Response to Gettings

GRAHAM OPPY

In Oppy (1996), I claimed that it is possible to parody Godel's ontological argument—or, at any rate, C. Anthony Anderson's variant of Godel's ontological argument—in the same way in which Gaunilo parodied Anselm's ontological argument. Michael Gettings (1999) claims that the parodies which I provided do not work. I agree, more or less. I would add that there is room for dispute about whether Gettings' Axiom 7 is really part of Godel's argument—or of C. Anthony Anderson's variant thereof—and for dispute about whether there is anything which Godel says which really supports the attribution of anything like Axiom 7 to him. Moreover, I continue to maintain that the first of my attempted parodies does succeed against the argument if Axiom 7 is not included. And I would also add that the second of my attempted parodies fails for reasons which have nothing to do with considerations which pertain to the new Axiom 7. But I do not propose to take up these issues here. For a minor change to the second of the attempted parodies from my earlier paper does provide a successful parody of the argument which includes Axiom 7; consequently, Gettings' further claims about the invulnerability of Godel's argument to Gaunilist strategies are mistaken.

Godel's ontological argument—henceforth I shall stop making reference to the fact that I am really discussing C. Anthony Anderson's version of that argument, but without ceasing to intend to refer to that version of the argument—may be briefly and conveniently summarised as follows:

Definition 1: x is God-like iff x has as essential properties those and only those properties which are positive.
Definition 2: A is an essence of x iff for every property B, x has B necessarily iff A entails B
Definition 3: x necessarily exists iff every essence of x is necessarily exemplified.
Axiom 1: If a property is positive, then its negation is not positive.
Axiom 2: Any property entailed by [= strictly implied by] a positive property is positive.
Axiom 3: The property of being God-like is positive.
Axiom 4: If a property is positive, then it is necessarily positive.
Axiom 5: Necessary existence is positive.
Axiom 7: For any property P, if P is positive, then being necessarily P is positive.
Theorem 1: If a property is positive, then it is consistent [=possibly exemplified].
Corollary 1: The property of being God-like is consistent.
Theorem 2: If something is God-like, then the property of being God-like is an essence of that thing.
Theorem 3: Necessarily, the property of being God-like is exemplified.

One role of the axioms is to characterise the positive properties: whatever the positive properties may be, they must at least form a collection which conforms to the axioms. Suppose that the positive properties form a set. Then the requirements imposed by the axioms are as follows:

(1) If a property belongs to the set, then its negation does not belong to the set.

(2) The set is closed under entailment.
(3) The property of having as essential properties just those properties which are in the set is itself in the set.
(4) The set has exactly the same members in all possible worlds.
(5) The property of necessary existence is in the set.
(6) If a property is in the set, then the property of having that property necessarily is also in the set.

Suppose that it is granted that there is at least one set of properties which conforms to (1)-(6). The Gaunilist intuition is that there will then be many sets of properties which conform to (1)-(6), and that the Godelian ontological argument will go through just as well—or just as badly—with respect to those other sets of properties. Of course, it might be that there is no set of properties which conforms to (1)-(6); in that case, the argument is defeated on other grounds.

Suppose that there is some set of properties which conforms to (1)-(6). Suppose, if you like, that it conforms to some prior conception of what the 'positive' properties are. Can we use this set of properties to generate other sets of properties which will serve the purposes of the Gaunilist? I think so.

Begin with the assumption that there is some set of independent properties $\{I, G_i\}$ which can be used to generate the set of positive properties by closure under entailment and 'necessitation'. (Independence is explained as follows: no one of the properties in the set is entailed by all the rest. 'Necessitation' means: if P is in the set, then so is necessarily having P.) I is the property of having as essential properties just those properties which are in the set generated by $\{I, G_i\}$ under the relevant kind of closure. One of the G_i will be necessary existence. And, very plausibly, there will be many others. All that the Gaunilist requires is that there are at least two other members of this set of generating properties.

Pick some proper subset of $\{G_i\}$—$\{G_j\}$, say—which contains necessary existence and at least one other property. Define a new generating set $\{I^@, G_j\}$, where $I^@$ is the property of having as essential properties just those properties which are in the set generated by $\{I^@, G_j\}$. This subset generates a set of positive$^@$ properties under closure by entailment and 'necessitation'. We then proceed to parody the Godelian argument as follows:

Definition 1$^@$: x is God-like$^@$ iff x has as essential properties those and only those properties which are positive$^@$.
Definition 2: A is an essence of x iff for every property B, x has B necessarily iff A entails B
Definition 3: x necessarily exists iff every essence of x is necessarily exemplified.
Axiom 1$^@$: If a property is positive$^@$, then its negation is not positive$^@$.
Axiom 2$^@$: Any property entailed by [= strictly implied by] a positive$^@$ property is positive$^@$.
Axiom 3$^@$: The property of being God-like$^@$ is positive$^@$.
Axiom 4$^@$: If a property is positive$^@$, then it is necessarily positive$^@$.
Axiom 5$^@$: Necessary existence is positive$^@$.
Axiom 7$^@$: For any property P, if P is positive$^@$, then being necessarily P is positive$^@$.

Theorem $1^{@}$: If a property is positive$^{@}$, then it is consistent [=possibly exemplified].
Corollary $1^{@}$: The property of being God-like$^{@}$ is consistent.
Theorem $2^{@}$: If something is God-like$^{@}$, then the property of being God-like$^{@}$ is an essence of that thing.
Theorem $3^{@}$: Necessarily, the property of being God-like$^{@}$ is exemplified.

The property of being God-like$^{@}$ is, of course, the property of having as essential properties just the members of the set of positive$^{@}$ properties. And, if the property of being God-like$^{@}$ is exemplified, then it is exemplified by a being which is not God-like. Moreover—and this marks a crucial point which was overlooked in the construction which I gave in my previous paper—the property of being God-like$^{@}$ is not positive, i.e. it is certainly not the case that every positive$^{@}$ property is positive. Indeed, each different subset of generators from $\{G_i\}$satisfying the conditions specified earlier leads to the generation of a set which is neither included in nor includes any of the sets which are generated by the other subsets of generators.

Gettings' argument that my previous construction ended in contradiction relies crucially on the claim that every positive$^{@}$ property is positive. Since the new construction does not involve this assumption, that argument is defused. Moreover, the words 'positive' and 'God-like' appear nowhere in the proof of the existence of a God-like$^{@}$ being, and Axioms 1, 2, 4, and 7 from Godel's proof can be consistently added to the definitions and axioms which are used in that latter proof. So Gettings' worries about the need for the Gaunilist to rely on these axioms can be met directly. (As it happens, I also think that those worries are misplaced; but I shan't try to argue for that claim here.)

It is plausible to think that there could not be both a God-like being and a God-like$^{@}$ being. This will certainly be true if, for example, the property of being the sole creator of the universe is one of the G_i which is involved in the definition of each of these properties. Consequently, it is plausible to think that the combination of all the axioms and definitions from the two proofs will lead to contradiction. But so what? The Gaunilist claims, not that we should accept both proofs, but rather, that Gaunilists have been given no reason to accept one of the proofs at the expense of the other. Considered in isolation, neither proof is more convincing to Gaunilists than the other; considered together, they lead to contradiction. Why should Gaunilists think that one of them is successful?

Although the construction which I have given starts with the set of positive properties, and then generates new sets of properties from that initial set, it is not essential to the Gaunilist strategy that this should be the case. ANY set of properties which satisfies conditions (1)-(6) above will suffice for the purpose. I think that it is plausible to suppose that there will be many more such sets of properties; however, the ones that I have already found suffice to vindicate the Gaunilist. (Perhaps a defender of the argument could resort to the desperate claim that the set of positive properties is generated by no more than three independent properties. This claim is massively implausible; but, if it were accepted, then my Gaunilist would need to find a new construction. Perhaps, for example, we could consider the set generated by {necessary existence, omniscience, omnipotence, omnimalevolence, possessing essentially just the properties which are generated by this very set}, or some suitable expansion

thereof. Given the historical and theological importance of the doctrine of divine simplicity, this is a matter which might be further explored elsewhere.)

One last point. If we are prepared to accept the rest of the apparatus of the proofs, then the acceptability of the proofs might be thought to turn on the acceptability of Axiom 3 and Axiom $3^{@}$. Given everything else—and, in particular, given the Godelian proof—whether we should allow that Godlikeness is positive or Godlikeness$^{@}$ is positive$^{@}$ turns on whether we think that there is a Godlike or Godlike$^{@}$ being. Consequently, given everything else, it should not be conceded that it is simply a conceptual truth about positive properties that Godlikeness is positive. Even if we can allow that Axioms 1, 2, 4, and 7 are acceptable on the grounds that they merely help to define what it is to be a positive property, we cannot extend this same charity to all of the axioms of the Godel argument. (We might argue about Axiom 5 and Axiom $5^{@}$ as well, of course.) But the Gaunilist only needs to hold that at least *one* Axiom is more than merely definitional of the positive properties in order to evade Gettings' charge that the Gaunilist 'rejects the notion of positive properties altogether'. And, since Gettings does not think that the argument is successful, I don't see how Gettings can fail to concede the reasonableness of *this* Gaunilist claim: after all, if all the premises are straightforward conceptual truths about positive properties, then surely the Godelian argument must be successful![1]

Monash University
Clayton Vic 3800 Australia
Graham.Oppy@arts.monash.edu.au

References

Anderson, A. 1990. Some Emendations on Godel's Ontological Proof. *Faith and Philosophy* 7:291-303.

Gettings, M. 1999. Godel's Ontological Argument: A Reply to Oppy *Analysis* 59:309-13.

Hazen, A. 1999. On Godel's Ontological Proof. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 76:361-77.

Oppy, G. 1996. Godelian Ontological Arguments *Analysis* 56:226-30.

[1] Thanks to Michael Gettings, Allen Hazen, and Lloyd Humberstone for comments on earlier versions of this paper. I am especially indebted to Michael Gettings for his friendly detection of holes in prior versions of the argument presented here.