

The problem with parody modal ontological arguments

Abstract:

Ontological Arguments are arguments that try to argue from the concept of God to his existence, generally without the need of any other consideration. A common way of demonstrating their absurdity has been to appeal to parody ontological arguments. In this paper, I consider one such ontological argument namely the Modal Ontological Argument, and show that it is immune to parody versions. I argue two things; first, there is a crucial asymmetry between parody versions and the Modal ontological argument, and second, even if successful, parody versions provide further support for the conclusion of the traditional modal ontological argument. I make use of Ibn Sina's distinction between mere Modal Necessity and Ontological Necessity.

Keywords: Modal Ontological Argument; Ontological Argument; Ibn Sina; Avicenna; Necessary Existence

1. Introduction

Suppose a person were to thoroughly understand what it means to be God, would they without the need of any other consideration, conclude that God exists? In an attempt to answer this question in the affirmative, a family of arguments known as *Ontological Arguments* were born. Such arguments rely solely on “armchair reasoning” to prove theism, or “in other words, ontological arguments are arguments from what are typically alleged to be none but analytic, *a priori* and necessary premises to the conclusion that God exists”¹. Needless to say, like all arguments for God, Ontological Arguments were also subjected to extensive scrutiny. One strategy employed against them has been an attempt at producing some parody argument that concludes something absurd or undesirable for the theist. In this paper I shall consider one such version of a parody argument against one of the most promising versions of the ontological argument, one that relies on modal reasoning, namely the *Modal Ontological Argument* (MOA). The parody version that I will be considering is the Modal Ontological Argument for a limited God. Detractors of the MOA suggest that we can use the MOA to conclude the existence of a limited God instead of the traditional unlimited God of Abrahamic theism. If this parody argument is successful then it could mean one of these things; either the conclusion that a limited God exists is such that we do not need God anymore, or a limited God and God exist independent of one another, or something is wrong with the MOA. Each of these possible results is undesirable for any traditional Abrahamic theist who solely relies on the MOA. I shall be demonstrating why I think any MOA for a limited God is unsuccessful by relying on the distinction between mere *modal necessity* and *ontological necessity*. This distinction shall bring to light the problem with any and all parody

¹ See Graham Oppy, Joshua Rasmussen, and Joseph Schmid, “Ontological Arguments” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman. Fall 2025 Edition. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2025/entries/ontological-arguments/>.

MOAs. Note, I shall not be discussing *reverse* ontological arguments, which I understand to be arguments that are meant to conclude the opposite conclusion (i.e. God does not exist). I shall only focus on parody modal ontological arguments, which are meant to show that a similar reasoning can be used to conclude the existence of other necessary beings.

2. Modal Ontological Argument for a Limited God

The traditional structure of the MOA can be represented as follows:²

- i. It is possible that God exists. (Premise)
- ii. God is not a contingent being, i.e., either it is not possible that God exists, or it is necessary that God exists. (Premise)
- iii. Hence, it is necessary that God exists. (From i and ii)
- iv. Hence, God exists.

The MOA makes use of the fact that by definition, God is a maximally perfect being and metaphysical necessity seems like a perfection, thus by definition, he must either span across all possible worlds, or be absent from all of them. We can further dig into this to reveal the following skeleton:

- v. A necessary being is possible.
- vi. If a necessary being is possible then it is actual.
- vii. Therefore, a necessary being is actual.

Premise (vi) is supported via S5, which states that if something is possibly necessary, then it is necessary.³ Generally, the possibility premise, i.e. premise (v) is what is in question. Defenders of the MOA attempt to motivate this possibility premise, whereas detractors attempt to demonstrate the flaw in the method of the defender. One route the detractor may take is to develop a parody argument. I will be discussing what I consider to be the most interesting parody MOA, namely the MOA for an imperfect or a limited God.⁴ Limited God (LG) may be defined as a being which is defined almost exactly like God, meaning it may also be defined as necessary, however it shall have some limit. We shall go with the following definition; LG shall be defined as God with limited goodness (i.e. a God who isn't wholly good). As LG is not maximally perfect, LG's necessary existence would have to be added to its definition, as it does not intuitively seem to follow from rest of the definition. A parody MOA for a LG would thus be as follows:

- I. LG is possible.
- II. If LG is possible, then it is actual.
- III. Therefore, LG is actual.

On face value, this argument seems to be identical to the MOA. However, I will explain in the next section that this argument is in fact different from the MOA in a crucial way. This asymmetry does not allow it (or any other parody argument for that matter) to defeat the MOA.

² Oppy, Joshua Rasmussen, and Joseph Schmid, "Ontological Arguments".

³ James Garson, "Modal Logic" in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman. Spring 2024 Edition. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2024/entries/logic-modal/>.

⁴ Richard M. Blaber, "A Modal Ontological Argument for the Existence of an Imperfect God," *SocArXiv*, March 27 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/ejv52>.

3. The Flaw: Modal Necessity vs Ontological Necessity

Until now we have been using the term *necessary* without qualification. What do we mean when we say a being is necessary? A being is considered necessary if it cannot fail to exist.⁵ If this was all there was to this term, then the parody MOA and the traditional MOA would in fact be similar. However, that is not the case. Muslim philosopher Ibn Sina differentiated between a necessary being that is *necessary in itself* and a necessary being that is *necessary by another*.⁶ He points out (I think correctly) that a being may not fail to exist due to two reasons; either the nature of the being is such that it cannot fail to exist (necessary in itself), or the being cannot fail to exist because its existence is entailed by a being of the former kind, thus, its necessity is borrowed so to speak (necessary by another). This distinction between necessary by itself and necessary by another has come to be known as the distinction between *Ontological Necessity* and mere *Modal Necessity* respectively, and this distinction has recently been somewhat defended to a degree.⁷ A being may be modally necessary, but that tells us nothing about *why* that is the case. It may be the case that the being is also ontologically necessary, or it may be the case that the being is dependent on another being which is ontologically necessary. God is considered to be ontologically necessary rather than merely modally necessary. For the purposes of this paper, the words shall be defined as follows:

A being is *ontologically necessary*, if and only if its nature is such that it cannot fail to exist and it is in-principle uncausable, thereby possessing necessary existence simply by virtue of what it is. By contrast, a being is *merely modally necessary* if it is either necessary by virtue of being dependent on some other necessary being, or it is just a brute necessity, either way it is *not* in-principle uncausable. Ibn Sina's dichotomy is such that there are no brute necessities, thus, his dichotomy entails that all merely modally necessary beings are dependent on some other necessary being. Note, both mere modal necessity and ontological necessity count as metaphysical necessity, that is to say it is metaphysically impossible for both a merely modally necessary being and an ontologically necessary being to fail to exist.

After having made this distinction, it becomes clear that the parody MOA is equivocating on the term 'necessary', for all parody MOAs show is that some being may be metaphysically necessary, they tell us nothing about whether that being is ontologically necessary or not. One may ask why is it significant though? The reason is; if a being possesses mere modal necessity and it cannot be shown that the being is also ontologically necessary, then we should think the necessity of the being is borrowed, for if it isn't necessary by itself then it is necessary by another (more on this dichotomy in section 5). Which therefore leads us to conclude the existence of another being which is ontologically necessary or necessary by itself, in our context, the being is God.⁸ Therefore, *any parody MOA, if successful, would only be further reason to think that God exists*. At this point one may object as follows; 'Proponents of Limited God MOAs don't advocate those arguments. Rather, they think something like this: these arguments clearly don't show the existence of

⁵ Matthew Davidson, "God and Other Necessary Beings" in The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, edited by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman. Fall 2024 Edition. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2024/entries/god-necessary-being/>.

⁶ Mohammad Saleh Zarepour, *Necessary Existence and Monotheism: An Avicennian Account of the Islamic Conception of Divine Unity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 13-22.

⁷ See Hayyan Sheikh, "Ibn Sina's Revenge: From Modal Necessity to Ontological Necessity", *Philosophia* 53(2), 895-903.

⁸ Sheikh, "Ibn Sina's Revenge".

LGs, and they are alike enough in their reasoning and premises to MOAs that the latter fail to show the existence of God. The proponent of the parody version simply doesn't care if their parody can be used as an argument for the existence of God, they care that their argument isn't any good, and that's its relevantly similar to MOAs. The distinction between ontological and modal necessity has not been shown to be relevant.'

While this objection is enlightening, it raises a new question; in what sense is the parody MOA meant to be a parody? Surely it isn't a *reductio*, for nothing absurd has been concluded. One might think the existence of a LG is absurd on other grounds, but that hasn't been demonstrated by the argument. Recall, earlier in the paper I mentioned three possible undesirable conclusions for the theist; either LG exists independently of God, or the conclusion that LG exists is such that God is not required, or there is something wrong with the MOA. However, due to the distinction between mere modal and ontological necessity, it becomes clear that the first two options are ruled out. There is nothing undesirable for the theist (at least philosophically), if a bunch of limited necessary beings exist, so long as they are all dependent on God. The distinction between mere modal necessity and ontological necessity is relevant in this case because it is *precisely* this distinction which rules out any possible result that the theist might find absurd, thereby allowing theists to embrace the parody argument as well. The proponent of the parody version would like to insist that it is the third option that has been proven, but how? To say that 'clearly this parody argument is a bad argument for its conclusion' is just question begging. Had the parody version resulted in a limited yet ontologically necessary being, then there was a case to be made that something absurd has been concluded, for one may be able to reasonably argue that limited beings could possibly have a cause, thus a limited ontologically necessary being is impossible. However, if all that has been concluded is the existence of some merely modally necessary being, then it becomes unclear what's the issue. A theist might object that even merely modally necessary beings cannot be limited, fair enough, but that defeats *only* parody MOAs, not the traditional MOA, for the problem with the parody MOA in this case would be its possibility premise that 'a limited modally necessary being is possible.'

One might also object by asking; 'Why can't LG also be considered ontologically necessary?' There are ways to respond to this, but this question changes the discourse to something entirely different. Notice, this question is pretty much identical to the 'gap problem.' The gap problem may be understood as the problem that arguments for God usually conclude beings that share one or two features with God, but it is unclear why we should think such beings just are God. For example, the contingency argument concludes the existence of a necessary being, but it is unclear why this necessary being should be God? This problem led to the creation of the distinction between stage one and stage two cosmological arguments, where stage one is the argument that concludes some foundational being, and stage two argues said being is God.⁹ Ultimately, if my line of reasoning up until this point is sound, then it would have reduced the problem of parody MOAs to the gap problem. The former just ends up being a version of the latter. This revelation would allow the theist to kill two birds with one stone, one would be able to reinforce both MOAs and cosmological arguments by dealing with just one problem, namely the gap problem.

As for the gap problem itself, since it is not the subject of this paper, an extensive discussion of the same is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I direct readers towards

⁹ Simón Tadeo Ocampo, "Strategies for stage II of cosmological arguments", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 96, no. 1 (2024), 55-88.

Ocampo's compilation of various stage two arguments meant to deal with the gap problem.¹⁰ Briefly though, some routes one could explore are as follows:

First, as has been argued by Byerly and others,¹¹ in the case of God, we can *see* why he is ontologically necessary, that is to say it is plausible that if there were a God then he would be ontologically necessary rather than merely modally necessary. Recall, the MOA relies on the intuition that a maximally perfect being, if not impossible, would be ontologically necessary. However, the same cannot be said for a limited being of any sort. It is not as immediately clear why we should think that if there were a limited God, he would also be ontologically necessary, rather, this needs to be argued. To simply add ontological necessity to the definition of a LG seems question begging, moreover, this leads us to another way of dealing with this objection. As I hinted earlier; it seems possible that limits can have further causal explanations for we can possibly further explain why the being possesses said limit. For example, if a being is limited in spatial extension, it seems possible that we can further explain said limit by appealing to some cause. If that is correct, then an ontologically necessary being cannot have any limits, for it is in principle uncausable (by definition), thus it cannot even possibly have a further causal explanation. If one further objects that there is still a gap between unlimited and perfect, one may point to Rasmussen's treatment of this objection.¹²

All in all, the parody MOA is flawed in the sense that it is not a parody of the traditional MOA due to the distinction between the types of necessity I highlighted. The parody MOA is also unsuccessful in its aim, for even if sound, they provide further support for the conclusion of the traditional MOA as opposed to providing reasons for doubt. The parody MOA hasn't been shown to be a *reductio*, nor does it conclude anything undesirable for the theist. A proponent of the MOA, could happily admit that a parody MOA does in fact successfully conclude the existence of some other merely modally necessary being, and while the detractor might insist it is a bad argument for its conclusion, the detractor hasn't successfully shown why that is the case. At this point the reader may have other questions or objections. Further, I shall attempt to anticipate and comment on them.

4. Potential Objections

In this section I will comment on some other potential objections.

A.) *Why think a merely modally necessary being derives its necessity from some other being? Or why should we accept Ibn Sina's dichotomy?*

It is beyond the scope of this paper to give a thorough defense of Ibn Sina's dichotomy, for something close to the same, see Sheikh (2025). However, I shall provide some other relevant considerations. They are as follows:

¹⁰ The so-called 'gap problem' in cosmological arguments concerns the transition from establishing the existence of a first cause or necessary being (Stage I) to identifying that being with the God of classical theism (Stage II). While Stage I may demonstrate that some necessary, uncaused reality exists, it does not by itself establish that this reality is personal, omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, or otherwise possesses the distinctive attributes traditionally ascribed to God. The philosophical challenge, therefore, is to justify this inferential step rather than merely assuming it. Contemporary discussions have accordingly focused on developing deductive, abductive, and explanatory strategies that bridge this conceptual gap by deriving specifically theistic attributes from the conclusions of the cosmological argument. See Ocampo, "Strategies for stage II of Cosmological Arguments".

¹¹ T. Ryan Byerly, "From a Necessary Being to a Perfect Being," *Analysis* 79, 1 (2019): 10–17.

¹² See Joshua Rasmussen, "An Argument for a Supreme Foundation" in *A New Theist Response to the New Atheists*, edited by Kevin Vallier and Joshua Rasmussen (New York: Routledge, 2019), 21–32.

One way to go about arguing for this dichotomy would be to make use of some *principle of sufficient reason (PSR)* that allows for necessary beings to come under scrutiny as well. A more modest approach however, would be an abductive one. We may reasonably prefer theories with fewer brute necessities. The best theory would thus be the one where if there is a foundational necessary being, then its nature is such that we cannot ask ‘why is the being necessary.’ Giving an explanation for why a being is necessary would mean that if its necessity is not essential, then it is further explained, thereby resulting in Ibn Sina’s dichotomy (or at least some version of it that suffices), and of course a foundational necessary being would either be brute or ontologically necessary, and if we prefer fewer brute necessities, then we arrive at a theory on which Ibn Sina’s dichotomy holds. One doesn’t need to be committed to the idea that the question ‘why is a being necessary’ has to have an answer, rather, the simple fact that answering the question supports the truth of theism may be seen as an advantage for theism. A third reason to prefer the truth of Ibn Sina’s dichotomy would be simplicity. To suggest that his dichotomy is false while accepting the existence of necessary beings would be to postulate the existence of a *third* kind of a necessary being; a being that is ‘necessary by happenstance’, which seems unnecessary when we need only postulate two.

B.) There’s no explaining why something is necessary. Necessity is the end of explaining you can do.

This objection is interesting because it assumes some sort of PSR. It would be interesting to see what precisely that PSR is and whether it entails mere modal necessity or ontological necessity. Though, as I mentioned above, one does not have to be strongly committed to there being explained necessities, rather one must only prefer them. Moreover, if an atheist makes this objection, it would place a massive burden of proof on the atheist: to argue that it is impossible for a merely modally necessary being to have some further explanation, even if such an explanation is not required. I suspect this objection to be based on a misunderstanding of traditional contingency arguments. Traditional contingency arguments merely result in necessary beings not *requiring* explanations, that does not entail that they cannot have an explanation.¹³ The question of what sort of being cannot have an explanation is a further important question.

C.) You only discussed one parody argument.

I discuss only one version of the parody MOA because every parody MOA argues for the existence of a necessary being which is limited, as an unlimited being could plausibly be considered God. The MOA for a LG is the one I picked as it is the one which is most similar to the traditional MOA.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, I hope to have demonstrated that the distinction between more modal necessity and ontological necessity is of vital importance when discussing the Modal Ontological Argument. When this distinction is made, it exposes a flaw with parody modal ontological arguments, i.e. they equivocate on the term necessary. Parody versions conclude the existence of a being that is modally necessary as opposed to proving a being that is ontologically necessary. This is a crucial asymmetry between the two arguments. Moreover, I showed if

¹³ Bruce Reichenbach, “Cosmological Argument” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman. Summer 2024 Edition. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2024/entries/cosmological-argument/>.

Ibn Sina's dichotomy is correct, then it would result in modally necessary beings depending on some other being, thus eventually resulting in the existence of an ontologically necessary being. This would mean that parody versions, even if sound, provide further support for the conclusion of the modal ontological argument as opposed to providing reasons for doubt, and hence can be embraced by theists for nothing absurd is concluded by MOAs for the theist. The detractor would need to say something more than just the assertion that 'clearly parody MOAs are bad, therefore MOAs are bad.' It remains a mere assertion.

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