DIALOGUES CONCERNING NATURAL RELIGION

By David Hume

PART 2

I shan’t beat about the bush, said Cleanthes, addressing himself to Demea. [...] What I shall do is to explain briefly how I conceive this matter. Look round the world, contemplating the whole thing and every part of it; you will find that it is nothing but one big machine subdivided into an infinite number of smaller ones, which in their turn could be subdivided to a degree beyond what human senses and faculties can trace and explain. All these various machines, and even their most minute parts, are adjusted to each other so precisely that everyone who has ever contemplated them is filled with wonder. The intricate fitting of means to ends throughout all nature is just like (though more wonderful than) the fitting of means to ends in things that have been produced by us - products of human designs, thought, wisdom, and intelligence. Since the effects resemble each other, we are led to infer by all the rules of analogy that the causes are also alike, and that the author of nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man, though he has much larger faculties to go with the grandeur of the work he has carried out. By this argument a posteriori, and by this argument alone, do we prove both that there is a God and that he resembles human mind and intelligence.

I have to tell you, Cleanthes, said Demea, that from the beginning, I could not approve of your conclusion about the similarity of God to men; still less can I approve of your ways of trying to establish it. What! No demonstration that God exists! No abstract arguments! No a priori proofs! [An a priori argument is one that proceeds by sheer thinking,

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making no use of contingent facts about what the world is like. An argument that does appeal to such facts is called *a posteriori*, which is what Cleanthes says that his argument is.] What about the ones that have in the past been so much insisted on by philosophers - are they all fallacious, all mere tricks? Do *experience* and *probability* mark the limit to how far we can go in this subject? I will not say that this is betraying the cause of a God: but, surely, by this show of even-handedness you provide atheists with advantages that they could never have obtained purely through argument and reasoning.

My main reservation about what Cleanthes has said, Philo remarked, is not so much that he bases all religious arguments on experience as that his arguments seem not to be the most certain and unbreakable even of that inferior - experience-based- kind. That a stone will fall, that fire will burn, that the earth has solidity, we have observed thousands of times; and when any new instance of this sort is presented we don’t hesitate to draw the usual conclusion - this stone will fall, this fire will burn, the earth that I am about to put my right foot on is solid. The exact similarity of the cases gives us a perfect assurance of a similar outcome; and we never want or look for stronger evidence than that. But the evidence is less strong when the cases are less than perfectly alike; any reduction in similarity, however tiny, brings a corresponding reduction in the strength of the evidence; and as we move down that scale we may eventually reach a very weak analogy, leading to a conclusion which is confessedly liable to error and uncertainty. After having observed the circulation of the blood in human creatures, we have no doubt that it circulates in Titius and Maevius. But from its circulation in frogs and fishes it is only a presumption - though a strong one, from analogy - that blood circulates in men and other animals. The analogical reasoning is even weaker when we infer the circulation of the sap in plants from our experience that the blood circulates in animals; and those who hastily followed that imperfect analogy between plants and animals have been found by more accurate experiments to have been mistaken.

If we see a house, Cleanthes, we conclude with the greatest certainty that it had an architect or builder; because this is precisely the kind of effect that we have experienced as coming from that kind of cause. But surely you will not say that the universe is so like a house that we can with the same certainty infer a similar cause, or that the analogy is here entire and perfect. The unlikeness in this case is so striking that the most you can offer - on the basis of it - is a guess, a conjecture, a presumption about a similar cause; and I leave it to you to
consider how that offering will be received in the world!

If I granted that the proofs of the existence of a God amount to no more than a guess or conjecture, replied Cleanthes, that would not be well received, and I would deservedly be blamed and detested. But is it such a slight resemblance between how means are fitted to ends in a house and how they are fitted in the universe? The way things are fitted to their purposes? The order, proportion, and arrangement of every part? Steps of a staircase are plainly designed so that human legs can use them in climbing; and this inference from how the steps can be used to their purpose is certain and infallible. Human legs are also designed for walking and climbing; and this inference from how legs can be used to their purpose, I admit, is not quite so certain, because of the dissimilarity you have pointed out; but does that downgrade it to mere presumption or conjecture?

Good God! exclaimed Demea, interrupting him, what have we come to? Earnest defenders of religion admitting that the proofs of a God fall short of being perfectly evident! And you, Philo, whose help I depended on in proving the worshipful mysteriousness of God’s nature - do you assent to all these extreme opinions of Cleanthes? For how else can I describe them? And why should I tone down my criticism when such principles are advanced, supported by such an authority as Cleanthes, in the presence of such a young man as Pamphilus?

You seem not to grasp, replied Philo, that I argue with Cleanthes in his own way: I hope that by showing him the dangerous consequences of his views I shall finally bring him to share our opinion. But what bothers you most, I notice, is Cleanthes’ account of the argument a posteriori. You find that that argument in his version of it is likely to slip out of your grasp and vanish into thin air; you think Cleanthes has so disguised it that you can hardly believe he has presented it properly. Now, however much I may disagree in other ways with the dangerous principles of Cleanthes, I must admit that he has fairly presented that argument; and I shall try to set it out for you in such a way that you will no longer view it with suspicion.

If a man were to set aside everything he knows or has seen, he would be entirely unable to work out, merely from his own ideas, what the universe must be like, or to think one state of affairs to be more likely than another. Nothing that he clearly conceives could be thought to be impossible or to imply a contradiction, so every fanciful story his imagination comes up with would be upon an equal footing with every other; and he could give no valid reason for sticking to one idea or
system and rejecting the others which are equally possible.

Next step in the argument: after he opens his eyes and sees the world as it really is, he cannot at first tell what the cause was of any one event, much less of the totality of things or of the universe. He might start his imagination rambling, and it might bring in to him an infinite variety of reports and stories. These would all be possible, but because they would all be equally possible he could never from his own resources explain satisfactorily why he prefers one of them to the rest. Experience alone can point out to him the true cause of anything that happens.

Now, Demea, this method of reasoning leads to something that Cleanthes himself has tacitly admitted, namely: order, arrangement, or the suitability of things for various purposes (like the suitability of legs for walking) is not of itself any proof that a designer has been at work, except in cases where experience has shown us that such order, arrangement, etc. is due to a designer. For all we can know a priori, matter may have a source of order within it, just as mind does, having it inherently, basically, ·not acquired from somewhere else·. When a number of elements come together in an exquisite arrangement, ·you may think it harder to conceive that they do this of their own accord than to conceive that some designer put them into that arrangement. But that is too quick and careless. Think about what is involved in a designer’s arranging them: it means that he creates the arrangement in his mind, assembling in the appropriate way the ideas of the elements in question. But, then, how does that happen? I put it to you, it is no harder to conceive that the elements are caused to come together into this arrangement by some unknown cause that is internal to them, than to conceive that the ideas of these elements come together in that arrangement in the great universal mind, being caused to do so by a similarly unknown cause that is internal to that great mind. These two suppositions are agreed to be equally possible; but according to Cleanthes experience shows us a difference between them. Throw several pieces of steel together, without shape or form: they will never arrange themselves so as to compose a watch. Stone, and mortar, and wood, without an architect, never erect a house. But we see that the ideas in a human mind arrange themselves so as to form the plan of a watch or house, though we haven’t the faintest notion of how they do this. So experience shows that minds - and not matter - have a built-in principle of order. From similar effects we infer similar causes. The way means are fitted to ends in the universe at large is like the way means are fitted to ends in a machine designed by a human being. The cause of the machine, therefore, must be similar to the cause of the universe.
I was, I admit, shocked by this assertion of a resemblance between God and human creatures. I can’t help seeing it as implying such a lowering of the supreme being that no right-thinking Theist could put up with it. With your assistance, therefore, Demea, I shall try to defend what you justly call the worshipful mysteriousness of God’s nature, and shall refute this reasoning of Cleanthes, provided he agrees that I have presented it fairly.

When Cleanthes had agreed to this, Philo, after a short pause, proceeded in the following manner.

In the meantime I shall not disagree much with your theses that all inferences concerning matters of fact are based on experience, and that all experimental reasoning is based on the supposition that similar causes prove similar effects, and similar effects similar causes. But please notice how extremely cautious good thinkers are in transferring a discovered result to a similar case. These thinkers are not perfectly confident in applying their past observation to some other particular phenomenon, unless the old and new cases are exactly similar. Every alteration in the circumstances of the cause raises a doubt about the outcome; and it requires new experiments to prove for sure that the new circumstances have no causal significance. A change in size, position, arrangement, age, disposition of the air or of surrounding bodies - any of these may bring with it the most unexpected consequences. Unless the objects are quite familiar to us, it is much too bold to expect confidently that when a cause has been found to have a certain effect another cause, differing from the earlier one in one of these ways, will have the same effect. The slow and deliberate steps of scientists, here if anywhere, are in contrast with the precipitate march of common men who, hurried along by the smallest similarity, are incapable of pondering or making distinctions.

Which group, Cleanthes, have you just shown yourself to belong to? You are usually cool and philosophical in these matters, but has your usual attitude been preserved in the stride you have taken in likening the universe to houses, ships, furniture, machines, and from their similarity in some respects inferred a similarity in their causes? Thought, design, intelligence, such as we discover in men and other animals, is just one of the springs and principles of the universe, along with heat and cold, attraction and repulsion, and a hundred others that we observe daily. It is an active cause through which (we find) certain particular parts of nature produce alterations in other parts. But can it be proper to argue from parts to the whole? Does not the great disproportion between part and whole bar all comparison and
inference? From observing the growth of a hair, can we learn anything about how men come into being? Would the way a leaf blows - even if we knew this perfectly - teach us anything about how a tree grows?

Anyway, even if we do take the operations of one part of nature on another as our basis for a judgment about the origin of the whole (which is something we should never do), why would be select as our basis such a tiny, weak, limited cause as the reason and design of animals upon this planet seems to be? What special privilege has this little agitation of the brain that we call ‘thought’, that entitles it to serve as the model of the whole universe? It looms large for us because we are always in the presence of it; but sound philosophy ought carefully to guard against this kind of natural illusion.

So far from admitting, continued Philo, that the operations of a part entitle us to draw any conclusion about the origin of the whole, I will not even allow any one part to justify conclusions about another part, if the two are very unlike one another. Is there any reasonable ground to conclude that the inhabitants of other planets have thought, intelligence, reason, or anything similar to these faculties that men have? When nature has operated in such a wide variety of ways on this small planet, can we think that she incessantly copies herself throughout the rest of this immense universe? Also, it seems likely enough that thought occurs only in this narrow corner, and even here its sphere of action is very limited - namely, to affecting the movements of the bodies of some animals. So what can justify taking thought to be the original cause of everything? Such a jump is worse than that of a peasant whose idea of the government of kingdoms is based on how he runs his own household!

But even if we were perfectly sure that thought and reason similar to ours is to be found throughout the whole universe, and even if its activity elsewhere in the universe is vastly greater in scope and more powerful than it appears to be on this planet, still I cannot see that the operations of a world that is fully constituted, arranged and adjusted can properly be extended to a world that is in its embryo state, and is still moving towards that finished constitution and arrangement. By observation we know a certain amount about how a finished animal moves, is nourished, stays alive; but we should be cautious about transferring that knowledge speculatively to the growth of a foetus in the womb, and still more to the formation of an animalcule in the testes of its male parent. [‘animalcule’ = ‘tiny animal’. It was commonly thought that the animal is formed in miniature in the father’s body, the mother’s contribution being merely to provide it with somewhere to
[grow.] Even our limited experience shows us that nature has an infinite number of causes and principles which incessantly reveal themselves as circumstances change. It would be absurdly rash of us to claim to know what new and unknown principles would be at work in such a new and unknown situation as that of the formation of a universe.

A very small part of this great system of the universe, during a very short time, is very imperfectly revealed to us. Do we then pronounce confidently about the origin of the whole?

Admirable conclusion! At this time on this little planet, stone, wood, brick, iron, brass are not ordered or arranged except through human artifice and contrivance; therefore the universe could not originally attain its order and arrangement without something similar to human artifice. But is a part of nature a rule for another part that is very different from it? Is it a rule for the whole? Is a very small part a rule for the universe? Is nature in one situation a certain rule for nature in another situation vastly different from the former? Is nature at work in our considerably developed universe a certain rule for nature at work in starting a universe?

And can you blame me, Cleanthes, if I here imitate the wise caution of Simonides? According to the famous story, Hiero asked him ‘What is God?’, and Simonides asked for a day to think about it, and then two days more; and in that way he continually prolonged his time for thinking about it, without ever producing a definition or description. Could you even blame me if I answered straight off that I did not know what God is, and was aware that this subject lies vastly beyond the reach of my faculties? You might cry ‘Sceptic!’ and ‘Tease!’ as much as you pleased; but having found the imperfections and even contradictions of human reason when it is exercised on so many other subjects that are much more familiar than this one, I would never expect any success from reason’s feeble conjectures concerning a subject that is so elevated and so remote from the sphere of our observation. When two sorts of objects have always been observed to be conjoined together, custom leads me to infer the existence of an object of one sort, wherever I see the existence of an object of the other sort; and I call this an argument from experience. But it is hard to see how this pattern of argument be appropriate in our present case, where the objects we are considering do not fall into sorts, but are single, individual, without parallel or specific resemblance. And will anyone tell me with a straight face that an orderly universe must arise from some thought and artifice like human thought and artifice, because we have experience of it? To make this reasoning secure, we would need to have had experience of
the origins of *worlds*; it is not sufficient, surely, to have seen *ships and cities* arise from human artifice and contrivance.

**PART 5**

But to show you still more inconveniences in your anthropomorphism, continued *Philo*, please look again at your principles. *Like effects prove like causes.* This is the ·basis for every·empirical argument, and you say that it is also the only ·basis for the·theological argument. Now, it is certain that the more similar the observed effects, and the more similar the causes that are inferred, the stronger is the argument. Every move away from similarity, between the effects or between the causes, diminishes the probability and makes the empirical argument less conclusive. You cannot doubt the principle; so you ought not to reject its consequences.

According to the true system of *theism*, all the new discoveries in astronomy, which prove the immense grandeur and magnificence of the works of nature, are further arguments for the existence of a God; according to your hypothesis of empirical *theism* they become objections, by moving the universe still further from all resemblance to the effects of human skill and contrivance. If the argument for genuine theism had force in earlier times, how much more force it must have now, when the bounds of nature are so infinitely enlarged and such a magnificent scene is opened to us? [As evidence of its support in ancient times, Philo quotes (in Latin) from Lucretius and Cicero.] It is still more unreasonable to form our idea of the cause of such an unlimited effect on the basis of our experience of ·the causes of· the narrow products of human design and invention.

The discoveries by microscopes, as they open a new universe in miniature, are arguments ·for theism· according to me, whereas to you they are objections to it. The further we push our researches of this kind, the more we are led to infer that the universal cause of it all is vastly different from mankind, and from anything of which we have empirical knowledge.

And what say you to the discoveries in anatomy, chemistry, botany?...

Those surely are not objections, interrupted *Cleanthes*; they only reveal new instances of skill and contrivance. It is still the image of *mind* reflected on us from innumerable objects. Add, a mind *like the human*,

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said Philo. That's the only kind I know, replied Cleanthes. And the more like the better, insisted Philo. To be sure, said Cleanthes.

Now, Cleanthes, said Philo, pouncing with an air of triumph, note the consequences! First, by this method of reasoning, you give up all claim to infinity in any of the attributes of God. For, as the cause ought to be proportioned to the effect, and the effect - so far as we know - is not infinite, what right have we (on your theory) to ascribe infinity to God? You will still have to say that when we remove him so far from similarity to human creatures, we give in to the most arbitrary hypothesis and at the same time weaken all proofs of his existence.

Secondly, your theory gives you no reason to ascribe perfection to God even in his capacity as a finite being, or to suppose him to be free from every error, mistake, or incoherence in his activities. Consider the many inexplicable difficulties in the works of nature - illnesses, earthquakes, natural calamities of all kinds. If we think we can prove a priori that the world has a perfect creator, all these calamities become unproblematic: we can say that they only seem to us to be difficulties, because we with our limited intellects cannot follow all the infinitely complex details of which they are a part. But according to your line of argument these difficulties are real; indeed they might be emphasized as new instances of the world’s likeness to the products of human skill and contrivance! You must, at least, admit that we with our limited knowledge cannot possible tell whether this system contains any great faults, or deserves any considerable praise, when compared to other possible systems and perhaps even when compared to real ones. If the Aeneid were read to a peasant, could he judge it to absolutely faultless? Could he even give it proper place in a ranking of the products of human wit - he who had never seen any of the others?

Even if this world were a perfect product, we still couldn’t be sure whether all the excellences of the work could justly be ascribed to the workman. When we survey a ship, we may get an exalted idea of the ingenuity of the carpenter who built such a complicated, useful, and beautiful machine. But then we shall be surprised to find that the carpenter is a stupid tradesman who imitated others, and followed a trade which has gradually improved down the centuries, after multiplied trials, mistakes, corrections, deliberations, and controversies. Perhaps our world is like that ship. It may be that many worlds were botched and bungled, throughout an eternity, before our present system was built; much labour lost, many useless trials made, and a slow but continued improvement carried on during infinite ages in the world-making trade. In such subjects as this, who can determine what is true -
who indeed can even guess what is probable - when so many hypotheses can be put forward, and even more can be imagined?

And what shadow of an argument, continued Philo, can you produce, from your hypothesis, to prove that God is one being? A great many men join together to build a house or ship, to found and develop a city, to create a commonwealth; why couldn’t several gods combine in designing and making a world? This would only serve to make divine activities more like human ones. By sharing the work among several gods we can reduce still further the attributes of each one of them; we can get rid of that extensive power and knowledge which we have to suppose the one God to possess (if there is only one) - that extent of power and knowledge which, according to you, serves merely to weaken the argument for God’s existence. And if such foolish, vicious creatures as men can often unite in forming and carrying out one plan, how much could that be done by those gods or semi-gods whom we may suppose to be quite a lot more perfect than we are?

To multiply causes without necessity is indeed contrary to true philosophy; but that principle doesn’t apply to our present case. If your theory had already established that there is one God who had every attribute needed for the production of the universe, then, I admit, it would be needless (though not absurd) to suppose that any other god existed. But while we are still confronting the question:

Are all these attributes united in one thing that has them all, or are they shared out among several independent beings?

What phenomena in nature can we point to as supplying the answer? When we see a body raised in a scale, we are sure that in the opposite scale - even if we cannot see it - there is some counterbalancing weight equal to it; but we can still question whether that weight is a heap of many distinct bodies, or rather one uniform united mass; ·for example, whether it is a heap of stones or a lead weight·. And if the weight needed for the counterbalancing is very much greater than we have ever seen any single body to possess, the former supposition becomes still more probable and natural ·than the latter. As with weights, so with creators·. An intelligent being of such vast power and ability as is necessary to produce the universe - or, to speak in the language of ancient philosophy, so prodigious an animal ·goes beyond any analogy with ourselves, and indeed goes beyond what we can understand.

Furthermore, Cleanthes: men are mortal, and renew their species by generation, and so do all living creatures. The two great sexes of
male and female, says Milton, animate the world. Why shouldn’t this universal and essential feature of our condition also apply to those numerous and limited gods - that I am saying you should argue for? And that brings us back to the ancient tales about the birth of the gods.

Indeed, why not become a perfect anthropomorphite? Why not assert that God is - or that each god is - corporeal, having eyes, a nose, mouth, ears, etc.? Epicurus maintained that no man has ever seen reason except in someone of human shape, and that therefore the gods must have that shape. This inference was deservedly ridiculed by Cicero, but by your standards it is solid and philosophical.

In a word, Cleanthes, someone who follows your hypothesis can perhaps assert or conjecture that,

The universe at some time arose from something like design.

But beyond that he cannot make a case for any further details, and is left to fill in his theology by wildly imagining or guessing the rest. For all he knows, the world is very faulty and imperfect by certain higher standards, which opens the doors to all sorts of ‘theologies’, no one of which he can refute. Here are just three of them. This world was only the first rough attempt of some infant god, who afterwards abandoned it, ashamed of his poor performance; it is the work of some dependent, inferior god, whose superiors hold it up for ridicule; it was produced by some god in his old age and near-senility, and ever since his death the world has continued without further guidance, activated by the first shove he gave to it and the active force that he built into it. You rightly give signs of horror, Demetria, at these strange suppositions; but these - and a thousand more like them are Cleanthes’ suppositions, not mine. As soon as the attributes of God are supposed to be finite, all these suppositions get a foot-hold. Speaking for myself, I cannot see that having such a wild and unsettled a system of theology is in any way preferable to having none at all - that is, being an atheist.

I absolutely disown these suppositions, exclaimed Cleanthes; but they don’t fill me with horror, especially when put forward in the casual way in which you throw them off. On the contrary, they give me pleasure when I see that even when giving your imagination completely free rein, you do not get rid of the hypothesis of design in the universe, but are obliged rely on it at every turn. That concession is what I stick to; and I regard it as a sufficient foundation for religion.
But if there are so many difficulties in the \textit{a posteriori} argument, said Demea, hadn’t we better stay with the simple and sublime \textit{a priori} argument which cuts off all doubt and difficulty with a single blow, by offering to us an infallible knock-down proof? Furthermore, this argument lets us prove the \textit{infinity} of God’s attributes - that he infinitely wise, infinitely good, infinitely powerful, and so on - which, I am afraid, can never be established with certainty in any other manner. For how can an infinite cause be inferred from an effect which is finite, or which may be finite for all we know to the contrary? The unity of God’s nature, also, is very hard - if not absolutely impossible – to infer merely from observing the works of nature; even if it is granted that the plan of the universe is all of a piece, that is not enough to ensure us of God’s unity. Whereas the \textit{a priori} argument . . .

Cleanthes interrupted: You seem to reason, Demea, as if those advantages and conveniences in the abstract \textit{-a priori} argument were full proofs of its soundness. But in my opinion we should first settle \textit{what} argument with all these advantages you choose to insist on; and then we can try to decide what value we ought to put upon it - doing this better by looking at the argument itself than by considering its useful consequences.

The argument that I would insist on, replied Demea, is the common one:- Whatever exists must have a cause or reason for its existence, as it is absolutely impossible for anything to produce itself, or be the cause of its own existence. In working back, therefore, from effects to causes, we must either (1) go on tracing causes to infinity, without any ultimate cause at all, or (2) at last have recourse to some ultimate cause that is necessarily existent - and therefore does not need an external cause-. Supposition (1) is absurd, as I now prove:

In the \textit{-supposed} infinite chain or series of causes and effects, each single effect is made to exist by the power and efficacy of the cause that immediately preceded it; but the whole eternal chain or series, considered as a whole, is not caused by anything; and yet it obviously requires a cause or reason, as much as any particular thing that begins to exist in time. We are entitled to ask why this particular series of causes existed from eternity, and not some other series, or no series at all. If there is no necessarily existent being, all the suppositions we can make about this are equally possible; and there is no more absurdity in nothing’s having
existed from eternity than there is in the series of causes that constitutes the universe. What was it, then, that made something exist rather than nothing, and gave existence to one particular possibility as against any of the others? External causes? We are supposing that there are none. Chance? That is a word without a meaning. Was it Nothing? But that can never produce anything.

So we must adopt supposition (2), and have recourse to a necessarily existent being, who carries the reason of his existence in himself and cannot be supposed not to exist without an express contradiction. So there is such a being; that is, there is a God.

I know that Philo loves raising objections, said Cleanthes, but I shan’t leave it to him to point out the weakness of your metaphysical reasoning. Your argument seems to me so obviously ill-grounded, and even if it succeeded to offer so little help to the cause of true piety and religion, that I shall myself venture to show what is wrong with it.

I start by remarking that there is an evident absurdity in claiming to demonstrate - or to prove by any a priori arguments - any matter of fact.

Nothing is demonstrable unless its contrary implies a contradiction. Nothing that is distinctly conceivable implies a contradiction. Whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent. So there is no being whose non-existence implies a contradiction. So there is no being whose existence is demonstrable.

I offer this argument as entirely decisive, and am willing to rest the whole controversy upon it.

You claim that God is a necessarily existent being; and the friends of your line of argument try to explain this necessity of his existence by saying that if we knew his whole essence or nature, we would perceive it to be as impossible for him not to exist as for twice two not to be four. But obviously this can never happen, while our faculties remain the same as they are now. It will always be possible for us at any time to conceive the nonexistence of something we formerly conceived to exist; the mind can never have to suppose some object to remain always in existence, in the way in which we always have to conceive twice two to be four. So the words ‘necessary existence’ have no meaning - or (the same thing) no meaning that is consistent.
Furthermore, if we do go along with this claimed explanation of necessary existence, why shouldn’t the material universe be the necessarily existent being? We dare not claim to know all the qualities of matter; and for all we can tell matter may have some qualities which, if we knew them, would make matter’s non-existence appear as great a contradiction as twice two’s being five. I have found only one argument trying 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’, Dr Clarke has said, ‘can be conceived to be annihilated; and any form can be conceived to be altered. Such an annihilation or alteration, therefore, is not impossible.’ But it seems very biased not to see that the same argument applies just as well to God, so far as we have any conception of him; and that our mind can at least imagine God to be non-existent or his attributes to be altered. If something is to make his non-existence appear impossible, or his attributes unalterable, it must be some qualities of his that we don’t know and can’t conceive; but then no reason can be given why these qualities may not belong to matter. As they are altogether unknown and inconceivable, they can never be proved incompatible with the nature of matter as we know it.

A further objection: in tracing an eternal series of items, it seems absurd to ask for a general cause or first author of the entire series. How can something that exists from eternity have a cause, since the causal relation implies priority in time and a beginning of existence?

Also, in such a chain or series of items, each part is caused by the part that preceded it, and causes the one that follows. So where is the difficulty? But the whole needs a cause! you say. I answer that the uniting of these parts into a whole, like the uniting of several distinct counties into one kingdom, or several distinct members into one organic body, is performed merely by an arbitrary act of the mind and has no influence on the nature of things. If I showed you the particular causes of each individual in a collection of twenty particles of matter, I would think it very unreasonable if you then asked me what was the cause of the whole twenty. The cause of the whole is sufficiently explained by explaining the cause of the parts.