Ontological Arguments

According to common philosophical understanding, a successful ontological argument would be an argument that established the existence of God using nothing more than the resources of logical reasoning. That is, according to common philosophical understanding, a successful ontological argument would be an argument that had nothing but truths of logic—i.e. truths that can be known *a priori* by any reasonable cognitive agent—for its premises, and reached the conclusion that God exists using nothing but logically impeccable inferences from those premises. Hence, according to common philosophical understanding, a successful ontological argument would show that there is a sense in which it is a logical theorem—a truth provable *a priori* by any reasonable cognitive agent—that God exists.

Given this common philosophical understanding, we can say that the aim of those who put forward what they call "ontological arguments" is to show that, merely in virtue of being reasonable in the formation of beliefs that it holds on the basis of reason alone, any reasonable cognitive agent holds beliefs that jointly entail that God exists. Moreover, we can observe that a successful ontological argument will be such that none of its premises can be reasonably rejected by a reasonable cognitive agent; and it will be such that no reasonable being can reasonably deny that the conclusion of the argument is entailed by the premises of the argument; and it will have the conclusion that God exists.

The last claim in the previous paragraph is not *exactly* right. Many so-called "ontological arguments" do not end with the words "Therefore God exists". Often enough, so-called "ontological arguments" end with the words "Therefore so-and-so exists", where "so-and-so" is something that at least some theists will suppose is identifiable with God. This qualification is important for some interpretations of some so-called "ontological arguments", where there is room for reasonable disagreement about whether "so-and-so" is properly identified with God.

No-one who understands the ambitious aim of ontological arguments should be surprised to hear that the majority verdict of philosophers throughout the ages has been that no so-called "ontological argument" is successful. John Locke speaks for the majority of *theistic* philosophers when, concerning Descartes' "ontological argument" he writes: "It is an ill way of establishing [God's existence] and silencing atheists". But, of course, even if this verdict is correct—something that can only be decided on the basis of case-by-case examination of so-called "ontological arguments" that have been proposed down the centuries—it is a further question whether there is a successful ontological argument that awaits discovery. Many opponents of so-called "ontological arguments" have tried to show, on the basis of *a priori* considerations, that there could not be a successful ontological argument; these *a priori* counter-arguments are hardly in better standing than the so-called "ontological arguments" themselves. Moreover, even though there is fairly widespread agreement that no so-called "ontological argument" that has been proposed thus far is successful, there is considerable disagreement about the shortcomings of these arguments: even if philosophers are in broad agreement that particular so-called

"ontological arguments" are unsuccessful, they are certainly not in agreement about why it is that those arguments are unsuccessful.

One further reason for being cautious in embracing majority verdicts concerning so-called "ontological arguments" is the calibre of some of the philosophers who have defended these arguments. Anselm, Descartes, Leibniz, Gödel, and Plantinga are not intellectual lightweights; when they claim that there are successful ontological arguments, we have good reason to look carefully at the particular arguments that they offer. However, when we turn to a careful examination of these paradigmatic defences of so-called "ontological arguments", we immediately encounter serious difficulties.

In the case of Anselm and Descartes, the principle difficulty is that it is not at all easy to be confident that one is making proper application of modern analytical techniques to "the ontological arguments" that are defended by these authors. In the current literature, there are many wildly discrepant readings of "Anselm's *Proslogion II* Argument" and "Descartes' *Meditation V* Argument". One point worth noting here is that there is a tendency for non-theists to find, in these texts, arguments that commit relatively elementary errors of reasoning; there is a much wider variation in the responses to these arguments on the part of logically adept theistic commentators.

In the case of Gödel, the principal difficulty is that the argument is technically complicated; one needs to have a reasonably extensive understanding of twentieth century developments in logic in order to begin to understand the argument. There has been extensive recent discussion of this argument, including discussion of the attitude that Gödel himself took towards it. It is not at all clear that Gödel himself supposed that the argument constitutes a "successful proof" in the sense discussed above. (I shall not discuss Gödel's proof further in the present article.)

And, in the case of Plantinga, while the argument that he presents is clear and straightforward, it is much less clear what he is getting at when he claims that the "ontological argument" that he presents is "successful". Indeed, since Plantinga himself concedes that his argument certainly does *not* meet the standards for "successful proof" set out earlier, one might take the view that there is no room at all for thinking that his "ontological argument" remains live.

There are, of course, many other "ontological arguments" that have been presented and defended in recent times; there is no way of doing full justice to the extant literature in a brief review article like this one. Interested readers might choose to consult Oppy (1995) (2006) for a much more comprehensive set of analyses.

Anselm

In *Proslogion II*, Anselm writes:

> Even the fool is convinced that something than which nothing greater can be conceived is in the understanding, since when he hears this, he understands it; and

whatever is understood is in the understanding. And certainly that than which a greater cannot be conceived cannot be in the understanding alone. For if it is even in the understanding alone, it can be conceived to exist in reality also, which is greater. Thus if that that which a greater cannot be conceived is in the understanding alone, then that than which a greater cannot be conceived is itself that then which a greater can be conceived. But surely this cannot be. Thus without doubt something than which a greater cannot be conceived exists, both in the understanding and in reality.

This argument has been variously represented. Here are five quite recent representations:

Chambers (2000):

1. There is a thing x, and a magnitude m, such that x exists in the understanding, m is the magnitude of x, and it is not possible that there is a thing y and a magnitude n such that n is the magnitude of y and n>m.
2. For any thing x and magnitude m, if x exists in the understanding, m is the magnitude of x, and it is not possible that there is a thing y and magnitude n such that n is the magnitude of y and n>m, then it is possible that x exists in reality.
3. For any thing x and magnitude m, if m is the magnitude of x, and it is not possible that there is a thing y and a magnitude n such that n is the magnitude of y and n>m, and x does not exist in reality, then it is not possible that if x exists in reality then there is a magnitude n such that n is greater than m and n is the magnitude of x.
4. (Hence) There is a thing x and a magnitude m such that x exists in the understanding, and x exists in reality, and m is the magnitude of x, and it is not possible that there is a thing y and a magnitude n such that n is the magnitude of y and n>m. (From 1, 2, and 3.)

Millican (2004):

1. The phrase 'a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought' is clearly understood by the Fool, and apparently makes sense.
2. If a phrase 'A' is clearly understood and apparently makes sense, then we can take it to successfully denote some specific nature.
3. A nature which is instantiated in reality is greater than one which is not instantiated in nature.
4. It is obviously impossible to think of a nature that is greater than a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought.
5. (Hence), a-nature-than-which-no-greater-nature-can-be-thought must indeed be instantiated in reality. (From 1, 2, 3, and 4.)

Sobel (2004):

1. At least one thing than which nothing greater can be thought exists in the mind.
2. Existing both in the mind and in reality is greater than existing in the mind alone.

3. (Therefore) At least one thing than which nothing greater can be thought exists both in the mind and in reality. (From 1 and 2.)

Everitt (2005):

1. When the fool hears the words 'A being-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought', he understands these words.
2. Whatever is understood is in the mind.
3. If a being-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought existed only in the fool's mind, it could also be thought of as existing in reality as well, and this is greater.
4. (Hence) A being-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought exists both in the mind and in reality. (From 1, 2, and 3.)

Leftow (2005):

1. Someone thinks of a possible object which is something than which no greater can be thought.
2. If a possible something than which no greater can be thought is thought of but not actual, it could have been greater than it actually is.
3. (So) There actually exists something than which no greater can be thought. (From 1 and 2.)

There are various reasons why authors arrive at such different representations of "Anselm's *Proslogion II* Argument". The text itself is rather elusive. Moreover, given that the text is elusive, it is highly tempting for interpreters to read their own assumptions into the text to arrive at an interpretation that they find satisfying.

Despite the difficulties involved in the interpretation of *Proslogion II*, I think that it is possible to show that the argument that is actually presented in the text is unsuccessful.

Consider Anselm's claim that even the Fool is convinced that something than which nothing greater can be conceived exists in the understanding. What is the best way to represent the content of the belief that is here attributed to the Fool? I take it that it is something like this: [In the understanding] [There exists an x] [It is not the case that] [It is conceivable that] [There exists a y] [y>x]. Here, '[In the understanding]' is a sentential operator whose scope governs all of the remaining materials—quantifiers, operators, etc.—that occur in the sentence. Moreover, '[In the understanding]' operates in the same way as '[According to the fiction]', by providing protection against the incurring of ontological commitment via occurrences of quantifiers that lie within its scope. (Compare: [In the understanding] [There is an x] [x lives at the North Pole, wears a red suit, and delivers presents to children at Xmas]. It certainly does not follow from this claim that [There is an x] [In the understanding] [x lives at the North Pole, wears a read suit, and delivers presents to children at Xmas]. One who asserts the former claim is by no means committed to the latter.)

But, if this is how Anselm's initial claim is meant to be understood, then it seems to me that it is quite clear that his argument is unsuccessful. What Anselm's *reductio* argument requires is the assumption that [There is an x] [In the understanding] [It is not the case that] [It is conceivable that] [There exists a y] [y>x]. But, first, Anselm's preliminary considerations provide us with no reason to suppose that this claim is true, even if we concede that the Fool must allow that [In the understanding] [There exists an x] [It is not the case that] [It is conceivable that] [There exists a y] [y>x]. And, second, there is good reason for the Fool to deny the claim that Anselm imputes to him: the Fool does not and should not accept that *there is* something *of* which he understands that nothing greater than *it* can be conceived; his mere *understanding* of the expression 'something than which nothing greater can be conceived' does not require his commitment to the *existence* of any beings of any kind.

Perhaps it might be objected: surely we can allow to Anselm his (tacit) assumption that *there are* things that exist only in the understanding. But, if we do make this concession to Anselm, then we are faced with a series of questions. Suppose we allow that [There is an x] [In the understanding] [x lives at the North Pole, wears a read suit, and delivers presents to children at Xmas]. How is this concession consistent with the evident truth that Santa Claus does not exist? What properties should we suppose that an x of the kind in question possesses, i.e. what properties does it *really* have (given that, of course, *there is no one* who lives at the North Pole and who delivers presents to children at Xmas)?

It might be suggested that some version of Meinong's theory of objects can be used to provide answers to these questions: there are non-existent objects; hence, in particular, there is a non-existent x which has the properties that it lives at the North Pole, wears a red suit, and delivers presents to children at Christmas. However, while there are consistent theories of this kind, the price of consistency is the adoption of constraints that rule out the possibility of successful ontological arguments that adopt these theories. That we need some constraints is evident. Given the description 'the existent Santa Claus', we cannot allow that the Meinongian object referred to by this description is really an existing Santa Claus, on pain of violating evident commonsense. So consistent Meinongian theories adopt a protective mechanism: perhaps they distinguish between characterising and non-characterising properties—only the former may belong to descriptions that are *guaranteed by the theory* to refer to objects, and the latter include all 'real existence' entailing attributes; or perhaps they distinguish between exemplification and encoding of properties—so that, while Santa Claus *encodes* the properties of really existing, and living at the North Pole and giving presents to children at Xmas, that Meinongian object doesn't *really exemplify* any of these properties; or perhaps they distinguish between two kinds of predication—so that, while Santa Claus 'really exists' and 'lives at the North Pole' and 'gives presents to children at Xmas', this Meinongian object doesn't really exist, nor really live at the North Pole, nor really give presents to children at Xmas; or perhaps they just choose a privileged vocabulary—e.g. the words "really exist"—and insist that, when these words are used in a description, there is no theoretical guarantee that there will be an object that corresponds to this description; and so forth. But, however we proceed, we provide the Fool with theoretical protection against the kind of argument that Anselm wishes to foist upon him. Perhaps, for example,

the Meinongian Fool can agree that there is an object that *encodes* the property of being such that no greater can be conceived; and perhaps the Fool can then also agree that it follows that this object *encodes* the property of actually existing; but the Fool will then point out that it simply doesn't follow that this object *exemplifies* the property of actually existing—and so, in the relevant sense, Anselm's argument simply doesn't show that there *really is* a being than which no greater can be conceived.

Of course, even if it is plausible to suppose that Anselm's text actually contains an unsuccessful argument, it certainly does not follow that the various arguments that other philosophers have read into the text are unsuccessful. On the contrary, a proper discussion of "ontological arguments" requires that each of the available formulations needs to be carefully considered on its own terms. While I cannot discuss all of the above examples of arguments derived from Anselm's text—though I can refer the reader to analyses of these, and many other formulations, in Oppy (1995)(2006)—I would like to close this section with a comment on Leftow's formulation.

Leftow claims that his argument "survives objections" (111). However, on his own admission, he makes no attempt to show that his first premise—essentially, the claim that it is possible that there is something than which nothing greater can be conceived—is something that reasonable people are required to accept simply in virtue of being rational cognitive agents. To the objection that insistence on this first premise simply begs the question against those who do not accept that there is a being than which no greater can be conceived—and who *consequently* do not accept that it is *possible* that there is a being than which no greater can be conceived—Leftow says: "Every argument asserts rather than justifies its own premises. If we need reason to believe [that it is possible that there is something than which nothing greater can be conceived] ... this shows not that [our] argument begs the question, but merely that another argument is needed, on behalf of one of its premises." (91) But this really amounts to nothing more than the claim that there *might* be a successful ontological argument out there awaiting discovery; even Leftow tacitly concedes that there is *no* reason for the Fool to be persuaded by the argument that he has given *so far*.

Descartes

In *Meditation V*, Descartes writes:

> If from the fact alone that I can draw from my thought the idea of a thing, it follows that all that I recognise clearly and distinctly as belonging to that thing does indeed belong to it, cannot I derive from this an argument and a proof demonstrating the existence of God? It is certain that I no less find the idea of God in me, that is to say, the idea of a supremely perfect being, than that of any figure or number whatsoever. And I know no less clearly and distinctly that an actual and eternal existence belongs to his nature, than that all I can demonstrate of any figure or number truly belongs to the nature of that figure or number. … There is no less contradiction in conceiving a God, that is to say, a supremely perfect being, who lacks existence, that is to say, who lacks some particular perfection, than in conceiving a mountain without a valley.

As in the case of Anselm's *Proslogion II* argument, Descartes' *Meditation V* argument has been quite variously represented in the recent literature. Again, the text is rather elusive. And, again, because the text is elusive, it is highly tempting for interpreters to read their own assumptions into the text to arrive at an interpretation that they find satisfying. Here are some recent representations of the argument:

Dore (1997)

1.   The concept of a supremely perfect being is, in part, the concept of a person who has all those properties which are such that it is better than not that a person jointly possesses them.
2.   The concept of existence is the concept of such a property.
3.   (Hence) A supremely perfect being exists. (From 1 and 2.)

Everitt (2004)

1.   God is by definition a being with all perfections.
2.   Existence is a perfection
3.   (So) God has the perfection of existence, i.e. God exists. (From 1 and 2)

Sobel (2004)

1.   A supremely perfect being has every perfection.
2.   Existence is a perfection.
3.   A supremely perfect being exists. (From 1 and 2)

Leftow (2005)

1.   If God does not exist, a being with all perfections lacks a perfection.
2.   A being with all perfections lacks a perfection entails a contradiction.
3.   (Hence) God exists. (From 1 and 2)

1.   For all x, if being F is part of the concept of x, then Fx
2.   It is part of the concept of God that if God's nature is what it is, God exists.
3.   God's nature is what it is.
4.   (So) God exists. (From 1 and 2)

1.   If the 'true and immutable nature' of x includes being F, then Fx.
2.   The 'true and immutable nature' of God includes existence.
3.   (So) God exists. (From 1 and 2.)

If anything, it seems to me that these arguments do less justice to Descartes' text than the recent representations of Anselm's *Proslogion II* argument do to Anselm's text. But, despite the interpretative difficulties, I think that it is possible to show that the actual argument that Descartes gives is unpersuasive.

Suppose that a non-theist grants to Descartes that we can frame the idea of God. Suppose that our non-theist also grants to Descartes that it is 'part of the idea of God' that God is a supremely perfect being. And, finally, suppose that our non-theist grants to Descartes that anything that is a supremely perfect being is actually, eternally—and even necessarily— existent. Does it follow that our non-theist is rationally required to grant to Descartes that there is a supremely perfect being? Not at all. What our non-theist grants initially is that [According to the relevant idea] [God is a supremely perfect being]. Given the other claims that are granted to Descartes, what follows, at most, is that, [According to the relevant idea] [God is an actually, eternally—and even necessarily—existent supremely perfect being]. But, of course, it simply doesn't follow from [According to the relevant idea] [God is an actually, eternally—and even necessarily—existent supremely perfect being] that God exists. For, plainly enough, it no more follows from the claim that, [According to the relevant idea][Santa Claus is an existent inhabitant of the North Pole who wears a red suit and delivers presents to children at Xmas] that Santa Claus exists. (And it is undeniable that it is 'part of the Santa Claus idea' that Santa Claus exists. The story is *not* that some metaphysically bizarre, non-existent man lives at the North Pole, etc.! Moreover, re-telling the story so that Santa Claus is eternally and/or necessarily existent would make no difference: no amount of extra metaphysical biff in the *content* of the idea will legitimate the exportation of the claim that Santa Claus exists from within the scope of the '[According to the relevant idea]' operator.)

Even those people who are disposed to see some merit in Anselm's *Proslogion II* argument are typically not disposed to see any merit in Descartes' *Meditation V* argument. Leftow (2005) is a good recent example of someone who thinks that Descartes' argument is a failure, but who thinks that Anselm's argument has not yet been shown to fail. Sobel (2004) sees far more merit in Anselm's argument than he sees in Descartes' argument, even though he holds that both arguments fail. Dore (1997) is one of very few people who think that Descartes' *Meditation V* argument is compelling.

Plantinga

Plantinga's 'successful' modal ontological argument may be stated quite briefly. Say that an entity is *maximally excellent* if it is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect. Say, further, than an entity is *maximally great* iff it is maximally excellent in every possible world, i.e. iff it is necessarily existent and necessarily maximally excellent. Then Plantinga's argument runs as follows:

1. It is possible that there is a maximally great entity.
2. (Hence) There is a maximally excellent entity. (From 1.)

Under suitable assumptions about the underlying modal logic, this is a valid argument. Moreover, it is clear that, if there can be theists who reasonably believe that there is a maximally great entity, then there certainly can be theists who reasonably believe that it is possible that there is a maximally great entity. Nonetheless, it seems clear that this argument falls well short of being a successful argument for its conclusion. For, as

Plantinga himself observes, this argument should be assessed only in conjunction with the following valid argument:

1. It is possible that there is no maximally great entity.
2. (Hence) There is no maximally excellent entity. (From 1.)

Plainly enough, if there can be reasonable non-theists who reasonably believe that there is no maximally great entity, then certainly there can be reasonable non-theists who reasonably believe that it is possible that there is no maximally great entity. So neither of these arguments can reasonably be considered to be persuasive. Moreover, contrary to Plantinga's own claim, neither of these arguments shows anything at all about the reasonableness of accepting the conclusions of these arguments.

It is perhaps worth noting that Plantinga's 'successful' modal ontological argument is similar to an argument developed by Charles Hartshorne, and which has been linked by some to an argument devised by Anselm in *Proslogion III*. There is an enormous literature on the overall structure of Anselm's *Proslogion*, and, in particular, on the relationships that hold between the arguments in *Proslogion II* and *Proslogion III*. And there are other places in which Anselm's elaborates upon and defends the arguments of *Proslogion II* and *Proslogion III*. To do full justice to Anselm's "ontological arguments" is an enormous task that has not yet been seriously attempted.

A Priori Objections

As I noted earlier, there are many philosophers who have undertaken to show, on the basis of purely *a priori* considerations, that there *could not* be a successful ontological argument. Most famously, Kant produced often cited *a priori* objections to the possibility of successful ontological arguments. In particular, many philosophers have taken from Kant the idea that there is something wrong with the thought that existence is a property, or a defining property, or a property that can be incorporated into ideas or individual concepts. Kant writes:

> 'Being' is obviously not a real predicate; that is, it is not a concept of something which could be added to the concept of a thing. … By whatever and however many predicates we may think a thing—even if we completely determine it—we do not make the least addition to the thing when we further declare that this thing is. Otherwise, it would not be exactly the same thing that exists, but something more than we thought in the concept; and we could not, therefore, say that the exact object of my concept exists.

Despite the obvious interpretative difficulties, I think that we can be pretty confident that there is no successful *a priori* objection to the possibility of a successful ontological argument buried in this Kantian text. Focus for a moment on sentences of the form 'a is F', where 'a' is a singular denoting term, and 'F' is a predicate. If we suppose that singular denoting terms and predicates express 'concepts', it is clear that we shall need to

allow that, in many ordinary cases in which we accept judgments of the form 'a is F', it is not the case that the concept associated with 'a' *includes* the concept expressed by 'F'. (Put another way, in many ordinary cases in which we accept a judgment of the form 'a is F', it is not the case that our acceptance of this judgment is based in *a priori* considerations.) But, in ordinary cases, involving uncontroversial 'predicates', this failure of *inclusion* does nothing at all towards showing that these predicates fail to express real properties, or that 'the exact objects of our concepts' do not exist. Bertrand Russell is the exact object of my concept 'Bertrand Russell', even though there are many claims of the form 'Bertrand Russell is F' that I accept only on *a posteriori* grounds. So there is no reason here to suppose that 'exists' cannot be treated as a real predicate.

Perhaps it might be objected that, in the case of other predicates that do form part of our concepts, we can draw secure *a priori* inferences: if 'F' is included in my concept of Bertrand Russell, then I know *a priori* that Bertrand Russell is F. And it might be added that there is an evident difficulty in allowing that existence can be incorporated into concepts: given the concept 'existent denizen of the North Pole who wears a red suit and distributes presents to children at Xmas', I cannot securely draw the conclusion that Santa Claus exists. However, as we have already noted, there seems to be only two available options at this point. On the one hand, we might insist that it is no more true that Santa Claus lives at the North Pole: for *there are no* permanent denizens of the North Pole. Granted, according to the Santa Claus story, Santa lives at the North Pole; but it does not follow from this uncontroversial claim that there is someone who lives at the North Pole. On the other hand, if we wish to follow Meinong in allowing that it is true that Santa Claus lives at the North Pole even though Santa Claus is a non-existent object, then we need to adopt one of the available protective strategies to ensure that we are not committed to the claim that we know *a priori* that a is F whenever the concept 'F' is contained in the concept 'a'. But, of course, these strategies do not forbid us from incorporating 'existence' into our concepts: from the standpoint of these Meinongian theories, there is, after all, nothing in the least problematic about, say, a 'John F. Kennedy' concept that includes existence. Rather, what these strategies do is to limit the *a priori* inferences that can be drawn from concepts so that Meinongian theories square with evident claims about what *really* does not exist.

There are other *a priori* objections that have been made to the possibility of a successful ontological argument. In my view, these objections are no more successful than the Kantian objection that we have just been discussing. There are many subtle questions that can be raised about the nature of existence, intentional objects, mind/world relations, the fallacy of begging the question, and the like; but it is not the case that the investigation of any of these questions has thus far led to a successful demonstration that it is knowable *a priori* that there cannot be a successful ontological argument. (Of course, in saying that, I don't mean to deny that it can be shown *a priori* that some particular ontological arguments are unsuccessful. I have argued elsewhere, for example, that this is true of the argument in Maydole (2003). The objections that I have sketched above to the arguments of Anselm and Descartes also fall into this category.)

Parody

Apart from the Kantian objections, the most often discussed objections to ontological arguments are modelled on one of the responses that the monk Gaunilo made to Anselm's ontological argument. Although Gaunilo doesn't quite make his objection in the following terms, we can imagine him presenting the following argument to Anselm:

> Even the fool is convinced that an island than which no greater island can be conceived is in the understanding, since when he hears this, he understands it; and whatever is understood is in the understanding. And certainly that island than which a greater island cannot be conceived cannot be in the understanding alone. For if it is even in the understanding alone, it can be conceived to exist in reality also, which is greater. Thus if that island than which a greater island cannot be conceived is in the understanding alone, then that island than which a greater island cannot be conceived is itself an island than which a greater island can be conceived. But surely this cannot be. Thus without doubt an island than which a greater island cannot be conceived exists, both in the understanding and in reality.

If Anselm's argument succeeded in showing that there is a being than which no greater can be conceived, then surely a very similar argument would succeed in showing that there is an island than which no greater island can be conceived. But it is absurd to suppose that this very similar argument succeeds in showing that there is an island than which no greater island can be conceived. Whence it follows that Anselm's argument cannot succeed in showing that there is a being than which no greater can be conceived.

Responses to Gaunilo's objection have typically taken one of two forms. Some philosophers have claimed that, while the fool really does understand the expression 'being than which no greater can be conceived', he doesn't really understand the expression 'island than which no greater island can be conceived'. So, for example, we have Plantinga's claim—cited in Oppy (1995: 163-4)—that the idea of a greatest possible island is incoherent: '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.' Plantinga's particular line of attack is suspect: the greatest possible island will be an island, hence girt by sea, hence of finite size. An island *overcrowded* with whatever it is that makes for greatness of islands will not be the greatest conceivable island. Moreover, the general strategy that underlies Plantinga's response is also dangerous: if, for example, we suppose that a being is greater in proportion to the number of universes that it creates, then the same line of argument would show that the fool doesn't really understand the expression 'being than which no greater can be conceived'.

Other philosophers have claimed that, while it is true that real existence is great-making for beings in general, it is not the case that real existence is great-making for islands. Even if the fool were to concede this claim, the most that would be achieved would be to shift attention to other cases—e.g. beings than which no greater can be conceived except that they know nothing about inaccessible cardinal numbers. Since the fool would surely

be right to insist that real existence is great-making in this case, it seems clear that, on its own, this strategy cannot generate a successful response to Gaunilo's objection.

Of course, the above remarks barely begin to scratch the surface of recent discussions of Gaunilo-style objections to ontological arguments. Philosophers disagree about the effectiveness of this style of objection: for example, Leftow (2005:92-7) gives an interesting—though, in my view, ultimately unsuccessful—defence of Anselm against Gaunilo's objection. Philosophers disagree about the range of its applicability: even if Gaunilo's objection does defeat Anselm's argument, are there other ontological arguments that can be defeated by objections in this style? And philosophers disagree about the value of these kinds of objections: even if Gaunilo-style objections do show that there is something wrong with ontological arguments, surely they don't satisfy our desire to know why it is that ontological arguments fail.

Concluding Remarks

In the heyday of logical positivism and ordinary language philosophy, there were many philosophers who were quite happy to bury all discussion of ontological arguments. Consider, for example, Stace (1959:180), cited in Oppy (1995:202):

> I simply cannot bear to discuss the dreary logomachy of the ontological argument. Probably Broad has completed demolished the argument. But I cannot bring myself to think that it needs demolishing.

Today, the situation is a bit different. While ontological arguments still have few serious defenders, there is a much wider recognition that there are interesting, live questions to be taken up in connection with them. And while most recent discussions of ontological arguments occur in compendiums, companions, encyclopaedias, and the like—see, for example, Dore (1997), Everitt (2004), Sobel (2004), Leftow (2005), Matthews (2005) and Oppy (2006)—there has been some interesting activity in the journals, in, e.g., Chambers (2000), Maydole (2003), and Millican (2004). I think that we can confidently expect to hear much more about ontological arguments in the coming decade.

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