance to one another, yet we still find ourselves apt to say that, should we have all of the information requisite to make an informed decision, we would correctly equate the one with the other. Plantinga believes the problem of transworld identity to be a perfectly analogous case:

*Similarly, then, for the possible worlds case. To understand the suggestion that there is a world W in which Socrates did not teach Plato, I need know nothing about which other persons exist in W or—except for his essential properties—which other properties Socrates has in that world. Indeed, how could I know more? All I have been told about W is that it is one of the many worlds in which Socrates exists but does not teach Plato; and for any property P Socrates has inessentially (except for those entailing the property of teaching Plato) there is a world that meets that description and in which Socrates has P. The claim that I must somehow be able to identify Socrates in W—pick him out—is either trivial or confused. Of course I must know which of the persons existing in W—the persons who would have existed had W been actual—I am talking about. But the answer, obviously and trivially, is Socrates. And to be able thus to answer I need know nothing further about what Socrates would have been like had W been actual.<sup>20</sup>*

In short, Plantinga attests that, should one place a requirement of identifiability on beings *across worlds*, they must also place a like requirement on beings *throughout time within a single world*.

As the latter requirement strikes us as absurd and ineffectual, so then must the former.

At this point, we have outlined all of those aspects of Plantinga's world theory that are relevant to this work. What remains to be done in part two, then, is to make clear how this theory informs Plantinga's stance on the rationality of theism. We must now, therefore, revisit a concept discussed previously in part one—the problem of evil.

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<sup>20</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (New York: Oxford, 1974), 97.

#### 4. THE PROBLEM OF EVIL, ACCORDING TO PLANTINGA

Recall, if you will, that central claim made by the atheist when appealing to the problem of evil: “There is an undeniable inconsistency between a) the omnipotence and perfect benevolence of God, and b) the existence of both moral and natural evil.” Given Plantinga’s Christian sympathies, it should come as no surprise that he readily adopts a form of the free will defense that was discussed earlier in this work. But does Plantinga’s version avoid the pitfalls by which free will defenses are so commonly crippled? Namely, can it both provide sufficient support for the claim that “*certain* individuals invariably go wrong with respect to *certain* actions,”<sup>21</sup> and account for the free will defense’s seeming inapplicability to cases of natural evil? Plantinga certainly believes so, and this due in no small part to the possibility of *transworld depravity*.

Plantinga explicitly defines the concept of transworld depravity as follows:

*(33) A person P suffers from transworld depravity if and only if the following holds: for every world W such that P is significantly free in W and P does only what is right in W, there is an action A and a maximal world segment<sup>22</sup> S' such that*

*(1) S' includes A's being morally significant for P*

*(2) S' includes P's being free with respect to A*

*(3) S' is included in W and includes neither P's performing A nor P's refraining from performing A[,] and*

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<sup>21</sup> Part One, Sec. 3, Page 10.

<sup>22</sup> A maximal world segment may be defined as follows: If any state of affairs, when added to another state of affairs that is compatible with it, but not included in it, results in a possible world, then the former state of affairs is a maximal world segment.

(4) if *S*' were actual, *P* would go wrong with respect to *A*.<sup>23</sup>

What this definition is intended to show is that *P*, afflicted as he/she is with the abstract malady of transworld depravity, though *possibly* devoid of unsound moral judgment and practice, is nevertheless incapable of *actually* going right with regards to all of his/her actions in any world actualized by God. The inclusion of this concept into a free will defense definitely sets Plantinga upon the right track, but it is not enough to ensure that he will resoundingly trounce the atheistic opposition up against which he finds himself. At this point, the atheist may sarcastically respond: “It is all well and good that there are *particular* individuals that, once actualized by God, inevitably go wrong with respect to some action or other, but couldn't God simply refrain from actualizing *them*, and instead actualize others that do not suffer from this abstract ailment?” It is at this time that Plantinga enlists the aid of essences.

Just as individual beings may suffer from transworld depravity, says Plantinga, so *must* such beings' essences. Hence the following:

*[I]f [P] suffers from transworld depravity, then [P]'s essence has this property: God could not have created any world W such that [P]hood contains the properties “is significantly free in W” and “always does what is right in W.”*<sup>24</sup>

At least initially, the shift between talking of transworld depravity as it pertains to individual beings, and talking of transworld depravity as it pertains to essences, appears vacuous. Could not the atheist respond with his/her previous argument, substituting “*particular* essences” for “*particular* individuals?” Plantinga thinks not, for he claims that “it is possible that every creaturely essence—every essence including the property of being created by God—suffers from

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<sup>23</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1977), 48.

<sup>24</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1977), 52.

transworld depravity.”<sup>25</sup> It is this possibility, contends Plantinga, that renders his free will defense effective up to this point.<sup>26</sup>

Having now adequately (for the moment, at least) dealt with one of the two problems with which we were burdened at this section’s beginning, we now come to the second: How does a free will defense like Plantinga’s account for the existence of natural evil? As it turns out, quite easily. Just as moral evil is owing to the wrong actions of free, rational agents, so it is that natural evil comes about, on Plantinga’s view, as a result of the wrong actions of free, rational, *non-human* agents. It matters little whether we refer to such beings as demons, spirits, ghosts or what-have-you. What matters is that such beings as we typically consign to the realms of fables and theistic literature are *possible*, and if they possibly exist, it is equally possible that their essences suffer from the same transworld depravity of which we spoke above. Ultimately,

*All natural evil is due to the free activity of non-human persons; there is a balance of good over evil with respect to the actions of these non-human persons; and there is no world God could have created which contains a more favourable balance of good over evil with respect to the free activity of the non-human persons it contains.*<sup>27</sup>

So, the free will defense, as Plantinga has constructed it, appears victorious over its atheistic opponents. Seeing as we are primarily concerned with Plantinga’s version of the ontological argument, however, we still have one task remaining within this work’s second part—an explication of the Anselmian argument, as Plantinga has adapted it to world-oriented modal considerations.

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<sup>25</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1977), 53.

<sup>26</sup> Here, we would do well to note a distinction between a free will *defense* and a free will *theodicy*. The purpose of a free will defense is, as we are aware, to show that it is *possible* that God’s omnipotence and perfect benevolence are consistent with the existence of evil. A free will theodicy, however, uses similar means to make a much stronger claim, e.g. that God’s existence is *probable*.

<sup>27</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (New York: Oxford, 1974), 192.

## 5. PLANTINGA'S FORMULATION OF THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

After proceeding through those lines of thought that we have been discussing for some ten pages, Plantinga finally concludes the following:

*(34) The property "has maximal greatness" entails the property "has maximal excellence in every possible world."*

*(35) Maximal excellence entails omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection.*

*(36) Maximal greatness is possibly exemplified...*

*(37) There is a world  $W^*$  and an essence  $E^*$  such that  $E^*$  is exemplified in  $W^*$  and  $E^*$  entails "has maximal greatness in  $W^*$ ..."*

*(38) For any object  $x$ , if  $x$  exemplifies  $E^*$ , then  $x$  exemplifies the property "has maximal excellence in every possible world..."*

*(39)  $E^*$  entails the property "has maximal excellence in every possible world...."*

*(40) If  $W^*$  had been actual, it would have been impossible that  $E^*$  fail to be exemplified...*

*(41) There exists a being that has maximal excellence in every world.<sup>28</sup>*

Considering that necessity and possibility do not vary from world to world, this is a valid argument. Nevertheless, I can quite easily imagine an atheist poring over its premises and inferences, yet still rejecting its conclusion—and rationally, at that. How could this be? Has Plantinga decidedly failed in his efforts before even affording his opposition the chance for a rebuttal? In short, the answer is "no." While most formulations of the ontological argument attempt to prove the existence of God, Plantinga's is much less ambitious. Its sole aim is to prove that one may accept the existence of God without dispensing of his/her rational faculties.

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<sup>28</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (New York: Oxford, 1974), 214-215.

Following close examination, then, it appears that the soundness of this particular version of the ontological argument rests on premise (36), which Plantinga assures us may be either rationally accepted or rationally rejected, as the atheist has no more proof of its falsity than the theist has of its truth. If we may be, at this time, permitted to conclude anything regarding the superiority of Plantinga's formulation over Anselm's, it is the following: a) Plantinga's version admits of a greater exactness of concepts, and b) in striving to prove only the rationality of theistic belief, Plantinga affords himself both a smaller margin of error, and a less aggravated opposition.

Aggravated or not, however, there are still a number of individuals (myself included) who take issue with Plantinga's conclusion—namely, that aspect of it that claims premise (36) may be rationally accepted. Having now, then, provided what I consider to be a wholly accurate and charitable account of Plantinga's work within the field of philosophical theology, I hope to persuade you that (36) and, ultimately, Plantinga's final conclusion are false.



### III. PLANTINGA'S POSITION REFUTED

Where, then, has Plantinga gone wrong? His world theory, being merely an abstract system based on intuitive logical relations, certainly seems beyond reproach. What about essences, though, and that transworld depravity that conceivably prevents all of them from being morally infallible? As far-fetched of a concept as the latter may be, neither lie distinctly outside the realm of possibility. But what of the problem of evil? This is so crucial an aspect of any ontological argument, that to prove evil's lack of justification is to effectively disprove the existence of any deity possessed of those three traits with which Plantinga believes God to be endowed—that is, omnipotence, omniscience and, specifically, moral perfection. Has Plantinga, then, made any missteps or oversights in his handling of the problem of evil? In short, yes.

## 1. THE PROBLEM OF OMNISCIENCE

The problem of omniscience is not, by any means, a new problem for the theist. Then why, you may ask, have we not touched upon it prior to this work's third and final part? The answer is two-fold: First, as part one dealt with the theistic/atheistic debate as a whole, the problem of omniscience was too narrow of a topic to warrant inclusion. Second, part two was to treat solely of Plantinga's own position, which accounted for the problem of omniscience briefly and poorly in *God, Freedom, and Evil*, and not at all in *The Nature of Necessity*. Let us begin this section, then, by outlining the problem as it is understood by Nelson Pike.

*[T]here is a selection from among the various doctrines and principles clustering about the notions of knowledge, omniscience, and God which, when brought together, demand the conclusion that if God exists, no human action is voluntary.*<sup>29</sup>

This is, of course, a very rough approximation of the problem in question, but the implications are clear: The problem of omniscience, if left unsolved, effectively maintains that we are not (contrary to the conclusions reached by Plantinga and many other theistic philosophers) possessed of free will. Recall, if you will, that Plantinga circumvented the problem of evil by appealing to a *free will defense*. If all of humanity, therefore, is found to be devoid of such free will, the problem of evil will undoubtedly find renewed life, and Plantinga's position will be in dire jeopardy. Before we move on, then, it would do us well to outline the problem of omniscience in greater detail.

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<sup>29</sup> Nelson Pike, "Omniscience and Voluntary Action," *The Philosophical Review* 74 (1965): 27.

In treating of the present subject, Pike employs the following example: An individual, Jones, mowed his lawn last Saturday afternoon. Considering that God is omniscient, it follows that, at any time prior to last Saturday afternoon, God *knew* that Jones would mow his lawn on the date in question. If we are to presume that God *knew* this state of affairs to obtain, and that knowledge implies truth, then it seems to follow that, last Saturday afternoon, Jones was not free with respect to the action of mowing his lawn. Pike clearly divides his argument up as follows:

1. *“God existed at  $T_1$ ” entails “If Jones did  $X$  at  $T_2$ , God believed at  $T_1$  that Jones would do  $X$  at  $T_2$ .”*
2. *“God believes  $X$ ” entails “ $X$  is true.”*
3. *It is not within one’s power at a given time to do something having a description that is logically contradictory.*
4. *It is not within one’s power at a given time to do something that would bring it about that someone who held a certain belief at a time prior to the time in question did not hold that belief at the time prior to the time in question.*
5. *It is not within one’s power at a given time to do something that would bring it about that a person who existed at an earlier time did not exist at that earlier time.*
6. *If God existed at  $T_1$  and if God believed at  $T_1$  that Jones would do  $X$  at  $T_2$ , then if it was within Jones’s power at  $T_2$  to refrain from doing  $X$ , then (1) it was within Jones’s power at  $T_2$  to do something that would have brought it about that God held a false belief at  $T_1$ , or (2) it was within Jones’s power at  $T_2$  to do something which would have brought it about that God did not hold the belief He held at  $T_1$ , or (3) it was within Jones’s power at  $T_2$  to do something that would have brought it about that any person who believed at  $T_1$  that Jones would do  $X$  at  $T_2$  (one of whom was, by hypothesis, God) held a false belief and thus was not God—that is, that God (who by hypothesis existed at  $T_1$ ) did not exist at  $T_1$ .*
7. *Alternative 1 in the consequent of item 6 is false (from 2 and 3).*
8. *Alternative 2 in the consequent of item 6 is false (from 4).*
9. *Alternative 3 in the consequent of item 6 is false (from 5).*
10. *Therefore, if God existed at  $T_1$  and if God believed at  $T_1$  that Jones would do  $X$  at  $T_2$ , then it was not within Jones’s power at  $T_2$  to refrain from doing  $X$  (from 6 through 9).*
11. *Therefore, if God existed at  $T_1$ , and if Jones did  $X$  at  $T_2$ , it was not within Jones’s power at  $T_2$  to refrain from doing  $X$  (from 1 and 10).<sup>30</sup>*

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<sup>30</sup> Nelson Pike, “Omniscience and Voluntary Action,” *The Philosophical Review* 74 (1965): 33-34.

Obviously, the key premise here is (6), of which each of the consequent's three disjuncts (all of them being logically contradictory) appears to be necessarily false. The pivotal question on which this argument's soundness rests, then, is as follows: Does, in fact, any disjunct within the consequent of (6) follow from the antecedent? Plantinga, in that brief excerpt from *God, Freedom, and Evil* in which he responds to Pike, believes the answer to be a resounding "no."

Consider Plantinga's treatment of the consequent's first disjunct:

*[The first disjunct] says that it was within Jones' power to do something—namely, refrain from doing X—such that if he had done that thing, then God would have held a false belief at T<sub>1</sub>. But this does not follow...If Jones had refrained from X, then a proposition that God did in fact believe would have been false; but if Jones had refrained from X at T<sub>2</sub>, then God (since He is omniscient) would not have believed at T<sub>1</sub> that Jones will do X at T<sub>2</sub>—indeed, He would have held the true belief that Jones will refrain from doing X at T<sub>2</sub>. What follows...is not [the first disjunct] but only (52'):*

***(52') It was within Jones' power to do something such that if he had done it, then a belief that God did hold at T<sub>1</sub> would have been false.***

*But (52') is not at all paradoxical and in particular does not imply that it was within Jones' power to do something that would have brought it about that God held a false belief.<sup>31</sup>*

The move Plantinga is pulling here may be described as "slippery," at best, and "grossly erroneous," at worst. And he makes use of the same maneuver when addressing each remaining disjunct within (6)'s consequent. Just what, then, is the nature of Plantinga's error? Let us now turn to an explication of it.

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<sup>31</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1977), 70.

## 2. PLANTINGA'S CONFLATION OF THE CONCEPTS INVOLVED

Of what, exactly, do we speak, when we talk of possibility? Should we talk of it as Plantinga does, we refer to nothing more than broadly logical possibility. To reiterate a description with which we should all, at present, be rather well acquainted, when I attribute possibility to a state of affairs S, I am saying no more than that S is logically consistent. Falling under such a heading would be states of affairs such as 1) my existing on Earth one second, and then existing on Mars the next; 2) Gregor Samsa's being humanoid in the evening, and insectoid in the morning; 3) the laws of gravity being re-written in an instant, resulting in the nearly immediate loss of all life in the solar system, etc. In effect, we are talking about ways in which *any* world *could* be. What is of no consequence, however, is how *our world*— $\alpha$ —*is*. When I say that it is possible for Charles Manson to have never conspired to commit murder, and thus never to have been imprisoned for such a conspiracy, and finally to have been a free man today, such a state of affairs' possibility says absolutely nothing about the state of affairs that obtains—the state of affairs that is  $\alpha$ .

Opposed to this talk of possibility is talk of freedom. When I say of a person P who exists in  $\alpha$ , that P is free to go to work on Monday, or free to call in sick, I am *specifically* concerned with  $\alpha$ . I am acknowledging that it is within P's powers, given his/her physical capabilities *and* the physical laws that govern  $\alpha$ , to live up to his/her occupational duties, or to abstain from them.

In other words,  $\alpha$  is inextricably bound up with the concept of freedom, as it is applied to  $\alpha$ 's inhabitants.<sup>32</sup>

To provide a clearer example of the distinction between freedom and possibility, consider the following case: Anthony, an inhabitant of  $\alpha$ , has been convicted of 1<sup>st</sup> degree murder, and has been sentenced to carry out two life sentences, with no chance of parole. On the 20<sup>th</sup> day of the 4<sup>th</sup> month of the 2<sup>nd</sup> year, Anthony is placed into solitary confinement for bad behavior. Over the next month, he will be confined to a small, cubical cell with three inch walls made of solid steel. On the one hand, it is certainly *possible* that Anthony could be reintroduced to the outside world in a matter of hours. Perhaps the security guard charged with overseeing his imprisonment, overcome by an inexplicable wave of remorse, sees fit to discretely release him; or maybe an earthquake shatters the very foundations of the prison in which Anthony is to carry out his term, jarring the bars from his window, and thus providing him a means of escape. On the other hand, however, we would be more than reticent to say that Anthony is *free* to leave his cell. It just so happens that those possible states of affairs in which Anthony is acquainted with sympathetic guards and palsied tectonic plates are not to be found in  $\alpha$ . Anthony, then, being a man of meager build and alienating temperament, finds it beyond his abilities to breach the cell's walls, or sweet-talk his guard into affording him an early release. It would appear that Anthony is not, in any sense, *free* to escape his unfortunate circumstances, however *possible* such an escape may be.

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<sup>32</sup> This is not to imply that, whenever we talk of freedom, we are necessarily concerned with  $\alpha$ . Rather, whenever we talk of anything as being free or not free, we are necessarily concerned with whatever possible world that thing inhabits. Therefore, just as one cannot refer to *my* freedom without also making reference to  $\alpha$ , one cannot refer to *Gregor Samsa's* freedom without also making reference to *whichever possible world he happens to inhabit*.

With the concepts of freedom and possibility now clearly understood and distinguished from one another, we return to Plantinga's treatment of (6)'s consequent's first disjunct. Recall that Plantinga argued that the first disjunct, as worded by Pike, *does not* follow from the antecedent, but (52') does. If you examine (52') closely, however, you will see that it only follows from the antecedent if the latter is to replace "it was within Jones's power at  $T_2$  to refrain from doing X" with "it was possible for Jones, at  $T_2$ , to refrain from doing X." This is to say that (52') *only follows if one substitutes possibility talk for freedom talk*. At this point, Plantinga and Pike are talking about two distinctly different things. When Plantinga, therefore, dismisses Pike's argument as ineffectual, he is dismissing a straw-man. Whether he has done so ignorantly or cleverly, his tactic is fallacious either way, and it serves only to set him upon the path to ruin—a path we must now examine in greater detail.

### 3. THE REPERCUSSIONS OF PLANTINGA'S ERROR

If we respect, as we should, the distinction between freedom and possibility outlined above, there are two ways in which we may read Pike's argument, both of which are equally crippling to Plantinga's position. The first way involves a preservation of Pike's freedom talk as such, and results in the following: Pike's argument, being both valid *and* sound, effectively establishes the truth of the claim that, "if God is extant and omniscient, it is not within one's power (where "one" is any non-divine entity) to perform any action not foreseen by God," or, "if God is extant and omniscient, humans lack free will." To expound, in as great of clarity as possible, upon just how Pike's conclusion affects Plantinga's, consider the following:

1. The property "has maximal greatness" entails the property "has maximal excellence in every possible world." (definition)
2. Maximal excellence entails omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection. (definition)
3. Maximal greatness is possibly exemplified. (assumption for reductio ad absurdum)
4. Maximal excellence is exemplified in  $\alpha$ . (from 1 and 3)
5. If maximal excellence is exemplified in  $\alpha$ , then rational beings lack free will in  $\alpha$ . (premise, on the grounds of Pike's argument)
6. Rational beings lack free will in  $\alpha$ . (from 4 and 5)
7. The existence of free will is the only sufficient justification for the existence of evil. (premise)
8. If rational beings lack free will in  $\alpha$ , then any maximally excellent being in  $\alpha$  is unjustified in permitting the existence of evil in  $\alpha$ . (from 7)
9. Any maximally excellent being in  $\alpha$  is unjustified in permitting the existence of evil in  $\alpha$ . (from 6 and 8)
10. No omnipotent, omniscient and morally perfect being would permit the existence of evil without justification. (premise)
11. Evil cannot exist in  $\alpha$ . (from 4, 9 and 10)
12. But evil *does* exist in  $\alpha$ . (premise)
13. Maximal greatness is *not* possibly exemplified. (from 3, 11 and 12)



The case, here, appears rather cut-and-dry. If we apply the convincing conclusion from Pike's argument to Plantinga's formulation of the ontological argument, we see that the latter's central premise (and, ultimately, its conclusion) is false. But perhaps we are being uncharitable. Is it so crucial to an adequate treatment of the subject that we speak of freedom qua freedom as opposed to freedom qua possibility? Perhaps, and due in no small part to the general disdain with which we are taught to approach instances of equivocation, we have been too hasty in our judgment, and Plantinga's position is, in fact, saved from peril by a counterintuitive, but ultimately harmless reimagining of the concept of freedom. Unfortunately for Plantinga, this is not the case. Enter the second way in which we may read Pike's argument—in terms of possibility.

If we should, as Plantinga seems to encourage, think of freedom as merely being synonymous with possibility, Pike's argument poses no threat to the theist. On this account, to say of Jones, that it is within his power to refrain, at  $T_2$ , from performing that action which God, at  $T_1$ , *knew* Jones to perform at  $T_2$ , is to say nothing more than this: There is a possible world  $W$  in which Jones refrains from performing  $X$  at  $T_2$ , but no contradiction arises, for though God knows Jones will perform  $X$  at  $T_2$  in  $\alpha$ , God holds the opposite, but equally true, belief that Jones will refrain from performing  $X$  at  $T_2$  in  $W$ . Consider Plantinga's discussion of an analogous situation:

*It is indeed necessarily true that if God (or anyone else) knows that a proposition  $P$  is true, then  $P$  is true; but it simply doesn't follow that if God knows  $P$ , then  $P$  is necessarily true. If I know that Henry is a bachelor, then "Henry is a bachelor" is a necessary truth; it does not follow that if I know that Henry is a bachelor, then it is necessarily true that he is. I know that Henry is a bachelor: what follows is only that "Henry is married" is false; it doesn't follow that it is necessarily false... So the claim that divine omniscience is incompatible with human freedom seems to be based upon confusion.<sup>33</sup>*

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<sup>33</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1977), 67.

At this point, it initially seems as if the theist no longer has any cause for alarm. Pike's argument (under an alternate formulation, mind you) has been proven vacuous, and Plantinga's ontological argument stands mostly uncontested. Or does it? Remember, if you will, the nature of Plantinga's free will defense.

*A world containing creatures who are significantly free (and freely perform more good than evil actions) is more valuable, all else being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all. Now God can create free creatures, but He can't cause or determine them to do only what is right. For if He does so, then they aren't significantly free after all; they do not do what is right freely.<sup>34</sup>*

Here, one may notice an obvious inconsistency among Plantinga's various treatments of freedom. In this particular passage, Plantinga no longer speaks of freedom as if it is on a conceptual par with possibility. Should you be skeptical of this assertion, I justify my reasoning thus: if freedom truly may be construed as nothing more than possibility, then it is well within God's capacities to determine the actions of his creaturely subjects, while nevertheless preserving their freedom, as there are innumerable other possible worlds in which He has determined their actions differently. If we grant, then, that freedom is to be understood simply as possibility, and is thus necessarily compatible with divine determinism, we must also infer that there is no justification for the existence of evil. At this point, we would do well to consider a second formalized proof against Plantinga's ontological argument—one which necessarily follows from our current interpretation of freedom:

1. The property "has maximal greatness" entails the property "has maximal excellence in every possible world." (definition)
2. Maximal excellence entails omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection. (definition)
3. Maximal greatness is possibly exemplified. (assumption for reductio ad absurdum)
4. Maximal excellence is exemplified in  $\alpha$ . (from 1 and 3)

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<sup>34</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (New York: Oxford, 1974), 166-167.

5. Any maximally excellent being in  $\alpha$  will make  $\alpha$  as valuable as is within His power to make it. (premise, on the grounds that God is morally perfect)
6. If maximal excellence is exemplified in  $\alpha$ , then rational beings have free will in  $\alpha$ . (from 5, on the grounds that a world containing significantly free creatures is more valuable than a world containing none)
7. Rational beings have free will in  $\alpha$ . (from 4 and 6)
8. Free will is compatible with divine determinism. (premise, on the grounds that free will is nothing more than possibility)
9. A world in which free rational beings are determined so as to commit no evil is more valuable than a world in which they are not. (premise)
10. In  $\alpha$ , free rational beings are determined so as to commit no evil. (from 5, 7, 8 and 9)
11. Evil does not exist in  $\alpha$ . (from 10)
12. But evil *does* exist in  $\alpha$ . (premise)
13. Maximal greatness is *not* possibly exemplified. (from 3, 11 and 12)

As you can see, whether we consistently interpret freedom as being one and the same with possibility, or rather a concept entirely distinct from it, the truth of Plantinga's central premise is shown to be impossible.

Of course, from the standpoint of *some* theistic doctrines, one could attempt to counter my argument with the following objection: "God is to be understood as existing *outside of time*. Pike's argument, therefore, has no efficacy, regardless of how we interpret 'freedom' within it, for to speak of God's knowledge as being *prior* to Jones' action is to assume a relationship between the two that does not exist." To this objection, I have two replies: First, nowhere within Plantinga's works does he lead us to believe that he subscribes to such a theistic doctrine as the aforementioned. Second, seeing as humans *just are* subjected to a temporal framework in  $\alpha$ , we have no means of conceiving what time-independence is like, rendering any talk of the latter little more than empty words.

#### 4. CLOSING REMARKS

As this essay draws to a close, I am inclined to make a particularly pertinent judgment regarding it, such that you will not take away from my work any more or less than was intended. I do not pretend to have disproved the existence of any God, Christian or otherwise. All I have endeavored to prove is the inadequacy of *Plantinga's argument* in establishing the following as a true proposition: "One may rationally accept the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient and morally perfect being." As the heart of my argument hinges on the problems of omniscience and evil, I cannot immediately see anything irrational about accepting the existence of a God that is 1) omnipotent, omniscient, but morally *imperfect*; 2) omnipotent, morally perfect, but *not* omniscient; 3) omniscient, morally perfect, but *not* omnipotent; 4) merely omnipotent; 5) merely omniscient; or 6) merely morally perfect. Additionally, it is not my intention to imply that free will *is* the only possible justification for the existence of evil, but rather that it fails as one, given Plantinga's theistic and modal frameworks.

Having said this, I do believe I have succeeded in my aim, however humble it may be. If I am to leave no significant imprint on the field of religious philosophy, I hope that I shall at least have done my part in furthering attentiveness to a scholastic doctrine of which all philosophers should be ever mindful: When one's work is victim to even the slightest oversight or inconsistency, one must never rest its overarching success on the expectation of shared intuitions.

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## VITA

B.A., Philosophy and Religion, 2011, Drury University, Springfield, Missouri.

