Correspondence

Joseph Butler and Samuel Clarke

[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis . . . . indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth. Longer omissions are reported between brackets in normal-sized type.—At the time of this correspondence, Butler was a 21-year-old theology student; Clarke was 38 years old, and was already a well-known author of, among other things, *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God*, which is what Butler wrote to him about. Clarke's important exchange of papers with Leibniz began a year after the present correspondence ended.—This version will omit the opening salutations ('Reverend Sir' from Butler and 'Sir' from Clarke), and the signing-off flourishes.

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Glossary

beg the question: Until fairly recently, to 'beg the question' was to offer a 'proof' of P from premises that include P. It now means 'raise the question' ('That begs the question of what he was doing on the roof in the first place.') What seems to have happened is that complacently illiterate journalists (of whom there are many) encountered the phrase, liked it, guessed at its meaning, and saw no reason to check on the guess.

being: As an abstract noun this means 'existence' (proof of the being of God); as a concrete noun it means 'thing'. When on page 8 Clarke says that 'thought is not a being' he means that thought is not a *thing* but rather a state or property of a thing.

demonstration: This means 'strictly logically rigorous proof, knock-down proof'. That is what Clarke claimed to have in the book that attracted Butler's attention, and Butler's opening paragraph focuses on the difference between 'demonstrative' arguments and merely 'probable' ones.

immense: Infinitely large.

indifferent to: To say that someone is 'indifferent to' right motives is to say that his belief that a certain motive would be morally right has no affect on his behaviour.

natural religion: This is religion as inferred from facts about the natural world, e.g. empirical evidence about what the 'purposes' are of parts of organisms etc. It stands in contrast with 'revealed' religion; it is not clear why Butler should say in his first paragraph that revealed religion 'follows from' natural religion.

self-existing: To call God a 'self-existing being' is to say that God's existence is not an upshot of anything else; to understand why God exists you have only to have a full enough grasp of God's intrinsic nature. This was usually understood—as it is in these letters—as meaning that *God exists* is an absolutely necessary truth

***sine qua non*:** Latin meaning 'without which not'. If x is a *sine qua non* of y, y can't exist unless x does; or, as we say these days, x is a necessary condition of y. The Latin phrase is still used quite a lot, and is worth learning. Rhymes approximately with 'shiny hay con'.

vice, vicious: Morally wrong conduct, not necessarily of the special kind that we reserve 'vice' for these days, or the different special kind that we label as 'vicious'.

Butler's first letter (4.xi.1713)

I suppose you will be surprised at being disturbed by someone who is a perfect stranger to you, though you're not a stranger to him, but I hope the occasion will excuse my boldness. Ever since I thought myself capable of this sort of reasoning I have made it my business to prove to myself God's existence and his attributes. And being aware of the utter importance of this, I have tried to get a demonstrative [see Glossary] proof, not only •for my own satisfaction but also •in order to defend against all opponents the great truths of natural [see Glossary] religion, and those of the Christian revelation that follow from them. But I have to admit, unhappily, that so far I have been unsuccessful: I have found some very •probable arguments, but can't get any great distance with •demonstration in the proof of those things. Your book on those subjects is rightly admired by everyone I have talked with about it; and when it was first recommended to me I was in great hopes of having all my questions answered. But in some places in your book my hopes have been dashed—perhaps I haven't understood you, or perhaps there's some other cause, though I don't know what—so that now I almost despair of ever getting the satisfaction I have been searching for, unless I can get it by the method I am now using, ·namely writing to you for help·. I'm sure you know that two different expressions of the same thing, though they are equally clear to some readers, may strike others differently, so that some people find one of them very obscure and the other perfectly intelligible. Perhaps that is what is happening in my case: those of your arguments that I have doubts about might be perfectly convincing to me if they were differently worded. I can't help thinking that this is a sufficient excuse for my intruding on you with this letter—an excuse that I hope will be found adequate by someone who seems, as you do, to aim at nothing more than the good work of instructing others.

In your *Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God*, proposition 6, you propose to prove the •infinity or •omnipresence of the self-existing [see Glossary] Being. [In that sentence, 'or' means 'i.e.'; the idea is that God is infinite then he must be everywhere, and conversely.] The earlier part of the proof seems highly •probable; but the rest of it—which seems to aim at •demonstration—doesn't convince me. That later part of the paragraph is, I think, an entire argument in itself, namely this:

> 'To suppose a finite being to be self-existing is to say that •it is a contradiction for that being not to exist ·because it is self-existing·, and yet its absence can be conceived without a contradiction ·because it is finite·; which is the greatest absurdity in the world."

The sense of the words 'its absence' seems plainly to be fixed by your next sentence as meaning the thing's absence from any particular place. And that next sentence, which is to prove it to be an absurdity, is this:

> 'For if a being can without a contradiction be absent from one place, it can without a contradiction be absent from another place, and from all places.'

But the most that this proves is that if a being can without a contradiction be absent from one place at one time, it can without a contradiction be absent from another place, and so from all places, *at different times*. (For I can't see that if a being can be absent from one place at one time it can without a contradiction be absent from all places at the same time, i.e. can cease to exist.) Now, if that is all

that it proves, I can't see that it reduces the supposition to any absurdity. Suppose I demonstrate that a particular man will live for a thousand years: this man might without a contradiction be absent from this place, that place, all places, at different times; but it doesn't follow that he might be absent from all places *at the same time*, i.e. that he might cease to exist. No—that *would* be a contradiction, because we are supposing that he lives for a thousand years. It would be exactly the same if instead of 'a thousand years' I were to say 'for ever'; and the proof seems to be the same whether it is being applied to a self-existent or a dependent being.

The other thing I have to offer concerns your proof in Proposition 7 that the self-existent Being must necessarily be only one, ·i.e. that it is impossible for there to be two or more self-existent beings·:

> 'To suppose two or more different natures existing of themselves, necessarily and independent from each other, implies this plain contradiction: "Because they are independent of one another, each can be supposed to exist alone; so that it will be no contradiction to imagine the other not to exist; and consequently neither of them will be necessarily existing."'

[Just to make sure this is clear: Because A is independent of B, A could exist alone, i.e. in a world where B doesn't exist. And because B is independent of A, B could exist alone, i.e. in a world where A doesn't exist. So we are envisaging one possibility in which B doesn't exist, and another in which A doesn't exist; so clearly we are implying that neither A nor B exists necessarily.] The supposition does indeed imply that since each of these beings is independent of the other, either of them may exist alone, i.e. without any relation to or dependence on the other; but where is the linking idea to connect this proposition and the following one, namely that it will be no contradiction to imagine the other not to exist?. . . . ·I am entitled to ask what links the two propositions·:

(a) Either can be supposed to exist independently of the other.

(b) The other can be supposed not to exist at all.

The two are obviously *different*; and I'll leave it to your readers to decide whether **(b)** *immediately* follows from **(a)**. ·It's because I think it doesn't that I claim that you need some third item to link the two propositions to one another·. If there is an absurdity here, it doesn't appear at first sight to be any worse than the absurdity of saying that *the angles below the base of an isosceles triangle are unequal*. This is absolutely false, but I don't think anyone would present its contradictory as an axiom; because although the contradictory is true there needs to be a proof to show that it is so.

Someone might answer what I am saying thus:

> 'You haven't rightly explained the words "exist alone". They don't mean only **(i)** "exist independently of the other" but rather **(ii)** "exist while nothing else exists".'

[Butler's thought about this is clear and elegant, but his presentation makes it harder than it needs to be. What follows is a slightly ironed-out version of what he says, but it adds *nothing* to its content. What we are confronted with here are three propositions:

(a) Two different natures exist of themselves, necessarily and independently of each other.

(b) Either of them can exist independently of the other.

(c) Either of them can exist while nothing else exists.

(d) It is possible for either of them not to exist.

If they exist necessarily, then **(d)** cannot be true, which is to say that it contradicts **(a)**. But there is an ambiguity in **(a)**: on one understanding of it, **(a)** does imply **(b)**, but **(b)** doesn't imply **(d)**. Given that the two things are independent of one another, neither of them will be held in existence by the other one, but each might be held in existence by something

else, namely the necessity of its own nature. On the other understanding of the ambiguity, we have **(c)**, which does imply **(d)**, but isn't implied by **(a)**. Either way, there seems to be no deductive route form **(a)** to **(d)**.]

I have proposed my doubts, with the reasons for them. If in this I have pulled your words into meaning something other than what you meant by them, or if I have in any way argued unfairly, I assure you that I didn't intend to do so, and I hope you will attribute it to a mere mistake. If it won't give you too much trouble, let me once more beg the favour of a line from you. . . .

Clarke's first reply (10.xi.1713)

If the authors of controversial papers regularly wrote with the candour and straightforwardness with which you present your difficulties, I'm convinced that most disputes could be very amicably terminated, either by men's eventually coming to agree in opinion, or at least by their finding reason to accept their differences in a friendly spirit.

Your two objections are very ingenious, and urged with great strength and acuteness; but I think I may be able to give you satisfaction in both of them. To **your first objection** I answer as follows. If something can without a contradiction be absent from some one place at some one time, it can without a contradiction be absent from all places at all times. For anything that is absolutely necessary at all is absolutely necessary in every part of space and at every point in time. Whatever can at any time be conceived as possibly absent from any one part of space can for the same reason—namely, implying no contradiction in the nature of things—be conceived as possibly absent from every other part of space at the same time; either by going out of existence or by never having begun to exist. Your example about a man who lives for a thousand years is what (I think) led you into the mistake; and it's a good example to lead you out of it again. You may suppose that a man will live for a thousand years, or God may reveal and promise that he will live that long, and on that supposition ·or on that promise· it won't be possible for the man to be absent from all places in any part of that time. Very true; but *why* won't it be possible? Only because it is contrary to your supposition or to God's promise; it's not contrary to the absolute nature of things, which would be the case if the man existed necessarily (as every part of space does). In supposing you could *demonstrate* that a man will live for a thousand years (or for one year), you are making an impossible and contradictory supposition. Even if you know for certain (by revelation, suppose) that he will live that long, this is only the certainty of a something's being •true in fact, not •in itself necessary; and demonstration is applicable only to what is necessary in itself, necessary in all places and at all times equally.

To **your second difficulty** I answer as follows. [In this next sentence, the switch from 'must' to 'may' is Clarke's.] Anything that exists necessarily not only •must exist alone in such a way as to be independent of anything else, but also (being self-sufficient) •may also exist alone in such a way that everything else may possibly be supposed not to exist at all ('possibly' meaning 'without any contradiction in the nature of things'); and consequently—given that something that can possibly be supposed not to exist at all isn't necessarily existent—no other thing can be necessarily existent. If something exists necessarily, its existence is needed for anything else to be able to exist; so nothing can possibly be supposed to exist without presupposing. . . .the existence of that which is necessary. For example, supposing the existence of anything whatever necessarily includes supposing the existence of space and time; and if anything could exist without space or time it would follow that space and time didn't necessarily exist. Therefore, to suppose of something that it might possibly exist alone, so as not necessarily to include the presupposition of some other thing, proves demonstrably that the other thing in question doesn't exist necessarily; because if it did exist necessarily it couldn't possibly, in any conception whatsoever, be supposed away. There can't

possibly be any notion of the existence of something—there can't possibly be any notion of existence *period*—that doesn't pre-include [Clarke's word] the notion of that which exists necessarily. And, consequently, the two propositions ·**(b)** and **(d)** on page 2· which you judged to be independent of one another are really necessarily connected. These sorts of things are hard to express, and hard to think about except by very attentive minds; but to anyone who will attend, I think, nothing is more demonstrably convincing.

If anything still sticks with you in this, or any other part of my books, I shall be very willing to be informed of it.

Butler's second letter (23.xi.1713)

I have often thought that the chief causes of men's differing so much in their opinions were either •their not understanding each other or else •their turning away from the honest search for truth in order to find out arguments for the proof of what they have once asserted. However, there certainly may be other reasons for persons not agreeing in their opinions; and when there are, I have to agree with you that they'll find reason to live in friendly disagreement, because each man's way of thinking is in some respects exclusively his own.

I am sorry to have to tell you that your answers to my objections are not satisfactory. The reasons why I think them not so, are as follows:

·In answer to my **first difficulty**· you say: 'Anything that is absolutely necessary at all is absolutely necessary in every part of space and at every point in time.' If this were evident, it would certainly prove what you want it to prove, namely that whatever can without a contradiction be absent from one place at one time can also be absent from all places at all times. But I don't find that the idea of *being everywhere* is contained in the idea of self-existence, or directly follows from it; the nearest I can get to it is the thesis that whatever exists must exist somewhere. You add: 'Whatever can at any time be conceived as possibly absent from any one part of space can for the same reason—namely, implying no contradiction in the nature of things—be conceived as possibly absent from every other part of space at the same time.' Now, I can't see that I can make these two suppositions for the same reason. . . . The reason why

I conceive this being as possibly absent from one place

is that this **doesn't contradict** the previous proof, drawn from the nature of things, that it must necessarily exist. But as for this:

I can conceive this being as possibly absent from every part of space at the very same time;

that **directly contradicts** the proof that the thing must exist somewhere; and so it is an explicit contradiction.

You might be swayed by the apparent similarity of these:

- •When we have proved the three angles of a triangle to be equal to two right angles, the relation of *equality between its angles and two right angles* will be—·will exist·—wherever a triangle exists.
- •When we have proved the necessary existence of a being, this being must exist everywhere.

But there's a great difference between these. One is the proof of a certain *relation* on the supposition of the existence of a thing with such-and-such properties, ·namely the properties that make it a triangle·, from which it follows that wherever this being with these properties exists, this relation must exist too. But from the proof of the necessary existence of a *being* it doesn't obviously follow that it exists everywhere. ·When in the example I gave I spoke of demonstrating that a man would live for a thousand years·, my using the word 'demonstration' instead of 'proof that leaves no room for doubt' was sheer carelessness, for I never heard of strict demonstration of any matter of fact.

In your answer to my **second difficulty** you say: 'If something exists necessarily, its existence is needed for anything else to be able to exist.' I can see that all the consequences you draw from this proposition do demonstrably follow, which shows me that the two propositions—·**(b)** and **(d)** on page 2·—I thought to be independent of one another are closely connected. But what grounds are there for the

thesis that the existence of whatever exists necessarily is required for the existence of anything else? I can think of only two answers that you might give.

(i) It is like the need for space and time if anything is to exist.

(ii) The necessarily existing thing is needed as the *cause* of the existence of everything else.

If you go with **(i)**—which the example you give seems to show that you do—then I answer that space and time are very abstruse [here = 'abstract'] in their natures; I don't think they can properly be called *things*, but are considered rather as *states or properties* that belong to the existence of all things and have to come before the things in the order of our thoughts. The suggestion that

> *A necessarily existing being is needed for the existence of any other being*

is true for the same reason that

> *Space and time are needed for the existence of any other being*

strikes me as being on a par with

> *There is a triangular thought*;

the point being that •triangularity no more belongs to •thought than •the existence of something that exists necessarily belongs to •the existence of anything else. If on the other hand you go with **(ii)**, and maintain that the existence of whatever is a necessary being is needed as the *cause* of the existence of everything else, I think this is plainly begging the question [see Glossary], because it assumes that any other being that exists •is caused to do so, and therefore •doesn't exist necessarily. And I can't conceive of any basis other than **(i)** or **(ii)** for saying that the existence of a necessary being is needed for anything else to exist.

Thus, sir, you see that I entirely agree with all your inferences from your premises, but I can't see that the premises are true.

In writing this I have aimed at nothing in my style except to be intelligible, because I am aware that it is very difficult (as you remark) to express oneself on subjects like this, especially for one who is altogether unaccustomed to write about them.

I have nothing to add except my sincerest thanks for your trouble in answering my letter, and for your offer of readiness to learn of any other difficulty that I may encounter in any of your writings. I'm willing to interpret this as something like a promise of an answer to what I have written in this letter, if anything in it deserves an answer.

Clarke's second reply (28.xi.1713)

·**Concerning the first difficulty:**· It seems to me that the reason why you don't see *being everywhere* as necessarily connected with self-existence is that when you think about these matters you •first conceive a being (a finite being, suppose) •and then conceive self-existence to be a property of it; in the way that the angles are properties of a triangle when a triangle exists. Whereas necessity of existence is not

•a property that something may have if the thing exists, but rather

•the prior cause or ground of a thing's existing.

So it is evident that this necessity, not being limited to some antecedent subject as angles are to a triangle, but being itself basic, absolute, and (in order of nature) antecedent to all existence, *must* be •everywhere for the same reason that it is •anywhere. By applying this reasoning to the instance of space, you will find that by consequence it belongs truly to that substance whereof space is a property or mode of existence, as duration also is. [The preceding sentence is exactly as Clarke wrote it.] What you say about a necessary being existing somewhere presupposes that the being is finite; so it presupposes that some cause determined that precisely such-and-such a quantity of that being should exist; and there are only two possibilities for what that cause might be: it might be •a voluntary cause, ·i.e. the upshot of a decision by a thinking being·, or it might be •an ordinary necessitating cause whose power-level must be determined and limited by some other cause. But in basic absolute necessity, which is antecedent (in order of nature) to the existence of anything, neither of those can be the case. So the necessity is necessarily the same everywhere.

Concerning the second difficulty, I answer as follows. Something that exists necessarily is needed for the existence of any other thing, not as a needed •*cause* of other things' existing (for that would indeed be begging the question) but as a •*sine qua non* [see Glossary] of their existing, in the same way that space is necessary to everything, and nothing can possibly be conceived to exist without thereby presupposing space; from which I infer that space is a property or state of the self-existent substance; and because space is obviously necessary itself, the substance of which it is a property must also be necessary—necessary •in itself, and necessary for the existence of anything else whatsoever. It's true that extension doesn't belong to thought, ·but that is· because thought is not a being [see Glossary]. Extension *is* needed for the existence of every being—whatever other qualities (e.g. thought) that being has.

Butler's third letter (5.xii.1713)

I don't very well understand your meaning when you say that you think that when I think about these matters I first conceive a being (a finite being, suppose) and then conceive self-existence to be a property of it. If you mean this:

> I first •suppose a finite being to exist I don't know why; then •affirm necessity of existence to be only an upshot of its existence; and then, having supposed it to be finite, I •confidently conclude it is not infinite;

I am utterly at a loss to know what I said in my letter that could have led you to this conjecture ·about my thought-processes·. But if you mean this:

> I first of all prove a being to exist from eternity, and then from the reasons of things prove that such a being must be eternally necessary,

I freely admit it. And I don't see anything irregular or absurd in this, because there's a big difference between •the order in which things exist and •the order in which I prove to myself that they exist. Also, I don't think that my saying that a necessary being exists somewhere presupposes that it is finite; it only presupposes that this being exists in space, without determining whether here, or there, or everywhere.

To my second objection, you say that that which exists necessarily is needed for the existence of anything else, as a *sine qua non*, in the way in which space is necessary to everything. And you say that this is proved thus:

> •Space is a property of the self-existent substance;
> •Space is both necessary in itself and needed for the existence of everything else;

therefore

> •The substance of which space is a property must also be needed for the existence of everything else.

I accept that space is in one sense a property of the self-existent substance; but in that same sense it is also a property of all other substances—the only difference is •quantitative [meaning that the only difference between your spatiality and God's is that you spread through •*less* space than God does]. And since it's not just the whole of space but every part of it that is necessary, it follows that *every substance must be self-existent* because it has this self-existent property. You won't accept that conclusion; but it directly follows from your arguments; so there is something wrong with the arguments.

What you say under the first heading provides (I think) a highly •probable argument, though I can't see it as having the evidentness of •demonstration; but I can't at all see the force of your arguments under the second heading.

It gives me no pleasure to be able to present objections to your arguments. If I had been able to enter into your reasonings and see the force of them, I would have thought that was an honour, not to mention the satisfaction it would have given me in my own mind. I can't want to trespass any more upon your time, when you have better things to do; so I only add my hearty thanks for your trouble on my account.

Clarke's third reply (10.xii.1713)

Which ever way I look at it, I am fully convinced that there is no defect in my argument; but its presenting a difficulty to someone as able and insightful as you are shows me that there must be some lack of clearness ·in what I have written·. I didn't mean that your saying that a necessary being *exists somewhere* has to presuppose that the being is finite. All I meant was that your way of putting things is apt to arouse in the mind an idea of a finite being, at the same time that you are thinking of a necessary being, without accurately attending to the *kind* of necessity by which it exists. Necessity that is absolute and antecedent (in order of nature) to the existence of any subject has nothing to limit it; if it operates at all (which it must do), it must operate (if I may so speak) everywhere and at all times alike. If something x lasts for a particular time and exists in a particular place, those limitations on it must arise from something external to x itself. Consider:

> Why is it that scattered through the immense ·nearly· empty stretches of space there are just precisely n ounces of matter?

·Think of the question as being asked for the right value of n, whatever that may be·. No answer can be given. There can't be anything in nature that could have settled something so intrinsically indifferent—·so trivial and unimportant·—as is the value of n, except for the will of a thinking and free agent. To suppose that something that exists necessarily—matter, or whatever—occupies precisely 7 in^3 is exactly the same absurdity as supposing that something exists necessarily for just 7 years—which everyone sees to be a plain contradiction. There's a parallel argument about the origin of motion. Motion can't exist necessarily. Why not? Because obviously any particular way of moving is as possible for a body as any other; so the answer to

> 'Why did body x move to the right rather than to the left at that moment?'

can't be

> 'Because movement in that direction by x was necessary in itself.'

So the answer must be either

> 'Because it was caused to do so by the will of a free thinking agent,

or else

> 'There is no answer; that movement of x was an effect produced and determined without any cause at all.

And this is an express contradiction, as I have shown early in my *Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God*.

To the second head of argument I answer as follows. Space is a property or mode of •the self-existent substance but not of •any other substances. All other substances are in space, and have space all through them; but the self-existent substance isn't *in* space and doesn't have space all *through* it; rather, it is itself (if I may so speak) the substratum of space, ·the basic *thing* that has this *property*·, the ground of the very existence of space and time. It's very clear that space and time are necessary, though they aren't themselves substances but rather properties or states; so the substance ·that *has* them—the substance· without which they couldn't exist—is itself much more necessary than they are (or would be if that were possible!). And as space and time are needed for (i.e. are a *sine qua non* of) the existence of everything else, so also, therefore, is the substance to which these properties belong in the special manner I have described.

Butler's fourth letter (16.xii.1713)

Whatever explains my not seeing the force of your reasonings, I can't attribute it (as you do) to a lack of clarity on your part. I know myself too well to think that if I don't understand an argument, that shows that the argument is either poorly expressed or not conclusive—unless I can clearly show its defect. With the greatest satisfaction, I must tell you now that the more I reflect on your first argument, the more convinced I am of the truth of it. It now seems to me entirely unreasonable to think that absolute necessity can have any relation to one part of space more than another; and if that is right, an absolutely necessary being must exist everywhere.

I wish I were as well satisfied with the other argument. You say that all substances except the self-existent one are in space, and have space all through them. Well, no doubt all substances—whether body or spirit—do exist in space; but when I say that a spirit exists in space, I don't see how I could explain what I mean by this except to say. . . [In Butler's completion of this, too much is happening at once. Having seemed to announce an account of •what it is for **(a)** one spirit to **(b)** be in a certain location, he instead gives an account of •what it is for **(c)** spirits in general to **(d)** have a certain size. What he says about that is that the size of spirits is the size of the largest region of space in which a spirit can *act* at one time. Butler continues:] Actually, I think the spatial aspects of the existence of spirits involves something that more directly corresponds to the spatial aspects of the existence of body; but I can't possibly form any idea of what that is or of how spirits exist in space. And it seems much *more* difficult (if that were possible) to discover how the self-existent Being relates to space. In my last letter I pretty well asserted that he exists in space in the same way that other substances do; but that was rash, was perhaps putting the Creator too much on a level with the creature, and in any case isn't plainly and evidently true. To say that the self-existent substance is the 'substratum' of space, in the ordinary sense of that word, is barely intelligible, and it certainly isn't obviously true. Now, though there may be a hundred relations other than those two—·i.e. other than the one I proposed and the one you proposed·—but I can't conceive how we might come by ideas of them. When it is said that 'the self-existent substance is the substratum of space, or the ground of its existence' we may indeed have ideas for those words, and not be entirely deserting the words' ordinary meanings; but I see no reason to think that the statement is true. Space seems to me to be as absolutely self-existent as anything can possibly be: whatever other supposition we choose to make—·i.e. whatever thought-experiment we conduct·—we can't help supposing immense [see Glossary] space, because there must be either an infinity of being or else (if you will allow the expression) an infinite vacuity ·or emptiness or absence· of being. You might object to this as follows:

(1) Space is indeed really necessary, but that is only because it is a property of the self-existent substance;
(2) It's being necessary is very obvious; its depending on the self-existent substance is less so;
(3) Because of **(2)**, we are ready to conclude that space is not merely self-existent but necessary absolutely, ·i.e. in a way that doesn't depend on anything else·;
(4) And that in turn is the reason why the idea of space forces itself in on our minds, without our having any thought of anything else that might be the basis for its existence.

Now this really is an objection, but it isn't a direct answer to what I have said, because it presupposes the thing that was to be proved, namely that *the reason why space is necessary is its being a property of a self-existent substance*. And granting that we can't say

It's obvious that space *is* absolutely self-existent,

while this matter is still in doubt we can't say, either,

It's obvious that space *isn't* absolutely self-existent.

So we aren't entitled to argue as though we were sure that space is only a property of the self-existent substance.. . . .

I can see that all your inferences from your supposition are sound; if the supposition were obviously true, I think it would serve to prove the result that you want it for and several other results as well. For that reason I would be extremely pleased to see it proved by anyone. Because I have made the search after truth the business of my life, I shan't be ashamed to learn from anyone; though I can't help being aware that instruction from some men, like the gift of a prince, reflects honour on the person on whom it lays an obligation. Your obliged servant. . .

Clarke's fourth reply (29.i.1714)

My being out of town through most of January, and some other things that came up, prevented me from answering your letter sooner. The sum of the difficulties it contains is (I think) this: •it is hard to determine how the self-existent substance relates to space; •to say it is the 'substratum' of space in the ordinary sense of that word is barely intelligible, or at least isn't obviously true; •space seems to be as absolutely self-existent as anything could possibly be; and •its being a property of the self-existent substance can't be presupposed because it is the thing that was to be proved. This indeed gets right to the bottom of the matter, and I'll try to give you as brief and clear an answer as I can.

'The self-existent substance is the substratum of space' and 'Space is a property of the self-existent substance' are not perhaps very proper expressions; and it isn't easy to find ways of putting it that are proper. But here's what I mean: the idea of space (as also the idea of time) is an abstract or partial idea. It's an idea of a certain quality or relation that we clearly see to exist necessarily; but because it isn't itself a substance it necessarily presupposes a substance without which it couldn't exist; and this substance must itself exist necessarily (even more necessarily, if that is possible). The best way I know of to explain this is through the following analogous case. •When a blind man tries to form for himself the idea of *body*, all he achieves is the idea of *hardness*. •A sighted man who had no power of motion and no tactual sense, when *he* tried to form the idea of body he would achieve only the idea of *colour*. Now, hardness is not body, and colour is not body; but in the minds of those men those properties necessarily imply the existence of a substance of which they have no idea. Similarly for us, space is not itself ·a· substance, but it necessarily implies the existence of a substance that doesn't affect any our present senses; and because that quality or relation is necessary, it follows that the substance that it implies is (much more) necessary.

Butler's fifth letter (3.ii.1714)

You have comprehensively expressed in a few lines all the difficulties of my letter. I would have tried to make it shorter if I hadn't been afraid of expressing myself wrongly and leading you to mistake my meaning. I'm glad the debate has been narrowed down in this way, because I think that it now entirely turns upon this one question: Are our ideas of space and time partial, so as to presuppose the existence of some other thing? Your example of the blind man is very suitable to explain your meaning, which I think I fully understand, but it doesn't seem to entirely settle the issue between us. Why does the blind man conclude that there must be something external ·to him· to give him that idea of hardness? It's because he thinks he couldn't be affected in this way unless there were some cause of it; remove the cause and the effect—·the feeling of hardness·—would immediately vanish, and any residual idea of hardness that he had would be through memory. Now, to apply this to the instance of space and duration: a man who has ideas of space and time rightly infers that something external must be the cause of them; so if that cause (whatever it is) were to be taken away, those ideas of his would disappear also; and if something x that he thinks is the cause is taken away yet the ideas persist, x can't be the real cause. [Something has come unstuck in Butler's next sentence. It is meant to produce something that '. . . seems to show that the self-existent substance is not the substratum of space and duration'; but what goes before that makes no sense: 'Now, granting the self-existent substance to be the substratum of these ideas, could we make the supposition of its ceasing to be, yet space and duration would still remain unaltered: which. . . '. Let us press on:] And it won't solve this the difficulty to say that every property of the self-existent substance is as necessary as the substance itself, because that holds only for as long as the substance itself exists—it's an upshot of the fact that the idea of *property* implies the impossibility of existing without a substratum. I admit that the supposition ·of the non-existence of a being that necessarily exists· is absurd; but how can we know whether something is a property of such a substance except by examining whether it would cease to exist if its supposed substance did so? Despite what I have just said, I can't say that I believe that your argument is not conclusive; for I have to admit to my ignorance—I am really at a loss about the nature of space and time. But if it were obviously true that they are properties of a substance, that would give us an easy way to deal with the atheists, because it would prove demonstratively •that there is an eternal necessary self-existent Being, •that there is only *one* such, and •that he is needed for the existence of all other things. Which makes me think that although your view may be true, it isn't obvious to people at every intellectual level; otherwise it would have been generally used as a basic argument for the existence of God.

I must add one thing more. Your argument for the omnipresence of God always seemed to me very probable. It was because I wanted to have it appear as demonstratively conclusive that I sometimes had to say things that I didn't think were wholly true. I didn't do this for the sake of disputing; I'm not temperamentally given to that, and anyway if I had wanted to waste someone's time I wouldn't have chosen you! My purpose was just to make the objection show up clearly, so that it could be more fully answered. . . .

Clarke's fifth reply (8.iv.1714)

In the bustle of affairs I mislaid your last letter, and couldn't answer it until I happened to come across it among my papers. We seem to have pushed the issue between us as far as it will go; and I have to say that in debates like this one I have seldom met with anyone as reasonable and unprejudiced as you have been.

I think that all I need to say in answer to the reasoning in your letter is that when you grant the absurdity of the supposition you were trying to make you are thereby granting the necessary truth of my argument [Clarke's phrase]. If space and time necessarily remain even after they are supposed to be taken away, the substance on whose existence they depend will likewise necessarily remain even after *it* is supposed to be taken away; which shows that the supposed 'taking away' is impossible and contradictory. (This assumes that space and time are not themselves substances, as obviously they are not.)

Near the end of your letter you remark that if the argument I have been pressing were obvious to people at every intellectual level it would have been used more often as a basic proof of God's existence. I think that the true cause of its having been seldom used is this:

> •The universal prevalence of Descartes's absurd notions—
>
> > •teaching that matter is necessarily infinite and necessarily eternal,
> > •explaining everything in terms of mere mechanical laws of motion,
> > •banishing from the government of the world all purposes, all will and intelligence, and divine Providence
>
> has incredibly blinded the eyes of common reason, and prevented men from discerning ·God·, him in whom they live and move and have their being.

There have been other examples of something similar. Think how widespread down through the centuries has been the view that eternity is not temporal and infinity is not spatial! The same kind of thing has happened in the matter of transubstantiation, and (I think) in the scholastic notion of the Trinity.

Butler's sixth letter (6.x.1714)

[This is not a response to Clarke's fifth reply (8.iv.1714). There must have been at least one philosophically contentful letter-and-response in the intervening six months, and the topic has changed.]

For a long time I resisted an inclination to ask for your thoughts about the difficulty mentioned in my last letter, and then it occurred to me that any trouble you took in answering it would only be carrying on the general purpose of your life, and that I could claim the same right to your instructions as others have. Despite that, I wouldn't have written to you about the difficulty if I hadn't thought (as is natural when one things one sees a thing clearly) that I could easily express it clearly to you. [Butler is here semi-apologising for an earlier letter that we don't have. Evidently Clarke didn't find it perfectly clear; and Butler is now apologising for writing a second time about it.] However, I certainly wouldn't have troubled you on this subject a second time if you hadn't explicitly allowed me to do so. I mention all this so that you won't suspect me of unfairly taking advantage of your obligingness; I really wouldn't trouble you with anything but objections that strike me as substantial and that I can't get rid of any other way.

For us to be moral agents we need not only •a capacity to tell which motives are morally right but also—equally essential—•a disposition in our natures to be influenced by right motives. These two are I think quite distinct perceptions [Butler's word], the former being only our understanding, i.e. our faculty for seeing truth, and the latter a conscious being's desire for his own happiness. Because a disposition to be influenced by right motives is a *sine qua non* of virtuous actions, being indifferent [see Glossary] to right motives must make us incapable of virtuous actions, or make us. . . .not moral agents. I don't in fact think that any rational creature is strictly speaking *indifferent to* right motives, but there does exist something that for present purposes is the same, namely a stronger disposition to be influenced by contrary or wrong motives; and I think that that's what is the case whenever any vice [see Glossary] is committed. But you may be right in your hint that this stronger disposition to be influenced by vicious motives is contracted by repeated acts of wickedness, so let us consider the *first* vicious action someone is guilty of—·being the first, it owes nothing to a habit of vice cause by repeated vicious actions·. No man would have committed this first vicious action if his disposition to be influenced by the motives of this vicious action hadn't been at least as strong as his disposition to be influenced by the motives of the contrary virtuous action. From this I infer—and it's a perfectly safe inference—that every man, in advance of committing his first vice (and everyone *has* committed one), had a stronger disposition to be influenced by the vicious motive than by the virtuous one (and everyone does have a virtuous one antecedent to his first vice). Here's my difficulty about this:

> A stronger natural disposition to be influenced by the vicious motive than by the virtuous one seems, for all present purposes, to put the man in the same condition as he would be in if he were indifferent [see Glossary] to the virtuous motive; and **indifference to the virtuous motive** would have made the man incapable of being a moral agent or of being guilty for anything; so doesn't that same moral incapacity also arise from **a stronger disposition to be influenced by the vicious motive**?

Suppose I have two diversions [= 'entertainments'] offered to

me, and I can't have both. I like both of them, but have a stronger inclination to one x than to the other y; I am not indeed strictly indifferent to either, because I would be glad to enjoy both; but aren't I in exactly in the same situation, so far as my behaviour is concerned, as if I were absolutely indifferent to y? You hold that man is naturally equipped with a disposition to be influenced by virtuous motives, and that this disposition is a *sine qua non* of virtuous actions. I completely agree with you on both points. But you don't mention the natural inclination to be influenced by vicious motives; whenever a vice is committed this disposition is at least as strong as the other; and in the first vicious action it isn't affected by ·vicious· habits, but is as natural as the other and as much out of a man's power.

Clarke's sixth reply (about 8.x.1714

Your objection seems indeed very skillful, but I really think that basically there's nothing in it. Don't just take my word for that; listen to my reasons.

[In this letter Clarke will speak of being influenced by wrong motives

- 'formally and as such',
- 'formally'
- 'as such'.

For him these are synonymous. They mean *at least*

'influenced by wrong motives in full awareness of their wrongness',

and possibly *also* mean

'. . . and motivated by that awareness'.

Decide for yourself whether that extra bit is part of what he means.]

A disposition to be influenced by right motives is, I think, what we call rationality. [He is evidently thinking of the time-hallowed definition of 'human being' as 'rational animal', implying that 'human being who isn't disposed to be influenced by good motives' is a contradiction in terms, like 'four-sided triangle'.] A man can't naturally have any such thing as a disposition to be influenced by wrong motives. All there can be is a perverseness of will, and I think it is very doubtful that even that can be said to amount to a disposition to be influenced by wrong motives formally and as such. Men have by nature strong inclinations to certain objects. None of these inclinations are vicious, but vice consists in going after one of those objects in circumstances where reason, i.e. the natural disposition to be influenced by right motives, declares to the man's conscience at the same time that the object ought not to be pursued in those circumstances. (Declares, or *would* declare if he attended to it.) Where the man commits the crime, the natural disposition was only towards the object, not formally towards doing it upon wrong motives; and generally the very essence of the crime consists in •the liberty of the will forcibly overruling the actual disposition towards being influenced by right motives, and not at all (as you suppose) in •the man's having any natural disposition to be influenced by wrong motives, as such.

Butler's seventh letter (10.x.1714)

I had the honour of receiving your kind letter yesterday, and I must admit that I do now see a difference between the nature of •our disposition to be influenced by virtuous motives and that of •the contrary disposition (or whatever else it may properly be called) that is the occasion of our committing sin; and I hope eventually to get a thorough insight into this subject by means of the helps you have been so good as to offer me. My need to consider such very abstruse questions comes up at different times and in different dispositions; and I have found particular use for this method when thinking about the abstract subject of *necessity* [i.e. the 'method' of thinking about necessity at different times and in different moods]; for although when I had finished writing to you about the unity of the Divine Nature I still didn't see the force of your argument on that subject, I am now fully satisfied that the argument is conclusive. A final note: something in my last letter must have been unclear, for I didn't at all mean to say that the essence of any crime consisted in the man's having a natural disposition to be influenced by wrong motives. [The second half of this letter concerns Butler's plans for his own education, signing off. . .]

With the greatest respect and gratitude for all your favours. . .

[We have no record of a reply to this by Clarke.]