

Gaunilo's reply to Anselm

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Gaunilo, a monk who was a contemporary of St. Anselm, offered an early and influential reply to the ontological argument.

1 Gaunilo's 'Lost Island' argument

We saw in our discussion of Anselm that Anselm was trying to provide a *reductio ad absurdum* of the atheist's position, by showing that the supposition that God does not exist in reality leads to an absurdity. Gaunilo, in effect, tries to provide a *reductio* of Anselm's argument. In outline, Gaunilo's reply to Anselm goes like this:

1. If Anselm's proof for the existence of a greatest conceivable being were sound, then we could give a sound proof for the existence of a greatest conceivable island.
 2. We cannot give a sound proof of the existence of a greatest conceivable island.
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- C. Anselm's proof for the existence of a greatest conceivable being is not sound.

What form of reasoning is this? Is it valid?

The key claim in the above statement of Gaunilo's reply to Anselm is the first: the claim that if Anselm's argument for the existence of God is any good, then we can give an equally good argument for the absurd conclusion that the greatest imaginable island exists (in reality, and not just in the mind). Why does Gaunilo think this?

He presents his reasons in §6 of his 'Reply on Behalf of the Fool':

"...they say that there is the ocean somewhere an island which, because of the difficulty (or rather the impossibility) of finding that which does not exist, some have called the 'Lost Island.' And the story goes that it is blessed with all manner of priceless riches and delights in abundance ... and ... is superior everywhere in abundance to all those other lands that men inhabit. Now, if anyone tell me that it is like this, I shall easily understand what is said, since nothing is difficult about it. But if he should then go on to say, as though it were a logical consequence of this: You cannot any more doubt that this island that is more excellent than all other lands truly exists somewhere in reality

than you can doubt that it is in your mind; and since it is more excellent to exist not only in the mind alone but also in reality, therefore it must needs be that it exists. For if it did not exist, any other land existing in reality would be more excellent than it, and so this island, already conceived by you to be more excellent than others, will not be more excellent. If, I say, someone wishes thus to persuade me that this island really exists beyond all doubt, I should either think that he was joking, or I should find it hard to decide which of us I ought to judge the bigger fool – I, if I agreed with him, or he, is he thought that he had proved the existence of this island . . .”

Clearly, Gaunilo thinks that he can give just the same kind of argument for the existence of a greatest conceivable island as Anselm gave for the existence of a greatest conceivable being.

Is he right about this? To see, let’s look at Gaunilo’s argument for the existence of the Lost Island next to Anselm’s argument for the existence of God:

<i>Anselm’s ontological argument</i>	<i>Gaunilo’s ‘Lost Island’ argument</i>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived. (Definition) 2. God exists in the mind, but not in reality. (Premise to be reduced to absurdity) 3. Existence in reality is greater than existence in the understanding alone. (Premise) 4. It is conceivable that God exists in reality. (Premise) 5. It is conceivable that there is a being greater than God. (Follows from 2, 3, and 4) <hr style="width: 50%; margin-left: 0;"/> <p>C. It is conceivable that there is a being greater than that than which nothing greater can be conceived. (Follows from 1 and 5)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Lost Island is that than which no greater island can be conceived. (Definition) 2. The Lost Island exists in the mind, but not in reality. (Premise to be reduced to absurdity) 3. Existence in reality is greater than existence in the understanding alone. (Premise) 4. It is conceivable that the Lost Island exists in reality. (Premise) 5. It is conceivable that there is an island greater than the Lost Island. (Follows from 2, 3, and 4) <hr style="width: 50%; margin-left: 0;"/> <p>C. It is conceivable that there is an island greater than that island than which no greater island can be conceived. (Follows from 1 and 5)</p>

The two arguments certainly look similar; and Gaunilo is certainly right that we cannot prove the existence of an island than which no greater can be conceived. Can we conclude that Anselm’s has failed to prove the existence of a being than which no greater can be conceived?

We still have a bit of work to do, no matter what you think of Gaunilo's argument. Even if you think that Gaunilo's argument is parallel to Anselm's, and therefore that Anselm's is unsound, we still have no explanation of where Anselm's argument goes wrong; all we know is that it must go wrong *somewhere or other*. And this is a bit unsatisfying.

On the hand, if you think that the ontological argument is sound (and you agree that Gaunilo has not proved that the greatest possible island exists in reality), then you had better find some disanalogy between the two arguments.

We now discuss these topics in turn.

2 Gaunilo's diagnosis of the error in the ontological argument

Gaunilo in fact suggests an explanation for what he takes to be the failure of Anselm's argument: Anselm's idea that God exists in the mind. Gaunilo charges that our understanding of the definition 'that being than which no greater can be conceived' is merely verbal (§4), and that this is where the argument goes wrong.

Is Gaunilo right that God does not really exist in the mind of the Fool? If he is right, how damaging is this to Anselm's argument? Can you think of a way to get around the problem? One way that a defender of Anselm might reply is by trying to restate the argument without using any assumptions about God existing in the mind of the Fool. Here is one attempt to do that:

A revised version of the ontological argument

1. God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived. (Definition)
 - 2'. God does not exist in reality. (Premise to be reduced to absurdity)
 - 3'. It is greater to exist in reality than not to exist in reality. (Premise)
 4. It is conceivable that God exists in reality. (Premise)
 5. It is conceivable that there is a being greater than God. (Follows from 2', 3', and 4)
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- C. It is conceivable that there is a being greater than that than which nothing greater can be conceived. (Follows from 1 and 5)

Here premises (2) and (3) have been revised to avoid the assumption that God exists in the mind. Is this enough to respond to Gaunilo's worry that we do not really have a full understanding of the idea of a being than which no greater can be conceived? How might Gaunilo restate his objection to apply to this revised version of the argument?

3 A possible disanalogy between the greatest island and the greatest being

Whether or not Gaunilo has identified a flaw in Anselm's reasoning, his 'Lost Island argument' presents a serious challenge to the defender of the ontological argument. The defender of Anselm's position must find some difference between the two arguments which makes Gaunilo's unsound, but does not affect Anselm's.

There are two ways to do this.

1. One might argue that Gaunilo's argument is invalid, whereas Anselm's is valid.
2. One might argue that one of the premises of Gaunilo's argument is false, whereas the corresponding premise of Anselm's argument is true.

The first option appears implausible, since, as far as logic goes, the two arguments seem to be just the same.

An option for the defender of Anselm: claim that premise (4) of Gaunilo's argument is false, because the Lost Island cannot be conceived to exist in reality. An argument that the idea of a greatest possible island is incoherent in a way that the idea of a greatest possible being is not.