

“Entirely decisive”? Hume and the Ontological Argument

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What was Hume’s view of the Ontological Argument? It turns out that this is not an especially easy question to answer, for reasons exegetical and theoretical. Casual readers may correctly surmise that Hume would not hold the Ontological Argument in high esteem, since this view was common among the British Empiricists, Berkeley famously remarking that it is “absurd to argue the existence of God from his idea. We have no idea of God. ‘Tis impossible!”¹ However, careful scrutiny of Hume’s work reveals that he nowhere *explicitly* addresses the Ontological Argument, and so the precise content of his critique has thus far remained obscured. In this paper, I attempt some clarification.

The paper has three parts. In part one, it is my primary concern to make the case for the interpretative claim that—appearances to the contrary notwithstanding—Hume does address the Ontological Argument, and takes himself to possess a compelling argument against it. I defend the view that Cleanthes’ argument in the infamously cryptic Dialogue IX forms the locus of Hume’s response to the Ontological Argument. Moreover, if we accept this interpretation of Dialogue IX, we render Cleanthes’ argument more intelligible and less susceptible to certain obvious criticisms. In part two, my purpose is to analyze the content of Cleanthes’ argument, pressing on it to reveal where it requires support. I argue that Cleanthes’ position may be cogently underwritten by certain passages in the *Treatise*, *Abstract* and *Enquiry*, which together comprise a systematic and unified reply to the Ontological Argument. Finally, in part three, I critically evaluate Hume’s argument, especially its efficacy in vanquishing the Ontological Argument. I attend closely to one of the most influential reactions to Dialogue IX, the sharply disapproving critique from David Stove. Stove was moved to conclude that Cleanthes’ “criticisms are all extremely defective, and that they even include an inconsistency.”² I evaluate Stove’s complaints, and I argue that Hume’s claims are not quite so defective at all. In particular, I argue that we can make sense of *a matter of fact and existence* in a way which avoids Stove’s objections, and which makes Hume’s reply to the Ontological Argument quite attractive. My argument will

¹ George Berkeley, “Commonplace Book,” in *The Works of George Berkeley*, ed. Alexander Campbell Fraser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901), 48.

² D. C. Stove, “Part IX of Hume’s Dialogues,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 28, no. 113 (1978).

depend on an analysis of Hume's notions of existence, conceivability, and a treatment of his 'Fork' as an inferential barrier.

Part 1: The proposed interpretation

The Ontological Argument

To be clear, by the *Ontological Argument*, I refer to the traditional accounts as produced by Anselm and Descartes. I believe, as many scholars do, that Descartes and Anselm's arguments share several significant features and so may be thought of as alike in kind. There are certain interesting and subtle differences, however, and I have reason to prefer Descartes' more mature formulation, to which, I believe, Hume most closely attends (These passages, along with Demea's argument and Cleanthes' reply, are included in full in the appendix to this paper.) The most salient feature of an Ontological Argument is its suggestion that from the *concept* of God as the bearer of all perfections, it may be deduced that God exists, and indeed could not fail to exist. Anselm commences with the claim that he very well understands the concept of God ("something than which nothing greater can be conceived is in the understanding"). Then, employing *a priori* reasoning from the notion of 'greatness,' and the concept of God as the greatest conceivable being, Anselm concludes that "without doubt something than which a greater cannot be conceived exists, both in the understanding and in reality." Similarly, Descartes begins with the *concept* of the deity: "I find the idea of him, that is, of a supremely perfect being, in myself."³ Attending to this idea, Descartes notes that pain of contradiction prevents him from thinking of this being as not existing—this would be "to think of the supremely perfect being without the supreme perfection."⁴ Descartes concludes "that existence is inseparable from God, and therefore that he exists in reality."⁵

My interest in the Ontological Argument here is admittedly expedient. I am not concerned to defend it or deny it, and neither do I offer much by way of useful scholarship on the work of its historical proponents. Rather, I deploy it

³ René Descartes, "Meditations on First Philosophy," in *Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies*, ed. Michael Moriarty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 65.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 67.

as a tool for exposing Hume's views on existence and necessity and clarifying the role of the somewhat unwieldy Dialogue IX.

Demea's argument

Part IX of Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* is exceedingly peculiar. As Sessions observes, "Part 9 is the shortest in the *Dialogues*, its discussion of *a priori* arguments seems oddly discordant with the other conversations, its insertion seems poorly motivated, and the quality of argument is curiously weak."⁶ Indeed, in that dialogue Demea presents the only *a priori* theistic argument in the entire text. Perhaps most unusually, for the first time in the *Dialogues*, Cleanthes usurps Philo's traditional role, presenting the dominant reply to Demea, with Philo merely echoing these criticisms. What is more, there is reason to believe that neither Cleanthes' reply nor Philo's echoes squarely answer Demea's argument. What little scholarship has been produced on Part IX has often simply derided the inadequacies and confusions of Hume's work here. I hope to make some interpretive headway in this "very strange—if not thoroughly comic"⁷—episode in Hume's corpus. Let us first attend to the argument of Demea.

Plainly, the arguments of Anselm and Descartes are alike in certain important respects, and so both may lay claim to being Ontological Arguments. *Not so in Demea's case.* Demea claims that the argument he will defend is "the common one,"⁸ namely "that simple and sublime argument *a priori*."⁹ From this declaration, one may expect Demea to present an Ontological Argument, but one would be disappointed. Contemporary readers will be especially disappointed, since Demea proceeds to offer an argument which by contemporary standards is wholly uncommon, is not simple but rather complicated, is not obviously *a priori* at all, containing many *a posteriori* elements, and is altogether very far from sublime. However, a little historical and terminological clarification *mostly* dissolves these concerns. There is general (though not exhaustive) consensus that Demea's argument is really a

⁶ William Lad Sessions, *Reading Hume's Dialogues : A Veneration for True Religion*, Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 136-37.

⁷ Gene Fendt, "Number, Form, Content: Hume's Dialogues, Number Nine," *Philosophy* 84, no. 3 (2009): 394.

⁸ David Hume, "Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion," in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion and Other Writings*, ed. Dorothy Coleman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), Pt. IX, 3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Pt. IX, 1.

formulation of the then-popular¹⁰ Cosmological Argument so devised by Clarke in his *Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God*.¹¹

In contrast to the traditional Ontological Argument, the argument Demea starts to present—“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”¹²—reads at first quite naturally as one of the *a posteriori* theistic arguments for the necessity of a first cause. However, by Hume’s and Clarke’s lights, this argument may properly be called *a priori* since for them the *a priori* is that which is prior to experience, with some pre-Kantian modifications. Buckle notes that “Hume’s use of the term reflects the Aristotelian conception of experience as the fruit of sensations and memories over time.”¹³ Given this understanding, the principle of sufficient reason (“Whatever exists must have a cause or reason of its existence”¹⁴) will be considered an *a priori* premise; so, those arguments devised in accordance with the principle are accordingly *a priori* arguments.

Demea’s argument, in the first part, proceeds in similar fashion to Aquinas’ Second Way, which was certainly influential in Clarke’s formulation.¹⁵ From the observation of extant events and the principle of sufficient reason, it is deduced that either we admit an infinite regress of (contingent or dependent)

¹⁰ Cf. Russell: “Clarke’s statement of the argument *a priori* enjoyed considerable prestige and influence during the first half of the eighteenth century. During this period, a number of theologians and philosophers revised and defended his demonstrative strategy” (Paul Russell, *The Riddle of Hume’s Treatise: Skepticism, Naturalism, and Irreligion* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 118.).

¹¹ Samuel Clarke, “A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God,” in *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God and Other Writings*, ed. Ezio Vailati (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

¹² Hume, “Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion,” Pt. IX, 3.

¹³ Steven Buckle in David Hume, “An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding,” in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding and Other Writings*, ed. Stephen Buckle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 30.

¹⁴ Hume, “Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion,” Pt. IX, 3.

¹⁵ And, like Aquinas’ Second Way, the first part of Demea’s argument suffers from similar objections: for example, even if it establishes the existence of a necessary being, it fails to establish that this being has all the qualities of the classical deity of monotheism. This sort of objection is plainly what Cleanthes has in mind when he asks, “why may not the material universe be the necessarily existent being, according to this pretended explication of necessity?” (ibid., Pt. IX, 7.).

causes, or we recognize some “ultimate cause, that is *necessarily* existent.”¹⁶ However, Demea does not dissolve the dilemma as Aquinas did. Instead of dismissing the infinite regress out of hand and affirming the existence of a necessary first cause, Demea offers a separate line of argument to rule in God’s favor. Shifting moods, Demea asks “philosophy’s central, and most perplexing, question,”¹⁷ namely, “[w]hat was it then, which determined something to exist rather than nothing, and bestowed being on a particular possibility, exclusive of the rest?”¹⁸ It could not be *chance*, and it could not be *nothing*, so *God* is the only candidate to explain that the world exists with the character it has.¹⁹ It is only at this moment, the statement of his conclusion, that it may seem interpretatively available that Demea is advancing a kind of Ontological Argument: Demea concludes that “[w]e 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.”²⁰ However, Demea doesn’t have the Ontological Argument in mind at all. Demea’s claim—that God is a “necessarily existent being who carries the REASON of his existence in himself”—is not a statement about the *concept* or *essence* of God (as in the Ontological Argument), but rather a statement that God may be his own ‘sufficient reason’ and so could anchor the “succession of causes” (as in the Cosmological Argument).

The foregoing analysis, however brief, reveals clearly enough the differences between Demea’s argument and the Ontological Arguments of Anselm or Descartes. This leads Stewart, in his influential paper, to conclude that “the ontological argument, as such, is never considered by Hume.”²¹ Indeed, Clarke himself thought that the traditional Ontological Argument was unsuccessful,

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Pt. IX, 3., emphasis in the original.

¹⁷ Bede Rundle, *Why There Is Something Rather Than Nothing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), vii.

¹⁸ Hume, "Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion," Pt. IX, 3.

¹⁹ Fendt (Fendt, "Number, Form, Content: Hume's Dialogues, Number Nine," 401.) suggests that this move recalls Aquinas’ Third Way, “possible being needs unconditionally actual being.”

²⁰ Hume, "Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion," Pt. IX, 3., capital letters in the original.

²¹ M.A. Stewart, "Hume and the 'Metaphysical Argument a Priori'," in *Philosophy, Its History and Historiography*, ed. A.J. Holland (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1985), 245.

and he offered this Cosmological variant as an alternative.²² James Dye similarly states outright that “Demea’s a priori proof is not a version of the ontological argument, which begins with the concept of a necessarily existent being and proceeds to deduce the actual existence of that being. Demea’s argument instead concludes with a necessarily existent being because it seems that such a being is required to provide a complete causal explanation of particular existences.”²³ Campbell’s critique likewise proceeds on the assumption that it is Clarke’s Cosmological Argument which Demea has in mind.²⁴ Perhaps most pertinently, in Dialogue IX Hume credits Clarke directly with one premise in Demea’s argument.²⁵

So, there is considerable evidence that Demea’s argument is Clarke’s, and not a version of the Ontological Argument. However, not all scholars share this opinion. Disputes about this matter come in two varieties: some suggest that Demea’s argument is not Clarke’s because it does not do justice to Clarke’s own formulation,²⁶ and others, notably Kemp Smith,²⁷ believe that Demea’s is Clarke’s argument, but that the argument in question is a hybrid of the Cosmological and the Ontological Argument.²⁸ However, I tend to agree with the majority interpretation here, that Demea’s argument is intended to be Clarke’s metaphysical argument (whatever its misunderstandings of the original), and that any Ontological elements are quite invisible in Demea’s presentation. My view is shared by Williford, who notes that “Demea does not

²² Khamara (Edward J. Khamara, "Hume Versus Clarke on the Cosmological Argument," *Philosophical Quarterly* 42, no. 166 (1992): 34.) affirms this reading: "Clarke thought of his own version of the cosmological argument as supplanting the ontological argument, which he did not accept; and in calling it 'the argument a priori' he conveyed his belief that it succeeded where the ontological argument failed."

²³ James Dye, "A Word on Behalf of Demea," *Hume Studies* 15, no. 1 (1989): 125.

²⁴ J.K. Campbell, "Hume's Refutation of the Cosmological Argument," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 40, no. 3 (1996).

²⁵ Hume, "Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion," Pt. IX, 7.

²⁶ For example, according to Khamara, "Hume's failure to put his finger on the argument's weak spots does not stem from any fundamental defect in his own central doctrines, but rather from his inadvertent misrepresentation of the argument, as propounded by Clarke, and his failure to appreciate the fact that Clarke's own views on causality and the causal principle were very different from his" (Khamara, "Hume Versus Clarke on the Cosmological Argument," 35.).

²⁷ Norman Kemp Smith, "Appendix," in *Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Norman Kemp Smith (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1947), 115.

²⁸ Cf. Sessions, *Reading Hume's Dialogues : A Veneration for True Religion*, 137.

start with the concept of an ontologically perfect or necessary being and deduce therefrom its actuality. Rather, Demea starts with a version of the causal maxim and the existence of a causal chain and eventually *arrives* at the conclusion that the ultimate cause is a (logically) necessarily existing being.”²⁹ The similarities between Demea’s argument and the Ontological Argument are too slender to bear much consideration, and I therefore do not think that we have much to learn about Hume’s answer to the Ontological Argument through Demea’s argument. My claim, instead, is that it is in Cleanthes’ *response*, and Hume’s work which underpins it, that the connection to the Ontological Argument is germane. More precisely, I suggest that Cleanthes’ objection in *DNR* Part IX is most fruitfully interpreted to aim at the Ontological Argument, rather than at Demea’s Cosmological thesis.

Cleanthes’ argument

Cleanthes’ reply, which I take to be the core of Hume’s response to the Ontological Argument, proceeds as follows.

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.³⁰

That Cleanthes’ objection here is sufficiently general that it *has implications* for the Ontological Argument may be established quite easily. Cleanthes’ claim—“there is no being, whose existence is demonstrable”—would, if correct, defeat the Ontological Argument. As Barnes notes, in Dialogue IX “[Hume] magisterially disposes of all *a priori* arguments for the existence of God (*or of anything else*).”³¹ But this weaker claim is common cause even with those like Stewart who insist that Hume did not consider the Ontological Argument. The more interesting claim I wish to consider is that *Hume himself* was specifically interested in the Ontological Argument, and that Cleanthes’ argument may be

²⁹ Kenneth Williford, "Demea's *a priori* Theistic Proof," *Hume Studies* 34, no. 1 (2003): 103. See also Stewart, "Hume and the 'Metaphysical Argument *a priori*,'" 243-44.

³⁰ Hume, "Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion," Pt. IX, 5.

³¹ Jonathan Barnes, *The Ontological Argument*, New Studies in the Philosophy of Religion (London: Macmillan, 1972), 32. Emphasis mine.

taken to represent his considered view of the matter. In support of this claim, the textual evidence I adduce shows Hume to use language which is quite inexplicable if directed at Demea, but perfectly intelligible if directed at the Ontological Argument.

Close analysis of the core of Descartes' Fifth Meditation and Cleanthes' objection in Dialogue IX reveal an uncanny symmetry, the former's key claims being the express denial of the latter's (and, obviously, vice versa). This may be aptly illustrated as follows.

<i>Cleanthes</i>	<i>Descartes</i>
"Whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent."	"I cannot think of God except as existing." ³²
"There is no being, therefore, whose non-existence implies a contradiction."	"The thought of a God (that is, a supremely perfect being) who lacks existence (that is, who lacks a certain perfection) is no less contradictory than the thought of a mountain without a valley." ³³
"Consequently there is no being, whose existence is demonstrable."	"I have used the idea of God that we have to demonstrate his existence" ³⁴

First let us note that Demea's Argument quite clearly *could not* be formulated so as to reveal this depth of call-response symmetry. Which claim of Demea's could take the place of any of Descartes' above, standing in similarly tight opposition to Cleanthes' reply? Indeed, the connection between Descartes' Ontological Argument and Cleanthes' objection is made all the more palpable when we consider Cleanthes' comments after his central argument. He writes:

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 nonexistence of what we formerly conceived to exist; nor can the mind ever lie under a necessity of supposing

³² Descartes, "Meditations on First Philosophy," 67.

³³ Ibid., 66.

³⁴ Descartes, "The Objections and Replies," 188.

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.³⁵

It is quite implausible to read this passage as a response to Demea. Unlike Descartes', Demea's argument makes no mention of *essence*, of *mathematical demonstration*, or of the *conceivability* of the necessary existent. Cleanthes states that *his opponent* claims 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 Demea advances no such argument! If taken as a response to Demea, then, Cleanthes' argument appears to be a flagrant non-sequitur. At best, Cleanthes addresses Demea's conclusion but ignores his premises. However—and I reiterate my thesis—a cursory examination of Descartes' Ontological Argument makes Cleanthes' comments both germane and incisive, since Descartes *does* advance such an argument, and does so *in the precise terms* to which Cleanthes' reply is apt. Descartes writes that "I clearly and distinctly understand that eternal existence belongs to his nature—just as clearly and distinctly as I understand that the properties I can demonstrate of some shape or number belong in fact to the nature of that shape or number." Coupling the notions of essence and existence with a mathematical analogy—just as Cleanthes describes his opponent to do—Descartes writes that "existence can no more be separated from the essence of God than we can separate from the essence of a triangle that the sum of its three angles adds up to two right angles."³⁶ Finally, where Cleanthes writes that "It will still be possible for us, at any time, to conceive the nonexistence of what we formerly conceived to exist," this is most easily taken as a reply not to anything Demea has said, but to Descartes' claim that "granted that one exists now, I plainly see that it is necessary both that he should have existed for all eternity up to now, and that he will continue to exist for an eternity in the future."³⁷

Hume's spokesman

The foregoing shows that Cleanthes' objection is very plausibly understood to fire at Descartes' Ontological Argument. It remains to be shown, however, that Cleanthes' objection represents *Hume's* settled view; it is this project I

³⁵ Hume, "Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion," Pt. IX, 6.

³⁶ Descartes, "Meditations on First Philosophy," 66.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 68.

undertake now.³⁸ Before I state the evidence for my view, it should be noted that this claim is also somewhat controversial.³⁹ Kemp Smith, in his introduction to the text, offered a persuasive account according to which Philo alone speaks for Hume in the Dialogues.⁴⁰ Parent concurs with Kemp Smith's general finding, and offers a very useful rubric by which we may evaluate the claim that a character is Hume's mouthpiece:

Philo is indeed Hume's spokesman. To [show that this is true] I must show that Hume would definitely or likely accept all of the basic ideas, principles, and arguments explicitly advanced or implicitly endorsed by Philo, while he would likely or definitely disclaim at least one of Cleanthes' beliefs and at least one of Demea's... Moreover, in claiming that Hume would or would not accept a certain thesis put forth in the Dialogues we must refer solely to the principles and arguments he defends in other works.⁴¹

I fully endorse these *criteria*: if any character in the *Dialogues* should satisfy them then he is almost certainly Hume's spokesman. Unlike Parent and Kemp Smith, however, I believe that the evidence points us in a different direction in Dialogue IX: We should correctly take Cleanthes to speak for Hume here.

My claim is surprisingly easy to defend, given its restriction to the altogether unusual Dialogue IX. In most of the *Dialogues*, Parent and Kemp Smith may well be correct: it is Philo rather than Cleanthes who most obviously speaks for Hume, Philo's views squaring better with Hume's than Cleanthes' views do. However, in restricting my claim to Dialogue IX, the requirement to defend Cleanthes *over* Philo is thankfully obviated. In Dialogue IX, for the first time,

³⁸ Williford (Williford, "Demea's a Priori Theistic Proof," 103.) *assumes* that Cleanthes speaks for Hume, although in a footnote cites similar textual evidence to mine here.

³⁹ Stove (Stove, "Part Ix of Hume's Dialogues," 300.) evidently thought that this matter was really *uncontroversial*: "It is acknowledged by all students of the Dialogues that, in making these criticisms, both Cleanthes and Philo speak for Hume himself." Stove's strong remark may be explained in part by the fact that some of his disputants' writings postdate his suggestion here.

⁴⁰ Kemp Smith (Kemp Smith, "Introduction," 59.) writes that "'I shall contend that Philo, from start to finish, represents Hume; and that Cleanthes can be regarded as Hume's mouthpiece only in those passages in which he is explicitly agreeing with Philo, or in those other passages in which, while refuting Demea, he is also being used to prepare the way for one or other of Philo's independent conclusions.'" I do not believe Cleanthes claim in Dialogue IX satisfies even the lattermost condition.

⁴¹ William A. Parent, "An Interpretation of Hume's 'Dialogues'," *The Review of Metaphysics* 30, no. 1 (1976): 96.

Cleanthes usurps Philo's traditional role, presenting the dominant reply to Demea, with Philo merely echoing these criticisms: "I will 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."⁴² Philo accordingly concedes that "the reasonings, which you have urged, *Cleanthes*, may well excuse me, said *Philo*, from starting any farther difficulties."⁴³ In these passages of Dialogue IX, there is thus no *contest* for Hume's authority: if anyone speaks for Hume there, Cleanthes does.

Cleanthes' disruption is most interesting because he does not carry the voice of some impetuous interrupter, but of *Hume himself*. Yes; my claim very well satisfies the criteria that "Hume would definitely or likely accept all of the basic ideas, principles, and arguments explicitly advanced or implicitly endorsed by Cleanthes" and this may be shown by reference "solely to the principles and arguments he defends in other works."⁴⁴ In fact, Hume, *in propria persona*, advances Cleanthes' argument almost verbatim in the *Enquiry* and the *Abstract*.⁴⁵ The relevant passages of these texts speak for themselves.

ENQUIRY: "The contrary of every matter of fact is still possible; because it can never imply a contradiction, and is conceived by the mind with the same facility and distinctness, as if ever so conformable to reality. *That the sun will not rise tomorrow* is no less intelligible a proposition, and implies no more contradiction than the affirmation, *that it will rise*. We should in vain, therefore, attempt to demonstrate its falsehood. Were it demonstratively false, it would imply a contradiction, and could never be distinctly conceived by the mind."⁴⁶

ABSTRACT: "When a demonstration convinces me of any proposition, it not only makes me conceive the proposition, but also makes me sensible, that 'tis impossible to conceive any thing contrary. What is demonstratively false implies a contradiction; and what implies a contradiction cannot be

⁴² Hume, "Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion," Pt. IX, 4.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, Pt. IX, 10.

⁴⁴ Parent, "An Interpretation of Hume's 'Dialogues'," 96.

⁴⁵ That Hume includes this section in the *Abstract* is most telling, since we may surmise then that he thought this matter to be salient to his overall project in the *Treatise*.

⁴⁶ Hume, "An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding," 4.2.

conceived. But with regard to any matter of fact, however strong the proof may be from experience, I can always conceive the contrary”⁴⁷

These familiar passages suffice to show that Cleanthes’ speaks for Hume here. Parent and Kemp Smith could, I suppose, sustain their opinion that Philo is Hume’s mouthpiece, since they could claim that Philo’s views are always identical with Hume’s views—it just so happens that Cleanthes *articulates* Philo’s views here. Indeed, since identity is transitive, there need be no serious quarrel between my view and Kemp Smith’s: in Dialogue IX, if Hume’s view is Cleanthes’ view, and Cleanthes view is Philo’s view, then Hume’s view is Philo’s view. So Kemp Smith’s general understanding about the identity of Hume in the Dialogues may stand. However, he must relinquish the claim that Philo is Hume’s *unique* mouthpiece, or that Cleanthes speaks only in service of Philo’s independent conclusions. Anyone who claims that Hume has *only one* mouthpiece in the Dialogues owes us a good explanation why, in Dialogue IX, Cleanthes may disrupt the order of proceedings so boldly.

I have proposed that Hume does address the Ontological Argument, and that his settled view is articulated in the mouth of Cleanthes in Dialogue IX. There is, however, an apparently significant impediment to imputing the proposed view to Hume, specifically, a remark in the *Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh*. Hume had hoped to secure the chair of moral philosophy at Edinburgh University, but the university’s principal, William Wishart, produced a pamphlet detailing a host of ‘heresies’ he thought were contained in or implied by Hume’s *Treatise*. Of particular interest here, Hume is charged with maintaining “principles leading to downright atheism, by denying the doctrine of causes and effects, where he maintains, that the necessity of a cause to every beginning of existence is not founded on any arguments demonstrative or intuitive.”⁴⁸ In answering this charge, the following apology is made for Hume:

how is this a principle that leads to atheism? It would be no difficult matter to show, that the arguments a posteriori from the order and course of nature, these arguments so sensible, so convincing, and so obvious, remain still in their full force; and that nothing is affected by it but the metaphysical argument a priori, which many men of learning cannot comprehend, and which many men both of piety and learning show no great value for...

⁴⁷ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888), Abstract 18.

⁴⁸ Hume, "A Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh," 154.

I say further, that even the metaphysical arguments for a Deity are not affected by a denial of the proposition above-mentioned. It is only Dr. Clarke's argument which can be supposed to be any way concerned. Many other arguments of the same kind still remain; Descartes's for instance, which has always been esteemed as solid and convincing as the other.⁴⁹

This is, I grant, *prima facie* evidence which counts against my proposal that Hume was interested in Descartes' Ontological Argument. The author of the text appears to grant that Hume's objection may discredit Clarke's argument but leave Descartes' Ontological Argument⁵⁰ intact. On the assumption that this is Hume's own view, does this invalidate my proposed interpretation concerning the Ontological Argument? No, I think this is not necessary at all. Firstly, we should note that in this letter Hume is at pains to give his incendiary principles their most narrow interpretation. Moreover, in avoiding the charge of atheism, it would be expedient for Hume to play up those theistic arguments which may fall outside the express purview of his 'heretical' objections. Most importantly, Hume is here referring to a particular answer he gives to a particular question in the *Treatise* (§1.3.3), namely, "whether every object, which begins to exist, must owe its existence to a cause; and this I assert neither to be intuitively nor demonstratively certain." Hume's "*curious nostrum*"—"if we reason a priori, anything may appear able to produce anything"⁵¹—will undermine any demonstrative arguments founded on the Principle of Sufficient Reason. Hume makes this expressly clear in a footnote to his 'nostrum':

That impious maxim of the ancient philosophy, *Ex nihilo, nihil fit*, by which the creation of matter was excluded, ceases to be a maxim, according to this philosophy. Not only the will of the Supreme Being may create matter; but, for aught we know a priori, the will of any other being might create it, or any other cause, that the most whimsical imagination can assign.⁵²

Hume here goes on to finger Clarke's argument by name. This explains very well why Hume would suggest in the *Letter* that one of his theses may

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 156-57.

⁵⁰ I believe it is clear that Descartes' argument referred to in the *Letter* here must be his Ontological Argument in the Fifth Meditation, since his argument in the Third Meditation, like Clarke's metaphysical argument, depends on the principle of sufficient reason, while the Ontological Argument does not.

⁵¹ Hume, "An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding," 12.29.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 12.29.

invalidate Clarke's *a priori* argument while leaving Descartes' unscathed: Clarke's metaphysical argument, unlike Descartes' Ontological Argument, employs the Principle of Sufficient Reason as a premise. So, we may conclude that Hume's apology here concerns the implications of his *nostrum* against demonstrative arguments which employ the principle of sufficient reason. This plainly does not conflict with the evidence I have adduced thus far, which evidence strongly suggests that Hume saw Descartes' Ontological Argument as his target in Dialogue IX.

Part 2: Articulating Hume's Argument

In the foregoing section I have argued that Hume does address the Ontological Argument, and that we may take Cleanthes' argument in Dialogue IX to represent Hume's considered view of the matter. However, as will become clear, the argument requires supplementation if it is to withstand scrutiny. My intention in this section is carefully to inspect the argument, identifying its weaker links and providing support from Hume's texts where appropriate, so as to reveal Hume's complete and coherent response to the Ontological Argument.

Hume's argument (in the mouth of Cleanthes as well as in the *Treatise* and *Enquiry*) is evinced clearly, and its logical form seems generally unimpeachable. Let us make its structure perspicuous.

1. A can be demonstrated if and only if A implies a contradiction.
2. A is distinctly conceivable if and only if A does not imply a contradiction.
3. For any x , if x can be distinctly conceived as existent, then x can be distinctly conceived as nonexistent.
4. For any x , the nonexistence of x does not imply a contradiction (From 2, 3)
5. Therefore, for any x , the existence of x is not demonstrable. (From 1, 4)⁵³

⁵³ Cf. Graham Robert Oppy, *Ontological Arguments and Belief in God* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 27.

Hume's Fork

The argument above, the reader will recognize, is a consequence of Hume's 'Fork' in the avenues of human understanding: "All reasonings may be divided into two kinds, namely, demonstrative reasoning, or that concerning relations of ideas, and moral reasoning, or that concerning matter of fact and existence."⁵⁴ It is this division, in conjunction with other pieces of Hume's philosophy, which supports Cleanthes' claim that "there is an evident absurdity in pretending to demonstrate a matter of fact, or to prove it by any arguments *a priori*." What is intended by this, and how does this tell against the Ontological Argument?

Hume's fork specifies a division in the kinds of propositions delivered (e.g., their modality, their logic), and also *the methods of inference and reasoning* by which these propositions may be ascertained.⁵⁵ Relations of ideas deliver certainty:⁵⁶ when we attend to the contents of our ideas, and the agreement or disagreement between them, the propositions which result are incontrovertible—their contrary implies a contradiction. Just as the truths of Euclidean triangles may be *demonstrated* directly from the axioms which govern them, relations of ideas are "discoverable by the mere operation of thought,"⁵⁷ that is, *a priori*. On the other prong are *matters of fact*, which are not demonstrable in this way: any matter of fact may be denied without contradiction. Though we firmly believe, say, that the sun will rise tomorrow, we can very well conceive otherwise; and in so doing we will not have entertained a contradiction. These matters of fact (often called matters of fact

⁵⁴ Hume, "An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding," 4.18.

⁵⁵ Cf. Robert J. Fogelin, "Hume's Scepticism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume, Second Edition*, ed. David Fate Norton and Jacqueline Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 216-17.

⁵⁶ "ALL certainty arises from the comparison of ideas, and from the discovery of such relations as are unalterable, so long as the ideas continue the same" (Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.3.3.2.).

⁵⁷ Note that Hume's suggestions in the *Treatise* seem at odds with his later claims in the *Enquiry* regarding the demonstrative status of geometric truths—the former denying and the latter affirming that they are demonstrative. Given Hume's general tenor about demonstration in the *Treatise* I found his recalcitrance with respect to geometry quite surprising. Owing to Hume's apparent change of heart in the *Enquiry* (which strikes my ear much more naturally), I am inclined to take the later view to represent his settled opinion. However, this is not uncontroversial: see Allison's interesting argument to the contrary (Henry E. Allison, *Custom and Reason in Hume: A Kantian Reading of the First Book of the Treatise* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 64-72.)

and existence), admit of no certainty or demonstration, but are the province of *probabilistic* reasoning.

So understood, premise 1 ('A can be demonstrated if and only if not-A implies a contradiction') is quite true. Understanding *demonstrations* to be the exclusive province of *relations of ideas* ("the assurance of a demonstration proceeds always from a comparison of ideas"⁵⁸), then to say that *A can be demonstrated* is to say that there is a valid argument from *a priori* premises alone to the conclusion that A. If A is so demonstrable, then, obviously the denial of A implies a contradiction.

Premise 2 ('A is distinctly conceivable if and only if A does not imply a contradiction') is also perfectly plausible, and Hume states his approval for this claim in several places. Hume holds what Garrett calls the *Conceivability Criterion of Possibility*:⁵⁹ "nothing of which we can form a clear and distinct idea is absurd and impossible"⁶⁰ This suggests that for all *x*, if *x* is (distinctly) conceivable, then *x* is possible. Consequently, if *x* is impossible then *x* is inconceivable, and so Hume writes "'Tis in vain to search for a contradiction in any thing that is distinctly conceiv'd by the mind. Did it imply any contradiction, 'tis impossible it cou'd ever be conceiv'd."⁶¹ Elsewhere Hume states the thesis in a manner which makes conceivability stand in a *biconditional* or *equivalence* relation to possibility.⁶² Most clearly, Hume writes at 1.2.2.8: "*whatever the mind clearly conceives includes the idea of possible existence, or in other words, that nothing we imagine is absolutely impossible.*"⁶³ Adding to this the assumption of the law of non-contradiction (that contradictions are impossible), there is a perfect correlation between what is

⁵⁸ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.3.4.3.

⁵⁹ Don Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 24.

⁶⁰ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.1.7.6.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 1.2.4.11.

⁶² Cf. *Ibid.*, 1.1.7.6.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 1.2.2.8., emphasis in the original.

conceivable and what is possible. This thesis has been accepted by a wide range of philosophers both before and since Hume, and its appeal remains striking.⁶⁴

These first two premises and the validity of the argument being granted, there are two natural places to take issue with Hume's claim. Firstly, why should we accept premise 3 (anything which can be conceived to exist can be conceived as not existing)? Secondly, even if the conclusion is validly entailed by true premises, how exactly does it succeed in discrediting the Ontological Argument? These questions take us beyond Cleanthes' argument and deeper into Hume's critical philosophy elsewhere. There is relatively little literature which addresses how Cleanthes' argument in the unusual Dialogue IX fits into Hume's overall corpus. As Stewart notes, commentators "are not always clear as to what the argument is or about the force of Hume's comments on it."⁶⁵ David Stove, in exception to this trend, produced a critique of Part IX which is precise and methodical, and clarified the text in several ways. Nevertheless, Stove was moved to conclude that Cleanthes' "criticisms are all extremely defective, and that they even include an inconsistency."⁶⁶ I attend to his criticisms, and I argue that Hume's claims are neither so defective nor so inconsistent.

Existence

The third premise—"Whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent"—bears significantly more argumentative weight than the first two premises, which would likely be accepted by Descartes as they stand. However, neither Demea nor Descartes will allow that whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent, since they expressly maintain that God may not be conceived as non-existent. When it comes to evaluating Cleanthes' third premise, Stove is unforgiving. Incredulous, Stove asks, "how can it be other than question-begging to advance an argument which has as a premise, that we can conceive as non-existent whatever we conceive as

⁶⁴ Many accept that conceivability is a good guide to *logical* or *conceptual* possibility, and this is, I think, what Hume intends here. Logical possibility is, some believe, broader in scope than *metaphysical* possibility. That is, the number of things consistent with the laws of logic is greater than the number of things consistent with metaphysical laws. This unfortunately leads to some (merely) terminological confusion since Hume claims that "whatever we *conceive* is possible, at least in a metaphysical sense" (ibid., Abstract 11.).

⁶⁵ Stewart, "Hume and the 'Metaphysical Argument a Priori'," 245.

⁶⁶ Stove, "Part IX of Hume's Dialogues," 300.

existent?”⁶⁷ Indeed, Stove is quite correct in this sense: Cleanthes asserts this claim without providing any additional argument for it in Dialogue IX, it is an immediate defeater against Cleanthes’ opponents, and they would not accept it unless they were compelled by argument to do so. However, Stove’s critique is not decisive. It is true that Cleanthes’ premise receives no support where he makes it in Dialogue IX, but this is not to say it is unsupported *elsewhere*. In fact, Hume (for whom Cleanthes speaks) does mount a defense of this thesis in the *Treatise*, and, moreover, Hume’s defense reveals even further evidence of his inclination to discredit the Ontological Argument.

What is it we conceive when we conceive of something as existing? Hume seems to offer conflicting answers to this question. In Dialogue IX, he says that “whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent.” However, in the *Treatise* Hume suggests that “Whatever we conceive, we conceive to be existent.”⁶⁸ These assertions appear to stand in tension with each other: how could we conceive a thing as non-existent, if to conceive it *at all* is to conceive of it as existent? Suppose I conceive that Sherlock Holmes doesn’t exist. Then, since “whatever we conceive, we conceive to be existent,” it seems by Hume’s lights that the content of my thought is that Sherlock Holmes does and does not exist, which is absurd.

Fortunately, I believe this apparent inconsistency may be removed if we attend to Hume’s explication of this principle in the *Treatise*. We should properly read Hume in the *Treatise* to claim that whatever we conceive, we conceive as a *possible* existent.⁶⁹ This is best articulated where Hume writes that “TIS an establish’d maxim in metaphysics, *That whatever the mind clearly conceives includes the idea of possible existence*, or in other words, *that nothing we imagine is absolutely impossible*.”⁷⁰ This returns us, of course, to Hume’s Conceivability Criterion of Possibility. So, more fully, Hume holds that all objects are conceived with the *modality of possibility*, or in his words, “Whatever can be conceiv’d by a clear and distinct idea necessarily implies the possibility of existence.”⁷¹ Now, this principle underwrites Cleanthes third premise in Dialogue IX: If for every conceivable object, that object possibly

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 304.:

⁶⁸ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.2.6.4.

⁶⁹ Cf. S. Tweyman, “Some Reflections on Hume on Existence,” *Hume Studies* 18, no. 2 (1992): 141-42.)

⁷⁰ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.2.2.8., emphasis in the original.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 1.2.4.11.

exists, then there is some world (or some conceivable state of affairs) in which that object exists, and some other in which it fails to exist. This is to say that possible existents and possible non-existents are identical with respect to their modal analysis—both receive the modal status of *possible*, rather than *necessary*, or *impossible*. Since Hume holds that everything which is conceivable possibly exists, he must as a matter of logic hold that these same items possibly *do not* exist. Combining these claims, Hume may consistently affirm Cleanthes' third premise that everything which may be conceived as existent may be conceived as non-existent.

So, far from being incompatible, Hume's claim that *whatever we conceive, we conceive as a possible existent* is the express *support* for Cleanthes' third premise that *whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent*. This alone ought to subdue Stove's charge of question-begging. But we can and should go further, seeking Hume's justification for the prior claim that to conceive of something is to conceive of it as possibly existing. Surely this supporting premise will be no more attractive to Descartes or Demea than the former! These theists will similarly reject this premise since, from their perspective, to conceive of God as *merely possibly* existing is not to conceive of God *at all*; to return to Descartes' pithy reply, this would be "to think of the supremely perfect being without the supreme perfection."⁷²

So, then, what defense does Hume offer of the claim that *whatever we conceive, we conceive to be existent*? The answer to this question, it turns out, gives us a further interesting reason to hold that Hume was deeply concerned with the Ontological Argument, and I will address this point first. Hume is correctly credited with having anticipated Kant's objection to the Ontological Argument,⁷³ arguing to the effect that existence is not a real predicate, or a predicate expressing a property. Where it appears in the First Critique ("On the impossibility of an ontological proof of God's existence"⁷⁴), Kant's intentions to quash Descartes' argument are admittedly more perspicuous than Hume's. However, we should note that Kant and Hume express almost identical

⁷² Descartes, "Meditations on First Philosophy," 67.

⁷³ Oppy, in his extensive survey of the Ontological Argument in philosophy, writes that "Kant took up Hume's objection and elaborated upon it in a number of different ways - though without making any substantial addition to it" (Oppy, *Ontological Arguments and Belief in God*, 29.).

⁷⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), A592/B620.

propositions in these passages,⁷⁵ and Kant clearly did understand Hume's argument here as an objection to the Ontological Argument. Hume writes:

“Tis also evident, that the idea of existence is nothing different from the idea of any object, and that when after the simple conception of any thing we wou'd conceive it as existent, we in reality make no addition to or alteration on our first idea. Thus when we affirm, that God is existent, we simply form the idea of such a being, as he is represented to us; nor is the existence, which we attribute to him, conceiv'd by a particular idea, which we join to the idea of his other qualities, and can again separate and distinguish from them... the conception of the existence of any object is no addition to the simple conception of it.⁷⁶

Surely this should strike an attentive reader as little more than a thinly-veiled backhand at the Ontological Argument! Why on earth would Hume choose *God* as the best exemplar of his point concerning existence here? Surely, one could pick really *any* ordinary object—a house, or a boat, say—and appreciate Hume's point that conceiving of an object and conceiving of it as existent are alike. This passage, embedded in the section of the *Treatise* entitled “Of the nature of the idea or belief” is not some segue from a discussion of theistic or atheistic matters; it is quite apropos nothing that Hume chooses God as his exemplar here. Moreover, God is really the only example in the history of philosophy for which Hume's argument is controversial. It is very telling, then, that Hume chose God as his example here. Judging by the argument's efficacy as an objection to the Ontological Argument (especially in Kant's mouth), I think we may justly infer that Hume indeed did intend this as such.

Setting aside the argument's support for my interpretative project, the claim advanced here also succeeds in supporting Hume's argument in Dialogue IX. As we have canvassed, Cleanthes' third premise (whatever we conceive as

⁷⁵ Kant (ibid. A599/B627 - A600/B628) writes: “Now if I take the subject (God) together with all his predicates (among which omnipotence belongs), and say God is, or there is a God, then I add no new predicate to the concept of God, but only posit the subject in itself with all its predicates, and indeed posit the object in relation to my concept. Both must contain exactly the same, and hence when I think this object as given absolutely (through the expression, “it is”), nothing is thereby added to the concept, which expresses merely its possibility... Thus when I think a thing, through whichever and however many predicates I like (even in its thoroughgoing determination), not the least bit gets added to the thing when I posit in addition that this thing is.” It is plain just how much Kant owes to Hume here.

⁷⁶ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.3.7.2.

existent we can also conceive as nonexistent) requires justification, and finds it in the claim that *whatever we conceive, we conceive as possibly existent*. This claim, in turn, requires justification, and finds it here in Hume's claim, popularized by Kant and *contra* Descartes, that existence is not some further property or perfection which an object may possess. As Hume argues, to think of a thing as possibly existing is (and is nothing more than) to think of the thing, and vice versa.⁷⁷ As Smithurst observes, "For Hume, conceiving a thing, thinking of it, picturing it to yourself, and having the thought 'Such a thing as this exists' are the very same mental event."⁷⁸ This supports Hume's objection to the Ontological Argument by denying that existence is a property of an object at all (and thus *a fortiori* not a 'perfection'). Hume crystallizes the central intuition in this claim: "When I think of God, when I think of him as existent, and when I believe him to be existent, my idea of him neither encreases nor diminishes."⁷⁹ If there are any differences between these thoughts, Hume argues, they lie in the *manner of conception* rather than in the *object*; the object remains identical throughout.⁸⁰

The virtues and pitfalls of this objection are very well known. For example, if existence is not a predicate, why does it appear to function perfectly well as a predicate in natural language? Does modern quantificational logic really vindicate Hume's objection? I will not canvas these important questions here. I am more interested to show that this move provides the necessary support for Cleanthes' argument. Stove claimed that it is mere question-begging against Demea to affirm as a premise that whatever can be conceived as existent can also be conceived as non-existent. I have shown that Hume does provide support for this premise in the *Treatise*, and he does so in a way which lends credence to my interpretative claim that Hume was anxious to vanquish the Ontological Argument. I believe that Hume's objection to the Ontological

⁷⁷ In Hume's words, "THE idea of existence, then, is the very same with the idea of what we conceive to be existent. To reflect on any thing simply, and to reflect on it as existent, are nothing different from each other. That idea, when conjoin'd with the idea of any object, makes no addition to it. Whatever we conceive, we conceive to be existent. Any idea we please to form is the idea of a being; and the idea of a being is any idea we please to form." *Ibid.*, 1.2.6.4.

⁷⁸ Michael Smithurst, "Hume on Existence and Possibility," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 81(1980): 18.

⁷⁹ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.3.7.2.

⁸⁰ Cf. *Ibid.*, 1.3.8.7.

Argument may now be stated fully, inserting the previously missing premises as follows:

1. A can be demonstrated if and only if A implies a contradiction.
2. A is distinctly conceivable if and only if A does not imply a contradiction.
 - a. The conception of the existence of any object is identical with (and thus no addition to) the simple conception of it.
 - b. Whatever we conceive, we conceive as possibly existent, that is, we conceive of all objects as having the modality of possibility (from 2a)
3. For any x , if x can be distinctly conceived as existent, then x can be distinctly conceived as nonexistent (from 2a and 2b)
4. For any x , the nonexistence of x does not imply a contradiction (From 2, 3)
5. Therefore, for any x , the existence of x is not demonstrable. (From 1, 4)⁸¹

Before proceeding to the final evaluation of the argument, I wish to draw attention to another explanatory virtue of my proposed interpretation. Cleanthes' second argumentative stream in Dialogue IX concludes that "The words, therefore, *necessary existence*, have no meaning; or, which is the same thing, none that is consistent."⁸² Stove did not interrogate this claim, but with a wave of his hand observed that "To have no meaning is not the same thing as to have no consistent meaning."⁸³ Whether or not Cleanthes is correct, I wish to note here that his conclusion is actually the product of consistently applying the principles Hume affirms in the *Treatise*, and so is not as confused as Stove supposes. As discussed, Hume maintains the following three principles:

1. Something is conceivable if and only if it is possible
($\forall x$)(x is conceivable \leftrightarrow x is possible)
2. To conceive of a thing is the same as to conceive it as existing
($\forall x$)(x is conceivable \leftrightarrow x is conceivable as existent)
3. That which is conceivable as existent is conceivable as non-existent
($\forall x$)(x is conceivable as existent \rightarrow x is conceivable as non-existent)

⁸¹ Cf. Oppy, *Ontological Arguments and Belief in God*, 27.

⁸² Hume, "Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion," Pt. IX, 6.

⁸³ Stove, "Part IX of Hume's Dialogues," 304.

What then should Hume say about the notion of *necessary existence*? As Descartes suggests and Hume acknowledges, the concept of a necessary existent is the concept of a being which is impossible to conceive as non-existent. Specifically, a necessary existent is the x which denies the consequent of premise 3. So:

4. The necessary existent, a , is by definition something which cannot be conceived as non-existent.
5. From 3 and 4, by modus tollens, a is not conceivable as existent
6. From 2 and 5, a is not conceivable
7. From 1 and 6, a is not possible

By applying Hume's principles, from the assumption that a necessarily exists we derive the conclusion that a is impossible. That is, an application of Hume's principles delivers the finding that *necessary existence* implies a contradiction. It is therefore quite fitting for Hume to aver that necessary existence is meaningless, or has no consistent meaning. The derived sentence ' a necessarily exists and a is impossible' really is meaningless, since its meaning (given semantically: that a has some property and a lacks that same property) is inconsistent. Indeed, it is this which informs Hartshorne's observation that "it was a corollary that to deny the conceivability of 'necessarily existent' is to affirm 'God is inconceivable'. Hence the universal contingency of existence, affirmed by Hume as beyond all exception, is the downright denial even of the thinkability of deity."⁸⁴

Part 3: Substantiveness

Having articulated Hume's answer to the Ontological Argument, I wish to consider whether his objection is ultimately successful. In particular, I wish to attend to the legitimate concern that Cleanthes' conclusion ("there is an evident absurdity in pretending to demonstrate a matter of fact, or to prove it by any arguments *a priori*"), *even if true*, may yet fail to undermine the Ontological Argument. Stove examines two interpretations of *matter of fact*, concluding that neither interpretation delivers a result favorable to Hume. On one reading (*Contingency*), Cleanthes' conclusion is true, but irrelevant; on the other reading (*Existence*), Cleanthes' conclusion is relevant, but false. I attempt to do better by Hume, finding some alternative interpretation (*Substantiveness*) which allows Hume's usage to be both relevant and true.

⁸⁴ Charles Hartshorne, *Anselm's Discovery* (La Salle, Ill.,: Open Court, 1965), 206.

Contingency. Stove argues that we should understand Hume’s fork between *relations of ideas* and *matters of fact* to track the distinction between *necessary* and *contingent* truths. It is admittedly rather tempting to read Hume this way. As mentioned, Hume’s most clear definition of the fork in the *Enquiry* gives a positive characterization of relations of ideas, and defines matters of fact negatively, in opposition to the former. Relations of ideas seem to be all of them necessary truths (of one kind or another), known entirely *a priori*; so, then, we would expect matters of fact to be a class of *contingent* truths. This gloss on Hume’s fork, whatever subtleties it lacks, has the virtue of making many of Hume’s claims perfectly true and often trenchant. Consider the inestimable occasions on which Hume rebukes all attempts to demonstrate some event in the course of nature (that is, some matter of fact) by arguments *a priori*, as when one would attempt to demonstrate that the sun will rise the following day. Hume proceeds by undermining the pretended *necessity* of the conclusion: “That there are no demonstrative arguments in the case [of matters of fact] seems evident; since it implies no contradiction that the course of nature may change, and that an object, seemingly like those which we have experienced, may be attended with different or contrary effects.”⁸⁵ It seems that we can very well make sense of this key passage in terms of the modal notions of necessity and contingency, between what must obtain and what may obtain. When Hume suggests that the course of nature may change, it is easy to take him to mean that the course of nature is contingent, rather than necessary, since it is obviously *possible* that its course proceed otherwise. This modal interpretation being accepted, Hume can depend on Cleanthes’ maxim and it will hit its mark against his opponent. Indeed, on the *Contingency* reading, Cleanthes’ thesis is a brilliant, palpably true observation: it is that there are no valid inferences from necessary premises to contingent conclusions.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Hume, "An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding," 4.18.

⁸⁶ This is easily demonstrated through a possible-worlds analysis of modality and validity.

1. Suppose, for *reductio ad absurdum*, that there is some necessary truth (premise P) from which we may validly derive a contingent truth (conclusion C).
2. P is necessarily true, so it is true at all worlds.
3. C is contingently true, so it is false in at least one world.
4. If the inference from P to C were valid, then C would be true in all worlds in which P is true.
5. However, from 2 and 3, there is at least one world in which P is true and C is false.
6. So, from 4 and 5, the inference from P to C is invalid. Therefore, 1 is false.

Hume himself articulates Cleanthes' thesis in several places, and, on the *Contingency* reading, it is evidently useful in deflating his (causally confused) opponents in the *Enquiry* and *Treatise*. When it comes to Dialogue IX, however, Stove soundly observes that the *Contingency* reading has the deep and regrettable flaw of making Cleanthes' argument quite *irrelevant*, both to its ostensible target, Demea's claim, and to the Ontological Argument. These theistic arguments do not purport to derive any *contingent* conclusions, but only *necessary* ones—namely, that God *necessarily* exists. As Hughes remarks, some “arguments against the existence of God are such that the theist can gaily rebut them with the remark, ‘But that is not at all the kind of being in whose existence I believe,’”⁸⁷ and this is plainly what would transpire here. On this reading, the theist should retort that his argument proceeds from *necessary* premises to *necessary* conclusions and that Cleanthes' remarks are thus patent non-sequiturs. Could we put this issue to rest, maintaining that, since the *Contingency* reading is effective throughout Hume's critical writings, Cleanthes' remarks in Dialogue IX are merely an unfortunate but unimportant casualty? I think not. Recall that in Dialogue IX *Cleanthes speaks for Hume*; there is impetus, therefore, for us to press on, and pursue an interpretation of *a matter of fact* which may be sustained throughout Hume's writings as well as in Cleanthes' mouth in Dialogue IX.

Existence. Stove, to his credit, also does not leave the matter there; he attempts another interpretation of *a matter of fact*. Here he observes that in Hume's writings, this species of human inquiry is often called—more fully, perhaps—*a matter of fact and existence*.⁸⁸ Could we fare better if we attended to the *existence* portion of this notion, interpreting *matter of fact and existence* to refer to claims which *assert the existence* of something? This interpretation has one immediately obvious benefit: It makes Cleanthes' objection relevant where it is stated. When Cleanthes' responds with the dictum in question, he is claiming, on this interpretation, that there are no valid arguments from necessary premises to conclusions which assert the existence of something. Since Demea's argument and the Ontological Argument both proceed in this manner, they will be relevantly attacked by Cleanthes' objection.

However, there are reasons to reject this move, of which Stove canvasses two. First, the proposed interpretation is *ad hoc*; in particular, we have little

⁸⁷ George E. Hughes, "Has God's Existence Been Disproved? A Reply to Professor J.N. Findlay," *Mind* 58, no. 229 (1949): 67.

⁸⁸ See, for example, *Enquiry* 4.18, 5.20, 12.17, 12.21 and 12.28.

independent reason—other than the desire to reform Cleanthes' claim—to believe that Hume uses this oft-repeated phrase in the manner proposed. Again, when Hume objects that we could not discern the course of nature through *a priori* demonstrations, it is awkward (at best) to suppose that Hume's objection is that such arguments illegitimately 'assert the existence of something.' Second, and most damning, according to Stove, is that the *Existence* interpretation is false because it is subject to obvious counterexamples. Consider that, from the necessary truth that there are two even numbers between one and five, we may validly assert that *some even numbers exist*. We have proceeded validly from necessary premises to a conclusion which asserts the existence of something, thereby invalidating the *Existence* interpretation. Since the *Existence* interpretation is seemingly just as defective as the *Contingency* one, Stove abandons the project of finding a reading which is plausible as an objection to Demea and plausibly Hume's.

Substantiveness. It is my hope to do a little better by Hume, proceeding from the instructive assumption that Hume was interested in the Ontological Argument. In devising this interpretation, I make use of the notion of an *inferential barrier*.

Inferential Barriers

In the *Treatise*, Hume incisively exposes a series of *inferential barriers*; these are the barriers we encounter when, having commenced with premises of one type, we attempt deductively to derive conclusions of a different type.⁸⁹ The notion of an inferential barrier is evident, for example, in the legendary *no-ought-from-is* slogan—more precisely, in Hume's suggestion that we may not proceed from premises about what *is* (purely descriptive premises) to conclusions about what *ought* to be (normative conclusions).⁹⁰ In each case of an inferential barrier, according to Hume, we fail to specify "how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it."⁹¹ For a further example, Hume's famous critique of induction (interpretative subtleties notwithstanding) may be loosely taken to hold that we cannot

⁸⁹ While preparing this paper, I was very pleased to learn of the excellent recent work of Restall and Russell (Greg Restall and Gillian Russell, "Barriers to Implication," in *Hume on 'Is' and 'Ought'*, ed. Charles Pigden (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).). I am indebted to them for crystallizing certain logical aspects of this class of problem. They do not consider this particular inferential barrier, however.

⁹⁰ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 3.1.1.27.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 3.1.1.27.

proceed validly from claims about the past to claims about the future. Now, I suggest that Cleanthes' claim—there are no demonstrations of a matter of fact and existence—may likewise be fruitfully considered as an *inferential barrier*. So, in attempting to find a worthy interpretation for *a matter of fact and existence*, we should attend to how the notion might figure in a chain of reasoning. Of particular importance will be cases where the barrier is imposed; that is, where we are precluded from making an inference from relations of ideas to matters of fact.

Prior and prior-style counterexamples

Arthur Prior demonstrated that one of Hume's most solid barriers may be broken.⁹² Setting his sights on Hume's *no-ought-from-is* thesis, Prior showed that we may very well reason from descriptive premises to normative conclusions. Consider the following valid inference:

$$(1) P \vdash (P \vee Q)$$

So, to get a normative conclusion from descriptive premises, simply assign a descriptive claim to P , and a normative claim to Q , as in

P : Tea-drinking is common in England (*descriptive*)

Q : All New Zealanders ought to be shot (*normative*)

So, on the assumption that $(P \vee Q)$ is normative, lemma (1) is a counterexample to Hume's normative inferential barrier, since the premise is descriptive but the conclusion is normative. But perhaps it will be suggested that this assumption is incorrect, that $(P \vee Q)$ is not normative but descriptive. Still Hume's *no-ought-from-is* thesis is not out of the woods. Consider how this new assumption, that $(P \vee Q)$ is descriptive, figures in the following disjunctive syllogism:

$$(2) (P \vee Q), \neg P \vdash Q$$

Ex hypothesi, both premises are descriptive, and yet the conclusion is normative. Thus, whether $(P \vee Q)$ is normative or descriptive, we are able to generate a counterexample to the hitherto sturdy no-ought-from-is inferential barrier.

Interestingly, we may derive a similar result when we apply Prior's counterexample method to the notions of *matters of fact* and *relations of ideas* (setting aside for a moment the correct analysis of *matter of fact* we hope to find). First, assume that true propositions are either matters of fact or relations

⁹² A. N. Prior, "The Autonomy of Ethics," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 38, no. 3 (1960).

of ideas. Then assume that relations of ideas and matters of fact are respectively closed under negation; that is, the denial of a proposition which expresses a relation of ideas is itself a relation of ideas, and the denial of a proposition which expresses a matter of fact is itself a matter of fact. This seems plausible when we attend to Hume's *epistemic* analysis of matters of fact (acquired *a posteriori*) and relations of ideas (acquired *a priori*). For example, consider the matter of fact that *there are three kinds of tiger in India*; quite clearly, the negation of this (*there are not three kinds of tiger in India*) is also a matter of fact since its truth value is also ascertained *a posteriori*. Then, consider the relation of ideas that *no bachelors are married*; similarly, the negation of this (*some bachelors are married*) expresses a relation of ideas since its truth value (here, its falsehood) may also be known entirely *a priori*. Once these assumptions are granted, we may assign a proposition expressing a matter of fact to *P* and a proposition expressing a relation of ideas to *Q*. Inserting these into Prior's lemma (1) and (2) above will deliver a counterexample to Hume's inferential barrier that there are no demonstrations of a matter of fact.⁹³

Such counterexamples may leave one feeling unsettled, sensing that in the final analysis these lemma have not undermined the *heart* of Hume's insight. Certainly, it is a truth of logic that from a contradiction anything follows; so, pick a descriptive sentence, conjoin it with its negation, derive a normative statement of your choosing, and—*voilà!*—one has a counterexample to the apparently unassailable *no-ought-from-is* rule. This is nonetheless quite an unsatisfying way to argue against Hume's inferential barriers, I believe, because such counterexamples are sensitive *only to the form* of the components in an argument, and not to their *content*. That is, when we reflect on the *nature* (rather than merely the logical structure) of relations of ideas and matters of fact, we see that there is some impasse which precludes our proceeding validly from premises expressing the former to conclusions expressing the latter. This is, of course, just to repeat Hume's thesis, in the hope that the intuition will take root: it is not yet to offer an argument for it. My suggestion is thus that we attend to the *kinds* of claims which relations of ideas and matters of fact respectively express, and how they tell against the Ontological Argument.

⁹³ I believe that inferential barriers will be generally vulnerable to Prior-style counterexamples wherever the barrier is posited as standing between a pair of mutually exclusive propositional types, each of which is closed under negation.

The structure of the Ontological Argument

When a thoughtful reader first considers the Ontological Argument, he often reports being gripped by the force of two impressions. Firstly, he notes the argument's seemingly impeccable *cogency and logic*. The premises of the Ontological Argument are all of them plausible, and the reader almost unhesitatingly lends his assent to them. He will readily attest to understanding the concept of God, thinking this a rather benign admission. Furthermore, he notes that the conclusion appears to follow quite seamlessly from the premises. Secondly, however, he feels the force that, notwithstanding the first feeling (that the argument is reasoned validly from true premises), there is—*there must be*, he thinks—something *wrong* with the argument. This latter reaction is, of course, rather difficult to articulate: if one sincerely accepts the truth (indeed, the necessary truth) of the premises and the validity of the argument, what reason could one possibly have to reject the conclusion?

And yet many *do* feel queasy about the conclusion. It is this feature—that we are *surprised* by the conclusion of the Ontological Argument—that I think is important here with respect to our interpretation of Hume's objection. It is a feature of deductive arguments, speaking crudely, that one *gets out* only what one *puts in*. That is, in a deductive argument there can be no content in the conclusion which does not appear in (or is not implied by) the premises.⁹⁴ My point here is that this restriction on valid processes of reasoning clearly informs Hume's inferential barriers: these barriers are intended to preclude our passing from premises of one type to conclusions of another.

In making headway with respect to the Ontological Argument, then, let us consider the question, what sort of premises *could* validly deliver the conclusion that God exists? I believe we may answer this question in terms of another pair of exclusive propositional types: some statements are *substantive*, and some are *inane*. Substantive theses make *informative* claims about the *actual* contents of the world. In this way, following Unger, a substantive thesis "delineates a way for concrete reality to be which differs from other ways for it

⁹⁴ This feature is, I think, central to Oppy's (Graham Robert Oppy, *Arguing About Gods* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), Ch. 2.) 'general objection' to the Ontological Argument.

to be.”⁹⁵ The claims, say, that the Atlantic ocean is colder than the Pacific, or that Hydrogen-1 is the most abundant isotope in the solar system, that I know my way around New York, are all substantive claims. By contrast, a thesis may be empty or inane; these are those theses which do not make informative claims about the contents of the world, or say what concrete reality is like. Inane theses often (but not always) have a universal or conditional form, such as, *if dualism is true then materialism is false*. Such a thesis does not indicate *what the world is like, concretely speaking, only how it may be, hypothetically speaking*.

Now, I believe that the inane/substantive distinction mirrors the distinction Hume has in mind between relations of ideas and matters of fact. My claim is informed most by Hume’s remarks where he evinces his Fork: Unlike matters of fact, relations of ideas “are discoverable by the mere operation of thought, without dependence on what is anywhere existent in the universe.”⁹⁶ By these lights, relations of ideas are all of them quite obviously inane. That *all bachelors are unmarried* reveals nothing about the contents of the world, and does not delineate any way concrete reality is from a way it could be. It reveals only that *if* there should be any bachelors, those bachelors are unmarried. Examples of this kind are easily multiplied: wherever we attend only to relations of ideas, our enquiry is quite inane since it is always *hypothetical* and never concrete. Such truths have their truth values quite independently of how things are in concrete reality. To use Hume’s example, “Though there never were a circle or triangle in nature, the truths demonstrated by Euclid would for ever retain their certainty and evidence.”⁹⁷

Accordingly, I believe we may align *substantive* claims with *matters of fact*. To make this move intuitively attractive, consider that for all substantive claims, it will be sensible and correct to prefix the claim with the phrase *as a matter of fact*, and this prefix is implicitly understood even when it is not explicitly stated. For example, it is a substantive claim that there are two hundred elephants in South Africa; this claim suggests that concrete reality has certain features which delineate it from other ways it could be (say, if there were one hundred elephants in South Africa). Thus, we may say that *as a matter of fact* there are two hundred elephants in South Africa. It is a substantive claim that the earth is spherical, and we may say that *as a matter of fact* the earth is

⁹⁵ Peter Unger, "Beyond Emptiness," <http://philosophy.fas.nyu.edu/object/peterunger>.

⁹⁶ Hume, "An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding," 4.1.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.1.

spherical. This is all well and good; we appear to use the phrase *matter of fact* correctly in all and only those cases in which a substantive thesis is proposed, suggesting some connection between the two notions. But does this connection hold in some non-arbitrary, principled way which fits *Hume's* proprietary terminology of 'a matter of fact or existence'? Yes, I believe so. Matters of fact (in Hume's sense) are those which, unlike relations of ideas, do depend on "what is anywhere existent in the universe." Surely this is just to say that matters of fact are statements about *how things are in concrete reality*, about what is *actual* rather than hypothetical—about what is *substantive* rather than inane.

Note that this substantive/inane distinction is not reducible to the modal distinction of necessity/contingency which Stove sustained earlier (and which proved fruitless to Cleanthes' cause). The substantive/inane distinction, to my mind, may allow for the possibility of necessary matters of fact; perhaps the identity which holds between H₂O and water, or Hesperus and Phosphorus is a necessary matter of fact. That Hume himself may not have accepted this particular application is beside the point; I am merely showing that the distinction I am proposing is distinct from the other modal distinctions heretofore considered.

Now, let us bring this distinction to bear upon the Ontological Argument. My proposal is that Hume's conclusion—"there is an evident absurdity in pretending to demonstrate a matter of fact, or to prove it by any arguments *a priori*"—may be understood to erect an inferential barrier between inane premises and substantive conclusions. This interpretation, I believe, would tell against the Ontological Argument in a subtle but satisfying way which previous objections do not. Recall that the Ontological Argument escaped the inferential barrier between necessary premises and contingent conclusions: although the barrier is quite correct (there are no demonstrations of contingent conclusions), it misses its target since the Ontological Argument proceeds from necessary premises to a *necessary* conclusion. My proposed barrier, by contrast, strikes the Ontological Argument in precisely the right place: the Ontological Argument proceeds from inane premises to a *substantive* conclusion.

Let me spell this out more fully. Firstly, the premises of the Ontological Argument are rightly understood as inane. The concept of God is the concept of the most perfect being. This expresses an inane *relation of ideas*—and is intended by its proponents to be taken as such. One need only attend to the

concept of God to affirm that he is the most perfect being. Similarly, the concept of the most perfect being is the concept of a being whose essence it is eternally to exist; this expresses a relation of ideas, and is intended to be taken as such. But then the conclusion—that God exists—is surely a *substantive* claim! It is surely intended to express a *matter of fact*, in the sense that it makes a claim about how things are in concrete reality. This is obviously what proponents of the Ontological Argument have in mind, since the contrary—that God exists is an *inane* claim—is both an uninspiring and theologically dubious conclusion. If the conclusion were an inane claim, moreover, it is hard to see why anyone would bother to defend or deride the argument in the first place. Descartes, for example, is anxious to insist that the conclusion of the Ontological Argument is not the inane hypothetical claim that *if* God were to exist, he would have certain features. In Descartes' words, "the point is not that, from my inability to think of a mountain except with a valley, it follows that a mountain and a valley exist somewhere, but only that the mountain and the valley, whether they exist or not, cannot be separated from each other."⁹⁸ Rather, the conclusion is intended to assert the existence of God in a *substantive* sense, stating that *as a matter of fact and real existence*, God exists.

And so we have in the Ontological Argument the problem for which Cleanthes' conclusion is the solution; there are no proofs which proceed validly from relations of ideas (inane premises) to matters of fact or existence (substantive conclusions). This interpretation has the virtue of making Cleanthes' objection relevant *and* true where he uses it; it succeeds in discrediting the Ontological Argument as well as Demea's version of Clarke's argument. I also believe that this view may plausibly be attributed to Hume. Hume, we see both in the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*, is interested to attend to that "subject worthy of curiosity, to enquire what is the nature of that evidence which assures us of any real existence and matter of fact."⁹⁹ In considering this question, Hume repeats often the maxim considered here, that there are no demonstrations of a matter of fact or existence. And Hume goes further, evincing the insight which underpins this inferential barrier: "nor can our reason, unassisted by experience, ever draw any inference concerning real existence and matter of fact."¹⁰⁰ I take Hume to mean that an argument which consists solely of *a priori* premises may not proceed validly to a conclusion concerning real existence

⁹⁸ Descartes, "Meditations on First Philosophy," 66-67.

⁹⁹ Hume, "An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding," 4.3.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.6.

and matter of fact. This is precisely the thesis I have defended here. To my mind, Hume provides an articulate answer to our discomfort with the Ontological Argument when he writes, “In a word, if we proceed not upon some fact, present to the memory or senses, our reasonings would be merely hypothetical; and however the particular links might be connected with each other, the whole chain of inferences would have nothing to support it, nor could we ever, by its means, arrive at the knowledge of any real existence.”¹⁰¹

Concluding remarks

This paper has undertaken to divine Hume’s hitherto hidden answer to the Ontological Argument. What has emerged, I believe, is a clear and coherent answer to Descartes’ argument which coheres with Hume’s opus overall. This is an especially rewarding result, since the locus of Hume’s thesis, Dialogue IX, has been the subject of significant criticism for its apparent incoherence. It was Stove’s contention that there was no plausible way of interpreting Cleanthes’ use of *a matter of fact* which was favorable to Hume, and he charged also that Cleanthes’ argument begged the question against Demea through the premise that *whatever we can conceive of as existent we can conceive as non-existent*. Indeed, if Stove’s criticisms were correct, than the most charitable interpretation would take Dialogue IX to be an unfortunate aberration, the confused contents of which were inconsistent with Hume’s work elsewhere, and which ought to be discarded. However, I hope to have shown that further textual insight (and a modicum of creativity) reveals an alternative view, which is far more favorable to Hume. Specifically, I adduced evidence to believe that Descartes’ Ontological Argument rather than Demea’s Cosmological Argument is the real target of Cleanthes’—that is, Hume’s—objection in Dialogue IX, an interpretation which renders Cleanthes’ comments intelligible rather than confused.

My interpretation required that I venture beyond the borders of the *Dialogues*, deeper into Hume’s views on existence and conceivability in the *Treatise* and *Enquiry*. This work has had the boon of further reinforcing the interpretation that Hume was inclined to discredit the Ontological Argument; this is the only and best explanation for Hume’s suggestion—which famously foreshadowed Kant’s criticism—that the conception of the existence of any object is no addition to the simple conception of it. This thesis provides the requisite

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 5.7.

support for Cleanthes' otherwise question-begging claim that whatever we can conceive as existent, we can conceive as non-existent. Finally, these argumentative strands, spread throughout the *Enquiry* and *Treatise* were woven together with Cleanthes' argument to produce a thoroughgoing reply to Descartes' Ontological Argument. I articulated the reply in terms of the characteristically Humean project of the construction of *inferential barriers*. The argument of Cleanthes erects a barrier between hypothetical (inane) premises, and (substantive) conclusions of a matter of fact or existence. This reply, I believe, succeeds in vanquishing the Ontological Argument, and may properly be called Hume's.

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Appendix: selected passages

Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, selection from Dialogue IX

3 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 anything 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 anything: 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 anything. 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.

4 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 show the fallacy of it.

5 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.

6 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 nonexistence 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.

Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Selections from the Fifth Meditation

[64] And what I think particularly needs to be considered here is this: that I find in myself innumerable ideas of certain things, that, even if, perhaps, they do not exist anywhere outside me, cannot yet be said to be nothing. And although, in a sense, whether I think of them or not is up to me, yet they are not inventions of my own mind, but they have true and immutable natures of their own. For instance, when I imagine a triangle, even if perhaps such a figure does not exist, and has never existed, anywhere at all outside my thought, it nonetheless certainly has a determinate nature, or essence, or form, that is immutable and eternal, which was not invented by me, and does not depend on my mind. This is clear from the fact that it is possible to demonstrate various properties of the triangle (for instance, that its three angles are equal to two right angles, and that the hypotenuse subtends the greatest angle, and so forth) which, whether I like it or not, I now clearly recognize to hold good, even if up to now I have never thought of them in any way when imagining a triangle. And therefore these properties were not invented by me.

It would make no difference if I were to say that perhaps this idea of a triangle has come to me from things outside myself via the sense-organs, because, that is, I have occasionally seen bodies of a triangular shape. For I can think up innumerable other shapes that it is impossible to suspect ever reached me via the senses; [65] and yet I can demonstrate several of their properties, just as I can with the triangle. And all of these properties are certainly true, since they are clearly known [*cognoscuntur*] by me, and therefore they are something, and not a pure nothing. For it is clear that everything that is true, is something; and I have already abundantly demonstrated that everything I clearly know [*cognosco*], is true. And even if I had not demonstrated this, the nature of my mind is such that I cannot in any case help assenting to the things I clearly perceive, at least, for as long as I clearly* perceive them; and I remember that even in past times, when I was as closely attached to the objects of the senses as it is possible to be, I always considered that truths of this kind that I clearly recognized, concerning shapes, or numbers, or other matters belonging to arithmetic or geometry or, in general, pure and abstract mathematics, were the most certain of all.

But now, if, from the fact alone that I can produce the idea of a given thing from my thought, it follows that everything I clearly and distinctly perceive to belong to the thing does in fact belong to it, cannot I also find here a further proof of the existence of God? Certainly, I find the idea of him, that is, of a supremely perfect being, in myself, just as much as I find the idea of any shape or number. And I clearly and distinctly understand that eternal existence belongs to his nature—just as clearly and distinctly as I understand that the properties I can demonstrate of some shape or number belong in fact to the nature of that shape or number. So that, even if not all the conclusions I have come to in my meditations over the past few days were true, I would still have to ascribe the same degree of certainty to the existence of God that I up to now have ascribed to mathematical truths. [66]

To be sure, this is not altogether evident at first sight: it appears to be something of a sophism. For since I am accustomed in all other things to distinguish existence from essence, I can easily convince myself that existence can be separated from the essence of God, and thus that God can be thought of as not existing. But if one considers the matter more closely, it becomes plain that existence can no more be separated from the essence of God than we can separate from the essence of a triangle that the sum of its three angles adds up to two right angles, or than we can separate the idea of a mountain from the idea of a valley.* So true is this that the thought of a God (that is, a supremely perfect being) who lacks existence (that is, who lacks a certain perfection) is no less contradictory than the thought of a mountain without a valley.

However, even if I can no more think of God without existence than I can think of a mountain without a valley, yet certainly, it does not follow from my thinking of a mountain as having a valley that any mountain exists in the world; similarly, from my thinking of God as existing, it does not seem to follow that God exists. For my thought imposes no necessity on things; and just as I am free to imagine a winged horse, even if no horse actually does have wings, so perhaps I can imagine the existence of a God, even though no God in fact exists.

No: this is where the sophism is lurking here. The point is not that, from my inability to think of a mountain except with a valley, it follows that a mountain and a valley exist somewhere, but only that [67] the mountain and the valley, whether they exist or not, cannot be separated from each other. Whereas from the fact that I cannot think of God except as existing, it follows that existence is inseparable from God, and therefore that he exists in reality. It is not that my thought brings his existence about, or that it imposes any necessity on anything, but, on the contrary, that the necessity of the thing itself, namely the existence of God, determines me to think it. Nor am I free to think of God without existence (that is, to think of the supremely perfect being without the supreme perfection), in the way I am free to imagine a horse with or without wings.

Nor can it be maintained that, although it is necessary to admit that God exists, once I have supposed him to possess all perfections, since existence is one of these perfections, the original supposition was not itself necessary* (just as it is not necessary for me to think that all quadrilateral shapes can be inscribed in a circle, but, supposing I do think this, I must admit that a rhombus can be inscribed in a circle, which, however, is patently impossible). For although it is not necessary that I should ever find myself thinking of God, nonetheless, whenever I choose to think about the first and supreme being, and bring forth the idea of him, so to speak, from the treasury of my mind, I must necessarily credit him with all perfections, even if at the time I neither list them all nor consider them individually. And this necessity is quite sufficient for me subsequently, when I recognize that existence is a perfection, to conclude, quite rightly, that the first and supreme being exists. In the same way, it is not necessary that I should ever imagine any triangle: but whenever I want to consider a straight-sided shape having only three angles, I must [68] necessarily credit it with properties from which it can be correctly inferred that the sum of its three angles does not exceed that of two right angles, even if I do not at the time realize this. On the other hand, when I am examining what shapes can be inscribed in a circle, there is absolutely no necessity for me to think that all quadrilaterals fall into this category: indeed, I cannot even imagine this to be true, as long as I am intending to accept only what I clearly and distinctly understand. For indeed, I understand in many ways that this idea is not something fictitious that depends on my own thinking, but the image of a true and immutable nature: first, because no other thing can be conceived by me to the essence of which existence belongs, besides God himself; secondly, because I cannot conceive of two or more such Gods, and because, granted that one exists now, I plainly see that it is necessary both that he should have existed for all eternity up to now, and that he will continue to exist for an eternity in the future; and finally, because I perceive many other properties in God of which none can be subtracted or altered by me.

But indeed, whatever kind of proof I use, the issue always comes down to this: that nothing convinces me fully but what I clearly and distinctly perceive. It is true that, of the things I so perceive, although there are several that are obvious to anyone, there are others that can be discovered only by those who look into the matter more closely and examine it carefully. Once, however, these latter have been discovered, they are counted as no less certain than the former. Just as, if we are dealing with a right-angled triangle, [69] it does not so readily appear that the square of the base is equal to the square of the sides as it does that the base is subtended by its greatest angle, nonetheless, once the first proposition has been grasped, it is as firmly believed as the second. But as far as God is concerned, certainly, if I were not overwhelmed by prejudices and if the images of sensible things were not pressing in on my thoughts from all directions, I should recognize nothing sooner and more readily than him. For

what is more obvious in itself than that the supreme being exists, that is to say, that God, to whose essence alone existence belongs, exists?

And although careful consideration was required before I was capable of perceiving this truth, now, however, not only am I equally certain of it as I am of anything else that seems completely certain, but, moreover, I also observe that the certitude of all these other things depends on it so completely that without it nothing can ever be perfectly known [*sciri*].