

# 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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## Letter from Pamphilus to Hermippus

It has been remarked that though the ancient philosophers mostly taught through dialogues, the dialogue form hasn't been much used in recent times, and has seldom succeeded when people have tried it. There is a good reason for this. Philosophical enquirers these days are expected to produce precise and orderly arguments; and someone aiming at those will naturally proceed with a methodical exposition in which he can, right at the outset, explain the point he wants to establish, and then proceed without interruption to present his proofs of it. It hardly seems natural to present a *system* in conversation. And there is also another disadvantage of the dialogue form. By departing from the direct style of composition the dialogue-writer hopes to give a freer air to his performance, and to avoid the appearance of *Author and Reader*; but he risks running into something worse, conveying the image of *Teacher and Pupil*. And if he avoids that by conducting the dispute in the natural spirit of good company, throwing in a variety of arguments, and preserving a proper balance among the speakers, he often spends so much time setting things up, and moving from one line of thought to another, that the reader will hardly think that the order, brevity, and precision which have been lost are made up for by all the graces of dialogue.

There are some subjects, however, for which dialogue-writing is especially suitable, and preferable to the direct and simple method of composition. I shall describe two of them; apart from their suitability for the dialogue form they are utterly unlike, though it will turn out that one big topic includes both.

Any point of doctrine that is so obvious that it can hardly be questioned, but at the same time so important that it

deserves to be taught repeatedly, seems to require some such method of handling it. In a dialogue, the novelty of the manner of presentation may make up for the triteness of the subject; and the liveliness of the conversation may reinforce the teaching. Also, the variety of different angles from which the characters in the dialogue approach the subject may appear neither tedious nor redundant.

On the other hand, any question of philosophy that is so obscure and uncertain that human reason can't reach a secure conclusion about it seems to lead us naturally into the style of dialogue and conversation. Reasonable men may be allowed to differ on a topic regarding which no-one can reasonably be confident. And opposing views, even without any decision as to which is right, provide an agreeable way of passing the time; and if the subject is challenging and interesting, the dialogue puts us (in a way) into the company of the characters in it. Thus a dialogue can unite the two greatest and purest pleasures of human life, study and the company of others.

Fortunately, all those features are to be found in the subject of NATURAL RELIGION. What truth is so obvious, so certain, as that there exists a God? People in the most ignorant ages have believed this, and the most refined geniuses have worked to produce new proofs and arguments for it. And what truth is so important as this? It is the ground of all our hopes, the surest foundation of morality, the firmest support of society, and the only principle that ought never to be a moment absent from our thoughts and meditations. But when we dig into this obvious and important truth, we run into obscure questions about the nature of that divine being, his attributes, his decrees, his plan of providence.

Men have always disagreed about these matters, and human reason hasn't definitely settled them. But these topics are so important that we can't restrain our restless enquiry into them, even though our most accurate researches have yielded nothing but doubt, uncertainty, and contradiction.

I recently had a chance to observe this—that is, the suitability of natural religion as a theme for dialogue—when I was spending part of the summer season with Cleanthes, as I usually do, and was present at the conversations he had with Philo and Demea—the ones I recently sketched to you. My sketch made you so curious to know more (you said) that I can't forbear to give you a more detailed report

on their reasonings, and to display the various systems that they defended relating to this delicate subject of natural religion. The characters of the three men are remarkably different, and this raised your expectations even higher. You contrasted the careful philosophical methods of Cleanthes with the casual scepticism of Philo, and contrasted each of those with the rigid inflexible orthodoxy of Demea. Being young, I listened but didn't speak; and my intense youthful interest in the whole conversation imprinted on my memory the whole chain and connection of their arguments. I hope and think that my account of the conversation won't omit or muddle any considerable part of it.

## Part 1

After I joined the group whom I found sitting in Cleanthes' library, **Demea** paid Cleanthes some compliments on the great care he took of my education, and on his unwearied perseverance and constancy in all his friendships. Pamphilus's father, he said, was your intimate friend; the son is your pupil, and we might think him to be your adopted son if we judged by the trouble you take in bringing to him every useful branch of literature and science. I am sure that you are as prudent as you are hard-working; so I shall tell you a maxim that I have followed with regard to my own children, wanting to know how far it agrees with your upbringing of Pamphilus. The method I follow in the education of my children is based on the saying of an ancient: *Students of philosophy ought first to learn logic, then ethics, next physics, last of all the nature of the gods.* Because this science of

natural theology is the most profound and abstruse of any, he held, students of it need mature judgment, and it can't safely be entrusted to a mind that isn't already enriched with all the other sciences. [In this work 'science' means something like 'systematic, disciplined, theoretical treatment'. It covers more than 'science' does today.]

Do you leave it as late as that, **Philo** asked, to teach your children the principles of religion? Isn't there a risk that they will neglect or even outright reject those religious views of which they have heard so little during the whole of their education?

**Demea** replied: I postpone the study of natural theology as a science that is open to human reasoning and controversy, but *only* as a science. My chief concern with my children is to bring piety into their minds while they are

young. By continual teaching (and also by example, I hope), I imprint deeply on their young minds a habitual reverence for all the principles of religion. While they pass through every other branch of knowledge, I comment on the uncertainty of each branch, on the eternal controversies of men, on the obscurity of all philosophy, and on the strange, ridiculous conclusions that some of the greatest geniuses have derived from the principles of mere human reason. Having thus tamed their mind to a proper submission and distrust of their own abilities, I no longer hesitate to open to them the greatest mysteries of religion; and I see no risk that the presumptuous arrogance of philosophy will lead them to reject the most established doctrines and opinions.

Your precaution of bringing piety into your children's minds early on, said **Philo**, is certainly very reasonable; it is indeed needed in this profane and irreligious age. But what I admire most in your plan of education is your way of getting advantage from the very principles of philosophy and learning which, by inspiring pride and self-sufficiency, have often throughout the centuries been found to be so destructive to the principles of religion. They are not so with everyone, admittedly. Common folk with no experience of science and profound enquiry, when they see how learned people are endlessly disputing, often have a thorough contempt for philosophy; and that makes them hold even more firmly to the great points of theology that they have been taught. People who enter *a little way* into study and enquiry •think they find evidence to support new and extraordinary doctrines; •come to think that nothing is too difficult for human reason; and presumptuously •break through all fences and •profane the holiest places in the temple. Our best protection against such arrogance in religious matters is *ignorance*; but after we have abandoned *that* we still have—as I hope Cleanthes will agree—one way remaining to

us to prevent this profane liberty of laying down the law in religious matters. What we should do is to adopt improved and cultivated versions of Demea's principles concerning our proneness to error and confusion. Let us become thoroughly aware of the weakness, blindness, and narrowness of human reason, paying proper attention to its uncertainty and its endless contradictions, even in ordinary everyday subjects; let the errors and deceits of our senses be kept in mind; the insuperable difficulties surrounding the basic principles of every intellectual system; the contradictions involved in the very ideas of matter, cause and effect, extension, space, time, motion—in short, all kinds of ideas of *quantity* of all kinds, though quantity is the topic of mathematics, the only science that has any claim to certainty or self-evidence. When *these* topics are displayed in their full light, as they are by some philosophers and almost all religious writers, who can remain confident enough of his frail *reason* to give heed to anything it tells him on topics that are so sublime, so abstruse, and so remote from common life and experience as the existence and nature of God? When we realize that really familiar things—like the holding-together of the parts of a stone, or even the structure of it that makes it an extended thing—are so inexplicable and involve such contradictions, how confidently can we reach conclusions about the origin of worlds, or trace their history from eternity to eternity?

As Philo spoke, I noticed that both Demea and Cleanthes were smiling. Demea's smile seemed to express total satisfaction with what Philo was saying; but, in Cleanthes' features I discerned an air of knowing amusement, as though he saw in Philo's reasonings some kind of teasing or trap-setting.

You propose then, Philo, said **Cleanthes**, to erect religious faith on a basis of philosophical scepticism; and you think that if certainty is expelled from every other subject of

enquiry it will retreat into these theological doctrines, where it will be stronger and more authoritative than ever. Whether your scepticism is as absolute and sincere as you claim is something we shall learn later on, when we end this little meeting: we'll see then whether you leave the room through the door or the window; and whether you really doubt that your body has gravity and can be injured by its fall—which is what people in general think on the basis of their fallacious senses and more fallacious experience. And I think that this consideration of the test of scepticism in everyday life can fairly serve to make us less angry with this whimsical sect of the sceptics. If they are wholly sincere, they won't trouble the world for much longer with their doubts, niggles, and disputes; and if they are only joking, they may perhaps be bad comedians but they can never be very dangerous to the state, to philosophy, or to religion.

In reality, Philo, he went on, it seems certain that even if a man entirely renounces all beliefs and opinions, doing this in a rush of blood to the head after intense thought about the contradictions and imperfections of human reason, he *can't* persevere in this total scepticism, or make it show in his conduct for more than a short time. External objects will press in on him; his passions will call to him; his philosophical gloom will dissipate; and he won't be able to preserve his poor appearance of scepticism—however hard he works on himself to do so. And what *reason* has he to work on himself in that way? He'll never be able to answer that question satisfactorily, consistently with his sceptical principles. So that on the whole nothing could be more ridiculous than the principles of the ancient Pyrrhonians [= extreme sceptics], if they really did try—as it has been claimed that they did—to apply to the whole of life the same scepticism that they learned from class-room lectures, which is where they ought to have confined it.

From this angle the Stoics seem to be *very like* their perpetual antagonists the Pyrrhonians. Each sect seems to be based on this erroneous maxim: *What a man can do sometimes and in some moods he can do always and in every mood*. When Stoical reflections raise the mind into a frenzy of virtue, and impress it with a sense of some kind of honour or public good, extreme bodily pain and sufferings won't prevail over such a high sense of duty; and it may even be possible for someone to smile and rejoice in the middle of being tortured. If this sometimes actually *happens*, how much more can a philosopher in his classroom or study work himself up to such a frenzy, and *imagine* himself bearing the acutest pain he can conceive! But how is he to maintain the frenzy itself? His frame of mind relaxes, and he cannot brace it up again just by wanting to do so; other activities lead him astray; misfortunes attack him unawares; and the philosopher gradually sinks into being an ordinary person.

I accept your comparison between the Stoics and Sceptics, replied **Philo**. Still, although the Stoic mind can't maintain the highest flights of philosophy, even when it sinks lower it still retains something of its former disposition; and the effects of the Stoic's reasoning will appear in his conduct in everyday life, flavouring all of his actions. The ancient schools of philosophy, particularly that of Zeno, produced examples of virtue and steadfastness which seem astonishing to us today:

Vain Wisdom all and false Philosophy,  
 Yet with a pleasing sorcery could charm  
 Pain, for a while, or anguish; and excite  
 Fallacious Hope, or arm the obdurate breast  
 With stubborn Patience, as with triple steel.

(Milton, *Paradise Lost* ii)

Similarly, if a man has accustomed himself to sceptical thoughts about the uncertainty and narrowness of reason, he won't entirely forget them when he turns his thought onto other subjects. In all his philosophical principles and reasoning—though I daren't say in his everyday conduct!—he will be found to be different from those who never formed any opinions on this topic and from those who have thought about it and taken a more favourable view of human reason.

[In this paragraph, Philo uses 'philosophy' to mean 'philosophy or science', apparently with his eye mainly on science. For ease of reading, 'philosophy' and its cognates are replaced by 'science' and its cognates throughout the paragraph.] However far anyone pushes his speculative principles of scepticism, he must—I admit—act and live and talk like other men; but the only reason he needs to give for this conduct is that it is absolutely necessary for him behave thus. If he goes further in this direction than he needs to for sheer survival, and engages in scientific enquiries into various non-human and human subjects, this doesn't show that he is insincere in his scepticism; because his reason for this scientific theorizing is just that he is drawn to it by a certain pleasure and satisfaction that he finds in employing himself in that way. He's also aware that everyone, even in common life, is forced to conduct himself in greater or lesser degree like a scientist: that from our earliest infancy we make continual advances in forming more general principles of conduct and reasoning; that as our experience widens and our reason strengthens, we make our principles more general and comprehensive; and that what we call 'science' is nothing but a more regular and methodical process of the same kind. To engage in scientific enquiry into such subjects is essentially the same as reasoning about common life; and we may only expect greater stability, if not greater truth, from our science, on account of its more exact and careful method of proceeding.

But when we look beyond human affairs and the properties of the material things around us—when we carry our speculations into

- the two eternities, before and after the present state of things,
- the creation and formation of the universe,
- the existence and properties of spirits,
- the powers and operations of one universal spirit existing without beginning and without end, omnipotent, omniscient, unchanging, infinite, and incomprehensible

—when we consider any of *this*, we would have to be *very* unsceptical not to worry that we have here gone quite beyond the reach of our faculties! So long as we confine our theorizing to trade, or morals, or politics, or criticism, we make continual appeals to common sense and experience; these appeals strengthen our philosophical and scientific conclusions, and at least partly remove the suspicion that we rightly have regarding any reasoning that is very subtle and delicate. But in theological reasonings we don't have this advantage of being able to appeal to common experience just when we have most need of it, while we are thinking about objects which—we must be aware—are too large for our grasp, and need more than any others to be presented to our minds in a way that will make them familiar to us. We are like foreigners in a strange country, to whom everything must seem suspicious, and who are in danger every moment of breaking the laws and customs of the people with whom they live and talk. We don't know how far we ought to trust our ordinary vulgar methods of reasoning in such a theological subject, because even in everyday life—in the area that is specially suited to them—we can't explain or justify them, and are entirely guided by a kind of *instinct* or *necessity* in employing them.

All sceptics claim that if reason is considered abstractly, it provides invincible arguments against itself, and that we could never retain any opinion or confidence on any subject if it were not that the sceptical reasonings in which reason discredits itself are so refined and subtle that they can't outweigh the more solid and more natural arguments derived from the senses and experience. But it is obvious that when our arguments lose this advantage of solidity and naturalness, and run wide of everyday life, the most refined scepticism comes to be on an equal footing with them and can oppose and counterbalance them. Neither side has more weight than the other. The mind must remain suspended between them; and that suspense or balance is the triumph of scepticism.

But I observe with regard to you, Philo, and to all theoretical sceptics, says **Cleanthes**, that your doctrine is at odds with your behaviour—just as much in the most abstruse points of theory as in the conduct of everyday life. Wherever evidence is found, you adhere to it, despite your supposed scepticism; and I can observe, too, that some of your fellow-sceptics are as decisive as those who claim higher levels of certainty and assurance. Really, wouldn't it be ridiculous for someone to say that he rejected Newton's explanation of the wonderful phenomenon of the rainbow, because that explanation gives a minute anatomy of the rays of light—'a subject' (says this absurd sceptic) 'too refined for human comprehension'? And what would you say to someone who, finding no fault with the arguments of Copernicus and Galileo for the motion of the earth, nevertheless withheld his assent on the general ground that these subjects are too magnificent and remote to be explained by the narrow and deceitful reason of mankind?

There is indeed a kind of crude and ignorant scepticism, as you rightly remarked, that gives common people a general

prejudice against things they can't easily understand, and makes them reject every principle that requires elaborate reasoning to prove and establish it. This sort of scepticism is fatal to knowledge, not to religion; for we find that many of those who most strenuously profess it give their assent not only to the great truths of theism and natural theology, but even to the most absurd doctrines that traditional superstition has recommended to them. They firmly believe in witches, though they refuse to believe or attend to the most simple proposition in Euclid's geometry. But the refined and philosophical sceptics fall into an inconsistency of an opposite kind. They push their researches into the most abstruse corners of science, and at every step they accept propositions in proportion to the evidence for them that they meet with. They are even obliged to admit that the most abstruse and remote objects are the ones that are best explained by science. Light is in reality anatomized. The true system of the heavenly bodies is discovered. But the nourishment of bodies by food is still a mystery that we can't explain. The holding together of the parts of matter is still incomprehensible. Light is abstruse, and the heavenly bodies are remote; but nourishment and the firmness of pebbles are neither. So the refined sceptics cannot draw a *general* line in those terms. These sceptics, therefore, are obliged in every enquiry to consider each particular bit of evidence separately, and to proportion their assent to the precise strength of the evidence they find. This is what they actually do in all natural, mathematical, moral, and political science. And why not the same, I ask, in theological and religious studies? Why should we confine to *them* the practice of rejecting conclusions, without looking into the evidence that has been offered, on the general ground that human reason is insufficient? Isn't this discriminatory attitude a plain proof of prejudice and passion?



Our senses, you say, are fallacious; our understanding is erroneous; our ideas—even of the most familiar objects: extension, duration, motion—are full of absurdities and contradictions. You defy me to solve the difficulties or reconcile the inconsistencies that you find in them. I haven't the skill for so great an undertaking; I haven't leisure for it; I see that there's no need for it. Your own conduct, in every circumstance, refutes your principles, and shows the firmest reliance on all the received maxims of science, morals, prudence, and behaviour.

I shall never accept the celebrated Arnauld's extravagant statement that the sceptics are not a sect of philosophers—only a sect of liars! But I will say—no offence meant—that they are a sect of comedians or teasers. For my part, though, whenever I find myself wanting fun and amusement, I shall certainly choose for my entertainment something less puzzling and abstruse than sceptical philosophy. A comedy, a novel, or at most a history, seems a more natural recreation than such metaphysical subtleties and abstractions.

It is no use for the sceptic to distinguish science from common life, or one science from another. The arguments that he uses, if they are sound, hold good in each of these areas and have just as much force in one as in another. Or if there is any difference among them, the advantage lies entirely on the side of theology and natural religion—the advantage, that is, of having the strength to resist scepticism. Many principles of mechanics are based on very abstruse reasoning, yet nobody with any degree of scientific competence claims to be in the least doubt concerning to them—nor indeed does any theoretical sceptic. The Copernican system contains the thesis that the sun doesn't go around the earth, which is the most surprising paradox, and the one most contrary to our natural conceptions, to appearances, and to our very senses; yet even monks and inquisitors have had to

withdraw their opposition to it. Then we have the religious hypothesis, which is based on the simplest and most obvious arguments, and is easily accepted by the mind of man unless it is blocked by artificial obstacles. Will Philo, a thoughtful and knowledgeable man, cast doubt on it because of the supposed unreliability of the human faculties in general, with no special reference to the religious hypothesis in particular?

And here we may observe (he went on, turning towards Demea) a rather curious fact in the history of the sciences. After philosophy was joined to the religion of the people, when Christianity was first established, religious teachers commonly denounced reason, the senses, and every principle derived merely from human research and enquiry. The Fathers of the Church took up all the themes of the ancient Academics [here = 'sceptics'], which then spread from them down the years into every school and pulpit in Christendom. The Reformers embraced the same principles of reasoning, or rather denunciation, and all flowery praise of the excellency of faith was sure to be spiced with some cutting jibes against natural reason. A celebrated Roman Catholic bishop, too, a man of the most extensive learning who wrote a demonstration of Christianity, has also written a book containing all the fault-finding of the boldest and most determined Pyrrhonism. It took centuries for this contempt for reason to die down. Locke seems to have been the first Christian to risk saying openly that faith is nothing but a species of reason, that religion is only a branch of philosophy, and that the arguments that have always been used in discovering all the principles of theology, natural and revealed, are just like those that have been used to establish truths in morals, politics, or physics. The miserable use that Bayle and other free-thinkers made of the philosophical scepticism of the Church Fathers and first reformers—namely, their use of it as a weapon against religion—had the effect of widening the

acceptance of Locke's sensible opinion; and now all those who claim to be thinkers assert, in a way, that 'atheist' and 'sceptic' are almost synonymous. And just as it is certain that no man would *sincerely* declare himself a sceptic, I venture to hope that there are as few who seriously maintain atheism.

Don't you remember, said **Philo**, the excellent saying of Lord Bacon on this topic? *That a little philosophy, replied Cleanthes, makes a man an atheist: a great deal converts him to religion.* That's a very sensible remark too, said **Philo**. But what I have in mind is another passage where, having mentioned David's 'fool who said in his heart that there is no God', this great philosopher observes *that the atheists nowadays are double fools; for they aren't contented to say in their hearts that there is no God but also utter that impiety with their lips, which makes them guilty of multiplied indiscretion and imprudence.* Such people, however serious and sincere they are, cannot be much of a threat, I think.

But even at the risk of your counting me as one of this class of fools, I can't forbear to say something that occurs to me, arising out of the history of religious and irreligious scepticism with which you have entertained us. It seems to me that there are strong symptoms of priestcraft in that whole course of events. During ignorant ages, such as those following the abolition of the ancient schools, the priests saw that atheism, deism [= a thin belief in a higher power, not necessarily a personal one], or heresy of any kind could only come

from the presumptuous questioning of common opinions, and from the belief that human reason is equal to every task. In those times •education had a great influence over the minds of men, and was almost equal in power to •the suggestions of the senses and common understanding, by which the most determined sceptic must admit that he is governed. But these days, when education has much less influence, and men's increased contacts throughout the world have taught them to compare the principles that are accepted in different nations and ages, our cunning divines have changed their whole system of philosophy, and talk the language of Stoics, Platonists, and Aristotelians, not that of Pyrrhonians and Academics. If we distrust human reason, we have now no other principle to lead us into religion. These reverend gentlemen can be depended on to identify the system that best suits their purpose of keeping an ascendancy over mankind—it may be scepticism in one age, dogmatism in another—and making it their favourite principle and established doctrine.

It is very natural, said **Cleanthes**, for men to embrace the principles by which they find they can best defend their doctrines; we can account for this reasonable behaviour without dragging priestcraft into the story. And, surely nothing can afford a stronger support for the truth of a set of principles than to observe that they tend to confirm true religion, and serve to silence the complaints of atheists, libertines, and freethinkers of all kinds.

## Part 2

I must admit, Cleanthes, said **Demea**, that nothing could surprise me more than the light in which you have all along put this argument. By the whole trend and tone of your remarks, one would think you were maintaining *the existence of a God* against the objections of atheists and infidels; and that you felt a need to stand up for that fundamental principle of all religion. But I hope there is no question here about the existence of a God. I am sure that no man—or anyway no man of common sense—ever had a serious doubt regarding such a certain and self-evident truth. The question is not about the *existence* but about the *nature* of God. Because of the infirmities of human understanding, I contend, the nature of God is entirely incomprehensible and unknown to us. The •essence of that supreme mind, •his attributes, •his way of existing, •his way of lasting through time—all these are mysterious to men, as is everything else concerning such a divine being. Finite, weak, and blind creatures such as we are ought to humble ourselves in his august presence; and, conscious of our frailties, stand in silent wonder at his infinite perfections, which eye has not seen, ear has not heard, neither has it entered into the heart of man to conceive. They are hidden from human curiosity by a deep cloud. It is insulting to God to try to penetrate these sacred obscurities. The audacity of prying into God's nature and essence, his decrees and attributes, is second only to the impiety of denying his existence.

Lest you should think that my piety has here overpowered my philosophy, I shall support my opinion—if it needs any support—by a very great authority. I could cite •in my support• almost any writer since the foundation of Christianity who has ever treated this or any other theological subject;

but for now I shall confine myself to just one, who is equally famous for piety and philosophy. It is Father Malebranche, whom I remember as expressing himself thus:

One ought to call God a spirit not so much to express positively what he *is* as to signify that he *is not* matter. He is an infinitely perfect being; this we cannot doubt. But just as we oughtn't to imagine, even supposing him corporeal, that he has a human body (as the anthropomorphites asserted, on the grounds that the human shape is the most perfect of any), so we oughtn't to imagine that the spirit of God has human ideas, or bears any resemblance to our spirit, on the grounds that we know nothing more perfect than a human mind. We ought rather to believe that just as he includes within himself the perfections of matter without being material, he includes within himself also the perfections of created spirits without being spirit according to our conception of spirit. We ought to believe that his true name is *He that is*, or in other words *Being without restriction, All being, the being infinite and universal*.

After so great an authority as that, Demea, replied **Philo**, and a thousand more that you could produce, it would appear ridiculous in me to add my own view or express my approval of your doctrine. But, surely, when reasonable men discuss these subjects their topic is never the existence of God but only his nature. That he exists is, as you well observe, unquestionable and self-evident. Nothing exists without a cause; and the original cause of this universe (whatever it may be) we call 'God', and piously ascribe to him every kind of perfection. Whoever questions this fundamental truth

deserves every punishment that philosophers can inflict on one another, namely, the greatest ridicule, contempt, and disapproval. But all perfection is entirely relative, so we ought never to imagine that we understand the attributes of this divine being, or to suppose that *his* perfections are in any way analogous or similar to the perfections of a human creature. Wisdom, thought, design, knowledge—it is proper for us to ascribe these to him, because those words are honourable among men, and we have no other language or other conceptions by which to express our wonder at his glory. But let us be careful *not* to think that our ideas of wisdom, thought, etc. in any way correspond to his perfections, or that his attributes have any resemblance to these qualities of men. He is infinitely superior to our restricted view and limited understanding, and is more the object of worship in the temple than of debate in the schools.

In reality, Cleanthes, he went on, we can arrive at this position without help from the pretend-scepticism that you so dislike. Here is how:

Our ideas reach no further than our experience.

We have no experience of divine attributes and operations.

I needn't conclude my syllogism: you can draw the inference yourself. And it is a pleasure to me (and I hope to you too) that valid reasoning and sound piety here work together to the same conclusion, and both of them establish the wondrously mysterious and incomprehensible nature of the supreme being.

I shan't beat about the bush, said **Cleanthes**, addressing himself to Demea. Still less shall I reply to Philo's pious speeches. What I shall do is to explain briefly how I conceive this matter. Look round the world, contemplating the whole thing and every part of it; you'll find that it is nothing but one big machine subdivided into an infinite number

of smaller ones, which in their turn could be subdivided to a degree beyond what human senses and faculties can trace and explain. All these various machines, and even their most minute parts, are adjusted to each other so precisely that everyone who has ever contemplated them is filled with wonder. The intricate fitting of means to ends throughout all nature is just like (though more wonderful than) the fitting of means to ends in things that have been produced by us—products of human designs, thought, wisdom, and intelligence. Since the effects resemble each other, we are led to infer by all the rules of analogy that the causes are also alike, and that the author of nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man, though he has much larger faculties to go with the grandeur of the work he has carried out. By this argument *a posteriori*, and by this argument alone, do we prove both that there is a God and that he resembles human mind and intelligence.

I have to tell you, Cleanthes, said **Demea**, that from the beginning, I could not approve of your conclusion about the similarity of God to men; still less can I approve of your ways of trying to establish it. What! No demonstration that God exists! No abstract arguments! No *a priori* proofs! [An *a priori* argument is one that proceeds by sheer thinking, making no use of contingent facts about what the world is like. An argument that *does* appeal to such facts is called *a posteriori*, which is what Cleanthes says that his argument is.] What about the ones that have in the past been so much insisted on by philosophers—are they all fallacious, all mere tricks? Do *experience* and *probability* mark the limit to how far we can go in this subject? I won't say that this is betraying the cause of a God; but, surely, by this show of even-handedness you provide atheists with advantages that they could never have obtained purely through argument and reasoning.

*My* main reservation about what Cleanthes has said, **Philo** remarked, is not so much that he bases all religious arguments on experience as that his arguments seem not to be the most certain and unbreakable even of that inferior ·experience-based· kind. That a stone will fall, that fire will burn, that the earth has solidity, we have observed thousands of times; and when any new instance of this sort is presented we don't hesitate to draw the usual conclusion—·this stone will fall, this fire will burn, the earth that I am about to put my right foot on is solid·. The exact similarity of the cases gives us a perfect assurance of a similar outcome; and we never want or look for stronger evidence than that. But the evidence is less strong when the cases are less than perfectly alike; *any* reduction in similarity, however tiny, brings a *corresponding* reduction in the strength of the evidence; and as we move down that scale we may eventually reach a very weak analogy, ·leading to a conclusion· that is confessedly liable to error and uncertainty. After having observed •the circulation of the blood in human creatures, we have no doubt that •it circulates in Titius and Maevius. But from •its circulation in frogs and fishes it is only a presumption—though a strong one, from analogy—that •blood circulates in men and other animals. The analogical reasoning is even weaker when we infer •the circulation of the sap in plants from our experience that •the blood circulates in animals; and those who hastily followed that imperfect analogy between plants and animals have been found by more accurate experiments to have been mistaken.

If we see a house, Cleanthes, we conclude with the greatest certainty that it had an architect or builder; because this is precisely the kind of effect that we have experienced as coming from that kind of cause. But surely you won't say •that the universe is so like a house that we can with the

same certainty infer a similar cause, or •that the analogy is here entire and perfect. The unlikeness in this case is so striking that the most you can offer ·on the basis of it· is a guess, a conjecture, a presumption about a similar cause; and I leave it to you to consider how *that* offering will be received in the world!

If I granted that the proofs of the existence of a God amount to no more than a guess or conjecture, replied **Cleanthes**, that wouldn't be well received, and I would deservedly be blamed and detested. But is it such a slight resemblance between how means are fitted to ends in a house and how they are fitted in the universe? The way things are fitted to their purposes? The order, proportion, and arrangement of every part? Steps of a staircase are plainly designed so that human legs can use them in climbing; and this inference ·from how the steps can be used to their purpose· is certain and infallible. Human legs are also designed for walking and climbing; and this inference ·from how legs can be used to *their* purpose·, I admit, is not quite so certain, because of the dissimilarity you have pointed out; but does that downgrade it to mere presumption or conjecture?

Good God! exclaimed **Demea**, interrupting him, what have we come to? Earnest defenders of religion admitting that the proofs of a God fall short of being perfectly evident! And you, Philo, whose help I depended on in proving the worshipful mysteriousness of God's nature—do you assent to all these extreme opinions of Cleanthes? For how else can I describe them? And why should I tone down my criticism when such principles are advanced, supported by such an authority ·as Cleanthes·, in the presence of such a young man as Pamphilus?

You seem not to grasp, replied **Philo**, that I argue with Cleanthes in his own way: I hope that by showing him the dangerous consequences of his views I shall finally bring him

to share *our* opinion. But what bothers you most, I notice, is Cleanthes' account of the argument *a posteriori*. You find that that argument—in his version of it—is likely to slip out of your grasp and vanish into thin air; you think Cleanthes has so disguised it that you can hardly believe he has presented it properly. Now, however much I may disagree in other ways with the dangerous principles of Cleanthes, I must admit that he has fairly presented that argument; and I shall try to set it out for you in such a way that you will no longer view it with suspicion.

If a man were to set aside everything he knows or has seen, he would be entirely unable to work out, merely from his own ideas, what the universe must be like, or to think one state of affairs to be more likely than another. Nothing that he clearly conceives could be thought to be impossible or to imply a contradiction, so every fanciful story his imagination comes up with would be on an equal footing with every other; and he could give no valid reason for sticking to one idea or system and rejecting the others that are equally possible.

Next step in the argument: after he opens his eyes and sees the world as it really is, he can't at first tell what the cause was of any one event, much less of the totality of things or of the universe. He might start his imagination rambling, and it might bring in to him an infinite variety of reports and stories. These would all be *possible*, but because they would all be *equally possible* he could never from his own resources explain satisfactorily why he prefers one of them to the rest. Experience alone can point out to him the true cause of anything that happens.

Now, Demea, this method of reasoning leads to something that Cleanthes himself has tacitly admitted, namely: order, arrangement, or the suitability of things for various purposes (like the suitability of legs for walking) is not of itself any proof that a designer has been at work, except in cases where

*experience has shown us* that such order, arrangement, etc. is due to a designer. For all we can know *a priori*, matter may have a source of order within it, just as mind does, having it inherently, basically, not acquired from somewhere else. [The interpolation in this next bit is longer than most. To make it easier to recognize, it is flagged by \*asterisks rather than small dots.] When a number of elements come together in an exquisite arrangement, \*you may think it harder to conceive that

- they do this of their own accord than to conceive that
- some designer put them into that arrangement. But that is too quick and careless. Think about what is involved in a designer's arranging them: it means that he creates the arrangement in his mind, assembling in the appropriate way the *ideas* of the elements in question. But, then, how does *that* happen? I put it to you\*, it is no harder to conceive that

- the elements are caused to come together into this arrangement by some unknown cause that is internal to them,

than it is to conceive that

- the ideas of these elements come together in that arrangement in the great universal mind, being caused to do so by a similarly unknown cause that is internal to that mind.

These two suppositions are agreed to be equally possible; but according to Cleanthes experience shows us a difference between them. Throw several pieces of steel together, without shape or form: they will never arrange themselves so as to compose a watch. Stone, and mortar, and wood, without an architect, never erect a house. But we see that the ideas in a human mind arrange themselves so as to form *the plan of* a watch or house, though we haven't the faintest notion of *how* they do this. So experience shows that minds—and not matter—have a built-in principle of order. From similar effects we infer similar causes. The way means are fitted to

ends in the universe at large is like the way means are fitted to ends in a machine designed by a human being. The cause of the machine, therefore, must be similar to the cause of the universe.

I was, I admit, shocked by this assertion of a resemblance between God and human creatures. I can't help seeing it as implying such a *lowering* of the supreme being that no right-thinking Theist could put up with it. With your assistance, therefore, Demea, I shall try to defend what you justly call the worshipful mysteriousness of God's nature, and shall refute this reasoning of Cleanthes, provided he agrees that I have presented it fairly.

When Cleanthes had agreed to this, Philo, after a short pause, proceeded in the following manner.

In the meantime I shan't disagree much with your theses •that all inferences concerning matters of fact are based on experience, and •that all experimental reasoning is based on the supposition that similar causes prove similar effects, and similar effects prove similar causes. But please notice how extremely cautious good thinkers are in transferring a discovered result to a similar case. These thinkers are not perfectly confident in applying their past observation to some other particular phenomenon, unless the •old and new• cases are *exactly* similar. Every alteration in the circumstances •of the cause• raises a doubt about the outcome; and it requires new experiments to prove for sure that the new circumstances have no causal significance. A change in size, position, arrangement, age, disposition of the air or of surrounding bodies—any of these may bring with it the most unexpected consequences. Unless the objects are quite familiar to us, it is much too bold to expect confidently that when a cause has been found to have a certain effect another cause, differing from the earlier one in one of these ways, will have the same effect. The slow and deliberate

steps of scientists, here if anywhere, are in contrast with the precipitate march of common men who, hurried along by the smallest similarity, are incapable of pondering or making distinctions.

•Which group, Cleanthes, have you just shown yourself to belong to?• You are usually cool and philosophical in these matters, but has your usual attitude been preserved in the *stride* you have taken in likening •the universe to •houses, ships, furniture, and machines, inferring from their similarity in some respects a similarity in their causes? Thought, design, intelligence, such as we discover in men and other animals, is just one of the springs and forces of the universe, along with heat and cold, attraction and repulsion, and a hundred others that we observe daily. It is an active cause through which (we find) certain particular *parts* of nature produce alterations in other *parts*. But can it be proper to argue from *parts* to the *whole*? Doesn't the great disproportion •between part and whole• bar all comparison and inference? From observing the growth of a hair, can we learn anything about how men come into being? Would the way a leaf blows—even if we knew this perfectly—teach us anything about how a tree grows?

Anyway, even if we do take the operations of one *part* of nature on another as our basis for a judgment about the origin of the *whole* (which is something we should never do), why would we select as our basis such a tiny, weak, limited cause as the reason and design of animals on this planet seems to be? This little agitation of the brain that we call 'thought'—what special privilege does *it* have that entitles it to serve as the model of the whole universe? It looms large for *us* because *we* are always in the presence of it; but sound philosophy ought carefully to guard against this kind of natural illusion.

So far from admitting, continued **Philo**, that the operations of a part entitle us to draw any conclusion about the origin of the whole, I won't even allow any one part to justify conclusions about another part, if the two are very unlike one another. Is there any reasonable ground to conclude that the inhabitants of other planets have thought, intelligence, reason, or anything similar to these faculties that men have? When nature has operated in such a wide variety of ways on this small planet, can we think that she incessantly copies herself throughout the rest of this immense universe? Also, it seems likely enough that *thought* occurs only in this narrow corner, and even here its sphere of action is very limited—namely, to affecting the movements of the bodies of some animals. So what can justify taking thought to be the original cause of everything? Such a jump is worse than that of a peasant whose idea of the government of kingdoms is based on how he runs his own household!

But even if we were perfectly sure that thought and reason similar to ours is to be found throughout the whole universe, and even if its activity elsewhere in the universe is vastly greater in scope and more powerful than it appears to be on this planet, *still* I cannot see that the operations of a world that is fully constituted, arranged and adjusted can properly be extended to a world that is in its embryo state, and is still moving towards that finished constitution and arrangement. By observation we know a certain amount about how a finished animal moves, is nourished, stays alive; but we should be cautious about transferring that knowledge speculatively to the growth of a foetus in the womb, and still more to the formation of an animalcule in the testes of its male parent. [*'animalcule' = 'tiny animal'*. It was commonly thought that the animal is formed in miniature in the father's body, the mother's contribution being merely to provide it with somewhere to grow.] Even our limited experience shows us that

nature has an infinite number of causes and principles which incessantly reveal themselves as circumstances change. It would be absurdly rash of us to claim to know what new and unknown principles would be at work in such a new and unknown situation as that of the formation of a universe.

A very small part of this great system of the universe, during a very short time, is very imperfectly revealed to us, Do we then pronounce confidently about the origin of the whole?

Admirable conclusion! At this time on this little planet stone, wood, brick, iron, brass are not ordered or arranged except through human artifice and contrivance; therefore the universe couldn't originally attain its order and arrangement without something similar to human artifice. But is one part of nature a rule for another part that is very different from it? Is it a rule for the whole? Is a very small part a rule for the universe? Is nature in one situation a certain rule for nature in another situation vastly different from the former? Is nature at work in our considerably developed universe a certain rule for nature at work in *starting* a universe?

And can you blame me, Cleanthes, if I here imitate the wise caution of Simonides? According to the famous story, Hiero asked him 'What is God?', and Simonides asked for a day to think about it, and then two days more; and in that way he continually prolonged his time for thinking about it, without ever producing a definition or description. Could you even blame me if I answered straight off that I didn't know what God is, and was aware that this subject lies vastly beyond the reach of my faculties? You might cry 'Sceptic!' and 'Tease!' as much as you pleased; but having found the imperfections and even contradictions of human reason when it is exercised on so many other subjects that are much more familiar than this one, I would never expect any success from reason's feeble conjectures concerning a



subject that is so elevated and so remote from the sphere of our observation. When two *sorts of* objects have always been observed to be conjoined together, custom leads me to infer the existence of ·an object of· one ·sort· wherever I see the existence of ·an object of· the other ·sort·; and I call this an argument from experience. But it is hard to see how this ·pattern of· argument can be appropriate in our present case, where the objects ·we are considering don't fall into *sorts*, but· are single, individual, without parallel or specific resemblance. And will anyone tell me with a straight face that an orderly universe must arise from some thought and artifice like human thought and artifice, because we have experience of it? To make this reasoning secure, we would need to have had experience of the origins of *worlds*; it isn't sufficient, surely, to have seen *ships and cities* arise from human artifice and contrivance.

Philo was going on in this vigorous manner, somewhere between joking and seriousness (it seemed to me), when he noticed signs of impatience in Cleanthes, and immediately stopped. What I wanted to cut in with, said **Cleanthes**, is only the suggestion that you stop abusing terms, using common everyday expressions to subvert philosophical reasonings. You know that common people often distinguish 'reason' from 'experience', even where the question relates only to a matter of fact and existence; though it is found that where that kind of 'reason' is properly analysed it turns out to be nothing but a sort of experience. To prove 'by experience' that the universe was originated by a mind is no more contrary to common speech than to prove 'by experience' that the earth moves. A fault-finder could raise against the Copernican system all the objections that you have urged against my reasonings. 'Have you other earths', he might say, 'which you have seen to move? Have. . .'

Yes! interrupted **Philo**, we *do* have other earths. Isn't the moon another earth, which we see to turn round its centre? Isn't Venus another earth, where we see the same thing? Aren't the revolutions of the sun also a confirmation—through analogy—of the same theory? Aren't all the planets that revolve around the sun *earths*? Aren't the satellites of Jupiter and Saturn *moons* that move around the sun along with their primary planets? These analogies and resemblances—and others that I haven't mentioned—are the only evidence for the Copernican system. It is for you to consider whether you have any analogies of the same kind to support your theory.

In reality, Cleanthes, he went on, the modern system of astronomy is now so thoroughly accepted by all enquirers, and has become such an essential a part of the education even of small children, that we are often not very scrupulous about examining the reasons for it. It is now become a matter of mere scholarly curiosity to study the first writers on that subject—the ones who had the full force of prejudice against them, and had to present their arguments in every possible light in order to render them popular and convincing. But if we peruse Galileo's famous Dialogues concerning the system of the world, we shall find that that great genius—one of the greatest who ever existed—first put all his efforts into proving that there is no basis for the distinction commonly made between 'elementary' and 'celestial' substances. The Aristotelian scientists, relying on sensory illusions, had made a great deal of this distinction; they had laid it down that 'celestial' substances cannot be generated, altered, or in any way affected, and they had assigned all the opposite qualities to 'elementary' substances. But Galileo, beginning with the moon, proved its similarity in every detail to the earth—its convex shape, its natural darkness when not illuminated ·by the sun·, its density, its distinction into solid and liquid,

the variations of its phases, the mutual illuminations of the earth and moon, their mutual eclipses, the unevenness of the moon's surface, and so on. After many examples of this kind relating to all the planets, men saw that these bodies were proper objects of experience, and that their similarity to one another entitled us to extend the same arguments and phenomena from one to another.

This cautious proceeding of the astronomers implicitly condemns your argument, Cleanthes; or, rather, it points to the fact that the subject on which you are engaged exceeds

all human reason and enquiry. Can you claim to show any such similarity between the structure of a house and the generation of a universe? Have you ever seen nature in a situation that resembles the first arrangement of the elements at the beginning of the universe? Have worlds ever been formed under your eye; and have you had leisure to observe the whole progress of world-making, from the first appearance of order to its final consummation? If you have, then cite your experience, and deliver your theory.

### Part 3

In the hands of an ingenious and inventive person, replied **Cleanthes**, even the most absurd argument can be made to seem plausible! Don't you realize, Philo, that Copernicus and his first disciples had to prove the similarity of terrestrial to celestial matter because various scientists—blinded by old systems, and supported by some empirical evidence—had denied that similarity? but that theists don't in the same way have to prove the similarity of the works of nature to those of human artifice, because this similarity is self-evident and undeniable? The works of nature are made of the same *stuff* as are human artifacts, and the two are alike in *form* also; what more is needed to show an analogy between their causes, and to show that the origin of all things is a divine purpose and intention? Your objections, to put it bluntly, are no better than the elaborate arguments used by the philosophers who denied that anything moves; and they ought to be refuted in the same way as those, by illustrations,

examples, and instances, rather than by serious argument and philosophy. That is how I shall oppose your arguments.

Suppose that an articulate voice were heard in the clouds, much louder and more melodious than any human voice could ever be; suppose further that this voice were heard at the same time in all nations, and that it spoke to each nation in its own language and dialect; suppose, finally, that the words spoken from the sky were not only meaningful but conveyed some instruction that was altogether worthy of a benevolent being who was superior to mankind. If all that occurred, could you possibly hesitate for a moment over the cause of this voice? Wouldn't you be compelled to ascribe it, straight off, to some design or purpose? Yet if you did come to that conclusion, your inference would be open to all the same objections (if they deserve such a label) that are brought against the system of theism.

Here's the position you seem to be committed to:

All conclusions about matters of fact are based on experience: when we hear an articulate voice in the dark and infer that a man has spoken, it is only the resemblance of the effects which leads us to conclude that there is a similar resemblance in the causes. But this extraordinary voice from the sky is loud and wide-ranging and flexible as to languages, which no human voice is; so we have no reason to suppose its cause is like the cause of human speech. So this rational, wise, coherent speech came from we know not where—perhaps an accidental whistling of the winds—and not from any divine reason or intelligence.

You can see clearly *your own* objections in *these* objections; and I hope you also see clearly that one lot is no better than the other.

But to bring the case still nearer our present topic of the universe, I shall make two suppositions, which—though they are weird and not true—don't involve any absurdity or impossibility. Suppose •that there is a natural, universal, invariable language, common to every individual of the human race; and •that books are natural products which perpetuate themselves in the same way as animals and plants do, by descent and propagation. These suppositions aren't as wildly far from fact as you might think. •We do have a kind of universal language, embedded in some expressions of our passions; and all the lower animals have a natural speech, which, however limited, is very intelligible to their own species. And •as the finest and most eloquent text is infinitely less complex and intricate than the coarsest organism, the propagation of an *Iliad* or *Aeneid* is easier to suppose than that of any plant or animal.

Well, now: suppose you enter your library, the shelves of which are full of natural volumes, containing the most

refined reasoning and most exquisite beauty; could you possibly open one of them and doubt that its original cause bore the strongest analogy to mind and intelligence? When it reasons and discourses; when it expostulates, argues, and enforces its views and lines of thought; when it appeals sometimes to the pure intellect, sometimes to the feelings; when it takes up every consideration suited to the subject, decorates it and deals with it; could you *still* say that all this basically had no meaning, and that thought and planning had no role to play when this volume first came into being in the loins of its original parent? I know you aren't as obstinate as that; even your irresponsible scepticism would be ashamed to assert such a glaring absurdity.

Furthermore, Philo, if there *is* any difference between my 'two suppositions' case and the real state of affairs in the universe, it is the latter that suits my argument better. The anatomy of an animal presents many stronger instances of design than the reading of Livy or Tacitus does; and any objection which you start in the 'real world' case, demanding that we attend to such an unusual and extraordinary scene as the first formation of worlds, holds equally in the 'two suppositions' case with its vegetating library. So choose sides, Philo, without ambiguity or evasion; either assert that a rational book needn't have a rational cause, or admit a similar cause for all the works of nature.

Let me add, **Cleanthes** went on, that this religious argument, instead of being weakened by the scepticism that you keep parading, is actually strengthened by it, becoming more firm and undisputed. To reject *all* argument and reasoning is either affectation or madness. Every reasonable sceptic rejects only argumentation that is abstruse, remote, and intricate; sticks to common sense and the plain instincts of nature; and assents to things the reasons for which strike him with so much force that it would take him an enormous

effort *not* to assent. Now the arguments for natural religion are plainly of this ·forceful, almost irresistible· kind; and nothing but the most perverse and obstinate metaphysics can reject them. Think about the anatomy of the eye, consider its structure and design, and then tell me—doesn't the idea of *a designer* immediately come into your mind with a force like that of a sensation? The most obvious conclusion, surely, is in favour of a designer; and it requires time, reflection, and study to bring to mind objections—which are frivolous although they are abstruse—which can support atheism. Who can see the male and female of each species, the fit between their bodies, their instincts, their passions, and their whole course of life before and after generation, without being aware that *the propagation of the species is intended by nature*? Millions and millions of such instances present themselves through every part of the universe; and •the intricate fit of things to their purposes conveys an intelligible and obvious meaning at least as well as does any •language. What level of blind dogmatism would you have to reach to reject such natural and convincing arguments?

However you may carp at it, the argument that likens an orderly world to a coherent, articulate speech will still be accepted as an incontestable proof of design and intention ·in the causation of the world·. If this argument for theism conflicts with the principles of logic, as you claim it does, its irresistible power over nearly everyone clearly shows that there may be arguments that are good although they break the rules. ·Don't dismiss this as special pleading, for we *do* sometimes accept rule-breaking performances as good, even as excellent·. We sometimes encounter beauties in writing that seem contrary to the rules, and yet gain our affections and enliven our imaginations in opposition to all the literary doctrines and to the authority of the established literary masters.

It sometimes happens, I admit, that the religious arguments don't have the influence they should have on an ignorant savage and barbarian; not because they are obscure and difficult, but because the savage never asks himself any of the questions on which they depend. Where does the intricate structure of an animal come from? From the copulation of its parents. And where do the parents come from? From *their* parents. Repeat this a few times and the objects come to be at such a distance from the savage that he loses them in darkness and confusion; and he has no curiosity to trace them further. But this is neither dogmatism nor scepticism, but stupidity: a state of mind very different from your close-arguing, question-raising disposition, my ingenious friend! You can trace causes from effects; you can compare the most distant and remote objects; and your greatest errors proceed not from *barrenness* of thought and invention, but from *too luxuriant a fertility*, which suppresses your natural good sense by a profusion of unnecessary doubts and objections.

Here I could observe that Philo was a little embarrassed and confused; but while he hesitated in giving an answer, **Demea** broke in on the conversation—luckily for Philo!

Your example involving books and language, he said to Cleanthes, gets much of its force from being familiar; but isn't there some danger in this very familiarity? May it not lead us to get above ourselves, by making us imagine we comprehend God and have some adequate idea of his nature and attributes? When I read a book I enter into the mind and intention of the author: at that moment I *become* him, in a way, and have an immediate feeling and conception of the ideas that revolved in his imagination when he was writing. But we can never come as close as that to God. His ways are not our ways. His attributes are perfect, but incomprehensible. And his 'book' of nature contains a great

and inexplicable riddle, more than any intelligible discourse or reasoning.

The ancient Platonists, you know, were the most religious and devout of all the pagan philosophers; yet many of them, particularly Plotinus, expressly declare that *intellect* or *understanding* is not to be ascribed to God, and that our most perfect worship of him consists not in acts of veneration, reverence, gratitude, or love but rather in a certain mysterious self-annihilation, or total extinction of all our faculties. These ideas are perhaps too far stretched; but still there is a truth buried in them: it must be admitted that by representing God as so intelligible and comprehensible, and so similar to a human mind, we are guilty of the grossest and most narrow self-centredness, making *ourselves* the model of the whole universe.

All the sentiments of the human mind—gratitude, resentment, love, friendship, approval, blame, pity, imitation, envy—clearly involve the state and situation of man, and are calculated for preserving the existence and promoting the activity of beings like us in circumstances like ours. So it seems unreasonable to transfer such sentiments to a supreme being, or to suppose that he is moved by them; besides which, the phenomena of the universe won't support

us in such a theory. All our ideas derived from the senses are confusedly false and deceptive, and so can't be supposed to have a place in a supreme intelligence; and the whole stock of the human understanding consists of those together with the ideas of the external senses, and we can't attribute the latter to God, who is in no way passive and so doesn't have senses as we do. We may conclude that none of the materials of thought in the human intelligence are in any respect like those of the divine intelligence. Now, as to the manner of thinking: how can we make any comparison between them, or suppose them to be in any way alike? Our thought is fluctuating, uncertain, fleeting, successive, and compounded [= 'made up of little elements of thought']; and these features of it belong to its essence, so that it would be an abuse of words to apply the name of 'thought' or 'reason' to anything that wasn't fluctuating, uncertain, etc. At least, if it seems more pious and respectful (as it really is) still to use these words when we speak of the supreme being, we should admit that their meaning as applied to him is totally incomprehensible, and that the weakness of our nature prevents us from having any ideas that correspond in the least to the ineffable sublimity of God's attributes.

## Part 4

It seems strange to me, said **Cleanthes**, that you, Demea, who are so sincere in the cause of religion, should still maintain the mysterious, incomprehensible nature of God, and should insist so strenuously that he in no way resembles human creatures. I freely admit that God has many powers and attributes that we can't comprehend; but if our ideas of him are not, as far as they go, true and adequate and in conformity with his real nature, I don't know what remains that is worth discussing in this subject. Is the name, without any meaning, of such vast importance? And how do you *mystics*, who maintain the absolute incomprehensibility of God, differ from *sceptics* or *atheists* who assert that the first cause of everything is unknown and unintelligible? They reject the view that the world was produced by a mind, by which I mean a mind like the human one (for I don't know of any other kind). They must be •very bold if they then go on to claim to know what *other* specific intelligible cause produced the world; and •if they don't make that claim, and admit that the cause is unknown to them•, they must be •very scrupulous indeed if they refuse to call the unknown cause of everything a 'God' or 'Deity', and to bestow on him as many high-flown praises and meaningless epithets as you may ask them to.

Who could imagine, replied **Demea**, that Cleanthes—the calm philosophical Cleanthes—would attempt to refute his antagonists by sticking a label on them (•namely the label 'mystic'•) and, like the common bigots and inquisitors of our time, resort to invective and rhetoric instead of reasoning? Doesn't he realize that his kind of attack can go either way, and that 'anthropomorphite' is as damaging and threatening a label, bringing as much danger with it, as the epithet

'mystic' with which he has honoured me? ['Anthropo-morphite' comes from Greek meaning 'human-shaped'. An anthropomorphite is someone who holds that God is like a man.] In reality, Cleanthes, consider what you are saying when you represent God as similar to a human mind and understanding. What is the mind of man? It is made up of *many different* faculties, passions, sentiments and ideas; they are indeed united into one self or person, but they are still distinct from each other. When a man's mind reasons, the ideas that are the parts of its •mental• discourse arrange themselves in a certain form or order; and this is not preserved intact for a moment, but immediately makes way for a new arrangement •of ideas•. New opinions, new passions, new affections, new feelings arise, which continually diversify the mental scene, and produce in it the *greatest variety* and most rapid *succession* imaginable. How is this compatible with that perfect *unchangingness* and *simplicity*—'simplicity' in the sense of 'not having parts'—which all true theists ascribe to God? According to them, he sees past, present, and future in a single act; his love and hatred, his mercy and justice, are one individual operation; he is entirely present at every point in space, and exists completely at every instant of time. God's nature doesn't involve the slightest hint of difference or variation: there is no sequence of events in him, he doesn't change, he doesn't gain or lose anything. What he is now is what he has always been, and always will be, without any change in what he thinks, feels, or does. He stands fixed in one simple, perfect state; and it can never be correct to say that *this* act of his is different from *that*, or that this judgment or idea is one that he had only recently, and that it will in time be followed by some other judgment or idea.

I can readily allow, said **Cleanthes**, that those who maintain that *God is perfectly simple* in the sense you have given to this, and to the extent that you have just expressed, are complete mystics, and are guilty of all the consequences that I have derived from their opinion. They are, in a word, atheists without knowing it. For though we may grant that God has attributes that we cannot understand, still we ought never to ascribe to him any attributes that are absolutely incompatible with the thinking nature that is essential to him. A 'mind' whose acts and feelings and ideas are not distinct and successive, a 'mind' that is wholly simple and totally unchanging, is a 'mind' that has no thought, no reason, no will, no sentiment, no love, no hatred. In short, it isn't a *mind* at all! It is an abuse of words to call it a 'mind', on a par with speaking of a region of space that has no shape, or of number that isn't composed of smaller numbers.

Think who your targets are! said **Philo**. You confer the title 'atheist' on almost all the sound, orthodox theologians who have treated this subject; and you will end up finding that by your criteria you are the only sound theist in the world. But if idolaters are atheists (as I think they can fairly be said to be), and if Christian theologians are also atheists (as you have implied), what is left of the famous argument for theism from the *universal consent* of mankind?

But I know that names and authorities don't carry much weight with you, so I'll try to show you a little more clearly the drawbacks of that *anthropomorphism* that you have embraced; and I shall prove that there is no basis for the view that a plan of the world was formed in God's mind, consisting of distinct ideas, differently arranged, in the way an architect forms in his head the plan of a house that he intends to build.

It isn't easy to see what is gained by this supposition that God had such a plan, whether we steer by reason

or by experience. You have offered this supposed plan as a satisfactory and conclusive cause of the world. But we cannot leave it at that, for we still have to raise the further question about the *cause of this cause*. Looking for an answer, let us first consult reason, then experience.

If reason (I mean abstract reason, involving *a priori* thoughts) is not equally silent with regard to all questions concerning cause and effect, it will at least venture to say this much:

A mental world (or universe of ideas) stands in as much need of a cause as does a material world (or universe of objects); and, if the mental world is similar in its arrangement to the material one, their causes must be similar.

For there is nothing here to give rise to a different conclusion or inference regarding one world from what we can conclude regarding the other. Looked at abstractly, they are entirely alike; and any problem concerning either of them is equally a problem for the other.

If we turn to experience, compelling it to say *something* on these subjects that lie beyond its sphere, it replies that it can't see any significant difference between these two kinds of worlds, so far as causation is concerned: it finds them to be governed by similar principles, and to depend on an equal variety of causes in their operations. We have specimens in miniature of both sorts of world: our mind resembles the one, a plant or animal the other. So let experience judge from these samples, which are within its sphere. Nothing seems more intricate in its causes than thought is. Because these causes never operate in the same way in two people, we never find two people who think exactly alike. Indeed, one person doesn't think in exactly the same way at any two times. A difference of age, of the disposition of his body, of weather, of food, of company, of books, of passions—any

of these details, and others that are less conspicuous, are sufficient to alter the precise machinery of thought and cause very different movements and operations in it. As far as we can judge, plants and animal bodies are no more intricate in their motions, and don't depend on a greater variety or more precise adjustment of springs and forces.

Now, as well as the question concerning •the cause of the being whom you suppose to be the author of nature, your system of anthropomorphism confronts us with another question, concerning the cause of •the mental world that you see as causing the material world—that is, the cause of •God's plan. How can we satisfy ourselves about *that*? Haven't we the same reason to see that mental world as caused by another mental world, or new force of thinking? But if we stop there, •refusing to raise the question about the cause of God's plan, why do we go as far as God's plan? Why not stop at the material world? How can we satisfy ourselves without going on to infinity? Not that there is any satisfaction in the infinite sequence •of causes of causes of. . . . Let us remember the story of the Indian philosopher and his elephant: •he thought that the earth needed something to hold it up, and supposed it rested on an elephant, which he then supposed rested on a tortoise. . . . The story was never more applicable than it is to the present subject, •switching from a *spatial* to a *causal* interpretation of 'rest on'. If the material world rests •causally• on a mental world that is similar to it, this mental world must rest on some other; and so on without end. It would be better, therefore, never to look beyond the present material world. By supposing it to contain within itself the causes of its order, we are really taking *it* to be God; and the sooner we arrive at that divine being, the better. When you go one step beyond the system of the familiar world, you only stir people up into asking questions that can't possibly be answered.

You may say 'The different ideas that make up God's plan fall into order of themselves, and by their own nature', but that has no precise meaning. If it *has* a meaning, I would like to know why it is not equally good sense to say 'The parts of the material world fall into order of themselves, and by their own nature'. Can one opinion be intelligible, when the other isn't?

We do indeed have experience of ideas that fall into order of themselves, and without any known cause •outside them. But I am sure we have much *more* experience of matter that does the same—for example in every case of generation and vegetation, where it is beyond our capacities to work out what the causes are [in this work 'generation' usually = the whole process through which animals have offspring, and 'vegetation' = the corresponding process for plants]. We have also experience of particular systems of thought and of matter that have no order—of thought in madness, of matter in the decay of dead organisms. So why should we think that order is more essential to one than to the other? And if order requires a cause in both, what advantage does your system give us when it takes the •material• universe of objects to be caused by a similar •mental• universe of ideas? Our first step •beyond the material world• leads us on for ever. So it would be wise of us to limit all our enquiries to the present world, without looking beyond it. We can get no satisfaction from these speculations that so far exceed the narrow limits of human understanding.

As you know, Cleanthes, when the ancient Aristotelians were asked about the cause of some phenomenon, they usually replied in terms of their concepts of *faculty* or *occult quality*. Asked why bread nourishes, for instance, they would say that bread nourishes by its •'nutritive faculty', and that senna purges by its •'purgative faculty'. But it has turned out that this device was merely a disguise for ignorance,



and that those philosophers were really saying—though less openly—the same thing as the sceptics and the plain people say when they candidly admit that they don't know what causes these phenomena. Well, now, when we ask what causes order in the ideas of God, can you anthropomorphites give any answer except that the cause is a 'rational faculty', and that such is the nature of God? If that is acceptable, then it is hard to see why it isn't equally acceptable to account for the world's order in a similar way—appealing to 'faculties' and 'natures' that material things have—without having recourse to any such thinking creator as you insist on. It is only to say that this is the 'nature' of material objects, and that they all have an inherent 'faculty' of order and proportion; which are merely more learned and elaborate ways of admitting ignorance. The comparable story about God's plan is no better than this one about the material world—except in being closer to the prejudices of common people.

You have presented this argument with great emphasis, replied **Cleanthes**, apparently not realizing how easy it is to answer it. When in everyday life I assign a cause for some event, Philo, is it any objection that I can't assign the cause of that cause, and answer every new question that may endlessly be raised? [In reading the next bit, remember that in Hume's day 'philosopher' covered scientists as well.] What philosophers could possibly submit to so rigid a rule? Philosophers admit that ultimate causes are totally unknown; and they are aware that the most refined principles which they use to explain the phenomena are as inexplicable to them as the phenomena themselves are to the common people. So there can be no question of their agreeing that it's no use

assigning a cause unless you also assign the cause of the cause. The order and arrangement of nature, the intricate adjustment of things to their purposes, the plain use and intended purpose of every part and organ of a plant or animal—all these announce in the clearest language an intelligent cause or author. The heavens and the earth join in the same testimony: the whole chorus of nature raises one hymn to the praises of its creator. You alone, or almost alone, disturb this general harmony. You start abstruse doubts, complaints, and objections; you ask me, what is the cause of this cause? I don't know, and I don't care. *I have found a God*, and with that I stop my enquiry. Let those who are wiser or more enterprising go further.

I don't claim to be wiser or more enterprising, replied **Philo**: and for that very reason I might never have tried to go so far; especially when I'm aware that I must eventually settle for the same answer that I might—saving myself all that trouble—have settled for from the beginning. If I am still to remain in utter ignorance of causes, and can't give a full explanation of anything, I shall never think it is an advantage to shove off for a moment a difficulty which (you admit) must immediately come back to me with its full force. Natural scientists indeed very properly explain particular effects by *more general* causes, even when these general causes themselves are in the end totally inexplicable; but surely they never think it satisfactory to explain a particular effect by a *particular* cause that is no more explicable than the effect itself. A 'system of ideas, arranged by itself without a prior design, is not a whit more explicable than a 'material system that attains its order in the same way; there is no more difficulty in the latter supposition than in the former.

## Part 5

But to show you still more inconveniences in your anthropomorphism, continued **Philo**, please look again at your principles. *Like effects prove like causes*. This is the basis for every empirical argument, and you say that it is also the only basis for the theological argument. Now, it is certain that the more similar the observed effects, and the more similar the causes that are inferred, the stronger is the argument. Every move away from similarity, between the effects or between the causes, lowers the probability and makes the empirical argument less conclusive. You can't doubt the principle; so you oughtn't to reject its consequences.

According to the true system of theism, all the new discoveries in astronomy, which prove the immense grandeur and magnificence of the works of nature, are further arguments for the existence of a God; according to your hypothesis of empirical theism they become objections, by moving the universe still further from all resemblance to the effects of human skill and contrivance. If the argument for genuine theism had force in earlier times, how much more force it must have now, when the bounds of nature are so infinitely enlarged and such a magnificent scene is opened to us? [As evidence of its support in ancient times, Philo quotes (in Latin) from Lucretius and Cicero. Then:] It is still more unreasonable to form our idea of the cause of such an unlimited effect on the basis of our experience of the causes of the narrow products of human design and invention.

The discoveries by microscopes, as they open a new universe in miniature, are arguments for theism according to me, whereas to you they are objections to it. The further we push our researches of this kind, the more we are led to infer that the universal cause of it all is vastly different from

mankind, and from anything of which we have empirical knowledge.

And what do you have to say about the discoveries in anatomy, chemistry, botany? . . .

Those surely are not objections, interrupted **Cleanthes**; they only reveal new instances of skill and contrivance. It is still the image of *mind* reflected on us from innumerable objects. Add, a mind *like the human*, said **Philo**. That's the only kind I know, replied **Cleanthes**. And *the more like the better*, insisted **Philo**. To be sure, said **Cleanthes**.

Now, Cleanthes, said **Philo**, pouncing with an air of triumph, note the consequences! First, by this method of reasoning, you give up all claim to *infinity* in any of the attributes of God. For, as the cause ought to be proportioned to the effect, and the effect—so far as we know—is not infinite, what right have we (on your theory) to ascribe infinity to God? You will still have to say that when we remove him so far from similarity to human creatures, we give in to the most arbitrary hypothesis and at the same time weaken all proofs of his existence.

Secondly, your theory gives you no reason to ascribe *perfection* to God even in his capacity as a finite being, or to suppose him to be free from every error, mistake, or incoherence in his activities. Consider the many inexplicable difficulties in the works of nature—illnesses, earthquakes, floods, volcanoes, and so on. If we think we can prove *a priori* that the world has a perfect creator, all these calamities become unproblematic: we can say that they only *seem to us* to be difficulties because we with our limited intellects can't follow all the infinitely complex details of which they are a part. But according to your line of argument these difficulties

are *real*; indeed they might be emphasized as new instances of the world's likeness to the products of human skill and contrivance! You must, at least, admit that we with our limited knowledge can't possibly tell whether this system contains any great faults, or deserves any considerable praise, when compared to other possible systems and perhaps even when compared to real ones. If the *Aeneid* were read to a peasant, could he judge it to absolutely faultless? Could he even give it proper place in a ranking of the products of human intelligence—he who had never seen any of the others?

Even if this world were a perfect product, we still couldn't be sure whether all the excellences of the work could justly be ascribed to the workman. When we survey a ship, we may get an exalted idea of the ingenuity of the carpenter who built such a complicated, useful, and beautiful machine. But then we shall be surprised to find that the carpenter is a stupid tradesman who imitated others, and followed a trade which has gradually improved down the centuries, after multiplied trials, mistakes, corrections, deliberations, and controversies. Perhaps our world is like that ship. It may be that many worlds were botched and bungled, throughout an eternity, before our present system was built; much labour lost, many useless trials made, and a slow but continued improvement carried on during infinite ages in the world-making trade. In such subjects as this, who can determine what is true—who indeed can even guess what is *probable*—when so many hypotheses can be put forward, and even more can be imagined?

And what shadow of an argument, continued **Philo**, can you produce, from your hypothesis, to prove that God is *one* being? A great many men join together to build a house or ship, to found and develop a city, to create a commonwealth; why couldn't several gods combine in designing and making

a world? This would only serve to make divine activities more like human ones. By sharing the work among several gods we can reduce still further the attributes of each one of them; we can get rid of the extensive power and knowledge that we have to suppose the one God to possess (if there is only one)—the extent of power and knowledge which, according to you, serves merely to *weaken* the argument for God's existence. And if such foolish, vicious creatures as men can often unite in forming and carrying out one plan, think how much more could be done by those gods or semi-gods whom we may suppose to be quite a lot more perfect than we are!

To *multiply causes without necessity* is indeed contrary to true philosophy; but that principle doesn't apply to our present case. If your theory had already established that there is one God who had every attribute needed for the production of the universe, then, I admit, it would be needless (though not absurd) to suppose that any other god existed. But while we are still confronting the question:

Are all these attributes united in one thing that has them all, or are they shared out among several independent beings?

what phenomena in nature can we point to as supplying the answer? When we see a body raised in a scale, we are sure that in the opposite scale—even if we can't see it—there is some counterbalancing weight equal to it; but we can still question whether that weight is a heap of many distinct bodies, or rather one uniform united mass; for example, whether it is a handful of pebbles or a single lump of lead. And if the weight needed for the counterbalancing is very much greater than we have ever seen any single body to possess, the former supposition becomes still more probable and natural than the latter. As with weights, so with creators. An intelligent being of such vast power and ability as is necessary to produce the universe—or, to

speak in the language of ancient philosophy, *so prodigious an animal*—goes beyond any analogy with ourselves, and indeed goes beyond what we can understand.

Furthermore, Cleanthes: men are mortal, and renew their species by generation, and so do all living creatures. The two great sexes of male and female, says Milton, animate the world. Why shouldn't this universal and essential feature of our condition also apply to those numerous and limited gods that I am saying you should argue for? And *that* brings us back to the ancient tales about the birth of the gods.

Indeed, why not become a perfect anthropomorphite? Why not assert that God is—or that each god is—corporeal, having eyes, a nose, mouth, ears, etc.? Epicurus maintained that *no man has ever seen reason except in someone of human shape, and that therefore the gods must have that shape*. This inference was deservedly ridiculed by Cicero, but by your standards it is solid and philosophical.

In a word, Cleanthes, someone who follows your hypothesis can perhaps assert or conjecture that

The universe at some time arose from something like design.

But beyond that he can't make a case for any further details, and is left to fill in his theology by wildly imagining or guessing the rest. For all he knows, the world is very faulty and imperfect by certain higher standards, which opens

the doors to all sorts of 'theologies', no one of which he can refute. Here are just three of them. This world was only the first rough attempt of some infant god, who afterwards abandoned it, ashamed of his poor performance; it is the work of some dependent, inferior god, whose superiors hold it up for ridicule; it was produced by some god in his old age and near-senility, and ever since his death the world has continued without further guidance, activated by the first shove he gave to it and the active force that he built into it. You rightly give signs of horror, Demea, at these strange suppositions; but these—and a thousand more like them—are Cleanthes' suppositions, not mine. As soon as the attributes of God are supposed to be finite, all these suppositions get a foot-hold. Speaking for myself, I can't see that having such a wild and unsettled a system of theology is in any way preferable to having none at all—that is, being an atheist.

I absolutely disown these suppositions! exclaimed **Cleanthes**; but they don't fill me with horror, especially when put forward in the casual way in which you throw them off. On the contrary, they give me pleasure when I see that even when giving your imagination completely free rein, you don't get rid of the hypothesis of *design in the universe*, but are obliged to rely on it at every turn. That concession is what I stick to, and I regard it as a sufficient foundation for religion.

## Part 6

It must be a flimsy building, said **Demea**, that can be erected on such a shaky foundation! While we are uncertain whether there is one god or many, whether God or the gods to whom we owe our existence are perfect or imperfect, subordinate or supreme, dead or alive, what trust or confidence can we put in them? What devotion or worship can we offer them? What veneration or obedience give to them? This theory of religion becomes altogether useless for all the *practical* purposes of life, and even when it is considered merely as a *speculative* theological theory, the uncertainty you attribute to it must render it totally precarious and unsatisfactory,

To make it still more unsatisfactory, said **Philo**, I've thought of another hypothesis that must seem probable when evaluated in terms of the method of reasoning that Cleanthes insists on so much. He takes the basis for all religion to be this:

Similar effects arise from similar causes.

But there is another principle of the same kind, equally certain and supported in the same way by experience. namely:

Where several known circumstances are observed to be similar, the unknown will also be found similar.

Example: if we see the limbs of a human body, we conclude that it is accompanied by a human head, even if we can't see it. Second example: if we see a small part of the sun through a crack in a wall, we conclude that if the wall were removed we would see the whole sun, In short, this type of inference is so obvious and familiar that there can be no doubts as to its soundness.

Now, if we survey the universe far as we know it, it bears a great resemblance to an animal or organic body, and seems

to be driven by a source of life and motion like the one that drives organisms. •A continual circulation of matter in it produces no disorder; •a continual waste in every part is incessantly repaired; •the different parts of the whole system are seen to act in harmony with one another; and •each part of the world or member of an organism, in doing its proper job, operates both for its own preservation and for that of the whole. From all this I infer the *the world is an animal*, and that God is the MIND of the world, driving it and being affected by it.

You have too much learning, Cleanthes, to be at all surprised by this opinion, which as you know was maintained by almost all the theists of antiquity, and is the main theology that one finds in their discourses and reasonings. For though the ancient philosophers sometimes reason from final causes, pointing to evidence of purpose in the world, as if they thought the world to be *something God made*, yet their favourite idea seems to have been that the world is *God's body*, which is organized in such a way that it obeys his commands (just as your body is so organized that—for example—when you decide to raise your arm it rises). The universe is more like a human body than like the works of human skill and planning; so if it is ever appropriate to liken the whole of nature to any facts about us, with all our limits, it seems that the ancient analogy between the universe and our body is sounder than the modern one between the universe and the things we make.

The former theory also has many other advantages that recommended it to the ancient theologians. Here is one important one. Nothing clashed more with all their notions, because nothing clashes more with common experience, than

*mind without body*—the idea of a purely mental substance, which they didn't understand and of which they hadn't observed a single instance throughout all of nature. They knew *mind and body* because they felt both; they also knew *an order, arrangement, organization, or internal machinery in both mind and body*, again because they felt both; so it was bound to seem reasonable to transfer this experience of themselves to the universe. That is to suppose that neither the divine mind nor the divine body came first, and that *each* of them has an order and arrangement that is naturally inherent in it and inseparable from it.

So here is a new sort of anthropomorphism, Cleanthes, for you to think about; and it's a theory that doesn't seem to be open to any great difficulties. I'm sure you are above such theoretical prejudices as to find any more difficulty in supposing an animal body to be ordered and organized *originally, of itself, or from unknown causes* than in supposing a mind to be ordered in that way. So you might think that likening the universe to an animal body doesn't require supposing that is driven by a mind, a divine mind. But the common prejudice that body and mind ought always to accompany each other ought not to be entirely neglected, for it is based on common experience, which is the only guide you claim to follow in all these theological enquiries. If you say that our limited experience is an inadequate standard by which to form opinions about the unlimited extent of nature, then you will be entirely abandoning your own hypothesis, and will have to adopt our mysticism (as you call it), and admit that God's nature is absolutely incomprehensible.

I admit, replied **Cleanthes**, that this theory had never before occurred to me, though it is a pretty natural one. I can't give an opinion about it until I have had more time to think it over. You are very scrupulous indeed, said **Philo**—more scrupulous than I am: if you had presented

*me* with a system of *yours*, I wouldn't have been half as cautious and reserved in starting objections and difficulties to it. However, if anything does occur to you, please tell us.

Why then, replied **Cleanthes**, it seems to me that though the world does in many ways resemble an animal body, this analogy is also defective in many important respects: •no organs of sense; •no seat of thought or reason; •no one precise origin of motion and action. In short, it seems to be more like a *plant* than an *animal*, and that weakens your inference to the mind of the world.

Secondly, your theory seems to imply the eternity of the world; and that thesis, I believe, can be refuted by the strongest reasons and probabilities. I shall suggest an argument against it—one that I think hasn't been insisted on by any writer. First, though, we should look at a different and less strong argument for the world's having had a beginning. It is argued that the arts and sciences came into existence only recently, and so the world's past is fairly short. This inference has some force, but perhaps it can be refuted—or, rather, its premise can be undercut—by a point concerning the nature of human society. We continually revolve between ignorance and knowledge, between liberty and slavery, between riches and poverty; so our limited experience doesn't enable us to foretell with confidence what outcomes may or may not be expected. Ancient learning and history seem to have been in great danger of entirely perishing after the influx of the barbarous nations into the Roman empire; and if these convulsions had continued a little longer, or been a little more violent, we would probably not have known now what happened in the world a few centuries ago. Indeed, the Latin language would have been utterly lost if it weren't for the superstition of the Popes, who preserved a little Latin jargon so as to keep their church looking ancient and universal. With Latin lost, the western world would have

been totally barbarous, and so wouldn't have been in a fit state to receive the Greek language and learning that came to them after the sacking of Constantinople. When learning and books had been extinguished, even the practical arts, skills, and trades would have fallen into considerable decay; and it is easy to imagine that in that case fable or tradition might ascribe to those arts a much later origin than they actually had. And so, by parity of argument, we are not entitled to confidence that *we* aren't doing the same thing, because the records of vastly earlier arts and sciences have been wiped out. This common argument against the eternity of the world, therefore, seems a little precarious.

But here is what seems to be the basis for a better argument. Lucullus was the first person who brought cherry-trees from Asia to Europe; yet that tree thrives so well in many European climates that it grows in the woods without being cultivated. Is it possible that *throughout a whole eternity* no European ever visited Asia and thought of transplanting such a delicious fruit into his own country? If it was once transplanted and propagated before the time of Lucullus, how could it ever afterwards perish? Empires may rise and fall, liberty and slavery succeed alternately, ignorance and knowledge give place to each other—but the cherry-tree will still remain in the woods of Greece, Spain, and Italy, and will never be affected by the revolutions of human society.

It is less than two thousand years since vines were transplanted into France, though there is no climate in the world more favourable to them. It is less than three centuries since horses, cows, sheep, pigs, dogs, and corn were first known in America. Is it possible that during the revolutions of *a whole eternity* there never arose a Columbus who could put Europe into communication with that continent? We may as well imagine that all men would wear stockings for

ten thousand years, and never have the sense to think of garters to tie them. All these seem convincing proofs that the world is young, indeed a mere infant; because the argument involving them is based on principles that are more constant and steady than those by which human society is governed and directed. It would take a total convulsion of the elements to destroy all the European animals and vegetables that are now to be found on the American continent.

Well, what argument have you against such convulsions? replied **Philo**. Strong and almost incontestable evidence can be found over the whole earth that every part of this planet has for centuries been entirely covered with water. And even if order is inseparable from matter and inherent in it, still matter may be susceptible of many and great revolutions through the endless periods of eternal duration. We can see that in the changes and collapses *of which we have had experience* the world has merely passed from one state of order to another; and matter can't ever stay in a totally disordered and confused state. Still, the constant changes that occur in every part of the material world seem to suggest that some such *general* transformations sometimes occur. What we see in the parts we may infer in the whole—at any rate that's the pattern of argument on which you rest your whole theory. And if I *had* to defend some particular system of this type (which I would never do willingly!), I find none of them more plausible than the theory that ascribes to the world an eternal inherent ordering force, though accompanied by great and continual revolutions and alterations. This at once solves all the difficulties; and if the solution is too lacking in detail to be entirely complete and satisfactory, it is at least a theory that we *must* eventually accept, whatever more detailed system we embrace. How could things have been as they are if there were not an original inherent principle of order *somewhere*—in thought or in matter? It doesn't matter

in the slightest which of these—thought or matter—we prefer. No hypothesis, whether sceptical or religious, should make room for *chance*; everything is surely governed by steady, inviolable laws. And if the inmost essence of things were laid open to us, we would then discover a scene of which at present we can have no idea. Instead of wondering at the order of natural things, we would see clearly that it was absolutely impossible for their ordering to be different—even in some tiny detail—from what it is in actuality.

If anyone wanted to revive the ancient pagan theology which maintained, as we learn from Hesiod, that this planet was governed by 30,000 gods who arose from the unknown

powers of nature, you would naturally object, Cleanthes, that nothing is gained by this hypothesis, and that it's as easy to suppose all men and animals—more numerous, but less perfect—to have sprung immediately from a source of that kind. Push the same inference a step further and you will find that a large *society of gods* is no harder to explain than *one universal God* who contains within himself the powers and perfections of the whole society. So you must allow that all these systems—scepticism, polytheism, and theism—are on an equal footing when judged by your principles. That shows you that your principles are wrong.

## Part 7

In thinking about the ancient system of God as the mind of the world, **Philo** continued, I have just been struck by a new idea. If it is right, it comes close to subverting all your reasoning, and destroying even the first inferences in which you place such confidence. If the universe resembles animal bodies and plants more than it does the works of human skill, it is more probable that its cause resembles the cause of the former than the cause of the latter; so its origin ought to be ascribed to generation or vegetation rather than to reason or design. So your conclusion is lame and defective, even according to your own principles.

Please expand this argument a little, said **Demea**, for I haven't properly grasped it in the concise form in which you have expressed it.

Our friend Cleanthes, replied **Philo**, as you have heard, asserts that since no question of fact can be answered except through experience, the existence of a God cannot be proved in any other way. The world, he says, resembles things made by human skill; so its cause must also resemble the cause of human artifacts. I note in passing that the operation of one very small part of nature, namely man, on another very small part, namely the inanimate matter lying within his reach, is the basis on which Cleanthes judges of the origin of the whole of nature; he measures the vast whole by the same individual standard as he does the tiny parts. But I shan't press that point. If we are going to argue from parts to the whole, let us at least be careful about what parts we select for this special treatment. I affirm that some parts of the universe other than the machines of human invention



are still more like the fabric of the world than machines are, and therefore point to a better conjecture about the origin of this whole system of the universe. These parts are *animals* and *plants*. The world plainly resembles an animal or a plant more than it does a watch or a knitting-loom. Its cause is therefore more likely to resemble the cause of the former than to resemble the cause of the latter. The cause of the former is generation or vegetation. So we can conclude that the cause of the world is something similar or analogous to generation or vegetation.

But how is it conceivable, said **Demea**, that the world can arise from anything similar to vegetation or generation?

Very easily, replied **Philo**. Here is one way it could happen. Just as a tree sheds its seeds into the neighbouring fields and produces other trees, so the great plant, the world or this planetary system, produces within itself certain seeds which it scatters into the surrounding chaos in which they grow into new worlds. A comet, for instance, is the seed of a world; and after it has been fully ripened by passing from sun to sun and star to star, it is at last tossed into the unformed elements which everywhere surround this universe, and immediately sprouts up into a new system.

Or we might suppose this world to be an animal. (There is no advantage in this, but let's try it just for variety.) So: a comet is the egg of this animal; and just as an ostrich lays its egg in the sand, where the egg hatches without any further care, and produces a new animal, so . . .

I understand you, interrupted **Demea**, but what wild, arbitrary suppositions are these? What data have you for such extraordinary conclusions? Is the slight, imaginary resemblance of the world to a plant or an animal sufficient to support conclusions about the world based on what happens with plants or animals? Ought objects that are in general so widely different be taken as a standard for each other?

Right! exclaimed **Philo**: that is what I have been insisting on all along. I have gone on asserting that we have no data to establish any system of cosmogony [= 'theory, system, or story about the origin of the world']. Our experience, which is so imperfect in itself and which covers such small stretches of space and time, can't give us any probable conjecture concerning the whole of things. But if we *have to settle* for some hypothesis, tell me what rule we can use to make our choice. Is there any rule except the one that bases the greater acceptability of an hypothesis on the greater similarity of the objects compared? And doesn't a plant or an animal that arises from vegetation or generation resemble the world more closely than does any artificial machine that arises from reason and design?

But what is this vegetation and generation of which you talk? said **Demea**. Can you explain how they work, and lay out the details of that fine internal structure on which they depend?

I can do that, replied **Philo**, at least as well as Cleanthes can explain how *reason* works, or lay out in detail the internal structure on which *it* depends! But I don't need to go into all that: it is enough that *when I see an animal, I infer that it arose from generation*, and am as sure of this as you are when you infer that a house arose from design. The words 'generation' and 'reason' serve merely to label certain powers and energies in nature. We know the effects of these powers, but have no grasp of their essence; and neither of them has a better claim than the other to be made a standard for the whole of nature.

In fact, Demea, we can reasonably expect that the wider the range of facts that we take in, the better they will guide us in our conclusions about such extraordinary and magnificent subjects. In this little corner of the world alone, there are four principles [here = 'driving forces' or 'sources of energy']:

reason, instinct, generation, vegetation, that are similar to each other and are the causes of similar effects. How many other principles can we naturally suppose to be at work in the immense extent and variety of the universe—principles that we might discover if we could travel from planet to planet, and from system to system, so to examine each part of this mighty structure? Any one of the above four principles (and a hundred others which lie open if not to our *senses*, then at least to our *conjecture*) can give us a theory about the origin of the world; and to confine our view entirely to the one of the four that governs how our own minds operate—namely, *reason*—is to be guilty of gross bias. If reason were more intelligible to us than the other three principles because it governs *our* minds, there would be some excuse for our bias in its favour; but that isn't how things stand, because the internal structure of reason is really as little known to us as are the structures of instinct and vegetation. Even that vague, indeterminate word 'nature', which common people drag in to explain everything, stands for something that is basically no more inexplicable than reason. Our experience shows us the effects of these principles; but the principles themselves, and their ways of working, are totally unknown to us. To say:

The world arose by vegetation from a seed shed by another world

is not less intelligible, or less in harmony with experience, than to say:

The world arose from a divine reason or plan, taking this in the sense in which Cleanthes understands it.

But if the world did have a vegetative quality, said **Demea**, and could sow the seeds of new worlds into the infinite chaos, I would see this power as a further argument for design in its author. For where could such a wonderful power come from if not from design? How can order spring from anything

which doesn't perceive the order which it gives?

You need only look around you, replied **Philo**, to get the answer to this question. A tree gives order and organization to the tree that arises from it, without knowing that order; similarly with an animal and its offspring, a bird and its nest. There are in the world more examples of this kind than there are instances of order arising from reason and planning. To say that *all this order in animals and plants proceeds ultimately from design* is to assume the very point that is at issue. The only way to settle the point in favour of design would be to prove *a priori* both that order is from its own nature inseparably attached to thought, and that order is prevented from belonging to matter, either by its own nature or by some unknown basic principle.

Furthermore, Demea, the objection you have just brought can't be made by Cleanthes unless he gives up a defence that he used against one of my objections. When I asked about the cause of that supreme reason and intelligence from which he derives everything else, Cleanthes said this:

The impossibility of answering such questions is never a legitimate objection in any kind of philosophy. We must stop somewhere; and wherever we stop, more questions can be raised, because humans will never be able to explain ultimate causes, or to show the absolutely basic connections between things. All that should be demanded is that whatever steps we do take be supported by experience and observation.

Now it can't be denied that order in nature is found by experience to come from vegetation and generation, as well as from reason. It is for me to choose whether to base my system of cosmogony on the former rather than on the latter. The choice seems entirely arbitrary. And when Cleanthes asks me what the cause is of my vegetative or generative faculty, I am equally entitled to ask him what

causes his reasoning principle. We have agreed to pass up these questions on both sides, and in our present context it is in his interests to stick to this agreement. Judging by our limited and imperfect experience, generation has some privileges over reason: for we see every day reason arise from generation—for example, *my* reason, which has in its causal ancestry my parent's begetting of me—but never see generation arise from reason.

Please compare the consequences on both sides. •The world, I say, resembles an animal, so it is an animal, so it arose from generation. The steps in that argument are jumps, I admit, but each of them involves some small appearance of analogy ·between world and animal·. •The world, says Cleanthes, resembles a machine, so it is a machine, so it arose from design. These steps are jumps too, and here the analogy—·between world and machine·—is less striking. And if he claims to push one step further than my hypothesis, by inferring that design or reason caused the great principle of generation which I have emphasized, I have a better right to push one step further than *his* hypothesis, by inferring that a divine generation or god-birth caused his principle of reason. I have empirical evidence on my side, because reason is observed in countless cases to arise from generation, and never to arise from any other source. This is ·admittedly only· a faint shadow of evidence for my hypothesis, but on this topic faint shadows are the best we can do.

The ancient mythologists were so struck with this analogy that they all explained the origin of nature in terms of birth and copulation. Plato too, so far as he is intelligible, seems to have adopted some such notion in his *Timaeus*.

The Brahmins assert that the world arose from an infinitely large spider who spun this whole complicated mass from his bowels, and then annihilates all or some of it by absorbing it again and taking it into his own essence. Here is a kind of cosmogony that strikes us as ridiculous because a spider is a negligible little animal whose doings we are never likely to take for a model of the whole universe. Still, even for us on our planet, this is a new kind of analogy ·for us to think about·. If there were (as there well might be) a planet wholly inhabited by spiders, this inference would seem *there* as natural and secure against criticism as the one that *here* ascribes the origin of all things to design and intelligence, as explained by Cleanthes. He will find it hard to give a satisfactory reason why an orderly system might not be spun from the belly as well as from the brain,

I must say, Philo, replied **Cleanthes**, that the task you have undertaken, of raising doubts and objections, suits you better than it does anyone else alive; it seems in a way natural and unavoidable to you. You are so fertile in your inventions that I am not ashamed to admit that I can't, straight off, solve in a disciplined way such out-of-the-way difficulties as you keep launching at me, though I can clearly see in a general way that they are wrong. I have no doubt that you are at present in the same position as I am, not having any solution as ready to hand as the objection. And you must be aware that common sense and reason are entirely against you, and that whimsical hypotheses like the ones you have produced may puzzle us but can never convince us.

## Part 8

What you ascribe to the fertility of my invention, replied **Philo**, comes purely from the nature of the subject. In topics that are suited to our limited human reason there is often only *one* view that carries probability or conviction with it; and to a man of sound judgment all *other* suppositions appear entirely absurd and fanciful. But in questions like our present one, a hundred mutually contradictory views can get some kind of support, because each preserves a kind of imperfect analogy; so here, with all those contenders and no clear winner, invention has full scope to exert itself. I believe that I could, in an instant and with no great effort of thought, propose still further systems of cosmogony that would have some faint appearance of truth, though the odds are a thousand—indeed a million—to one against any of them, *or yours*, being the true system.

For instance, what if I should revive the old Epicurean hypothesis? This is commonly and I think rightly regarded as the most absurd system ever yet proposed; but I suspect that with a few alterations it might be given a faint appearance of probability. Instead of supposing matter to be infinite, as Epicurus did, let us suppose it to be finite and also suppose space to be finite, while still supposing time to be infinite. A finite number of particles in a finite space can have only a finite number of transpositions; and in an infinitely long period of time every possible order or position of particles must occur an infinite number of times. So this world, with all its events right down to the tiniest details, has already been produced and destroyed and will again be produced and destroyed an unlimited number of times. No-one who properly grasps the difference between infinite and finite will have any trouble with this conclusion.

But this presupposes, said **Demea**, that matter can come to move without any voluntary agent or first mover [= 'without any agent that causes the motion by willing or deciding that it shall occur'].

And where's the difficulty in that? replied **Philo**. •In advance of experience every outcome is as hard to credit and as incomprehensible as every other; and •after experience every outcome is as easy to believe and as intelligible as every other. Matter often starts to move through gravity, through elasticity, through electricity, without any *known* voluntary agent; and to suppose that in all these cases there is an *unknown* voluntary agent is merely to put forward an hypothesis—and one that has no advantages. That unaided matter should put itself into motion is as conceivable *a priori* as that it should be put into motion by mind and intelligence.

Besides, why can't motion have been passed from object to object by impact, and the same (or nearly the same) stock of it go on being maintained in the universe? The motion lost in one process is gained in the opposite process. [Hume wrote: 'As much is lost by the composition of motion, as much is gained by its resolution.'] And whatever the causes of it are, the *fact* is certain that matter is and always has been in continual agitation, as far as human experience or tradition reaches. In the whole universe right now there is probably not one particle of matter at absolute rest.

Philo went on: And this very consideration that we have stumbled on in the course of the argument suggests yet another hypothesis of cosmogony that isn't entirely absurd and improbable. Is there a system, an order, an arrangement of things, through which matter can •preserve the perpetual agitation that seems essential to it and yet •maintain a

constancy in the forms it produces? [Philo may be using 'form' to refer to any regularly ordered part of the physical world, but he is evidently thinking mainly of organisms, especially animals.] Yes, there certainly is such an arrangement, for this is actually the case with the present world ·in which •matter is constantly moving, and yet •many forms and structures remain the same·. If matter moves continually and has only a finite number of orderings into which it can fall ·assuming that matter and space are both finite·, it *must* ·eventually· produce this arrangement or order that the world actually has; and by its very nature this order once it is established supports *itself* for many ages, if not to eternity. But wherever matter is poised, arranged, and adjusted in such a way as to continue in perpetual motion and yet preserve a constancy in the forms, the state of affairs is bound to have the very same appearance of planning and skill that we observe at present. •Every part of each form must be related to each other part of it and to the whole form; and the whole form itself must be related to the other parts of the universe—•to the element in which the form subsists, •to the materials with which it repairs its waste and decay, •and to every other form which is hostile or friendly towards it. A defect in any of those respects—·as when •arteries fail to carry blood to the brain, or •a trout becomes unable to get oxygen out of the water it swims in, or •a heron becomes unable to escape hawks or to capture fish·—destroys the form; and the matter of which it is composed is again set loose, and is thrown into irregular motions and fermentations until it unites itself to some other regular form, ·for example by being eaten·. If no such form is prepared to receive it, and if there is a great quantity of this corrupted matter in the universe, the universe itself comes to be entirely disordered; and this holds true whether what is destroyed is •the feeble embryo of a world in its first beginnings or •the rotten carcass of a world

drifting into old age and infirmity. In either case a chaos ensues, until through countless (though not infinitely) many re-arrangements there come to be, yet again, some forms whose parts and organs are so adjusted that they enable the forms to stay in existence while the matter in them continually changes.

I shall try to put all this differently. Suppose that matter is thrown into some position by a blind, unguided force. It is obvious that this first position must in all probability be utterly confused and disorderly, with no resemblance to the human artifacts which display, along with a symmetry of parts, an adjustment of means to ends, and a tendency to self-preservation. If the ·original· actuating force ceases after this first operation ·and stops imparting motion to matter·, matter will have to remain for ever in disorder, and continue to be an immense chaos without any proportion or activity. But suppose that the actuating force (whatever it may be) still continues to drive matter along, this first position will immediately give place to a second, which will likewise in all probability be as disorderly as the first, and so on through many series of changes and revolutions. No particular order or position ever stays unaltered for a moment. The original force, still at work, gives a perpetual restlessness to matter. Every possible state of affairs is produced, and instantly destroyed. If a glimpse or dawn of order appears for a moment, it is instantly hurried away, reduced to a confusion, by that never-ceasing force which drives every part of the material world.

Thus the universe goes on for many ages in a continuous series of states of chaos and disorder. But couldn't it happen that it eventually settles down, not so as to lose its motion and active force (for we are assuming that that is inherent in it), but so as to preserve a uniformity of appearance through all the hubbub of its moving parts? This is what we find

to be the actual state of the universe at present. Every individual is perpetually changing, and so is every part of every individual; and yet the whole appears to be the same. ·A tiny example: a rabbit takes in pure air and breathes out foul air, it drinks water and emits urine, it eats grass and extrudes faeces; and yet through all this change in its constituent matter it appears to us as *the very same rabbit*·. Isn't this state of affairs one that might be hoped for—indeed, one that would be sure to arise—out of the eternal revolutions of *unguided* matter; and couldn't this account for all the appearances of wisdom and planning that the universe contains? Think about this a little and you'll find that if matter did arrive at this set-up, in which forms seem to be stable while their parts are really moving and changing with them, that would provide a plausible and perhaps a true solution of the problem ·of explaining the appearance of design in the universe·.

So it's pointless to stress the uses of the parts in animals or plants, and their intricate interplay between the parts. I'd like to know how an animal could survive if its parts were *not* so inter-related! When an animal's parts lose those inter-relations, don't we find that it immediately dies and that its decaying flesh and blood try some new form? It happens indeed that the parts of the world are so well adjusted to one another that some regular form immediately lays claim to this decaying matter; if that didn't happen, could the ·biological· world continue to exist? Wouldn't it die along with the ·individual· animal, and ·its constituent matter· go through new positions and relationships, until—after a vast but finite series of changes—it falls at last into an order such as the one we actually have?

It is just as well, replied **Cleanthes**, that you told us that this hypothesis came to you suddenly in the course of the argument. If you had taken the time to examine it, you

would soon have seen the insuperable objections that it is open to. You say that no form can survive unless it has the powers and organs needed for survival; some new order or arrangement must be tried, ·and another, and another·, and so on without interruption until at last some order that can support and maintain itself *happens* to come into existence. But according to this hypothesis, what brings about the many *conveniences and advantages* that men and all animals have? •Two eyes, two ears, aren't absolutely necessary for the survival of the species. •The human race could have existed and continued without there being any horses, dogs, cows, sheep, and those innumerable fruits and products which bring us satisfaction and enjoyment. •If no camels had been created for the use of man in the sandy deserts of Africa and Arabia, would the world have been dissolved? •If no magnet had been formed so as to give that wonderful and useful direction to the compass-needle, would human society and the human species have been immediately extinguished? The rules by which nature works are in general far from lavish, but still instances of this kind are far from being rare; and any one of them is a sufficient proof that a design—a *benevolent* design—gave rise to the order and arrangement of the universe.

At least you can safely conclude, said **Philo**, that the hypothesis I put forward is not yet complete and perfect; and I readily admit that. But can we ever reasonably expect greater success in any attempts of this nature? Can we ever hope to construct a system of cosmogony that will be free of exceptions and in no way conflict with our limited and imperfect experience of the analogy of nature? Your own theory surely can't claim to be as good as that, even though you have embraced anthropomorphism so as to improve the theory's conformity to common experience. Let us try it out yet again. •In all instances that we have ever encountered,

*ideas are copied from real objects.* You reverse this order, and make thought come first. •In all instances that we have ever encountered, *thought has no influence on matter except where that matter is so conjoined with thought as to have an equal reciprocal influence on it.* All that an animal can move immediately are parts of its own body ·and the condition of those can in return affect the animal's mental states·; and indeed, the equality of action and reaction seems to be a universal law of nature. Your theory implies a contradiction to this experience. It would be easy to assemble plenty more such difficulties, especially in the supposition of a mind or system of thought that is eternal, in other words an animal that was never born and will never die. These instances can teach us all to be moderate in our criticisms of each other, and let us see that just as •no system of this kind ought ever to be accepted on the basis of a slight analogy, so •none should be rejected on account of a small incongruity. For that is a drawback from which, we can reasonably hold, no

system of cosmogony is exempt.

Every religious system is held ·by many people· to be subject to great and insuperable difficulties. Each disputant has his period of triumph while he carries on an offensive war, and exposes the absurdities, barbarities, and pernicious doctrines of his antagonist. But religious systems taken all together provide the sceptic with a complete ·and permanent· triumph; for he tells the disputants that •no system of cosmogony ought ever to be accepted, for the simple reason that •no system of *anything* ought ever to be accepted if it is absurd. A total suspension of judgment is here our only reasonable resource. And given that we commonly see that among theologians every attack succeeds and every defence fails, how complete a victory must come to someone who remains always on the offensive against all mankind, and has himself no fixed position or abiding city that he is ever obliged to defend?

## 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.<sup>1</sup>

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

<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.