Maximal God: A New Defence of Perfect Being Theism, by Yujin Nagasawa. Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. viii + 225. $61.00 (hardcover).

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For nearly a thousand years, St. Anselm's ontological argument has exhibited a curious necromantic cycle. Generations of critics declare the argument dead, only to see the thing reanimated by the cunning incantations of a Descartes, a Gödel, or a Plantinga. It must be frustrating.

In this compact and ambitious book, Nagasawa sets out to vindicate the ontological argument and the perfect being theology it recommends. Nagasawa also aims to refute atheological arguments from evil—and other atheological arguments besides. I'm afraid, then, that St. Anselm's critics are in for some more frustration. So too are some theists, I suspect—for Nagasawa suggests that their tradition is mistaken in insisting on the thesis that God is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent.

Nagasawa has published extensively on perfect being theology and related matters; his views there are already well known to metaphysicians and philosophers of religion. And those views haven't changed much, so

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far as I can tell. In substance and in style—the prose is direct and unadorned throughout—this book contains few surprises. Still, it is good to see Nagasawa's particular spin on perfect being metaphysics systematically integrated, updated here or there, and ultimately deployed in the service of a novel and positive case for the ontological argument.

The book divides into thirds. In the first, Nagasawa develops perfect being theism, according to which there is a God who is the greatest metaphysically possible being. In the second, Nagasawa argues that standard atheological arguments may be refuted by replacing the view that God is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent with a version of perfect being theism. In the third, Nagasawa defends various formulations of the ontological argument and offers a new case for the possibility premise in the modal ontological argument.

Thus, the book in broad outline. Let's slow down and observe in more detail. In what follows, I'll discuss three novel and particularly interesting moves Nagasawa makes—one from each third of the book.

Perfect being theism fits nicely with a great chain of being—a ranking by greatness of all things big and small, with God at the top (50–52). But affirming that chain isn't easy. It seems to require that everything be commensurable with everything else when it comes to greatness, an implication that has seemed implausible to many. Which is greater, the critics ask—a lampshade or a rainbow? How about an aardvark or an escalator? And there are harder cases too: how about a mathematical genius who's bad at music or a musical genius who is bad at math? (73)

Nagasawa replies that these puzzling pairs are either instances of *equal* greatness or that they indeed involve one member of the pair being greater than the other—perhaps in ways that are difficult to calculate or understand (75–76). So Nagasawa does defend this *linear* model of greatness. But he also supplies an intriguing alternative—a *radial* model. On the radial view, God's greatness does not consist in resting at the top of one chain of all beings. Rather, God's greatness consists in resting at the top of every local chain of non-divine beings, of which chains there may be many (62).

It is not enough to say that, on perfect being theism, God is great—whether by being at the top of the one great chain of being or by being at the top of a hoard of local chains. One wants to know the criteria according to which God enjoys those elevated positions (63). Nagasawa has a good deal to say here and uses diagrams to some effect; of particular value are the distinctions he draws between various possible relations of relative greatness (59–60) and the interactions between great-making properties, especially those that come in degrees (65–70). The position on which Nagasawa lands—the *maximal God* view—has it that God tops off the relevant chains by having the maximal consistent set of knowledge, power, and benevolence (92). Crucially, this view does not unquestionably entail that God is omniscient, omnipotent, or omnibenevolent (93).

Theists have widely maintained that God is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent. A standard atheological program, accordingly, takes this shape: show that those omni-properties are incoherent or incompatible with some known fact (82–88) and conclude on that basis that there is no God. Atheists have argued, for example, that omnipotence is incoherent and so God, conceived as a being that is omnipotent, could not exist. And they've argued, furthermore, that the various omni-properties are together incompatible with various imperfections of the actual world—evil, suffering, divine hiddenness, and so on. And so God, conceived as a being possessed of all the omni-properties, does not exist.

Dozens of atheological arguments take this broad form. They purport to target theism, but in fact take aim at omni-properties. Nagasawa has an efficient and unified reply—a refutation, he calls it—to all those arguments at once. Nagasawa claims that not one of these arguments undermines perfect being theism. They may or may not undermine the view that there is an omniscient, omnipotent, or omnibenevolent God. But there is "no obvious reason to accept" that a maximally great being must have those omni-properties, and so the atheological arguments, even if sound, do not tell against perfect being theism (90–91). Nagasawa does not, to be clear, reject the claims that God is omniscient, omnipotent, or omnibenevolent; he claims instead that "this is an open question, on which the cogency of perfect being theism does not hinge" (93).

Nagasawa's refutation may not be as exciting as it initially appears. It leaves untouched evidential formulations of the atheological argument from evil (86n10)—arguably the most potent of all atheological arguments. And in a way, Nagasawa's refutation retreads familiar territory. It would surprise few (certainly not Professor Mackie) to learn that theism may be preserved by giving up on the omni-properties (117). Nagasawa is sensitive to this concern, and is careful to note several times over that he does *not advocate* the thesis that God is not omniscient, omnipotent, or omnibenevolent (118). Rather, he holds that theists may regard that thesis as an open option.

I wonder, though, just how open this option is. Take omniscience. More than a few theistic traditions insist that God is omniscient. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, teaches as a matter of *de fide* dogma that God's knowledge is infinite and comprehensive. Could a faithful Catholic believer maintain that God's omniscience is an open question, even though the Church teaches with the highest degree of certainty that God knows everything there is to know? I don't think so. And it's not just Catholics or Christians who face this bind. The Qur'an, too, appears to teach that Allah is omnipotent. Could a devout Muslim maintain that it is an open question whether Allah is omnipotent, even though the Qur'an appears to plainly teach as much? This is far from obvious. Theists from some Vedic traditions, finally, have commitments here too—the *Gītā* appears to teach that Lord Kṛiṣhṇa is omnipotent. Could a dutiful student of that

text follow Nagasawa and say that the degree of power enjoyed by Lord Kṛiṣhṇa was an open question or somehow unsettled? Again, this is hard to see.

Perhaps the kind of traditionally rooted theist I've discussed is not Nagasawa's audience. Could his program appeal to a more rootless or purely philosophical theist? I'm not so sure. The God of the Philosophers has long been thought to play a variety of theoretical roles. God, we're told, is the explanation for why there is anything at all, the cause of the universe's beginning to exist, the ground of being, the source of moral obligation, goodness itself, and so on. It is unclear, to be sure, whether a being of any kind can fulfill these roles. But it seems to me that Nagasawa's refutation makes things even worse. For it is even more unclear whether those roles can be filled by a being that is not, after all, omniscient, omnipotent, or omnibenevolent (or if that being's omni-property status is an open question).

I tentatively conclude that Nagasawa's refutation—exciting though it may seem—comes at a price for a wide range of theists.

The ontological argument comes in various formulations and flavors. So too the objections. Nagasawa ably treats a host of these objections in the final section. His treatment here is state-of-the-art and often, to my mind, convincing. As it turns out, just about every objection requires substantive metaphysical or epistemic assumptions—so refuting the argument is just as hard as advancing it (152). This is not to say, though, that the argument succeeds (180).

But Nagasawa does think one version indeed succeeds—the *modal* ontological argument. Nagasawa models his formulation after Plantinga's (183–184; 204–205). Plantinga distinguishes *maximal excellence* (being omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent in a world) from *maximal greatness* (being maximally excellent in every possible world). Maximal greatness is possibly instantiated, Plantinga's argument says, and so by some widely accepted modal theorems, maximal excellence is in fact instantiated.

Nagasawa likewise distinguishes *real maximal excellence* (having the maximal consistent set of knowledge, power, and benevolence in a world) from *maximal greatness* (being really maximally excellent in every possible world). Real maximal greatness is possibly instantiated, Nagasawa's argument says, and so by the same widely accepted modal theorems, real maximal excellence is in fact instantiated (205).

What's to say about these arguments? It all comes down to the possibility premise. Nagasawa offers a brief and friendly survey of five extant arguments for that key claim (186–202). This is useful, if only to correct the common but dubious claim that the possibility premise begs the question. There are, in fact, *arguments* for that premise, and critics of the modal ontological argument would do well to engage them directly. But Nagasawa does not rely on extant arguments—none are compelling, he says—to

establish the key possibility claim (186). He instead offers his own case for the premise. It appears in the penultimate page of the main text:

> The maximal God thesis explicates the perfect being thesis by saying that God is the being that has the maximal consistent set of knowledge, power, and benevolence . . . we can automatically derive that it is possible that God exists because here God is understood as the being that has the maximal consistent set of knowledge, power, and benevolence. In other words, the maximal concept of God is *by definition* internally coherent. . . . This guarantees the possibility of the existence of God. That is, the possibility of God's existence comes for free given the maximal God thesis." (204, emphasis original)

A neat trick, to be sure. But does it succeed? For two reasons, I'm not sanguine.

First, note the slide from *consistency* to *possibility*. The claim here appears to be that, if it is *consistent* that some properties be jointly exemplified then it is therefore *possible.* But there are familiar reasons to question any straightforward inference along these lines. Some sentences have a model (and thus satisfy formal definitions of consistency) but nonetheless express propositions that cannot be true—think here of "Yujin is a prime number." Maybe I'm being pedantic. Maybe "consistent" just means "possible." Then at least we'd have a *valid* inference—but hardly a convincing one.

Second, note the definite description ("the maximal . . ."). This appears to require that there be just *one* such maximal consistent set. Is there just one such set, though? Is there exactly one combination of knowledge, power, and benevolence—a combination falling short of full omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence—greater than any other? Nagasawa claims that the burden here lies with the critics (106). So here's a case. It seems to me that a being with {knowledge4.9, power5, and benevolence5} may well be *tied* for greatness with one who enjoys {knowledge5, power4.9, and benevolence5}—much like a musical genius who's not so good at math may well tie for greatness with a math genius who is not so good at music. I have no conclusive argument for my judgment about the case. But in its light, Nagasawa's uniqueness assumption isn't *obvious*—certainly not obvious enough to warrant claims to a "free" or "automatic" guarantee of God's possible existence. This is precisely where one would hope for argument. Nagasawa, alas, does not oblige.

This is, again, an ambitious book. Will Nagasawa's arguments significantly improve the reception and reputation of the ontological argument? Somehow I doubt it. But if you've ever found yourself intrigued and annoyed by that argument, you'll find this book a good read. Thanks to this book and the literature it will spawn, the ontological argument will no doubt continue in its curious cycle. I can't help but think that St. Anselm would be proud.

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