



MEDIEVAL PROOF OF GOD'S EXISTENCE: ST. ANSELM AND AVICENNA

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Gentrain 405: The Medieval World, Part I

Faith and the existence of God

St Anselm of Canterbury and Avicenna (Ibn-Sina)

- **God is unseen □ takes greater faith to believe in God**
- **Creates problems for religious people and philosophers □ can never confirm God's existence**



St Anselm of Canterbury
An illuminated
archbishop—presumably
Anselm—from a
12th-century edition of
his *Meditations*

Ibn-Sina (12th
century portrait)



St. Anselm of Canterbury

St. Anselm:

1033/4–1109 CE □

monk and the
Archbishop of
Canterbury



- Ontological proof: a philosophical argument for the existence of god.
 - Argument a fascinating attempt to prove the existence of a God.
 - Attempts to demonstrate that it is self-contradictory to deny the existence of God.

St. Anselm's intellectual climate

- The role of theology: mere Bible commentary or the need for rational argument/analysis
 - Bible commentary: God mysterious, inaccessible through senses/intellect □ Bible provides the symbolic language needed to talk about him □ cannot go past the symbolic language or infer truths by reason
 - Rational theological argument: it is not only through symbolic language but reason which allows us access to faith
- Anselm's thought in the second group. The beginning of his *Proslogian* (c 1077):

“sin has so darkened our minds that we cannot hope to reach the truth unless God graciously leads us to it. He does so by offering us the truth through revelation and by inspiring us to accept that revelation in faith. Once we accept the truth on that basis, however, we can hope to reason out proofs for what we have already accepted through faith. **God is rational, and what he does is rational, and we ourselves are blessed with reason. Thus we should be able to discover the rationality of God's actions, at least to some extent.** We are like students who, unable to solve a mathematical problem, are given the answer to it and then discover they can reason out why that answer is correct.”

Proslogion

“fides quaerens intellectum”

Note: “something god-like” =

“that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-conceived”

Anselm in the *Proslogion*: ***“Even the fool is forced to agree that [something god-like] exists in his mind, since he understands this when he hears it, and whatever is understood is in the mind. And surely that [something god-like] cannot exist in the mind alone.”***

- Claims that God is the greatest being that can be imaged, and that the idea of him exists already in our minds.

In the Mind Alone?

The first argument



“Suppose it exists in the mind alone: then it can be conceived to exist in reality; which is greater...Therefore, if that [something god-like] exists in the understanding alone, the very being, [something god-like], is one that which a greater can be conceived. But obviously this is impossible. Hence, there is no doubt that there exists a being, [something god-like], and it exists both in the understanding and in reality.”

A mid-17th century line-engraved portrait of St Anselm by George Glover

The first argument

God must exist outside of the mind

1. One can imagine a being than which none greater can be conceived.
2. We know that existence in reality is greater than existence in the mind alone.
3. If the being we imagine exists only in our mind, then it is not a "being than which none greater can be conceived".
4. A being than which none greater can be conceived must also exist in reality.
5. Failure to exist in reality would be failure to be a being than which none greater can be conceived.
6. Thus a being than which none greater can be conceived must exist, and we call this being God.

Dr. Scott H. Moore's rendering

The Second Argument

God is not self-contradictory

1. “God” means “that than which nothing greater can be conceived.”
2. The idea of God is not contradictory.
3. That which can be thought of as not existing (a contingent being) is not as great as that which cannot be thought of as not existing (a necessary being).
4. Therefore, to think of God as possibly not existing (as contingent) is not to think of the greatest conceivable being. It is a contradiction to think of the greatest conceivable being as nonexistent.
5. Therefore, God exists.

Avicenna (Ibn-Sina)

The argument of dependency



- Some find Anselm's argument clever but unconvincing.
- Contrast it to his near contemporary Avicenna (Ibn-Sina) □ Early Islamic philosopher, c. 980 – 1037
- Rather than abstract ideas about thought and ideas, Avicenna argues from a place of observation □ we can see that the things around us are dependent on one another.

“Proof of the Truthful”

In “The Book of the Directives and Remarks”

1. Everything we encounter is determined by and dependent on something
2. That something also has something beyond it, on which it is dependent □ it is guaranteed by its nature
 - A conditional thing on its own can either exist or not exist, but requires some external cause to make it exist □ a catalyst
 - For example, I might have existed or not existed, but some external catalyst brought me into being (my parents for example)
3. The entire universe is dependent on something, since everything is contingent
4. Therefore, the universe requires an external cause (a catalyst) to bring it into existence
5. Therefore, there must be an external deity which is the cause for everything □ This deity is God.

Avicenna

- Avicenna □ Persian polymath (born in present day Uzbekistan)
 - Memorized Quran by age of 10, and learned arithmetic from a grocer
 - Troubled by Aristotle's *Metaphysics* as a teenager and began studying philosophy, but started to devote himself to medicine as his primary interest at the age of 16.
- One of the most prominent thinkers of the Islamic Golden Age (8th-14th century) □ father of early modern medicine
- Wrote around 450 works, of which 240 have survived
- Most famous works are *The Book of Healing* and *The Canon of Medicine* □ became standard medical text in many medieval universities until seventeenth century.



Avicenna and the Islamic Golden Age



An Arabic manuscript from the 13th century depicting **Socrates** (Soqrāt) in discussion with his pupils

- Avicenna grew up in the Islamic Golden Age
 - Islamic Golden Age: period of economic, scientific, artistic and cultural flourishing (8th-12th centuries)
 - Greco-Roman texts (including Neoplatonic and Aristotelian texts) were circulated and studied carefully
 - Combined with texts and ideas from the Kindi School (philosophy based on the “Father of Arab philosophy” Al-Kindi, b. c. 801 CE)
 - Islamic intellectuals developed on Indian and Persian mathematical ideas, science, astronomy, algebra, etc.
- The study of the Quran and philosophy thrived.
- Avicenna debated philosophical points with the greatest scholars and thinkers of his time
 - Spent time with the greatest minds of his time: scientists, philosophers, astronomers, physicians

Avicenna and Averroes

The great philosophers of the Islamic Golden Age

- Avicenna and Averroes (1126-1198 CE)
→ important role in the interpretation of Aristotle
 - Interpretations of Aristotle would become influential to non-religious thought in both the Christian and Muslim worlds
- Dag Nikolaus Hasse: The translations of these classical philosophical works from Arabic into Latin in the medieval world “led to the transformation of almost all philosophical disciplines” of this time.
- Influence in Europe of Islamic philosophy strong in the fields of science, natural philosophy, psychology, ethics, logic, etc.



Scholars at an Abbasid library, from the *Maqamat* of al-Hariri by Yahya ibn Mahmud al-Wasiti, Baghdad, 1237.

Contrasting Avicenna and Anselm

Avicenna

- The domain of dependencies must have an external cause □ not included in set, therefore not dependent on anything
- Avicenna's "Proof of the Truthful" □ involves both arguments, but is more cosmological.
 - Does not define God □ provides reasoning to derive characteristics

Anselm

- "That-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-conceived" must already exist in reality. Otherwise that same thing that exists in reality would be greater.
- Anselm provided an **ontological proof**, contrasted by what is known as **cosmological proof**.
 - Ontological argument: God exists from the idea of God
 - Cosmological argument: God as first cause.