By discussing here Gaunilo’s so-called “perfect island objection” to Anselm’s ontological argument for the existence of God, we will not only encounter one of the most common criticisms of the argument, but through examining replies to Gaunilo’s objection, will also gain a better sense of Anselm’s reasoning in the argument.

First then, recall Anselm’s argument. Since the idea of God is not incoherent, then it is conceivable that God exists. In other words, God exists in the understanding. If God exists in the understanding, then God must also exist in reality. Thus, Anselm concludes, God exists in reality.

Premise 1: Since the idea of God is not incoherent, then it is conceivable that God exists. In other words, God exists in the understanding.

Premise 2: If God exists in the understanding, then God must also exist in reality.

Conclusion: God exists in reality.

Anselm makes his most controversial move in the second premise. Surely not just any idea we can get into mind must actually exist in reality. There is nothing about the idea of a unicorn that is incoherent. Yet that fact by itself is not enough to convince us of the existence of unicorns. What is so special about the idea of God that it must actually correspond to something real?

Recall that for Anselm God is defined as “that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-conceived.” And since a God that exists in the understanding and in reality is a greater being than any being that exists in the understanding alone, God must exist. We might wonder, though, whether there is something fishy in this reasoning. A contemporary of Anselm, the Christian monk Gaunilo, thought that there is.

Consider Gaunilo’s Lost Island: “For example, there are those who say that somewhere in the ocean is an island… more plentifully endowed than even the Isles of the Blessed with an indescribable abundance of all sorts of riches and delights… You cannot any longer doubt that this island, more excellent than all others on earth, truly exists somewhere in reality. For you do not doubt that this island exists in your understanding, and since it is more excellent to exist not merely in the understanding, but also in reality, this island must also exist in reality” (Anselm 140). Gaunilo’s argument can be formalized as follows…

Premise 1: Since the idea of a perfect island is not incoherent, then it is conceivable that a perfect island exists. In other words, a perfect island exists in the understanding. Premise 2: If a perfect island exists in the understanding, then a perfect island must also exist in reality.

Conclusion: A perfect island exists in reality. Notice that Gaunilo’s argument simply switches out the term “God” in the original argument for the words “perfect island,” thereby demonstrating, by the same logic used by Anselm, that a perfect island must exist, which is absurd. We might at first be inclined to reject the second premise. But this won’t do. Gaunilo simply uses the same reason with respect to the perfect island as Anselm uses with respect to God. And since a perfect island that exists in the understanding and in reality is a greater island than one that exists in the understanding alone, a perfect island must exist. Gaunilo’s point is obviously not to show that perfect islands exist, but to show that if the very same reasoning used in Anslem’s
argument can be used to prove the existence of a perfect island, then there must be something wrong with it.

Charles Hartshorne, a modern defender of Anselm’s ontological argument, is not convinced: “The old objection that if a perfect being must exist then a perfect island or a perfect devil must exist is not perhaps very profound. For it is answered simply by denying that anyone can conceive perfection, in the strict sense employed by the argument, to be possessed by an island or a devil” (Hartshorne 303).

In other words, the problem with Gaunilo’s perfect island argument is that the very idea of a perfect island is incoherent, making the first premise of the perfect island argument false. There can be no such thing as a perfect island in the same sense of something is both an island (in the ordinary use of that term) and absolutely perfect in every way. If an island were perfect in every possible way, then it would have to be omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, and have every other possible perfection, which is absurd. And what if Gaunilo should insist that the island he has in mind is absolutely perfect in every way? It loves perfectly; it is self-existent; it knows all things perfectly; and so on.

Well, if Gaunilo insists that the island is perfect in every possible way, then the words “perfect island” are simply being used in a funny way to refer to God, in which case the perfect island argument shows nothing less than that God exists. In other words, if Gaunilo has the idea of a being “that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-conceived” in mind, then he simply has God in mind. Calling this idea a “perfect island” is silly, but it picks out the same existent divinity.

Works Cited
