IN BEHALF OF 'IN BEHALF OF THE FOOL'

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Gaunilo's reply to Anselm's argument for the existence of God was a similar argument for the existence of the lost island, 'more excellent than all other countries' ([2]:11). Anselm's God has done fairly well since that time; He has walked with Bonaventure and Descartes, with Leibniz and with Barth. Noteworthy among recent and not-quite-so-recent defenders of Anselm's argument are Alvin Plantinga ([8], [9]) and Charles Hartshorne ([5]). Gaunilo's island has not done so well; both Plantinga and Hartshorne reject the parody in no uncertain terms, and Hartshorne goes so far as to nominate Gaunilo as 'the most overrated thinker in history' ([5]:113).

Anselm's presentation of the argument is couched in terms of 'greatness' and 'existence in the imagination', and the crucial premise which even the fool must grant is that God exists in the imagination. Gaunilo's parody rests on the similar premise that the lost island exists in the imagination. But Anselm's argument has not escaped attempts at improvement; Hartshorne replaces 'greatness' with 'perfection', Plantinga uses 'maximal greatness' and 'maximal excellence' defined in terms of omniscience, omnipotence, moral perfection and possible worlds, and both replace Anselm's 'existence in the imagination' with possible existence.[1] Thus in contemporary forms of the argument the crucial premise is that it is possible that God exists (or possible that 'maximal greatness' is instantiated), and a similarly updated form of Gaunilo's parody would rely on the premise that it is possible that the lost island (suitably specified) exists.

Hartshorne and Plantinga both use the strategy of denying the crucial premise of Gaunilo's parody while defending its analogue in the ontological argument; it is *not* possible that such an island exists, though it is possible that God does, or that maximal greatness is instantiated. Their reasons for apparent unanimity on this point, however, are different enough to call for individual scrutiny.

In what follows I hope to show that both Hartshorne's and Plantinga's replies to Gaunilo are inadequate, and that contemporary forms of the ontological argument are as open to parody in the manner of Gaunilo as was Anselm's original. I will also say a few things about what it is that successful parody really shows.

I. Hartshorne and the Lost Island

Hartshorne argues:

> Suppose we should speak of a 'necessarily-existent' island. Since the necessary is of course so, said Island must exist. What is wrong? Simply that the notion of island is that of a contingent thing, resulting from causes whose operation is not infallible and everlasting ....Thus a language which required one to admit as a genuine concept 'necessarily-existing island' would be self-inconsistent. The 'necessarily-existing island' must exist, but also it must not and cannot exist. ([5]:55)

Islands are essentially contingent entities, Hartshorne insists, and thus a 'necessarily existing island' or an island which 'if possible, is necessary' would be a contradiction in terms. So much for Gaunilo's island.[2]

Are all islands essentially contingent? *Must* something be contingent in order to qualify as an island? Hartshorne doesn't further support his affirmative answer, and I'm not sure how he would attempt to do so. I am quite ready to admit, on the basis of (limited) geological knowledge, that Tahiti, Oahu, Hawaii, and the Solomons might have been other than they are or might not have been at all. But my confidence in the contingency of these particular islands rests on a knowledge of geology rather than on an analysis of 'island' or on *a priori* reflection as to what if anything '...is an island' strictly entails with respect to modalities and existence.[3] One might also charge Hartshorne with using against Gaunilo's parody a traditional objection he is not willing to apply against his own argument. The charge that all island-existence claims are contingent is simply a special case of the more general contention that all existence claims are contingent. If the latter is to be rejected as lacking sufficient support, perhaps the former should be according the same treatment.

But let us grant, for the sake of argument, that 'necessarily-existent island' is a contradiction in terms. It is not clear that this would be enough. In order to apply Hartshorne's attack against island-producing parodies in general, we would have to demand that all marvelous islands introduced in parody be specified as necessarily existent—presumably on the grounds that necessary existence is a crucial part of the ontological argument and must therefore appear in any suitably analogous parody. If necessary existence is not crucial to the ontological argument, or need not appear in parodies of it, the fact (if it is a fact) that islands cannot necessarily exist would do nothing to stop parodies in which marvelous islands are not specified as fully necessary. Gaunilo's lost island, for one, is not so specified.

There are perfectly respectable forms of the ontological argument which do not involve necessary existence, and parodies which have the same form. Thus Gaunilo's island may constitute an adequate parody of Anselm's argument even if Hartshorne is right that it would be inconsistent to specify that

island as necessarily existent.

Consider the following as a modified ontological argument:

(1) Necessarily, something is locally maximal only if it is magnificent in Kronos (where Kronos is a name for our world, the actual world).
(2) Necessarily, something is magnificent in a possible world only if it is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect in that world.
(3) It is possible that something is locally maximal.

For convenience I have phrased this in roughly Plantingan terms, though a form such as Hartshorne's would do equally well. If (3) is true, there is a possible world in which something is locally maximal. 'Local maximality', however, is a world-indexed property, and in order for something to have that property in any possible world it must be magnificent in Kronos. But Kronos is our world, and by the definition of 'magnificent' it follows that there is in our world a being which is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect.

If the more standard forms of the ontological argument are acceptable, then so is this one; it differs from the standard only in replacing existence in every possible world with existence in one in particular. Similar arguments might be constructed in which we specified groups of possible worlds not by name (as we have done above, using 'Kronos') but by using some general description. We might thus entertain beings which, if possible, exist in those possible worlds in which the earth revolves around the sun or in which their existence has been entertained. One lesson which such forms of the argument offer is this: were we out simply to demonstrate the (actual) existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect being (or whatever attributes we choose), appeal to fully necessary existence existence in *every* world would be something of an overkill.

In this light, consider a sufficiently marvelous island which, if possible, exists in Kronos or which, if possible, exists in all worlds in which milk is white. Given its possibility, we could demonstrate its existence in the manner above. But we need not maintain that such an island exists in every possible world, and thus we need not violate Hartshorne's stipulation that islands be contingent. Even if Gaunilo's island is essentially contingent, it may quite properly appear in a satisfactory parody of Anselm's God.

Were Hartshorne's rejection of Gaunilo's island generally adequate against a strategy of parody, moreover, it would have to hold against all the odd beings we are clever enough or depraved enough to invent. This it could not do even if, in addition to the concessions above, we artificially limited our attention to forms of parody involving fully necessary existence.

Consider in this regard beings defined such that, if it is possible that they exist, they necessarily exist and: are maximally ignorant; or maximally indifferent to foreign affairs; or maximally mediocre in all they attempt; or maximally obsessed with postage stamps. In order for Hartshorne's strategy to prove effective against these and myriad similar cases, it would be neces-

sary to show that beings with such maximalities are essentially contingent. But if the classical attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, and moral perfection do not condemn their possessor to essential contingency, we can surely find other attributes more humorous and more blasphemous but logically no more objectionable. Nor, in the end, need we confine our attention to fully 'maximal' properties; omniscience except for a total ignorance of theology, or moral perfection tempered by a weakness for chocolates, or typical average run-of-the-mill mediocrity are equally fair game.[4]

We might also toy with interesting sets of such beings. Consider, for example, the following group of definitions:

God_1 = df. a being which, if it is possible that such a being exists, necessarily exists and is omnipotent, omniscient, morally perfect, and not identical to God_2 or God_3.

God_2 = df. a being which, if it is possible that such a being exists, necessarily exists and is omnipotent, omniscient, morally perfect, and not identical to God_1 or God_3.

God_3 = df. a being which, if it is possible that such a being exists, necessarily exists and is omnipotent, omniscient, morally perfect, and not identical to God_1 or God_2.

Given the possible existence of each of these, we can demonstrate the truth of polytheism. I leave as an exercise the construction of definitions appropriate to series of Gods and demigods loving or loathing others of their number, not on speaking terms or extending invitations to tea.

Hartshorne's attack ultimately fails, I think, even against Gaunilo's lost island; demonstrations parallel to the ontological argument in all relevant respects can be constructed which do not involve necessary existence, and thus the claim that 'necessarily-existent island' is a contradiction in terms is an inadequate response even if true. A rich vein for parody remains, moreover, even if Gaunilo's island is lost; even if we avoid arguably contingent entities such as islands and even if we artificially limit our attention to parodies involving fully necessary existence. In that regard Gaunilo clearly has the last laugh.

II. Plantinga's Attack

Plantinga, like Hartshorne, rejects Gaunilo's island by denying the crucial claim that it is possible that such an island exists. But for Plantinga it is 'greatest possible' islands, rather than 'necessarily existent' ones, which are logically suspect:

> The idea of an island than which it's not possible that there be a greater is like the idea of a natural number than which it's not possible that there be a greater, or the idea of a line than which none more crooked

is possible. There neither is nor could be a greatest possible natural number; indeed, there isn't a greatest *actual* number, let alone a greatest possible. And the same goes for islands. No matter how great an island is, no matter how many Nubian maidens and dancing girls adorn it, there could always be a greater—one with twice as many, for example. The qualities that make for greatness in islands—number of palm trees, amount and quality of coconuts, for example—most of these qualities have no *intrinsic maximum*. That is, there is no degree of productivity or number of palm trees (or of dancing girls) such that it is impossible that an island display more of that quality. So the idea of a greatest possible island is an inconsistent or incoherent idea; it's not possible that there be such a thing. ([8] :91-92)[5]

Plantinga's attack is in many ways more substantial than Hartshorne's; we are not left, for example, with merely a bald insistence that 'greatest possible island' is a contradiction in terms. But I am not sure that Plantinga's objections are ultimately any more effective either against Gaunilo's island in particular or as a hedge against parody in general.

Consider first the matter of whether the wonderful attributes of wonderful islands lack *inherent maxima*. There is no greatest possible number of dancing girls, and if a greatest possible island requires a greatest possible number of dancing girls, it does indeed appear to be a lost impossibility. But it is not at all clear that the greatest possible island would demand the greatest possible number of dancing girls or palm trees any more than it would have to have the greatest possible size. 'Right-sizedness' rather than sheer enormity makes for greatness in islands, real or imagined, and within the limits imposed by 'right-sizedness' too many palm trees would be sorely inconvenient and too many dancing girls would be an ecological menace. Between 'right-sized' islands congested with palm trees and crowded with dancing girls, a few *less* of each might characterize that island greater all things considered. So even if there is no *inherent maximum* with respect to numbers of dancing girls in the abstract, there may well be a limit to the number of dancing girls admissable on an island great in other respects; right-sized and not overcrowded, for example. If the qualities of an island which contribute to its greatness are in this sense in equilibrium, those qualities may have *inherent maxima* in the context of an island great all things considered even if they do not have *inherent maxima* in isolation and in the abstract.

Plantinga's mistake here is a compound of two fairly elementary fallacies. The first is to think that certain attributes of something which is y must themselves be y; that the physique of our best novelist must be the best physique, that the hairs of our most respected statesman must be our most respected hairs, that the number of dancing girls on the greatest island must be the greatest number of dancing girls. The second is a fallacy of ambiguity; 'greatness' is applied to islands, as to gods, in part at least in the sense of 'grandness' or 'perfection' rather than 'largeness'. In this sense the greatest

possible number of dancing girls on an island is the *best* number, all things considered, rather than an impossible largest number in the abstract. It is somewhat surprising that Plantinga makes either of these slips, since he is quite careful to avoid similar traps in dealing with the problem of evil.

In rejecting Gaunilo's island on the grounds that it has qualities without *inherent maxima*, Plantinga must guard against a similar objection to his own 'omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect being'. Plantinga does make a plausible case that 'omniscience' has a suitable limit: 'If for every proposition p, a being B knows whether or not p is true, then B has a degree of knowledge that is utterly unsurpassable' ([8]:91). But with regard to omnipotence and perfection he concedes that the case is less clear. Consider in this regard an objection to omnipotence similar to Plantinga's attack on Gaunilo: Among rulers and those in power generally, the number of people over which one has power is a measure of the extent of one's power. Thus a being with the greatest possible power would be a being with power over the greatest possible number of people. But there neither is nor could be a 'greatest number of people'; omnipotence is without an *inherent maximum* and thus it is impossible that any being be omnipotent.

I won't claim that this is any better an argument against Plantinga's God than is its analogue against Gaunilo's island; my point is simply that the attack against Gaunilo's island, if adequate, would appear to apply equally well against Plantinga's God. At that point at which Plantinga considers the possibility, he remarks abruptly, 'rather than pause to discuss this question, let's note simply that there may be a weak point in Anselm's argument and move on.' ([8]:91). But of course any difficulties in this regard concerning omnipotence, omniscience, or moral perfection would infect Plantinga's final form of the argument as much as Anselm's original. Even if each of the divine attributes is interpreted so as to have an *inherent maximum*, moreover, difficulties of consistency might arise in their joint assertion.

But les us suppose, for the sake of argument, that the attributes of Plantinga's God have *inherent maxima* (and that such a being is otherwise consistent) and that those of a 'greatest possible island' do not. Would this be enough? No. Plantinga would still have failed to dispose of island-proving parodies, since the 'full perfection' or 'fullest possible greatness' which his objections address need not be an essential part of such parodies. Perhaps the point can most clearly be put as follows. Plantinga claims that among the qualities p_1, p_2, ... p_n which make for greatness in an island are some without *inherent maxima*; numbers of dancing girls, for example. But let us construct an island-specification by assigning an artificial limit for each such property which gives us a mildly wonderful instantiation of that property even if not 'the most wonderful possible'. 2,000 dancing girls at one's beck and call is perhaps sufficient, and 40,000 palm trees each with an annual crop of 1,000 Grade A Large coconuts would be enough. Without insisting that an island so specified is the greatest possible, we can I think agree that it is mildly spectacular and moderately marvelous. And as long as we further specify that it is possible

that it exists only if it necessarily exists, we can on the premise of its possibility demonstrate the existence of as wonderful an island of this sort as we please. Full perfection or greatest possible greatness are no more necessary to the ontological argument or parodies thereof—they do not, in fact, have any important role in Plantinga's argument—than is fully necessary existence.[6] Even were we to grant Plantinga's objections to 'greatest possible islands' on the grounds of *inherent maxima,* and even were we to assume that Plantinga's God did not face similar difficulties, Gaunilo's lost island would return in one form or another to plague the ontological argument.

It should be clear from the considerations above that Plantinga's and Hartshorne's attacks would ultimately be no more effective if united than each is individually. Were we (wrongly but politely) to concede all that each demands - that 'necessarily existent island', 'necessarily existent mermaid', and the like are contradictions in terms, and that greatness in islands involves qualities without *inherent maxima*—and were we further to limit ourselves to parodies involving fully necessary existence, the vein for parody would still be a rich one. However much such artificial strictures might limit our creative powers, they could not limit them enough; an indefinitely wide field remains for the invention of absurd beings specified in terms of fully necessary existence and the attributes of which either have *inherent maxima* or are carefully specified in terms of certain limits: perfectly ignorant beings and those who know only Ayn Rand, maximally irritating beings and those merely tactless on Tuesdays, totally tasteless beings and those with a passion for paint-by-numbers.

III. What Parody Shows

It is one thing to show that parodies are an inescapable accompaniment to the ontological argument, however, and another to draw any logical lessons from them. Parodies have always been seen as something of an embarrassment to defenders of the ontological argument; but why? Precisely what is it that such parodies show?

They certainly do not show invalidity. An invalid form of the ontological argument would have similarly invalid parodies; but since the same holds for valid forms with valid parodies, parodies alone do nothing to indicate invalidity. Perhaps the closest we could come to a demonstration of invalidity by means of parody alone would be as follows. We construct a definition (let us say for 'God_{27}' or 'maximal greatness sense 29') similar to those on which all forms of the ontological argument rest, and such that from the apparently innocuous premise 'it is possible that God_{27} exists' or 'it is possible that maximal greatness sense 29 is instantiated' we can derive a contradiction. It is in fact quite easy to construct such arguments. But they do not show anything remotely approaching invalidity. What the derivation of a contradiction in such a case *would* show would be merely that the 'possibility' premise

relied on was necessarily false. The existence of the being proposed, or the instantiation of the property defined, would be a simple impossibility logically demonstrable as such—and nothing more. The form of the argument used would not itself be shown invalid, and the impossibility of one being defined in a certain manner need not impugn the possibility of others.

Nor do the parodies show that someone who accepts the existence of God on the basis of the ontological argument is thereby forced to accept the existence of other odd beings we might introduce in parody. All arguments in ontological argument form rely on a 'possibility' premise—'it is possible that God exists' or 'it is possible that maximal stupidity is instantiated'- and we are under no logical compulsion to grant any one such premise or to grant every such premise. One can consistently take one's pick of beings defined (among other things) as necessary if possible, rejecting as impossible those one doesn't care for and accepting as possible those one wishes to embrace. Nor need one man's collection of favorite necessary beings coincide with another's. One can resist necessarily existent marvelous islands in the same way one can resist any God of any form of the ontological argument; by refusing to grant that that particular being is possible (or conceivable, or whatever the particular form of the argument demands). We need not play the fool to Anselm's argument by granting his crucial premise, and he need not play the fool to Gaunilo's parody by granting its analogous premise.[7]

What parodies *do* successfully show is that the 'possibility' premise of the ontological argument is not as innocuous as it might appear. Most things we encounter or imagine are such that their mere possibility buys very little, and certainly does not entail their actual existence. But the odd beings of the ontological argument and its parodies are definitionally stipulated in such a way that 'mere' possibility buys quite a lot. This lesson can, I think, be generalized for any modality which might appear in an apparently harmless premise. No modality is safe to grant for every specifiable being, since for any modality we can define a range of beings whose 'existence in' that modality generates almost anything we please.

What parodies show is that the 'possibility' premise of the ontological argument is not to be granted lightly, since similar 'possibility' premises in the parodies would force us to accept any number of odd and unlikely things. Thus parody shows that the argument is clearly insufficient as a 'proof'; the necessary 'possibility' premise is one for which additional justification is required as much as it would be for the bald claim that the God of the definition actually exists. This is an additional requirement which the argument does not itself satisfy, and which has never been satisfactorily provided for it. What parody shows is this ultimate inadequacy of the argument as anything more than an interesting logical novelty.

Successful parody also puts the onus squarely on the defender of the ontological argument to show why his 'possibility' premise is any more worthy of our acceptance than the similar premises of the parodies; why the acceptance of his premise over its rivals amounts to anything more than an

entirely arbitrary adoption of a favorite mythology. Plantinga concedes that the ontological argument is not a 'proof', but maintains that 'there is nothing *contrary to reason* or *irrational*' in accepting the crucial premise, and thus that the argument establishes the 'rational acceptability of theism' ([8]:112; see also [9]:220-21). What parody shows, if its challenge goes unanswered, is how little these claims amount to. There is nothing '*contrary to reason* or *irrational*' in accepting the possibility that God exists in no stronger sense than that in which there is nothing '*contrary to reason* or *irrational*' in accepting the possibility of necessary beings with a passion for stamp collecting or maximally indifferent beings or marvelous islands without a tourist trade. Theism is shown to be as 'rationally acceptable', and no more, than is belief in bogies and beasties and long-legged daddies and things that go bump in the night.

Gaunilo's comments on his parody are clearly intended to apply to Anselm's argument. They do, and apply with equal force to all forms of the argument since:

> If a man should try to prove to me by such reasoning that this island truly exists I know not which I should regard as the greater fool: myself, supposing that I should allow this proof; or him, if he should suppose he had established with any certainty the existence of this island. ([2]:11-12)

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NOTES

1. Plantinga's and Hartshorne's forms of the argument are more than just terminologically distinct, however. This is not of importance here, but is of interest with respect to some criticisms of the arguments (see [3]).
2. This argument is in fact borrowed from Bonaventure. My comments also apply against a more recent presentation by Philip E. Devine [1].
3. I am here ignoring the Putnamian thesis that empirical knowledge of islands and claims regarding essences and possibilities are quite intimately connected ([10]). In the present context this minor simplification seems harmless.
4. I give a more complete presentation of a number of parodies of this type in [4]. Somewhat similar beings – 'Nec' and his brothers – appear in Paul Henle [6].
5. This argument, complete with the phrase 'intrinsic maxima', appears in Broad as an argument against a 'most perfect being'. For a more recent discussion of the issue, see [7] and [14].
6. The 'maximally excellent being' of Plantinga's conclusion is not, in fact, a being 'greater than which none can be conceived' (on this, see [3]).
7. Purtill makes this point well in both [11] and [12] (see also [13]).