The Ontological Parody:
A Reply to Joshua Ernst's "Charles Hartshorne and the Ontological Argument"

JOSHUA SEIGAL

Charles Hartshorne argues that Kant's criticisms of Anselm's onto-logical argument were not directed against its strongest formulation. Kant criticised the argument on the famous grounds that existence is not a predicate (B620–30); however, Hartshorne argued that there is a modal distinction that needs to be made between existing contingently and existing necessarily, and while "existence" *per se* may not be a real predicate, *necessary* existence is.

In his paper, "Charles Hartshorne and the Ontological Argument," Joshua Ernst argues that Hartshorne's revisions of the ontological argument "can withstand Kant's critique of predicated existence" (Ernst 60), and that Hartshorne's version of the argument "solved the problems faced by Anselm's original argument such as those of perfection and infinity" (Ernst 65). In this reply, I argue that there are key problems faced by Anselm's argu-ment other than the ones to which Ernst points, and that Hartshorne's version of the argument is just as vulnerable to these problems.

My strategy shall be as follows: After briefly explicating Anselm's ontological argument, I shall point to two objections that can be levelled against it. These objections take for granted that existence *can* be predi-cated of an object (and so the objections come at the argument from a very different angle to those of Kant), but they show that if the argument proves that God exists, then it proves that other things exist too. Thus, the objections proceed by way of parody: Anselm's ontological argument can be parodied, thus proving the existence of all kinds of things that are likely

Joshua Seigal is a senior at University College London. He has a broad range of interests, including the history of philosophy and George Berkeley's philosophy, but he focuses primarily on epistemology and philosophy of mind. He intends to continue studying philosophy as a postgraduate.

to be uncongenial to the theist. Furthermore, once I have highlighted these objections and argued that Anselm's argument is powerless against them, I shall turn my attention to Hartshorne's modal version of the ontological argument, and argue that Hartshorne's argument, no less than Anselm's, is vulnerable to such objections. Thus, my argument goes against that of Ernst, who claims that Hartshorne's argument is not vulnerable to the same objections as Anselm's.

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I

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As Ernst acknowledges, Anselm's argument is *a priori*: it is an attempt to prove the existence of God without using any empirical premises; it proceeds simply through an analysis of the very concept of God. The most famous version of the argument can be found in the *Proslogion* 2, where Anselm claims, "the fool hath said in his heart 'There is no God.'" Anselm attempts to argue that the fool has actually uttered something incoherent. This is because Anselm believes that we all have in our understanding the notion of God as "that than which nothing greater can be conceived," and, since it is greater to exist in the mind *and* in reality than in the mind alone, the fool must acknowledge that, given his understanding of God, God must exist in reality. Thus, the fool, at the same time as saying in his heart that "there is no God," is committed to God's existence *de re*.

Since Anselm's point was originally stated as a prayer rather than as an explicit argument, the correct way to set out the argument is open to dispute. However, it seems plausible that, paring the argument down to its bare bones, it can be laid out as follows:

> (1) God = (df) that than which nothing greater can be conceived.
> (2) It is greater to exist in the mind and in reality than in the mind alone.
> (3) Therefore, God exists both in the mind and in reality.

However, crucial to Ernst's argument is that the ontological argument is concerned not just *that* God exists, but also with the *manner* in which He exists. Thus, according to Ernst, "Anselm believed that if God exists, He must exist necessarily" (Ernst 59). Furthermore, Ernst argues that it is *this* aspect of the ontological argument that Hartshorne is particularly concerned with. I want now to present two arguments that not only attack the version of the ontological argument adumbrated above, but also work against Hartshorne's revisions.

The first of the two arguments is a very famous one, made by a contemporary of Anselm's several centuries before Kant's famous objection. Gaunilo parodied Anselm's argument by arguing that just as one can use it

to prove the existence of God, one can also use it to prove the existence of a perfect island. It all depends on how we define such a thing: if we similarly define it as an island such that no greater island can be conceived, we can see that, by the same logic as Anselm's argument, such an island must exist in reality. The problem is that the theist is not likely to sanction the sort of bloated ontology that includes things such as perfect islands. But, if the theist is not willing to do this, then the theist should be no more willing to sanction the conclusion of Anselm's ontological argument. At any rate, he requires a different argument in favour of Anselm's conclusion.

The second argument against Anselm is made by Michael Martin in his book *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*. Again, the argument takes the form of a parody. Just as Gaunilo argues that we can parody Anselm's argument in order to argue for an ontology containing all sorts of strange items, Martin argues that we can also parody the argument in order to yield a conclusion that is inconsistent with that of Anselm. Again, Martin's argument takes for granted that existence *can* be a predicate, and so it is a very different type of objection to that of Kant. Martin asks: "why could not one argue that existence is an essential part of the intrinsic evilness of a completely evil being?" Let me explain this: premise 2 of the argument that I outlined above assumes that *de re* existence is an intrinsic part of the greatness of God (which was attributed to Him in premise 1). However, it seems that if a being such that no greater being can be conceived must exist in reality, then it similarly seems that a being such that none more evil can be conceived must exist in reality also. Thus, an argument for what Martin calls the "Absolute Evil One" could run as follows:

> (1) The Absolute Evil One (AEO) = (df) a being such that none more evil can be conceived.
> (2) Such a being would be more evil if it exists in reality than in the mind alone.
> (3) Therefore, AEO exists in reality.

In premise 1 we have simply stipulated the definition of AEO to mirror that of God in Anselm's argument. Premise 2, moreover, is surely correct. AEO would be more evil if he existed in reality since it would be existence in reality that afforded him the opportunity to carry out evil deeds; just as an evil torturer that existed in reality would be more evil than one that existed in the mind alone, so AEO would be more evil if he existed in reality than in the mind alone. We can see that Martin's argument, like Anselm's, takes for granted the perhaps dubious view that existence can be a predicate, but, even if this is granted, Martin shows that the argument can be parodied to yield a conclusion that is inconsistent with Anselm's. Such a conclusion *is* inconsistent, since, as Martin argues, "One cannot prove the

existence of both God and the absolute evil one, since they are mutually exclusive" (Martin 82): AEO and God would *both* have to be omnipotent (if AEO were not omnipotent then he would not be a "being such that none more evil can be conceived"since we would be able to conceive of a being that was more evil by dint of being able to do more evil things; and if God were not omnipotent then He would not be "that than which nothing greater can be conceived" since we would be able to conceive of a being that was greater by dint of being able to do more great things) but it seems inconsistent to suppose that there could be two beings, one wholly good and the other wholly evil, such that *both* are omnipotent. Thus, given Martin's parody, the onus seems to be on the defender of Anselm to present reasons as to why we should accept the conclusion of Anselm's argument, rather than that of Martin's parody.

II

We have so far seen that Anselm's ontological argument is vulnerable to two objections (besides the ones elucidated by Ernst). I now wish to argue against Ernst's claim that Hartshorne's ontological argument "solved the problems faced by Anselm's original argument" (Ernst 65). This will be seen to be the case when we consider that Ernst does not take into account the objections presented by Gaunilo and Martin.

Let us look as Hartshorne's argument. Norman Malcolm is famous for having identified two separate arguments within Anselm's thought, one of which is unsound and the other of which (he claimed) is sound. Hartshorne, however, maintains that it was *he*, before Malcolm, who identified these two strands. Drawing on the second of these two arguments of Anselm's, Hartshorne, in *The Logic of Perfection*, sets out the following argument, where "q" is "there exists a perfect being," and "N" is "it is necessary (logically true) that":

1.	$q \supset Nq$	(Anselm's Principle)
2.	$Nq \lor \neg Nq$	(excluded middle)
3.	$\neg Nq \supset N\neg Nq$	(Becker's postulate)
4.	$Nq \lor N\neg Nq$	(from 2 and 3)
5.	$N\neg Nq \supset N\neg q$	(from 1)
6.	$Nq \lor N\neg q$	(from 4 and 5)
7.	$\neg N\neg q$	(intuitive postulate)
8.	Nq	(from 6 and 7)
9.	$Nq \supset q$	(modal axiom)
10.	q	(from 8 and 9)

Now, crucial to Hartshorne's argument is our understanding of "perfection." Hartshorne argues that a perfect being is such that, if it exists, it

exists necessarily. I argue that Hartshorne's version of the ontological argument is powerless against the two objections presented above; that is, we can formulate interpretations of "q" that parody Hartshorne's argument, such that if Hartshorne's argument is sound, then these parodies must also be sound, leading to problems and even contradictions.

Let us first consider Gaunilo's objection. Perhaps we could use the logic of perfection to prove the existence of a perfect island. If such a perfect island is possible then *it too*, according to the logic of Hartshorne's argument, must exist. However, Hartshorne argues that a perfect island is not possible. He claims that it is incoherent to suppose that an island could be perfect, since in order to be perfect it would have to be noncontingent (as we can see from premise 1), and an island, by its very nature, is contingent (Martin 89). As Martin notes, however, this is not a particularly promising line of argument. Martin asks, "could one not introduce the concept of a super island that, if it existed at all, would exist necessarily?" (Martin 89). Hartshorne argues that this is impossible, but it is not clear why this should be the case (*Logic of Perfection* 55). Hartshorne argues that a necessary being cannot be causally dependent upon anything else, and since islands *are* causally dependent, they cannot be necessary. However, as Martin highlights, "islands are *in fact* so dependent, but it does not seem impossible to imagine an island that was not" (Martin 90). The problem here is that Hartshorne has claimed that the notion is "self-inconsistent" (*Logic of Perfection* 55) However, the fact that the islands we have observed do not conform to his criteria for necessity does not in itself indicate that we cannot frame the notion of a necessarily existing island. If we can frame such a notion (and Hartshorne seems to give us no reason to suppose that we could not), then the notion is not self-inconsistent. Thus, there seems to be no reason why we cannot interpret "q" as "there exists a perfect island," such that if this island exists then it exists necessarily. If we can do this, then, given Hartshorne's logic of perfection, the above argument will go through. Gaunilo's objection, therefore, seems to work against Hartshorne, meaning that we can parody Hartshorne's argument to yield an uncongenial conclusion, namely that a perfect island exists.

What about Martin's notion of AEO? It seems that Hartshorne's argument also licenses "there exists a perfectly *evil* being" as an interpretation of "q." We could frame an idea of AEO such that if it exists, then it exists necessarily. Again, Hartshorne argues that such a notion is incoherent. He argues against the existence of a "perfect devil" on the grounds that such a being would have to be "infinitely responsible for all that exists besides itself, and yet infinitely averse to all that exists" (*Necessary Existent* 127). However, it is by no means clear that this is the case. Surely we could frame an idea of AEO such that he is *not* averse to all that exists since he has created

everything with the specific aim of causing unlimited pain and suffering. As we saw above, a being that created everything with this sole aim would be more evil than one who was "averse" to all of existence and created nothing at all. If this is the case, then AEO would not be averse to all that exists, and our conception of AEO would not, contrary to what Hartshorne claims, amount to a "necessary nothing." Thus, it seems that Hartshorne has failed to show that his argument would not work just as well with AEO as it would with God, and, since these two concepts are mutually exclusive, the argument must be going wrong somewhere.

Conclusion

My aim in this paper has been to argue against Joshua Ernst's claim that Hartshorne's version of the ontological argument "solved the problems faced by Anselm's original argument such as those of perfection and infinity." Ernst primarily considers Kant's objections, and argues that Hartshorne is successful in overcoming them. This may indeed be the case. However, as I have argued, there are other important ways in which Anselm's argument can be criticised. I pointed to two such ways, one put forward by Gaunilo, the other put forward by Michael Martin. These objections bypass Kant's critique of predicated existence, and I argued that Anselm's argument is vulnerable to these objections. I also argued that, whilst Hartshorne's argument may overcome Kant's objections, it will have a lot more work to do if it is to overcome Gaunilo's and Martin's objections. Moreover, I have presented some reasons as to why, *prima facie*, it seems that Hartshorne is unable to do this.

Works Cited

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