Clarke, Composition, and the Cosmological Argument

According to the late William Rowe, “the most sophisticated and fully developed form of the [cosmological] argument is the eighteenth-century version developed by Samuel Clarke [1675-1729].”¹ Originally delivered as the Boyle Lectures in 1704 (8 sermons at St. Paul’s Cathedral)—and subsequently published under the title *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God, more particularly in Answer to Mr Hobbes, Spinoza, and their Followers, wherein the Notion of Liberty is Stated, and the Possibility and Certainty of it Proved, in Opposition to Necessity and Fate*—Clarke’s formulation, Rowe tells us, constitutes “the most complete, forceful, and cogent presentation of the Cosmological Argument we possess.”² On the logic of Clarke’s arguments, Rowe quotes no less an authority than George Boole (1815-1864):

...they [i.e., Clarke’s arguments] are almost always specimens of correct logic, and they exhibit a subtlety of apprehension and a force of reasoning which have seldom been equaled, never perhaps surpassed.³

Who wouldn’t be delighted with such a ringing endorsement (especially from a logician of Boole’s stature)? And yet Rowe casts a cold eye on Clarke’s argument, devoting some 200 pages of criticism to a mere 20 pages from the *Demonstration* (itself 92 pages in length in the 1998 Cambridge edition).

Indeed, Rowe’s negative case is so formidable that some philosophers of religion have simply conceded that Clarke’s argument is invalid. Clarke’s main contention is that to suppose there is an endless succession of dependent beings “without any original cause at all” is “plainly impossible and contradictory”—so much so that “very few atheists ever were so weak as openly and directly to defend it.”⁴ “He who supposes there is no original independent being in the universe,” says Clarke, “supposes a contradiction.”⁵ Strong words. In short, the co-assertions *There is a universe* and *There is no God* are logically incompatible.

But here Richard Swinburne demurs:

[N]otoriously, attempts to derive obviously incoherent propositions from such co-assertions have failed through the commission of some elementary logical error.⁶

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² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
⁵ Ibid., p. 14.
Atheism does seem to be a supposition consistent with the existence of...our universe. Of course things may not be as they seem, but in the absence of any worthwhile argument to the contrary known to me, I shall assume the non-existence of God is logically compatible with the existence of the universe, and that [Clarke’s] cosmological argument is not a valid, and so not a good, deductive argument.⁷

The co-assertions seem to be consistent, he says, but then again “things may not be as they seem.” But then apart from actually exposing Clarke’s “elementary logical error,” it’s hard to see how Swinburne is justified in assuming the argument’s invalidity. To be sure, he does tell his reader that Rowe has provided a “very full and interesting treatment” of Clarke’s Argument; so perhaps he’s satisfied that Rowe has uncovered the error.⁸

Well, as it happens, there is an inference allegedly rising to the level of “logical error.” Rowe accuses Clarke of a modal composition fallacy:

Clarke tries to establish the proposition that it is possible for there to be no dependent beings by inferring it from the proposition that no dependent being necessarily exists...The difficulty is that this inference does not appear to be sanctioned by any valid rule of modal logic.⁹

I believe that Rowe’s modal accusation here is misconceived. I begin with a brief sketch of Clarke’s Argument. Then I show that Rowe’s composition complaint falters, since (as he admits elsewhere) “it is not always a fallacy to infer that a whole has a certain property from the premise that all of its constituent parts have that property.”¹⁰ Clarke’s inference, I argue, is an exception to this general rule.

1 CLARKE’S CONTENTION

1.1 THE FIRST STAGE

Clarke’s cosmological argument unfolds in three propositions. In the first, he attempts to show that “something has existed from all eternity.”¹¹ In the second, that “something” is narrowed down to “some one unchangeable and independent being.”¹² And in the third, he argues that this being “must be self-existent, that is, necessarily existing.”¹³

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⁷ Swinburne, The Existence of God, p. 120.
⁸ Compare Swinburne: “Clarke’s argument, treated as a deductive argument, has received very full and interesting treatment in W. L. Rowe, The Cosmological Argument...This is one reason why I concentrate on Leibniz’s version” (ibid., p. 119, fn. 2).
¹¹ Clarke, Demonstration, p. 8.
¹² Ibid., p. 10.
¹³ Ibid., p. 12.
Of the first proposition, Clarke says that “there is little need of being particular in the proof of it.”\textsuperscript{14} This is because it is “so evident and undeniable a proposition, that no atheist in any age has ever presumed to assert the contrary.”\textsuperscript{15} That’s certainly true of Rowe. Even so, he isn’t happy with how Clarke comes by it. From the fact that

\begin{enumerate}
\item something now is
\end{enumerate}

“it is evident,” says Clarke, that

\begin{enumerate}
\item something always was.
\end{enumerate}

For “otherwise the things that now are must have been produced out of nothing, absolutely and without a cause, which is a plain contradiction in terms.”\textsuperscript{16} And this, in turn, is evident:

\begin{quote}
For, to say a thing is produced and yet there is no cause at all for the production, is to say that something is effected when it is effected by nothing, that is, at the same time when it is not effected at all.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

Unfortunately, Rowe misconstrues the argument at this point. He represents Clarke as reasoning:

\begin{enumerate}
\item “Something has been produced out of nothing” entails “Something has been produced and not produced.”
\end{enumerate}

Therefore:

\begin{enumerate}
\item “Something has been produced out of nothing” is a contradiction.
\end{enumerate}

But if so, then (2) is true: something has always existed. Rowe then remarks:

\begin{quote}
The difficulty is that the premise, (3a), is false. It is false because, although “Something has been produced out of nothing” entails “Something has not been produced,” it surely does not entail “Something has been produced.” To say “Something has been produced out of [by] nothing” is to say no more than “Something exists which has not been produced.”\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

Right. And if that were Clarke’s argument, Rowe might have a point. But Clarke isn’t reasoning that way. He’s not saying that “Something has been produced out of nothing”—that proposition just in itself—is or entails a contradiction. Not at all. Rowe has

\textsuperscript{14} Clarke, Demonstration, p. 8.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} Rowe, The Cosmological Argument, 2d. ed., p. 62.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
tragically cut off the last sentence of the argument, actually treating it as “what appears to be a second argument”\textsuperscript{20} for Proposition I. Here is the sentence:

\begin{quote}
Whatever exists, has a cause, a reason, a ground of its existence; (a foundation, on which its existence relies; a ground or reason why it doth exist rather than not exist;) either in the necessity of its own nature...or in the will of some other being.\textsuperscript{21}
\end{quote}

This is of course the famous Principle of Sufficient Reason (hereafter, PSR). A couple of things to note. First, PSR is not an argument; on its face, it’s a universally quantified (“whatever”) sentence—more exactly, the conjunction of two universally quantified conditionals:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textbf{PSR(a):} For any thing \( x \), if \( x \) exists, then the existence of \( x \) has a ground, reason, or cause—a GRC.
  \item \textbf{PSR(b):} For any thing \( x \), if the existence of \( x \) has a GRC, then that GRC is either an internal cause (a “necessity of its own nature”) or an external cause (“the will of some other being”).\textsuperscript{22}
\end{itemize}

\textbf{Second}, notice how Clarke introduces the “effected” and “not effected” contradiction. He begins: “to say a thing is produced... .” But just where and when was \textit{that} said? The immediate context provides the clue. For in the very next sentence—the last of five in the sole paragraph where Clarke sets forth his argument for Proposition I—we have PSR, which says or at least implies that \textit{everything} is produced or effected. (Indeed, in later editions of the \textit{Demonstration}, the last sentence is preceded by an \textit{em dash},\textsuperscript{23} suggesting a pause in the argument before its final supporting reason is given.) The thing to see is that PSR doesn’t even \textit{appear} to be a second argument—or a premise for a second argument—for Proposition I. Rather, in the context of Clarke’s opening paragraph, it serves as an anchoring premise for the inference from (1) to (2). Take it out and you have invalidity; leave it in and you don’t.

So Clarke’s argument goes like this. If (1) is true, which of course it is, then by PSR the things that now exist have been produced. If (2) isn’t true, they’ve been produced out of nothing, which is just to say that they haven’t been produced.\textsuperscript{24} In the presence of PSR, therefore, (1) is true and (2) can’t be false; so (1) entails (2). Here there isn’t even the hint of an “elementary error”—except (perhaps) an elementary \textit{exegetical} error on Rowe’s part. If we’re looking for a \textit{logical} error, we shall have to look elsewhere.

\textsuperscript{20} Rowe, \textit{The Cosmological Argument}, 2d. ed., p. 63.
\textsuperscript{21} Clarke, \textit{Demonstration}, p. 8.
\textsuperscript{22} We can refer to “internal” and “external” causes here because Clarke himself speaks (in this connection) of causes of existence “from without” and causes of existence from “within the thing itself” (ibid., p. 10).
\textsuperscript{23} See, e.g., the edition printed for Richard Griffin and Co. (Glasgow, 1823), p. 8.
\textsuperscript{24} “[F]or nothing is that which has no properties or modes whatsoever; that is to say it is that of which nothing can truly be affirmed, and of which everything can truly be denied” (Clarke, \textit{Demonstration}, p. 13).
1.2 The Second and Third Stages

Having shown that something has existed from all eternity, Clarke goes on (in his second proposition) to present two alternatives for what this “something” might be:

(S1) “There has always existed some one unchangeable and independent being, from which all other beings that are or ever were in the universe have received their original”

or

(S2) “There has been an infinite succession of changeable and dependent beings, produced one from another, in an endless progression without any original cause at all.”

To conclude to the first, he rules out the second, which, he claims, is “plainly impossible and contradictory to itself.”

Let ‘SERIES’ stand for this hypothetical “endless series of dependent beings” (hereafter, ESDB). SERIES can have “no reason within itself for its existence.” This is because no one being in this infinite succession is supposed to be self-existent or necessary...but every one dependent on the foregoing. And where no part is necessary, it is manifest the whole cannot be necessary.

So this endless series lacks an internal cause. By PSR, then, SERIES has an external cause. However, by hypothesis—i.e., on (S2)—such a cause doesn’t exist; in which case it is “caused absolutely by nothing.” That is to say, it has no cause—“an express contradiction and impossibility” given PSR. Consequently, since (S2) is contradictory, (S1) has to be true: “there must . . . of necessity have existed from eternity some one immutable and independent being.”

Now if this line of reasoning is in order, we also have Clarke’s third proposition: that this being must be “self-existent, that is, necessarily existing.” It must exist by a necessity of its own nature.

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25 Clarke, Demonstration, p. 10.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., p. 11.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid., p. 12.
For whatever exists must either have come into being out of nothing, absolutely without a cause, or it must have been produced by some external cause, or it must be self-existent.  

The attentive reader will have noticed the similarity between this principle (call it PSR+) and PSR. PSR+ includes PSR but also the previously refuted disjunct: that a thing—in this case, an immutable and independent being—might “come into being out of nothing.” If PSR holds, this disjunct is demonstrably false. But so is the second; no independent being can be “produced by some external cause.” For then its existence would depend on that cause, and this “cannot possibly be true of everything” (as shown in the second proposition.) Only one possibility remains then. This immutable and independent being which has always existed—the cause of SERIES, if such there be—must be self-existent and necessary.

2 COMPOSITION CALAMITY?

Now Rowe thinks he sees a modal parts-to-whole fallacy in all of this. In his mind, Clarke’s fatal mistake is embodied in this inference:

(A) If for every dependent being it is possible that it doesn’t exist, then it is possible that every dependent being doesn’t exist

which, in turn, is a substitution instance of

(B) If for every being it is possible that it has P, then it is possible that every being has P.

But the problem is: “(B) is an invalid principle.” Moreover, (A) “does not appear to be sanctioned by any valid rule of modal logic.” It doesn’t follow, of course, that (A) isn’t a necessary truth. Perhaps it is; however, “we do not seem to know that it is.” Consequently, “a vital portion of the reasoning in the Cosmological Argument rests on [an] unproved premise.”

2.1 COPI AND COMPOSITION

What might a defender of Clarke’s argument say by way of response? Well, it’s certainly true that (B) has an invalid form. From a statement of the form (∀x)◇Px, we may not validly infer ◇(∀x)Px. For instance, it’s no doubt true that

(4) Every world W is possibly actual.

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35 Clarke, Demonstration, p. 12.
36 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid., p. 55.
41 Ibid.
It hardly follows that

(5) Possibly, every world $W$ is actual.

For that would involve the obtaining of contradictory states of affairs. So (B) isn’t necessarily true; it has some false substitution instances. But that fact alone won’t show that (A) isn’t necessary. For example, where the domain of quantification is dependent beings, and ‘Ex’ is ‘x exists’, (A) tells us that if

$$(4^*) \quad (\forall x) \Box \neg Ex$$

is true, so is

$$(5^*) \quad \Box (\forall x) \neg Ex.$$ 

Now $(4^*)$ is true if each object in the domain $D(\alpha)$—the objects that exist in $\alpha$, the actual world—is such that there is a possible world in which it doesn’t exist. $(5^*)$, on the other hand, is true just if there is a possible world $W$ such that $D(W)$ doesn’t include anything; that is to say, $D(W)$ is empty. But surely, you say, that’s a possibility. Think, for example, of a world in which only abstract objects exist: numbers, propositions, properties, and the like. There doesn’t seem to be anything incoherent about that. But if so, then $(5^*)$ is true. How, then, could the inference $(4^*) \rightarrow (5^*)$ be invalid? To demonstrate that, you’d have to show that it’s impossible for there to be no dependent beings—that is, that *there are dependent beings* is logically necessary.

Here we must note that Clarke’s modal composition principle (“where no part is necessary, it is manifest the whole cannot be necessary”), put more perspicuously as

**COMPOSITION:** If all the parts of SERIES lack necessity, then SERIES lacks necessity

can’t be invalidated by casually observing that it involves a composition inference. For example, in his paper “The Fallacy of Composition” (*Mind*, 1962), Rowe invites us to consider these instances of composition—instances that meet Copi’s condition for being guilty of the fallacy of composition:

Letting $x$ range over wholes and $\Phi$ ranges over properties: a form of this inference is: all the parts of $x$ have $\Phi$; therefore, $x$ has $\Phi$. What Copi is saying is that every argument employing this form of inference commits the fallacy of composition.\(^{43}\)

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43 Rowe, “The Fallacy of Composition,” p. 87.
But according to Rowe, “it is a mistake to think that every inference of this form is fallacious.”\textsuperscript{44} For consider, he says, the following:

(6) All the parts of this desk are made of metal; therefore, this desk is made of metal.

(7) All the parts of this object are located in space; therefore, this object is located in space.

(8) All the parts (links) of this chain are strong; therefore, this chain is strong.

(6), (7), and (8) make composition inferences “but are not fallacious.”\textsuperscript{45} Indeed, they are logically necessary: “I think it is logically impossible for all the parts of a chain to be strong if the chain is not itself strong.”\textsuperscript{46} Given the “customary meanings of the expressions” in (6)-(8), in “each case we would be involved in a contradiction”\textsuperscript{47} were we to deny the inference.

All of this makes eminently good sense. But it raises a question: why not pay the same compliment to Clarke’s inference? Rowe says that (A)—or what I’ve cast as COMPOSITION—“might (for all we know) be a necessary truth.”\textsuperscript{48} It’s just that we “do not seem to know that it is.”\textsuperscript{49} But given what Rowe has just said about (6)-(8), that suggests he doesn’t believe we know enough about the meanings of such terms as ‘series’, ‘dependent being’ or ‘necessity’ to see that we contradict ourselves in denying COMPOSITION. Well, let’s see.

First, let’s get clear about what Clarke means by ‘necessity’ or ‘self-existence’. It is, he says, “to exist by an absolute necessity originally in the nature of the thing itself.”\textsuperscript{50} It is “an inward and essential property of the nature of the thing which so exists.”\textsuperscript{51} To say that it is absolute means that it “cannot be a necessity consequent upon any foregoing supposition . . . because nothing can be antecedent to that which is self-existent.”\textsuperscript{52} Nor is it relative to time or place:

When I say that necessity, absolutely such in itself, has no relation to time or place, my meaning is that it has no relation to, or dependence upon, any particular time or place, or any thing in any particular time or place, but that it is the same in all time and in all place.\textsuperscript{53}  

\textsuperscript{44} Rowe, “The Fallacy of Composition,” p. 87.  
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., p. 88.  
\textsuperscript{46} Rowe, p. 91.  
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., p. 89.  
\textsuperscript{48} Rowe, “The Cosmological Argument,” p. 54.  
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., p. 55.  
\textsuperscript{50} Clarke, \textit{Demonstration}, p. 12.  
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., p. 10.  
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., p. 14  
\textsuperscript{53} Clarke, “The Answer to a Sixth Letter,” in \textit{Demonstration}, p. 114.
What then is it? Clarke tells us. The “only idea we can frame of an absolute necessity”\textsuperscript{54} is this: the idea of a being “the supposition of whose not-existing is an . . . express contradiction.”\textsuperscript{55} Or again,

\begin{quote}
Now, a necessity, not relatively or consequentially, but absolutely such in its own nature, is nothing else but its being a plain impossibility or implying a contradiction to suppose the contrary.\textsuperscript{56}
\end{quote}

To leave no doubt in the matter, “the relation of equality between twice two and four” is said to be absolutely necessary “only because it is an immediate contradiction in terms to suppose them unequal.”\textsuperscript{57} In short, absolute necessity is “the same necessity that is the (formal) cause of the unalterable proportion between 2 and 4.”\textsuperscript{58}

Next, consider the parts of SERIES. These all exist in “stages of succession”\textsuperscript{59} with “every one dependent on the foregoing.”\textsuperscript{60} That is, the existence of each—by definition—is relative to and consequent upon other dependent beings; in which case they don’t exist by an absolute necessity. Hence, none is such that its not-existing is an “express contradiction.” But then what could Rowe possibly mean when he tells us: “the 18th century proponents of the Cosmological Argument . . . never saw clearly that the collection of dependent beings is not itself a dependent being”?\textsuperscript{61}

Unless we are just begging questions against Clarke here—defining terms like ‘dependent’ to mean something other than what he meant by them—to deny COMPOSITION is a contradiction in terms. For suppose SERIES is in-dependent. In Clarke’s terms, this is just to say that its existence isn’t consequent upon anything; that is, it exists by a de re absolute necessity in its nature. However, for Clarke, SERIES just is the sum of its parts and the relations (temporal and causal) in which they stand; it is nothing ‘over and above’ these things. Hence, this supposed absolute necessity in its nature would have to be grounded in those related parts—the “inward and essential” nature of the series. If that’s right, the existence of any ESB will be absolutely necessary only if the existence of its related parts are. By hypothesis, however, they aren’t. So contrary to our assumption for reductio: SERIES isn’t in-dependent. It is therefore dependent.

Given his terms, then, there seems to be no denying Clarke’s COMPOSITION principle. You might as well argue that while all the links in a chain are weak, the chain is nevertheless strong. But then, I’m afraid, you’d have Rowe himself to contend with. For he insists that

\textsuperscript{54} Clarke, \textit{Demonstration}, p.14. Compare: “to use the word in any other sense seems to be using it without any signification at all” (ibid.).
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{58} Clarke, “The Answer to a Sixth Letter,” in \textit{Demonstration}, p. 113.
\textsuperscript{59} Clarke, \textit{Demonstration}, p. 11.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., p. 10.
\textsuperscript{61} Rowe, “The Cosmological Argument,” p. 56.
If a given link is only so strong—i.e., can only hold so much weight or stand only so much pressure—then the chain will be no stronger than that link. This is what it means to say ‘A chain is no stronger than its weakest link’.\(^62\)

Well, what’s sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. The modal strength of the entire, endless series of dependent beings (one thinks) can be no greater than its weakest part: that part being non-self-existent and its not-existing perfectly possible.

2.2 A “LOGICAL LEAP”?

Let’s return to Rowe’s 1970 portrayal of Clarke’s “logical leap”:\(^63\)

(A) If for every dependent being it is possible that it doesn’t exist, then it is possible that every dependent being doesn’t exist.

We are now in a position to ask how closely (A) represents Clarke’s actual thinking. There are some important differences.

2.21 Sets versus Series

Note first that Clarke’s argument, unlike Rowe’s (A), is stated in terms of a “whole series,” its parts, and the temporal and causal relations in which they stand. To be fair, however, I should mention that in his 1998 explication of Clarke’s reasoning—offered 27 years later—Rowe does offer a more refined version of (A), where at least the idea of a whole gets worked in:

\[(A^*)\] If for every member of the collection of dependent beings it is possible that it doesn’t exist, then it is possible that every member of the collection of dependent beings doesn’t exist,\(^64\)

in which case, so the argument goes, since the collection isn’t self-existent, by PSR it requires an external ground, reason, or cause.

Now here, at least initially, there appears to be a Collection Problem. To decide whether Clarke is right—that PSR can be applied to the entire collection of dependent beings—we must first decide whether that collection is a “concrete entity—for example, a physical whole or aggregate—or . . . an abstract entity”\(^65\) (say, a set). Concrete things can have causes; abstracta cannot. Regrettably, says Rowe, we just don’t know enough about “the things (both past and present) comprising the

\(^{62}\) Rowe, “The Fallacy of Composition,” p. 92.


\(^{64}\) Ibid., p. 161. Rowe labels this proposition ‘P’. I have re-labelled it ‘(A*)’ to make it clear that it’s a revision of (A).

\(^{65}\) Ibid., p. 134.
universe” to say whether the sum of them is “itself something concrete.” Indeed, to think of this collection as concrete “is implausible, if not plainly incorrect.”

Well, how so exactly? Rowe points us to a physical collection that “cannot possibly” be a concrete entity:

Think, for example, of the collection whose members are the largest prehistoric beast, Socrates, and the Empire State Building. By any stretch of the imagination can we view this collection as itself a concrete thing? Clearly we cannot.

Suppose we let ‘SUM’ name this strange, disjointed collection. Two questions come to mind. First, why think SUM isn’t a concrete thing? Rowe says it’s clearly not. But why not? And then, secondly, how is the example of a scattered object, like SUM, so much as relevant to Clarke’s connected series of dependent beings? To be sure, the members of SUM have existed in succession: the largest prehistoric beast coming first, then Socrates, and finally the Empire State Building. But as Rowe himself admits, these things are “causally unrelated.” Not so for the parts of SERIES. Its members are “produced one from another in an endless progression.” Without question, then, they are causally related.

But in that case, we might think that SERIES is a concrete object even if SUM is not. For SUM strikes us as a contrived object, a mere mental construct: its unrelated parts joined only in the imagination, and the sum of them causally inert. By sharp contrast, not only are the members of SERIES all concrete objects, they are arranged in such a way (spatio-temporally and causally) that they can produce new members in the series—new concrete dependent beings. So unlike SUM, SERIES looks like a perfectly respectable candidate for being considered a concrete thing. What is it about SUM and SERIES, then, that makes Rowe think neither is a concrete object, and that both must be construed as abstracta?

The answer seems to be that both collections include “past things”: things that once existed, but exist no more (e.g., Socrates). Accordingly, while the members of SUM can be collected, the resulting “collection must be construed as an abstract entity, a class or set.” The difficulty here isn’t that past and present things can’t be causally related. They can. As Rowe notes:

it is equally easy to think of collections that cannot possibly be concrete entities whose members are causally related—e.g., the collection whose members are the ancestors of a given man.

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67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
70 Clarke, Demonstration, p. 10.
72 Ibid., fn. 13.
The problem is that many of my ancestors (once concrete entities in themselves) have moved off the scene and are now at best abstractions. Thus the sum of my forebears is a strange concoction of concrete particulars and abstract entities—nothing like “a physical whole or aggregate.” We must therefore think of it as an abstract set.

Now if I understand Rowe correctly, he means to pay the same compliment to the collection of dependent beings; some of these are now also abstractions, so that it doesn’t “make sense” to ask “Why does SERIES exist?” For qua abstract set, SERIES can no more have a cause than can the number 7. What we can ask (intelligibly) is why it has members. Or consider Rowe’s M: “the set of men.” If we want to know why M exists, we don’t “What caused M to exist?” Instead, we ask: “Why does M have the members it does rather than none at all?” And here, says Rowe, the answer is fairly straightforward:

Presumably, the theory of evolution might be a part of the explanation of why M is not included in the null set and why its members have certain properties rather than others.

The point is: that M has members has an explanation; that M (qua abstract entity) exists does not. And the same thing goes for SERIES; it isn’t a concrete entity either—say, a “physical heap or aggregate.” If it were, PSR would certainly apply to it, and we could reasonably ask for its cause. Instead, it’s a mixed bag of past and present things. It qualifies as a set alright; but PSR doesn’t apply to sets. And thus we might think Clarke is guilty of a “logical leap”: assuming that SERIES has an external cause if it’s not self-existent.

Now it seems to me that this migration from series to collections to sets leads us astray. For one thing, to represent Clarke as arguing set-theoretically—as Rowe clearly does—is certainly a strawman, since Clarke is an ardent nominalist who denies the mind-independent reality of not only heat, light, colours, tastes, and sounds—normally thought to be sensible qualities—but also all other “abstract notions.” Of course, he might be wrong about that; perhaps there really are sets. And perhaps the only way to collect past (no longer existent) things and present (existent) things is in set-theoretic fashion. In that case, what Rowe should have said is that Clarke is committed to there being sets for his argument to have any chance:

74 Ibid., p. 143.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid., p. 137.
77 Ibid., p. 145.
78 Compare Rowe: “Clarke’s position is that there is one, and only one, way in which...the set of dependent beings, could have the explanation of its existence within itself” (ibid., p. 163). This can hardly be Clarke’s position, if he doesn’t believe in the real existence of sets. Indeed, the concept of a set is never mentioned (let alone employed) in any of Clarke’s writings.
that only sets are up to the task of gathering dependent beings into a collected whole to which PSR can then be applied. Wouldn’t it follow, then, that Clarke’s argument crumbles, since it involves the idea that sets can have causes?

Not necessarily. Rowe’s criticism overlooks (or fails to appreciate) an important fact about sets. The null set aside: sets exist because their members do. Or as philosophers like to say, sets supervene on their members. Some sets are necessary because their members are. The set of natural numbers comes to mind. Other sets exist contingently: failing to exist if their members do. If Trump had not existed, for example, his singleton—i.e., the set whose sole member is Trump—wouldn’t have existed either. For there would have been nothing for it to contain. The crucial point is that once we have Trump (however we want to explain his existence), nothing further is needed for there to be his singleton. As David Armstrong says, “You get the supervenient for free.”

The same thing goes for Rowe’s M: the set of all men. Like any non-empty set, we know why it exists. M exists because its members do. But why is that? Well, it’s not because they are all self-existent; for surely “it is a contingent fact that any men exist at all.” Instead, in PSR-like fashion, Rowe reaches for an external cause here: a cause not itself a member of M, namely, the evolutionary process. It causes it to be the case that there are men, which in turn brings it about (at no extra charge) that there is an abstract set of men. But notice: this external, evolutionary cause also explains why there has been a series of men, produced one from another, at successive stages of evolutionary history. (It cannot help but do so.) And yet many or most of its dependent members have long since ceased to exist.

By parity of reasoning, then, even if SERIES is a mere abstract set, its existence doesn’t have to proceed (directly) from the declaration “Let there be the set of all dependent beings.” It need only be said: “Let there be dependent beings.” And then not only will such a set (promptly and superveniently) come into being, but (as with Rowe’s M) so will SERIES itself—regardless of whether its members can be gathered up into a heap. If there is a “logical leap” or “logical error” associated with Clarke’s COMPOSITION inference, this isn’t it.

2.22 From Something to Nothing

A more likely candidate for “logical error” stems from an alleged Scope Ambiguity. Clarke’s COMPOSITION inference is cast in terms of one and the same ESDB—namely, SERIES. If the members of SERIES lack absolute necessity (i.e., possibly fail to exist), then by COMPOSITION so does SERIES. So the consequent of COMPOSITION is or entails

(9) Possibly, every member of SERIES fails to exist.

But notice that the consequent of Rowe’s (A*) is somewhat different:

(10) Possibly, every member of the collection of dependent beings fails to exist.

Now (9) and (10) are not equivalent. For the description ‘the collection of dependent beings’, as Rowe employs it, isn’t being used in (10) as a rigid designator in Kripke’s sense. That is to say, it doesn’t pick out one and the same object (namely, SERIES) across worlds. In this respect, it’s like the description ‘the 45th President of the U.S.’, which denotes its object in a non-rigid or accidental way. In the actual world, as we all know, it denotes Trump. However, in other worlds—say, where Trump doesn’t exist, or where he does but never runs for office—it might well designate someone else: Hillary Clinton, perhaps.

The thing to see is that if ‘the collection of dependent beings’ is non-rigid—if it denotes any such collection across any world in which there are collections—then (10)’s scope is far wider than (9)’s. Indeed, in that case, what (10) tells us is that

(10*) Possibly, there are no dependent beings.

Does Clarke reason in this way? Does he think that (9) entails (10*)? There is reason to think he does. For suppose that (S2) is true; SERIES is all there is. And then suppose, as (9) would have it, that each part of SERIES is possibly non-existent. It then follows, says Clarke, that

\[
\text{it was originally equally possible that from eternity there should never have existed anything at all, as that there should from eternity have existed a succession of changeable and dependent beings.}^{84}
\]

Put more perspicuously, what follows is

(11) ◻ (There is nothing—i.e., there are no dependent beings), and ◻ (There is an endless series of dependent beings).

Now if (S2) and (9) jointly entail (11), then given that (S2) is relevant to and implies only (11)’s right-conjunct, it must be that (9) implies its left. But the left-conjunct is simply (10*); so Clarke is committed to (9)’s entailing (10*): that there could have been nothing at all.

The problem here, Rowe contends, is not only that “the rules of logic do not sanction this inference,” but that the inference itself appears to be invalid on its face:

\[\]

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84 Clarke, Demonstration, p. 12.
For suppose that, even though no dependent being necessarily exists, it is nevertheless necessary that some dependent beings exist. That is, suppose that the set in question [i.e., the set of dependent beings] is such that although no one of its members necessarily exists, it is necessary that the set has members. In this case...there is an explanation of why the set has members. It has members (at least one) because the set is such that it is logically impossible for it not to have members.\(^{86}\)

So we can stipulate that (9) is true: every member of SERIES lacks absolute necessity. Hence, by COMPOSITION, SERIES lacks absolute necessity. (Rowe doesn’t dispute the point.) It doesn’t follow, however, that there isn’t (or couldn’t be) an ESDB in every world. For Clarke “overlooks the idea that although no dependent being necessarily exists, it \textit{might}, nevertheless, be \textit{necessary} that some dependent being exists.”\(^{87}\) In that event, no one ESDB would be necessary, but that there are ESDBs would be a necessary truth.

Of course, if we are going to make the charge of invalidity stick, we’re going to need a good deal more than a sweeping generalization to the effect that all of this \textit{might be} true. The difficulty here (for Rowe) is compounded by the fact that he concedesthat (10*)  is true. “For my part,” he says:

\begin{quote}
I am quite willing to agree that it is a contingent fact that dependent beings exist. It seems clear to me that there is a possible world in which no dependent being exists. But I know of no proof that this is so.\(^{88}\)
\end{quote}

But if it’s “clear” that it’s a contingent fact, it’s not “necessary that some dependent beings exist.”\(^{89}\) So which is it? Is there a world without dependent beings or not? Well, it’s not entirely clear; but I suspect Rowe means for us to reason as follows. Since there is no proof that there is a world without dependent beings, we are not entitled to suppose there is. Further, we may suppose that there isn’t such a world if the set of dependent beings “is such that it is logically impossible for it not to have members.” Let’s examine these claims in reverse order.

First, Rowe is no doubt correct when he says Clarke’s (10*) is on rocky ground, if we may suppose it is “necessary that some dependent beings exist.” For this is only to say, if

\begin{equation}
(13) \quad \text{Necessarily, there are dependent beings}
\end{equation}

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\(^{86}\) Ibid., pp. 162-163.

\(^{87}\) Ibid., p. xv, fn. 7.

\(^{88}\) Ibid. This remark appears in the preface to the 2nd edition (1998) of his \textit{The Cosmological Argument}. The first edition was published in 1975.

\(^{89}\) Ibid., p. 163. For Clarke’s arguments against the necessary existence of matter, including the views of Spinoza, see his \textit{Demonstration}, pp. 17-23.
is true, then \((10^*)\) is false. And there’s no denying that: one is the negation of the other. But why think we can suppose \((13)\)? Here Rowe cites the fact that “it is necessary that the set [of dependent beings] has members.” However, as we noted above, “the set of dependent beings” (as Rowe uses that term) is a non-rigid designator. There is no unique object it denotes; it denotes different sets in different worlds. It is therefore somewhat misleading to speak of the set of dependent beings being necessarily such that it has members. What we have instead are (non-empty) sets of dependent beings: one set per world, if Rowe is correct. Thus, Rowe’s reason for supposing \((13)\) is true can be put as follows:

\[
\text{(14)} \quad \text{For any } x, \text{ if } x \text{ is a set of dependent beings, then it is necessary that (if } x \text{ exists, then } x \text{ has members).}
\]

And \((14)\), as it happens, is equivalent to

\[
\text{(15)} \quad \text{For any } x, \text{ if } x \text{ is a set of dependent beings, then it is logically impossible that (} x \text{ exists and } x \text{ has no members)}
\]

which (in the passage quoted above) is said to be the “explanation of why the set [of dependent beings] has members.” Simplifying then, \((15)\)—or its equivalent \((14)\)—explains why the set of dependent beings has members. And that, in turn, is supposed to explain why \((13)\) is true: that (necessarily) there are dependent beings.

What shall we make of this argument? If (as we said earlier) sets supervene on their members, then \((14)\) is certainly true. It just says that it is essential to any existing set of dependent beings that it has members. The problem comes with the move from \((14)\) to \((13)\). That inference is patently invalid. From the fact that every set of dependent beings is necessarily such that it has members, it doesn’t follow that it is necessarily true that there are dependent beings. The necessity in \((14)\) is \textit{de re}; that in \((13)\) is \textit{de dicto}. It’s a modal operator shift. You might just as well argue that since every set of giraffes necessarily has members, it’s necessary that there are giraffes. It won’t do.

For the inference to work, Rowe needs not only the necessity of \((14)\)—we can stipulate that, if we like—but also the missing premise: \textit{Necessarily, there is a set of dependent beings}. Only then will it follow (given the supervenience of sets on their members) that necessarily there are dependent beings. Unfortunately, Rowe never argues for this missing premise, and what he does say—namely, that it’s “clear” that there could be no dependent beings—actually mitigates against it.

2.3 Is Matter Necessary?

So Rowe’s argument for supposing \((10^*)\) is false doesn’t succeed. What about his other claim though: that we can’t take \((10^*)\) for granted because there is no proof—none that Rowe knows of anyway—for Clarke’s assertion (in Proposition II) that it’s possible “there should never have existed anything at all”? Is that correct? Well, I don’t think so. Here Rowe overlooks the fact that some of the reasoning underlying
Clarke’s acceptance of (10*) doesn’t appear until later in his third proposition—and that under a different guise.

There Clarke explores the idea that matter or the material world—coextensive with the dependent beings his argument has in view—might exist necessarily. It is “very evident,” Clarke thinks, that it cannot—not if we’re talking about an “absolute necessity in the nature of the thing itself.” If a thing exists with an absolute de re necessity, then its not-existing is contradictory. But “nothing is more easy” than to suppose (without contradiction) that there is no material world, and hence no dependent beings. Clarke’s and Rowe’s modal intuitions line up perfectly. Still, an intuition is nothing like a full proof. Does Clarke have anything more substantial to offer?

Perhaps so. Citing experiments involving “falling bodies” and “pendulums,” Clarke argues that there must be a vacuum—at least one place (however small) in all of space unoccupied by any material object: surely a minimal claim. However, if that be the case, “it follows plainly that matter is not a necessary being. For if a vacuum actually be, then it is evidently more than possible for matter not to be.” But how so? How does it follow that if matter can be absent from one place, it could be absent altogether—i.e., from all places? In the Boyle Lectures of 1704 (Proposition III), Clarke explains:

If it be no impossibility for matter to be absent from one place, it is no impossibility (absolutely in the nature of the thing, for no relative or consequential necessity can have any room in this argument)—it is not absolute impossibility, I say, in the nature of the thing, that matter should be absent from any other place or from every place.

This line of reasoning prompted the following response from Joseph Butler in his letter to Clarke of November 4, 1713. All Clarke succeeds in proving, he says, is that

If a being can without a contradiction be absent from one place at one time, it may without a contradiction be absent from another place, and so from all places, at different times (for I cannot see that if a being can be absent from one place at one time, therefore it may without a contradiction be absent from all places at the same time, i.e., may cease to exist.)

If Butler is right, the principal argument for (10*) is invalid. In a letter of reply on November 10, 1713, Clarke attempts to extricate himself from this logical snarl by presses two theses: one about the nature of necessity, the other the nature of matter.

90 Clarke, Demonstration, p. 18.
91 Ibid.
92 Ibid.
93 Ibid., p. 20.
94 Ibid.
95 “Butler’s First Letter,” in ibid., p. 96.
According to the first thesis, if something exists (/has a property) with absolute necessity, it exists (/has that property) everywhere and everywhen: “For whatever is absolutely necessary at all is absolutely necessary in every part of space and in every point of duration.” The second thesis has to do with matter: it has the essential property of being possibly absent from (at least) one place. It doesn’t exist with an absolute necessity. With these two theses in hand, Clarke endeavours to shore up his argument:

Whatever may, without a contradiction, be absent from any one place at any one time may also, without a contradiction, be absent from all places at all times. For, whatever is absolutely necessary at all is absolutely necessary in every part of space and in every point of duration. Whatever can at any time be conceived possible to be absent from any one part of space may for the same reason (viz., the implying no contradiction in the nature of things) be conceived possible to be absent from every other part of space at the same time either by ceasing to be, or by supposing it never to have begun to be.

After exchanging two more letters, none shedding further light on the matter, Butler unexpectedly yields (December 16, 1713): “It is with the greatest satisfaction I must tell you that the more I reflect on your...argument, the more I am convinced of the truth of it.”

But here I suspect Rowe would say that we haven’t yet risen to anything like the level of a proof for (10*). Let’s see if we can fill in the gaps. To show that matter “may cease to exist”—i.e., not exist at all—we must show that it could be absent from all places at the same time. That is, we must prove

**ABSENCE:** Possibly, there is a time at which material objects are absent from every part of space.

Now suppose for *reductio* that ABSENCE is false; that is, for every world \( W \), at every point in time, some part of space is occupied by a material object. Then, in \( W \), there must be a time \( T \), place \( P \), and material object \( O \) such that

\[
(16) \quad O \text{ occupies } P \text{ at } T.
\]

However, if we are following Clarke, we must also contend with the truth of

**MATTER:** Necessarily, every material object has the essential property of being

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96 “Clarke’s answer to Butler’s First Letter,” in ibid., p. 98.
97 Ibid., pp. 98-99.
98 “Butler’s Fourth Letter,” in ibid, p. 106.
99 Where ‘Oxyz’ is ‘x occupies y at z’, the ABSENCE principle can be stated symbolically: \( \diamond (\exists t)(p)(x) \rightarrow \neg O_{xpt} \).
possibly absent from any part of space at any point of time.\textsuperscript{100}

But if MATTER is true, then in W, it is possible that O is absent from P at T; in which case, given the invariance of modality, there will be a world $W^*$ such that

\begin{equation}
(17) \quad \text{O is absent from P at T.}
\end{equation}

However, this immediately leads to grief. For if, in any world W, O occupies P at T, then (16) is also true in $W^*$. In $W^*$, therefore, both (16) and (17) are true. O both occupies and is absent from P at T. So our \textit{reductio} is complete. The denial of ABSENCE has led to a contradiction; accordingly, ABSENCE is true.

Someone might object that just because there are possible worlds in which there is a \textit{time} at which there are no (material) dependent beings, it doesn’t follow that in those ‘gap’ worlds there are no dependent beings whatsoever. Perhaps there are dependent beings at some times, but at others none at all. In that case, ABSENCE wouldn’t go any distance in showing that Clarke’s (10*) was true. The problem with this suggestion, however, is that MATTER also gives deductive support to a much stronger version of ABSENCE:

ABSENCE+: Possibly, at all times, material objects are absent from every part of space.

And if ABSENCE+ is true, then so is (10*); in fact, they are equivalent.

3 CLARKE’S CHAIN

Nevertheless, let’s suppose our critic is right. Every world includes either an ESDB (as per Rowe) or a finite series of dependent beings interspersed with ‘gaps’. How might the Great Newtonian respond? I think we know. In a strange twist—and buried in an overlooked footnote to “a late able author” (Wm. Wollaston [1660-1724])—Clarke actually calls upon Rowe’s chain:

\begin{quote}
Suppose a chain hung down out of the heavens from an unknown height, and though every link of it gravitated toward the Earth and what it hung upon was not visible, yet it did not descend but kept its situation; and [suppose] upon this a question should arise, what supported or kept up this chain?\textsuperscript{101}
\end{quote}

It would hardly do to reply: Well, the “last or lowest” link is suspended upon a second above it, which in turn is hung upon a third, and so on \textit{ad infinitum}—all the way up.

\textsuperscript{100} Where ‘Oxyz’ is ‘x occupies y at z’, the MATTER principle can be stated symbolically: $\Box (x) \Box (p)(t) \neg Oxpt$.

“For what holds up the whole?” The fact is: Rowe (and our critic) only see half the picture. To be sure, a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. That’s right. What they forgets is that no link can suspend anything (hold any weight or bear any pressure at all) unless the chain of which it is a part is suspended by something. The application to an infinite or finite chains of dependent beings is patent.

So if it turns out that there are chains of dependent beings in every world, all the better for Clarke. It’s just another way of saying that (necessarily) there is an absolutely necessary cause of dependent beings across worlds. At any rate, thus sayeth the Principle of Sufficient Reason, and (thus far) not an “elementary logical error” in sight.

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\(^{102}\) Ibid.