

Losing the Lost Island

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Abstract Gaunilo's Lost Island Objection to Anselm's Ontological Argument aims to show that if Anselm's argument can establish the existence of a greatest conceivable being then a very similar argument can establish the existence of a greatest conceivable island. The challenge for the defender of Anselm is to identify the relevant disanalogy between Anselm's argument and Gaunilo's, in order to explain why Anselm's can succeed while Gaunilo's fails. In this essay I take up this challenge. Reflection on the differences between the nature of islands and the nature of being yields the relevant disanalogy.

Keywords Anselm · Gaunilo · Ontological Argument · Lost Island

Gaunilo's Lost Island Objection is his most famous reply to Anselm's ontological argument. It purports to describe an island than which no greater island can be conceived or, for short, a *greatest conceivable island*. It is a parody of Anselm's description of God as a being than which no greater being can be conceived, or a *greatest conceivable being*. A greatest conceivable being exists in the mind and it is greater to exist in reality than in the mind alone, so Anselm infers that a greatest conceivable being exists in reality. Gaunilo mimics Anselm's reasoning: a greatest conceivable island exists in the mind and it is greater to exist in reality than in the mind alone, so a greatest conceivable island exists in reality. But it is obviously fatuous to suppose that we could reasonably believe in the existence of such an island on the basis of such an argument. Since the argument for the existence-in-reality of the Lost Island is extremely similar to Anselm's argument for the

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existence-in-reality of God, simply swapping “being” for “island” and leaving all else the same, it is supposed to be equally fatuous to suppose that we could reasonably believe in God’s existence on the basis of Anselm’s argument. Gaunilo supposes that there is no difference between beings and islands that is relevant to Anselm’s argument and his. But there is such a difference, or so I will argue. It is right there on the surface of Anselm’s reply to Gaunilo (albeit poorly stated). So I don’t take myself to be supplying a difference on Anselm’s behalf; instead, I’m letting him speak for himself against critics, like Bencivenga, who make claims like this: “Anselm is known to provide quite an unsatisfactory response to [Gaunilo’s objection] (Bencivenga 2007, p. 583).”

Anselm’s response to the Lost Island Objection is, admittedly, strange. In the third chapter of Anselm’s Reply to Gaunilo (hereafter referred to as ‘Reply III’), Anselm first restates the Objection and then issues the following challenge: “I say quite confidently that if anyone can find for me something existing either in reality or only in thought to which he can apply this inference in my argument, besides that than which a greater cannot be thought, I will find and give to him that Lost Island, never to be lost again (Anselm 2007, pp. 107–108).” From what follows we know that Anselm does not think that Gaunilo has found such a thing, but unfortunately Anselm does not say explicitly, “The relevant difference between being and island is such and such.” Instead, immediately following the challenge, he repeats the conclusion of *Proslogion* III, that the greatest conceivable being cannot be conceived not to exist. From context we must assume that Anselm took this restatement to be relevant to formulating a response to the Objection. But it is not obvious how it is relevant.

Nicholas Wolterstorff discerned no relevance: “To defend himself, Anselm has to point out why the finest conceivable island argument is not a good analogue. He does nothing of the sort. Instead he blusters (Wolterstorff 2010, p. 68),” and later Wolterstorff affirms, “Anselm realized that there was no relevant disanalogy to point out (Ibid., p. 70).”

If Anselm were trying to point out some relevant disanalogy, the natural place to do it would be *Reply* III. What we find there is the restatement of the conclusion of *Proslogion* III. Surely this is at least a *clue* about how Anselm thought being was relevantly different from island. The greatest conceivable being cannot be conceived not to exist, Anselm reminds us. If we add *greatest conceivable* to *being* we can formulate a valid argument that such a being is *necessary*. I take it that Anselm means to imply that if we add *greatest conceivable* to *island* we cannot formulate a valid argument that such an island is necessary. The reasons why we can formulate for the former what we can’t for the latter reveal the relevant disanalogy or difference between being and island.

Now why should Gaunilo, or any Fool on whose behalf he writes, concede that being necessary belongs to the greatest conceivable being but not to the greatest conceivable island? After all, the reasoning Anselm offers for the necessity of the greatest conceivable being can be parodied just as easily as the reasoning he offers for its existence-in-reality. To show just how easy this is, here is Anselm’s argument in *Proslogion* III for the conclusion that the greatest conceivable being cannot be conceived not to exist, edited to make it an argument about a greatest conceivable

island: “This [island] exists so truly that it cannot even be thought not to exist. For it is possible to think that [an island] exists that cannot be thought not to exist, and such [an island] is greater than one that can be thought not to exist. Therefore, if that [island] than which a greater cannot be thought can be thought not to exist, then that [island] than which a greater cannot be thought is *not* that [island] than which a greater cannot be thought; and this is a contradiction. So that [island] than which a greater cannot be thought exists so truly that it cannot even be thought not to exist (Anselm 2007, p. 82).”

Despite the easiness of the parody, I think that Anselm is right to imply that the greatest conceivable island, whatever else we might want to say about it, just does not have necessary existence. The reason it lacks this great-making feature has nothing to do with being the *greatest conceivable* island and everything to do with being the greatest conceivable *island*. Islands, whatever fancy adjectives you put in front of them, just aren't the sorts of things eligible for the property of necessary existence. This ineligibility is due to facts about the *nature* of islands. An island, for example, is a kind of land, and a land is made of earth, such as rocks, soil, and sand. A greatest conceivable island might be an especially large land made of especially precious rocks (*diamond-sand beaches!*), but it is a feature of land, *qua* land, that a sufficiently powerful agent could *break it apart*. What defenses has this island against the erosive effects of the water that surrounds it? How will it protect itself against an atomic bomb, or a meteor, or an army of Ents, or the wrath of God? Being land, one or more of these will or could destroy it in the end.

The by-nature vulnerability of the greatest conceivable island could be rejected only by supposing that the greatest conceivable island is not really an island. This is a strategy pursued by Ermanno Bencivenga. He supposes that “‘than which no greater island can be thought’ is a qualifier that contradicts the meaning of ‘island,’ and hence [an island than which no greater island can be thought] *is not an island* (Bencivenga 2007, pp. 585–586, italics his).” Bencivenga offers examples of terms whose meanings are contradicted when certain qualifiers are applied to them: “a faulty proof is not a proof,” “an incomplete circle is not a circle.” He also notes that Anselm himself, in *De conceptu virginali*, gives an example of one: “a depicted man is not really a man.” These examples are supposed to motivate Bencivenga's claim that an island than which no greater island can be thought is not really an island. The argument for the claim that such an island is not really an island is this:

Consider any natural-kind term *A* that is less general than “being.” We can argue that, whatever the criteria for greatness are for *As*, we must come to a point where getting greater according to those criteria would mean losing what makes the thing an *A* at all. One island, for example, might be greater than another one because it has more luscious hills and more sandy beaches; but if we keep on adding luscious hills and sandy beaches to an island we end up making it no longer an island but a continent (Bencivenga 2007, p. 585).

The natural objection to this argument is that being a continent has nothing at all to do with being the greatest conceivable island (Bencivenga seems to exclude island-continents such as Australia, and I'll follow this exclusion for the sake of argument). If you're thinking of a continent, however great, you're just not thinking

of the greatest conceivable island. Bencivenga anticipates the objection. He considers the position of someone who, like me, thinks “that *being an island* is analytically built into *being an island than which no greater island can be thought*.” He then rightly points out that for at least some of the qualities that make islands great (such as having pretty flowers), “there is no maximal element with respect to greatness.” The idea here is that a great-making quality such as having pretty flowers implies no limit, no “maximal element.” The pretty flowers something has could always be more numerous or more beautiful. So for any very great island, we could think of one that is greater. Bencivenga draws the right conclusion: “Therefore, if we consider it necessary for *an island than which no greater island can be thought* that it be an island, there is no such.”

Exactly. And here I wish Bencivenga would have stopped. The problem with Gaunilo’s Lost Island is that it is an incoherent idea—“there is no such.” But Bencivenga does not stop here. Instead, he asserts that “if Anselm’s proof is sound (which, in the context of this particular objection by Gaunilo, is a point agreed upon by both interlocutors), the same kind of proof lets us establish [that an] island than which no greater island can be thought exists, and thus we find ourselves in an antinomical situation,” namely that on the one hand there is no such island, and on the other hand that there is a sound proof that there is such an island. The only way out of the antinomical situation, Bencivenga concludes, is to say that, like the pictured man which isn’t a man, the greatest conceivable island is not an island (Ibid.).

Pursuing Bencivenga’s strategy, if we consider just those features that make islands great and ignore the natural restrictions on the ways in which islands can exemplify those features, we could after all sketch a way in which a greatest conceivable island could have a property like necessary existence. For example, being stable is a great-making feature of islands and thus a feature exemplified to some degree by the greatest conceivable island. But if the greatest conceivable island is not really an island, it has no islandy limitations on the degree to which it can exemplify stability. In fact, a greatest conceivable island can, and indeed must, be incorruptible (*you can’t get any stabler than that!*). Bencivenga goes on to suggest that once we take all the great-making features of islands to their logical extremes, still ignoring islandy limitations, the greatest conceivable island turns out to be identical with God (Ibid., p. 586). So by Bencivenga’s lights, if Gaunilo’s Lost Island argument proves anything at all, it proves exactly what Anselm’s own argument attempts to prove. This, Bencivenga concludes, is what “Anselm should have said (Ibid., p. 587).”

In response, I want to say, first, that Bencivenga is just incorrect to assert that the only way out of the antinomical situation described above is to deny that the greatest conceivable island is an island. There is another way out. It involves denying Bencivenga’s conditional that if Anselm’s proof is sound then Gaunilo’s is too. The reason we should deny the conditional is that there is something about being an island which will not let Gaunilo’s proof go through—the greatest conceivable island does not exist in reality. Moreover, there is something about being an island which renders impossible being a greatest conceivable island—the greatest conceivable island does not even exist in the mind.

Second, while Bencivenga's defense of Anselm against Gaunilo's Objection is clever, it is insufficiently attentive to what Anselm himself says, or at least implies, in his own defense. For Anselm seems to imply that *being such that it cannot be conceived not to exist*, which I have glossed so far as *being necessary*, is a property which a greatest conceivable being has and which a greatest conceivable island lacks. If we suppose, with Bencivenga, that a greatest conceivable island is not really an island, then we can no longer suppose that necessary existence is distinctive of the greatest conceivable being. Well, so what? On Bencivenga's strategy we get the brilliant conclusion that the greatest conceivable island = God. Why would an Anselm-sympathizer quibble about what Anselm might have been implying in his own stulted self-defense in *Reply III*, given such a conclusion?

My reply is partly motivated by a sense of fairness both to Gaunilo, who was trying to talk about an island, and to Anselm, who understood Gaunilo to be trying to talk about an island. Whatever the merits of Bencivenga's argument for the conclusion that the greatest conceivable island is identical with God, both the argument and the conclusion are alien to Anselm and Gaunilo, and Bencivenga's position is that Anselm simply bungled his reply to Gaunilo. Bencivenga thinks that Gaunilo's argument demonstrates the Lost Island's existence, but both Gaunilo and Anselm were unaware that it also demonstrates the existence of God. I think that Gaunilo's argument fails to demonstrate the Lost Island's existence; it follows from this view that the argument also fails to demonstrate God's existence.

My position is that Gaunilo knew what he was doing when he advanced the Lost Island Objection, and that Anselm knew how to overcome it—though I admit he did not express himself very clearly. So my attempt to vindicate Anselm's reasoning against the Lost Island Objection is really a two-fold vindication: to *defend* Anselm's argument against the Lost Island Objection, and to *interpret* Anselm in a way that shows that it is *he* who mounted the defense. Since I think Anselm's own words point the way to overcoming the Lost Island Objection, I think it would be fairer and simpler to attend closely to these and reason accordingly. So I think we should hold on to an understanding of "greatest conceivable island" which keeps it true that a greatest conceivable island is an island.

So the greatest conceivable island, being by nature made of land, will by nature be corruptible and therefore ineligible for the property of necessary existence. A greatest conceivable being, by contrast, implies no such restrictions. And this has everything to do with its being a being. *Being an island* is one way to be a *being*, a limited way. Similarly, *being a man* or *a potato chip* or *a sonata* are other ways to be *beings*, all limited. But simply to be, to be a being, is not to be limited in this or that way. If all we knew of a potato chip is that it is a being, for all we know that potato chip might have wings, or know calculus, or be the creator of the universe. Only when we know that this being is limited in just the way dictated by the nature, potato chip, will we know that it neither is nor could be any of these things. More generally, if all we know of *x*, for any *x*, is that *x* is a being, then for all we know *x* might be a necessary being, might possess all the perfections traditionally attributed to God, and might possess all these in an infinite way. *Being* is uniquely suitable for the sort of argument Anselm bequeathed us; being implies no limitations either on the kinds of properties it can possess or on the degree to which it can possess them.

My suggestion is that Anselm reminded us in *Reply III* that the greatest conceivable being cannot be thought not to exist in order to highlight this important difference between being and island. *Being as such* is indifferent between necessary and contingent; it is greater to be necessary than contingent; so the greatest conceivable being is necessary. *Being an island as such* is not indifferent between necessary and contingent; in fact, being an island entails being contingent, so the parody argument which purports to show that the greatest conceivable island is necessary is unsound.

Brian Garrett has recently asserted that Gaunilo could have made such a parody argument. He writes, “An Anselmian argument for the necessity of God’s existence (‘Suppose that God existed contingently. Then we could conceive of a being greater than God—one with all God’s traditional qualities who existed necessarily. But...’) can be parodied by Gaunilo to show that the perfect island exists of necessity (Garrett 2013, p. 482).” The foregoing reflections show that Garrett’s assertion is almost certainly false. Given the kind of thing an island is, specifically that it is a complex material thing, it can be broken apart and therefore is at best a merely contingent thing.

Anselm’s strategy against Gaunilo’s Lost Island Objection, stated more generally, is this: *to identify features of island-nature which won’t let island function in Gaunilo’s Objection the way being functions in Anselm’s Argument*. One such feature is the intrinsic corruptibility of complex material objects, which entails that such objects are not necessary beings.

With this general strategy we can home in on what we’re really after: a difference between being and island which will give us a principled reason for rejecting Gaunilo’s parody argument for the *existence* of the Lost Island, not its necessity, while accepting Anselm’s argument for God’s existence.

To my mind, Alvin Plantinga nailed it years ago: “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* (Plantinga 1974, pp. 90–91, italics his).” Thus there is no such thing as a greatest conceivable island, neither in reality nor even in the mind. Qualities that do admit of intrinsic maxima include those traditionally thought to belong to God: God has goodness, power, wisdom, etc., not just infinitely but *maximally*—they are not able to be possessed to a higher degree. (The distinction between infinite and maximal matters to those who might quibble that there could be more than one infinitely good thing, where one yet has more goodness than another.) Plantinga’s thought here is that even if some of the qualities possessed by the Lost Island have intrinsic maxima, many do not—such as having coconuts, palm trees and attractive dancers. More to the point, if it is necessary that the Lost Island have *at least one* great-making feature which does not have an intrinsic maximum, then there cannot be a greatest conceivable island, neither in reality nor in the mind. And surely there is at least one. Maybe the Island isn’t tropical at all; maybe it’s a snowy wonderland in the Arctic. In this case it wouldn’t have coconuts and such, but it would have everything pertaining to being an island. One feature of being an island is being surrounded by water (or perhaps

just liquid), and one feature of being surrounded is having determinate dimensions. Bigness isn't everything, but you need a lot of land to hold all those pines and ice caves and polar bears. So either for its own sake or for the sake of what it enables, having determinate dimensions is a great-making feature of an island. But for any really great island you fancy, you could fancy a bigger.

Brian Garrett (Garrett 2013) has criticized Plantinga's take on the relevant difference between island and being. He thinks that what Gaunilo is committed to is not that every great-making feature of an island is exemplified by the Lost Island to the greatest degree it can be exemplified, but instead that the Lost Island possesses all of an island's great-making features to an "ideal" degree. And being ideal is being intrinsically maximal "properly understood." He writes, "It is good for an island to have coconuts, but not too many. A warm sea can always be hotter, but not consistently with still being warm [...] 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 [...] Since these qualities are intrinsically maximal, Plantinga's riposte to Gaunilo's parody collapses (Garrett 2013, p. 482)."

Garrett's response is unsuccessful. In reply, it should be said that Garrett's criticism has no force against the enormous intuitive plausibility of the idea that for any island you imagine, you can imagine it being at least a teensy bit better in some way or other. Every grain of sand is good. So one more will make the island a bit better. If you do not find this thought as intuitive as I do, it may be because you are concerned not just with the overall amount of good things but also with the good order or harmony of good things to each other. Maybe the addition of one grain of sand would make the island better, but only if we also added (or subtracted) something else. Then the net increase in goodness on the island would result from the combination of the extra grain and whatever else we undertake. Or maybe, to make way for that extra undertaking (which itself is meant to make way for the extra grain), there is yet another addition (or subtraction) we must make. And this may go on and on and on; but the point is that whenever we completed the necessary modifications, we'd have an overall better island. And then I ask again, "And how about yet another grain of sand?" And the process starts again, but again with the result of an overall net gain of goodness. So the first objection to Garrett's criticism of Plantinga is simply that it's implausible relative to the highly plausible thought that for any finitely good thing (including islands), there will always be some way to make it just a teensy bit better.

The second objection is that Garrett's notion of an ideal number is in this context hopelessly relative. His perfect island would have the ideal number of coconuts. Relative to what would this number be ideal? The amount of space on the island? The nutritional needs of coconut-eating animals on the island? The insatiable appetite for coconuts of coconut-eating animals on the island? The favorite number of the Queen of the Island? Each is hopelessly arbitrary and any other candidate ideal-setter would be, too. Since each of these standards is arbitrary, they are more likely to yield different ideal numbers than the same ideal numbers. If different ideal numbers, then it would be true of the Lost Island that it has n coconuts where $n > 0$, and $n + x$ coconuts where $x > 0$. In this case the concept of the Lost Island would

be incoherent. If the same ideal numbers—if according to any standard whatsoever we ended up with the same number as the ideal number of coconuts—we would naturally seek some explanation for this remarkable alignment. In this case the concept of the Lost Island would be coherent but bizarre and unmotivated. Given these two objections, I conclude that Garrett’s argument against Plantinga’s argument against Gaunilo’s argument against Anselm’s argument, is unsound.

If the view I have presented in this paper is correct, then Anselm, at best, drops a hint in *Reply III* about how he might have gone about replying to the Objection. The hint consists in his explicit restatement of the view that the greatest conceivable being is a necessary being, and in his implicit assertion that the greatest conceivable island is not a necessary being. Reflection on why the latter would be merely contingent yielded the thought that, islands being what they are, no island, however great, could be necessary. This seems to me conclusive against any possible Gaunilo-type parody argument which aims to show that there is a necessarily existing Lost Island. I then applied Anselm’s *Reply III*-hint directly to Gaunilo’s actual parody argument, the one which made him famous. I argued that facts about the natures of islands, and specifically that they have some determinate dimensions, render it impossible that there is a Lost Island. Lost Island lost.

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