

Emilie Du Châtelet on the existence of God

In 1740 Emilie Du Châtelet (1706-1749) published a book on physics that she had written for her son, entitled *Foundations of Physics*. "You are, my dear son, in this happy age when the mind begins to think, and when the heart has passions not yet lively enough to disturb it," she wrote. "Now is perhaps the only time of your life that you will devote to the study of nature." She wrote for her son chapters on topics that would seem familiar to students in a modern physics class: space, time, matter, gravity, motion, pendulums, projectiles, forces, and the work of Isaac Newton. But Du Châtelet addressed the first chapter of her book to a discussion of those principles by which things can be known, and the second chapter to the question of the existence of God.



The following is Du Châtelet's first five sections from the second chapter, along with an English translation. For a complete English translation of the second chapter (slightly different from the one here), along with the first chapter and several other chapters as well, see Judith P. Zinsser's *Emilie Du Châtelet: Selected Philosophical and Scientific Writings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

From

Institutions de physique (Foundations of Physics)

Gabrielle Emilie Le Tonnelier de Breteuil Du Châtelet

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CHAPITRE II

De l'Existence de Dieu

§18. L'étude de la nature nous eleve a la connoissance d'un Etre supreme; cette grande verite est encore plus necessaire, s'il est possible, a la bonne Physique qu'a la Morale, & elle doit etre le fondement & la conclusion de toutes les recherches que nous faisons dans cette science.

CHAPTER II

On the Existence of God

§18. The study of nature elevates us to the knowledge of a supreme Being; this great truth is even more necessary, if it is possible, to good Physics than to Morality, and it must be the foundation and the conclusion of all the research that we do in this science.

Je crois donc indispensable de commencer par vous mettre sous les yeux un precis des preuves de cette importante verite, par lequel, vous pourrez juger par vous-meme de son evidence.

§19. 1. Quelque chose existe, puisque j'existe

2. Puisque quelque chose existe, il faut que quelque chose ait existe de toute eternite, sans cela il faudroit que le neant qui n'est qu'une negation eut produit tout ce qui existe, ce qui est une contradiction dans les termes, car, c'est dire qu'une chose a ete produite, & ne reconnoître cependant aucune cause de son existence.

3. L' Etre qui a existe de toute eternite doit exister necessairement & ne tenir son existence d'aucune cause, car s'il avoit recu son existence d'un autre Etre, il faudroit que cet autre Etre existat par lui-même, & alors c'est lui dont je parle, & c'est Dieu, ou bien il tiendroit encore son existence d'un autre: on voit aisement qu'en remontant ainsi a l'infini, il faut arriver a un Etre necessaire qui existe par lui-même, ou bien admettre une chaine infinie d'Etres, lesquels pris tous ensemble, n'auront aucune cause externe de leur existence (puisque tous les Etres entrent dans cette chaine infinie) & qui, chacun en particulier, n'en auront aucune cause interne, puisqu'aucun n'existe par lui-même, & qu'ils tiennent tous l'existence les uns des autres dans une gradation a l'infini. Ainsi, c'est supposer une chaine d'Etres qui separemment ont ete produits par une cause, & qui tous ensemble n'ont ete produits par rien, ce qui est une contradiction dans les termes. Il y a donc un Etre qui existe necessairement, puisqu'il implique contradiction qu'un tel Etre n'eiste pas.

4. Tout ce qui nous environne nait & perit successivement; rien ne jouit d'un etat necessaire, tout se succede, & nous nous succedons nous-memes les uns aux autres; il n'y a donc que de la contingence dans tous les Etres qui nous environment, c'est-a-dire, que le contraire est egalement possible, & n'implique

I believe it is essential to begin by putting before you an abridgement of the proofs of this important truth, by which you will be able to judge for yourself regarding its obviousness.

§19. 1. Something exists, because I exist.

2. Since something exists, something must have existed from eternity, otherwise it would be necessary for a nothingness that is nothing but a negation to have produced all that exists, which is a contradiction in terms because it is to say that a thing has been produced, and yet recognize no cause of its existence.

3. The Being who has existed from all eternity must exist necessarily, and hold its existence of no cause, for if it had received its existence from another Being, it must be that this other Being existed by itself, and then it is that of whom I speak, and that is God, or else that would still hold its existence of another: we can easily see that by going back to infinity, we have either to come to a necessary Being that exists by itself, or to admit an infinite chain of Beings, that all taken together, will have no external cause of their existence (since all the Beings fall in this infinite chain) and that, each in particular, will have no internal cause, since no one exists by itself, and that they all hold the existence of each other in a gradation to infinity. Thus, it is to suppose a chain of Beings which each have been produced by a cause, and which together have not been produced by anything, which is a contradiction in terms. There is therefore a Being which necessarily exists, since it implies contradiction that such a Being is not existent.

4. All that surrounds us is born and perishes in turn; nothing enjoys a necessary state, everything follows another, and we follow one another; there is then only contingency in all the Beings that surround us, that is to say, that the opposite is equally possible, and does not imply a contradiction (for that is what

point contradiction, (car c'est ce qui distingue un Etre contingent d'un Etre necessaire.)

5. Tout ce qui existe a une raison suffisante de son existence, ainsi il faut que la raison suffisante de l'existence d'un Etre soit dans lui, ou hors de lui: or la raison de l'existence d'un Etre contingent ne peut etre dans lui, car s'il portoit la raison suffisante de son existence en lui, il seroit impossible qu'il n'existant pas, ce qui est contradictoire a la definition, d'un Etre contingent; la raison suffisante de l'existence d'un Etre contingent doit donc necessairement etre hors de lui, puisqu'il ne sauroit l'avoir en lui-meme.

6. Cetre raison suffisante ne peut se trouver dans un autre Etre contingent, ni dans une suite de ces Etres, puisque la meme question se retrouverat toujours au bout de cette chaine quelque loin qu'on la puisse etendre: il faut donc en venir a un Etre necessaire qui contienne la raison suffisante de l'existence de tous les Etres contingens, & de la sienne propre, & cet Etre c'est Dieu.

§20. Les attributs de cet Etre supreme sont une suite de la necessite de son existence.

Ainsi il est eternal, c'est-a-dire, qu'il n'a point eu de commencement, & qu'il n'aura jamais de fin, car si l'Etre necessaire avoit commence, il faudroit ou qu'il eut agi, avant que d'etre, pour se produire, ce qui est absurde, ou bien que quelque chose l'ait produit, ce qui est contre la definition de l'Etre necessaire.

Il ne peut avoir de fin, parce que la raison suffisante de son existence residant en lui, elle ne peut jamais l'abandonner; de plus, ce qui est contraire a une chose necessaire, implique contradiction, & est par consequent impossible: il est donc impossible que l'Etre necessaire cesse d'exister, de la meme facon qu'il est impossible que trois fois 3. fassent 8.

distinguishes a contingent Being from a necessary Being).

5. All that exists has a sufficient reason for its existence, so therefore the sufficient reason for the existence of a Being must be within it, or outside of it: now the reason for the existence of a contingent Being cannot be within it, for if it carried the sufficient reason for its existence within it, it would be impossible for it not to exist, which is contradictory to the definition of a contingent Being; the sufficient reason for the existence of a contingent Being must therefore necessarily be outside of it, since it cannot have it within itself.

6. This sufficient reason cannot be found in another contingent Being, nor in a succession of these Beings, since the same question is always found at the end of this chain, so far as it can be extended: we must therefore come to a necessary Being which contains the sufficient reason for the existence of all the contingent Beings, and for its own, and this Being is God.

§20. The attributes of this supreme Being are of one piece with the necessity of its existence.

Thus it is eternal, that is to say, that it had no beginning, and that it will never end, for if the necessary Being had begun, it would be necessary either that it had acted before being, in order to produce itself, which is absurd, or that something produced it, which is contrary to the definition of a necessary Being.

It can have no end, because the sufficient reason of its existence residing in it can never abandon it; moreover, what is contrary to a necessary thing, implies contradiction, and is consequently impossible: it is therefore impossible for the necessary Being to cease to exist, in the same way as it is impossible for three times 3 to make 8.

Il est immuable, car s'il changeoit il ne seroit plus ce qu'il etoit, & par consequent it n'auroit pu exister necessairement: il faut deplus que chaque etat successif ait sa raison suffisante dans un etat precedent, celui-la dans un autre, & ainsi de suite: or comme, dans l'Etre necessaire on ne parviendroit jamais au dernier etat, puisque l'Etre n'a jamais commence, un etat successif quelconque feroit sans raison suffisante, s'il etoit susceptible de succession; ainsi, il ne peut point y avoir de changement, ni de succession dans l'Etre necessaire.

Il fuit clairement de ce qu'on vient de dire, que l'Etre necessaire ne scauroit etre un Etre compose, qui n'existe qu'autant que ses parties sont liees ensemble, & qui peut etre detruit par la dissociation de ces memes parties, & que par consequent l'Etre existant par lui-meme est un etre simple.

§21. Le Monde que nous voyons ne scauroit etrel'Etre necessaire, car il est compose de parties & il y a une succession continue en lui, ce qui est absolument contradictoire aux attributs que je viens de montrer appartenir a l'Etre necessaire.

Par la meme raison, la Matiere ni les Elements de la Matiere ne peuvent point etre l'Etre necessaire.

Notre Ame ne peut point etre non plus cet Etre necessaire, car ses perceptions changeant continuallement, elle est dans des variations perpetuelles, mais l'Etre necessaire ne peut varier: notre Ame n'est donc point l'Etre necessaire.

L'Etre existant par lui-meme est donc un Etre different du Monde que nous voyons, de la Matiere qui compose ce Monde, des elemens qui composent cette Matiere, & de notre Ame; & il contient en lui la raison suffisante de son existence, & de celle de tous les Etres qui existent.

It is immutable, for if it changed it would not be what it was, and consequently it could not have existed necessarily: it is necessary that each successive state have its sufficient reason in a preceding state, that in another, and so on: as, in the necessary Being, one would never reach the last state, since the Being never began, any successive state would be without sufficient reason, if it were susceptible to succession; thus, there can be no change, nor succession in the necessary Being.

It is clear from what has just been said, that the necessary Being cannot be a composite Being, which exists only insofar as its parts are connected together, and which can be destroyed by the dissociation of these same parts. Therefore, the Being existing by itself is a simple being.

§21. The world we see cannot be the necessary Being, for it is composed of parts, and there is a continual succession in it, which is absolutely contradictory to the attributes which I have just shown to belong to the necessary Being.

By the same reason, Matter and the Elements of Matter cannot be the necessary Being.

Nor can our Soul be this necessary Being, for its perceptions continually change, it is in perpetual variation, but the necessary Being cannot vary: our Soul is therefore not the necessary Being.

The Being existing by itself is therefore a Being different from the World we see, from the Matter that composes this World, from the elements that compose this Matter, and from our Soul; and it contains within itself the sufficient reason for its existence, and that of all the Beings that exist.

§22. On voit aisement par tout ce qui vient d'etre dit, qu'il ne peut y avoir qu'un Etre necessaire, car s'il y avoit deux Etres qui existassent necessairement, & independamment l'un de l'autre, il seroit possible que chacun existat seul, & par consequen tni l'un ni l'autre n'existeroit necessairement.

§23. Il est evident que tout ce qui est possible n'existe pas, & qu'une infinite de choses qui pourroient arriver, n'arrivent point. Alexandre, par exemple, au lieu de detruire l' Empire des Perses, pouvoit tourner ses armes contre les Peuples de l'Occident, ou bien vivre paisiblement dans son Royaume: il pouvoit prendre enfin une infinite de partis differens de celui qu'il a pris, qui auroient tous fait naître une infinite de combinaisons qui etoient possibles alors, & qui auroient produit des evenemens tous differens de ceux qui sont arrives; les evenemens que contiennent les Romans sont dans le meme cas; ils pourroient arriver si une autre suite de choses avoit lieu, ce sont des histoires d'un Monde possible auquel il manque l'actualite, car chaque suite de choses constitue un Monde qui seroit different de tout autre par les evenemens qui lui seroient particuliers; ainsi, l'on peut concevoir une telle suite de causes qui auroit fait naître les evenemens qui sont dans Zaïde, ou ceux de la Reine de Navarre, car ces evenemens sont possibles, & il ne leur manque que l'actualite; de meme, on peut concevoir des Univers possibles, dans lesquels il y auroit d'autres Etoiles & d'autres Planetes; & comme les differens rapports de ces Univers peuvent etre combines d'une infinite de manieres, il y a une infinite de Mondes possibles, dont un seul existe actuellement.

Lorsqu'il n'y avoit encore rien de produit, & qu'aucun de ces Mondes possibles n'existoit, ils etoient tous egalement en pouvoir de parvenir a l'existence; & ils attendoient, pour ainsi dire, qu'une puissance externe les y appellat, & les rendit actuels; car ce qui n'existe point, ne peut contribuer a son existence qu'idealement; c'est-a-dire, autant qu'il renferme certaines

§22. It is easy to see by all that has just been said, that there can only be one necessary Being, for if there were two Beings who necessarily existed, and independently of each other, it would be possible for each one to exist alone, and consequently neither one nor the other would exist necessarily.

§23. It is evident that all that is possible does not exist, and that an infinite number of things which could happen, never occur. Alexander, for example, instead of destroying the Persian Empire, might have turned his arms against the Peoples of the West, or lived peacefully in his Kingdom: ultimately he could have taken an infinite number of paths different from the one he did take, which would have given rise to an infinity of combinations which were then possible, and which would have produced events all different from those which have occurred; the events contained in works of fiction are a similar example; they could happen if another series of things took place, they are stories of a possible World which lacks actuality, for each sequence of things constitutes a World which would be different from any other by the events which would be particular to it; thus, one can conceive such a series of causes which would have given rise to the events which are in *Zaïre*, or those of the *Reine de Navarre*, for these events are possible, and they lack only actuality; similarly, we can conceive of possible Universes, in which there would be other Stars and other Planets; and since the different relations of these Universes can be combined in an infinite number of ways, there is an infinity of possible Worlds, of which only one exists at present.

When there was as yet nothing made, and none of these possible Worlds existed, they were all equally capable of coming into being; and they waited, so to speak, for an extra power to call them forth, and make them present; because that which does not exist can only contribute to its existence in an ideal way; that is to say, as long as it contains certain determinations, that

determinations, que le reste ne renferme pas, & qui peuvent determiner un Etre Intelligent a le choisir pour lui donner l'existence.

Il faut qu'il y ait une raison suffisante de l'actualite du Monde que nous voyons, puisqu'une infinite d'autres Mondes etoient possibles: or cette raison ne peut se trouver que dans les differences qui distinguent ce Monde-ci, de tous les autres Mondes: il faut donc que l'Etre necessaire se soit represente tous les Mondes possibles, qu'il ait considere leurs arrangemens divers, & leurs differences, pour avoir pu se determiner ensuite a donner l'actualite a celui qui lui plaisir le plus.

La representation distincte des choses fait l'entendement, or l'Etre necessaire qui a du se representer tous les Mondes possibles avant de creer celui-ci, est donc un Etre intelligent, donc l'entendement est infini, car tous les Mondes possibles renferment tous les arrangemens possibles de toutes les choses possibles; ainsi, cet Etre que nous nommons Dieu, est un Etre intelligent, qui voit non-seulement tout ce qui arrive actuellement, mais encore tout ce qui arriveroit dans quelque Combinaison des choses possible, entre dans las Mondes qu'il contemple sans cesse, & qui se jouent, pour ainsi dire, devant lui.

Du Châtelet continues Chapter 2 by extending her discussion further to argue that the application of reason indicates that God must be infinitely intelligent (§24), free (§25), and wise (§26-27); that the world God created is the best of all possible worlds overall, resting atop an infinite pyramid of possible worlds that would contain less good (§28); and that God is infinitely good (§29) and infinitely powerful (§30).

Du Châtelet's other discussions of God within *Foundations* include (but are not limited to) arguments that God exists outside of time (§104), that the fundamental components of the universe have their source in God (§124), and that at every moment God essentially knows and solves a complete mathematical description of the universe (§130).

The bulk of *Foundations*, which extends up through §590, concerns the more usual material found in physics texts, as discussed previously.

the rest do not contain, and that can prompt an Intelligent Being to choose it to give it existence.

There must be sufficient reason for the actuality of the World that we see, since an infinite number of other Worlds were possible: but this reason can only be found in the differences which distinguish this World, from all the other Worlds: it is therefore necessary that the necessary Being has presented to itself all the possible Worlds, that it has considered their various arrangements, and their differences, to have been able then to determine to give actuality to the one which pleases it most.

The distinct representation of things is understanding, and the necessary Being, who had to present to itself all possible Worlds before creating this one, is therefore an intelligent Being, therefore the understanding is infinite, for all the possible Worlds contain all the possible arrangements of all possible things; thus, that Being, who we call God, is an intelligent Being, who sees not only all that is happening now, but all that would happen in some Combination of things possible, occurring in the Worlds which he contemplates incessantly, and which play, so to speak, before him.