

Disputing the modal ontological argument: the evil god objection



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Criticisms of the Modal Ontological Argument (MOA) have largely centered on its two key claims, specifically (1) that necessary existence is a great-making property, and (2) that a maximally perfect being is metaphysically possible. For the purposes of this essay, I will grant these premises to be valid, and instead, I will focus on the implications of this argument. In this paper, I argue that the MOA can be used to prove the necessary existence of absurdities like an Evil God, since such beings are modally just as feasible as God. Thus, this objection poses a clear issue to the monotheistic traditions of Western religion, for the MOA can only be upheld as an immaculate proof of God's existence if other beings like Evil God are analogously accepted as well.

Examining the Modal Ontological Argument

The MOA appeals to the philosophical notion of *possible worlds* to prove the existence of God as *necessary*. When philosophers make statements about *the World*, they are merely referring to the totality of all things that exist in their present form (Van Inwagen 123). However, upon close inspection, it is easy to see that this is not the only manner in which the world could have arranged itself. For example, it is possible to imagine a world in which William & Mary was founded in 1694 or even in 1964. We can imagine even more absurd potentialities, like a world in which chickens hunt humans for sport. These plausible iterations of the world constitute *possible worlds* or alternate specifications of the way the world could have manifested (Van Inwagen 123). These *possible worlds* are all as valid as our world, which we

call the *actual world*, for the actual world is merely one of the many possibilities. Now let us proceed with the idea of necessary existence, or existence in every possible circumstance. Using the modal concept of possible worlds, we can add to this definition by further stating that necessary existence also entails existence in all possible worlds.

With these presumptions, we may proceed with the argument. God is traditionally defined as a maximally perfect being, or a being who contains all the 'great-making' properties, such as omnipotence and omniscience, Proponents of the MOA also ascribe necessary existence as one of God's great-making properties, for it is undoubtedly a greater property to exist in all possible worlds than to only exist in only a few. Thus, if a perfect being exists, he must also exist necessarily. From here, the MOA proceeds with the claim that, since the vast schematic of all possible worlds contain all possibilities, it is plausible to imagine at least one possible world in which such a perfect being does exist. However, as previously noted, if a perfect being were to exist, he would also exist necessarily, which would imply that this perfect being exists in the entire set of all possible worlds including the actual world. Thus, the possibility of God's existence in a possible world necessitates his existence in our actual world as well.

The Evil God Objection

Objections to past iterations of the Ontological Argument have mainly exposed how the argument's premises can also be used to justify the existence of implausible absurdities like perfect islands. Since existence in the actual world was deemed to be an essential part of perfection, perfect

beings and perfect islands could both be proven to exist under the argument's framework. Modal Ontological arguments have largely avoided these objections by inserting the property of necessary existence into their definitions of a perfect being □ a property that material objects cannot possess, since they are composed of smaller parts. Despite this, the property of necessary existence is not solely enjoyed by God, and resultantly, the MOA can also be used to prove the existence of another perfect being, if not a perfect island.

Let us now imagine the concept of an Evil God, similar to the malicious God posited by Daniel Chlastawa (116). Such an Evil God would be an omni-temporal being without parts, who possesses all the same traits as God, with the only difference being that he is maximally evil instead of maximally good. Such a perfect being meets the aforementioned prerequisites for necessary existence, and the idea of an Evil God is not internally inconsistent with the concept of necessary existence □ thus, such a parallel with the theistic God cannot be outwardly dismissed as invalid. Now, one might contend that maximal evil does not constitute a perfection, and I address this objection later in this paper. Continuing with the discussion, since the Evil God differs with the theistic God solely on the characteristic of omni-malevolence instead of omnibenevolence, which is an irrelevant trait for the purposes of the argument, Evil god can effectively be substituted with God in the MOA to prove that the possible existence of such a being necessitates existence in the actual world as well.

Notable Objections

One could object to the Evil God objection by claiming that such a being is impossible. However, according to Van Inwagen, the only condition which precludes possibility is an intrinsic impossibility (137). Since the concept of Evil God is not internally inconsistent, meaning it does not imply an innate contradiction, such a being is not impossible. Thus, the concept of an Evil God is not logically inconsistent with the concept of modal possibility.

The most significant objection which a theist could make would be to argue that the theistic God is more perfect than Evil God in light of his omnibenevolence, which would consequently grant some degree of supremacy over beings like Evil God. However, such an objection hinges on the ambiguous nature of a perfect being. While van Inwagen defines such a being as one who possesses all 'perfections' necessarily, he does not define the notion of perfection itself (125). However, from his work, we can reasonably assume that these perfections are maximally powerful and constitute some benefit for the being who possesses them. Let us analyze two of God's notable perfections, omnipotence and omniscience. Since power and wisdom can be used in a variety of moral applications, these two concepts are not predicated upon the idea of goodness. Instead, omnipotence and omniscience simply represent the maximization of two characteristics. Omnibenevolence and omni-malevolence similarly represent the maximization of a characteristic, namely good and evil, and they both constitute a beneficial maximization for each being. Consequently, Evil God and theistic God both possess all the same types of perfections, and in the only situation in which they do not, the differing property of evil is still

maximized to the same degree as God's goodness. Thus, there is no reason to assume that Evil God cannot be a perfect being.

Conclusion

The Evil God objection does not discredit the MOA as fallacious, rather it highlights how such an argument can inadvertently instantiate the existence of other god-like beings. By proving the concurrent necessary existence of Evil God, this objection shows that the MOA does not necessitate the existence of only a single god, rather a seemingly countless number of other perfect beings □ an issue which Anselm's original argument also faced. Ultimately, the idea of a plurality of Gods is innately inconsistent with the monotheistic traditions of western scripture, and it represents a proposition which most theists will undoubtedly reject.

[Word Count: 1195]

Works Cited

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