

Week 9 (11 April, 2005): Anselm's Ontological Argument

Bed and Breakfast, Voorjaar 2005, Nijmeegs Instituut voor Informatica en Informatiekunde

April 9, 2005

1 *Reductio ad absurdum*

Reductio ad absurdum is a very common form of reasoning, sometimes also called *proof by contradiction*. In a proof of this sort, we begin by assuming the opposite of what we want to prove. Then we derive a contradiction or an absurdity from this supposition. And from this we conclude that our original assumption was false. The general form of such an argument is as follows.

- (1) Suppose P.
- (2) From P it follows that Q.
- (3) But Q is absurd (self-contradictory).
- (4) Therefore P is false.

Question: which rules of natural deduction we learnt in class take this form?

2 Faith by rationality

St. Anselm (1033-1109) was an Italian-born philosophical theologian who became the Archbishop of Canterbury, England, in 1093. He is most famous for his *ontological argument* for the existence of God, presented in the *Proslogium*. This purports to be an *a priori* proof of God's existence; i.e., it relies on purely logical means and is completely independent from experience.

Anselm's aim is to refute the fool who says in his heart that there is no God (*Psalms* 14:1). This fool has two important features: (i) he understands the claim that God exists, and (ii) he does not believe that God exists. Anselm argues that anyone who understands the statement "God exists" can be led to see that God does exist. On this view, the atheist is not just mistaken: his position is internally inconsistent.

Below we reproduce his arguments. First he presents a definition of "God" and some assumptions about the Fool's understanding.

- (a) By "God" we mean "a being than which no greater being can be conceived."
- (b) We understand what it means to speak of a being than which no greater can be conceived.
- (c) We can conceive of such a being existing in reality.

Next comes a principle that Anselm takes as self-evident.

- (d) If we understand what it means to speak of X, then X exists in the understanding.

From Items (a), (b) and (d) Anselm infers:

- (e) God exists in the understanding.

Anselm now employs *reductio ad absurdum* to argue against the claim that God exists in the understanding alone.

- (f) Suppose that God exists in the understanding but not in reality.

From Items (f) and (e) he infers the following.

- (g) God in fact exists in the understanding alone, but he may be conceived to exist in reality as well as in the understanding.

Here comes the most controversial premise. Very roughly, the idea is: if we compare two things that are alike in all respects except that one exists in the understanding alone and the other exists in reality, then the one that exists in reality is clearly greater, better, more perfect.

- (h) If something exists in the understanding alone, but can be conceived to exist in reality, then that thing can be conceived to be greater than it actually is.

This, together with Item (g), yields the following.

- (i) God can be conceived to be greater than it actually is.

In light of the definition (a), Item (i) leads to Item (j) below.

- (j) A being that cannot be conceived to be greater than it is can be conceived to be greater than it is.

This is of course absurd, therefore Anselm concludes:

- (k) God exists in reality.

Question: Are you convinced?

Sources

- <http://www.princeton.edu/grosen/puc/phi203/anselm.html>.
- <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/anselm.html>.
- <http://www.answers.com/topic/st-anselm>.