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SIMPLY THE BEST? ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS, MEINONGIANISM, AND CLASSICAL THEISM

Gregory R. P. Stacey

Some critics claim that ontological arguments are dialectically ineffective against sceptics, whatever the sceptics' broader metaphysical commitments. In this paper, I examine and contest arguments for this conclusion. I suggest that such critics overlook important claims about God's nature (viz. divine simplicity and divine inimitability) typically advanced by proponents of ontological arguments who endorse classical theism. I reformulate two representative ontological arguments in light of this characterization of God, arguing that for philosophers prepared to endorse Meinongianism or modal Platonism, alongside divine simplicity and inimitability, such arguments are not invalid, question-begging, or obviously liable to parody. Accordingly, two species of ontological argument may possess some persuasive force, albeit for a select audience.

Despite their twentieth century revival, ontological arguments win few converts to theism. While ontological arguments fascinate some philosophers, most regard them as curiosities which may entertain but will not convince.¹

Even many philosophers who examine ontological arguments seriously hold that one can demonstrate that they are dialectically ineffective, without engaging in metaphysical controversy. From a historical perspective, Peter Millican claims that Anselm's argument fails because of "a relatively shallow ambiguity in his key phrase, rather than any deep metaphysical mistake,"² while Kevin Harrelson argues at length that "modern" ontological arguments following Descartes cannot persuade sceptics of their conclusion.³ Graham Oppy once argued more broadly that "No matter how the argument is formulated, an opponent can always either (i) reasonably claim that the question has been begged or else (ii) object that the inference is simply invalid."⁴ Indeed, many suggest that even valid and

¹Nagasawa, *Maximal God*, 131.

²Millican, "Ontological Arguments and the Superiority of Existence," 1053.

³Harrelson, *The Ontological Argument from Descartes to Hegel*.

⁴Oppy, *Ontological Arguments and Belief in God*, 116.



unambiguous “modal” arguments are question-begging. As Peter van Inwagen asserts, “no version of the modal ontological argument can serve as a vehicle from which one can pass from epistemic neutrality as regards its conclusion to justification or warrant.”⁵ If extant ontological arguments are universally invalid or question-begging—or if, as Oppy later allowed, they fail for other metaphysically uncontroversial reasons—maybe “there cannot be a dialectically effective ontological argument.”⁶

In this paper, I dispute the claim that ontological arguments are dialectically impotent. But what is it for an argument to be dialectically effective? Here, I consider philosophical arguments to be forms of intellectual persuasion, which aim to provide rational motivation for those who doubt some position to embrace it. Roughly, arguments are dialectically effective if they provide some otherwise sceptical audience with a significant degree of such motivation. Accordingly, the power of arguments depends on the receptivity of their audience. To provide significant rational motivation for some skeptical audience to adopt a position, an argument must meet four conditions:

1. The forms of inference from the premises to the conclusion must be rationally acceptable to the audience.
2. The premises must be (jointly) rationally credible to the audience, even though prior to consideration of the argument, the audience doubts its conclusion.
3. The premises must be (jointly) sufficiently thus credible to the audience that consideration of the argument affords the audience rational motivation to raise their credence in its conclusion by some significant degree.

And

4. The audience must not rationally consider the argument’s conclusion so improbable, prior to consideration of the argument, that consideration of the argument cannot rationally make their credence in its conclusion more than negligible.

I here assume that an argument is dialectically effective in modern philosophical contexts if it meets these conditions for some audience of contemporary philosophers, or for some philosophical audience which might easily exist. I focus on showing that some ontological arguments meet the first three conditions outlined above for some philosophical audience. That is, the arguments are clearly valid (condition 1) and some non-theist philosophers have (or there could easily be philosophers who have) strong motivation to jointly accept the arguments’ premises (condition 2), so that consideration of these arguments should raise their credence in theism by an appreciable degree (condition 3). I lack space to show that all non-theist philosophers need not otherwise consider theism so improbable that

⁵van Inwagen, “Begging the Question,” 245.

⁶Oppy, *Ontological Arguments and Belief in God*, 116.

their credence in theism should rationally remain negligible even given the arguments (condition 4), but I assume that some non-theists need not consider theism that unlikely.

An argument need not actually persuade anyone of its conclusion to be effective; nor need it possess universal persuasive force. But by arguing that ontological arguments can be dismissed by skeptics of all philosophical persuasions as, say, question-begging or invalid, influential critics have denied that ontological arguments are dialectically effective in this sense, because they fail to satisfy conditions (1) or (2).

Accordingly, whilst I will not argue that any ontological argument has force for all philosophers, I contend that some Meinongians (who believe in non-existent objects, *vel sim*) or Platonists about modality possess significant motivation to consider two species of ontological argument sound. Commentary on ontological arguments often overlooks broader claims about God endorsed by “classical theists” who developed these arguments. According to Anselm, Descartes, and others, God is *simple* (He lacks proper parts) and *incomprehensible* or *inimitable* (He cannot be fully understood or represented by any creature/s). Thomists urge that both characteristics can be inferred from the fact that God is “Unlimited Being” (*Esse Subsistens*). When ontological arguments are reformulated with these attributes in mind, Meinongians who countenance that God might possess these attributes have reason to accept the reworked arguments.

In Sections I and II, I outline two representative ontological arguments, exploring influential rejoinders that they can be rejected without metaphysical controversy. I focus on Oppy’s “General Objection” to Anselmian and Cartesian Arguments, van Inwagen’s charge that Modal Arguments “beg the question,” and attempts to parody ontological arguments of all types. I then sketch the claim of classical theists that God is simple, and incomprehensible or inimitable (Section III), drawing on a Thomistic account of God’s nature. In Sections IV and V, I reformulate the arguments discussed in Sections I and II, suggesting that some Meinongians and others have reason to endorse the arguments’ premises, and to reject the criticisms previously outlined.

One might worry that my conclusion—that some ontological arguments possess dialectical efficacy, albeit for select audiences—is too modest to be interesting. But my discussion significantly advances consideration of ontological arguments in three ways. Firstly, it is widely thought that ontological arguments are evidently dialectically impotent. Accordingly, the claim that some ontological arguments possess persuasive force is noteworthy. Secondly, my analysis develops novel forms of ontological argument, which illustrate how consideration of God’s (putative) simplicity and inimitability provides rational support for theism. I judge that these arguments possess distinctive appeal. Finally, this paper is a *prolegomenon* to a future argument that my reformulated arguments are sound.

I

Since this is not an exegetical article, I will not present a conceptual or historical taxonomy of ontological arguments. Instead, I outline three token arguments, which represent influential species of ontological argument, explaining criticisms of each. I begin with Yujin Nagasawa's restatement of Anselm's argument in *Proslogion* 2, which illustrates pitfalls for arguments which infer God's existence from the premise that His nature is denoted or understood.⁷ Nagasawa's formulation (the "Anselmian Argument") runs as follows:

(A1) The phrase "a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought"⁸ is clearly understood by the Fool, and apparently makes sense.

(A2) Hence we can take the phrase "a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought" as successfully denoting some specific nature.

(A3) A nature which is instantiated in reality is greater than one which is not.

(A4) A-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought that is instantiated in reality is greater than a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought that is conceived only in the mind (because existence is a great-making property).

(A5) But this would be a contradiction, since it is obviously impossible to think of a nature that is greater than a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought.

(A6) Therefore, a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought must indeed be instantiated in reality.

The Anselmian Argument infamously contains questionable premises. Firstly, it is dubious that "a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought" can be instantiated in reality, as (A1) may intend to claim. Perhaps it is impossible for any nature to be "a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought," since every nature is necessarily surpassable in greatness. (A3) is likewise questionable: is a nature instantiated in reality more valuable (*ceteris paribus*) than an uninstantiated nature? Finally, if this argument is presented as an argument for

⁷Nagasawa, *Maximal God*, 143–144. Nagasawa's argument is adapted from Millican's "The One Fatal Flaw in Anselm's Argument." Barth's claim that Anselm did not intend to provide a dialectically effective philosophical argument for God's existence is tangential to my argument, but against Barth's reading see Visser and Williams, *Anselm*, 13–25; Logan, *Reading Anselm's Proslogion*, 168–172.

⁸How should we interpret "thought" here? I assume that it means something like "accurately described as." If "thought" is merely parsed as "assumed to be" (i.e., perhaps, falsely), (A5) is likely false. As Anselm notes in *Proslogion* 4, a nature can be misconceived, so that its greatness is undervalued.

God's existence, proponents must motivate the identification of divinity with "a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought." But these objections, however persuasive, are metaphysically controversial. Since I am merely concerned to argue that ontological arguments need not be unpersuasive to all skeptical philosophers, I will not discuss these critiques further.

However, several critics suggest that the Anselmian Argument's fundamental problem does not lie in (A1) or (A3). Rather, the argument lacks persuasive force because of an ambiguity in (A2).⁹

The term "denoting" in (A2) is susceptible of multiple interpretations. "Denoting" might be read in an ontologically loaded manner, to mean "referring to a nature instantiated in reality." On this reading, critics allege, non-theists lack reason to accept (A2), without independent evidence for theism. Doing so would involve admitting what they doubt: that God's nature is instantiated.

Alternatively, "denoting" in (A2) might be interpreted in some sense which is ontologically innocent from a nontheistic perspective. But such readings of (A2) fail to yield a valid *reductio*. For example, perhaps (A2) should be read as stating that one can think about the relevant nature: a thought about that nature exists (though the nature need not be instantiated in reality). While skeptics might endorse (A2) on this reading, they should not be more impressed by the argument. A thought need not instantiate the properties which its object would instantiate, were it to exist. Rocks are hard and grey; thoughts of rocks are neither. Because thoughts do not (generally and necessarily) instantiate the properties belonging to their objects, it is not absurd that one can imagine a nature which can be thought to be (i.e., referred to as) greater than the nature of the thought of "a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought."

Thus if (A5) is interpreted as stating that one cannot think of (refer to) a nature which is in fact greater than that instantiated by the thought of "a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought," (A5) is false. Accordingly, the existence of the thought of "a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought" is apparently consistent with that nature not being instantiated. But if the claim in (A5) is simply that it is impossible to denote (refer to) a greater nature than one which instantiates the property of being "a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought," the skeptic can agree that (A5) is true. Yet since on this reading (A2) fails to establish that "a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought" is

⁹Modern philosophers who endorse an objection of this type (which I term the "General Objection," below) include Lewis, "Anselm and Actuality," 175 (foreshadowing Oppy and Millican); Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil*, 101–104; McGrath, "The Refutation of the Ontological Argument"; Oppy, *Ontological Arguments and Belief in God*, 58–64; Millican, "Ontological Arguments and the Superiority of Existence," and Wierenga, "The Ontological Argument and Objects of Thought." Similar criticisms were presented by pre-20th century philosophers, including Aquinas (e.g., *ST*1a; 2.1; *SCG* I, 11) and Kant (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A595/B623).

instantiated, the sceptic will hold that they are not committed to any such absurdity.

There are various readings of (A2). But if they do not entail the real-world instantiation of "a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought," (A4) will not be absurd; if they entail such instantiation, non-theists will reject (A2).¹⁰

Similar objections challenge other ontological arguments. Consider, for example, the following "Cartesian Argument" of my own formulation, inspired by Descartes's Fifth Meditation:

(C1) The phrase "Perfect Being" is clearly understood by the Fool, and apparently makes sense.

(C2) So, we can take the phrase "Perfect Being" as successfully denoting some specific entity.

(C3) Every entity possesses all its essential properties.

(C4) Existence is an essential property of a "Perfect Being."

(C5) So, a "Perfect Being" possesses existence (i.e., exists).

Again, the second premise is slippery: it can be read in ontologically loaded or innocent senses. Sceptics will reasonably doubt (C2) if it asserts that "Perfect Being" has a real-world referent. But if (C2) is read as merely claiming that a "Perfect Being" exists as an object of thought (*vel sim*), sceptics will deny that "possession" in (C3) properly refers to instantiation. Objects of thought need not instantiate the properties of their objects, even if they "possess" them in some extended sense.

Following this analysis, we can pose something akin to Graham Oppy's "general objection" (GO) to arguments which infer the existence of an unsurpassably great being from the premise that such a being is denoted, conceived of, experienced, etc. These verbs might be interpreted as entailing reference to a being which instantiates the relevant predicates; on this reading a skeptic should deny this premise. But if these verbs are not read as entailing reference to an entity instantiating the suggested predicates, inferred claims about the being's existence should not be interpreted as referring to the real existence of any entity, but merely to the purely conceptual existence of an unreal object of thought, concept, or experience.

¹⁰Lynne Rudder Baker and Grant Matthews claim to provide a reading of Anselm's argument which is neither invalid nor question-begging in "Anselm's Argument Reconsidered." See Wierenga, "The Ontological Argument and Objects of Thought" for critique, and Baker's (unconvincing) response in "Must Anselm be Interpreted as a Meinongian?"

Oppy himself phrases the General Objection somewhat differently, so that it challenges a wide range of (or as he initially claimed, all) ontological arguments.¹¹ He notes that non-theists have no (*a priori*) rational motivation to endorse any premises of ontological arguments which “involve expressions—names, definite descriptions, quantified noun phrases, and the like—whose use incurs an ontological commitment to an orthodoxly conceived monotheistic god.”¹² *A fortiori*, they lack motivation to accept premises in which such expressions are embedded in “extensional” operators (e.g., “*a* knows that . . .,” “necessarily . . .”), by which Oppy here means operators which carry commitment to the existence of entities which embedded expressions describe.¹³ Ontological arguments with premises of this kind therefore lack persuasive force for non-theists: they “beg the question,” because those who doubt their conclusion cannot rationally embrace their premises.

Non-theists only have rational motivation to embrace premises involving expressions whose use ordinarily incurs an ontological commitment to God’s existence if these expressions are embedded in what Oppy terms “intensional” or “protective” operators (e.g., “*a* believes that,” “*ex hypothesi*”): operators which cancel the ontological commitments of the expressions which they contain. But when such expressions are so embedded, an ontological argument’s premises “won’t permit the inference of the desired conclusion”:¹⁴ some proposition which asserts or obviously entails God’s existence, which is not embedded in any protective operator.

Abstracting from Oppy’s presentation of the objection in terms of operators, the GO claims that all or many ontological arguments—including those which infer the existence of an unsurpassably great being from the premise that such a being is denoted, conceived of, or experienced—lack dialectical efficacy. Either they “beg the question” (violating condition 2 above), since their premises assert or immediately entail God’s real-world existence and are thus rationally unacceptable to non-theists; or they are invalid (failing condition 1), because one cannot validly infer their intended conclusion—that God exists in the actual world—from premises which do not assert or immediately entail God’s real-world existence. As Oppy summarises: “no matter how the argument is formulated, an opponent can always either (i) reasonably claim that the question has been begged or else (ii) object that the inference is simply invalid.”¹⁵

¹¹See Oppy, *Ontological Arguments and Belief in God*, 115–118, *Arguing About Gods*, 51–52.

¹²Oppy, *Arguing About Gods*, 51.

¹³Oppy’s use of “extensional” and “intensional” to describe operators is idiosyncratic. As he notes (*Ontological Arguments and Belief in God*, 115n5), “nothing in the objection hinges on the effect of substitution of co-referring terms within the scope of the operators in question.” Rather, “the point at issue is whether vocabulary that occurs within the scope of the operators must be regarded as carrying ontological commitment.”

¹⁴Oppy, *Ontological Arguments and Belief in God*, 115.

¹⁵Oppy, *Ontological Arguments and Belief in God*, 115.

I should clarify that while in *Ontological Arguments and Belief in God* (1995) Oppy argued that the GO shows that *all* extant and possible ontological arguments are dialectically ineffective, he no longer holds this. Responding to Bruce Langtry's review of *Ontological Arguments and Belief in God*, in *Arguing About Gods* (2005) Oppy grants that for all he knows, forthcoming ontological arguments might avoid the GO.¹⁶ Indeed, Oppy develops a "Mereological Argument" which is invulnerable to the GO—although he adds that like other extant arguments which avoid the GO, the Mereological Argument fails to demonstrate the existence of an entity which theists would call "God." He knows of no ontological argument which is valid, does not beg the question, and has a conclusion of religious significance.¹⁷ Oppy later hints that some ontological arguments are dialectically ineffective because they are vulnerable to parody rather than the GO, noting that he is unaware of any ontological argument which is "(1) valid; (2) resistant to successful parody; and (3) non-question-begging."¹⁸ Nevertheless, Oppy's commentary indicates that he maintains that the GO demonstrates the dialectical impotence of *some, or even many* ontological arguments, including (presumably) the Anselmian or Cartesian Arguments.¹⁹ As such, the GO remains a key challenge to the claim that these and similar ontological arguments are dialectically effective.

Perhaps, however, the GO need not render Anselmian or Cartesian Arguments implausible to all non-theists. Might Meinongians, among whom Anselm is often counted,²⁰ be motivated by (A1) to hold to the stronger interpretation of (A2), according to which "a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought" is instantiated?

To understand why one might think that Meinongians should resist the GO, recall why Meinongians include non-existent objects in their ontologies. Typically, they suggest that it is difficult to understand the truth of well-formed sentences unless non-existent objects serve as their truthmakers.²¹ Firstly, consider negative existential sentences about individuals such as "Pegasus does not exist." Their surface grammar suggests that these sentences refer to some individual, while denying that the predicate "exists" applies to it. Equally, some sentences express true, positive propositions about fictional objects (e.g., "Pegasus has four hooves"). Again, it is natural to think that the truthmaker for this sentence is an object which is (somehow) quadrupedal. While opponents claim that such sentences can be paraphrased so that they do not require non-existent objects as their truthmakers, Meinongians reject suggested paraphrases as inadequate.

¹⁶Oppy, *Arguing About Gods*, 52–57.

¹⁷Oppy, *Arguing About Gods*, 57–64.

¹⁸Oppy, "Maydole on Ontological Arguments," 468.

¹⁹Oppy, *Arguing about Gods*, 58–59; 65.

²⁰But see Visser and Williams, *Anselm*, 89 and Lynne Rudder Baker, "Must Anselm be Interpreted as a Meinongian?"

²¹Parsons, *Nonexistent Objects*, 32–38; Miravalle, *God, Existence and Fictional Objects*, 41–56; Berto, "Modal Meinongianism and Fiction."

One might, therefore, think that Meinongians are committed to a “Characterization Principle” (CP), such as:

The *F* is an *F* (where “*F*” can be any meaningful noun phrase).²²

How should we interpret the locution “is an *F*” in this CP? On a naïve reading, this means “instantiates *F*-ness,” such that for each meaningful noun-phrase, some (perhaps, non-existent) object instantiates the predicates therein. For Meinongians committed to CP thus understood, (A1) yields the stronger interpretation of (A2). (A1) implies that “the-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought” is a meaningful noun-phrase, so given CP one can infer that some object instantiates the property of being “a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought.”

However, as Graham Priest observes, contemporary Meinongians universally restrict the Characterization Principle’s scope.²³ Unless CP is restricted, Meinongians must admit that every meaningful noun-phrase has an existent object as its referent. This might seem unintuitive; cannot Meinongians claim that these referents are non-existent? Sadly, no. One can add a clause such as “which exists in reality” to any meaningful noun-phrase which might describe a non-existent object. Thus, for example, since “golden mountain” is meaningful, an unrestricted CP does not merely license the conclusion that we can successfully refer to a (perhaps, non-existent) golden mountain, but also that there is an existent golden mountain, since the noun-phrase “existent golden mountain” is equally meaningful.²⁴

Three reinterpretations of CP are presently proposed by Meinongians. According to some “classical” Meinongians²⁵ including Terence Parsons, Meinongians should distinguish “nuclear” from “extranuclear” predicates.²⁶ While this distinction has been criticized as unclear or arbitrary,²⁷ the broad idea is that nuclear predicates (e.g., “golden”; “brittle”) describe an object’s intrinsic properties, whereas extranuclear predicates, which include modal and ontological predicates (e.g., “is possible”; “exists”), are somehow external to the object. Parsons suggests that the scope of CP should be restricted to “nuclear” predicates. But if CP is so restricted, it does not entail that every meaningful set of predicates is instantiated. By parallel, commentators maintain that a restricted CP does not motivate the inference of (A2) from (A1) in the Anselmian Argument or similar

²²From Koons and Pickavance, *The Atlas of Reality*, 256.

²³Priest, “Characterisation, Existence and Necessity,” 263.

²⁴Non-Meinongianism might question whether “existent” adds meaning to the original noun-phrase, but classical Meinongians affirm a meaningful distinction between existent and non-existent objects.

²⁵Meinongians whose ontology includes non-existent objects, *sensu strictu*.

²⁶Parsons, *Nonexistent Objects*, 22–27.

²⁷Priest et al., “Modal Meinongianism and Object Theory,” 13–15.

arguments.²⁸ In the Anselmian Argument, the predicate “than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought,” is extranuclear: it describes a nature’s relationship to other natures, not its intrinsic characteristics.²⁹

Another modification of CP is suggested by “Dual Copula” Meinongians such as Edward Zalta.³⁰ Zalta holds that “is” in CP should be read in a non-standard sense. He maintains that there are two fundamentally different ways in which objects bear properties: by “exemplifying” (instantiating) them, and by “encoding” them. According to Dual Copula Meinongianism, CP should be read to assert that every meaningful noun phrase has a referent which encodes the relevant properties/predicates, without exemplifying them. In place of the “non-existent objects” posited by classical Meinongians, Zalta proposes that there are (existent) abstract objects which encode all meaningful noun-phrases. Crucially, these abstract objects do not exemplify the predicates which they encode: the abstract object encoding “Pegasus” is not a horse, and the abstract object encoding “golden mountain” is not golden.

As Zalta observes, Dual Copula Meinongianism does not allow one to infer the stronger interpretation of (A2)—that “a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought” is instantiated—from (A1).³¹ Rather, (A1) merely establishes the existence of an abstract object which encodes “a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought.”³² Yet on this account, (A4) is not absurd, because it is unproblematic that a nature which instantiates the property “a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought” can be accurately described as greater than the nature of the abstract object which merely encodes that same property.

The final modification of CP is endorsed by “Modal Meinongians” such as Francesco Berto and Priest himself.³³ On this reformulation, the “is” in CP should be read as “is instantiated in some possible or impossible world”: every meaningful noun-phrase is instantiated in some possible or impossible world. If so, from (A1) one can infer something like (A2): that “a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought” is instantiated in some possible or impossible world. But on this interpretation of (A2), (A4) is again unproblematic. It is not absurd to think one *can* think of a nature which is actually greater than

²⁸Parsons, *Nonexistent Objects*, 213; Oppy, *Ontological Arguments and Belief in God*, 117; Priest, “Existence,” 263.

²⁹My arguments here and below that Meinongian non-theists need not accept the Anselmian Argument can be expanded, *mutatis mutandis*, to show that they need not accept the Cartesian Argument; I omit the analysis here for brevity’s sake.

³⁰See Zalta, *Abstract Objects*, 11–12.

³¹Oppenheimer and Zalta, “Reflections on the Logic of the Ontological Argument.”

³²Oppenheimer and Zalta (“Reflections on the Logic of the Ontological Argument,” 32) note that from this new version of (A2), it is possible to show that an abstract object encodes “a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought” as an existent object, but that this is not the argument’s intended conclusion.

³³See Priest, *Towards Non-Being* and Berto, “Modal Meinongianism and Fiction.”

“a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought,” if the latter only exists in some possible or impossible world.

To conclude, this section has presented a “General Objection” which alleges that some ontological arguments—including the Anselmian and Cartesian Arguments—are dialectically ineffective. This powerful objection threatens many arguments which seek to establish God’s existence from our ability to denote, understand, or experience His nature. According to prominent commentators, the GO shows that even Meinongians should reject at least some arguments of this kind, including the Anselmian and Cartesian Arguments.

Might the Anselmian or Cartesian Arguments be developed, to render them dialectically effective? Unlikely as this may seem, my discussion suggests two potential strategies. Proponents of the Anselmian or Cartesian Argument might make their proofs more appealing by outlining a version of CP which appears plausible to Meinongians, and which allows one to infer the instantiation of God’s nature from the fact that we can meaningfully describe God. This may prove challenging, since it would involve demonstrating (i) that the version of CP which establishes God’s existence is not *ad hoc*, and (ii) that this CP does not establish the existence of all objects which we can meaningfully describe.

Alternatively—and perhaps, more realistically—defenders of the Anselmian or Cartesian Argument might try to show that, despite the foregoing analysis, extant reinterpretations of CP can be employed to demonstrate the instantiation of some property which entails God’s existence. Yet current commentary suggests that CP’s presently endorsed by Meinongians do not yield the instantiation of “a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought.” Philosophers pursuing this strategy might, therefore, propose some alternative characterisation of divinity which Meinongians might reasonably believe is instantiated. In Section III of this paper, I will outline such a description of God’s nature, and in Section IV I will explore the extent to which modern Meinongians might be motivated to hold that this characterisation of divinity is exemplified by an existent object.

II

Readers who believe that ontological arguments can be dialectically effective might be feeling impatient. Granted, it is commonly held that the Anselmian Argument and its Cartesian kin are undermined by the GO. But, readers might observe, the GO does not undermine modern “modal” ontological arguments, which were developed to avoid ambiguity, with the GO in mind.³⁴

³⁴See e.g., Plantinga’s development of the Modal Argument to improve upon Anselm’s argument (*God, Freedom and Evil*, 101–104).

Yet although modal ontological arguments avoid the GO, according to some philosophers they are similarly unpersuasive. Critics claim that modal arguments are question-begging, and susceptible to parody.³⁵ I now explore this claim, with a view to suggesting that one route to defending modal arguments might resemble the second strategy just outlined for developing Anselmian or Cartesian arguments.

The next ontological argument which I will examine, therefore, is the Modal Argument. The following formulation is based on Plantinga's discussion in *God, Freedom and Evil*.³⁶

(M1) Necessarily, a being is maximally great only if it has maximal excellence in every possible world.

(M2) Necessarily, a being is maximally excellent only if it has omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection in each possible world in which it exists.

(M3) Maximal greatness is instantiated in some possible world.

(M4) So, a (some token) being has maximal excellence in every possible world.

(M5) So, a being has omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection in the actual world.

Unlike the Anselmian Argument, Plantinga's Modal Argument is clearly valid and unambiguous. Moreover, the number of premises to which sceptics can reasonably object is limited, since the first two are stipulative definitions. Admittedly, (M4) assumes that the accessibility relation between possible worlds is symmetrical and transitive, but critics often accept this. Perhaps the Modal Argument also presumes the falsity of modal fictionalism.³⁷ But since modal fictionalism is contentious, this does not show that Plantinga's argument lacks dialectical efficacy.

Discussion of the Modal Argument's persuasiveness centers, therefore, on (M3). Critics often contend that those initially sceptical of theism lack reason to affirm (M3), since (sceptics will claim) they lack independent all-things-considered reason to affirm the existence of a maximally great being (i.e., (M4) and thus obviously (M5)).³⁸ But as Peter van Inwagen has argued, it's sufficient for an argument to "beg the question" that one cannot rationally accept its premises unless one independently accepts its conclusion.³⁹ So, as William Rowe charges, Plantinga's Modal Argument "begs

³⁵Parody objections have also been raised against the Anselmian and Cartesian Arguments from their inception; I omit discussion of such objections for reasons of space.

³⁶Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil*, 104–112.

³⁷Parent, "The Modal Ontological Argument Meets Modal Fictionalism."

³⁸McGrath, "The Refutation of the Ontological Argument," Rowe, "Plantinga on the Ontological Argument," van Inwagen, "Begging the Question"; similarly Oppy, *Ontological Arguments and Belief in God*, 70–78; 187–192.

³⁹van Inwagen, "Begging the Question," 239.

the question epistemically because in order to know that the crucial premise ‘It is possible that [sc. necessarily] God exists in reality.’ is true, we have to know that God does in fact [necessarily] exist in reality.”⁴⁰ The objection is not simply that those who doubt the argument’s conclusion have reason to deny its controversial premise: that holds for any argument, however persuasive. Rather, critics suggest that any rational motivation for (M3) would give one independent reason to affirm (M4) and thus (M5), or to affirm (M5) itself. Since sceptics claim to lack conclusive reason to affirm (M4) and (M5), they will claim to lack reason to endorse (M3). Besides, if compelling evidence for (M4) or (M5) is available, (M3) appears dialectically superfluous: non-theists have evidence for (M5) itself or can directly infer (M5) from (M4). I term this charge that the Modal Argument begs the question the “Question-Begging Objection” (QBO).

Arguments for a key thesis of QBO—that any reason to affirm (M3) would afford independent support for (M4) and/or (M5)—are surprisingly rare. Having suggested that there is no *a priori* reason to affirm (M3), van Inwagen defends this thesis by appeal to the following principle:

If a proposition *p* is non-contingent, and is known to be non-contingent by a certain person or certain population at a certain time, and if *p* is epistemically neutral for that person or population at that time, then the proposition that *p* is possibly true is also epistemically neutral for that person or population at that time.⁴¹

Accordingly, van Inwagen argues that the Modal Argument cannot “serve as a vehicle from which one can pass from epistemic neutrality as regards its conclusion to justification or warrant.”⁴² While he motivates this principle by appeal to a plausible example—that one cannot know that Goldbach’s conjecture is possibly necessarily true without knowing that it is true—it is scarcely obvious that this principle holds generally, or that it applies to (M3). Indeed, philosophers offer several arguments for (M3) which do not (obviously) directly support (M4) or (M5). Alexander Pruss argues that the content of mystical experiences, and the fact that theism provides a central motivation for a distinctive way of living, give reasons to affirm (M3);⁴³ Joshua Rasmussen claims that (M3) is credible since greatness is instantiated to imperfect degrees in creatures.⁴⁴ William Wainwright discusses further evidence for (M3), including the suggestion that (M3) might seem intrinsically plausible on reflection.⁴⁵ Although I lack space to consider these arguments for (M3), and whether they do

⁴⁰Rowe, “Plantinga on the Ontological Argument,” 91.

⁴¹van Inwagen, “Begging the Question,” 244.

⁴²van Inwagen, “Begging the Question,” 245.

⁴³Pruss, “Samkara’s Principle and Two Ontomystical Arguments”; “The Ontological Argument and the Motivational Centres of Lives.”

⁴⁴Rasmussen, “Plantinga.”

⁴⁵Wainwright, “Assessing Ontological Arguments.”

not independently support (M4) or (M5), they indicate that QBO does not demonstrate decisively that the Modal Argument is dialectically impotent.

Nevertheless, QBO retains substantial force. Whatever the power of current arguments for (M3), those canvassed above are all (save Wainwright's suggestion that (M3) is intuitive) *a posteriori*. Accordingly, sole reliance on them to render (M3) plausible would mean that the Modal Argument cannot function as an argument for God's existence from truths which can be justifiably believed *a priori*—at least, for those familiar with certain concepts. While not a deficiency of the Modal Argument *per se*, this robs the argument of some distinctive elegance.

Indeed, *a priori* arguments for (M3) are unpersuasive. Nagasawa, for example, suggests that theists stipulate that "God is the being that has the maximal consistent set of knowledge, power, and benevolence." In this way, Nagasawa thinks that theists can easily establish that God (so-defined) possibly exists and reframe the Modal Argument as an argument for His existence.⁴⁶ But substituting Nagasawa's new definition of maximal excellence into the Modal Argument scarcely increases (M3)'s plausibility. (M3) states that a being possibly possesses maximal greatness: that it possibly evinces maximal excellence in all possible worlds. This claim is far stronger than the claim that maximal excellence is possibly instantiated, and the latter's truth does not obviously much increase its probability. Accordingly, *a priori* arguments that God's attributes are logically compatible⁴⁷ cannot render (M3) significantly plausible unless they also show that it is broadly logically possible that these attributes are necessarily instantiated. To my knowledge, no extant arguments accomplish this feat.

There is another celebrated method for showing that the Anselmian Argument and the Modal Argument obviously lack efficacy without disputing the plausibility of their premises. This is the strategy of parodying ontological arguments by constructing structurally similar arguments with equally plausible premises, but conclusions which are absurd or incompatible with theism.⁴⁸ How do parodies show that arguments lack dialectical efficacy? Perhaps, by showing that the conclusions of similarly structured arguments with equally plausible premises are rationally incredible, parodies indicate that there is some (undiagnosed) flaw in ontological arguments' premises or inferences, so that their conclusions are equally rationally incredible.

Three species of parodies are typically advanced against the Modal Argument and (*mutatis mutandis*) other ontological arguments. As Oppy

⁴⁶Nagasawa, *Maximal God*, 204.

⁴⁷E.g., Bernstein, "Giving the Ontological Argument its Due."

⁴⁸See Oppy, *Ontological Argument and Belief in God*, 162–185; Nagasawa, *Maximal God*, 180–206. The debate between Oppy and Maydole in Szatowski ed. *Ontological Proofs Today* illustrates how the different types of parody can be suitably advanced against different ontological arguments, and how defenders of the argument seek to show disanalogies between their arguments and proffered parodies.

notes, particular types of parody target different ontological arguments: “it is very important to match ontological arguments to appropriate parodies: there are different kinds of parodies that are appropriate to different kinds of ontological arguments.”⁴⁹

1. Parodies which substitute, in place of (M3), the premise that Maximal Greatness is not instantiated in some possible world, yielding the conclusion that Maximal Greatness is not instantiated in the actual world.⁵⁰ Like the QBO, Type (1) parodies intend to show that one has no reason to accept rather than to deny (M3).
2. Parodies which substitute, in place of “maximal excellence” and the properties on which it supervenes, given in (M2), any arbitrary or ridiculous property and set of properties upon which it supervenes, to yield the conclusion that the set of properties is instantiated in the actual world. One might, for example, stipulate in place of (M1), (M1*): “Necessarily, a being is Maximally Great Again only if has Maximal Triumphood in every possible world,” and in place of (M2), (M2*): “Necessarily, a being is Maximally Trumpish if it has orange and thin skin in each possible world in which it exists.” From (M3*): “Maximal Recurring Greatness is instantiated in some possible world,” we can (absurdly) infer (M4*): “Some (token) being has orange and thin skin in every possible world.” Type (2) parodies present a *reductio* against the Modal Argument, by alleging that if one accepts the Modal Argument, one should equally believe that a multitude of beings necessarily exist (many of which evidently do not).⁵¹
3. Parodies which substitute, in place of “maximal excellence” in (M2), some set/s of logically compatible properties which are incompatible with theism, to yield the conclusion that the set of properties is instantiated in the actual world. One such parody substitutes “perfect malevolence” for “moral perfection” in (M2), so that the parody yields the conclusion in (M5) that an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly malevolent being exists in the actual world.⁵² Type (3) parodies aim to present a *reductio* against the Modal Argument by yielding a conclusion which is logically incompatible with the argument’s original conclusion; although they do not suggest that all sets of properties can be substituted into the Modal Argument at (M2) with equal plausibility.

The success of parodies is disputed. Type (2) parodies might seem implausible, because it is unintuitive that all entities can exist necessarily. Perhaps, for example, all material beings are contingent. I shall not further explore contemporary literature on parody objections, which can be posed against

⁴⁹Oppy, “Maydole on Ontological Arguments,” 468.

⁵⁰See e.g., Oppy, *Ontological Arguments and Belief in God*, 70–78.

⁵¹The most famous such parody was advanced by Gaunilo, who offered Anselm a parodic proof that there is an island than which none greater can be conceived. For contemporary evaluations, see Ward, “Losing the Lost Island.”

⁵²On a similar parody advanced by Millican, see Nagasawa, *Maximal God*, 160–168. Another parody of this type, arguing for the existence of an “essentially supernaturally unaccompanied being than which it is not conceivable for some essentially supernaturally accompanied being to be greater” is advanced by Oppy in “Maydole on Ontological Arguments,” 452–455.

all species of ontological argument. But according to many commentators, some parodies—particularly, of type (3)—show that philosophers of all stripes should reject the Modal Argument.

In sum, the QBO and Parody objections do not decisively demonstrate that the Modal Argument lacks dialectical efficacy. Nevertheless, both objections invite further reply. One response might involve highlighting distinctive characteristics of God's nature, which (i) render it plausible *a priori* that divinity is possibly necessarily instantiated and (ii) enable defenders of the Modal Argument to show why it is not similarly plausible that other natures are instantiated.

III

One route to showing that ontological arguments possess dialectical force would involve explaining how God's nature is distinctive. To support the Anselmian or Cartesian Argument, one might show how CP's endorsed by Meinongians allow one to infer the instantiation of divinity from some meaningful description of God. Similarly, one might respond to criticisms of the Modal Argument by showing that given God's nature, it is more intuitive (ideally, *a priori*) that maximal greatness is possibly instantiated than that it is possibly not instantiated, or that properties given in parody arguments are instantiated.

I now briefly explore one familiar characterisation of God: the Thomistic description of God as Unlimited Being. I draw on Barry Miller's account of existence and God's nature, which attempts to render Aquinas's doctrine intelligible to analytic metaphysicians.⁵³

To understand Miller's characterisation of God, we should first consider his account of existence. Miller rejects the analytic consensus that "exists" is not a first-order predicate. According to Miller, there is an intuitive case that "exists" functions as a first-order predicate, since existence is a real property: its presence or absence makes an (intrinsic) difference to individuals.⁵⁴ In virtue of existence, individuals can be referred to, and stand in causal relations. But the claim that existence is a real property faces a strong objection. *Contra* Meinong, Miller believes that unless an object exists, it can bear no properties whatsoever. But the claim that existence "makes a difference" to individuals suggests, in a Meinongian vein, that non-existent individuals bear properties.⁵⁵ In response, Miller gives a novel model of the relationship between an individual and its properties.⁵⁶ An individual's properties (besides existence) are "limits" or "bounds" on its existence. As a block of butter is separated from other objects and given distinctive shape by its bounds, so on Miller's telling, entities are

⁵³Miller, *A Most Unlikely God*; Kremer, *Analysis of Existing*, 17–48; 79–100.

⁵⁴Kremer, *Analysis of Existing*, 20–31.

⁵⁵Miller, *A Most Unlikely God*, 28–32.

⁵⁶Miller, *A Most Unlikely God*, 33ff., Kremer, *Analysis of Existing*, 34–38.

individuated and possess their essential and accidental properties in virtue of the “bounds” to their existence.

Can Meinongians endorse Miller’s ontology? It is compatible with Dual Copula and Modal Meinongianism that existence enables reference, and that all objects exist. This is likewise compatible with a (quasi) classical Meinongianism, which holds that all objects have *some* mode of existence, although some lack existence proper. Since it is unintuitive that objects possessing any mode of existence can exemplify logically contradictory properties, Meinongians sympathetic to Miller’s ontology might restrict CP by claiming that noun-phrases which contain such properties (e.g., “the square circle”) fail to refer.⁵⁷ Alternatively, classical Meinongians sympathetic to Miller’s ontology might endorse Miller’s analysis of the relationship between the existence and properties of existent entities, but hold that non-existent objects possess properties in another way.

Miller’s ontology affords an account of God’s nature. Unlike creatures, there are no “limits” or “bounds” to God’s existence, which means that besides existence, God shares no properties with creatures. Yet God is not a “thin” being, lacking perfection. Rather, God is an infinitely rich entity, whose nature somehow “contains” all the real properties which give creatures value.⁵⁸

One might object that Unlimited Existence (or following Aquinas, “*Esse Subsistens*”), which shares no properties with creatures, cannot be identified with the God of Abraham. However, Aquinas famously claimed that creaturely perfections can be predicated of *Esse Subsistens*, albeit in “analogous” senses.⁵⁹ Miller draws on Aquinas to develop his own model of religious language, according to which God shares no properties with creatures (besides existence). Rather, Miller claims that in possessing “perfect” knowledge and power, God stands as a “limit case” of a series of creaturely perfections. A limit case of a series is something which falls outside an ordered series, yet to which the series points. A point, for example, is the limit case of a series of lines of decreasing length.⁶⁰ Miller argues that *Esse Subsistens* is the limit case of several series of creaturely properties, such as “having the power to create things from more/fewer materials,” because God is able to create anything *ex nihilo*.⁶¹ Accordingly, Miller ascribes perfect power, knowledge and understanding to *Esse Subsistens*, where “perfect” functions as an *alienans* adjective: an adjective which modifies the sense of the noun which it characterises (e.g., “rocking horse”).⁶²

⁵⁷Thus, independently, Miravalle, *God, Existence and Fictional Objects*, 46–48.

⁵⁸Compare Aquinas, *ST*Ia.4.2: “Since therefore God is subsisting being itself, nothing of the perfection of being can be wanting to Him. Now all created perfections are included in the perfection of being; for things are perfect, precisely so far as they have being after some fashion.”

⁵⁹Aquinas, *SCG* I.30–36; *ST*Ia.13.

⁶⁰Miller, *A Most Unlikely God*, 8–10.

⁶¹Miller, *A Most Unlikely God*, 87 ff.; Kremer, *Analysis of Existing*, 92–100.

⁶²Elsewhere, I critique Miller’s account of religious language, but offer an alternative procedure for predicating creaturely properties of *Esse Subsistens*. See Stacey, “Perfect Being Theology and Analogy.”

If God is unbounded existence, we can note two further divine characteristics. Firstly, God is simple: He has no metaphysical parts. Why does this follow? According to Miller's metaphysics, entities are individuated by their bounds (i.e., properties), which also make them the sort of entities that they are. God has no properties besides existence; accordingly, there is nothing to individuate or distinguish any parts which might compose Him. In Thomistic language, God consists of a single, unbounded act of existence. Creatures, in addition to existence, possess essential and accidental properties which are the "bounds" of their existence. In a similar vein, Scholastics sometimes claimed that in creatures—but not in God—there is some extra-mental distinction between "essence" and "existence."

Secondly, as Aquinas argues, God cannot be fully understood by creatures; unless through grace, He becomes the medium through which created intellects know Him directly.⁶³ Aquinas believes this because on his metaphysics of knowledge, a knower somehow "contains" the object of her knowledge—or at least, its Aristotelian form. However, as *Esse Subsistens*, God possesses no "form" or properties aside from His unbounded existence. Accordingly, it appears that no finite entity can "contain" (or comprehensively represent) God's nature. The single divine property of existence has no formal structure which any creature can replicate; it consists of an infinite richness of being or content which no finite creature can possess or mirror.⁶⁴ We might summarise Aquinas's suggestion: God's essence cannot (naturally) be completely understood by any creature, since it cannot be fully represented by any finite entity.

In this section, I have outlined Miller's account of God as *Esse Subsistens*, which boasts considerable pedigree. On that account, God is simple, incomprehensible, and inimitable—He cannot be perfectly represented by any creature. These divine characteristics follow directly from a Thomistic metaphysics of God. But many "classical theists" who do not embrace Thomistic ontology also accept that God is simple, incomprehensible, and inimitable. Anselm, for example, inferred God's simplicity⁶⁵ and incomprehensibility⁶⁶ through the procedures of "perfect being theology" which are not committed to any ontology. Likewise, one might argue that God (putatively) evinces simplicity and incomprehensibility/inimitability because He is the ultimate explanation of creatures' existence, or because these characteristics are evinced by an object of mystical experience.

Since Aquinas's description of God as "*Esse Subsistens*" is reached through *a posteriori* reflection on God's characteristics as First Cause (see

⁶³SCG III.49; ST1a12.4.

⁶⁴One might wonder whether God's nature could be represented by an abstract or concrete object containing every possible perfection exemplified by non-divine beings. But plausibly, even this will fail to capture the richness of God's nature, for there are perhaps depths of God's being which cannot be instantiated to any degree in creatures—e.g., the beauty and value attendant on possessing all the perfections of creatures in a simple act of existence.

⁶⁵*Proslogion*, 12; 18.

⁶⁶*Proslogion*, 15.

ST1a 2; 3; 12), a reviewer wonders whether it could appropriately feature in ontological arguments. In one sense, *any* non-stipulative characterization of God which features in philosophical arguments (e.g., “perfect being”) is necessarily made *a posteriori*, because it involves a claim about the meaning of “God.” More broadly, historical ontological arguments—and corresponding parodies—refer to properties, entities, and judgements about relative excellence which might only be discoverable *a posteriori* (e.g., greatness; islands; the claim that existence is great-making). So, ontological arguments’ premises need not be believed simply through *a priori* reflection, although ontological arguments are plausibly distinguished by their attempt to show that God exists by considering some putative characterisation of God, rather than broader empirical facts about creation. Ontological arguments may therefore employ Aquinas’s characterisation of God, so long as at their outset, the characterization is presented as merely putative (e.g., as the description of what a First Cause would be like).

Claims that God is simple and inimitable (if He exists) are controversial. Some non-theists may reject them, and any ontological arguments which rest on them. But given sophisticated defenses of classical theism, they retain some plausibility.⁶⁷ Moreover, many arguments *against* divine simplicity object that it is incompatible with other, authoritative descriptions of God given by particular religious traditions. Non-theists will presumably not accept these traditions as authoritative, and so may be more open than some theists to the suggestion that God would be simple, were He to exist. I assume, therefore that *some* modern non-theists (easily could) find it credible that God is simple and inimitable, if He exists. This is all I will require for my conclusion that ontological arguments possess dialectical efficacy.

IV

I have presented a characterisation of God as *Esse Subsistens* which differs in sense from the Anselmian characterisation of God as a being possessing “a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought.” I now argue that both the Cartesian and Modal arguments gain dialectical force if they are reworked to employ the suggestion that God is *Esse Subsistens*, or the claim that God is simple and inimitable.⁶⁸

I first consider the Cartesian Argument, which is challenged by the GO. According to the GO, ontological arguments which attempt to demonstrate that God exists because He is denoted (etc.) are question-begging or invalid. If their premises directly assert that God’s nature is instantiated,

⁶⁷See e.g., Aquinas, Miller, and Brower, “Simplicity and Aseity,” for one current defense of divine simplicity.

⁶⁸Although this way of defending ontological arguments is novel in current literature, my strategy here was anticipated by seventeenth-century authors, including Descartes. See Harrelson, *The Ontological Argument from Descartes to Hegel, passim*.

they are unacceptable to sceptics who doubt their conclusion; otherwise, they fail to yield the conclusion that God exists. In the Cartesian Argument, sceptics might accept (C1): that “Perfect Being” is meaningful. But this gives them no motivation to accept (C2)—that “Perfect Being” denotes some entity—if this premise is interpreted as claiming that “Perfect Being” has a real-world referent. Alternatively, if (C2) merely holds that “Perfect Being” merely refers to an object of thought, the argument does not logically yield the conclusion that a Perfect Being exists *in re*.

However, I now suggest that Meinongians have significant reason to hold that *Esse Subsistens* is instantiated in reality, given their commitment to the Characterization Principle. I consider two modern interpretations of CP discussed in Section II, arguing that Meinongians who embrace either have reason to believe that the noun-phrase “Unlimited Being” (*Esse Subsistens*) has a real-world referent, if “Unlimited Being” is meaningful. If so, some Meinongians have reason to infer the ontologically committed interpretation of a re-phrased version (C2) from a re-phrased version of (C1), and perhaps therefore to consider a reformulated Cartesian Argument sound. These Meinongians should reject the GO as an adequate rebuttal of the re-worked Cartesian Argument, because there is a reading on which the argument is valid, yet not question-begging for them, since they have reason to accept the argument’s premises even though they (otherwise) doubt its conclusion.

Firstly, according to classical Meinongians following Parsons, CP should be restricted to nuclear predicates. Every set of nuclear predicates is instantiated in some object, but (since “existent” is an extranuclear predicate) not every set of predicates is instantiated in an existent object. But this restricted CP gives no reason to hold that the noun-phrase “perfect being” has a real-world reference (as *per* the stronger interpretation of (C2) of the Cartesian Argument), because “perfect” is plausibly an extranuclear predicate, indicating a being’s relative superiority (see my parallel remarks on the Anselmian Argument, above).

What about the noun-phrase “Unlimited Being,” understood in Miller’s sense? Does this have a referent on Parsons’s account? This seems harder to say. On the one hand, predicates which describe an entity’s intrinsic properties are supposed to be nuclear. But on Miller’s account, existence is the *only* intrinsic property which characterises God: no properties constitute God’s “essence” besides His existence. Equally, Parsons is explicit that “exists” is an extranuclear predicate.⁶⁹

Yet on balance, Meinongians endorsing Parsons’s CP have *some* significant positive reason to believe that “Unlimited Being” is instantiated, if they allow that it is meaningful. The central motivation for any CP is the

⁶⁹Some classical Meinongians will reject Miller’s particular account of existence for reasons glossed earlier. But note that, more generally, if existence is a real property of entities, and if it is meaningful to talk about a completely simple divine nature, Meinongians who restrict CP to nuclear predicates may struggle to decide whether God’s nature is instantiated.

thought that the truth of sentences about fictional objects suggests that all or many meaningful noun-phrases have real-world referents. This leads classical Meinongians to posit the reality of non-existent objects, even at the price of accepting a new category of entities into their ontology. Now suppose that “Unlimited Being,” or some similar description of God is meaningful. It seems, by parallel reasoning, that Meinongians possess motivation to hold that this noun-phrase has a referent. And this motivation is heightened by the observation that it is difficult to tell whether “Unlimited Being” is a nuclear predicate.

What might prevent Meinongians from believing that God’s nature is instantiated? Principally, fear that by admitting that “Unlimited Being” is instantiated, one should hold by parity that all meaningful noun-phrases have real-world referents.⁷⁰ But would admitting that “*Esse Subsistens*” is instantiated motivate this absurd conclusion? Surely not. God is highly unusual on the Thomistic account, because there is no distinction between His essence and existence; this is what makes it dubious whether “*Esse Subsistens*” is an extranuclear predicate. In sum, classical Meinongians are committed to affirming the instantiation of nuclear properties to explain how sentences apparently refer to fictional or non-existent objects. It is an extension of the same logic to hold that God’s nature is instantiated in reality.

Secondly, according to “Dual Copula” Meinongians including Zalta, CP should be interpreted as holding that every set of properties is “encoded” in an abstract object. This allows Dual Copula Meinongians to hold that all meaningful noun-phrases have a referent, without claiming that each set of properties is exemplified by a concrete object. Could reference to God be secured because God’s nature is “encoded” in an abstract object? We have seen substantial reason to doubt this, because according to classical theists, God’s nature cannot be wholly represented by any non-divine entity. Admittedly, it is difficult to understand what it means for properties to be encoded on Zalta’s account, since encoding is a primitive notion. Nevertheless, considerations adduced to show that God’s nature cannot be represented by the properties exemplified by creatures—i.e., that finite creatures cannot represent the infinite richness of divine existence, and that God has no properties besides His existence—seem to rule out God’s nature being “encoded” in a non-divine abstract object, if encoded properties comprehensively represent or resemble their exemplified counterparts. But if God’s nature cannot be encoded in an abstract object, Dual Copula Meinongians have some reason to think that God’s nature—or the simple property which constitutes God—is instantiated in reality. Dual Copula Meinongians posit the existence of abstract entities which encode properties

⁷⁰Meinongians may have further worries about granting that “Unlimited Being” is nuclear, e.g., that Unlimited Being would be objectionably “incomplete” (Parsons, *Nonexistent Objects*, 23) or that Unlimited Being would (impossibly) possess further, incompatible properties. I believe that these problems are superable given Unlimited Being’s unique nature, but lack space for further discussion.

to (*inter alia*) solve difficulties with sentences which apparently refer to fictional objects.⁷¹ Like other Meinongians, they are prepared to posit exotic entities to explain reference. If the property “Unlimited Being” cannot be encoded by an abstract object, yet we can apparently refer to an Unlimited Being, Dual Copula Meinongians possess motivation to hold that the property “Unlimited Being” is exemplified by a concrete object (i.e., God).

Since two CP’s endorsed by Meinongians support the suggestion that “Unlimited Being” is instantiated, one can develop a “Simplified Cartesian Argument” for God’s existence:

(SC1) The phrase “Unlimited Being” is clearly understood by the Fool, and apparently makes sense.

(SC2) So, we can take the phrase “Unlimited Being” as successfully denoting (i.e., referring to) some specific entity.⁷²

(SC3) Every entity possesses all its essential properties.

(SC4) Existence is an essential property of an “Unlimited Being.”

(SC5) So, an “Unlimited Being” possesses existence (i.e., exists).

How should we evaluate this argument? (SC1) is more controversial than (C1) of the Cartesian Argument. If Miller’s (or, some similar) ontology is false, perhaps “Unlimited Being” is meaningless. Moreover, as in the Cartesian Argument, the second premise appears dubious, if (as intended above) it maintains that the description “Unlimited Being” has a real-world referent. However, I have argued that two current varieties of Meinongianism provide *some* significant reason to infer (SC2) in this sense from (SC1), so that the argument is not question-begging for some Meinongians. For such an audience, the GO therefore does not undermine the argument. Since it includes at least two dubious premises, the Simplified Cartesian Argument is unlikely to convert many to theism. But is it dialectically impotent? No. The argument is valid, and while both Meinongianism and Scholastic accounts of existence/God’s nature are controversial, one might affirm both together on non-theistic grounds, and thereby have significant reason to accept the argument’s premises and conclusion. The argument therefore meets criteria (1–3) for dialectical efficacy.

V

We can now examine the prospects for developing the Modal Argument, if God is characterised as simple and inimitable, or “Unlimited Being.” Consider the following Simplified Modal Argument:

⁷¹Bueno and Zalta, “Object Theory and Modal Meinongianism,” *passim*.

⁷²*Pace* Thomist claims that “God is not a being amongst beings,” here and in the following Simplified Cartesian Argument, “entity” merely means “object of reference.”

(SM1) Necessarily, an entity is maximally great only if it has maximal excellence in every possible world.

(SM2) Necessarily, an entity is maximally excellent only if it exists as Unlimited Being.

(SM3) Maximal greatness is instantiated in some possible world.

(SM4) So, an entity has maximal excellence in every possible world.

(SM5) So, an entity exists as Unlimited Being in the actual world.

I tentatively propose that Modal Meinongianism (see Section II) provides *a priori* reason to affirm (SM3)—or at least, a nearby claim about the possibility of God's existence, from which God's existence can be inferred. If there is reason for some philosophers to hold (SM3, *vel sim.*), which is independent of reason to hold (SM4) and/or (SM5), then the Simplified Modal Argument is not vulnerable to the QBO: the charge that it "begs the question" because one cannot rationally accept its premises unless one independently accepts its conclusion.

According to Modal Meinongians, CP should be interpreted as holding that each meaningful set of predicates is instantiated in some possible or impossible world. So, on Modal Meinongianism, maximal excellence is instantiated in some possible or impossible world. Is it plausible that maximal excellence is instantiated in some possible world? Consider the intuitive appeal of this Simple Possibility Principle:

SPP: Each simple, basic, and independent property (entity, *vel sim.*), of which we can meaningfully speak, is instantiated in some possible world.

For present purposes, a simple property is a property which is not an aggregate or disjunction of other properties; a basic property is a property which does not necessarily supervene on other properties; and an independent property (or entity) is a property that can exist in an individual "by itself," even if the individual possesses no further basic properties. On Miller's account, God (Unlimited Being) is a simple entity, which does not supervene on any other. Accordingly, if SPP holds, God exists in some possible world. Doubtless, some philosophers (e.g., those who believe that modality is grounded in a substance's causal powers), will reject SPP. However, SPP may seem intuitive to others, including some "Abstractionists" about modality, who hold that possible worlds are abstract objects.⁷³ For how can some simple, basic, and independent properties fail to exist as abstract objects which can serve as representations of some possible world?⁷⁴

⁷³For "Abstractionism" ("Platonism") about modality, see Koons and Pickavance, *Atlas of Reality*, 332ff. and Pruss, *Actuality, Possibility and Worlds*, 125–177.

⁷⁴"Lagadonian Linguistic Abstractionists" (Koons and Pickavance, 343), who believe that modality is grounded in existent objects which act as building-blocks for abstract possible worlds, might demur.

If *Esse Subsistens* exists in some possible world—or according to Modal Meinongianism, perhaps in some impossible world—we can ask what grounds this fact. Those likely to endorse SPP will give different answers. Abstractionists may suggest that some abstract object represents *Esse Subsistens*. But as we saw when examining the suggestion that an abstract object might encode God’s nature, it is plausibly impossible for any abstract object to function as a comprehensive representation of *Esse Subsistens*.⁷⁵

One might think that this would give Abstractionists reason to deny that God exists in any possible world. But this is too fast. William Vallicella has advanced the ingenious suggestion that it is consistent with divine simplicity and classical theism generally that God *is* an abstract object.⁷⁶ This is not to say that God is causally inert or lacks the properties/degree of reality usually ascribed to Him. Rather, on this account God is a self-exemplifying abstract object (consider by parallel the properties “being abstract” or “being inanimate”), and according to Vallicella this does not prevent Him from being an individual.

Although Vallicella’s claim that God is an abstract object is unusual, and incompatible with some characterisations of *abstracta*,⁷⁷ the thought that God resembles abstract objects has precedent in Thomistic thought. As Eleonore Stump observes, Aquinas affirms that while we cannot adequately describe God’s nature, both concrete and abstract terms convey something of His simplicity and richness.⁷⁸ Moreover, according to classical theists, God possesses important properties with *abstracta*: immateriality, atemporality, and necessity.

It seems plausible, then, that on an Abstractionist account of modality, those affirming that *Esse Subsistens* exists in a possible world should hold that *Esse Subsistens* itself is—or serves as—the abstract object which grounds God’s existence in some possible world. But if *Esse Subsistens* exists in some possible world because it (God) exists in the actual world, then (if the accessibility relation between possible worlds is symmetrical and transitive), God exists in all possible worlds (SM4), including this world (SM5).

I have argued that given Modal Meinongianism and/or SPP, (SM3) of the Simplified Argument has plausibility on *a priori* grounds; at least for Abstractionists about modality. Or rather, reflection on the possibility of God’s existence gives Abstractionists reason to affirm His actual existence (see my “Inimitable Argument,” below). Consequently, the Simplified Modal Argument can provide a better response to the QBO than the original Modal Argument, because proponents of the Modal Argument have

⁷⁵Although Abstractionists might claim that the required representation is conventional or incomplete, such that some abstract object can sufficiently resemble God to ground modal truths about Him.

⁷⁶Vallicella, “Divine Simplicity: A New Defense.”

⁷⁷E.g., Zalta, *Abstract Objects*, 12.

⁷⁸See Stump, “God’s Simplicity.”

struggled to provide *a priori* reason to affirm dialectically useful claims about God's possibility (such as (M3)) which are credible to non-theists and which do not independently support the claims that God necessarily or actually exists ((M4) or (M5)).

Is the Simplified Modal Argument as vulnerable to parody as the Modal Argument? While I lack space for extended discussion, it appears not.⁷⁹ The considerations which motivate belief that Unlimited Being exists in some possible world do not obviously motivate belief that maximal greatness is not instantiated in some possible world. Moreover, my defense of the Simplified Modal Argument is predicated on the claims that *Esse Subsistens* is simple and incapable of representation by non-divine beings. If these claims hold, parodies of the Simplified Modal Argument will fail, unless the entities which they purport to prove are likewise plausibly simple and inimitable.

Notably, my reformulation of the Modal Argument diverges from Plantinga's argumentative strategy. Rather than arguing that *Esse Subsistens*—or some simple and inimitable God—exists because His existence is possibly necessary (SM3), I first defend the claim that God exists in some possible or impossible world (given Modal Meinongianism or SPP) and then suggest that God's existence in some possible world is most plausibly grounded in his actual existence (given Abstractionist accounts of modality, and divine simplicity and inimitability). Perhaps, therefore, my reformulation might more precisely be elucidated as follows:

(IA1) If God (or, *Esse Subsistens*) exists, He is simple and inimitable.

(IA2) God exists in some possible or impossible world.

(IA3) Because God is simple and inimitable, His existence in any possible or impossible world is grounded in His existence in the actual world.

(IA4) So, God exists in the actual world.

I take it that this argument remains a species of Modal Argument (say, an "Inimitable Argument"); although as this last formulation shows, my defense of the Modal Argument rests on premises which are more obviously metaphysically controversial than those employed by Plantinga.

VI

My conclusion is modest. I have argued that Cartesian and Modal arguments can be reformulated to become dialectically effective: to at least meet my conditions (1–3) for efficacy. The reworked arguments are valid, and their premises may prove sufficiently plausible to some non-theist philosophers to render their conclusions significantly credible to them

⁷⁹So likewise, the Simplified Cartesian Argument is harder to parody than the Cartesian Argument.

(*sans* defeaters). Because non-theists have reason to accept these arguments' premises, even if they otherwise doubt their conclusion, the arguments are not "question-begging."

However, my reformulated ontological arguments will only appeal to a (perhaps hypothetical) minority audience, who accept several controversial metaphysical positions in combination. These include the suggestion that if God exists, He is simple and inimitable (perhaps because He can be meaningfully described as "Unlimited Being"), that God cannot be fully represented by non-divine entities, and Meinongianism or Abstractionism about modality.

I have argued that proponents of ontological arguments might exploit the fact that Meinongians and others posit non-existent objects or *abstracta* to ground fictional and modal truths. Plausibly, fictional and modal truths about "Unlimited Being" (or, the God of classical theism) cannot be grounded in non-existent objects, *abstracta*, or other non-divine entities. "*Esse Subsistens*" cannot describe a non-existent object, and non-divine *abstracta* cannot fully represent Unlimited Being. Accordingly, since Meinongians and others happily include exotic entities in their ontologies to account for fictional and modal truths in general, they have underlying motivation to introduce an (existent) Unlimited Being into their metaphysics to ground such truths about God. But God is exceptional: the existence of non-divine objects is separate from their essential properties, so the latter can characterize non-existent objects; likewise, non-divine entities can be represented by non-existent objects or *abstracta*. Accordingly, the motivation for holding that God's nature is instantiated because "Unlimited Being" is meaningful, or exists in some possible world, does not (obviously) carry over into non-divine cases. Thus, it is more challenging to parody my reformulated ontological arguments than their original counterparts.

There is a cost to my reformulation of ontological arguments: most philosophers reject the commitments which motivate belief in their premises. However, if historical and modern ontological arguments are invalid or question-begging, my reformulations may nevertheless be more persuasive. Admittedly, I have not conclusively established that my reformulated arguments should prove convincing to even a limited audience. My arguments require development, and I have only touched on the question of the compatibility of Meinongianism with Thomism or classical theism.

Critics of ontological arguments can respond to the arguments introduced in this paper in two ways. Firstly, they can show that my reformulated arguments fail to meet conditions (1–4) for dialectical efficacy for any philosophical audience. For instance, *contra* my analysis, perhaps even the select audience which I suggest might find my arguments persuasive should reject them because of the GO, QBO, Parody, or other forthcoming objections. Alternatively, they can engage in substantive metaphysical debate, arguing that although my arguments are effective by my definition, they are nevertheless unsound. Since van Inwagen

already dismisses Anselm's ontological argument on the basis that it assumes Meinongianism,⁸⁰ and Oppy no longer holds that the GO shows that *all* ontological arguments are ineffective, they might favour this latter response.

Provisionally, I suggest that the contention that ontological arguments are universally dialectically ineffective remains unproven.⁸¹

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⁸⁰van Inwagen, "Three Versions of the Ontological Argument," 144–151.

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