**Biting Gaunilo’s Bullet**

Peter A. Sutton

(Presented at the Society of Christian Philosophers East Coast Conference, Messiah College, September 25, 2015)

Gaunilo tells us that Anselm’s ontological argument proves too much: The perfect island does not exist. If two arguments rely on the same (or sufficiently similar) premises and have the same logical form, then if one of those arguments proves the existence of the perfect island, then both arguments are unsound. Gaunilo gives an argument that the perfect island exists, and his argument uses the same logical form and the same (or sufficiently similar) premises as Anselm’s ontological argument. So it follows that Anselm’s ontological argument is unsound.

Let us grant that the perfect island argument and the ontological argument have the same logical form and the same (or sufficiently similar) premises. Must we also grant Gaunilo his assumption that the perfect island does not exist? Before Gaunilo even tells us anything about the island, he names it ‘the Lost Island’ because of the ‘impossibility…of finding what does not exist’ (Gaunilo 2003: 31). So he’s pretty confident in its non-existence. But non-existence is not (and cannot be[[1]](#footnote-1)) built into the concept of the island, and Gaunilo offers up no argument *against* its existence. So it is open for Anselm to bite Gaunilo’s bullet and ‘give to him that Lost Island, never to be lost again’ (Anselm 2003: 39).

Not only is it *open* for Anselm to accept the existence of the Lost Island, there are any number of arguments that he might have given (and that we might now give) in *favor* of its existence. Most of these arguments come from Plato and his ilk, and though they make no specific mention of islands, they certainly could have. For example, adapting an argument from *The Republic 596a*: “We call both Oahu and Goat Island ‘islands.’ But they are not precisely the same in any way. Their land, flora, fauna, shorelines, and their surrounding waters are different, and yet we recognize both as islands. The best explanation for how we can recognize island-ness in these two different things is that we see their resemblance to some unique third thing—the most island-y of islands—the perfect form of the island.”[[2]](#footnote-2) The works of Platocontain several other arguments (e.g. *Timaeus 51d, Phaedo 74a*) that can be adapted to the conclusion that there is a perfect form of an island, a.k.a. the perfect island. And that is the primary thesis of this paper: biting the bullet is an acceptable and independently well-motivated strategy for Anselm in response to Gaunilo’s criticism.

This is all well and good for Anselm. He was already a Platonist before he developed the ontological argument, so for him the bullet-biting option might be totally reasonable. But what if we aren’t already Platonists? Well, good news on that front: It turns out that the ontological argument just *is* an argument for Platonism, and Gaunilo has inadvertently helped us to see that. He has shown how its reasoning can be adapted to any object x of which we can conceive of a ‘greatest conceivable x.’ This gives us an impressive new argument for the forms that we can add to the pile that Plato has already given us. So if we’re already Platonists, then the bullet-biting is easy, and if we aren’t already Platonists, then Gaunilo has just shown us why we should be.

Note that this is Platonism with a capital ‘P’, not the more common lower-case platonism. As I read Plato, the form of an island is itself an island, and islands are physical things, not abstract concepts or ideas. Similarly, the perfect island Gaunilo describes is a physical island (if it exists at all). In neither case are we talking about an abstract, non-physical *idea* of an island, nor would I expect Anselm (as a capital ‘P’ Platonist himself) to be committed to the existence of such a thing. But an actual, physical, perfect island? That should be right up Anselm’s alley (Anselm 1995: 10-15).

But even setting aside this strong sort of Platonism, it remains the case that many (probably most) theists believe in some sort of heaven, and that they will often describe heaven as a ‘perfect world.’ Does heaven have islands? I don’t know, but if it does, they had better be *perfect* islands.[[3]](#footnote-3) So even a theist who isn’t totally on board with Platonism can bite Gaunilo’s bullet without any great additions to his or her ontology. If this sounds a little circular, it isn’t. I’m not suggesting that only someone who’s already a theist can accept Anselm’s argument. Rather, I am saying that anybody who is convinced of theism by Anselm’s argument will, *ipso facto*, be quite likely to believe in heaven. So, when confronted with Gaunilo’s objection, they need not regard it as an objection at all, but rather a glimpse into the details of the heaven in which they now believe. So a belief in the existence of heaven is not a reason to accept Anselm’s argument, but it could be a reason to reject Gaunilo’s objection to Anslem’s argument. And hecnce my second, more general, thesis: biting the bullet is an acceptable and independently well-motivated strategy for *any* theist in response to Gaunilo’s criticism. The perfect island *does* exist, so Gaunilo’s objection is no problem at all.

**Objection: Coastlines and Coconuts**

Some have have tried to defend Anselm against Gaunilo by questioning whether the ‘greatest conceivable island’ is something of which we can actually conceive. There might be good islands and bad islands, better islands and worse islands—there might even be a greatest island. But no matter how great an island we conceive of, we could *always* imagine one better. So the concept of ‘island’ does not, *contra* Gaunilo, admit of a

‘greatest conceivable’ in the way that (supposedly) ‘being’ does. As Plantinga (1976) says,

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. (91)

If Plantinga is right, then I am wrong, and it is *not* open to Anselm (or the rest of us) to give Gaunilo his island, since the existence of such an island is incoherent and therefore (presumably) impossible. If my goal were simply to save the ontological argument, I could throw up my hands up, accept the dilemma and proceed: “Either Gaunilo’s island is conceivable, or it isn’t. If it’s conceivable, we can bite the bullet. If it’s not conceivable, the Gaunilo’s objection is toothless. Either way, the ontological argument is vindicated.” But my goal is not to defend the ontological argument by any means available. Rather, I maintain that biting the bullet is a *good* response to Gaunilo, and one that gels well with many theists’ pre-existing commitments. As such, Plantinga is mistaken.

Martin (1990), Everitt (2004) and Garrett (2013) have all attacked Plantinga’s position outlined above. All of them argue that the perfect island would have the *ideal* number of coconuts, etc. Adding more coconuts does not always improve an island, so there is an “intrinsic maximum” of them. As Everitt (2003) puts it, “Clearly there would come a point where the superabundance of coconuts became a positive *nuisance*.” Danielyan (2015) has recently defended Plantinga against this sort of attack. But I think all these authors miss the mark in exactly the same way that Plantinga does. Their arguments all concern the island’s climate, its fauna, and its quantity of coconuts and dancing girls. These are all things that make an island *subjectively* great—great for people who like coconuts, for example. But surely when Anselm talks about the ‘greatest conceivable’ being, he does not have in mind mere *subjective* greatness. He means it in an objective sense. Any rational person will understand God to be (by definition) the greatest conceivable being, even if that person doesn’t personally *like* God. Remember, his target is the fool, and presumably the fool will have disordered desires and opinions when it comes to God, so we cannot rely on his or her subjective sense of greatness, at least not at the outset of the ontological argument.

But here we run into a problem. Do we have any idea of what would make an island great in a non-subjective way? This isn’t usually how we think of islands. The idea of absolute, objective goodness (greatness, etc.) is most often found in the realm of morality. We are generally comfortable with the idea that a person could be morally good, but universally reviled. But surely we don’t want to say that the greatest conceivable island is one that is *morally* great. Islands are not moral agents. So how are we to make sense of the ‘greatest conceivable island’ in a way that is not subjective, but that still fits with what we know about islands?

What we need is an objective, but non-absolute, notion of goodness or greatness. Luckily, such a notion is readily available. To be a good island or a great island is to be good or great *qua* island. A good toaster is one that toasts well. A good tennis player is one that plays tennis well, and generally, a good x is good *at being x*—it is good *qua x*. According to Thomson (2008), this is what we *always* have in mind when we call something a ‘good x.’ But whether or not Thomson is right that this is how we generally use the word ‘good’, it is obvious that such a usage is legitimate, and it offers us an objective but non-absolute way of understanding the expressions ‘good island’ and ‘great island.’ A great island is one that is great *qua* island.

Okay, new problem: what makes an island great *qua* island? What makes one island better than another? Before I answer that question (oh yes, I am going to answer!), I will point out that our discussion has taken us back to Plato, and that whatever difficulty I have in describing the perfect island, Plato (and Anselm) will have those same difficulties when it comes to the perfect bed, table, shuttle, or any of the other things of which he thought there were forms. And if the problem is shared by Plato, that gives us some evidence for my earlier claim, that Gaunilo’s argument is, effectively, an argument for Platonism.

I won’t be able to give a complete answer to what makes an island good (or great) *qua* island, but I will make a few suggestions:

* The perfect island won’t be too big. I don’t know what the upper size-limit on islands is, but I know that mainland North America is too big to be an island, so it will have to be smaller than that. But of course, it can’t be too small. A few pebbles or a bit of sand sticking up out of the water is a shoal or a sandbar, not an island. Presumably, the perfect island will be somewhere in between these extremes, probably trending to the smaller end rather than the larger. We call Australia both an island and a continent, but it’s clearly more the latter than the former.
* The surrounding water should be deep. If you can walk to the island from the mainland without getting your knees wet, then it’s not much of an island. It’s more of a tombolo.
* The surrounding water should be permanent. Yinshan Island in China’s Poyang Lake is just a hill much of the time.
* The coastline shouldn’t be too steep. The rock-formations off the coast of Thailand’s Phi Phi Island might be islands, but they are more obviously monoliths.
* The coastline-to-area ratio of the perfect island would such as to make it roughly circular, with a mostly solid interior. An atoll might be an island, but it’s not a very great one.
* And perhaps the perfect island should be extremely isolated from other land, making it an “island” in both the literal and metaphorical senses.

Putting all these together, I nominate Réunion Island (off the coast of Madagascar) as the world’s most perfect island. The runners-up would be Silhouette Island, Easter Island, and Wrangel Island.[[4]](#footnote-4)

You might disagree with my assessment of what makes an island great *qua* island. I’m not even sure I agree with it myself. But that shouldn’t hurt Gaunilo’s argument. As long as we agree that there is *some* non-subjective property of ‘island-ness’, and that some islands can be greater than others *qua* island, then we are in the same boat (forgive the pun) as Anselm’s original argument. Anselm does not think we will know and agree on all the properties that make one being greater than another, but as long as we agree that (a) there are some such properties, and (b) that existence in reality is one of them, his argument should go through. As it is for beings in general, so let it be for islands.

**Objection: Islands and Natural Kinds**

Some might think our lack of consensus about perfect islands is more fundamental than a debate about size, shape, and coconuts. There is serious doubt as to whether ‘island’ is a natural kind at all. And if it’s not a natural kind, if it doesn’t carve nature at the proverbial joints, then perhaps there can be no objective answer to what would make an island the “greatest conceivable.”[[5]](#footnote-5), [[6]](#footnote-6) Unlike Plantinga’s coconut objection above, I find that there is little I can say in the way of a direct defense of biting Gaunilo’s bullet here. I concede that ‘island’ is at least not obviously a natural kind, and that there is not obviously an objective way of understanding greatness in an island.[[7]](#footnote-7)

But even if it turns out that there is no objective standard of greatness for an island, that still would not undercut the thrust of my response to Gaunilo. If it turns out that some kind X does not admit of objective greatness *qua* X, then we will have to send Gaunilo back to the drawing board when he gives us an analog of the ontological argument. But the moment Gaunilo does come up with a kind Y that admits of objective greatness *qua* Y (like *water* or *toad*, maybe), the bullet-biting response will be available to Anselm and to us. If it turns out that there are *no* kinds X that admit of greatness *qua* X, then the ontological argument really will stand alone, and it will turn out that Plantinga was right after all.

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1. If it were, then the two arguments would no longer have the same (or sufficiently similar) premises. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I am basing this argument roughly on the Republic, 596a: “Well then, shall we begin the enquiry in our usual manner: whenever a number of individuals have a common name, we assume them to have a corresponding idea or form:--do you understand me?” “I do.” “Let us take any common instance; there are beds and tables in the world…God, whether from choice or from necessity, made one bed in nature and one only; two or more such ideal beds neither ever have been nor ever will be made by God.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Revelation suggests that the realm of God has a glassy sea with some land in the middle, but I certainly don’t want to rest *any* philosophical argument on an interpretation of Revelation. That way madness lies... [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The coconut palm does not grow on Wrangel Island at all. Neither does any other kind of tree. Take that, Plantinga. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A related problem is that the concept of ‘island’ inherently involves negations and limitations. I think the idea of an object with *perfect* limitations is coherent, but I have some sympathy for those who don’t. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. I do not concede that *only* natural kinds can be objectively great. Perhaps a constructed kind like “racecar” could still be such as to have an objective purpose (going fast) and objectively to fulfill that purpose (by going fast). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Thank you to my audience at The Society of Christian Philosophers (9/25/2015) for bringing up some of these problems. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)