

Clarke, Samuel (1675-1729) British theologian and philosopher. Widely regarded as the leading metaphysician in Britain after the death of John Locke (1632-1704) (Vailati 1998, p. xxxiv), Clarke's most important apologetic contributions are contained in his Boyle Lectures (delivered in 1704 and 1705). The first of these was published as *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God*. Here the arguments advanced are said to proceed deductively from only "the most incontestable principles of right reason . . . which all atheists pretend to be the foundation of their unbelief" (Vailati 1998, p. 7). The second set of lectures—published under the title *A Discourse Concerning the Unchangeable Obligations of Natural Religion, and the Truth and Certainty of the Christian Revelation*—complete Clarke's program by "proving and establishing the truth and excellency of the whole superstructure of our most holy religion"—that is, Christianity (*Works*, vol. 2, p. 596).

Audience

The *Demonstration* is aimed at one of three kinds of atheists—an atheist being defined as anyone who denies the existence of God or any of his essential attributes. The causes of atheism are threefold. First, there is *ignorance and stupidity*. Some atheists have lived their lives in a manner "very little superior to that of beasts," never having arrived at the use of their natural reason to discover the "plainest and most obvious truths" (Vailati 1998, p. 3). They must be instructed in "the first principles of reason as well as religion" (*ibid.*, p. 4) before there is any hope of their following, let alone profiting from,

Clarke's intricately woven chain of arguments.

The second cause of atheism is *debauchery and corruption*. Atheists in this category have "defaced the reason of their own minds" by leading a "vicious and degenerate life" (*ibid.*). They have enslaved themselves to unreasonable lusts and evil habits, and have "resolved not to harken to any fair reasoning" that would require them to forsake their "beloved vices" (*ibid.*). They are not capable of being reasoned with at all.

Clarke's *Demonstration* is directed at a third group: atheist *pretenders to reason*—those who, making use of the principles of reason and philosophy, pretend that the arguments brought against God's existence and his attributes are stronger than those marshalled in their favor. To hear his case with "patience and lack of prejudice" (Vailati 1998, p. 4), says Clarke, they must first concede that it is very desirable "for the great benefit and happiness of men" (*ibid.*) that the world is governed by an intelligent, just, and good God, as opposed to random chance or fatalistic necessity. More than that, these pretenders must eagerly desire not only "that their present position is in error," but also that "the contrary may be demonstrated to them to be true" (*ibid.*, p. 6). Only then can they legitimately claim to have examined his arguments with "all seriousness, attention, and impartiality" (*ibid.*).

The *Demonstration*

Clarke's proof for God's existence has been described as "the most complete, forceful, and cogent presentation of the Cosmological Argument we possess" (Rowe 1998, p. 8). According to the eminent logician, George Boole (1815-1864), the arguments mounted in the

Demonstration “exhibit a subtlety of apprehension and a force of reasoning which have seldom been equalled, never perhaps surpassed” (ibid.). From the fact that *Something now exists*, Clarke argues, it follows that *Something has always existed*. For if not, the things that now exist have been produced out of nothing, that is, without a cause. But this runs afoul of the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR), which states that “Whatever exists, has a cause, a reason, a ground of its existence . . . either in the necessity of its own nature [an internal cause] . . . or in the will of some other being [an external cause]” (Vailati 1998, p. 8). If PSR is true, everything has a cause, in which case it is contradictory to assert that something has been produced (that is, caused) out of nothing (that is, without a cause).

Clarke next presents two possibilities to account for something’s always having existed: (1) there has always been an independent being, the original cause of everything there is or has been; or (2) there is no original cause, but there has been an endless series of dependent beings (ESDB) produced one from another in succession. According to Clarke, however, (2) is contradictory. For suppose there has been an ESDB. By PSR, it must have an internal cause or an external cause. But it cannot have an internal cause. For none of its parts exists by a necessity of its own nature; each depends on a prior cause in the series. Neither can it have an external cause, since by hypothesis—that is, on (2)—such a cause doesn’t exist. Hence, this hypothetical ESDB has no cause at all, which isn’t possible given PSR.

It follows that there has existed from eternity an independent supreme cause of all things. This implies that “an eternal duration is now actually past” (ibid., p. 8). Holding as he does to a

Newtonian conception of absolute time, according to which time is unbounded in both ‘directions’, and would exist in the absence of material things, Clarke deems the objections raised against the idea of something’s having existed eternally to be “vain and of no force” (ibid., p. 9).

To be sure, we cannot comprehend how an eternity is past. Yet to deny this plain truth is a “real and express contradiction” (ibid., p. 8); for it implies that the things that now exist have been produced out of nothing. Moreover, the alleged metaphysical absurdities attending the real existence of an actual infinite—for example, that any one of its parts is equal to the whole—all falsely assume that infinities have finite parts that can be numbered, “when they have no number at all” (ibid., p. 9). You might as well ask whether two infinite lines, drawn from points at different distances, are of equal length or not. The question is misconceived; for it assumes that “they end together, when neither of them have any end at all” (ibid., p. 10).

Now given that there is an independent, eternal cause of all dependent beings, we can deduce a number of its essential attributes. First, if this being is independent, it cannot have an external cause. So by PSR, it must be *self-existent*; it must exist “by an absolute [non-relative] necessity originally in the nature of the thing itself” (ibid., p. 12). Its non-existence will therefore be logically impossible.

Contra Spinoza (1632-1677), then, the material world cannot possibly be the necessarily existing being. For it is no contradiction to suppose that matter does not exist. Furthermore, if matter is such that it could be absent from one place (as the existence of vacuums in nature shows), then it is not impossible “that matter should be absent from any

other place, or from every place” (ibid., p. 20).

Second, this self-existent being must be *omnipresent*, since the existence of an absolutely necessary being isn’t relative to or dependent upon particular times or places. If it exists anywhere, it will exist everywhere.

Third, there can be *only one* self-existent being. For if there were two such beings, being independent, we could imagine each of them existing apart from the other; in which case neither would be necessary.

Fourth, this self-existent being must be *intelligent*. For we find in men the power of thought, intelligence, and consciousness. This power could not have been transmitted via an endless series of (conscious) dependent beings. Nor could it have emerged out of unthinking matter, since this would involve something’s coming from nothing, which is impossible. It must therefore derive from an intelligent supreme cause.

Fifth, this self-existent being must possess *liberty* and *choice*. If it were a necessary agent whose actions were all equally necessary, then nothing in the universe could have been different from the way it is. This is evidently false, as there could have been more or fewer planets or stars of different sizes and celestial motions.

Sixth, this self-existent being must be *infinitely powerful* because as the sole supreme cause of all things, not only would everything depend on him for its being, but the powers and faculties of all things would derive from him and thus be wholly subject to him. He would have “absolute power to do everything he pleases with the most perfect ease” (ibid., p. 54).

Seventh, the self-existent being must be *infinitely wise*. Since he is

everywhere present, he knows everything: the inmost natures of all things, and the innermost thoughts of all men. Further, since they derive from him, he knows what the faculties and powers of all things could produce—individually and collectively. Thus he knows all the possible combinations of things and circumstances, and which of these would bring about what is best and fittest. Still further, since he is all-powerful, he cannot be prevented by force or error from effecting what is wisest and best overall. So he is infinitely wise.

Finally, the self-existent being must be infinitely *good, just, and truthful*, since any imperfection in these attributes could only be due to weaknesses in understanding, power, or will. But such defects are impossible in an all-sufficient, infinitely wise and powerful being.

The *Discourse*

If Clarke’s apologetic had ended there, he would have at best established deism. In the *Discourse*, however, he proceeds to build “upon this foundation of the certainty of the being and attributes of God” (*Works*, vol. 2, p. 596) to “prove in like manner by one direct and continued thread of arguing” (ibid., p. 608) that there is an eternal, moral law—the “Law of Nature” (ibid., p. 624), as he calls it—that places rational creatures under absolutely unalterable obligations. And then, given its fall into sin and corruption, “there was plainly wanting a divine revelation to recover mankind out of their universally degenerate state” (ibid., p. 598).

As far as moral truths go, these are no less necessary than mathematical truths. For example, it is obvious that we human beings must treat each other as

we expect to be treated. He who denies this self-evident truth is said to be guilty of “the very same unreasonableness and contradiction” (ibid., p. 613) as the one who denies that twice two is four. Our moral duties don’t derive from human invention, state authority, or public utility. Nor do they depend directly on the arbitrary will of God. Rather, they obtain antecedent to all of these, being rooted in the “nature and reason of things” (ibid., p. 625).

More exactly, our obligations are founded on the necessary and eternal differences between things: between good and evil, Creator and creatures, governors and subjects, citizens and foreigners. Some things are absolutely fitting and good—for example, that we honor and esteem God, keep our promises, and take care of our children. Other things—robbery, taking one’s own life, and worshipping heathen idols—are unfitting and absolutely evil.

If, following Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), we deny that there is a natural and absolute difference between good and evil in the nature of things antecedent to human compacts and civil conventions, then the Law of Nature derives solely from “the authority of men, and could be changed by it” (ibid., p. 626). But in that case, “all the commands of the cruelest and most barbarous tyrants in the world would be as just and equitable as the wisest laws that ever were made” (ibid.). Nothing could be more absurd.

Similarly, then, for God’s commands: they do not make a thing right or good. It is the nature of things and the different relations in which they stand that does that. It is good, for example, for children to honor their parents. However, God’s command to “Honor your father and mother” (Exodus 20:12) doesn’t *make* that right. Things are quite

the reverse. God issues this command because it *is* right—antecedently. Nevertheless, that there *are* things, whose natures and relations define our moral obligations, “depends entirely on the arbitrary will and good pleasure of God” (ibid., p. 640). Hence, in creating the world, he also manifests it to be his will that we are under those obligations.

Three things follow. First, there must be rewards and punishments attending our obeying and disobeying these eternal rules of good and evil. If God is necessarily just and good, he will be pleased with and approve those who obey the Law of Nature, and displeased with and condemn those who do not. But then if virtue goes unrewarded and vice unpunished, God’s laws will be “trampled upon and despised” (ibid., p. 642), and there will be no “suitable difference in his dealings” (ibid., p. 641) with those who obey him and those who do not. But this is an outright “denial of his moral attributes” (ibid., p. 642).

Second, since in this life there is no balancing of the scales of justice, and since it is impossible that the plan of an infinitely just and good God be that there be one generation of men after another with no reckoning, it is certain that there is a future life to come in which virtue is rewarded and wickedness punished. If this be not the case, “there is no justice, no goodness, no order, no reason, nor any thing upon which any argument in moral matters can be founded, left in the world” (ibid., p. 647).

Third, while all of these things are “in general deducible, even demonstrably, by a chain of clear and undeniable reasoning” (ibid., p. 652), it by no means follows that we are in a position to make the deductions. For there are four significant impediments to our grasping our unalterable moral obligations before

God, and the certainty of a future state of rewards and punishments awaiting us. (i) We have let our reason “sleep” (ibid., p. 653) by minding only what our sense can perceive. (ii) We have perverted reason by “many vain and foolish notions” inherited from “a careless and evil education” (ibid.). (iii) We have opposed “the motions of reason” by yielding to the “strength of passions and appetites” (ibid., p. 654). And finally, (iv) We have blinded reason by “superstitious opinions, vicious habits, and debauched practices” (ibid.).

Thus, there is particular need for weighty and authoritative teaching to lay bare our moral duties, and instruct us on how “the reconciliation of sinners to an offended God” (ibid., p. 686) is to be effected. While not deducible from bare reason, it is certainly agreeable to reason to believe that God would reveal his will to us, that he “would not be appeased, nor pardon sin without some punishment and satisfaction,” and that he would “appoint some sacrifice or expiation for sin” (ibid., p. 685) to “put away the guilt of our own sins . . . [even] upon such difficult terms as the death of his son” (ibid., p. 687).

According to Clarke, that Christian revelation is divinely authoritative is “confirmed and ascertained” (ibid., p. 702) as follows. First, Jesus fulfills all of the prophecies concerning the promised Messiah “to the greatest possible exactness” (ibid., p. 703)—for example, that he would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2), that he would open the eyes of the blind and unstop the ears of the deaf (Isaiah 35:5), that he would be betrayed for thirty pieces of silver (Zechariah 11:12), that his hands and feet would be pierced (Psalm 22:16), that the soldiers would cast lots for his garments (Psalm 22:18), and that he

would rise without seeing corruption (Psalm 16:10).

Secondly, there are Jesus’s own predictions concerning things to come. For instance, he foretold his own death and its circumstances (Matthew 16:21), that the chief priest and scribes would deliver him to the Gentiles to be mocked, flogged, and crucified (Matthew 20:18-19), that Judas Iscariot would betray him (Matthew 26:23), that Peter would deny him three times (Mark 14:30), and that all his disciples would scatter (Matthew 26:31).

Nonetheless, as striking as these prophetic fulfillments may be, they do not rise to “the nature of a direct or positive proof” (ibid., p. 715) that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. Rather, they are “nothing but such a congruity of marks or characters as removes all objections by which an adversary would endeavour to prove that it was not he” (ibid.). The truth and certainty of Christianity has a different foundation altogether, namely, the “many infallible signs and miracles which the author of it worked publicly as the evidence of his divine commission” (ibid., p. 599). As Clarke sees things, this is the way “by which Jesus was proved to be the Christ” (ibid., p. 715). And while we are not ourselves eyewitnesses, still the resurrection of Christ and his mighty miracles are “as clearly proved to us, as ‘tis possible for any matter of fact at that distance of time to be” (ibid., p. 730). We venture our secular affairs on far less.

In the end, God doesn’t ask us to believe “without very reasonable and sufficient proof” (ibid., p. 729). He has provided all the evidence the nature of the subject permits, that it was reasonable for him to grant, or that men should expect. Those who reject the truth of the Christian religion disbelieve

not because of lack of evidence, but because willful interests, passions, and lusts “pervert their judgment, and blind their understanding” (ibid., p. 732). In truth, they would not be moved “by any other evidence whatsoever; no, not though one should rise on purpose from the dead to endeavour to convince them” (ibid., p. 729).

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