

The Modal Bridge Problem

Conceivability, Greatness, and the Illicit Move from Concept to Instance

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Central claim

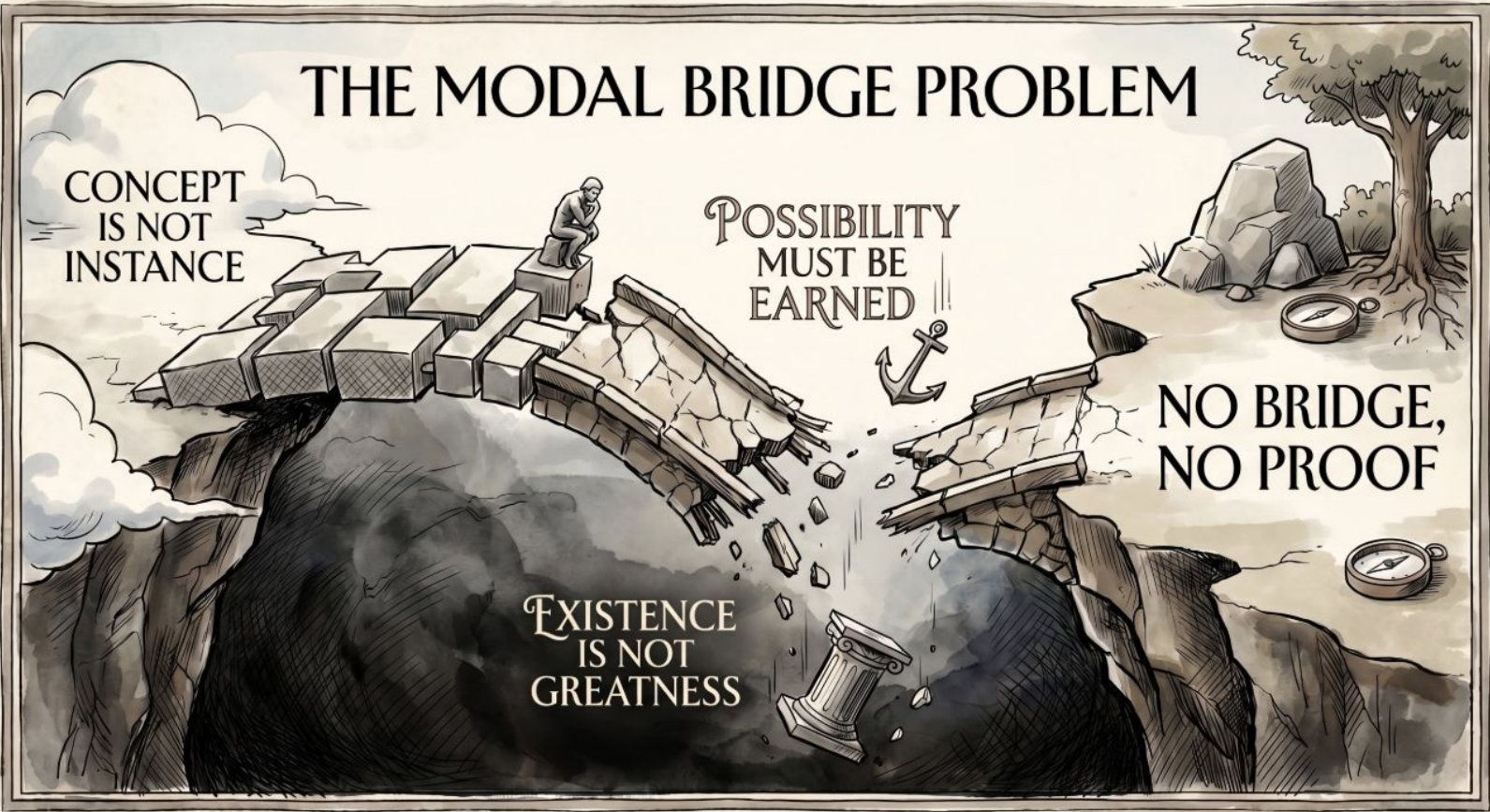
The modal ontological argument does not prove that a deity exists. It turns a disputed modal premise—the metaphysical possibility of a necessarily existent maximally great being—into actuality by a valid rule, but it supplies no public reason to prefer that premise over live incompatible modal claims. Until that preference is earned, the proof is a conditional theorem, not evidence; independent cases for theism or atheism remain open.

Preview:

Starting concept	Required bridge	Argumentative pressure	Warranted verdict
A maximally great God-concept can be described, and the S5 consequence relation can be stated precisely.	Description or conceivability must warrant metaphysical possibility; maximality must warrant necessary existence; the chosen modal logic must fit metaphysical reality.	Possible nonexistence is also intelligible, coherence is disputed, and the forward premise already carries the conclusion's ontological weight.	The derivation shows what follows <i>if</i> its bridges are true. Until they are independently supported, it should not raise credence by itself.

The conclusion is deliberately bounded. It does not show that every God-concept is impossible, deny responsible a priori modal knowledge, or establish atheism by a reverse proof. It identifies what an ontological argument must add before conceptual structure becomes public warrant for an instance.

Visual preview:



The broken span separates a concept that can be entertained from an instance that reality contains. The falling stones mark three unsupported moves—from greatness language to existence, from ordinary conceivability to metaphysical possibility, and from a possible necessary being to actuality. The image diagnoses a missing warrant; it does not depict the impossibility of every deity.

Abstract

Ontological arguments promise an unusually short route from a concept to an existent deity. Their modal versions are formally impressive: in an appropriate modal logic, the possible necessary existence of a maximally great being entails its actual or necessary existence. The principal result of this paper is that the derivation remains a conditional theorem rather than a public proof until four distinct bridges are earned. The target God-concept must be coherent and determinate; conceivability must responsibly license the relevant kind of metaphysical possibility; necessary existence must follow from the target's nature rather than from a stipulative definition; and the supporting reasons must discriminate the forward possibility premise from live incompatible modal premises.

The paper develops a modal bridge audit that joins older objections from Kant, Gaunilo, and modal critics to recent debate over reverse modal ontological arguments. Conceivability can sometimes guide modal judgment, but sophisticated accounts qualify the inference heavily. Likewise, recent work finds formal asymmetries that can favor a reverse argument in modal systems weaker than S5. Neither point licenses a shortcut. A logical consequence relation determines what follows from premises; it does not supply the epistemic warrant for choosing those premises or that logic as a model of metaphysical reality. The scope of the conclusion is therefore exact: the familiar modal ontological argument does not, by itself, warrant a credence increase in the instantiation of its maximally great God-concept. This does not prove atheism or modal skepticism. It returns the disputed ontological work to independent metaphysics and evidence, where it belonged all along.

Keywords: ontological argument; modal logic; conceivability; metaphysical possibility; maximal greatness; S5; reverse ontological argument; modal epistemology

1 A Definition Is Not a Passport into Reality

Ontological arguments are intellectually seductive because they offer something most arguments cannot: an existential conclusion without an observation, a historical record, a causal trace, or a comparative prediction. The argument appears to begin with an idea, polish it until no greater idea is available, and then discover that reality must contain its object. Thought seems to have acquired the power of a summons.

That appearance should make a careful reader suspicious, but suspicion is not yet criticism. Conceptual reasoning can reveal contradictions, consequences, identities, and necessities. Mathematics and logic routinely establish truths without laboratory work. The decisive question is therefore narrower than the slogan that one cannot define things into existence. It is this: what exactly entitles a reasoner to move from a described God-concept—a specified conception of a deity—to the metaphysical possibility and then the instantiation of the being described?

The classical and modal arguments answer that question in different vocabularies. Anselm's famous formulation begins from that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought and contrasts existence in the understanding with existence in reality (Anselm of Canterbury 1998). Modern versions treat necessary existence as a perfection or as part of maximal greatness, then use modal logic to move from possible necessary existence to actuality (Malcolm 1960; Hartshorne 1965; Plantinga 1974). Both strategies require more than a well-formed description. The classical form needs a principle connecting greatness to instantiation. The modal form needs principles connecting the target concept to metaphysical possibility, that possibility to necessary existence, and the selected modal logic to metaphysical reality.

The source of the illusion is compression. Several argumentative jobs are folded into one phrase—"maximally great being" or "possibly necessary"—and then the compact phrase is treated as though it had completed those jobs. It has not. A premise can contain enough structure to entail a conclusion without containing enough reason to believe itself. Validity preserves what is put into an argument; it does not certify the input.

This paper sharpens that diagnosis through a four-part modal bridge audit. It asks whether an ontological proof supplies:

1. a coherent and determinate target rather than an honorific bundle;
2. a responsible route from conceivability or non-contradiction to metaphysical possibility;
3. independent support for necessary existence rather than a definition that already carries the conclusion; and
4. discriminatory reason to prefer its modal premise over a live incompatible premise.

The audit identifies a practical lacuna between two familiar kinds of assessment. Philosophers often ask whether a formal derivation is valid or whether a particular modal premise is plausible. Those are essential questions, but public proof requires them to be connected. A valid derivation persuades only when the disputed premises receive reasons that are accessible beyond the conclusion's existing supporters. The bridge audit makes that public-warrant requirement explicit and applies it equally to the forward and reverse arguments.

The thesis is polemical but bounded. The familiar modal ontological argument does not establish the instantiation of its target God-concept. It relocates the ontological burden into modal premises and then displays the consequences of granting them. That is philosophically useful. It is not a proof from neutral ground, and it is not independent evidence for theism.

2 What the Classical Argument Must Cross

Anselm's *Proslogion* cannot be reduced without controversy to one modern syllogism. Its prayerful setting, the relation between chapters 2 and 3, and the meaning of "greater" all matter. Still, the argument's public-facing pressure is recognizable. If the greatest conceivable being existed only in the understanding, a greater being could be conceived—one existing in reality as well. Therefore the greatest conceivable being exists in reality (Anselm of Canterbury 1998).

The immediate problem is not that real existence would make no practical difference. A real physician is more useful than an imagined physician. The problem is that this difference does not function like an added descriptive feature inside the concept. Kant's hundred-thalers example distinguishes the content of a concept from whether that concept is instantiated. One hundred actual coins do not contain a larger numerical or descriptive content than one hundred possible coins; actuality concerns whether the described object is there (Kant 1998).

This matters because the greatness comparison risks changing its subject midway. At first it compares two conceptions: a greatest being and something supposedly greater. At the decisive step it compares a represented object with an instantiated one. The second may be preferable, valuable, or practically consequential, but that does not show that existence belongs inside a greatness scale in a way that reality must honor.

Gaunilo's reply performs a bridge test. His lost-island parody is not powerful because islands and deities are identical kinds of objects. They are not. It is powerful because it asks for the admission rule: why may this greatness concept cross from thought into reality while an ideal island may not? (Gaunilo of Marmoutiers 1998). A defender can answer that islands are contingent composites whereas a perfect being is the kind of being that exists necessarily if at all. But that answer does not restore a proof by concept alone. It adds an account of essence, modality, and admissible properties. The argument has moved into substantive metaphysics.

That movement is not a defeat. Substantive metaphysics is exactly where the debate belongs. It becomes a defeat only when the added metaphysics is smuggled back into the definition and presented

as though it emerged from greatness language itself. Findlay’s reversal of the necessity theme illustrates the danger: if necessary existence belongs essentially to the target, then a demonstrated incoherence would make the target impossible rather than merely absent (Findlay 1948). Necessity magnifies the consequences of modal classification in both directions. It cannot classify the target for us.

The classical form therefore exposes the first version of the modal bridge problem. An ideal description supplies a standard internal to thought. Instantiation is a claim about what reality contains. A proof must connect those categories with a warranted principle. Calling the proposed bridge “greatness” does not yet show that it can bear existential weight.

3 The Modal Argument: Validity Without Free Premises

Modal versions improve the discussion by making the bridge visible. Let G stand for the proposition that the specified maximally great being exists. A concise version states:

1. Necessarily, if G is true, then G is necessarily true.
2. Possibly, G is true.
3. Therefore, G is true.

In standard notation, the premises and conclusion are $\Box(G \rightarrow \Box G)$, $\Diamond G$, and G . The box means “necessarily”; the diamond means “possibly”. In S5, a strong and widely used modal system, the conclusion follows. Plantinga’s better-known presentation builds necessary existence into maximal greatness: if maximal greatness is possibly instantiated, then in some possible world a being has maximal excellence in every possible world; S5 carries that necessity to the actual world (Plantinga 1974). Malcolm and Hartshorne develop related necessity-centered readings of Anselm (Malcolm 1960; Hartshorne 1965).

The correct criticism is not that modus ponens stopped working or that modal logic is verbal smoke. Kane showed in detail that versions of the argument can be formally valid while still raising questions about the modal principles and the possibility of less-than-perfect necessary beings (Kane 1984). Oppy and Sobel likewise distinguish formal interest from dialectical success: a valid ontological argument may reveal commitments without providing premises that a reasonable non-theist should accept (Oppy 1995; Sobel 2004).

The possibility premise is also stronger than it sounds in ordinary speech. In conversation, “possibly” can mean that the speaker does not know the claim to be false. Metaphysical possibility is not a report about the speaker’s information. It says that the state of affairs could genuinely obtain, given the natures of things. When the target is a being whose existence would be necessary, the premise is not the mild suggestion that a deity has not been ruled out. It places the target in the space of metaphysical possibility with a modal character that, under the chosen logic, reaches actuality.

This is why the popular presentation can mislead even when every formal line is printed correctly. The audience sees a small premise and a large conclusion. The word “possibly” looks modest, so the conclusion feels like an achievement of logic. But the premise is a compressed ontological commitment. Under S5 and the maximal-greatness definition, granting it is granting the decisive route.

The conditional achievement

The modal argument can establish an important conditional: *if* the target God-concept is metaphysically possible, *if* it entails necessary existence, and *if* the selected modal logic correctly governs metaphysical necessity, then actuality follows. The conditional is not trivial. Its antecedent is not free.

Calling the result a conditional theorem is therefore not dismissive. It credits the logic while refusing to confuse a map of consequences with a reason to enter the map at one disputed point. Formal validity answers “What follows?” Public proof must also answer “Why accept these premises?”

4 The Four-Bridge Audit

The phrase “modal bridge” should not suggest one mysterious plank. The argument crosses four distinct gaps. Table 1 aligns each gap with the warrant required and the characteristic failure that results when the warrant is missing.

Table 1: The modal bridge audit

Bridge	Question it must answer	Warrant required	Failure when omitted
Target coherence	Is there one determinate package of jointly possible properties?	Analysis of the attributes, their relations, and the identity conditions of the proposed being.	A devotional honorific or underdescribed ideal is treated as a possible object.
Possibility access	Why does entertaining the description reveal metaphysical possibility?	A defensible account of conceivability, modal intuition, essence, or another route to objective possibility.	Ignorance of contradiction is mistaken for a fact about reality.
Necessity entitlement	Why would the target exist necessarily if it existed at all?	An account of essence and necessary existence that is not merely stipulated to obtain the conclusion.	The desired modal status is placed inside the definition and then read back as discovery.
Discrimination	Why prefer the forward modal premise to an incompatible reverse or parody premise?	Reasons that survive reciprocal application and favor one premise without assuming its conclusion.	Mirrored premises produce stalemate, contradiction, or conclusion-sensitive special pleading.

These bridges are cumulative. Satisfying one does not automatically satisfy the next. A concept can be precisely stated yet inconsistent. It can be coherent as a representation yet fail to describe a metaphysical possibility. It can be possible without including necessary existence. A necessary-existence premise can be intelligible while lacking reason to defeat the reverse premise. Compression encourages readers to treat the sequence as one act of conceiving. The audit prevents that slide.

4.1 Bridge one: a determinate and coherent target

“Maximal greatness” sounds like a single property, but it is usually a package: omniscience, omnipotence, perfect goodness, necessary existence, freedom, personhood, creative power, and perhaps other attributes. The package requires an account of compossibility—whether the properties can be instantiated together. Perfect goodness and significant freedom, timelessness and action, immutability and responsiveness, or comprehensive foreknowledge and libertarian agency generate genuine theoretical work. A defender may have sophisticated reconciliations. The audit asks that those reconciliations be supplied rather than assumed by the adjective “maximal.”

Nagasawa’s defense of perfect-being theism illustrates a serious attempt to refine the target and defend a maximal God-concept rather than rely on a casual superlative (Nagasawa 2017). That project

is exactly the right kind of work. Its existence also confirms the audit's point: the possibility premise is not licensed by the everyday ease with which a listener can repeat the phrase "maximally great being."

A target can also drift. If one version includes libertarian freedom but a reply to incoherence replaces it with necessary action, the defended concept may no longer be the one that entered the argument. If maximality means one ordering in moral theory and another in metaphysics, the proof may trade on an unresolved comparison. A stable proof needs stable content.

4.2 Bridge two: from conceivability to metaphysical possibility

Conceivability is not one simple mental event. A description may be imaginable in pictures, consistently assertible, not obviously contradictory, positively constructible in thought, or ideally conceivable after unlimited rational reflection. These are not interchangeable. Yablo argues that disciplined conceivability can provide modal guidance; Chalmers distinguishes *prima facie* from ideal, positive from negative, and primary from secondary conceivability before defending carefully limited entailments (Yablo 1993; Chalmers 2002).

Those qualifications matter. Ordinary apologetic use rarely establishes ideal positive conceivability. It more often reports that no contradiction is presently apparent. But a failure to find a contradiction can reflect incomplete description, limited attention, hidden essential facts, or uncertainty about the relevant modal category. Kripkean cases of the necessary *a posteriori* make the general point vivid: a description can seem coherent while failing to track metaphysical possibility because the actual identity or essence of what it describes is not transparent from the armchair.

Van Inwagen emphasizes how difficult it is to give a general account of basic modal knowledge comparable to familiar observation-based knowledge (Inwagen 1998). This does not entail modal skepticism. People can know that a table could have stood elsewhere or that a contradiction cannot obtain. It means that moving from a particular imaginative success to a heavyweight metaphysical possibility needs an epistemology, not a shrug.

The target God-concept intensifies the problem. It is not a familiar concrete object whose ordinary variations we track. It is a proposed necessary, unlimited, and metaphysically fundamental being. The concept's application conditions and essential properties are part of the dispute. The weaker our understanding of those conditions, the less evidential weight an initial feeling of conceivability should receive.

4.3 Bridge three: from maximality to necessary existence

Even if a being with extraordinary power, knowledge, and goodness is metaphysically possible, it does not immediately follow that its existence is necessary. Necessary existence must either be included in the target or derived from a theory of perfection. If it is included, the formal route becomes short; the epistemic burden moves to whether that modalized package is possible. If it is derived, the derivation must explain why necessary existence is a perfection, why the relevant ordering is coherent, and why the target could not exist contingently.

The distinction between "necessary if actual" and "possibly actual" is easy to blur. A definition can tell us what would be true of any instance. Defining a bachelor as unmarried tells us that any bachelor is unmarried; it does not produce a bachelor. Defining the target as necessarily existent if instantiated similarly constrains possible instances. It does not yet show that there is an instance in metaphysical possibility.

Pruss offers an independent route to the possibility premise by connecting the flourishing of lives to propositions at their motivational center (Pruss 2010). Whatever one thinks of that proposal, it concedes the structural point: the possibility premise needs support from outside the bare definition. The relevant questions then become empirical and epistemic. Does flourishing reliably indicate the

metaphysical possibility of each central proposition? Are coherent orientation, moral fruit, and literal truth sufficiently linked? Do rival religious and nonreligious lives create reciprocal pressure? The modal conclusion can be no stronger than the answers.

4.4 Bridge four: discrimination under reversal

A public proof must do more than make its preferred premise seem possible. It must explain why an incompatible premise should not receive equal treatment. The reverse modal ontological argument uses the same necessity premise but adds the possible nonexistence of the target. In S5, the forward and reverse forms can be displayed as Table 2 shows.

Table 2: Forward and reverse modal arguments

Argument	Shared necessity claim	Distinct possibility premise	Conclusion in S5
Forward	Necessarily, if the target exists, it exists necessarily.	The target possibly exists.	The target exists.
Reverse	Necessarily, if the target exists, it exists necessarily.	The target possibly does not exist.	The target does not exist.

If ordinary conceivability supports both distinct premises, the arguments cannot both be sound. A symmetry breaker must favor one premise on grounds that do not merely repeat the desired conclusion. Collin argues that lessons from necessary a posteriori truths undercut the reverse premise more than the forward premise (Collin 2022). Schmid replies that analogous modal-error cases can undercut the forward premise and that symmetry returns at the level of epistemic entitlement (Schmid 2023). Stacey’s survey shows that recent defenses increasingly depend on substantive theories of modal epistemology and metaphysics rather than a simple appeal to unexamined conceivability (Stacey 2023).

The lesson is not that symmetry can never be broken. It is that breaking it is the argument. Once a defender supplies a non-question-begging account of essence, possibility, or modal knowledge that favors the forward premise, that account deserves evaluation in its own right. The ontological derivation then propagates its result. It does not create the discriminating warrant.

5 Bridge Neutrality and Public Proof

The four bridges can be summarized by a neutrality requirement. A proposed bridge should not change its evidential standard merely because the destination is welcome. This does not require metaphysical neutrality in the impossible sense of having no background commitments. It requires reciprocal accountability: relevantly similar claims receive similar burdens, and relevant differences are named and defended.

A useful bridge should satisfy four tests:

1. **Independence.** Its support does not assume the target conclusion or a premise equivalent to it under the selected logic.
2. **Public accessibility.** A competent reader who does not already accept the conclusion can understand and assess the offered reason.
3. **Discrimination.** The reason makes the favored modal premise more credible than at least one serious incompatible premise.

4. **Reciprocal stability.** Applying the same standard to parodies, reverse arguments, and rival God-concepts does not generate an uncontrolled collection of incompatible conclusions.

These are epistemic tests, not additional axioms of modal logic. They ask whether the argument establishes its premises for an audience. A valid argument can fail every test. Conversely, a premise could be true even when its advocate cannot yet establish it. Public proof concerns warranted movement between interlocutors, not omniscient access to truth.

This distinction dissolves a common rhetorical maneuver. A defender sometimes says that the skeptic cannot prove the target impossible, so the possibility premise may be accepted. That inference confuses absence of a defeater with positive warrant, and it distributes burdens asymmetrically. The defender is making an existentially decisive modal claim. A skeptic may suspend judgment because the target is underdescribed, the modal epistemology unsettled, or the reverse premise similarly credible. Suspension is not a proof of impossibility. It is refusal to convert ignorance into possibility.

The same discipline applies to parodies. A parody need not match every property of the target. Its function is to reveal which difference carries the inference. When a defender says that perfect islands are contingent, the conversation advances: necessary existence is now the proposed difference. The audit then asks what licenses that property, whether it is compossible with the rest of the target, and whether its metaphysical possibility has support. A good parody is a diagnostic instrument, not a competing theology.

6 Recent Asymmetry Does Not Restore a Shortcut

The symmetry debate has advanced beyond a simple claim that the forward and reverse arguments are mirror images in every formal respect. Fritz, Lo, and Schmid argue that the reverse argument can remain valid in independently motivated modal logics weaker than S5 even when the forward argument fails, and that the reverse can avoid a symmetry problem of its own (Fritz, Lo, and Schmid 2026). That is a significant result. A responsible renewal of the modal bridge criticism must not pretend it does not exist.

The result strengthens one part of the bridge audit: the choice of modal logic cannot be treated as neutral machinery. If metaphysical necessity is better represented by a weaker system on independent grounds, the forward derivation may lose validity while the reverse survives. The modal system is therefore part of the argument's substantive burden, not a formatting choice.

Yet formal asymmetry is not the same as an established atheistic premise. The reverse argument still needs the possible nonexistence of the target and the shared necessity claim. A weaker logic may show that these premises entail nonexistence without entailing existence from the forward pair. It does not, by that fact alone, show that the reverse possibility premise is true. The same distinction between validity and premise support remains.

There are therefore three separate outcomes:

- If S5 governs the relevant modality and neither side has a symmetry breaker, the forward and reverse pressures expose inadequate premise support.
- If a weaker independently motivated logic invalidates the forward argument but validates the reverse, the formal balance favors the reverse; its premises still require metaphysical warrant.
- If one side supplies an independently supported modal premise and a justified logic, that additional support—not conceptual elegance alone—does the evidential work.

This is the advantage of the bridge framework. It neither freezes the debate at an old parody nor lets a new formal theorem outrun its premises. Logical architecture matters. So do the reasons for occupying one point within it.

7 Why Conceivability Cannot Carry the Whole Load

Defenders need not claim that whatever can be imagined is possible. A sophisticated version can appeal to ideal conceivability, positive construction, essence, or continuity principles. That is a real improvement. It also makes clear why a casual statement such as “I can conceive of a maximally great being” is insufficient.

First, a description may hide contradiction by leaving relations unspecified. A reader can separately entertain unlimited power, perfect goodness, exhaustive knowledge, and libertarian freedom without entertaining a complete model of their interaction. The resulting psychological ease is evidence about the description’s incompleteness as much as about the object’s possibility.

Second, negative conceivability—the inability to derive a contradiction—is hostage to the reasoner’s information and ingenuity. It becomes stronger only under idealization, but idealization creates an access problem. Actual disputants do not know that their reflection is ideal or undefeatable. Chalmers’s qualified modal rationalism is therefore not a license to treat first-pass imaginability as metaphysical data (Chalmers 2002).

Third, positive conceivability needs a stable target. One can construct a scenario under one interpretation of “greatness” and infer a modal claim about another. If the imagined being is extraordinarily powerful but contingent, the scenario does not establish the possibility of necessary maximal greatness. If the scenario simply labels the being necessary, the label does not construct the modal fact.

Fourth, concept familiarity is not modal evidence by itself. Centuries of theological use can make a phrase cognitively fluent. Fluency reduces the felt difficulty of processing a description, but it does not settle compossibility. The same cultural familiarity can also make incompatible God-concepts feel natural within different traditions. Public reasoning must distinguish sociological ease from metaphysical access.

None of this proves that the target is impossible. It establishes a proportional rule: the heavier the metaphysical conclusion, the more disciplined the route from conceivability must be. A premise that would settle the existence of a necessary being deserves more than the observation that no contradiction appeared during a brief exercise.

8 The Strongest Replies

The bridge diagnosis becomes useful only if it survives serious replies. Table 3 states five common responses, what each contributes, and what remains to be shown.

Table 3: Strong replies and their remaining burdens

Reply	What it correctly contributes	What still needs support
No contradiction has been shown.	Defeats an overconfident claim of demonstrated impossibility.	Positive warrant for metaphysical possibility; ignorance alone does not supply it.
Necessary existence is a perfection.	Identifies the proposed route from maximality to necessity.	A defensible greatness ordering, compossibility, and a non-stipulative reason that the target could have that status.
Only a personal absolute can be maximal.	Attempts to block islands and ordinary-object parodies.	A principled uniqueness argument that compares rival necessary beings and incompatible God-concepts.
S5 is the right logic of metaphysical modality.	Supplies a clear and powerful consequence relation.	Independent metaphysical reasons for S5, especially in light of weaker-system proposals.
The proof is meant for someone who already sees the premise.	Correctly presents the derivation as an internal clarification.	Any claim that the argument is a public proof or independent evidence for outsiders must be withdrawn.

8.1 “No contradiction has been shown”

This reply is effective against a critic who announces that the target has been disproved without argument. The present paper makes no such announcement. The issue is burden. A person who cannot tell whether a complex modal package is coherent should not assign it metaphysical possibility merely because a contradiction has not yet been found. Unknown is not a modal operator.

The reply also threatens to support the reverse premise. If no contradiction has been shown in the target’s nonexistence, why not accept possible nonexistence? A reason that favors only the forward premise must identify a relevant difference. Otherwise the reply produces suspension, not theism.

8.2 “Necessary existence is a perfection”

This claim may be part of a substantive perfect-being theory. It is not self-verifying. Greatness is an evaluative relation, and different goods may resist a single maximum. Even if necessary existence is better for a being that could possess it, the inference from “better if instantiated” to “possibly instantiated” remains invalid. An ideal can rank descriptions without placing the winner in reality.

The claim also invites Kane’s concern about less-than-perfect necessary beings: if necessary existence can belong to something that lacks other perfections, the relation between necessity and maximality needs further restrictions (Kane 1984). Those restrictions are additional metaphysics, not consequences of the word “perfect.”

8.3 “S5 is independently plausible”

S5 has powerful motivations and elegant semantics. The bridge audit need not deny them. It asks that the argument state the dependence openly. If the conclusion follows only in systems with particular accessibility principles, those principles are among the premises broadly understood. Recent work on weaker systems makes that dependence especially important (Fritz, Lo, and Schmid 2026).

Even granting S5 does not establish the forward possibility premise. The system tells us what follows from $\Diamond G$ together with the necessity claim. It does not determine whether $\Diamond G$ is true. A logic can be correct while an argument using it remains unsound.

8.4 “The argument is an internal clarification”

This is the strongest modest reply. A theist who already accepts the target’s metaphysical possibility can use the modal argument to understand the consequences of that commitment. Plantinga himself treats the argument as relevant to the rational acceptability of theism rather than as a proof guaranteed to convert every reasonable person (Plantinga 1974). On this interpretation, the argument is a map of a modal theology.

The cost of the reply is equally clear. An internal clarification cannot be advertised as premise-independent evidence for someone who disputes the entry point. It may show that a certain package is stable or that one belief commits its holder to another. It does not move an outsider until the shared bridges are supplied.

9 What Should Happen to Credence?

The epistemic question is not whether a valid argument should be ignored. It is how much a rational agent should update when the conclusion is generated by a premise whose support is the disputed issue.

Suppose a reader begins uncertain about whether the target God-concept is metaphysically possible. The modal derivation teaches the reader that, under S5 and the necessity premise, the possibility question is existentially decisive. That is new structural information. It may rationally redirect attention toward modal epistemology, coherence, and essence. It does not by itself make the possibility premise more probable.

This distinction blocks double counting. If a person’s only reason for $\Diamond G$ is that the resulting S5 argument reaches G , then the attractive conclusion is being used to support the premise that generates it. The deduction cannot return as an independent second reason. It has unpacked the initial commitment.

A simple analogy helps. From “If the witness is perfectly reliable, the accused was present” and “the witness is perfectly reliable,” the presence conclusion follows. Learning the valid conditional matters. But if the witness’s perfect reliability is exactly what the parties dispute, the derivation does not settle the case. Repeating the conclusion in formal dress does not independently certify the witness.

The rational options are therefore ordinary:

- increase credence if independent reasons support the target’s coherence, metaphysical possibility, necessary status, and the relevant modal logic;
- decrease credence if independent reasons support incoherence, possible nonexistence, or a logic that defeats the forward route;
- suspend or make little update when the decisive bridge premises remain balanced or opaque.

This is not a special evidential disability imposed on theism. A reverse argument for atheism receives the same treatment. Its formal advantages can matter, but its possibility premise and metaphysical background still need warrant. Bridge neutrality is reciprocal.

The result also preserves a legitimate role for ontological arguments. They reveal hidden modal commitments. They can show that a specified God-concept is necessary if possible, expose tensions within perfect-being theology, compare modal systems, and identify where disagreement must be resolved. Those are serious philosophical achievements. The mistake is to confuse a highly efficient consequence engine with a source of fuel.

10 Why the Lacuna Matters Beyond This Argument

The modal bridge problem is a special case of a wider epistemic pattern. A conclusion can be packed into a premise under a respectable abstraction and then reappear with the aura of discovery. The more technical the middle steps, the easier it is to overlook where the substantive commitment entered.

Three disciplines follow.

First, name the bridge in ordinary language. Instead of saying only $\Diamond\Box G \rightarrow \Box G$, say that the argument assumes the target's necessary existence is metaphysically possible. A competent non-specialist can then see why the premise is not modest.

Second, compare incompatible routes. If a standard supports both a proposition and its negation, the standard is not yet discriminating. The right response may be a symmetry breaker, a weaker conclusion, or suspension. It is not selective enthusiasm.

Third, keep validity, soundness, and evidential force separate. Validity concerns the relation between premises and conclusion. Soundness adds truth of the premises. Evidential force concerns what a reader is justified in believing given the reasons actually available. An argument can be valid, unsound, and epistemically revealing all at once.

These distinctions reduce heat without removing polemical force. The critic need not mock modal logic or declare every God-concept incoherent. It is enough to insist that existence not be smuggled through a premise labeled "possibility." The defender, in turn, receives a precise research program: define the target, defend its modal status, justify the necessity claim and the modal logic, and show why rival modal premises should be rejected.

That is harder than the slogan version of the ontological argument. Reality is allowed to be hard.

11 Conclusion

The modal ontological argument is formally elegant because its premises are powerful. Once a necessarily existent maximally great being is placed in metaphysical possibility and the relevant modal logic is granted, actuality follows quickly. The speed is real. So is the burden hidden inside the entry point.

The four-bridge audit shows what must be earned. The target must be determinate and coherent. Conceivability must connect responsibly to objective metaphysical possibility. Necessary existence must arise from defended metaphysics rather than from a conclusion-shaped definition. The forward premise must receive discriminatory support against possible nonexistence and other live alternatives. The familiar argument does not complete those tasks merely by displaying the S5 derivation.

Kant's predicate objection, Gaunilo's parody, modern modal criticism, and recent reverse-argument literature therefore converge on one disciplined verdict. A concept can organize thought. A modal system can preserve consequence. Neither operation, without warranted bridge premises, inserts an object into reality or independently raises rational credence that the object is there.

This conclusion does not prove atheism, deny every God-concept, or close the door on a priori modal knowledge. It removes an illicit shortcut. Theism and atheism remain answerable to independent metaphysics and evidence. If a defender can build the bridge, the route is open. Naming the destination is not building the bridge.

Formal Reconstruction of the Central Thesis

The formalization below is intentionally compact. It does not replace the paper's metaphysical discussion. It separates three questions that are often run together: whether the modal inference is valid, whether its premises are warranted, and whether the argument publicly establishes its conclusion. Each symbolic line is followed by an ordinary-language explanation.

Syllogistic reconstruction

The paper's central thesis can be stated without notation:

1. **Premise 1:** A public ontological proof succeeds only if it identifies a coherent target and independently supports the possibility, necessity, and discriminatory bridges that connect the target concept to an instance.
2. **Premise 2:** The familiar modal ontological argument supplies a valid consequence from its modal premises in S5, but the derivation itself does not independently support all of those bridges.
3. **Premise 3:** A valid derivation whose decisive bridge premises remain unsupported does not publicly establish its existential conclusion.
4. **Conclusion:** Therefore, the familiar modal ontological argument does not, by itself, publicly establish that its maximally great God-concept is instantiated.

This is a valid deductive inference: true premises would guarantee the conclusion. Premise 2 is the paper's substantive audit judgment, not a theorem of modal logic. The conclusion is about what this argument establishes. It does not assert that the target is impossible or that no other argument could support theism.

Symbols

Every symbol below is defined before inferential use. The letters T , P , N , and D name the four bridge conditions from Table 1; they are not unexplained labels for stages of the proof.

- G : the proposition that the specified maximally great God-concept is instantiated.
- $\neg$: negation; $\neg G$ means that the target is not instantiated.
- $\rightarrow$: “if-then”; $\wedge$: “and.”
- N : the necessity premise $\Box(G \rightarrow \Box G)$; the box means that the enclosed claim is metaphysically necessary.
- P_+ : the forward possibility premise $\Diamond G$; the diamond means that the enclosed claim is metaphysically possible.
- P_- : the reverse possibility premise $\Diamond \neg G$.
- A_+ : the forward modal ontological argument using N and P_+ .
- A_- : the reverse modal ontological argument using N and P_- .
- Γ : an independently discussed modal system weaker than S5.
- $\models_\Gamma$: the formula on the right follows validly in modal system Γ .
- $\not\models_\Gamma$: the formula on the right does not follow validly in modal system Γ .
- Pub: the named argument publicly establishes the stated conclusion for a competent reader who does not already assume it.
- B_T : the target-status bridge is adequately supported: the target is determinate, and its coherence or incoherence is warranted to the degree required by the conclusion being claimed.
- B_P : the relevant metaphysical-possibility premise is adequately supported.
- B_N : the necessity-entitlement bridge is adequately supported.
- B_D : the discriminatory bridge favoring the relevant modal premise over live incompatible premises is adequately supported.

The valid modal routes

The forward argument can be represented as:

$$N, P_+ \models_{S5} G. \quad (1)$$

Plain-English annotation. Line (1) says that in S5, the necessity premise and the target's possible existence entail its actual existence. This paper accepts the validity of the familiar route at this level. The line does not say that N or P_+ is true.

The reverse route uses the same necessity premise:

$$N, P_- \models_{S5} \neg G. \quad (2)$$

Plain-English annotation. Line (2) says that in S5, if the target would exist necessarily whenever it existed and if its nonexistence is possible, then it does not exist. Lines (1) and (2) cannot both be sound because their conclusions conflict. The tension directs attention to the premises and the modal system.

Recent weaker-system work adds a formal asymmetry. For some independently discussed systems Γ weaker than S5, the pattern can be:

$$N, P_- \models_{\Gamma} \neg G \quad \text{while} \quad N, P_+ \not\models_{\Gamma} G. \quad (3)$$

Plain-English annotation. Line (3) says that the reverse inference can remain valid in a weaker logic even when the forward inference fails. This matters to the choice of modal system. It still does not prove P_- or N ; formal advantage and premise truth are separate questions (Fritz, Lo, and Schmid 2026).

The public-proof condition

For the forward argument to function as a public proof, all four bridge conditions must be supported:

$$\text{Pub}(A_+, G) \rightarrow (B_T \wedge B_P \wedge B_N \wedge B_D). \quad (4)$$

Plain-English annotation. Line (4) states a necessary condition, not a guarantee. If the argument publicly establishes an instantiated maximally great being, it must have a coherent target, a warranted route to metaphysical possibility, a warranted necessity premise, and a reason to prefer the forward modal premise to incompatible alternatives. Other conditions may also be needed.

The paper’s audit judgment is:

$$\neg(B_T \wedge B_P \wedge B_N \wedge B_D). \quad (5)$$

Plain-English annotation. Line (5) does not claim that all four bridges fail. It says the familiar argument, by itself, does not adequately support the complete conjunction. For example, a sophisticated defender may improve target coherence while the possibility or discrimination bridge remains disputed.

From lines (4) and (5), modus tollens yields:

$$\therefore \neg \text{Pub}(A_+, G). \quad (6)$$

Plain-English annotation. Line (6) is the paper’s central conclusion: the forward argument does not, by itself, publicly establish its existential conclusion. Modus tollens is the valid pattern “If success requires all four bridges, and all four have not been supplied, then success has not been shown.”

The scope limit

Failure to establish a conclusion is not an entailment of its negation:

$$\neg \text{Pub}(A_+, G) \not\models \neg G. \quad (7)$$

Plain-English annotation. Line (7) prevents overclaiming. Showing that one ontological argument fails as a public proof does not show that the target is impossible or nonexistent. Independent evidence or another argument might support G ; independent evidence might instead support $\neg G$. The present verdict concerns this route.

The same audit is reciprocal. If the reverse argument is presented as a public proof, formal validity is not enough:

$$\text{Pub}(A_-, \neg G) \rightarrow (B_T \wedge B_P \wedge B_N \wedge B_D). \quad (8)$$

Plain-English annotation. Line (8) applies the bridge standard to atheistic use of the reverse argument. For this conclusion, B_T requires a determinate target and an adequately supported account of its modal status; B_P and B_D are indexed to the reverse premise. Possible nonexistence must receive warrant, and that warrant must discriminate against the forward possibility premise. The paper grants neither side a free modal premise.

The logical verdict is therefore modest but firm. Lines (1)–(3) concern validity within modal systems. Lines (4)–(8) concern public warrant. The formal consequence relation can be impeccable while the public proof fails because the reasons for entering the consequence relation at one disputed premise are inadequate. That is the modal bridge problem in its exact form.

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