

Gasking's Parody Re-examined

DUŠKO PRELEVIĆ

Department of Philosophy at the Faculty of Philosophy – University of Belgrade,
Čika Ljubina 18–20, 11000 Belgrade, Serbia
dusko.prelevic@f.bg.ac.rs

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ABSTRACT: Gasking's parody of Anselm's ontological argument is primarily based on the idea that the greater disability of the creator makes the achievement more impressive, and that, therefore, the non-existent God would be a greater creator of the universe than the existent God would be. On the contrary, I argue that either the non-existent God cannot create anything existent, or, if we introduce Meinongian metaphysics in order to save the parody, that non-existence would cease to be the most formidable handicap within the domain of fictional characters, or that encoded achievements need not be more impressive than exemplified achievements. These insights suggest that Gasking's parody does not work.

KEY WORDS: Ability, achievement, Gasking's parody, Meinongianism, the ontological argument.

Douglas Gasking's parody, reconstructed by William Grey (2000), is a witty and seductive way of challenging Anselm's ontological argument (Anselm 1973). My aim is to show in this paper that the parody, however ingenious, does not work due to the ambiguities in key notions used in the argument. After presenting Gasking's parody together with Grey's example intended to provide an intuitive support to its key premise, I offer some reasons why Gasking has not proved what he claims he did. Grey's reconstruction of Gasking's parody goes as follows (Grey 2000: 369):

- 1) The creation of the world is the most marvellous achievement imaginable.
- 2) The merit of an achievement is the product of (*a*) its intrinsic quality, and (*b*) the ability of its creator.
- 3) The greater the disability (or a handicap) of the creator, the more impressive the achievement.

- 4) The most formidable handicap for a creator would be non-existence.
 - 5) Therefore, if we suppose that the universe is the product of an *existent* creator, we can conceive a greater being – namely, one who created everything *while not existing*.
 - 6) An existing God, therefore, would not be *a being than which a greater cannot be conceived*, because an even more formidable and incredible creator would be a God *which did not exist*.
- Ergo,
- 7) God does not exist.

Gasking exploits the same principle that is used in the ontological argument, according to which existence is a perfection and non-existence is a handicap. By means of such a principle, the conclusion opposite to the conclusion of the ontological argument is inferred. This, of course, does not mean that Gasking's parody was intended to be an argument *against* the existence of God. It is rather an attempt of neutralizing the ontological argument either by showing that at least one of its general principles leads to contradiction or by shifting the burden of proof on those who try to keep the general principles and to attack other premises on which the parody is based.¹

Some think, like Richard Dawkins (2006: 83–84), that Gasking succeeded in parodying the ontological argument,² while philosophers like Graham Oppy and William Lane Craig dismiss Gasking's argument very briefly. Since I do not hold Oppy's or Craig's critiques plausible,³ I will present my own critique of Gasking's parody in due course.

1. Achieving So Much with So Little

Probably the most intriguing premise of Gasking's parody is premise (3).⁴ Grey is well aware of that, and soon after voicing Gasking's argument, he

¹ In that respect, parodies are usually counted as arguments (see, for example, Oppy 2016 for more details).

² William Grey, who has reconstructed Gasking's argument, did not say anything against it. Actually, he has provided an intuitive support to this argument (see the next section), and pointed out some advantages of Gasking's parody with respect to our understanding of creating the world by God (Grey 2000: footnote 5).

³ Reasons for this are given in footnote 4 and §2.

⁴ In his entry on ontological arguments, Graham Oppy (2016) challenges premise (1), claiming that one can imagine God creating two worlds instead of one. This objection might be handled if, for example, one endorses the combinatorial theory of possibility, according to which possibilities are understood as combinations of one and the same number of elements. In that case, it would not be possible to create two worlds instead of one. Further, even if this strategy is not accepted for some reason (for instance, if the combinatorial theory implies that it is inconceivable that God creates two worlds instead of one), Gasking's parody could be

offers an example in order to make premise (3) plausible (Grey 2000: 369). In his example, we are looking at an elaborate model of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, constructed entirely from toothpicks and glue, being amazed by the ingenuity and patience of its creator. Suddenly, we become even more amazed after realizing that the model was built by a quadriplegic who used only his teeth during the work. Such an enterprise looks more marvellous than the one in which, let us say, the same object was built by someone who does not suffer from quadriplegia. The moral of Gasking's parody is, according to Grey, that perfectness consists in "achieving so much with so little (indeed with nothing at all)" (Grey 2000: 369).

At first glance, it is a bit surprising that Grey emphasizes the "ingenuity and patience" of the creator of the model of the Sydney Harbour Bridge in order to illustrate the plausibility of Gasking's idea that the greater the disability of the creator the more impressive her achievement. After all, ingenuity and patience are usually considered to be *highly appreciated abilities*, of which the latter is probably nurtured, while the former is very often understood as a gift of Mother Nature.

Yet, under closer scrutiny, Grey's appeal to abilities like the ingenuity and patience of the creator does make sense, since some highly appreciated abilities are arguably *required* in order for something to be called "achievement". This is quite in accordance with how we understand this term in everyday life: We usually do not count as achievements the products of mere luck, but rather something which is the product of a voluntary and controlled activity. For example, in many cases in which the agent lacks the skill to reliably perform the behaviour, people are more inclined to give the agent very little praise if her success is due almost entirely to luck: A novice who does not have any skill in shooting would not have been praised had he hit the bull's-eye successfully, at least not when compared to a skilful shooter who manifested the same behaviour.⁵ In a sense, the disability of a creator sometimes decreases the merit of the achievement, or even precludes it, contrary to what premise (3) of Gasking's parody states.

reformulated so that its first premise states that *under the supposition that* the only one world was created, such an achievement ought to be counted as the most marvellous one.

On the other hand, Williams Lane Craig rejects premise (5) claiming that it is impossible for non-existent beings to create anything existent (Craig's talk is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sMFbKpPM-AM> [accessed April 4th 2018]). My line of criticism of Gasking's parody is partly based on that widely accepted metaphysical principle, but it is not reducible to it. Craig's critique, at least in its current state, does not succeed, since it does not address some Meinongian options worth considering that are available to the proponents of Gasking's parody (see §2 for more details). In due course, I try to enter more deeply into Gasking's argument, and to anticipate some potential fallbacks available to those who are ready to defend it in order to show that even under the most plausible interpretation the argument does not work.

⁵ The example is used, for different purposes, by Joshua Knobe (2006: 224).

If so, then not *any* disability is allowed in accounting for the marvelousness of an achievement, but just those disabilities that do not preclude something from being an achievement. In view of the last fact, it is possible to draw the distinction between the two notions of disability. Let us call “achievement-non-precluding disabilities” those disabilities that do not preclude something from being an achievement, and “achievement-precluding disabilities” those disabilities that do. Now, premise (3) should be formulated in the following way:

- 3a) The greater the achievement-non-precluding disability (or an achievement-non-precluding handicap) of the creator, the more impressive the achievement.

However, this would make premises (4)–(6) of Gasking’s parody contentious under the same reading of the notion of disability, for it is more likely that, in the case of achievements that are created *in the actual world*, that is, in the case of existent achievements, non-existence is an achievement-precluding disability rather than the achievement-non-precluding one. According to a widely accepted metaphysical principle, non-existent entities cannot be causally related to existent entities in any relevant sense.⁶ If so, then non-existence in premises (4)–(6) should be understood as an achievement-precluding handicap, which makes Gasking’s parody invalid, given that premises (2) and (3) seem plausible only if deployed in terms of achievement-non-precluding (dis)abilities.

2. Introducing Meinongianism: Is Non-Existence the Most Formidable Handicap?

As a response to the objection presented in the previous section, a defender of Gasking’s parody might appeal to fictional characters and argue that there is a sense in which it is possible to attribute properties to non-existent objects. This would invoke a Meinongian metaphysics, according to which *there are* non-existent objects (see Meinong 1960 for more details).

As is well known, Meinongianism is defended in more than one way (see Berto 2008 for more details), and some philosophers believe that Anselm’s ontological argument is based on a Meinongian metaphysics (see, for example,

⁶ William Lane Craig thinks that denying this principle would be logically incoherent (Craig’s talk is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sMFbKpPM-AM> [accessed April 4th 2018]).

Relatedly, even those who, inspired by Descartes (see, for example, Descartes 1991: 358–359), argue that God can do the (metaphysically and logically) impossible, typically have in mind that an *existent* God, and not a non-existent one, can do impossible.

van Inwagen 2012: 146). More importantly, Gasking himself presupposed a Meinongian metaphysics, since in his argument existence and non-existence are understood in terms of abilities and disabilities that an object can possess. Thus, interpreting Gasking's parody in the light of a Meinongian metaphysics seems quite natural.

For the sake of simplicity, let us recall one possible way of understanding Meinongianism, which can be found in the work of Edward Zalta, according to which there are two modes of property possession: *exemplification* and *encoding* (Zalta 1983: 12).⁷ For example, the fictional character Sherlock Holmes encodes the property *being a detective*, but fails to exemplify it. Instead, Sherlock exemplifies the property *being a non-detective, being a fictional character*, and the like. Zalta's distinction enables us to make the process of creating the world by the fictional God intelligible: the fictional God encodes the property *being the creator of the world* and exemplifies the property *being a fictional character*. In that respect, one might argue that there is a sense in which non-existence need not be understood as an achievement-precluding disability.

In addition, the defender of Gasking's parody might even argue that by "world" or "universe", mentioned in premises (1) and (5), Gasking meant the *fictional* world (or the fictional universe), and not the actual one. Relatedly, the term "achievement" might be interpreted in the same way. Let us recall here that there is more than one theory of actuality, and that some philosophers are interested to find out what justifies our common belief that our world is actual (see Adams 1974 for more details). Bearing this in mind, it is interesting to address the possibility that our world is not actual, and the possibility that the fictional God encodes the property *being the creator of the world* in order to check if such a remedy would render Gasking's argument more convincing. These options will be, among other things, addressed in due course.

However, if we focus only on the "achievements" of fictional characters, there is no reason to understand existence as the "most formidable handicap", contrary to what is stated in premise (4) of Gasking's parody, since *all* fictional characters are non-existent *by definition*. In the case of fictional characters, it looks more convincing if, by using Gasking's own criteria, we evaluate the merits of their "achievements" with respect to *other* properties they encode. For example, we are amazed by Sherlock Holmes's ingenuity manifested in solving crimes by noticing subtle details that were left unnoticed by other fictional characters depicted in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's novels. When reading

⁷The following argumentation against Gasking's parody will be based on Zalta's version of Meinongianism, but, *mutatis mutandis*, it works also within other versions of Meinongianism, such as Parsons' (see Parsons 1980 for more details).

Doyle's stories, it does not make sense to claim that, for example, we would be more amazed by Sherlock Holmes's achievements once we realize that he is a fictional character, since we knew from the very beginning that neither he, nor the products of his achievements exist in the actual world. What makes the achievements that Sherlock encodes more impressive than the achievements encoded by other fictional characters portrayed by Doyle is the way of resolving three-pipe problems, or, to use Grey's phrase, quoted at the very beginning of this paper, the ability of "achieving so much with so little".

By the same token, we can modify Grey's example and, instead of imagining existent quadriplegic exemplifying the property *being the creator of an elaborate model of the Sydney Harbour Bridge*, it is possible to imagine a fictional quadriplegic encoding the same property. Such an achievement, albeit fictional, would still be more marvellous than a fictional achievement encoded by a fictional person not suffering from quadriplegia. The moral of the modified Grey's example is that suffering from quadriplegia (in the sense of encoding such a property by a fictional character) is the greater handicap within the domain of fictional characters than non-existence. Examples like that can be multiplied in various ways. In a nutshell, *within* the domain of fictional characters, non-existence would not seem to be the most formidable handicap, contrary to what is stated in premise (4) of Gasking's parody.

3. On "More Impressive" Achievements

A defender of Gasking's parody might respond to the objections raised in §1 and §2 by claiming that the main idea of the parody was to make the comparison between the achievement of existent God and the achievement of non-existent God rather than just to compare the achievements of fictional characters. Premises (5) and (6) of the parody seem to go in favour of this view, as well as the interpretation of Gasking's parody that was mentioned in §2, according to which creating the world by God need not be understood as creating the actual world. This would lead to the comparison between the achievement that is exemplified by the existent God and the achievement that is encoded by the non-existent God, since fictional God cannot exemplify the property *being the creator of the world*. In view of the last fact, premise (5) should be interpreted in the following way:

- 5a) Therefore, if we suppose that the universe is the product of an *existent* creator, who *exemplifies* the property *being the creator of the world*, we can conceive a greater being – namely, one who created everything *while not existing*, that is, the one who *encodes* the property *being the creator of the world*.

However, this premise, taken at face value, is rather implausible. After all, in everyday life we usually praise more, *ceteris paribus*, the merits of achievements that are exemplified by existent creators than the merits of achievements that are encoded by fictional characters: The real quadriplegic exemplifying the property *being the creator of an elaborate model of the Sydney Harbour Bridge* is arguably the greater creator than the fictional one who encodes the very same property; real Novak Djokovic winning six Australian Open titles is greater tennis player than his fictional twin encoding the property *being the winner of six Australian Open titles*, and the like.⁸

In the latter case, winning Australian Open title six times (in the sense of encoding a property) seems like an easiest thing to do for fictional Novak Djokovic, while, on the other hand, existent Novak Djokovic should spend an incredible amount of effort in order to exemplify the same property. This is in accordance with common intuition that possibility outstrips actuality. Relatedly, it is very easy to imagine Novak Djokovic winning Australian Open title, let us say, twenty times, but something like that is incredibly hard, if not impossible, to achieve in the real life. In cases in which exemplified achievements are compared with encoded achievements, it is more likely that, contrary to what is claimed in premise (4) of Gasking's parody, existence is a handicap rather than an ability! Thus, it turns out that, *mutatis mutandis*, even according to Gasking's own principle that the greater handicap makes the achievement more impressive, the existing God who exemplifies the property *being the creator of the world* would be the greater creator than the non-existing God who encodes the same property, which would contradict premise (5a).

Now, let us check briefly what would happen if we take seriously the idea, mentioned in §2, that our world is not actual, and that God's achievement is an imaginary one. It seems that creating such a world by fictional God would still not be the more impressive achievement than imagining (and, in that sense, creating) the same world by existent God. For in that case, the comparison would be analogous to the one in which the merit of the achievement of existent Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (creating fictional character Sherlock Holmes) is compared to the merit of the same achievement accomplished by the *fictional* Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. However, in everyday life, we would not praise the latter accomplishment more than the former. Quite the contrary, we think that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle is a great writer because of inventing the stories about Sherlock Holmes. His achievement would normally be praised more than the same achievement encoded by the fictional Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. At any rate, the example with Sir Arthur Conan

⁸ Of course, real wrongdoings are, *ceteris paribus*, typically more blamed than fictional wrongdoings.

Doyle creating Sherlock Holmes, as well as the abovementioned examples with Novak Djokovic winning Australian Open title and the quadriplegic creating an elaborate model of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, suggests that, *ceteris paribus*, we are typically *not* more amazed by imaginary achievements than by the real ones, contrary to what premise (5a) presupposes. Premise (3) of Gasking's parody should be rejected for similar reasons, since the abovementioned examples show that there are cases in which disabilities, such as non-existence, need not make an achievement more impressive.

Let us summarize. Insofar non-existent God cannot *exemplify* the property *being the creator of the world*, premise (5) of Gasking's parody turns out false, since it violates the basic metaphysical principle, according to which non-existent beings cannot be causally related to existent beings. Appealing to fictional characters and Meinongian metaphysics might look like an interesting remedy of Gasking's parody. Yet, under closer scrutiny, such a fallback will not save the day, either because non-existence need not be considered the most formidable handicap *within* the domain of fictional characters, contrary to what is claimed by premise (4), or because the achievement of the fictional God who *encodes* the property *being the creator of the world* is not more impressive than the achievement of the existent God who *exemplifies* the very same property, contrary to what is stated by premise (5a) (and premise (3) as well). In a nutshell, non-existence would be the most formidable handicap for existent creators that, alas, precludes something to be an achievement in the actual world, while for fictional characters it is neither the most formidable handicap, nor it makes fictional achievements more impressive.⁹

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