
OFFICES AND GOD

Philip Hugly and Charles Saywood
University of Nebraska, Lincoln, U.S.A.

Here is Anselm's *Proslogion III* argument:

[That than which a greater cannot be thought] exists so truly [really] that it cannot even be thought not to exist. For there can be thought to exist something whose non-existence is inconceivable; and this thing is greater than anything whose non-existence is conceivable. Therefore, if that than which a greater cannot be thought could be thought not to exist, then that than which a greater cannot be thought would not be that than which a greater cannot be thought--a contradiction. ([1], p. 94)

In [2] Pavel Tich presents an interpretation of this argument and raises doubts about one of the premises. We contend that Tichý's interpretation of Anselm is wrong. The argument Tichý comes to raise doubts about isn't Anselm's.

I

Tichý's argument is founded on these propositions ([2], p. 415-416);

- (A) An individual office that instantiates necessary existence is greater than any other that does not.

Let 'H' abbreviate 'that than which a greater cannot be conceived'.

- (B) Necessary existence is a requisite of H.
(C) H is occupied.
(D) The occupant of H exemplifies necessary existence.

(A) plus the assumption that there are individual offices that enjoy necessary existence is said to entail (B). (B) and (C) are said to entail (D). (D) is supposed to correspond to Anselm's

conclusion that a being than which nothing greater can be conceived cannot be conceived not to exist; i.e., God necessarily exists.

The terminology needs to be explained in familiar terms. Tichý nowhere explicitly defines 'individual-office' but an examination of Section I of his paper will bear out the following analysis: An individual-office is a property ϕ of individuals such that for each possible world w and time t at most one individual is ϕ in w at t . An individual a occupies an individual-office ϕ in a possible world w at a time t iff a alone is ϕ in w at t . An individual-office is *total* iff, for every w and t , some individual a occupies ϕ in w at t . An individual-office enjoys necessary existence iff it is total.

A second-order office is any property A of properties of individuals such that, for each w and t , at most one individual-office is A in w at t . H is a second-order office. Existence is a second-order property.

In what follows Greek letters range over individual offices, $>$ is the second order greater-than relation, T is the second order property *being total*.

The argument Tichý ascribes to Anselm is founded on these propositions:

P1. $(\exists\phi)(\psi)\psi \not> \phi$

At least one individual office is surpassed by no individual office.

P2. $(\exists\phi)T\phi$

At least one individual office is total, i.e., always occupied in every possible world.

P3. $(\phi)(\psi)[T\phi \wedge \sim T\psi \bullet \rightarrow \phi > \psi]$

If ϕ is always occupied in every possible world and ψ isn't, ϕ is greater than ψ .

P4. $(\phi)(\psi)[(\alpha)\alpha \not> \phi \wedge (\alpha)\alpha \not> \psi \bullet \rightarrow \phi = \psi]$

At most one individual office is unsurpassed.

P3 is equivalent to Tichý's premise (A). P2 is equivalent to the thesis Tichý uses to derive (B) from (A). P1 and P4 are equivalent to the two theses Tichý uses to derive (C):

First [Anselm] argues that some individual-offices or "natures" are surpassed by no others . . . Secondly, he argues that there cannot be more than one such nature. ([2], p. 416).

What can be derived from P1 - P4? This proposition:

(E) $(\exists\phi) [(\alpha) \alpha \not\prec \phi \wedge (\psi)((\alpha) \alpha \not\prec \psi \rightarrow \phi = \psi \wedge T \phi)]$.

Exactly one individual office is unsurpassed and it is always occupied in every world.

We think (E) is equivalent to Tichý's (D). For Tichý cashes out his (C) ('H is occupied') in this way: "there is a unique individual office than which a greater individual office cannot be conceived". ([2], p. 416). This corresponds to

$(\exists\phi) [(\alpha) \alpha \not\prec \phi \wedge (\psi)((\alpha) \alpha \not\prec \psi \rightarrow \phi = \psi)]$.

(B) says that unique individual-office is total. Putting these together yields our (E).

Now it is clear that (E) does not capture Anselm's *Proslogion III* conclusion, which says that that than which a greater cannot be thought cannot be conceived not to exist, i.e., God necessarily exists. (E) says there is exactly one individual office ϕ such that ϕ is greater than all other individual offices and, for any possible world w and time t , there is an individual a which occupies ϕ in w at t . In so far as one can translate Anselm in terms of individual-offices at all, Anselm surely wants a stronger conclusion than that. He would want

(F) There is exactly one individual office ϕ greater than all others and some individual a such that for every world w and time t , a occupies ϕ in w at t .

But (F) does not follow from P1 - P4.

III

According to Tichý, Anselm asserted P1 and P4 as conclusions of arguments in *Monologion IV*, asserted P3 in *Proslogion III*, and considered P2 too obvious to warrant

argument. Anselm's *Proslogion III* argument is fairly represented by (A) - (D) only if each of these claims is correct.

Each of these claims depends on Tichý's implicit identification of Anselm's beings with natures, and Tichý's further identification of Anselm's natures with individual offices. The latter identification is not plausible.

Tichý cites the following passage from *Monologion IV* as evidence for his ascription of P4 to Anselm:

Assume [he says] that they are many and equal . . . [T]hey cannot be equal through different things but only through the same thing . . . [But then] they would be less than that through which they are great. For whatever is greater through another is less than that other through which it is great. Therefore, they would not be so great that nothing else is greater than they. ([2], p. 416)

Tichý correctly interprets the term 'thing' as referring to natures. Under this interpretation the argument in the passage comes to this:

- (1) If two or more natures are equally greater, then there is another nature distinct from each through which each is greater.
- (2) Any nature through which another nature is greater is greater than that nature.
- (3) Thus, there is at most one nature such that no nature is greater than it.

Tichý identifies P4 with the conclusion of this argument.

What is the *through* relation and what are the terms of that relation? Anselm's answer is platonic. "For whatever things are said to be *just*, when compared one with another, whether equally, or more, or less, cannot be understood as just, except through the quality of *justness*, which is not one thing in one instance, and another in another." (*Monologion I*) If a pair of properties are equally greater, then there is a form (nature) through which (by participation in which) each is greater. Following this line of interpretation, for each nature *n* which is a nature of individuals, if *n* is greater then there is another nature of natures of individuals *N* through which *n* is greater. Recasting these ideas in terms of offices

we see that no individual office can be greater through another individual office. Rather an individual office can be greater only through some second order office or some second order property.

So we can at most take the natures of which Anselm speaks to be offices and not just individual offices. But then the conclusion, (3), of Anselm's *Monologion IV* argument is the conclusion that there is at most one greatest office, in which case P4 is not an item asserted by Anselm. Further, if we replace P4 by

$$(x)(y)[(z)z \not\prec x \wedge (z)z \not\prec y \bullet \rightarrow x = y]$$

where the variables now range over all offices, (E) no longer follows.

IV

The closest Anselm comes to asserting P2, as a premise in his argument, is when he asserts, as part of his *Proslogion III* argument, this proposition:

- (i) [T]here can be thought to exist something whose nonexistence is inconceivable.
Supposing that the beings here referred to are individual-offices and that what cannot be conceived not to exist necessarily exists, (i) comes to
- (ii) There can be thought to be individual-offices enjoying necessary existence.

But (ii) and P2 plainly differ and, further, P2 does not follow from (ii). It thus appears that P2 does not correspond to anything Anselm premised in his argument.

Now, P2, put in Anselm's terms, comes to this:

P2' There are beings which cannot be conceived not to exist. To this Anselm would assent, for God is, he holds, such a being. But Anselm also holds that God *alone* cannot be conceived not to exist (cf. the *Appendix to Monologion*, Chapter IV). Thus, the only argument which Anselm could have given for P2' would have been precisely his *Proslogion III* argument extended by one existential generalization.

Thus, had the *Proslogion III* argument premised P2' it would have been flatly circular. But it isn't.

References

- [1] Jasper Hopkins and Herbert W. Richardson, eds. & trans., *Anselm of Canterbury*, Vol. I (London: SCM Press, 1974).
- [2] Pavel Tichý, "Existence and God" *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. LXXVI, August 1979, 403-420.