

# *On behalf of St Anselm*

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In *God, Freedom and Evil* Alvin Plantinga (1974: 90–91) proposes that Gaunilo’s parody of Anselm’s argument (Gaunilo 1965: 163) fails because great-making qualities of Gaunilo’s ‘Perfect Island’ are not maximal and thus ‘the greatest conceivable island’ is an incoherent concept. Brian Garrett in *On behalf of Gaunilo* (2013: 481–482) claims that ‘Properly understood, the great-making qualities of an island are maximal’ and therefore Plantinga’s riposte to Gaunilo’s parody collapses. Garrett proposes to support his assertion by defining Gaunilo’s ‘perfect island’ as an island with a series of ‘ideal’ qualities that describe the ‘perfect island’:

Properly understood, the great-making qualities of an island are maximal. We can make this explicit by defining the perfect island as the island of ideal size, possessing the ideal number of coconuts, ideally white sand, ideal sea and air temperature, etc. (Garrett 2013: 482)

This article argues that defining Gaunilo’s island by way of ‘ideal’ attributes does not save it from the peril of incoherence and thus Plantinga’s riposte stands. Garrett accepts that ‘Without the assumption that there is exactly one ideal size for an island [emphasis added], there would, for example, be no absolute ideal number of coconuts, just different numbers for different-sized islands.’ (Garrett 2013: 482)

It is therefore enough to refute Garrett’s argument by showing that either there is not exactly one ideal size for an island or that the concept of ideal size of an island is incoherent, circular or empty. Garrett provides no justification for assumption that there is exactly one ideal size for an island despite accepting that the whole argument hinges on such assumption.

Now the primary meaning of ‘ideal’ being ‘Satisfying one’s conception of what is perfect; most suitable’ (Oxford English Dictionary) Garrett’s re-definition of Gaunilo’s ‘Perfect Island’ as an island of the size that satisfies one’s conception of what is perfect or most suitable is essentially equivalent to ‘perfect island’, thus being a circular definition that adds no coherence to the original ‘Perfect Island’.

Clearly there is not exactly one ideal size for an island either, for one’s conception of what is perfect or most suitable is not contained in ‘ideal’ itself. Saying ‘island of an ideal size’ is meaningless without specifying some external contingent requirement of what constitutes ideal size, such contingent requirement being variable.

Island of a size ideal to maintain population of say 10 specimens of any species would differ from the size ideal to maintain a population of 10,000. For every island that is of ideal size for a population of  $N$ , a greater island can be conceived with size ideal for a population of  $N+1$  (note this conclusion is not dependent on population per se: any numerable characteristic that can satisfy  $N+1$  would demonstrate non-maximality).

Ergo, there is not exactly one ideal size for an island. Therefore Plantinga's assertion that the great-making qualities of an island are non-maximal and that the 'greatest conceivable island' is an incoherent concept stands.

### *References*

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