

Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion

David Hume

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[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 with square brackets in normal-sized type.

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Contents

Letter from Pamphilus to Hermippus	1
Part 1	2
Part 2	9
Part 3	16
Part 4	20
Part 5	24
Part 6	27
Part 7	30

Part 8	34
Part 9	38
Part 10	40
Part 11	47
Part 12	54

Part 9

But if there are so many difficulties in the *a posteriori* argument, said **Demea**, hadn't we better stay with the simple and sublime *a priori* argument which cuts off all doubt and difficulty with a single blow, by offering to us an infallible knock-down proof? Furthermore, this argument lets us prove •the *infinity* of God's attributes—that he is infinitely wise, infinitely good, infinitely powerful, and so on—which, I am afraid, can never be established with certainty in any other manner. For how can an infinite cause be inferred from an effect that is finite, or that may be finite for all we know to the contrary? •The unity of God's nature, also, is very hard—if not absolutely impossible—to infer merely from observing the works of nature; even if it is granted that the plan of the universe is all of a piece, that isn't enough to ensure us of God's unity. Whereas the *a priori* argument. . .

Cleanthes interrupted: You seem to reason, Demea, as if those advantages and conveniences in the abstract *a priori* argument were full proofs of its soundness. But in my opinion we should first settle *what* argument with all these advantages you choose to insist on; and then we can try to decide what value to put on it—doing this better by looking at the argument itself than by considering its useful consequences.

The argument that I would insist on, replied **Demea**, is the common one: Whatever exists must have a cause or reason for its existence, as it is absolutely impossible for anything to produce itself, or be the cause of its own existence. In working back, therefore, from effects to causes, we must either **(1)** go on tracing causes to infinity, without any ultimate cause at all, or **(2)** at last have recourse to some ultimate cause that is necessarily existent and therefore

doesn't need an external cause. Supposition **(1)** is absurd, as I now prove:

In the supposed infinite chain or series of causes and effects, each single effect is made to exist by the power and efficacy of the cause that immediately preceded it; but the whole eternal chain or series, considered as a whole, is not caused by anything; and yet it obviously requires a cause or reason, as much as any particular thing that begins to exist in time. We are entitled to ask why *this* particular series of causes existed from eternity, and not some other series, or no series at all. If there is no necessarily existent being, all the suppositions we can make about this are equally possible; and there is no more absurdity in •nothing's having existed from eternity than there is in •the series of causes that constitutes the universe. What was it, then, that made something exist rather than nothing, and gave existence to one particular possibility as against any of the others? •External causes? We are supposing that there aren't any. •Chance? That's a word without a meaning. Was it •Nothing? But that can never produce anything.

So we must adopt supposition **(2)**, and have recourse to a necessarily existent being, who carries the reason of his existence in himself and cannot be supposed not to exist without an express contradiction. So there is such a being; that is, there is a God.

I know that Philo loves raising objections, said **Cleanthes**, but I shan't leave it to him to point out the weakness of your metaphysical reasoning. Your argument seems to me so obviously ill-grounded, and even if it succeeded to offer so

little help to the cause of true piety and religion, that I shall myself venture to show what is wrong with it.

I start by remarking that there is an evident absurdity in claiming to demonstrate—or to prove by any *a priori* arguments—any matter of fact.

- Nothing is demonstrable unless its contrary implies a contradiction.
- Nothing that is distinctly conceivable implies a contradiction.
- Whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent.
- So there is no being whose non-existence implies a contradiction.
- So there is no being whose existence is demonstrable.

I offer this argument as entirely decisive, and am willing to rest the whole controversy on it.

You claim that God is a necessarily existent being; and the friends of your line of argument try to explain this necessity of his existence by saying that *if we knew his whole essence or nature, we would perceive it to be as impossible for •him not to exist as for •twice two not to be four*. But obviously this can never happen, while our faculties remain the same as they are now. It will always be possible for us at any time to conceive the non-existence of something we formerly conceived to exist; the mind can never *have to* suppose some object to remain always in existence, in the way in which we always *have to* conceive twice two to be four. So the words 'necessary existence' have no meaning—or (the same thing) no meaning that is consistent.

Furthermore, if we do go along with this claimed explanation of necessary existence, why shouldn't *the material universe* be the necessarily existent being? We dare not claim to know all the qualities of matter; and for all we can tell, matter may have some qualities which, if we knew

them, would make •matter's non-existence appear as great a contradiction as •twice two's being five. I have found only one argument trying to prove that the material world is not the necessarily existent being; and this argument is derived from the contingency both of the *matter* and the *form* of the world. 'Any particle of matter', Dr Clarke has said, 'can be conceived to be annihilated; and any form can be conceived to be altered. Such an annihilation or alteration, therefore, is not impossible.' But it seems very *biased* not to see that the same argument applies just as well to God, so far as we have any conception of him; and that our mind can at least imagine God to be non-existent or his attributes to be altered. If something is to make his non-existence appear impossible, or his attributes unalterable, it must be some qualities of his that we don't know and can't conceive; but then no reason can be given why these qualities may not belong to matter. As they are altogether unknown and inconceivable, they can never be proved incompatible with •the nature of matter as we know• it.

A further objection: in tracing an eternal series of items, it seems absurd to ask for a general cause or first author •of the entire series•. How can something that exists from eternity have a cause, since the causal relation implies •priority in time and •a beginning of existence?

Also: in such a chain or series of items, each part is caused by the part that preceded it, and causes the one that follows. So where is the difficulty? But the *whole* needs a cause! you say. I answer that the uniting of these parts into a whole, like the uniting of several distinct counties into one kingdom, or several distinct members into one organic body, is performed merely by an arbitrary act of the mind and has no influence on the nature of things. If I showed you the particular causes of each individual in a collection of twenty particles of matter, I would think it very unreasonable if you

then asked me what was the cause of the whole twenty. The cause of the whole is sufficiently explained by explaining the cause of the parts.

Your reasonings, Cleanthes, may well excuse me from raising any further difficulties, said **Philo**, but I can't resist bringing up another point. Arithmeticians have noted that every product of 9 has integers which add up to 9 or to some lesser product of 9. Thus, of 18, 27, and 36, which are products of 9, you make 9 by adding 1 to 8, 2 to 7, and 3 to 6. Thus, 369 is a product also of 9; and if you add 3, 6, and 9, you make 18, which is a lesser product of 9. To a superficial observer this splendid regularity may be wondered at as the effect either of •chance or •design; but a skillful algebraist immediately concludes it to be the work of •necessity, and demonstrates that it must forever result from the nature of these numbers. Isn't it probable, I now ask, that the whole way the universe works depends on this sort of necessity, though no human algebra can provide a key that solves the difficulty? Instead of wondering at the order of natural beings, mightn't it be that if we could penetrate into the intimate nature of bodies we would clearly see why it was absolutely impossible for them to be inter-related in

any other way? So you run a great risk when you introduce this idea of *necessity* into the present question, because it naturally supports an inference that is directly opposite to the religious hypothesis!

Anyway, continued Philo, dropping all these abstractions and staying with more familiar topics, I venture to remark that the *a priori* argument has seldom been found very convincing, except to people with metaphysical minds, who have accustomed themselves to abstract reasoning and who have developed bad intellectual habits, because, finding in mathematics that the understanding frequently leads through darkness to truths that at first didn't appear to be true, they have transferred the same habit of thinking to subjects where it isn't appropriate. Other people, even ones who have good sense and strong inclinations in favour of religion, always feel that there is something wrong with such arguments as the *a priori* argument for the existence of God, even though they may not be able to explain distinctly what the defect is; which is a certain proof that men always did and always will derive their religion from sources other than this sort of reasoning.

Part 10

It is my opinion, I admit, replied **Demea**, that each man somehow *feels in his heart* the truth of religion, and that what leads him to seek protection from •God•, the being on whom he and all nature depend, is not any reasoning but rather his consciousness of his own weakness and

misery. Even the best scenes of life are so troubling or so unpleasant that all our hopes and fears look to the future. We incessantly look forward, and try through prayers, adoration and sacrifice to appease those unknown powers who, we find by experience, can so thoroughly afflict and oppress

us. Wretched creatures that we are! What help would there be for us amid the innumerable ills of life if religion didn't suggest some ways of reconciling ourselves with God and soothe the terrors with which we are incessantly agitated and tormented?

I am indeed convinced, said **Philo**, that the best and indeed the only method of bringing everyone to a proper sense of religion is by making them see clearly the misery and wickedness of men. And for that purpose a talent for eloquence and strong imagery is more needed than a talent for reasoning and argument. What need is there to prove something that everyone feels within himself? It is only necessary to make us feel it, if possible, more strongly and intimately.

Indeed, replied **Demea**, the people are sufficiently convinced of this great and melancholy truth. These phrases:

the miseries of life
the unhappiness of man
the general corruptions of our nature
the unsatisfactory enjoyment of pleasures, riches,
honours

have become almost proverbial in all languages. And who can doubt something that all men declare from their own immediate feeling and experience?

On this point, said **Philo**, the learned are in perfect agreement with the common people; and in all literature, religious and otherwise, the topic of human misery has been stressed with the most pathetic eloquence that sorrow and melancholy could inspire. The works of the poets—whose testimony has extra authority because they speak from feeling, without a system—abound in images of this sort. From Homer down to Dr. Edward Young, the whole inspired tribe of poets have

always been aware that if they are to present human life in a way that fits what each individual person sees and feels it as being like, they will have to represent it in *that* way.

As for authorities, replied **Demea**, you needn't hunt for them. Look around this library of Cleanthes. I venture to guess that—except for authors of particular sciences such as chemistry or botany, who have no occasion to treat of human life—almost every one of those innumerable writers has, somewhere or other, been led by his sense of human misery to testify to it and complain of it. At any rate, the odds are that *almost all* of them have written in that way; and as far as I can remember *no* author has gone to the opposite extreme of denying human misery.

There you must excuse me, said **Philo**: Leibniz has denied it. He is perhaps the first who ventured on such a bold and paradoxical opinion; or, anyway, the first who made it essential to his philosophical system.¹

Given that he was the first, replied **Demea**, mightn't that very fact have made him realize that he was wrong? For is this a subject on which philosophers can claim to make *discoveries*, especially as late in history as this? And can any man hope by a simple denial to outweigh the united testimony of mankind, based on sense and consciousness? (I say 'a simple denial' because the subject scarcely admits of reasoning.)

And, he added, why should *man* claim to be exempt from the fate of all the other animals? The whole earth, believe me, Philo, is cursed and polluted. A perpetual war goes on among all living creatures. Need, hunger, and deprivation stimulate the strong and courageous; fear, anxiety and terror agitate the weak and infirm. •The first entrance into life brings distress to the new-born infant and to its wretched

¹ It was maintained by Dr. King and a few others, before Leibniz, but not by any as famous as that German philosopher.

mother; •weakness, impotence and distress accompany each stage of that life: and •eventually it reaches its end in agony and horror.

Observe too, says **Philo**, nature's intricate devices for embittering the life of every living being. The stronger ones prey on the weaker, and keep them in perpetual terror and anxiety. The weaker, in their turn, often prey on the stronger, and vex and trouble them, giving them no respite. Think of the innumerable race of insects that either are bred on the body of an animal or, flying about, put their stings into him. These insects are themselves tormented by others that are even smaller. And thus on every hand, before and behind, above and below, every animal is surrounded by enemies that constantly seek his misery and destruction.

Man alone, said **Demea**, seems to be a partial exception to this rule. For by coming together in society men can easily master lions, tigers, and bears, whose greater strength and agility naturally enable them to prey on him.

On the contrary, exclaimed **Philo**, it is just here that we can most clearly see how uniform and equal nature's maxims are! It is true that man can by combining surmount all his *real* enemies and become master of the whole animal kingdom; but doesn't he immediately conjure up imaginary enemies, the demons of his imagination, who haunt him with superstitious terrors and blast every enjoyment of life? He imagines that they see his pleasure as a crime, and that his food and leisure annoy and offend them. Even his sleep and dreams bring him new materials for anxious fear; and death, his refuge from every other ill, presents only the dread of endless and innumerable woes. The wolf's attack on the timid flock is no worse than what superstition does to the anxious feelings of wretched mortals.

Besides, Demea, think about this very society through which we get the upper hand over those wild beasts, our

natural enemies: what new enemies it raises against us! What woe and misery it causes! Man is the greatest enemy of man. Oppression, injustice, contempt, disrespect, violence, sedition, war, slander, treachery, fraud—men use these to torment one another, and they would soon dissolve the society they had formed if they weren't afraid that even greater ills would come from their doing so.

These external injuries, said **Demea**, that we suffer from animals, from men, and from all the elements, do indeed form a frightful catalogue of woes; but they are nothing in comparison to the ones that arise within ourselves from the illnesses of our mind and body. How many people lie under the lingering torment of diseases? Hear the pathetic list of the great poet.

Intestine stone and ulcer, colic-pangs,
 Demoniac frenzy, moping melancholy,
 And moon-struck madness, pining atrophy,
 Marasmus, and wide-wasting pestilence.
 Dire was the tossing, deep the groans: DESPAIR
 Tended the sick, busiest from couch to couch.
 And over them triumphant DEATH his dart
 Shook: but delay'd to strike, though oft invoc'd
 With vows, as their chief good and final hope.

(Milton, *Paradise Lost* 11)

The disorders of the mind, continued **Demea**, though they are more secret may be no less dismal and vexatious. Remorse, shame, anguish, rage, disappointment, anxiety, fear, dejection, despair; who has ever passed through life without cruel attacks from these tormentors? Many people have scarcely ever felt any better sensations than those! Labour and poverty, so hated by everyone, are the certain fate of the majority, and the privileged few who enjoy leisure and wealth never reach contentment or true happiness. All

the goods of life put together would not make a very happy man; but all the ills together would make a wretch indeed! Life can indeed be made unsatisfactory by almost any *one* of the ills (and who can be free from every one?), or indeed by the lack of any *one* good (and who can possess all?).

If an alien suddenly arrived in this world, I would show him, as a specimen of its ills, a hospital full of diseases, a prison crowded with criminals and debtors, a field of battle with corpses all over it, a fleet of ships sinking in the ocean, a nation suffering under tyranny, famine, or plague. To turn the cheerful side of life to him and give him a notion of its pleasures, where should I take him? to a ball, to an opera, to court? He might reasonably think that I was only showing him other kinds of distress and sorrow.

There is no way to escape such striking instances, said **Philo**, except by explaining them away—and that makes the indictment even more severe. Why, I ask, have all men in all ages complained incessantly of the miseries of life? Someone replies: ‘They have no good reason: they complain only because they are disposed to be discontented, regretful, anxious.’ I reply: what greater guarantee of misery could there be than to have such a wretched temperament?

‘But if they were really as unhappy as they claim,’ says my antagonist, ‘why do they stay alive?’

Not satisfied with life, afraid of death. [Milton, *Paradise Lost* 11]

This is the secret chain that holds us, I reply. We are terrified, not bribed, into continuing our existence.

‘It is only a false delicacy,’ he may insist, ‘which a few refined spirits permit themselves, and which has spread these complaints among the whole race of mankind.’ And what is this delicacy, I ask, which you blame? Isn’t it just a greater awareness of all the pleasures and pains of life? And if the man of a delicate, refined cast of mind, by being

so much more •alive than the rest of the world, is only made so much more •unhappy, what conclusion should we reach about human life in general?

‘If men remained at rest,’ says our adversary, ‘they would be at ease. Through all their busy, ambitious activity they are willing makers of their own misery.’ No! I reply: leisure makes them anxious and slack. Not that it would do any good for them to give up leisure, for activity and ambition bring disappointment, vexation, and trouble.

I can see something like what you describe in some others, replied **Cleanthes**: but I confess that I feel little or nothing of it in myself, and I hope it isn’t as common as you make it out to be.

If you don’t feel human misery yourself, exclaimed **De-meia**, I congratulate you on your happy uniqueness! Others, seemingly the most prosperous, haven’t been ashamed to give voice to their complaints in the saddest tones. Let us attend to the great, the fortunate emperor Charles V when, tired with human grandeur, he resigned all his extensive dominions into the hands of his son. In the last speech he made on that memorable occasion, he publicly testified that *the greatest prosperities he had ever enjoyed had been mixed with so many adversities that he could truly say that he had never enjoyed any satisfaction or contentment*. But did the retired life in which he hoped to shelter give him any greater happiness? If we can believe his son’s account, he started to regret his abdication on the very day he abdicated.

Cicero’s fortune rose from small beginnings to the greatest glory and fame; yet his letters to friends as well as his philosophical discourses contain ever so many pathetic complaints about the ills of life. And suitably to his own experience, he introduces Cato—the great, the fortunate Cato—protesting in his old age that if a new life were his for the asking, he would turn it down.

Ask yourself, ask anyone you know, whether they would be willing to live over again the last ten or twenty years of their lives. No! but the next twenty, they say, will be better. . . . Human misery is so great that it reconciles even contradictions! And so people eventually come to complain about the shortness of life and, in the same breath, complaining of its pointlessness and sorrow.

And is it possible, Cleanthes, said **Philo**, that after all these reflections, and countless others that might be suggested, you *still* stick to your anthropomorphism, and assert that the moral attributes of God—his justice, benevolence, mercy, and uprightness—are of the same nature as these virtues in human creatures? We grant that his power is infinite: whatever he wills to happen does happen. But neither man nor any other animal is happy; therefore God doesn't will their happiness. His knowledge is infinite: he is never mistaken in his choice of means to any end. But the course of nature doesn't lead to human or animal happiness; therefore nature isn't established for that purpose. Through the whole range of human knowledge, there are no inferences more certain and infallible than these. Well, then, in what respect *do* his benevolence and mercy resemble the benevolence and mercy of men?

Epicurus's old questions have still not been answered. •Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. •Is he able, but not willing? then he is malevolent. •Is he both able and willing? then where does evil come from? [In this work, as in all writings on the 'problem of evil', the topic is the entire range of bad states of affairs, including every kind of suffering; it is not confined to the extreme *moral* badness that 'evil' stands for today.]

You ascribe a purpose and intention to nature, Cleanthes, and I think you are right about that. But what, I ask you, is the aim of all the intricately designed machinery that nature has displayed in all animals? Here is my answer

to that. The aim is simply the preservation of individuals, and the continuance of the species. It seems enough for nature's purpose if the species is merely enabled to stay in existence, without any care or concern for the happiness of its individual members. No means for this are provided, no machinery aimed purely at giving pleasure or ease, no store of pure joy and contentment, no gratification without some lack or need to go with it. Or perhaps not quite *none*, but at least the few phenomena of this nature are outweighed by opposite phenomena of greater importance.

Our sense of music, harmony, and indeed beauty of all kinds gives satisfaction without being absolutely necessary to the preservation and propagation of the species. But contrast that with the racking pains that arise from gout, gravels, migraines, toothaches, rheumatisms, where the injury to the animal machinery is either small so that no pain-signal is *needed* or incurable so that no pain-signal is *useful*. Joy, laughter, play, frolic, seem to be gratuitous satisfactions that don't lead to anything further; and spleen, melancholy, discontent, superstition, are pains that also lead nowhere. How then does God's benevolence display itself according to you anthropomorphites? It is only we 'mystics' (as you were pleased to call us) who can account for this strange mixture of phenomena, by deriving it from divine attributes that are infinitely perfect but incomprehensible.

At last, Philo, said **Cleanthes** with a smile, you have let us see what you have been up to! Your long agreement with Demea surprised me a little, but now I see that all along you were preparing to train your guns on me. And I must admit that you have now come to a subject that is worthy of your notable spirit of opposition and controversy. If you can make good on your present point, and prove mankind to be unhappy or corrupted, there is an immediate end to all religion. For what is the point of establishing the natural

attributes of God while his moral attributes are still doubtful and uncertain?

You're very quick to object, replied **Demea**, to innocent opinions that are the most widely accepted, even among religious and devout people. I'm immensely surprised to find this theme of the wickedness and misery of man being charged with, of all things, atheism and profaneness. Haven't all pious divines and preachers who have lavished their rhetoric on this rich topic given a solution for any difficulties that may come with it? This world is a mere *point* in comparison with the universe; this life is a mere *moment* in comparison with eternity. The present evil phenomena, therefore, are set right in other regions and at some future time. And when that happens the eyes of men, being then opened to broader views of things, will see the whole connection of general laws, and with admiring wonder trace God's benevolence and justice through all the mazes and intricacies of his providence.

No! replied **Cleanthes**, No! These arbitrary suppositions can never be admitted; they are contrary to visible and unchallenged *facts*. How can any cause be known except from its known effects? How can any hypothesis be proved except from the experienced phenomena? To base one hypothesis on another is to build entirely in the air; and the most we ever achieve through these conjectures and fictions is to show that our opinion is *possible*; we can never in this way establish that it is *true*.

The only way to support divine benevolence—and it is what I willingly accept—is to deny absolutely the misery and wickedness of man. Your pictures of the human condition are exaggerated; your melancholy views are mostly fictitious; your conclusions are contrary to fact and experience. Health is more common than sickness; pleasure than pain; happiness than misery. I calculate that for each vexation that we

meet with we get a hundred enjoyments.

Your position is extremely doubtful, replied **Philo**, but even if we allow it you must at the same time admit that if pain is less frequent than pleasure it is infinitely more violent and lasting. One hour of pain is often able to outweigh a day, a week, a month of our ordinary tepid enjoyments; and some people pass days, weeks, and months in the most acute torments! Pleasure hardly ever rises to the height of ecstasy and rapture; and it can *never* continue for any time at its highest pitch and altitude. The spirits evaporate, the nerves relax, the body is out of order, and the enjoyment quickly degenerates into fatigue and uneasiness. But pain often—good God, *how* often!—rises to torture and agony; and the longer it continues the more thoroughly it becomes genuine agony and torture. Patience is exhausted, courage fades, melancholy seizes us, and nothing puts an end to our misery except the removal of its cause—or another event that is the sole cure of *all* evil though our natural foolishness leads us to regard it with still greater horror and consternation.

All this is obvious, certain, and important, continued Philo, but I shan't go on about it. I do take the opportunity to warn you, Cleanthes, that you have taken your stand on most dangerous ground, and without realizing it have introduced a total scepticism into the most essential articles of natural and revealed theology. What! no way to give religion a sound basis unless we allow the happiness of human life, and maintain that a continued existence even in this world—with all our actual pains, infirmities, vexations, and follies—is satisfactory and desirable! This is contrary to everyone's feeling and experience; which means that it is contrary to an authority so well established that nothing can undercut it. No decisive proofs can ever be produced against this authority; nor is it possible for you to compute,

estimate, and compare all the pains and all the pleasures in the lives of all men and of all animals; and so when you rest the whole system of religion on a claim which from its very nature must for ever be uncertain, you tacitly admit that the system is equally uncertain.

Animal happiness, or at least human happiness, in this life exceeds its misery—no-one will ever believe this, or at any rate you'll never be able to prove it. But even if we grant it to you, your argument has still achieved nothing; for this is far from what we expect from infinite power, infinite wisdom, and infinite goodness. Why is there any misery at all in the world? Not by chance, surely. From some cause, then. Is it from the intention of God? But he is perfectly benevolent. Is it contrary to his intention? But he is almighty. Nothing can shake the solidity of this reasoning, so short, so clear, so decisive—unless we say that these subjects exceed all human capacity, and that our common measures of truth and falsehood are not applicable to them; a thesis I have all along insisted on, but which you have from the outset rejected with scorn and indignation.

But I will be contented to shift back from this position—*doing this voluntarily*—, for I deny that you can ever *force* me out of it. I will allow *for purposes of argument* that pain or misery in man is compatible with infinite power and goodness in God, even when these attributes are understood in your way: what help do all these concessions give to

your position? A mere *possible compatibility* is not sufficient. You must *prove* the existence of these pure, unmixed, and uncontrollable attributes from the present mixed and confused phenomena, and from these alone. A hopeful undertaking! Even if the phenomena were ever so pure and unmixed, because they are finite they would be insufficient for your purpose. How much more *inadequate* when they are also so jarring and discordant!

Here, Cleanthes, I find I can relax in my argument. Here I triumph! When we argued earlier about the natural attributes of intelligence and design, I needed all my sceptical and metaphysical subtlety to escape your grasp. In many views of the universe and of its parts, particularly its parts, the beauty and fitness of final causes strike us with such irresistible force that all objections seem to be (as I think they really are) mere fault-finding and trickery; and then we can't imagine how we could ever give weight to them. But there is no view of human life or of the condition of mankind from which we can smoothly infer the moral attributes *of God*, or learn about that infinite benevolence, conjoined with infinite power and infinite wisdom, which we must discover by the eyes of faith alone. *But now the tables are turned!* It is now your turn to tug the labouring oar, and to defend your philosophical subtleties against the dictates of plain reason and experience.

Part 11

I don't mind admitting, said **Cleanthes**, that I have been inclined to suspect that the frequent repetition of the word 'infinite', which we meet with in all theological writers, has the flavour of *praise* more than of *philosophy*; and that any purposes of reasoning, and any purposes even of religion, would be better served if we contented ourselves with more accurate and moderate expressions. The terms 'admirable', 'excellent', 'superlatively great', 'wise', and 'holy'—these sufficiently fill the imaginations of men, and anything that goes further than they do has two drawbacks: it leads into absurdities, and it has no influence on our feelings or beliefs. The way someone feels about a God who is 'infinitely great' is exactly the way he would feel about a God who is superlatively great. Thus in our present subject if we abandon all human analogy, as you seem to want, Demea, I am afraid we abandon all religion and are left with no conception of God, the great object of our admiring wonder. If we keep the human analogy while also staying with 'infinite', we'll never be able to *reconcile* any mixture of evil in the universe with infinite attributes; much less can we ever *infer* the attributes from the facts about what evil there is in the universe. But if we suppose the author of nature to be only finitely perfect, though far more perfect than mankind, we can give a satisfactory account of natural and of moral evil, and every bad phenomenon can be explained and harmonized with the rest. A lesser evil may then be chosen in order to avoid a greater; inconveniences may be put up with in order to reach a desirable end; and, in brief,

benevolence, guided by wisdom, and limited by necessity

can produce just such a world as the one we have. You, Philo,

who are so prompt at launching views and reflections and analogies, I would be glad to hear—at length and without interruption—your opinion of this new theory of mine. If it turns out to deserve our attention, we can later take our time about shaping it up and filling in details.

My opinions, replied **Philo**, aren't worth being made a mystery of; so without more ado I'll tell you what occurs to me regarding this present subject. It must be admitted, I think, that if a being who had very limited intelligence and was utterly unacquainted with our universe were assured that it is the product of a being who, though finite, is very good, wise, and powerful, this would lead him *beforehand* to expect something different from what our experience shows the universe to be like; he would never imagine, merely from being informed that the cause is very good, wise, and powerful that the effect could be as full of vice and misery and disorder as it appears to be in this life. Supposing now that this person were brought into our world, still sure that it was the workmanship of that sublime and benevolent being; he might be surprised at the discrepancy with what he had expected; but he wouldn't retract his former belief about the cause of the universe *if that was founded on any very solid argument*; for a person with such a limited intelligence must be aware of his own blindness and ignorance, and must admit that these phenomena of vice, misery etc. may have explanations that he'll never be able to understand. But suppose that this creature is not—as *we are not*—convinced in advance of a supreme intelligence, benevolent and powerful, but is left to infer such a belief from the appearances of things; this entirely alters the case, and he will never find any reason for such a conclusion. He may

be fully convinced of the narrow limits of his understanding; but this won't help him to make an inference concerning the goodness of superior powers, because he has to make that inference from what he knows, not from what he is ignorant of. The more you exaggerate his weakness and ignorance, the more cautious you make him, and the more you make him suspect that such subjects are beyond the reach of his faculties. You are obliged, therefore, to reason with him merely from the known phenomena, and to drop every arbitrary supposition or conjecture.

If I showed you a house or palace where •there wasn't one convenient or agreeable apartment, where •the windows, doors, fireplaces, passages, stairs, and the whole arrangement of the building were the source of noise, confusion, fatigue, darkness, and the extremes of heat and cold, you would certainly blame the planning of the building without any further examination. It would be no use for the architect to display his subtlety, and to prove to you that if this door or that window were altered something worse would follow. What he says may be strictly true: it may be that it would only make things worse to alter one detail while leaving the other parts of the building unchanged. But you would still say in general that if the architect had had skill and good intentions he could have planned the whole building, and inter-related its parts, in such a way as to remedy all or most of these inconveniences. His ignorance of such a plan—even *your own* ignorance of such a plan—will never convince you that it is impossible. If you find any inconveniences and defects in the building, you will always—straight off—condemn the architect.

In short, I repeat the question: Is the world, considered over-all and as it appears to us in this life, different from what a limited being like a man would expect *beforehand* from a very powerful, wise, and benevolent God? It must

be a strange prejudice to assert that it isn't. And from this I conclude that however *consistent* the world may be (on certain assumptions and with allowances made) with the idea of such a God, it can never provide us with an *inference* to his existence. The consistency is not absolutely denied, only the inference. Conjectures, especially when infinity is excluded from God's attributes, may perhaps be sufficient to prove a consistency, but they can never be foundations for any inference.

There seem to be *four* circumstances on which depend all or most of the troubles that beset conscious creatures; and it isn't impossible that all these circumstances are necessary and unavoidable. We know so little beyond common life—we know indeed so little *of* common life—that when it comes to the way a universe is arranged •any conjecture, however wild, may be correct ·so far as we can tell to the contrary·; and •any conjecture, however plausible, may be erroneous ·so far as we can tell to the contrary·. The human understanding, in this deep ignorance and obscurity, ought to be sceptical, or at least cautious, and oughtn't to accept any hypothesis whatever, especially ones that aren't supported by any appearance of probability. I claim that this is the case with regard to all the causes of evil, and the circumstances on which it depends. None of them appears to human reason to be in the slightest necessary or unavoidable; and we can't suppose them to be so without letting our imaginations run wild.

(1) The *first* circumstance that introduces evil is the device or arrangement of the animal creation by which pains as well as pleasures are employed to rouse creatures to action, and make them alert in the great work of self-preservation. Now it seems to human understanding that pleasure alone, in its various levels of intensity, would suffice for this purpose. It could have been like this:

All animals are constantly in a state of enjoyment; but when they are urged by any of the necessities of nature—such as thirst, hunger, weariness—instead of pain they feel a lessening of pleasure, and this prompts them to seek whatever it is that is needed for their survival.

Men pursue pleasure as eagerly as they avoid pain—or, anyway, they *could* have been so constituted that this was true of them. So it seems clearly possible to carry on the business of life without any pain. Why then is any animal ever subjected to such a sensation? If animals can be free from it for an hour, they *could* be free from it all the time; and their being subject to pain is a positive fact about them, not a mere absence of something it might have been impossible to provide: it required a particular arrangement of their organs to produce pain, just as it did to endow them with sight, hearing, or any of the senses. Shall we conjecture—without any appearance of reason for it—that such an arrangement was *necessary*? and shall we build on that conjecture as we would on the most certain truth?

(2) But a *capacity for pain* would not of itself produce *pain* if it weren't for something else, namely the world's being governed by general laws; and this seems to be in no way necessary for a very perfect being. It is true that if each thing that happens were caused by an individual volition on God's part, the course of nature would be perpetually broken, there would be no dependable regularities, and so no man could employ his reason in the conduct of life. But if some such volitions threatened to have that effect, mightn't other particular volitions remedy this inconvenience? In short, might not God exterminate all misfortune, wherever it was to be found, and make everything all good, through judiciously placed individual volitions, and thus without any preparation or long chains of causes and effects?

Besides, we should bear in mind that in the present arrangement of the world the course of nature, though supposed to be entirely regular, appears to us *not* to be so; many events are uncertain, and many disappoint our expectations. Countless kinds of happenings whose causes are unknown and variable—for example health and sickness, calm and tempest—have a great influence both on the fortunes of particular persons and on the prosperity of whole communities; and indeed all human life depends in a way on such happenings. So a being who knows the secret workings of the universe might easily, by particular volitions, turn all these happenings to the good of mankind and make the whole world happy, without revealing himself in any operation. A fleet whose purposes were useful to society might always meet with a fair wind. Good rulers might enjoy sound health and long life. Persons born to power and authority might be endowed with good temperaments and virtuous dispositions. A few outcomes such as these, regularly and wisely brought about, would change the face of the world; and yet they would no more seem to disturb the course of nature or thwart human conduct than does the present arrangement of things where the causes are secret, and variable, and complex. Some small touches given to Caligula's brain in his infancy might have converted him into a Trajan. One wave a little higher than the rest, by burying Caesar and his fortune in the bottom of the ocean, might have restored liberty to a considerable part of mankind. There may, for all we know, be good reasons why Providence doesn't intervene in this manner; but we don't know them; and though the mere *supposition* that such reasons exist may be sufficient to *save* the conclusion concerning the Divine attributes from being refuted by the observed facts, it can surely never be sufficient to *establish* that conclusion.

If **(2)** everything in the universe is governed by general laws, and if **(1)** animals are made capable of pain, it seems almost inevitable that some misfortune will arise in the various collisions of matter, and the various agreements and clashes between general laws; but such misfortune would be very rare if it weren't for. . .

(3) . . . the third of the four factors that I proposed to mention. It is the great *frugality* with which all powers and abilities are distributed to every particular being. The organs and capacities of all animals are so well organized and so well fitted to their preservation that—judging by history and tradition—there appears never yet to have been a species that was extinguished in the universe. Every animal has the endowments it needs; but these endowments are given out with such careful economy—giving each creature only the bare necessities for its survival—that if anything considerable is taken away from them the creature is entirely destroyed. Wherever one power is increased, there is a proportional lessening of the others. Animals that excel in speed are commonly lacking in strength. Those that have both are either imperfect in some of their senses or are oppressed with the most craving wants. The human species, whose chief excellence is reason and foresight, has more needs and fewer bodily advantages than any of the others: ·think of how humans would be situated if they were· without clothes, without weapons, without food, without lodging, without any convenience of life except what they owe to their own skill and hard work. In short, nature seems to have calculated exactly what her creatures need, and—like a stern employer—has granted them little more than the powers or endowments that are strictly sufficient to meet those needs. An indulgent parent would have provided a great deal extra, so as to guard against unforeseen events and to secure the happiness and welfare of the creature in the worst crises. He

would not have left us in a condition where every course of life is surrounded with precipices to such an extent that the least departure from the true path—whether by mistake or by necessity—is bound to involve us in misery and ruin. Some reserve, some ·emergency· fund, would have been provided to ensure happiness; and our powers and our needs wouldn't have been so strictly balanced against each other. The author of nature is inconceivably powerful; his force is supposed to be great, even if not limitless; and there's no reason we can find why he should be so strictly frugal in his dealings with his creatures. If his power is extremely limited, he'd have done better to create fewer animals, and to have endowed *these* with more means for being happy and staying alive. A builder is never regarded as prudent if he tackles a plan that he hasn't the materials to finish.

In order to remedy most of the misfortunes of human life I don't require that man should have the wings of the eagle, the swiftness of the stag, the force of the ox, the arms of the lion, the scales of the crocodile or rhinoceros; much less do I demand the intelligence of an angel. I will settle for an increase in one single power or capacity of his mind: let him be endowed with *a greater liking for work*, a more vigorous bounce and activity of mind, a more constant tendency to get on with his business. If the whole species possessed *naturally* the same high level of diligence that many individuals *cultivate* in themselves, the immediate and necessary result of this endowment would be the most beneficial consequences, with no taint of anything bad. Almost all the *moral* evils of human life, as well as its *natural* evils, arise from ·idleness; and if our species had been built so as to be inherently free of ·this vice or infirmity, the immediate result would have been the perfect cultivation of land, the improvement of arts and manufactures, the exact performance of every office and duty, and men would

straight away have reached the state of society that ·as things are· is only imperfectly achieved by the best regulated government. But as hard-workingness is a power, and indeed the most valuable of all the powers, nature seems to be determined to follow her usual policy and to bestow it on men with a very sparing hand; and to punish him severely for not having enough of it rather than to reward him for his achievements. She has built him in such a way that nothing but the strongest need can force him to work, ·and she exploits *that* fact in order to get him to work·: she uses all his other wants to overcome, at least in part, his lack of diligence, thus endowing him •through hardship and need· with some share of a faculty that she has deprived him of •naturally. Here our demands can be agreed to be very humble, and thus all the more reasonable. If we required the endowments of sharper intellect and wiser judgment, of a more delicate taste for beauty, of more sensitive feelings of benevolence and friendship, we might be told •that we were impiously claiming to break the order of nature, •that we wanted to raise ourselves to a higher level of being, •that the gifts that we ask for, not being suitable to our state and condition, would only bring us misery. But it is hard—I dare to repeat it, it is *hard*—that when we are placed in a world so full of wants and necessities, where almost every being and element is either our foe or refuses its assistance, we should also have our own temperament to struggle with, and should be deprived of the only faculty—namely, an inclination for hard work·—that can protect us from these multiplied evils.

(4) The fourth factor leading to the misery and misfortune of the universe is the inaccurate workmanship of all the workings and principles of the great machine of nature. It must be admitted that most parts of the universe seem to serve some purpose, and in most cases the removal of a part would produce a visible defect and disorder in the whole. The

parts all hang together; and you can't change one without affecting the rest, more or less. But at the same time it must be observed that none of these parts or powers, however useful, are so accurately adjusted that they keep precisely within the limits of their usefulness; all of them are apt much of the time to run to one extreme or the other. This grand product, ·the universe·, is so unfinished in every part, and is carried out with such coarse brush-strokes, that one would think that its maker hadn't yet put on its finishing touches. Thus, winds are needed to blow away smoke and fog and noxious fumes, and to help men in navigation: but often they grow to being tempests and hurricanes, and then they become pernicious. Rains are necessary to nourish all the plants and animals of the earth; but often there are droughts and often the rain is excessive. Heat is needed for life and vegetation, but isn't always found at the right level. The health and prosperity of the animal depend on the making and mixing of the fluids and juices of its body, but the parts ·of these fluids· don't dependably perform their proper function. The passions of the mind—ambition, vanity, love, anger—are extremely useful, but they often overflow their banks and cause the greatest convulsions in society. Everything in the universe, however advantageous, frequently becomes pernicious through there being too much or too little of it; and nature has not guarded effectively against all disorder or confusion. The irregularity is perhaps never so great as to destroy any species, but is often sufficient to involve individuals in ruin and misery.

There are the *four* factors on which all or most natural evil depends. If **(1)** all living creatures were incapable of feeling pain, or if **(2)** the world were governed by particular volitions, evil never could have found its way into the universe; and if **(3)** animals were endowed with a large stock of powers and faculties, beyond what they strictly need for survival, or if

(4) the various springs and principles of the universe were so accurately devised as to preserve always the temperate middle level and not run to extremes, there would have been very little misfortune compared to what we feel at present. What then shall we say about all this? Shall we say that the universe could easily have been designed so as to be different in these four respects? This decision seems too presumptuous for creatures as blind and ignorant as we are. Let us be more modest in our conclusions. Let us allow that if the goodness of God (I mean a goodness like human goodness) could be established by any respectable *a priori* argument, these phenomena, however unfortunate, wouldn't be sufficient to undercut that principle of God's goodness; for the phenomena might be easily reconcilable to it in some way we don't know about. But we should still maintain that as God's goodness is *not* antecedently established, and has to be inferred from the phenomena, there can be no grounds for such an inference when there are so many misfortunes in the universe, and while these misfortunes could—as far as human understanding can be allowed to judge on such a subject—easily have been remedied. I am sceptic enough to allow that the bad appearances, notwithstanding all my reasonings, may be *compatible with* such divine attributes as you suppose; but surely they can never *prove* these attributes. The conclusion that God is good cannot result from scepticism, but must arise from the phenomena and from our confidence in the reasonings through which we draw conclusions from these phenomena.

Look around this universe. What an immense profusion of beings, animated and organized, conscious and active! You admire this prodigious variety and fruitfulness. But look a little more closely at these living things (the only ones worth thinking about). How hostile and destructive they are to each other! How far they all are from being able to achieve

their own happiness! How contemptible or odious they are to the spectator! The whole picture is one of a blind nature impregnated by some powerful life-giving force and pouring forth from her lap, without discernment or parental care, her maimed and abortive children!

Here the Manichaeic system—according to which the universe is governed by two fundamental forces, one good and the other bad—comes to mind as a good hypothesis to solve the difficulty. No doubt it is in some respects very attractive, and its giving a plausible account of the strange mixture of good and ill that appears in life makes it more probable than the common hypothesis of a single benevolent God. But if on the other hand we think about the perfect uniformity and agreement of the parts of the universe, we shan't discover in it any signs of a malevolent being's battle against a benevolent one. There is indeed an opposition of pains and pleasures in the feelings of conscious creatures; but aren't all the operations of nature carried on by an opposition of forces, of hot and cold, moist and dry, light and heavy? The true conclusion is that the original source of all things is entirely indifferent to all these forces, and no more prefers good above evil than heat above cold, or drought above moisture, or light above heavy.

Four hypotheses can be formed concerning the first causes of the universe: that they are endowed with perfect goodness; that they have perfect malice; that they are opposite, and have both goodness and malice; that they have neither goodness nor malice. Mixed phenomena can never prove the two former unmixed principles; and the uniformity and steadiness of general laws seem to oppose the third. The fourth, therefore, seems by far the most probable—that is, that the first causes of the universe are neutral with regard to good and bad.

What I have said about •natural evil also applies with little or no change to •moral evil: we have no more reason to infer that the uprightness of the supreme being resembles human uprightness than that his benevolence resembles human benevolence. Indeed, it will be thought that we have *more* reason to exclude from him moral feelings such as ours, because many people think that moral evil predominates over moral good *more than* natural evil above natural good.

But even if this is rejected, and even if the virtue that mankind has is acknowledged to be much superior to the vice, still as long as there is any vice at all in the universe you anthropomorphites will be very puzzled over how to account for it. You must assign a cause for it, without bringing in the first cause. But every effect must have a cause, and that cause must have another, and so you must either carry on the sequence ad infinitum or bring it to an end with that original principle who is the ultimate cause of all things. . .

Wait! Wait! exclaimed **Demea**: where is your imagination taking you? I allied myself with you in order to prove the incomprehensible nature of the divine being, and to refute the principles of Cleanthes who wants to measure everything by human rules and standards. But now I find you agreeing with all the views of the greatest libertines and infidels, and betraying that holy cause which you seemed earlier to embrace. Are you secretly, then, a more dangerous enemy than Cleanthes himself?

Has it taken you this long to see that? replied **Cleanthes**. Believe me, Demea, your friend Philo has from the outset been amusing himself at my expense and at yours; and I must admit that the incautious reasoning of our common theology has given him all too good a handle for ridicule. The total infirmity of human reason, the absolute incomprehensibility of God's nature, the great and universal misery and the

still greater wickedness of men—these are strange themes, surely, to be so fondly cherished by orthodox churchmen and professors. In ages of stupidity and ignorance, indeed, these principles may safely be espoused; and it may be that the best way to promote superstition is to encourage mankind in its blind bewilderment, its lack of confidence, its gloom. But at present. . .

Don't blame the trouble so much on the ignorance of these reverend gentlemen, interrupted **Philo**. They know how to change their style with the times. Formerly it was a most popular line in theology to maintain that human life is empty and miserable, and to exaggerate all the ills and pains that men undergo. But in recent years we have found theologians beginning to withdraw from this position, and to maintain, though still with some hesitation, that even in this life there are more goods than evils, more pleasures than pains. •When religion depended entirely on temperament and education, it was thought proper to encourage gloom; for indeed men are most ready to appeal to superior powers when they are feeling gloomy. •But now that men have learned to form principles and draw conclusions, •so that religion depends on arguments rather than merely on how you feel and how you have been indoctrinated•, it is necessary to bring some different guns to bear, and to make use of arguments that can survive at least some scrutiny and examination. This change of tactics is the same (and from the same causes) as the one I formerly remarked on with regard to scepticism.

In this way Philo continued to the last his spirit of opposition, and his condemnation of established opinions. But I could see that Demea didn't at all like the last part of what he said; and soon after that he made some excuse or other to leave the group.

Part 12

After Demea's departure, Cleanthes and Philo continued the conversation in the following manner. Our friend, I am afraid, said **Cleanthes**, won't be much inclined to revive this topic of discussion in a group containing you; and to tell you the truth, Philo, on a subject that is so elevated and that matters so much I would prefer to reason with you, or with Demea, alone. Your spirit of controversy, joined to your hatred of common superstition, carries you to strange lengths when you are engaged in an argument; and on such an occasion you don't spare *anything*, however sacred and venerable it is, even in your own eyes.

I must admit, replied **Philo**, that I am less cautious on the subject of natural religion than on any other; both because •I know that I can never corrupt the principles (concerning religion) of any man of common sense, and because •I am confident that no-one who sees me as a man of common sense will ever misunderstand my intentions. You, in particular, Cleanthes, with whom I live in unreserved intimacy—you are aware that despite the freedom of my conversation and my love of unusual arguments, no-one has a deeper sense of religion impressed on his mind than I do, or offers more profound adoration to the divine being as he reveals himself to our reason in the inexplicable design and artfulness of nature. The most careless, the most stupid, thinker sees everywhere a purpose, an intention, a design; and no man can be so hardened in absurd systems as to reject that at all times. That *nature does nothing in vain* is a maxim established in all the universities, merely on the strength of observing the works of nature, without any religious purpose; and from a firm conviction of its truth an anatomist who had observed a new organ or canal

•in an animal body• would never be satisfied until he had also discovered what it does and what it is for. One great foundation of the Copernican system is the maxim *that nature acts by the simplest methods, and chooses the most proper means to any end*; and astronomers often, without thinking of it, lay this strong foundation •stone on which can be erected the edifice• of piety and religion. The same thing is observable in other branches of learning; and thus almost all the sciences lead us insensibly to acknowledge a first thinking author; and their authority is often all the greater for the fact that they don't openly say that that's what they mean to do.

It is with pleasure that I hear Galen reason concerning the structure of the human body. The anatomy of a man, he says, reveals more than 600 different muscles; and anyone who studies these will find that in each of them nature must have taken into account at least ten different circumstances, in order to achieve the end that she proposed:

- right shape, •right size, •right disposition of the several ends, •the upper and •lower position of the whole muscle, the proper insertion of the various •nerves, •veins, and •arteries;

so that in the muscles alone more than 6,000 different plans and intentions must have been formed and carried out. He calculates that there are 284 bones, and that the structure of *each* of them aims at more than forty purposes. What an enormous display of planning, even in these simple and homogeneous parts! But if we consider the skin, ligaments, blood-vessels, glands, bodily fluids, the various limbs and members of the body—how our astonishment must increase in proportion to the number and intricacy of the parts so

artfully related to one another! As we go further in these researches, we discover new scenes of skill and wisdom; but we can tell that further down the smallness scale there are yet other scenes, beyond our ·perceptual· reach, in the fine internal structure of the parts, in the organization of the brain, in the build of the seminal vessels. All these devices are repeated in every different species of animal, with wonderful variety, and in each case exactly right for the intentions of nature in forming the species in question. And if Galen's irreligion couldn't withstand such striking appearances, even when these natural sciences were still imperfect, a scientist *today* must indeed be stubbornly obstinate if he can doubt that there is a supreme intelligence!

If I met with one of this sort (thank God, they are very rare), I would ask him: Supposing there were a God who didn't reveal himself immediately to our senses—enabling us to see or feel or hear *him*—could he possibly give stronger proofs of his existence than the proofs that *do* appear on the whole face of nature? What indeed *could* such a divine being do but •copy the present arrangement of things, •make many of his artifices so obvious that no stupidity could mistake them, •provide glimpses of still greater artifices that demonstrate his prodigious superiority above our narrow minds, and •conceal a great many of them altogether from such imperfect creatures ·as we are·? Now, according to all rules of sound reasoning, every factual proposition counts as indisputable when it is supported by *all the arguments that its nature admits of*, even if those arguments aren't in themselves very numerous or strong; how much more this applies in the present case where no human imagination can compute the number of the arguments and no understanding can take in how strong they are!

I shall add, said **Cleanthes**, to what you have so well urged that one great advantage of the principle of theism

is that it's the only system of cosmogony that can be made intelligible and complete while also preserving throughout a strong analogy to what we see and experience in the world every day. The comparison of the universe to a machine of human design is so obvious and natural, and is justified by so many examples of order and design in nature, that it must immediately occur to all unprejudiced minds, and win universal approval. Whoever wants to weaken this theory can't claim to succeed by •establishing in its place any other that is precise and determinate, ·for there is no such rival·: it is sufficient for him if he raises doubts and difficulties, and by remote and abstract views of things reaches that •suspense of judgment which on this topic is the most he can wish for. But •this state of mind, as well as being in itself unsatisfactory, can never be steadily maintained against such striking appearances as continually draw us into the religious hypothesis. Human nature is capable, through the force of prejudice, of obstinately persevering in a false, absurd system; but I think it is absolutely impossible to maintain or defend having no system at all, in opposition to a theory that is supported by strong and obvious reasons, by natural propensity, and by early education.

I have so little respect for this suspension of judgment about the existence of God, said **Philo**, that I'm inclined to suspect that this controversy is more of a *verbal dispute* than is usually imagined. That the works of nature are very like the products of ·human· ingenuity is evident; and according to all the rules of good reasoning we ought to infer—if we argue at all about them—that their causes are correspondingly alike. But as there are also considerable differences ·between the works of nature and human products·, we have reason to suppose that their causes are correspondingly *unlike*, and that in particular we ought to attribute *a much higher degree of power and energy* to the supreme cause than to any we

have ever observed in mankind. Here then the existence of a God is plainly discovered by reason: and if there is a question as to whether these analogies entitle us to call him a *mind* or *intelligence*, given the vast difference that can reasonably be supposed to exist between him and human minds, what is this but a mere verbal controversy? No man can deny the likenesses between the effects; to hold back from enquiring about the causes is scarcely possible. From this enquiry the legitimate conclusion is that the causes are also alike in some respects; and if we aren't contented with calling the first and supreme cause only a 'God' or 'deity' but want to find other words to apply to him, what can we call him but 'mind' or 'thought', given that he is justly supposed to bear a considerable resemblance to minds?

All sensible people are annoyed by verbal disputes, which occur so often in philosophical and theological enquiries; and it is found that the only remedy for this misuse of language comes from clear definitions, from the precision of the ideas that enter into any argument, and from strictly keeping to the meanings of the terms one uses. But there is one sort of controversy which, from the very nature of language and of human ideas, is involved in perpetual ambiguity and can never, by any precaution or any definitions, reach a reasonable certainty or precision. These are the controversies about the degrees of any quality or circumstance. Was Hannibal a great, or a very great, or a superlatively great man? How beautiful was Cleopatra? What term of praise is Livy or Thucydides entitled to? Men may argue to all eternity about such questions without ever settling on agreed answers. The disputants may here agree in what they think, and differ in the words they use—or vice versa—and yet never be able to define their terms so as to understand each other's meaning. That's because the degrees of these qualities, unlike quantity or number, can't be measured on any exact scale that could

be the standard in the controversy. The slightest enquiry reveals that the dispute concerning theism is of this nature, and consequently is merely verbal—or perhaps still more incurably ambiguous, if that is possible. I ask the theist if he doesn't agree that the difference between the human mind and the divine mind is great and (because it is incomprehensible) immeasurable; and the more pious he is the readier he will be to agree, and the more he will be disposed to magnify the difference; he will even assert that the difference is so great that it would be impossible to exaggerate how great it is. I next turn to the atheist—who I say is only nominally an atheist, and can't possibly be seriously so—and I ask him whether, judging by the coherence and apparent co-ordination among all the parts of this world, there isn't a certain similarity among all the operations of nature, in every situation and in every age—whether

the rotting of a turnip,
the coming into existence of an animal, and
the structure of human thought,

are not energies that probably bear some remote analogy to each other—and he can't possibly deny it; indeed, he will readily acknowledge it. Having obtained this concession from him, I push the self-described 'atheist' back still further: I ask him if it isn't likely that the source that first ordered this universe in general and still keeps it in order bears also some remote and hard-to-grasp analogy to the particular operations of nature, including the arrangements that produce the human mind and thought. However reluctantly, he must say Yes. Then I ask both these antagonists:

What are you arguing about? The theist allows that the original intelligence is very different from human reason; the atheist allows that the original source of order bears some remote analogy to it. Will you quarrel, gentlemen, about the *degrees* of difference and of

similarity, and enter into a controversy that can't be made precise and thus can't be settled? If you were to persist obstinately, I wouldn't be surprised to find you unknowingly changing sides—the theist exaggerating the *dissimilarity* between the supreme being and frail, imperfect, variable, fleeting, and mortal creatures, while the atheist exaggerates the similarity that there is among all the operations of nature, at every time and in every place and circumstance! Consider, then, what you are really disagreeing about, and if you can't set aside the disagreement, at least realize that it concerns the place of certain *dissimilarities* on a scale for which there is no precise measure, and thus try to cure yourselves of your hostility to one another.

And here I must also acknowledge, Cleanthes, that as the works of nature are more like the effects of our skill and planning than they are like the effects of our benevolence and justice, we have reason to infer that God's non-moral attributes have a greater resemblance to those of men than his moral attributes have to human virtues. But what follows from that? Only that man's moral qualities are *more defective in their kind* than are his non-moral abilities—for example, that man's *justice* is a worse sample of justice than his *cleverness* is a sample of cleverness. For it is agreed that God is absolutely and entirely perfect, so whatever differs most from him departs the furthest from the supreme standard of moral uprightness and perfection.²

These, Cleanthes, are my undisguised views on this subject; and you know that I have upheld and valued them for a long time. But my veneration for true religion is matched by my abhorrence of common superstitions, and I admit that I get a special pleasure out of *pushing* superstitions—sometimes into absurdity, sometimes into impiety. All bigots hate impiety more than they do absurdity, but, as you are well aware, they are often equally guilty of both.

My inclination, replied **Cleanthes**, lies in a different direction. Religion, however corrupted, is still better than no religion at all. The doctrine of a future state is so strong and necessary a security to morals that we never ought to abandon or neglect it. For if finite and temporary rewards and punishments have such a great effect as we daily find that they do, how much greater must be expected from rewards and punishments that are infinite and eternal?

If common superstition is so good for society, said **Philo**, then how does it happen that history is so full of accounts of its pernicious effects on public affairs? Factions, civil wars, persecutions, subversions of government, oppression, slavery—these are the dismal consequences which always accompany a prevalence of superstition in the minds of men. Whenever an historical narrative mentions the religious spirit, we are sure to find later in the story some details of the miseries that come with it. No period of time can be happier or more prosperous than those in which the religious spirit is never honoured or heard of.

² It seems obvious that the dispute between the sceptics and dogmatists is entirely verbal; or at any rate it only concerns how much doubt or assurance we should have in all our reasoning, and disputes about *that* are often basically verbal, and can't be definitively settled. No philosophical dogmatist denies that there are difficulties both with regard to the senses and to all science, and that these difficulties absolutely cannot be resolved in a regular, logical manner. No sceptic denies that we, despite these difficulties, cannot get out of thinking, and believing, and reasoning with regard to all kinds of subjects, or of often assenting to things with confidence and security. So the only difference between these sects (if that is what they are) is that the sceptic—from habit, whim, or inclination—insists most on the difficulties; the dogmatist, for like reasons, insists on the necessity.

The reason for this, replied **Cleanthes**, is obvious. The proper role of religion is to regulate the heart of men, humanize their conduct, infuse the spirit of temperance, order, and obedience; and as it works silently, and only strengthens the motives of morality and justice, it is in danger of being overlooked and being confused with those other motives. When religion calls attention to itself and acts as a separate motive force in men—instead of being only a good influence on all the other motive forces—it has left its proper sphere and has become only a cover for faction and ambition.

And so will all religion, said **Philo**, except the philosophical and rational kind. Your reasonings are easier to escape from than are my facts. 'Because finite and temporary rewards and punishments have so great influence, therefore infinite and eternal ones must have so much greater'—this reasoning is not sound. Consider, I beg you, how much we care about present things, and how little concern we express for objects as remote and uncertain—as the rewards or punishments promised in the after-life. When preachers declaim against the common behaviour and conduct of the world, they always represent this principle of concern for what is close—as the strongest imaginable (which indeed it is); and they describe most of mankind as lying under its influence, and sunk into the deepest lethargy and lack of concern for their religious interests. Yet these same religious spokesmen, defending religion against attacks, take the motives of religion to be so powerful that civil society couldn't survive without them; and they aren't ashamed of this obvious contradiction. Experience shows us, for sure, that •the smallest grain of natural honesty and benevolence has more effect on men's conduct than •the most grandly inflated views suggested by theological theories and systems. A man's *natural* inclination works on him all the time; it is always present to his mind, and mingles itself with every

view and consideration; whereas religious motives, where they act at all, operate only by fits and starts, and it is scarcely possible for them to become altogether habitual to the mind. The force of the greatest gravitational *pull*, say the physicists, is incomparably smaller than the force of the least *push*; yet it is certain that the smallest gravity will eventually prevail over a large push, because no strokes or blows can be repeated with such constancy as attraction and gravitation.

Another advantage that inclination has in the tussle with duty: it brings into play on its side all the sharpness and ingenuity of the mind, and when it is placed in opposition to religious principles it seeks every method and device for eluding them—and it nearly always succeeds! Who can explain the heart of man, or account for those strange special-pleadings and excuses with which people let themselves off when they are following their inclinations in opposition to their religious duty? This is well understood in the world; and only fools would trust a man less because they heard that study and philosophy have given him some speculative doubts with regard to theological subjects. And when we have dealings with a man who makes a great profession of religion and devotion, doesn't this put many sensible people on their guard against being cheated and deceived by him?

We must further consider that philosophers, who cultivate reason and reflection, have less need of such religious motives to keep them under the restraint of morals; and that common people—the only ones who may need religion to keep them in order—can't possibly have a religion so pure that it represents God as being pleased with nothing but virtue in human behaviour. Pleas for God's favour are generally understood to be either frivolous observances, or rapturous ecstasies, or a bigoted credulity—and therefore not to reflect or to encourage moral seriousness. We needn't

go back to ancient times, or wander into remote places, to find instances of this degeneracy of religion divorced from morality. Amongst ourselves some people have been guilty of something atrocious that even the Egyptian and Greek superstitions were not guilty of, namely, speaking out explicitly *against* morality, saying that if one puts the least trust or reliance in morality one will certainly lose favour with God.

And even if superstition or fanaticism didn't put itself in direct opposition to morality, it would still have the most pernicious consequences, greatly weakening men's attachment to the natural motives of justice and humanity. It would do this because of its diverting of the attention away from morality, its raising up of a new and frivolous sort of supposed merit, and the preposterous way in which it distributes praise and blame.

Such a religious action-driver, not being one of the familiar motives of human conduct, acts only intermittently on a person's temperament; and it has to be roused by continual efforts in order to render the pious zealot satisfied with his own conduct and make him fulfil his devotional task. Many religious exercises are begun with seeming fervour although the person's heart at the time feels cold and apathetic; he gradually acquires a habit of covering up his true feelings; and fraud and falsehood eventually become the predominant force in his mind. This explains the common observation that the highest zeal in religion and the deepest hypocrisy, so far from being inconsistent, are often or usually united in the same individual person.

The bad effects of such habits, even in ordinary everyday life, are easily imagined; but where the interests of religion are concerned, no morality can be strong enough to constrain the fanatical zealot. The sacredness of his cause—he thinks—sanctifies *anything* that he does to promote it.

Steadily and exclusively attending to something as important to oneself as eternal salvation is apt to extinguish one's benevolent feelings and to generate a narrow, contracted selfishness. And when such a temperament is *encouraged*, it easily eludes all the general precepts of charity and benevolence.

Thus, the motives of common superstition have no great influence on general conduct, and where they *do* predominate their influence is not favourable to morality.

Is any maxim in politics more certain and infallible than the one saying that the number and the authority of priests should be confined within very narrow limits, and that the civil magistrate ought never to allow the instruments of his authority fall into such dangerous hands as those of priests? But if the spirit of popular religion [= 'the religion of ordinary people'] were as salutary to society as its defenders say it is, a contrary maxim ought to prevail, reflecting a line of thought like the following: The more priests there are in law and government, the better. A greater number of priests, and their greater authority and riches, will always increase the religious spirit. And though the priests have the guidance of this spirit, we can expect them also to develop ever greater moral decency in their feelings. Why should we not expect a superior sanctity of life, and greater benevolence and moderation, from people who are set apart for religion, who are continually preaching it to others, and who must themselves imbibe a greater share of it?

Then how does it come about that in fact the most that a wise ruler can propose with regard to popular religions is, as far as possible, to make a saving game of it [= 'to minimize losses without expecting any gains'], and to prevent their pernicious consequences with regard to society? Every means he uses to carry out this modest purpose is surrounded with inconveniences. If he allows only one religion

among his subjects, he must sacrifice every consideration of public liberty, science, reason, industry, and even his own independence—all this in return for an uncertain prospect of ·religious· peace. •If he allows several sects, which is the wiser course for him to follow, he must preserve a very philosophical even-handedness regarding all of them, and carefully restrain the claims of the dominant sect; otherwise he can expect nothing but endless disputes, quarrels, factions, persecutions, and civil commotions.

True religion, I admit, has no such pernicious consequences; but we have to concern ourselves ·not with true religion, but· with religion as it has commonly been found in the world. And I am not discussing the speculative thesis of theism: being a philosophical theory, it must share in the beneficial influence of philosophy, while also suffering from philosophy's drawback of being accepted by very few people.

Oaths are required in all courts of law, but does their authority arise from any popular religion? ·I say No·. The chief restraints on mankind are •the solemnity and importance of the occasion, •a concern for one's reputation, and •reflection on the general interests of society. Custom-house oaths [= 'declarations about what one is importing or exporting'] and political oaths are not regarded as binding even by some who claim to abide by principles of honesty and religion; and we rightly put a Quaker's •assertion on the same footing as the •oath of any other person. I know that Polybius ascribes the notorious untrustworthiness of the Greeks to the prevalence of the Epicurean philosophy; but I know also that Carthaginian promises had as bad a reputation in ancient times as Irish testimony does today, and we can't account for these general impressions in the same way, ·namely the influence of Epicurean philosophy·. Not to mention that the Greeks were already notoriously untrustworthy *before* the rise of the Epicurean philosophy, and Euripides has aimed a

remarkable stroke of satire against his nation, with regard to trustworthiness.

Take care, Philo, replied **Cleanthes**, take care! Don't push matters too far; don't allow your zeal against false religion to undermine your reverence for the true. Don't give up this ·religious· principle, which is the chief, the only great comfort in life, and our principal support amidst all the attacks of adverse fortune. The most agreeable reflection that the human imagination can possibly suggest is that of *genuine theism*, which represents us as the workmanship of a being who is perfectly good, wise, and powerful; a being who created us to be happy and who, having implanted in us immeasurable desires for good things, will prolong our existence to all eternity, taking us into an infinite variety of scenes in order to satisfy those desires, and make our happiness complete and lasting. To be under the guardianship and protection of such a divine being is the happiest prospect we can imagine—second only (if this comparison is permissible) to the happiness of the divine being himself.

That picture of how a person *seems* to relate to religion, said **Philo**, is most engaging and alluring, and when the person is a true philosopher it is more than just *seeming*. But here as before, with regard to the greater part of mankind the appearances are deceitful, and the terrors of religion commonly prevail over its comforts.

It is common knowledge that men never seek help from devotion so readily as when they are dejected with grief or depressed by sickness. Doesn't that show that the religious spirit is not so closely tied to joy as it is to sorrow?

But when men are afflicted they find consolation in religion, replied **Cleanthes**.

Sometimes, said **Philo**; but it is natural to imagine that when they apply themselves to the contemplation of those unknown Beings—the Gods of their religion—they will form

a notion of them that is suitable to their own present gloom and melancholy. Accordingly, we find in every religion that the images of God as fearsome predominate over all the other images of him; and we ourselves, after using the most exalted language in our descriptions of God, fall into the flattest contradiction when we affirm that the damned infinitely outnumber those who are chosen to be saved.

I venture to assert that there has never been a popular religion which represented the state of departed souls in such a way as to make it *a good thing from the human point of view* that there should be such a state. These fine models of religion that you speak of so cheerfully, Cleanthes, are the mere product of philosophy and get no grip on the ordinary thoughts and feelings of ordinary people. When plain folk try to imagine the after-life, *death* intervenes between the mind's eye and the object; and death is so shocking to nature that it throws a gloom on all the regions that lie on the far side of it, and suggests to the general run of people the idea of Cerberus and Furies, devils, and torrents of fire and brimstone.

It is true that both fear and hope enter into religion, because both those passions agitate the human mind from time to time, and each of them forms a kind of divinity suitable to itself. But when a man is in a cheerful frame of mind he is fit for business, or company, or entertainment of any kind, and he naturally turns his attention to these and doesn't think of religion. When gloomy and dejected, on the other hand, he hasn't the spirit or energy to apply himself to anything in this world, so all he can do is to brood on the terrors of the after-world, and thus make his condition worse than ever. It may indeed happen that after he has in this way engraved the religious opinions deep into his thought and imagination, some change of health or circumstances restores his good-humour and, raising

cheerful prospects of the after-life, send him to the other extreme of joy and triumph. But still it must be admitted that, as terror is the driving force of religion, it is the passion that always predominates in it, and allows for only short periods of pleasure.

A further point: these bouts of excessive, extravagant joy, by exhausting the spirits, always prepare the way for equal bouts of superstitious terror and dejection. The happiest state of mind is not frenzied joy, but balanced calm. But it is impossible for a man to remain long in that state when he thinks that he lies in such profound darkness and uncertainty between an eternity of happiness and an eternity of misery. No wonder that such an opinion unhinges the ordinary frame of the mind and throws it into the utmost confusion. And though that opinion is seldom so steady in its operation that it influences all the person's actions, it is apt to make considerable inroads on his temperament, and to produce the gloom and melancholy that are so noticeable in all devout people.

It is contrary to common sense to be anxious or terrified about what may happen to us in the after-life on account of any opinion that we have, or to imagine that the freest use of our reason will run us into any risk in the hereafter. Such a view implies both an absurdity and an inconsistency. It is an absurdity to believe that God has human passions, and indeed one of the lowest of them, namely a restless appetite for applause. It is an inconsistency to believe that God has this human passion but doesn't have others also, and especially a disregard for the opinions of creatures so much inferior.

To know God, says Seneca, is to worship him. All other worship—that is, all worship that goes beyond expressing one's knowledge that God exists—is indeed absurd, superstitious, and even impious. It degrades God to the low condition

of ordinary men, who are delighted to be approached with entreaties, requests, presents, and flattery. Yet this is the least of the impieties of which superstition is guilty. Commonly, superstition pushes God down to a level far below that of mankind, and represents him as a capricious demon who exercises his power without reason and without humanity! If God were inclined to be offended at the vices and follies of silly mortals who are his own workmanship, the devotees of most popular superstitions would be in for a very bad time. None of the human race would deserve his •favour except for a very few, •the philosophical theists, who have—or at any rate try to have—*suitable* notions of his divine perfections; and the only persons entitled to his •compassion and leniency would be •the philosophical sceptics, an almost equally small sect, whose natural modesty about their own capacities leads them to suspend—or try to suspend—all judgment with regard to such sublime and extraordinary subjects.

If the whole of natural theology, as some people seem to maintain, boils down to one simple, though somewhat ambiguous or at least undefined proposition:

•The cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence;
 if •this proposition can't be extended, varied, or explained in more detail; if •it yields no inference that affects human life or can be the source of any action or forbearance from acting; and if •the analogy, imperfect as it is, extends only to human intelligence, and can't plausibly be transferred to the other qualities of the mind—if all this really is the case, what can the most curious, thoughtful, and religious man do except •give a plain, philosophical assent to the

proposition as often as it comes up, and •believe that the arguments on which it is based outweigh the objections against it? He will naturally feel somewhat unnerved by the greatness of the object, •that is, by the thought of the cause of *the universe*; somewhat sad that the object is hidden from him; somewhat contemptuous of human reason for its inability to make a better job of such an extraordinary and magnificent question. But believe me, Cleanthes, the most natural feeling that a well-disposed mind will have on this occasion is a longing desire and expectation [Hume's phrase] that God will be pleased to remove or at least to lessen this profound ignorance, by giving mankind some particular revelation, *revealing* the nature, attributes, and operations of the divine object of our faith. A person who has a sound sense of the imperfections of natural reason will eagerly fly to revealed truth, while the haughty dogmatist, persuaded that he can erect a complete system of theology with no help but that of philosophy, will disdain any further aid and will reject this help from the outside. To be a philosophical sceptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step towards being a sound, believing Christian; a proposition which I would willingly recommend to the attention of Pamphilus: and I hope Cleanthes will forgive me for interposing so far in the education and instruction of his pupil.

Cleanthes and Philo did not pursue this conversation much further; and as nothing ever made greater impression on me than all the reasonings of that day, so I confess that on carefully looking over the whole conversation I cannot help thinking that Philo's principles are more probable than Demea's, but that those of Cleanthes approach still nearer to the truth.