

## A DIVINE ARGUMENT ANSELM'S PROOF FOR GOD

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*Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109): archbishop, philosopher, logician*

The fame of Anselm derives primarily from his proof for God. The proof does not concern the existence of God. God, as spirit, cannot properly be said to exist. Existence is literally a prerogative of temporal beings. Instead, it claims to show that reference to God is not empty. It will not prove that God has 'being', whatsoever that is, but that the claim of atheism, that God is just a mental projection, is inconsistent.

This shows the proof to be a *reductio ad absurdum* intended to silence the atheist. It takes as its premiss a clear proclamation of the atheistic position: "There is no God!" Thus the atheist puts up the trap which is to catch himself, for his explicit repudiation entails the implicit concession that an imaginary god is unworthy of prayer and worship. The proof has no power against an agnostic pretending ignorance of the whole issue.

*By accepting the distinction between reality and illusion, the atheist clarifies the conceptual basis for his controversy with the believer and also raises the crucial issue. By denying his respect to a fictitious deity, he indirectly admits that his attitude might differ in case that he had been compelled by rational argument to accept a real God.*

A God who might manifest his indisputable reality is *greater* than the illusion of one who is a mere projection of human fancy. Clearly in this case there is *more* to fact than to fiction. Anselm is now able to formulate the first two premisses of his argument:

*1) That God might, after all, be real is possible (conceivable) even to the atheist. The crucial question, therefore, is whether God is merely a fictitious concept or whether He is more than a concept by being real, factual, or efficient, in His own right.*

*2) Of God, thought of as a conceptual possibility, it is true that we think greater of Him if we think Him as fact than if we think Him as fiction - i.e., we think Him greater if we think Him as a reality in His own right than if we think Him as mere illusion.*

It is hard for the atheist to discard these two premisses. The third premiss is posed by Anselm himself as a basic postulate of the Christian faith:

*3) God should be thought of as that than which nothing greater can be thought or, equivalently, as one than whom no better can be thought.*

If the atheist rejects this premiss Anselm can dismiss him with the rejoinder that he is a fool since he is ignorant of what he is talking about. If he accepts the premiss, Anselm can rebuke him with the remark that he is a fool as he is contradicting himself. The proof can be paraphrased thus: The atheist says: *There is no God*. Anselm answers:

*If you were right, then my God would be unreal or illusory. Now my God is that than which nothing greater can be thought. But that which you deny must be present to your thought as a conceptual possibility if you are not speaking empty words.*

*Thus, by claiming my God to be mere fiction, you equate that than which nothing greater can be thought with that than which something greater can be thought, since a fictitious deity is clearly something than which something greater can be thought, viz., the God you deny. Therefore you contradict yourself, which I promised to prove.*

According to Kierkegaard, proofs for God are either superfluous, or incoherent. For either there is a God, or there is no God: *tertium non datur* - but if God is, then all proofs are undeniably superfluous, and if he is not, no proof can possibly be coherent! Therefore the few engaged in proving God are fools who should not hope for fame and, rather than wasting precious time by yielding to futile speculation, they should concern themselves with the basic facts of existence in a serious struggle for authenticity.

Kierkegaard's disdain of speculation was only matched by his disdain of science, and he openly admitted his sole interest to be that of St. Augustine: God and the soul. He nevertheless conceded that a proof for God may be reasonable, perhaps even fruitful, if constructed expressly to the following purpose, namely, to elucidate the Idea of God. Unfortunately he forgot, or ignored, that precisely this was the intention of St. Anselm: *his* demonstration explicitly aimed at clarifying the Idea of God intellectually.

It will be noticed that we have spoken of God, but not of the "existence" of God. The reason is that the etymological origin of the word 'existence' (Lat. *existere*: to arise, to come forth, to become manifest) precludes that it be applied to God. According to human experience, as well as to the Jewish-Christian religious tradition, God is hidden, therefore he is disappointingly close to non-being. In the wording of the prophet Isaiah: *Verily, thou art a God who hides himself!* (Is.45,15).

However, it is the essence of Christianity that God was incarnate in Jesus Christ. Thus the Gospel teaches that God, who is, but does not exist, in fact did exist once, viz., in the man Jesus, son of Mary, and allegedly son of Joseph. But to say that God is a being who hides himself is to say next to nothing. Who is that God who was incarnate in the man Jesus of Nazareth - and what is He? Let us therefore listen to the prophet once more: *I am the Lord who created the World, who framed the Heaven and extended the Earth!* (Is.44,24) - *I am God from Eternity, the only one to remain for all future!* (Is.43,12)

God hides himself, must hide himself, since he is creator, source and origin of the world, including its possible future. God came to his own, but they did not receive him. Asked by Pilate who he was, Jesus presented himself as King of the Realm of Truth. *What is truth?* sneered the Roman sceptic. But St. Augustine gave the answer:

*Either truth is that which excels or transcends everything, and then truth is God. Or, if there be something which is higher, or greater, than truth, then that is God.*

This passage, which is a liberal translation of a passage in his work on free will, led Anselm to declare: *Deus est quo(d) nihil maius cogitari potest! God is that (whom) than which nothing greater can be thought!* This is true to the believer. How can that, which is a truth of faith, be the core of a proof of God? Because the disbeliever, by saying: *There is no God!*, takes his claim to imply that God, whom the faithful believes to be real, is in fact delusive. By asserting his denial, the atheist accepts to distinguish reality from illusion; not with respect to God, whom he rejects, but with regard to the Idea of God. So he turns his attention away from God towards the Idea of God.

Anselm's *ontological* proof which, in fact, ought rather to be termed *dialectical*, is meant to show that the proclamation of atheism is either irrelevant, or inconsistent.

The *first point* to be grasped is that the proof is not positive, but a *reductio* directed *ad hominem*, against the atheist. So it derives its very force from the vigour invested by the disbeliever in his own position. When the atheist is silenced, the theist stops arguing.

The *second point* to be realized is that the *premisses* of the proof are provided by the atheist himself: partly *a*) by the distinction of reality from illusion, entailed by his claim that the Idea of God denotes nothing, although it appears to; partly *b*) by his derogation of the illusive, as compared to the real, implied by his refusal to worship an illusion.

The *third point* to be understood is that the atheistic rejection of a divine being applies to any kind of deity, therefore also to God as confessed by Anselm who, together with Augustine, takes him to be *that, or whom, than which nothing greater can be conceived*. The infinite itself being indefinable, however, this is not a definition, but a description. The crucial question is, does the Idea thus described correspond to anything real?

Now Anselm argues thus: Anything thought of, e.g., an idea, has being in thought, i.e., *esse in intellectu*. The distinction between reality and illusion refers to the difference between that which has reality both in thought and in itself, *esse et in intellectu et in re*, and that which has reality merely as thought of, but not in itself, *esse in intellectu solo*. For the Idea of God to refer, or to be real, is to be both in itself and in thought, while for the Idea of God not to refer, or to be illusive, is to be only in thought, not in itself.

The atheist claims the Idea of God to be an illusion, nothing but a projection of the human mind, entirely unworthy of religious worship. By doing so, and by including *that than which nothing greater can be thought*, he discloses himself to be a fool, or a numskull, unworthy of intellectual respect. The point is that what is denied is thought of; hence the atheist, by denying that the Idea of God is real, does think of what he denies. But this proves the atheist to conceive *that than which nothing greater can be thought* as *that than which something greater can be thought*, which is a contradiction.

Anselm thus presents the atheist with a *dilemma*: either he does not know what he is talking about or he contradicts himself; in either case he makes a fool of himself.

Anselm's argument has been defended by Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz and Hegel, and it has been attacked by Aquinas and Kant and by a number of modern philosophers. But a formal analysis in terms of modal logic shows its structure to be impeccable.

What does the argument, in fact, prove, its validity being provisionally granted? Just like any other valid piece of logic, it transfers the truth-value of its premisses to its conclusion, its force being derived from its premisses. How these stem from the express statement of atheism we have already discussed; let us therefore consider the formula *quo(d) nihil maius cogitari potest* a little more. The significance of identifying the Idea of God with the *quo(d) nihil maius cogitari potest* is that the formal negation of supreme otherness enhances the divine *transcendence to actual infinity*. Thereby the Idea of God is elevated infinitely beyond the limits of pure reason and human contingency.

The importance of Anselm's dialectical proof of God is not that it illuminates the *meaning* or *contents* of the Idea of God for, in fact, it has none. The significance of the argument is that it elucidates the *function* of the Idea of God. It is impossible for us as finite creatures to grasp the infinite godhead; but the function of the Anselmian formula is to point out *the path to transcendence*: this it does by refusing to accept anything as divine to which something else is superior. Thus the argument becomes an instantiation of *via negativa* in contrast to *via affirmativa*: the divine is determined indirectly by the denial of everything that is not divine. Since divine existence is not at stake at all, *there is no question of inferring the existence of the godhead from its essence or nature, neither is there any question of using existence, or being, as a specific kind of predicate*; this may characterize the Cartesian approach, but has nothing to do with that of Anselm. All this immunizes the Anselmian proof not only to the objections of Aquinas, but also to the criticism of "yon great terminator of classical metaphysics", namely, Kant.

It therefore appears that we, in spite of Kant, can refer to at least one instance of authentic metaphysics based on pure reason, viz.: *atheism beguiles us into absurdity*. The *basic experience of existentialism* has thereby been affirmed by pure reasoning! Hence the only safe way to avoid God is to avoid speaking, yeah, even thinking, of God. The believer can argue against the atheist, not against the agnostic who dares not speak. Probably the agnostic does not want to dispute the abstract possibility of metaphysics, and we will thus allow ourselves the liberty to neglect his awkward position at present. Instead, I will defend the stance of A. Mercier, that *metaphysics is scientia sui generis*, viz., the *science of pure transcendence*, as extracted from the proof of Anselm.

To conclude, let us briefly recapitulate the structure of the argument:

1. (The Idea of) God is described as "that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought".
2. No-one is able to speak reasonably of anything that is not present to his/her mind. But we need to distinguish what is only present to the mind, such as mental illusions, from what we call independent reality, which is present both to the mind and in itself.
3. Regarding superiority, it is, *ceteris paribus*, greater to be present *both* to the mind and in itself, as independent reality, than to be present *only* to the mind, as mere illusion.

4. The Christian insists that God is whom-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought-of. To which the fool, or atheist, will reply: God is not real, but delusive: there is no God!
5. Thus God is present to the mind of both, at least as a conceptual possibility, or idea. Thus it seems as if two possibilities are both open to reason: Either God is *mere fiction*, present only to our minds. Or God is *pure fact*, present both to our minds and in himself.
6. But is it at all conceivable that God is a deceitful delusion, present solely to the mind? No, for then we are not thinking of that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought, but of that-than-which-something-greater-can-be-thought; i.e., we are not thinking of God.
7. To think that that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought is illusive is equivalent to thinking that God is not God. Hence *atheism is an untenable hypothesis*. QED.

### REFERENCES

1. St. Anselm's *Proslogion*, ed. by M.J. Charlesworth, Oxford 1965.
2. Karl Barth: *Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, John Knox 1960, Pickwick 1985.
3. Søren Kierkegaard: *Philosophical Fragments* (ch.iii), 1844.
4. André Mercier: *God, World, and Time*, Peter Lang 1996.
5. Alvin Plantinga: *The Nature of Necessity*, Oxford 1974.  
Plantinga treats of God as an object with properties and, relativizing God to be a possible object in an infinity of possible worlds, argues for God's necessity *de re*. In this paper, there is nothing of the kind!

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### ANSELM'S PROOF FOR GOD A FORMAL RECONSTRUCTION

***The formal development of the proof, of course,  
has been a long process of continued clarification.  
Whether it properly represents the view of Anselm  
remains a question open for further discussion.***

#### **Logical Foundations:**

##### **I. PC: Propositional Calculus, Lukasiewicz 1924**

Axioms: 1)  $\neg\alpha \Rightarrow \alpha \Rightarrow \alpha$ , 2)  $\alpha \Rightarrow \neg\alpha \Rightarrow \beta$ , 3)  $\alpha \Rightarrow \beta \wedge \beta \Rightarrow \gamma \Rightarrow \alpha \Rightarrow \gamma$

##### **II. QT: Quantificational Theory, the notation of Prior ( $\Sigma x \equiv \neg \Pi \neg x$ )**

We use Prior's formalization of QT,  $x,y,z$  being subject variables,  $C,M,G$  being predicate variables, and  $\Pi, \Sigma$  being universal and existential quantor, resp.

Mogens True Wegener

### III. S5: The strongest one of the Modal Systems of Lewis:

Our system is extended by 2 primitives, a *modus de re* and a *modus de dictu*, viz., 'R', where 'Rx' reads "x is real", and '∇', where '∇α' reads "thinkable α" or "it might be that α", α being a proposition of the type 'Rx', "x is real", or of the type '¬Rx', "x is faked".

In **S5**, the strongest 'must be' (□) entails the weakest 'might be' (∇), by the def.  $\Box\alpha \equiv \neg\nabla\neg\alpha$ ; hence 'necessary-not α'  $\equiv$  'α is inconceivable'  $\equiv$  'α is incoherent'.

Axioms for **S5**: 1.  $\Box\alpha \Rightarrow \alpha$ , 2.  $\Box.\alpha \Rightarrow \beta : \Rightarrow . \Box\alpha \Rightarrow \Box\beta$ , 3.  $\nabla\alpha \Rightarrow \Box\nabla\alpha$ .

#### Four Simple Premisses:

P<sub>1</sub>  $\Pi xy: Cxy \Rightarrow Cyx$

For all x&y: if x is comparable to y, then y is comparable to x.

NB The relation of comparability is symmetric and reflexive:  $Cxx \equiv \text{true}$ .

P<sub>2</sub>  $\Pi xy: Mxy \Rightarrow \neg Myx$

For all x&y: if x is greater than y, then y is not greater than x.

NB The relation of supremacy is asymmetric and irreflexive:  $Mxx \equiv \text{false}$ .

P<sub>3</sub>  $\Pi xy: \nabla Gx \wedge \nabla Gy. \Rightarrow \nabla Cxy$

For all x&y: if x might be a god and y might be a god, then x and y might be comparable, i.e., if thinking x is god and thinking y is god, then thinking x and y comparable.

P<sub>4</sub>  $\Pi xy: \nabla Cxy \Rightarrow : \nabla Rx \wedge \nabla \neg Ry. \Rightarrow \nabla Mxy$

For all x&y: if thinking x and y comparable then: if thinking x real and thinking y faked, then thinking x greater, or better, or more, than y.

NB Even the atheist who despises gods as being nothing but human fakes must admit that thinking x real but y faked implies thinking x more than y ('esse et in intellectu et in re' is more than 'esse in intellectu solo', since 'esse in re' is added to 'esse in intellectu' in the 1st case, not in the 2nd).

#### Four Simple Corollaries

Q  $\Pi xy: \nabla Gx \wedge \nabla Gy. \Rightarrow : \nabla Rx \wedge \nabla \neg Ry. \Rightarrow \nabla Mxy$  P<sub>3</sub> & P<sub>4</sub>, syll.

For all x&y: if x and y might both be divine (thinking gods to be comparable), then: if thinking x real and thinking y faked, then thinking x greater than y,

Q'  $\Pi x: \nabla Gx. \Rightarrow : \nabla Rx \wedge \nabla \neg Rx. \Rightarrow \nabla Mxx$  (false) Q, subst. y→x

For all x: if thinking x divine, then: if thinking x real and thinking x faked, then false.

Q''  $\Pi x: \nabla Gx \Rightarrow : \neg. \nabla Rx \wedge \nabla \neg Rx$  Q', modus tollens

For all x: if thinking x divine, then not both: thinking x real and thinking x faked.

Q'''  $\Pi x: \nabla Gx \Rightarrow : \neg. \nabla Rx \vee \neg \nabla \neg Rx$  Q'', de Morgan

For all x: if thinking x divine, then one of two (tertium non datur):

either inconceivable: x is real; or inconceivable: x is faked.

Q''''  $\Pi x: \nabla Gx \Rightarrow : \Box \neg Rx \vee \Box Rx$  Q''', def. □

For all x: if thinking x divine, then: either x is necessarily faked or x is necessarily real.

NB So, if thinking x divine, then x is not a contingent entity.

It will be noticed that our premisses PP<sub>1-4</sub> are neutral in the sense that they do not prejudge the conclusion.

**The Position of Atheism**

- N  $\Pi y: \nabla Gy \Rightarrow \neg \nabla Ry$  The Postulate of Negation.  
 For all x: if thinking y divine, then it is inconceivable that y is real.  
 N'  $\Pi y: \nabla Gy \Rightarrow . \neg \nabla Ry \vee \nabla Ry$  N,  $\Pi y: \neg \nabla Ry \Rightarrow . \neg \nabla Ry \vee \nabla Ry$   
 For all y: if y might be divine, then y is needs faked - or y might after all be real.  
 NB The reason why atheists claim all gods to be delusive is, precisely, that they are able to think what they deny, namely, that a god might be real:  
 N''  $\Pi y: \nabla Gy \Rightarrow . \nabla \neg Ry \vee \nabla Ry$  N',  $\Pi y: \neg \nabla Ry \Rightarrow \nabla \neg Ry$ , syll.  
 For all y: if y might be divine, then y might be faked - or y might after all be real.  
 NB The claim of the pagan that gods are faked and should be scorned masks the consequence that, nevertheless, he is able to think that, granted that some god were real, it might be worthy of glorification. If he declines that, insisting that all thinking of divinity is incoherent, the burden of proof that this is actually true rests heavily upon him.

**The Position of St. Anselm**

- F  $\nabla \Sigma x: G^{\dagger}x \wedge Rx$  The Postulate of Faith  
 There might be an x, so that x is the Christian God and x is real.  
 NB This x is thought to be real, namely, as an object of faith and worship. It is crucial that the idea of God be coherent, i.e., free of contradiction: if the atheist rejects that, it is only fair to demand a proof for his stance.  
 G  $\Pi xy: \nabla G^{\dagger}x \Rightarrow . \nabla Gx \wedge \neg \nabla Myx$  The Christian Idea of God  
 For all x&y: if x might be the Christian God, x might be divine, and it is inconceivable that y be greater than x: Deus est quo(d) nihil maius cogitari potest.

**Some Corollaries**

- F'  $\Sigma x: \nabla G^{\dagger}x \wedge \nabla Rx$  F, S5  
 There is an x: x might be the Christian God and x might be real.  
 G'  $\Pi x: \nabla G^{\dagger}x \Rightarrow \nabla Gx$  G,  $y \rightarrow x$ , PC  
 For all x: if x might be the Christian God, then x might be divine.  
 G''  $\Pi xy: \nabla G^{\dagger}x \Rightarrow \neg \nabla Myx$  G, G', PC  
 For all x&y: if x might be the Christian God, then not: y might be greater than x.  
 G'''  $\Pi xy: \nabla Mxy \Rightarrow \neg \nabla G^{\dagger}y$  G'', contrapos.  
 For all x&y: if x might be greater than y, then not: y might be the Christian God.

**An Unpleasant Dilemma**

The atheist may be asked to prove that the Christian Idea of God is incoherent. In order to accomplish the proof nothing less than a flat contradiction will suffice. Assuming that he cannot produce it, the issue remains open. So, who is right?

- F'  $\Sigma x: \nabla G^{\dagger}x \wedge \nabla Rx$  or  
 N'  $\Pi y: \nabla Gy \Rightarrow . \neg \nabla Ry$

Conjoining Anselm's postulate of faith to the pagan postulate of denial, we get:

A  $\Sigma x \Pi y: \nabla G^f x \wedge \nabla Gy. \Rightarrow : \nabla Rx \wedge \neg \nabla Ry$  F', N', PC

There is an x, and for all y: if x might be the Christian God and y might be divine too, then x might be real and it is inconceivable that y be real.

A'  $\Sigma x \Pi y: \nabla G^f x \wedge \nabla Gy. \Rightarrow \nabla Mxy$  A, Q,  $\neg \nabla Ry \Rightarrow \nabla \neg Ry$

There is an x, and for all y: if x might be the Christian God and y might be divine too, then it might be that x is greater than y.

The atheist is now confronted with a nasty dilemma between two horns,  $H_\alpha$  &  $H_\omega$ :

$H_\alpha$   $\Sigma x \Pi y: \nabla G^f x \wedge \nabla Gy. \Rightarrow : x = y. \Rightarrow \nabla Myy$  A', hyp.  $x = y$

There is an x, and for all y: if x might be the Christian God and y might be divine too, then: if  $x = y$ , then it might be that y is greater than y (contradiction).

NB Quo(d)-nihil-maius-cogitari-potest cannot be thought greater than it is!

$H_\omega$   $\Sigma x \Pi y: \nabla G^f x \wedge \nabla Gy. \Rightarrow : x \neq y. \Rightarrow \nabla Mxy$  A', hyp.  $x \neq y$

There is an x, and for all y: if x might be the Christian God and y might be divine too, then: if  $x \neq y$ , then it might be that x is greater than y.

NB If the postulate of denial is true, it does not refer to the Christian God!

### The Argument from Faith

D  $\Pi x: \nabla G^f x \Rightarrow . \Box \neg Rx \vee \Box Rx$  G', Q'', PC

For all x: if x might be the Christian God, then x is needs faked or needs real.

D'  $\Pi x: \nabla G^f x \wedge \nabla Rx. \Rightarrow \Box Rx$  D, hyp.  $\nabla Rx$ , PC

For all x: if thinking x is the Christian God and real, then x is necessarily real.

D<sup>†</sup>  $\Sigma x: \nabla G^f x \wedge \Box Rx$  F', D', PC

There is an x: x is thought to be the Christian God, and x is necessarily real.

Q.E.D.

### Conclusion

Granted that God is conceivable in the weakest sense whatsoever, then it is simply inconsistent even to imagine God as being faked.

Therefore, either the atheist does not know what he is talking about, or he is contradicting himself, implying that the Christian God is not the Christian God. So he is just a fool, or an idiot!

"Was sich überhaupt sagen lässt, lässt sich klar sagen, und wovon man nicht reden kann, darüber muss man schweigen."

Wittgenstein: 'Tractatus'

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