Below is the original text presenting the perfect island argument

IN BEHALF OF THE FOOL.

AN ANSWER TO THE ARGUMENT OF ANSELM IN THE PROSLOGIUM
BY GAUNILO, A MONK OF MARMOUTIER.

For example: it is said that somewhere in the ocean is an island, which, because of the difficulty, or rather the impossibility, of discovering what does not exist, is called the lost island. And they say that this island has an inestimable wealth of all manner of riches and delicacies in greater abundance than is told of the Islands of the Blest; and that having no owner or inhabitant, it is more excellent than all other countries, which are inhabited by mankind, in the abundance with which it is stored.

Now if some one should tell me that there is such an island, I should easily understand his words, in which there is no difficulty. But suppose that he went on to say, as if by a logical inference: "You can no longer doubt that this island which is more excellent than all lands exists somewhere, since you have no doubt that it is in your understanding. And since it is more excellent not to be in the understanding alone, but to exist both in the understanding and in reality, for this reason it must exist. For if it does not exist, any land which really exists will be more excellent than it; and so the island already understood by you to be more excellent will not be more excellent."

If a man should try to prove to me by such reasoning that this island truly exists, and that its existence should no longer be doubted, either I should believe that he was jesting, or I know not which I ought to regard as the greater fool: myself, supposing that I should allow this proof; or him, if he should suppose that he had established with any certainty the existence of this island. For he ought to show first that the hypothetical excellence of this island exists as a real and indubitable fact, and in no wise as any unreal object, or one whose existence is uncertain, in my understanding.
Gaunilo’s argument can be put in the following form to parody Anselm’s argument.

I can conceive of X as an island of such excellent features that I cannot think of any islands greater than it.

X exists not only in the mind but also in reality, because if it exists only in the mind then we can think of an island greater than it, that is, X that exists both in the mind and in reality.

The above argument has the same structure as Anselm’s first version of the ontological argument. If we accept Anselm’s argument then we have to accept the above argument. But then we also have to accept any arguments of the same form that seek to establish the existence of the greatest this and that. If we are averse to an overabundance of greatest things, then we have to reject any arguments of this form which include Anselm’s argument.

Therefore the perfect island argument is a successful refutation of Anselm’s first version of the ontological argument. Can we deploy it against his second version? We can try and it should look like this.

I can conceive of X as an island of such excellent features that I cannot think of any islands greater than it.

It cannot be that one can think of X as not existing, for if one thinks so then one can think of an island that is greater than it, that is, X that cannot be thought of as not existing.

But this doesn’t work because an island is a thing such that its existence depends on various causes. We can think of an island as not existing by imagining the elimination of its causes. In short, an island is a contingent thing and we cannot think of it a necessary being.

Therefore, the perfect island argument doesn’t work against Anselm’s second version of the ontological argument; and it doesn’t work against Descartes’ argument either. As I mentioned in my lecture note, Descartes also uses the concept of necessary existence. From the idea of God as a supremely perfect being, he can clearly and distinctly conceive that the property of necessary existence belongs to God. The connection is that if it is not so then He can’t be supremely perfect for His existence would depend upon something else. The perfect island argument cannot be put in this form for the same reason as in the case of Anselm’s second version.

In short, the ontological argument in its credible form depends upon the logical connection between the concept of the supremely perfect being or of the greatest being and that of the necessary being. The issue then turns upon the intelligibility of the concept of necessary existence. The opponent of the ontological argument can simply argue that this concept is unintelligible and thus the ontological argument is unsound.