A priori Arguments

Yesterday in class, I got a bit long-winded, and so didn’t get to finish our discussion of *a priori* vs. *a posteriori* arguments. There is a lot that could be said about what *a priori* knowledge is supposed to be, and whether or not we actually have any. I’m afraid that if I open this can of worms in class next week, I will just fall farther behind. So let me try to explain here the relevance of this distinction for our discussion of the arguments we will look at for the existence of God, starting with Anselm’s “Ontological Argument.”

Anselm’s argument for the existence of God stands in a class by itself. (There are, historically, different versions of it, by they are all variants of Anselm’s original argument.) Anselm’s argument is called (by Rowe, in our text, and by others) an “*a priori argument*” for the existence of God. It is the only such argument. All other arguments for the existence of God are *a posteriori*. (For now, just understand that *a posteriori* is the opposite of *a priori*.) So, what is unique about Anselm’s argument? What are we trying to get at by describing it as an “*a priori* argument?”

To explain what is unique about Anselm’s argument, let me begin by contrasting it with other arguments. I will begin with an argument that we won’t actually be covering this semester, but it is one that you have likely heard of.

You have probably heard about debates about whether or not “intelligent design” ought to be taught in schools as an alternative to the theory of evolution. This “intelligent design” theory is a version of an argument for the existence of God called the “Argument from Design.”

This is a very old argument, and goes something like this: we observe around us parts of the natural world that have certain features (namely, that they have an apparent “natural function,” and also a very complicated internal structure that allows them to function in this way). Now, the argument goes, these features could not have occurred by chance, and so must be the result of a purpose or “design.” That is, the world must have been “designed” or “created” this way for things to have these features. And so, there must be a “Designer” or “Creator,” i.e., there must be a God.
I’m not going to discuss or evaluate this argument here. All I want to point out is that it beings with an *observation* about some things we perceive in the world around us. (That is, we perceive things that have these features: a natural function, and a complicated structure that allows them to function in that way). So, this argument begins with a premise (that there are things with these features) that we believe on the basis of sense experience, i.e., on the basis of what we see or observe.

This is an *a posteriori* argument for the existence of God, because at least one of its premises is something that we know on the basis of what we perceive with our senses. Our reason or justification for thinking that things have these features (function and complexity) is that we observe this with our senses. That is the defining feature of a *a posteriori* argument: our evidence depends upon sense experience.

(If this argument interests you, you can find out more about it in our text: Paley’s selection, on p. 46, is the classic version of the Argument from Design. The following selection by David Hume, on p. 52, contains one of the first major criticisms of that argument.)

Another *a posteriori* argument is the so called “Cosmological Argument.” We will look at versions of this next Thursday. I will leave a substantive discussion of that argument until class, but I can summarize it here: we observe change in the world around us. (Specifically, we observe that things are in motion, and we observe that some things are caused by other things.) The argument is that this series of changes (of causes) had to have a beginning in time, and so that there must be a “first cause.” In a nutshell: we observe that things are caused by previous things, which are in turn caused by previous things, and so on. But this cannot go on to infinity. So, there must be a “first cause,” i.e., God.

So, like the Argument from Design, the Cosmological Argument is *a posteriori* because it starts with a claim that we know on the basis of sense experience--that things change, or have causes. It then reasons from this claim to the conclusion that there must be a God.

*A posteriori* arguments, then, are argument where at least one of the premises is a claim that we can only know on the basis of what we perceive with our senses. That is, for at least one of the premises, our *justification* for believing this claim to be true depends upon some kind of observational evidence.
But Anselm’s argument is different: it does not begin with any claims that are known on the basis of sense experience. It is, if you will, entirely “conceptual.” This makes the argument uniquely strong. Since it does not rely upon any information we gained through the senses, it cannot be refuted by anything we might learn through the senses. Of course, the argument is controversial, and may be rejected on other grounds. But since it is independent of sense experience, it cannot be refuted by anything that we might ever observe or perceive. It is offered as an argument that should convince anyone and everyone, because it relies only on “thinking,” and not on how anyone perceives the world.

(Anselm argues, in effect, that the existence of God follows from the very definition of God. So God could no more fail to exist than a bachelor could fail to be male. But this is very unusual. I can know perfectly well the definition of “bachelor” or of “rectangle” or of “winged horse,” without thereby knowing whether or not any existing thing “fits” these definitions. I know that there are bachelors and rectangles, but no winged-horses, because of what I perceive through my senses, not simply by understanding the meanings of these words. Even the defenders of Anselm’s argument admit that his argument works only in the case of God. They admit, that is, that for no other concept does existence follow by definition. But, they say, there is something about the concept of God—the concept a “fully perfect” being, such that nothing “more perfect” can even be conceived—that justifies this inference. We will talk about all of this on Tuesday.)

For the purposes of this chapter, and our discussion of arguments about the existence of God, that is all you really need to know about a priori vs. a posteriori arguments. There’s much more that could be said about a priori knowledge. Maybe we will come back to it later in the term. But for now, I have said enough.