

Hume, *Dialogues*, Part IX

Demea defends the argument from contingency (482)

- “Whatever exists must have a cause or reason of its existence.”
Since nothing can “produce itself,” or be the “cause of its own existence.”
- In “mounting up” from effect to cause, either (i) we arrive at “some ultimate cause that is *necessarily* existent,” or (ii) we do not.
- But (ii) is “absurd.”
Why? Because the *series as a whole* requires a cause as much as any of its members. If there were no necessarily existent being there would be no answer to the question, “why this particular succession or no succession at all.”
- So there must be a necessarily existent being
– i.e., a being “who carries the reason of his existence in himself; and who cannot be supposed not to exist without an express contradiction.”

COMMENT: This is not an especially felicitous statement of the argument from contingency. We don’t arrive at the Ultimate Cause by “mounting up” from one contingent cause to another. We arrive at the Ultimate Cause only when we ask for the cause of the series as a whole.

Cleanthes’ objections

- 1) No matter of fact can be proved *a priori*. (482-3)
 - a) Whatever we can (distinctly) conceive as existent, we can also (distinctly) conceive as non-existent.
 - b) Nothing that we can (distinctly) conceive implies a contradiction.
 - c) “There is no being, therefore, whose non-existence implies a contradiction.”
 - d) Nothing is demonstrable *a priori* unless its denial implies a contradiction.
 - e) Therefore, “there is no being, whose existence is demonstrable” *a priori*.

COMMENT: The *ontological* argument does indeed attempt to display a contradiction in the non-existence of God, but the *argument from contingency* does not do this. It merely tries to show that there must be a First Cause whose non-existence is absolutely impossible. It does not attempt to *exhibit* a contradiction in the non-existence of this being, or to explain just what makes its non-existence impossible.

- 2) Cleanthes next argues that the words, “necessary existence,” are meaningless.
The advocate of the argument from contingency may want to say that, although *we* can conceive of God’s non-existence, this is owing entirely to the fact that *we* cannot see what it is in God’s nature that makes his existence necessary. But *if*

(*per impossible*) “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.” (483)

Cleanthes responds in two ways:

- a) This cannot happen “while our faculties remain as at present. It will still be possible for us, at any time, at any time, to conceive the non-existence of what we formerly conceived to exist...” (483)

From this, Cleanthes concludes:

“The words, therefore, *necessary existence*, have no meaning; or, which is the same thing, none that is consistent.” (483)

COMMENT: This misses the point, doesn't it?

- b) But even if the proposed explanation of “necessary existence” were accepted, Cleanthes points out that it would work just as well to say that the *material universe* is the necessarily existent being we are looking for. If (*per impossible*) we knew the whole essence or nature of the material, it might be said, we would perceive *its* non-existence to be impossible. (483)

Only one argument for the contingency of the material universe has been given, viz., that we can consistently *conceive* of its non-existence. But this is just as good an argument for saying that God is contingent. (483)

- 3) Causes must *precede* their effects in time. Nothing could occur prior to a *beginningless* series of contingent causes and effects. Therefore such a series *could not* have a cause. (Remember that we are operating under the assumption that the world might be like this.) (484)

COMMENT: Is it impossible for a cause to be simultaneous with its effect?

- 4) In a beginningless chain of causes and effects, each member of the chain has a cause – viz., the previous member. But if *all* the members have causes, then the chain as a whole is fully accounted for. (484)

Did I show you the particular causes of twenty particles or matter, I should think it very unreasonable, should you afterward ask me, what was the cause of the whole twenty. (484)

COMMENT: This is fine for a finite series with a beginning. In that case the answer to the question, “Why the first one?” also gives the answer to the question, “Why any such series?” But in a beginningless series, there is no “first one,” and we are left to wonder why there was ever any such series of causes and effects.