

CLARKE'S MODAL COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

Samuel Clarke

I

First, then, it is absolutely and undeniably certain that *something has existed from all eternity*. This is so evident and undeniable a proposition, that no atheist in any age has ever presumed to assert the contrary, and therefore there is little need of being particular in the proof of it. For since something now is, it is evident that something always was, otherwise the things that now are must have been produced out of nothing, absolutely and without a cause, which is a plain contradiction in terms. For, to say a thing is produced and yet that there is no cause at all for that production, is to say that something is effected when it is effected by nothing, that is, at the same when it is not effected at all. Whatever exists has a cause, a reason, a ground of its existence, a foundation on which its existence relies, a ground or reason why it does exist rather than not exist, either in the necessity of its own nature (and then it must have been of itself eternal), or in the will of some other being (and then that other being must, at least in the order of nature and causality, have existed before it).

That something, therefore, has really existed from eternity, is one of the most certain and evident truths in the world, acknowledged by all men and disputed by no one. Yet, as to the manner how it can be, there is nothing in nature more difficult for the mind of men to conceive than this very first plain and self-evident truth. For how anything can have existed eternally, that is, how an eternal duration can be now actually past, is a thing utterly as impossible for our narrow understandings to comprehend, as anything that is not an express contradiction can be imagined to be. And yet, to deny the truth of the proposition, that an eternal duration is now actually past, would be to assert something still far more unintelligible, even a real and express contradiction.

The use I would make of this observation is this: that since in all questions concerning the nature and perfections of God (or concerning anything to which the idea of eternity or infinity is joined), though we can indeed demonstrate certain propositions to be true, yet it is impossible for us to comprehend or frame any adequate or complete ideas of the manner how the things so demonstrated can be. Therefore, when once any proposition is clearly demonstrated to be true, it ought not to disturb us that there be perhaps perplexing difficulties on the other side which, merely for want of adequate ideas of the manner of the existence of the things demonstrated, are not easy to be cleared. Indeed, were it possible there should be any proposition which could equally be demonstrated on both sides of the question, or which could on both sides be reduced to imply a contradiction (as some

have very inconsiderately asserted), this, it must be confessed, would alter the case. Upon this absurd supposition, all difference of true and false, all thinking and reasoning, and the use of all our faculties, would be entirely at an end. But when to demonstration on the one side there are proposed on the other only difficulties raised from our want of having adequate ideas of the things themselves, this ought not to be esteemed an objection of any real weight.

It is directly and clearly demonstrable, and acknowledged to be so, even by all atheists that ever lived, that something has been from eternity: All the objections therefore raised against the eternity of anything, grounded merely on our want of having an adequate idea of eternity, ought to be looked upon as of no real solidity. Thus in other the like instances: It is demonstrable, for example, that something must be actually infinite: All the metaphysical difficulties, therefore, which arise usually from applying the measures and relations of things finite, to what is infinite; and from supposing finites to be [aliquot] parts of infinite, when indeed they are not properly so, but only as mathematical points to quantity, which have no proportion at all: (and from imagining all infinities to be equal, when in things disparate they manifestly are not so; an infinite line, being not only not equal to, but infinitely less than an infinite surface, and an infinite surface than space infinite in all dimensions:) All metaphysical difficulties, I say, arising from false suppositions of this kind, ought to be esteemed vain and of no force. Again: it is in like manner demonstrable, that quantity is infinitely divisible: All the objections therefore raised, by supposing the sums total of all infinities to be equal, when in disparate parts they manifestly are not so; and by comparing the imaginary equality or inequality of the number of the parts of unequal quantities, whose parts have really no number at all, they all having parts without number; ought to be looked upon as weak and altogether inconclusive: To ask whether the parts of unequal quantities be equal in number or not, when they have no number at all, being the same thing as to ask whether two lines drawn from differently distant points, and each of them continued infinitely, be equal in length or not, that is, whether they end together, when neither of them have any end at all.

II

*There has existed from eternity some one unchangeable and independent being.** For since something must

* The meaning of this proposition, and all that the argument here requires, is that there must needs have always been some independent being, some one at least. To show that there can be

needs have been from eternity, as has been already proved and is granted on all hands, either there has always existed some one unchangeable and independent being from which all other beings that are or ever were in the universe have received their original, or else there has been an infinite succession of changeable and dependent beings produced one from another in an endless progression without any original cause at all. Now this latter supposition is so very absurd that, though all atheism must in its accounts of most things (as shall be shown hereafter) terminate in it, yet I think very few atheists ever were so weak as openly and directly to defend it. For it is plainly impossible and contradictory to itself. I shall not argue against it from the supposed impossibility of infinite succession, barely and absolutely considered in itself, for a reason which shall be mentioned hereafter. But, if we consider such an infinite progression as one entire endless series of dependent beings, it is plain this whole series of beings can have no cause from without of its existence because in it are supposed to be included all things that are, or ever were, in the universe. And it is plain it can have no reason within itself for its existence because no one being in this infinite succession is supposed to be self-existent or necessary (which is the only ground or reason of existence of anything that can be imagined within the thing itself, as will presently more fully appear), but every one dependent on the foregoing. And where no part is necessary, it is manifest the whole cannot be necessary-- absolute necessity of existence not being an extrinsic, relative, and accidental denomination but an inward and essential property of the nature of the thing which so exists.

An infinite succession, therefore, of merely dependent beings without any original independent cause is a series of beings that has neither necessity, nor cause, nor any reason or ground at all of its existence either within itself or from without. That is, it is an express contradiction and impossibility. It is a supposing something to be caused (because it is granted in every one of its stages of succession not to be necessarily and of itself), and yet that, in the whole, it is caused absolutely by nothing, which every man knows is a contradiction to imagine done in time; and because duration in this case makes no difference, it is equally a contradiction to suppose it done from eternity. And consequently there must, on the contrary, of necessity have existed from eternity some one immutable and independent being.

To suppose an infinite succession of changeable and dependent beings produced one from another in an endless progression, without any original cause at all, is only a driving back from one step to another, and

(as it were) removing out of sight, the question concerning the ground or reason of the existence of things.* It is in reality, and in point of argument, the very same supposition, as it would be to suppose one continued being, of beginningless and endless duration, neither self-existent and necessary in itself, nor having its existence founded in any self-existent cause; which is directly absurd and contradictory.

Otherwise, thus: either there has always existed some unchangeable and independent being from which all other beings have received their original, or else there has been an infinite succession of changeable and dependent beings, produced one from another in an endless progression without any original cause at all. According to this latter supposition, there is nothing in the universe self-existent or necessarily existing. And if so, then it was originally equally possible that from eternity there should never have existed anything at all, as that there should from eternity have existed a succession of changeable and dependent beings. Which being supposed, then, what is it that has from eternity determined such a succession of beings to exist, rather than that from eternity there should never have existed anything at all? Necessity it was not because it was equally possible, in this supposition, that they should not have existed at all. Chance is nothing but a mere word, without any signification. And other being it is supposed there was none, to determine the existence of these. Their existence, therefore, was determined by nothing; neither by any necessity in the nature of the things themselves, because it is supposed that none of them are self-existent, nor by any other being, because no other is supposed to exist. That is to say, of two equally possible things, viz., whether anything or

* This matter has been well illustrated by a late able writer.—“Suppose a chain hung down out of the heavens, from an unknown height; and, though every link of it gravitated toward the earth, and what it hung upon was not visible, yet it did not descend, but kept its situation: And, upon this, a question should arise, What supported or kept up this chain? Would it be a sufficient answer to say, that the first or lowest link hung upon the second, or that next above it; the second, or rather the first and second together, upon the third; and so on *in infinitum*? For, what holds up the *whole*? A chain of ten links, would fall down, unless something able to bear it hindered: One of twenty, if not stayed by something of a yet greater strength, in proportion to the increase of weight. And therefore one of infinite links, certainly; if not sustained by something infinitely strong, and capable to bear up an infinite weight: And thus it is in a chain of causes and effects, tending, or (as it were) gravitating, towards some end. The last, or lowest, depends, or, (as one may say) is suspended upon the cause above it. This, again, if it be not the first cause, is suspended, as an effect, upon something above it, &c. And if they should be infinite, unless (agreeably to what has been said) there is some cause, upon which all hang or depend, they would be but an infinite effect without an efficient: and to assert there is any such thing, would be as great an absurdity as to say, that a finite or little weight wants something to sustain it, but an infinite one (or the greatest) does not.”—*Religion of Nature Delineated*, page 67 [William Wollaston, 1724 edition].

no more than one, is not the design of this proposition, but of the seventh.

nothing should from eternity have existed, the one is determined rather than the other absolutely by nothing, which is an express contradiction. And consequently, as before, there must on the contrary of necessity have existed from eternity some one immutable and independent being. Which, what it is, remains in the next place to be inquired.

III

That unchangeable and independent being which has existed from eternity, without any external cause of its existence, must be self-existent, that is, necessarily existing. For whatever exists must either have come into being out of nothing, absolutely without cause, or it must have been produced by some external cause, or it must be self-existent. Now to arise out of nothing

absolutely without any cause has been already shown to be a plain contradiction. To have been produced by some external cause cannot possibly be true of everything, but something must have existed eternally and independently, as has likewise been shown already. Which remains, therefore, [is] that that being which has existed independently from eternity must of necessity be self-existent. Now to be self-existent is not to be produced by itself, for that is an express contradiction, but it is (which is the only idea we can frame of self-existence, and without which the word seems to have no signification at all)—it is, I say, to exist by an absolute necessity originally in the nature of the thing itself. . . .

HUME'S CRITIQUE OF CLARKE'S ARGUMENT

David Hume

PART IX

[*Demea's Clarke-style Argument:
the "argument a priori"*]

But if so many difficulties attend the argument *a posteriori*, said DEMEA, had we not better adhere to that simple and sublime argument *a priori*, which, by offering to us infallible demonstration, cuts off at once all doubt and difficulty? By this argument, too, we may prove the INFINITY of the Divine attributes, which, I am afraid, can never be ascertained with certainty from any other topic. For how can an effect, which either is finite, or, for aught we know, may be so; how can such an effect, I say, prove an infinite cause? The unity too of the Divine Nature, it is very difficult, if not absolutely impossible, to deduce merely from contemplating the works of nature; nor will the uniformity alone of the plan, even were it allowed, give us any assurance of that attribute. Whereas the argument *a priori* . . .

You seem to reason, DEMEA, interposed CLEANTHES, as if those advantages and conveniences in the abstract argument were full proofs of its solidity. But it is first proper, in my opinion, to determine what argument of this nature you choose to insist on; and we shall afterwards, from itself, better than from its *useful* consequences, endeavour to determine what value we ought to put upon it.

The argument, replied DEMEA, which I would insist on, is the common one. Whatever exists must have a cause or reason of its existence; it being absolutely impossible for any thing to produce itself, or be the cause of its own existence. In mounting up, therefore, from effects to causes, we must either go on in tracing an infinite succession, without any ultimate cause at all; or must at last have recourse to some ultimate cause, that is *necessarily* existent: Now, that the first supposition is absurd, may be thus proved. In the infinite chain

or succession of causes and effects, each single effect is determined to exist by the power and efficacy of that cause which immediately preceded; but the whole eternal chain or succession, taken together, is not determined or caused by any thing; and yet it is evident that it requires a cause or reason, as much as any particular object which begins to exist in time. The question is still reasonable, why this particular succession of causes existed from eternity, and not any other succession, or no succession at all. If there be no necessarily existent Being, any supposition which can be formed is equally possible; nor is there any more absurdity in nothing's having existed from eternity, than there is in that succession of causes which constitutes the universe. What was it, then, which determined something to exist rather than nothing, and bestowed being on a particular possibility, exclusive of the rest? *External causes*, there are supposed to be none. *Chance* is a word without a meaning. Was it *nothing*? But that can never produce any thing. We must, therefore, have recourse to a necessarily existent Being, who carries the REASON of his existence in himself, and who cannot be supposed not to exist, without an express contradiction. There is, consequently, such a Being; that is, there is a Deity.

[*Criticisms from Cleanthes and Philo*]

I shall not leave it to PHILO, said CLEANTHES (though I know that the starting objections is his chief delight), to point out the weakness of this metaphysical reasoning. It seems to me so obviously ill-grounded, and at the same time of so little consequence to the cause of true piety and religion, that I shall myself venture to shew the fallacy of it.

I shall begin with observing, that there is an evident absurdity in pretending to demonstrate a matter of fact, or to prove it by any arguments *a priori*. Nothing

is demonstrable, unless the contrary implies a contradiction. Nothing, that is distinctly conceivable, implies a contradiction. Whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent. There is no being, therefore, whose non-existence implies a contradiction. Consequently there is no being, whose existence is demonstrable. I propose this argument as entirely decisive, and am willing to rest the whole controversy upon it.

It is pretended that the Deity is a necessarily existent being; and this necessity of his existence is attempted to be explained by asserting, that if we knew his whole essence or nature, we should perceive it to be as impossible for him not to exist, as for twice two not to be four. But it is evident that this can never happen, while our faculties remain the same as at present. It will still be possible for us, at any time, to conceive the non-existence of what we formerly conceived to exist; nor can the mind ever lie under a necessity of supposing any object to remain always in being; in the same manner as we lie under a necessity of always conceiving twice two to be four. The words, therefore, *necessary existence*, have no meaning; or, which is the same thing, none that is consistent.

But farther, why may not the material universe be the necessarily existent being, according to this pretended explication of necessity? We dare not affirm that we know all the qualities of matter; and for aught we can determine, it may contain some qualities, which, were they known, would make its non-existence appear as great a contradiction as that twice two is five. I find only one argument employed to prove, that the material world is not the necessarily existent Being; and this argument is derived from the contingency both of the matter and the form of the world. "Any particle of matter," it is said, "may be *conceived* to be annihilated; and any form may be *conceived* to be altered. Such an annihilation or alteration, therefore, is not impossible." But it seems a great partiality not to perceive, that the same argument extends equally to the Deity, so far as we have any conception of him; and that the mind can at least imagine him to be non-existent, or his attributes to be altered. It must be some unknown, inconceivable qualities, which can make his non-existence appear impossible, or his attributes unalterable: and no reason can be assigned, why these qualities may not belong to matter. As they are altogether unknown and inconceivable, they can never be proved incompatible with it.

Add to this, that in tracing an eternal succession of objects, it seems absurd to enquire for a general cause or first author. How can any thing, that exists from eternity, have a cause, since that relation implies a priority in time, and a beginning of existence?

In such a chain, too, or succession of objects, each part is caused by that which preceded it, and causes

that which succeeds it. Where then is the difficulty? But the WHOLE, you say, wants a cause. I answer, that the uniting of these parts into a whole, like the uniting of several distinct countries into one kingdom, or several distinct members into one body, is performed merely by an arbitrary act of the mind, and has no influence on the nature of things. Did I shew you the particular causes of each individual in a collection of twenty particles of matter, I should think it very unreasonable, should you afterwards ask me, what was the cause of the whole twenty. This is sufficiently explained in explaining the cause of the parts.

Though the reasonings which you have urged, CLEANTHES, may well excuse me, said PHILO, from starting any farther difficulties, yet I cannot forbear insisting still upon another topic. It is observed by arithmeticians, that the products of 9, compose always either 9, or some lesser product of 9, if you add together all the characters of which any of the former products is composed. Thus, of 18, 27, 36, which are products of 9, you make 9 by adding 1 to 8, 2 to 7, 3 to 6. Thus, 369 is a product also of 9; and if you add 3, 6, and 9, you make 18, a lesser product of 9. To a superficial observer, so wonderful a regularity may be admired as the effect either of chance or design: but a skilful algebraist immediately concludes it to be the work of necessity, and demonstrates, that it must forever result from the nature of these numbers. Is it not probable, I ask, that the whole economy of the universe is conducted by a like necessity, though no human algebra can furnish a key which solves the difficulty? And instead of admiring the order of natural beings, may it not happen, that, could we penetrate into the intimate nature of bodies, we should clearly see why it was absolutely impossible they could ever admit of any other disposition? So dangerous is it to introduce this idea of necessity into the present question! and so naturally does it afford an inference directly opposite to the religious hypothesis!

But dropping all these abstractions, continued PHILO, and confining ourselves to more familiar topics, venture to add an observation, that the argument *a priori* has seldom been found very convincing, except to people of a metaphysical head, who have accustomed themselves to abstract reasoning, and who, finding from mathematics, that the understanding frequently leads to truth through obscurity, and, contrary to first appearances, have transferred the same habit of thinking to subjects where it ought not to have place. Other people, even of good sense and the best inclined to religion, feel always some deficiency in such arguments, though they are not perhaps able to explain distinctly where it lies; a certain proof that men ever did, and ever will derive their religion from other sources than from this species of reasoning.