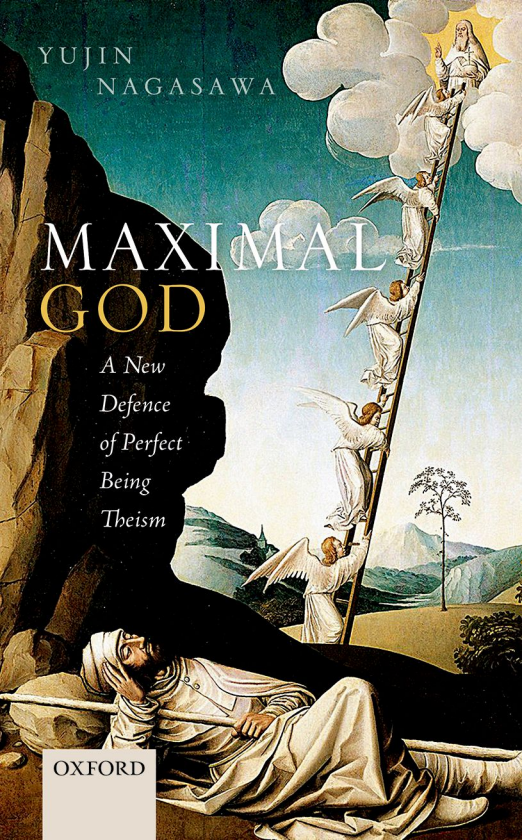


YUJIN  
NAGASAWA

# MAXIMAL GOD

*A New  
Defence  
of Perfect  
Being  
Theism*

OXFORD



Maximal God



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*A New Defence of Perfect  
Being Theism*

Yujin Nagasawa

OXFORD  
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*For Sylwia and Kazan, with love*



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See, through this air, this ocean, and this earth,  
All matter quick, and bursting into birth.  
Above, how high, progressive life may go!  
Around, how wide! how deep extend below?  
Vast chain of being! which from God began,  
Natures ethereal, human, angel, man,  
Beast, bird, fish, insect, what no eye can see,  
No glass can reach; from Infinite to thee,  
From thee to nothing.—On superior powers  
Were we to press, inferior might on ours;  
Or in the full creation leave a void,  
Where, one step broken, the great scale's destroy'd:  
From Nature's chain whatever link you strike,  
Tenth or ten thousandth, breaks the chain alike.

—Alexander Pope, *Essay on Man*



# Introduction

I do not remember how it happened, but when I was around fifteen years old I suddenly became fascinated by the existence of concepts, ideas, and thoughts. These elements of mental life are intangible—you cannot see or touch them. Yet they have ‘power’ to make people happy, sad, and even angry. They could make a couple get married but they could just as easily cause a war between countries. This seemed to me to be a mystery. I then wondered: Among uncountably many concepts, which one is the greatest? I wanted to find out the answer because I thought that I would feel comforted in conceiving such a concept. Is the greatest concept love, truth, or beauty? My tentative conclusion then was that whatever it is, it must be the concept of something that is truly incredible.

One day a mathematics teacher told me that there are proofs not only in mathematics but also in philosophy, and that there are indeed such things as philosophical proofs of the existence of God. I was excited to hear this—I did not know that the existence of God could be proved in the way that mathematical statements are proved. I went home and looked this up in an encyclopaedia. It turned out that what my teacher called proofs of the existence of God were not exactly proofs with mathematical precision, but *arguments* for the existence of God. (In defence of the teacher, Immanuel Kant and many other philosophers have used the term ‘proof’ in this context.) Among various arguments for the existence of God introduced in the encyclopaedia, I was particularly impressed by the ontological argument, which was originally introduced by Anselm of Canterbury in the eleventh century. The ontological argument is based on the concept of God as ‘the being thing than which no greater is conceivable’, which seemed to me to be the greatest concept—the very concept that I had been looking for. By appealing to this concept, Anselm develops a purely a priori argument for the existence of God. If Anselm’s argument is sound, then we do not need any

scientific investigation or empirical observation to derive the existence of God. We can sit down in an armchair and demonstrate through a mental exercise alone that God, as the being than which no greater is conceivable, exists in reality. I found it astonishing. I thought this could possibly be humanity's greatest discovery and, hence, I was puzzled as to why people do not talk about it all the time. (And I am still puzzled!) I had thought that if I could pinpoint the greatest concept, that would be a significant achievement. Anselm has not only discovered such a concept but also claims to have invented an argument for the existence of the very thing to which the concept refers.

The encyclopaedia I consulted also discussed an objection to the ontological argument. According to the objection, it is impossible that the existence of anything can be proved merely by analysing its concept. It is impossible, for example, to prove that there is a £20 note in your pocket by analysing the concept of a £20 note. Yet I speculated that perhaps God is an exception because, as the being than which no greater is conceivable, He might have a unique property that other beings lack. Schopenhauer says cynically that the ontological argument is only a 'charming joke', but there was something about the argument that made me not want to dismiss it as a philosophical joke. I thought it would be worth investigating this argument. Looking back now, that was when my long journey with perfect being theism began.

Perfect being theism is a form of theism based on Anselm's concept of God. According to perfect being theism, God, as the being than which no greater is conceivable or metaphysically possible, exists. Perfect being theism is widely accepted among Judeo-Christian-Islamic theists today. It is no exaggeration to say that nearly all the central debates over the existence and nature of God in the philosophy of religion rely on this form of theism. Even atheists and agnostics base their discussions on perfect being theism. Yet this view faces many criticisms. The aim of this book is to develop a radically new, game-changing defence of this important view. Perfect being theists typically subscribe to the 'omni God thesis', according to which God is the omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent being. I introduce an alternative to the omni God thesis, the 'maximal God thesis', according to which God is the being that has the maximal consistent set of knowledge, power, and benevolence. I argue that the maximal God thesis allows us to undermine nearly all existing arguments against perfect being theism simultaneously and,

moreover, to establish a new, successful version of the modal ontological argument for the existence of God.

This book has the following structure. In Part I, I offer a detailed survey of philosophical issues concerning perfect being theism. In particular, in Chapter 1, I consider perfect being theism in relation to various forms of theism and non-theism, such as monotheism, polytheism, pantheism, panentheism, and atheism. I also address the historical, cognitive, and developmental origins of perfect being theism and explain the philosophical merits of endorsing perfect being theism. I then provide an overview of arguments for and against perfect being theism. In Chapter 2, I consider precisely how we can understand the relationship between God and other possible beings in perfect being theism by referring to the notion of the ‘great chain of being’, a hierarchy of all beings. I introduce and examine various formulations of perfect being theism through distinct models of the great chain of being. I defend, with some caution, what I call the ‘radial model’ and the ‘linear model’.

In Part II, I focus on existing arguments against perfect being theism and develop a radically new, economical refutation of them. In particular, in Chapter 3, I classify existing arguments against perfect being theism into three types and offer a novel response to them using the maximal God thesis. I argue that my response undercuts nearly all the arguments against perfect being theism *all at once*. In Chapter 4, I try to strengthen my approach by responding to potential and existing criticisms. I conclude that there is no successful argument against perfect being theism.

Even if there is no successful argument against perfect being theism, critics can still question if there is a successful argument *for* perfect being theism. In Part III, therefore, I examine two versions of the ontological argument, the most prominent, direct argument for perfect being theism. In Chapters 5 and 6, I discuss the classical version of the ontological argument, which is normally attributed to the second chapter of Anselm’s *Proslogion*. I believe that refuting the argument is difficult because it is cleverly designed in such a way that no matter how one approaches it, one cannot undermine it without making a significant metaphysical or epistemic assumption, one that is likely to be contentious in its own right. I therefore pay particular attention to attempts to defeat the argument without making any significant assumptions. In particular, in Chapter 5, I examine Peter Millican’s attempt to refute the argument

which targets only shallow, logical details of the argument. In Chapter 6, I examine various attempts to reveal the absurdity of the argument by creating its parallel parodies. I argue that none of these attempts succeeds. I conclude at that point that as far as the classical ontological argument is concerned, perfect being theists and their critics end in a draw. Although there are powerful objections to the argument, they cannot undermine it without raising issues that are controversial independently of their relationships to the argument. In Chapter 7, I focus on the modal, as opposed to the classical, ontological argument for perfect being theism. The most controversial premise of the argument is the so-called ‘possibility premise’ which says that it is possible that God exists. It is relatively uncontroversial that the argument goes through once this premise is shown to be true. I consider existing arguments for the possibility premise and claim that none of them is compelling. I then introduce a new way of establishing the premise that uses, again, the maximal God thesis.

I hope to show over the course of this book that we have good reason to think that perfect being theism is true, because the maximal concept of God allows us to refute arguments *against* perfect being theism while establishing a robust argument *for* it.

# PART I

## Perfect Being Theism



# 1

## Conceptual, Historical, and Cognitive Roots of Perfect Being Theism

### 1.1 Introduction

Perfect being theism is arguably the most widely accepted form of traditional monotheism. It has been the central notion in the philosophy of religion over the last few centuries and it has always been the focus of philosophers of religion when they address the existence and nature of God. It is a view that is derived from (or at least inspired by) Anselm's *Proslogion*. In that work, Anselm proposes (or at least hints at or implies) the following definition of God:

- (1) God is something than which no greater is conceivable.<sup>1</sup>

The term 'thinkable' is sometimes used instead of 'conceivable'. Anselm also talks about whether the being in question can 'exist in the mind (rather than in reality)'. I assume here that 'thinkable', 'conceivable', and 'can exist in the mind' all mean the same. Anselm also seems to endorse the following thesis:

- (2) God is something than which no greater is metaphysically possible.

<sup>1</sup> Logan contends that Anselm does not intend to offer a definition of God because 'God is not susceptible of definition in the dialectical tradition in which Anselm is operating' (Logan 2009, p. 91). That is why I say Anselm at least *hints at* or *implies* this definition. Having said that, it seems puzzling to me that Anselm would have written that he tried to 'find one single argument . . . that by itself would suffice to prove that God really exists' if he really thought that God cannot be defined (Anselm 1965, originally 1077–8, p. 103). In any case, as I explain below, Anselm scholarship is not my primary concern in this book.

Thesis (1) is at least partly epistemic because it defines God in terms of what is *conceivable*. Thesis (2), however, is purely metaphysical because it defines God in terms of what is *metaphysically possible*. It is contentious whether (2) can be derived from (1). As I explain in detail in Chapter 7, philosophers dispute whether conceivability entails metaphysical possibility.<sup>2</sup> This is a broader philosophical dispute which is independent of the debate over perfect being theism. A derivation from conceivability to metaphysical possibility is a crucial step in the so-called ‘conceivability argument’ against physicalism in the philosophy of mind. Taking a closer look, however, it seems impossible to derive (2) from (1) on the assumption that conceivability entails metaphysical possibility. The derivation of (2) from (1) is based on the following reasoning: ‘A being that is greater than God is inconceivable; therefore, a being that is greater than God is metaphysically impossible.’ Thus what we need here is the assumption that *inconceivability* entails metaphysical *impossibility*, which is distinct from the assumption that conceivability entails metaphysical possibility. (The thesis that conceivability entails metaphysical possibility is logically equivalent to the thesis that metaphysical impossibility entails inconceivability, not the claim that inconceivability entails metaphysical impossibility. Hence, if conceivability entails metaphysical possibility, we can derive (1) from (2), but not (2) from (1).<sup>3</sup>)

Notice that thesis (1) does not say that God is something than which no *equal* or greater is conceivable. Similarly, thesis (2) does not say that God is something than which no *equal* or greater is metaphysically possible. Hence, it leaves open the possibility that something that is as great as God is conceivable or metaphysically possible. That is, theses (1) and (2) appear to be compatible with a version of polytheism which says that there is more than one being than which no greater is conceivable or metaphysically possible. Some philosophers argue that there cannot be more than one such being because it is impossible to obtain a situation in which such beings compete with each other. If, for example, something than which no greater is conceivable or metaphysically possible is an omnipotent being, perhaps there cannot be more than one such being because a competition between multiple omnipotent beings that are trying to perform opposing

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Chalmers (1996), Gendler and Hawthorne (2002), and Kirk (2005).

<sup>3</sup> The thesis that conceivability entails metaphysical possibility is directly relevant if one attempts to derive the metaphysical possibility of God from the conceivability of God.