

Alciphron  
or: The Minute Philosopher  
A Defence of the Christian Religion against the So-called Free-thinkers

George Berkeley

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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.—Some longer bits are replaced by brief accounts of what happens in them, between square brackets in normal-sized type. —The small black numbers are Berkeley's.

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**Seventh dialogue: The truth of Christianity**

I want to consider the various things that a free-thinker can be—atheist, libertine, fanatic, scorner, critic, metaphysician, fatalist, sceptic—but you shouldn't think that according to me every individual free-thinker is all of these. All I am saying is that each item on that list characterizes some free-thinkers. You may think that no free-thinker is an atheist. It has often been said that although there are admittedly some atheists who *claim* to be philosophical theorists, no-one is *really* an atheist as a matter of philosophical theory. I know these things are said; but I am well assured that one of the most noted writers against Christianity in our times claims to have discovered a demonstration [= 'knock-down proof'] that there is no God. If you take the trouble to consult conversation and books to inform yourself about the principles and tenets of our modern free-thinkers, I'm sure you'll find that every item on my list is true to life.

I am not writing only against *books*. Don't think that the free-thinking authors are being misrepresented if every notion of Alciphron or Lysicles is not found precisely in what the authors have written. We can expect that a man in a private conversation will speak more openly than others write, to improve on the hints given by authors of books,

and draw conclusions from their principles.

Whatever they may claim, I believe that all those who write either explicitly or by insinuation against the dignity, freedom, and immortality of the human soul can on that account be fairly accused of unsettling the principles of morality and destroying the means of making men rationally virtuous. We can expect from that direction a lot that is harmful to the interests of virtue. A certain admired writer has expressed the view that the cause of virtue is likely to suffer less from those who mock it than from those who tenderly nurse it, because the nurses are apt to bundle it up too warmly and kill it with excess of care and cherishing, and also make it a *mercenary* thing by talking so much of its *rewards*.

I leave it to you to decide whether this is a fair statement of the situation.

[The Dialogues are reported in a long letter written to a friend by a fictional gentleman named Dion—all the names are Greek. His opening words echo Berkeley's situation when composing this work: he was in Rhode Island, facing the probable failure of his plan to start a college in Bermuda. The Dialogues, however, are located in a quietly rural part of England.]

## First Dialogue (Monday)

1. I was optimistic enough to believe that by now I'd have been able to send you an agreeable account of the success of the plan that brought me to this remote corner of the country. But all I could report are the details of how it went wrong; and I prefer instead to entertain you with some amusing incidents that have helped to soothe me during the inevitable and unforeseeable difficulties that I have encountered. Events are not in our power; but we can always make good use even of the worst. And I have to admit that the way this affair went, and the outcome of it, gave me an opportunity for reflections that help to compensate for my great loss of time and my trouble and expense. . . . A mind that is free to reflect on its own processes, if it doesn't produce anything useful to the world, usually manages to entertain itself. For the past several months I have enjoyed that kind of freedom and leisure in this distant place, far from that great whirlpool of business, struggle, and pleasure that is called *the world*. And my enjoyment of this peaceful place has been greatly increased by the conversation and good qualities of my host, Euphranor—he's a philosopher and a farmer, two roles that are not so inconsistent in nature as you might think.

From the time he left the university, Euphranor has lived in this small town where he has a good house with a hundred acres of land adjoining it; after the work he has put into improving the land, it provides him with a comfortable income. He has a good collection of books, mainly old ones left to him by a clergyman uncle who brought him up. And the business of his farm doesn't hinder him from making good use of it. He has read much, and thought more; his health and strength of body helping him not to become

mentally weary. He thinks he can carry on his studies better in the field than in his study, and his mind is seldom idle while he prunes the trees, follows the plough, or looks after his flocks.

In the house of this honest friend I became acquainted with a wealthy and distinguished friend of Euphranor's named Crito. His (·Anglican·) parish church is in our town. One Sunday last summer when he was dining at Euphranor's, I asked after his guests, whom we had seen at church with him the previous Sunday. 'They are both well,' said Crito, 'but having dropped in at the church that one time, just to see what sort of congregation our parish could provide, they had no further curiosity about the church, and so chose to stay at home.' 'What!' said Euphranor, 'are they Presbyterians?' 'No,' replied Crito, 'they are free-thinkers.' Euphranor, who had never met any member of that species or sect of men, and knew little of their writings, wanted to know what their principles were, what system they accepted. 'That is more than I can tell you', said Crito. 'Their writers have different opinions. Some go further, and state their position more openly than others. But the best way to learn about the current ideas of the sect is to talk with those who declare themselves to be free-thinkers. Your curiosity could now be satisfied if you and Dion would spend a week at my house with these guests of mine, who seem very ready to declare and propagate their opinions. Alciphron is in his forties, and is no stranger to men or to books. I knew him first when we were both training as lawyers in London. When he came into a rich inheritance, he gave up his law studies and travelled through the civilized parts of Europe. After his return he lived among the amusements of London, but

he began to find them stale and insipid, which threw him into a sort of irritable laziness. My other guest, Lysicles [pronounced *Lie-suh-clees*], is a near relative of mine. He is a quick and clever young gentleman, with some general knowledge about bookish matters. After he had completed his formal education and seen a little of the world, he became friends with *men of pleasure and free-thinkers* [Berkeley's exact phrase], which I fear has greatly harmed his health and his fortune. But what I regret most is the corruption of his mind by a set of harmful principles that he won't ever be cured of. They have survived the passions of youth, so there's no chance of his losing them now. These two would be agreeable enough if only they didn't fancy themselves free-thinkers. Because of this, frankly speaking, they make it a little too obvious that they think themselves wiser than the rest of the world. I would like it if my guests met with their match where they least expected it, in a country farmer!' Euphranor replied: 'I'm not offering to do more than merely inform myself about their principles and opinions. So tomorrow I'll assign my workers their work for a week, and accept your invitation, if Dion is willing.' I gave my consent. 'Meanwhile,' said Crito, 'I'll prepare my guests, telling them that an honest neighbour would like to talk with them about their free-thinking. I'll be surprised if they don't *like* the prospect of leaving a convert behind them, even in a country village!'

Next morning Euphranor rose early and spent the morning putting his affairs in order. After lunch we took our walk to Crito's, which lay through half a dozen pleasant fields. . . . After walking for about an hour we came to Crito's house, which stands in the middle of a beautiful little park. . . . At the door we met a servant carrying a small basket of fruit to a grove, where he said his master was with his two guests. We found the three of them sitting in the shade. And after

the usual preliminaries for people meeting for the first time, Euphranor and I sat down by them.

We chatted about the beauty of this rural scene, the fine season of the year, and some improvements—new methods of agriculture—that had been introduced recently in the adjacent county. This gave Alciphron an opening to remark that the most valuable improvements came latest. 'I wouldn't be much tempted', he said, 'to live in a place where men don't have polished manners or cultivated minds, however greatly its land has been improved. I realised long ago that there is a gradual progress in human affairs. The first care of mankind is to **(1)** satisfy the cravings of nature; next they **(2)** attend to the conveniences and comforts of life. But **(3)** subduing prejudices and acquiring true knowledge—that Herculean labour!—comes last, because it requires the most perfect abilities and all other advantages prepare the way for it.' 'Right!' said Euphranor, 'Alciphron has mentioned our true defect. It has always been thought that as soon as we had **(1)** provided subsistence for the body our next concern should be to **(3)** improve the mind. But **(2)** the desire for wealth steps between, and occupies men's thoughts.'

**2. Alciphron:** We're told that *thought* is what distinguishes man from beast; ·to which I add that· *freedom of thought* makes just as much difference between man and man. It's the noble upholders of this privilege and perfection of human kind—the free-thinkers I mean, who have sprung up and multiplied in recent years—to whom we are indebted for all those important discoveries, that ocean of light, that has broken in and poured through in spite of slavery and superstition.

Euphranor, who is a sincere enemy to both slavery and superstition, expressed his admiration for the good people who had saved their country from being ruined by them, having spread so much light and knowledge over the land. He

added that he liked the name ‘free-thinker’ and approved of people’s being free thinkers; but in his sense of the term every honest inquirer after truth in any age or country was entitled to it. So what about this sect that according to Alciphron had recently ‘sprung up?’ What were their tenets? Euphranor wanted to know. What were their discoveries—the ones through which they brought benefits to mankind? He would be grateful if Alciphron would inform him about all this.

‘That will be no trouble’, replied Alciphron, ‘because I myself am one of them, and some of the most considerable free-thinkers are close friends of mine.’ And seeing that Euphranor was listening respectfully, he went on very fluently: ‘The mind of man is like a piece of land. What uprooting, ploughing, digging, and harrowing is to the land is what thinking, reflecting and examining is to the human mind. There’s a right way to cultivate each. Land that is allowed to stay waste and wild for a long time will be choked with brush-wood, brambles, thorns, and other plants that are neither useful nor beautiful. Similarly, in a neglected uncultivated mind many prejudices and absurd opinions will sprout up, owing their origin partly to the •soil itself (the passions and imperfections of the mind of man) and partly to •seeds that happen to have been scattered there by every wind of doctrine that is raised up by the cunning of politicians, the eccentricities of pedants, the superstition of fools, or the dishonesty of priests. What can we expect the human mind to be like today, after so many ages of being vulnerable to the frauds of dishonest men and the follies of weak ones? Its prejudices and errors—what strong deep roots they must have! What a hard job it will be to tear them out! But this difficult glorious work is what the modern free-thinkers are undertaking.’ Alciphron paused and looked around his listeners.

‘Indeed,’ I said, ‘a very praiseworthy undertaking!’

‘People generally think’, said Euphranor, ‘that it is praiseworthy to clear and subdue the earth, to tame brute animals, . . . to provide nourishment for men’s bodies, and cure their illnesses. But what is all this in comparison to the most excellent and useful undertaking of freeing mankind from their errors, and improving and adorning their minds?’ . . .

‘These days’, replied Alciphron, ‘people are fools enough not to be able to tell their best benefactors from their worst enemies. They have a blind respect for those who enslave them, and regard their deliverers as dangerous men who want to undermine accepted principles and opinions.’

**Euphranor:** It would be a pity if such worthy and able men were to meet with any discouragement. It seems to me that a man who spends his time in such a laborious, impartial search for truth is a better friend to mankind than the greatest statesman or hero. The good that *they* do is confined to a small part of the world and a short period of time, whereas a ray of truth can enlighten the whole world and carry on into future ages.

**Alciphron:** I’m afraid the common herd won’t soon come to think like you about this. But the better sort, educated men with good abilities, are properly respectful of those who support light and truth.

**Euphranor:** No doubt the clergy are always ready to help and applaud your worthy endeavours.

Upon hearing this Lysicles could hardly stifle his laughter, and Alciphron, with an air of pity, told Euphranor: ‘I see that you don’t know what these men are really like. Surely you must realise that of all men living the clergy are our greatest enemies. They would (if they could) extinguish the light of nature itself, turn the world into a dungeon, and keep mankind for ever in chains and darkness.’

**Euphranor:** I never imagined anything like this of our Protestant clergy, particularly the Anglican ones, whom I would have expected—going by what I have seen of them and their writings—to be lovers of learning and useful knowledge.

**Alciphron:** Believe me, priests of all religions are the same: where there are priests there will be priestcraft; and where there is priestcraft there will be a persecuting spirit. You can depend on them to exercise their full persecutory power against anyone who •has the courage to think for himself and who •refuses to be hoodwinked and shackled by his reverend leaders. Those great masters of hair-splitting and jargon have fabricated various systems—which [this is added sarcastically] are all equally true and equally important for the world. Everyone is wedded to his own sect, and furiously attacks all those who disagree with it. [The next sentence speaks of ‘the magistrate’, a term that will occur several more times in these dialogues. It is a kind of short-hand for ‘judges and anyone else who is involved in the enforcement of the law of the land’. Sometimes, as on page 8, it seems to cover also law-makers.] The chief vices of priests and churchmen all over the world are cruelty and ambition, so they do their best to get the upper hand over the rest of mankind; and the magistrate—having a joint interest with the priest in subduing, confusing and scaring the people—too often lends a hand to the church authorities, who always think that their authority and possessions aren’t safe until those whose opinions are different from their own are deprived of their rights, including the rights belonging to their social status and even their rights as human beings. Picture to yourselves a monster or ghost made up of superstition and fanaticism, the offspring of statecraft and priestcraft, rattling chains in one hand, and with the other brandishing a flaming sword over the land and threatening destruction to all who dare to follow the dictates of reason and common sense. Just think about this, and then say if our undertaking

isn’t dangerous as well as difficult! And yet, because of the noble ardour that truth inspires, our free-thinkers are neither overcome by the difficulty nor daunted by the danger. In spite of both, we have already made so many converts among people of the better sort. . . .that we hope to be able •eventually• to carry all before us, beat down the walls of secular and ecclesiastical tyranny, break the fetters and chains of our countrymen, and restore the original inherent rights, liberties, and privileges of mankind.

Having said all this in a highly emotional way, Alciphron paused to get his breath back. But nobody answered him (Euphranor was staring at him, mouth open); so Alciphron went on. Turning to Euphranor, he spoke less excitedly: ‘The more innocent and honest a man is, the more vulnerable he is to being taken in by the plausible claims of other men. You have probably encountered writings by our theologians that discuss grace, virtue, goodness, and such matters—writings that are fit to confuse and deceive a simple, honest mind. But however much they may whitewash their designs, they are all basically engaged in the same selfish project. I don’t deny that •among •the theologians• there may be here and there a poor half-witted man who means no harm; but I don’t hesitate to say that all the men of sense among •them are fundamentally driven by ambition, avarice, and vengeance.’

4. While Alciphron was speaking, a servant came to tell him and Lysicles that some men who were about to set off for London were waiting to receive their orders. So they both got up and went towards the house. As soon as they were gone, Euphranor remarked to Crito that he thought the poor gentleman must have been made to suffer greatly because of his free-thinking, because he seemed to speak with the passion and resentment natural to men who have been treated very badly.

'I don't believe it', answered Crito. 'In members of his sect—i.e. free-thinkers—I have often noticed two conversational faults, namely •high-flown rhetoric and •teasing, depending on whether their mood of the moment is tragic or comic. Sometimes they work themselves into high passions and are then frightened by the ghosts they have created. When they are having one of *those* fits, every assistant parson of a little country church is seen as an inquisitor. At other times they adopt a sly joking manner, using hints and allusions, saying little but insinuating much, and over-all seeming to amuse themselves at the expense of the subject and of their adversaries. If you want to know what they really believe, you'll have to get them to speak up and not to ramble off the topic. They tend to go on about being persecuted for free-thinking; but they have no good reason for this, because everyone is perfectly free to think what he pleases; I don't know of any persecution in England for opinion, intellectual attitude, or thought. But I suppose that in every country some •care is taken to restrain obscene speech, and to discourage an *outward* contempt for what the public holds sacred, whatever the person's *inward* thoughts may be. Whether this •care in England has recently become so excessive as to distress the subjects of this formerly free and easy government, whether the free-thinkers can fairly complain of any hardship suffered because of conscience or opinion, you'll be better placed to judge when you hear *their* account of the numbers, progress, and notions of their sect. I'm sure they will tell you all this fully and freely, provided nobody present seems shocked or offended, for in that case they may tone things down out of sheer good manners.'

'I am never angry with any man for his opinion', said Euphranor. 'Whether he's a Jew, Turk, or idol-worshipper, he can speak his mind freely to me without fear of offending. I would even be *glad* to hear what he has to say, provided

he says it in an honest open manner. Whoever digs in the mine of truth is my fellow-labourer, I think; but if while I am trying hard he amuses himself by teasing me and flinging dust in my eyes, I'll soon be tired of him.

5. In the meantime, Alciphron and Lysicles, having settled their bit of business, returned to us. Lysicles sat down in the same place as before. But Alciphron stood in front of us, with his arms folded and his head leaning on his left shoulder in the posture of a man meditating. We sat silent, so as not to disturb his thoughts, and after two or three minutes he said 'Oh truth! Oh liberty!' After which he went on musing.

At this point Euphranor ventured to interrupt him. 'Alciphron', he said, 'it isn't fair to spend your time in silent soliloquies. In this corner of the world we don't often get a chance to have a conversation with learned and well-informed men, and the opportunity you have put into my hands is too valuable for me not to make the best use of it.'

**Alciphron:** Are you, then, a sincere devotee of truth? And can you stand the freedom of a fair inquiry?

**Euphranor:** That's what I want more than anything.

**Alciphron:** What? on every subject? On the notions that you first took in with your mother's milk, and that have ever since been fed to you by other 'nurses'—parents, pastors, tutors, religious assemblies, books of devotion, and other such devices for taking hold of men's minds?

**Euphranor:** I love information on all subjects that come my way, and especially on those that are most important.

**Alciphron:** Well, then, if you are in earnest, stay fair and stand firm while I probe your prejudices and wipe out your principles—'while I pull from your heart your hoary old wives' tales' [he says this in Latin, quoting the poet Persius]. Whereupon



Alciphron frowned, paused, and then launched forth: 'If we take the trouble to dig down to the bottom of things, and analyse the basic principles on which opinions rest, we'll find that the opinions that are thought to be the most important have the flimsiest bases, being derived either from the casual customs of the country where we live, or from indoctrination that we were subjected to before we could tell right from wrong, true from false. [Alciphron is about the speak of the 'vulgar', and to say what he means by that word. Broadly speaking, its sense at that time was 'common, ordinary, run-of-the-mill, not very educated, not possessed of serious intellectual interests'—*something* along those lines; it didn't have the sense of 'rude, crude, bad-mannered' or the like. In the present work, 'vulgar' is sometimes used as a term of disdain or condescension to refer to people who wouldn't have counted as 'vulgar' is the sober, strictly literal sense of the word.] The vulgar—meaning all the people who don't make a free use of their reason—tend to regard these prejudices as sacred and unquestionable, believing them to be •imprinted on the hearts of men by God himself, or •conveyed by revelation from heaven, or •so intrinsically clear and evident that one can't help accepting them without any inquiry or examination. In this way the shallow vulgar have their heads full of fancies, principles and doctrines—religious, moral and political—all of which they maintain with a level of energy that is proportional to their lack of reason! On the other hand, those who properly used their faculties in the search for truth are especially careful to weed out of their minds any notions or prejudices that were planted in them before they were old enough to use reason freely and completely. Our modern free-thinkers have actually *done* this: as well as shrewdly dissecting the generally accepted systems •of belief, they have traced every established prejudice to its source—the *real* reasons why people believe what they believe. And in the course of doing this—and getting a comprehensive overview of the various

parts and ages of the world—they have been able to observe an amazing variety of •customs and rites, of •religious and civil institutions, of •ideas and beliefs that are very unlike (and even contrary to) one another, which conclusively shows that they can't all be true. Yet each of them is maintained by its supporters with the same air of confidence, the same energetic earnestness, and when they are examined they all turn out to have the very same foundation—namely, the strength of prejudice! With the help of these observations and discoveries, they have broken the chains of popular custom, and, having freed themselves from fraud, they now generously lend a hand to their fellow-subjects, to lead *them* into the same paths of light and liberty.

That is a quick summary of the views and projects of the so-called free-thinkers. If anything that I have said or anything I'll say later is contrary to your preconceived opinions, and therefore shocking and disagreeable to you, you'll pardon the openness and plainness of a philosopher, and remember that whenever I displease you in that way I am doing it out of •respect for the truth, and •obedience to your own commands. I'm well aware that eyes long kept in the dark can't bear a sudden view of noonday light, and must be brought to it by degrees. For that reason, the able free-thinkers proceed gradually, starting with the prejudices to which men are least attached, and then moving on to undermine the rest by slow and imperceptible degrees, till they have demolished the whole fabric of human folly and superstition. But I don't have time here to come at things in that roundabout way; I'll have to proceed directly and plainly—more so, perhaps, than will be thought prudent and well-mannered.'

We assured him he was entirely free to speak his mind concerning things, persons and opinions, without holding anything back.

‘That is a freedom’, Alciphron replied, ‘that we free-thinkers are as willing to give as we are to take it. We like to call things by their right names, and we can’t bear having truth suffer because people *politely* let falsehoods pass without challenge. So let us settle this in advance: no-one will take offence at anything whatsoever that is said on either side.’ We agreed to this.

6. ‘Well, then,’ said Alciphron, ‘let us start our pursuit of the truth by supposing that I have been brought up in—let’s say—the Church of England, the Anglican church. When I reach maturity of judgment, and think about the particular forms of worship and opinions of this Church, I don’t remember when or how they first took possession of my mind; as I look back, I find them to have been in my mind for as far back as my memory of *anything* stretches. Then, looking at the upbringing of children as a basis for a judgment about how my own upbringing went, I see them being instructed in religious matters before they can reason about them; so that all such instruction is nothing but filling the tender mind of a child with prejudices. This leads me to reject all those religious ideas, regarding them as on a par with the other follies of my childhood. I am confirmed in this attitude when I widen my view and see Roman Catholics and various sects of Protestants which all agree in a general profession of belief in Christ, but differ vastly one from another regarding details of faith and worship. Then I widen my view still further so as to take in Jews and Moslems: I see that they agree a little with Christians—in that they all believe in one God—but each of these religions has its own special laws and revelations, for which it expresses the same respect as the others have for *their* laws and revelations. Looking further afield *still*, to examine heathen and idolatrous nations, I discover an endless variety, not only in •details of doctrine and •forms of worship, but even in •the very notion of a God, in which they

differ widely from one another *and* from all the other sects I have mentioned. The bottom line is that instead of simple and uniform truth, I see nothing but discord, opposition, and wild claims, all springing up from the prejudices of upbringing. From reflecting on and thinking about these facts, thoughtful men have concluded that *all* religions are false—are fables. The reason why one man is a Christian, another a Jew, a third a Moslem, a fourth a heathen idolater is that each happened to be brought up in that particular sect. So: just as each of these contending parties condemns the rest, so an unprejudiced bystander will condemn and reject them *en bloc*, seeing that they all originate from the •same error-rich source, and are kept going by •the same techniques, to meet the •same purposes of the priest and the magistrate [see note on page 5].

7. **Euphranor:** So you think that the magistrate goes along with the priest in misleading the people?

**Alciphron:** I do; and so must everyone who considers things in a true light. For you must know that the magistrate’s main aim is to keep the people under him in awe. Now, the public eye restrains men from •open offences against the laws and government. But, to prevent •secret crimes, a magistrate finds it expedient that men should believe that God’s eye is watching over their private actions and designs. And to intimidate those who might otherwise be drawn into crimes by the prospect of pleasure and profit, he tells them that whoever escapes punishment in this life will be sure to find it in the after-life—where it will be so heavy and long-lasting that it *infinitely* outweighs any pleasure or profit that he got from his crimes. So it has come about that the beliefs that

- there is a God,
- the soul is immortal, and
- there is a future state of rewards and punishments

have been valued as useful *engines of government*. These are rather notional airy doctrines, and the rulers need them to impress themselves on people's *senses*, and to be retained in their minds; and so the rulers of the various civilized nations of the earth have skillfully devised temples, sacrifices, churches, rites, ceremonies, clerical clothing, music, prayer, preaching, and other such 'spiritual' foolery, all of which helps the priest to prosper in his career, and satisfies the magistrate by frightening and subduing the people. That's the source of

- the alliance between Church and State,
- religion established by law, and
- the rights, immunities and incomes of priests all over the world.

*Every government wants you to fear God, so that you'll honour the king or civil power. . . .*

Crito and I heard this speech of Alciphron's with the utmost attention but without looking surprised—and indeed for us there was nothing new or unexpected in it. But Euphranor, who had never before been present at such conversation, couldn't help showing some astonishment; and Lysicles, who noticed it, asked him brightly how he liked Alciphron's lecture. 'I think it's the first you ever heard of that kind,' he said, 'and you'll have needed a strong stomach to digest it.'

**Euphranor:** I admit that I don't have the quickest digestion; but it has sometimes gradually been able to assimilate things that at first seemed indigestible. Right now, I admire Alciphron's free spirit and eloquence; but frankly I'm astonished by his opinions rather than convinced of their truth. What! (he said, turning to Alciphron)—can you really not believe in the existence of a God?

**Alciphron:** To be plain with you, I do not.

**8.** But this is what I thought would happen: a flood of light let in on the mind all at once is more likely to dazzle and disorder the mind than to enlighten it. If I weren't short of time, I would have begun in the regular way:

- first describing the features of religion that aren't essential to it;
- then attacking the mysteries of Christianity;
- after that proceeding to what Christianity teaches about conduct; and
- finally wiping out the belief in a God,

this last being the first taught of all the religious prejudices, and the basis of the rest, so that it has taken the deepest root in our minds. I'm not surprised that you still have this belief, this prejudice, because I have known a number of very able men who had trouble freeing themselves from it.

**Euphranor:** Not everyone has the same speed and energy of thinking as you do. I, for one, find it hard to keep up with you.

**Alciphron:** To help you, I'll go back a little, and pick up the thread of my reasoning. **(1)** First, I must tell you that having thought hard about the idea of *truth*, I have found truth to be stable, permanent, and uniform—not various and changeable, like modes or fashions, or matters of taste. **(2)** In the next place, having observed many sects and splinters from sects adopting very different and contrary opinions while all professing Christianity, I rejected any doctrine on which they didn't all agree, and kept only the one that was agreed to by all; and so I became a Latitudinarian [= roughly: 'someone who is a "Christian" in a broad sense, with no interest in the details of doctrine, church government, forms of worship etc. that divide branches of Christianity from one another']. **(3)** After going on to attend to more of the facts, I saw that Christians, Jews, and Moslems have their different systems of faith, agreeing

only in the belief that there is one God; and so I became a Deist [= roughly: 'someone who rejects miracles, revelation, anything supernatural, and has no interest in any organized church or form of worship, but believes that natural evidence points to there being a God']. (4) Lastly, I extended my view to *all* the many nations that inhabit this globe, and found that they didn't agree—with one another or with any of the sects I have mentioned—on *any* point of faith, not even on the notion of a God. . . . So I became an atheist; because I think that a man of courage and good sense should follow his argument wherever it leads him, and that nothing is more ridiculous than to be a free-thinker by halves! I approve of the man who does the job thoroughly—not merely lopping off the branches but pulling up the root from which they grew.

[Regarding this next bit: (1) The 'grand arcanum' was the mythical 'philosopher's stone', which was reputed to •transform lead into gold and/or perform other wonders. Alciphron's ironical use of the term may be meant to indicate that atheism •transforms large parts of one's belief-system. (2) In Berkeley's day, calling someone 'a genius' was stronger than merely calling him clever, but had less force than 'genius' does in our day.]

9. So you see that atheism—which frightens women and fools—is the very peak and perfection of free-thinking. It is the grand arcanum to which a true genius naturally rises—perhaps gradually, perhaps as a sudden intellectual break-through—and without it he can never have absolute freedom and peace in his soul. To become thoroughly convinced about this central point, just examine the notion of a God with the same freedom that you would examine any other prejudice. Track it back to its source, and you won't find that you acquired it through any of your senses, though these are in fact the only true means of discovering what is real and substantial in nature. You'll find it lying

among other old lumber in some obscure corner of your imagination, the proper dumping-ground for visions, fancies, and prejudices of all kinds; and if you are more attached to this 'bit of lumber' than you are to the rest, that's only because it is the oldest. That is all. Take my word for it, and not just mine but that of many of the ablest men of our times, whose views about God are the same as mine. They really are, though some of these people think they should go more gently in declaring to the world their opinion on this matter than on most others. And I have to admit that in England there are still too many people who retain a foolish prejudice against the label 'atheist'. But that is lessening every day among people of the better sort; and when it—i.e. the prejudice against the word 'atheist'—has faded to nothing, our free-thinkers can *then*, at last, be said to have given the death-blow to religion; because it's obvious that so long as people think that God exists, religion must survive in some shape or other. But once the root has been plucked up, all its offspring will wither and decay as a matter of course. The 'offspring' I'm talking about are all those whimsical notions of conscience, duty, principle, and the like, which fill a man's head with worries, awe him with fears, and make him more thoroughly a slave than is the horse he rides. It's a thousand times better to be •hunted by debt-collectors or bailiffs with subpoenas than to be •haunted by these spectres 'of conscience etc.', which trouble and embitter all his pleasures, creating the most real and severe slavery on earth. But the free-thinker, with a vigorous flight of thought, breaks through those airy traps and asserts his basic independence. Others may talk and write and fight about liberty, and outwardly claim to have it; but only the free-thinker is truly free.

When Alciphron ended this speech with an air of triumph, Euphranor said to him: 'You make clear work. It seems that

the gentlemen who believe as you do are admirable weeders. You have rooted up a world of notions; now show me what fine things you have planted in place of them.'

**Alciphron:** Be patient, Euphranor! I'll show you first •that we leave untouched whatever was sound and good, encouraging it to grow in the mind of man. And secondly I'll show you •what excellent things we have planted there. Pushing on with our close and severe scrutiny, we eventually arrive at something solid and real on which all mankind agree—namely, the appetites, passions, and senses. These are rooted in nature, are real, have real objects, and bring with them real and substantial pleasures—food, drink, sleep, and other such animal enjoyments being what all men like and love. And if we extend our view to the other kinds of animals, we'll find that they all have certain natural appetites and senses, which they are constantly engaged in gratifying and satisfying. We are so far from •destroying these real natural good things, which have nothing notional or fanciful about them, that we do our best to •cherish and improve them. According to us, every wise man regards himself—i.e. his own bodily existence in this present world—as the centre and ultimate end of all his actions and concerns. He regards his appetites as natural guides that will direct him to his proper good, and regards his passions and senses as the natural true means of enjoying this good. So he tries to keep his appetites alert, and •his passions and senses strong and lively, and works very hard in every possible way to provide the greatest quantity and variety of real objects suited to •them. A man who can do this without restraint, remorse, or fear is as happy as any other animal whatsoever—as happy as his nature is capable of being. There! I have given you a condensed view of the principles, discoveries, and beliefs of the select spirits [here = 'the best minds'] of this enlightened age.

**10.** [After a polite little to-and-fro about the need for open frankness on both sides, the discussion continues:] 'I am half ashamed', said Euphranor, to admit that I have a weakness that lesser minds are prone to (I'm no great genius!). I have favourite opinions that you represent as errors and prejudices. For instance, the immortality of the soul is a notion I'm fond of because it supports the mind with a very pleasing prospect. If it is wrong, I might side with Cicero, who said that in that case he would be sorry to know the truth, and, speaking of certain philosophers of his time who taught that the human soul was mortal, said that he had nothing to thank *them* for. Those philosophers seem to have been predecessors of those who are now called free-thinkers. [Euphranor goes on to remark that 'free-thinker' is too general a name, and that he has no objection to thinking freely. He proposes that the 'sect' be given the name that Cicero gave them.]

**Alciphron:** With all my heart. What name is it?

**Euphranor:** Why, he calls them 'minute philosophers'. [This is 'minute' = 'small', not = '60 seconds'. Euphranor's point is of course not that these philosophers are small, but that they represent valuable things as small or of small importance. Alciphron will soon suggest a different meaning for the label.]

'Right!' said Crito, 'the modern free-thinkers are just like the ones that Cicero called "minute philosophers". It's an excellent name for them, because they *diminish* all the most valuable things—the thoughts, views, and hopes of men. They •reduce all the knowledge, ideas, and theories that men have to *sense*; they •shrink and downgrade human nature to the narrow low standard of *animal life*; and •they assign to us only a small pittance of time instead of immortality.'

Alciphron very gravely remarked that the gentlemen of his sect had not insulted man, and that if man is a little,

short-lived, negligible animal, it wasn't their saying it that made him so; and they were no more to blame for whatever defects they reveal in themselves than a good mirror is to blame for *making* the wrinkles that it *shows*. 'As for your remark that those we now call "free-thinkers" were in ancient times called "minute philosophers", I suggest that this label may have come from their considering things minutely rather than swallowing them in great lumps as other men usually do. Anyway, we all know that the best eyes are necessary to pick out the minutest objects: so it seems that minute philosophers might have been so-called because they were so sharp-sighted.'

**Euphranor:** O Alciphron! These minute philosophers (that is the right name for them) are like pirates who plunder everything that comes in their way. I feel like a man who has been left stripped and desolate on a bleak beach.

**11.** But who *are* these profound and learned men that in recent years have demolished the whole fabric that lawgivers, philosophers, and theologians had been erecting for so many ages?

Lysicles, smiling, said he believed Euphranor was imagining philosophers in square caps and long gowns, and that in these happy times the reign of pedantry was over. 'Our philosophers', he said, 'are very different from the awkward students who try to get knowledge by poring over dead languages and ancient authors, or by shutting themselves off from the cares of the world to meditate in solitude. •They are the best bred men of the age, men who know the world, men of pleasure, men of fashion, and fine gentlemen.'

**Euphranor:** I have *some* idea of the people you're talking about, but I would never have taken them for philosophers.

**Crito:** Nor would anyone else until quite recently. It seems that for centuries everyone mistakenly thought that the way

to knowledge was through a tedious course of academic education and study. But one of the chief discoveries of the present time is that such a method slows down and blocks knowledge rather than promoting it. [Crito is of course speaking sarcastically; he doesn't actually side with the minute philosophers. He will keep up this tone until page 15, where he will come into the open. His open attacks on the minute philosophy in the second dialogue are the most rhetorically vivid and passionate things that Berkeley ever wrote.]

**Alciphron:** There are two strands in academic study—•reading and •thinking. What the students mainly •read are ancient authors in dead languages, so that much of their time is spent in learning words which, once they've been laboriously mastered, reward the scholar with old and obsolete ideas that are now quite exploded and abandoned. As for their •thinking: what good can possibly come of it? If someone doesn't have the right materials to think *about*, he can think and meditate for ever without getting anywhere. Those cobwebs that scholars spin out of their own brains are neither useful nor beautiful. There's only one way to get proper ideas, or materials of thought, and that is by keeping good company. I know several gentlemen who, since their appearance in the world [= 'the non-academic world' or perhaps more narrowly 'the world of high society and fashion'], have spent as much time rubbing off the rust and pedantry of a college education as they had first spent acquiring it.

**Lysicles:** I'll bet that a fourteen-year-old who is brought up in the modern way will make a better showing, and be more admired in any drawing-room or assembly of cultivated people, than a twenty-four-year-old who has set aside long time for studies at school and college. He'll say better things in a better manner, and be more liked by good judges.

**Euphranor:** Where does he pick up all this improvement?

**Crito:** Where our solemn ancestors would never have looked

for it, in a drawing-room, a coffee-house, a tavern, a gambling den. In fashionable places like these it's the custom for cultivated persons to speak freely on all subjects—religious, moral, or political. So that a young gentleman who spends much time in them is in a position to hear many instructive lectures, spiced with wit and teasing and uttered with energy. Three or four well-delivered sentences from a man of quality make more of an impression, and convey more knowledge, than a dozen dry academic lectures.

**Euphranor:** So there's no method, no set course of studies, in those places?

**Lysicles:** None but an easy free conversation, which takes up every topic that anyone offers, without any rule or design.

**Euphranor:** I always thought that to get any useful amount of knowledge one needed some *order* in one's studies; that haste and confusion create self-satisfied ignorance; that our advances can't be secure unless they are gradual, and that one should start by learning things that might cast a light on what was to follow.

**Alciphron:** So long as learning could be obtained only by that slow formal course of study, few of the better people knew much of it; but now that learning has grown into a *pastime*, our young gentry and nobility unknowingly absorb it during their other pastimes, and make a considerable progress.

**Euphranor:** That's presumably why there are so many minute philosophers.

[Crito resumes his sarcastic pretended admiration for the minute philosophers. Then:]

**Euphranor:** It would seem, then, that method, exactness, and hard work are a *positive* disadvantage.

Here Alciphron, turning to Lysicles, said he could make the point very clear, if Euphranor had any notion of painting.

**Euphranor:** I never saw a first-rate picture in my life, but I have a pretty good collection of prints, and have seen some good drawings.

**Alciphron:** So you know the difference between the Dutch and the Italian manner?

**Euphranor:** I have some idea of it.

**Alciphron:** Well, then, compare •a drawing done by the exact and laborious touches of a Dutch pencil with •a drawing casually dashed off in the free manner of a great Italian master. The Dutch piece, which has taken so much trouble and time, will indeed be *exact*, but it won't have the force, spirit, or grace that appear in the Italian drawing and are the effects of an easy, free pencil. Apply this example to our discussion and you'll get my point.

**Euphranor:** Tell me, did those great Italian masters •begin and continue in their art without any choice of method or subject, and always draw with the same ease and freedom? Or did they •conform to some method, beginning with simple and elementary parts—an eye, a nose, a finger—which they drew with great effort and care, often drawing the same thing over and over again so as to get it right, and so gradually acquiring, through patience and hard work through many years, the free masterly manner you speak of? If the latter is right, I leave you to apply the example to our discussion, •so that *you* will get *my* point·!

**Alciphron:** Dispute the matter if you like. But a man of many talents is one thing, and a pedant is another. Hard methodical work may do for some kinds of people. It takes a long time to ignite wet straw, and when you do you get a vile smothering flame; whereas spirits blaze out at once.

**Euphranor:** The minute philosophers have, it seems, better talents than other men, which qualifies them for a different education.

**Alciphron:** Tell me, Euphranor, what does one man get to *look good* in a way that others don't? What causes him to be more polished in how he dresses, how he speaks, and how he moves? Nothing but keeping good company. That is also how men gradually and unconsciously get a delicate taste, a refined judgment, a certain polish in thinking and expressing themselves. It's not surprising that you folk who live out in the country aren't acquainted with the advantage of elegant conversation, which constantly keeps the mind awake and active, making use of its abilities and demanding all its strength and spirit, on a thousand different occasions and on subjects that never come in the way of a book-worm in a college any more than a ploughman.

**Crito:** Hence the lively faculties, quickness of uptake, slyness of ridicule, and enormous talent of wit and humour, that distinguish the gentlemen who believe as you do.

**Euphranor:** It should seem then that your sect is made up of what you call fine gentlemen.

**Lysicles:** Not altogether, for we have among us some thoughtful people whose upbringing was coarser; but though they can't be called 'fine gentlemen' they have made fine contributions to our cause. Having observed the behaviour of apprentices, watermen, porters, and the gatherings of rabble in the streets, they have arrived at a profound knowledge of human nature, and made great discoveries about the sources, springs, and motives of moral actions. [The phrase 'moral actions' standardly meant 'actions that do or could involve consciously held reasons or purposes'.] These discoveries have demolished the accepted systems of morality, and done a world of good in the city.

We have men of all sorts and professions—plodding citizens, thriving stock-brokers, skillful men of business, elegant courtiers, gallant men of the army—but our chief

strength comes from those promising young men who have the advantage of a modern education. These are the growing hopes of our sect; through their influence, we expect, the great things we have in view will be actually accomplished.

**Euphranor:** I would never have thought your sect was so considerable.

**Alciphron:** Many honest folk in England are as much in the dark about these matters as you are.

**12.** It would be wrong to infer what the prevailing opinion among people of fashion is from what is said by a legislator in parliament, a judge on the bench, or a priest in the pulpit. They all speak according to law, i.e. according to the reverend prejudices of our forefathers. You should go into good company, and take note of what able and well-bred men say, those who are most listened to and most admired, in public gatherings as well as in private conversations. Only someone who has these opportunities can know our real strength, our numbers, and the impression we make on the world.

**Euphranor:** By your account there must be many minute philosophers among the men of rank and fortune.

**Alciphron:** A good many; and they contribute greatly to the spreading of our notions. Anyone who knows the world has to know that fashions always come from above; so the right way to propagate an opinion is to start at the upper end of society. Also, the patronage of men of rank and fortune is an encouragement to our authors.

**Euphranor:** So you have authors among you?

**Lysicles:** We do indeed, a number of them; and they are very great men who have favoured the world with many useful and profound discoveries.

**Crito:** [He is now laying on really thick his sarcastically intended rhetoric in favour of the minute philosophers. He will soon drop it



altogether. •The proper names in this speech refer to real people; the device of giving one's targets ancient-sounding names was a common practice in polemical writing at that time.] Moschon, for instance, has proved that man and beast are really of the same nature, and that consequently a man needs only to indulge his senses and appetites to be as happy as a brute. Gorgias has gone further, demonstrating that •man is a piece of clock-work, a machine; and that •thought or reason are the same thing as the collision of balls. Cimon has made distinguished use of these discoveries, proving as clearly as any proposition in mathematics that conscience is a whim and morality a prejudice; and that a man is no more accountable for his actions than a clock is for striking. What Tryphon has written about the usefulness of vice can't be refuted. Thrasenor has destroyed the foolish prejudice men had against atheism, showing that a republic of atheists might live very happily together. Demylus has made a joke of loyalty, and convinced the world that there's nothing in it. We owe to him, and to another philosopher of the same type, the discovery that public spirit is a pointless fanaticism that seizes only on weak minds. I could go on indefinitely reciting the discoveries made by writers of this sect.

**Lysicles:** But the masterpiece and *coup de grace* •for the old system• is a learned work by our great Diagoras, containing a demonstration of the nonexistence of God; it hasn't yet been published because the public are thought to be not yet ripe for it, but I'm assured by some judicious friends who have seen it that it's as clear as daylight, and will do a world of good by demolishing at one blow the whole system of religion. These discoveries are published by our philosophers, sometimes in bound books but often merely in pamphlets and loose pages, making it easier for them to be spread through the kingdom. They deserve the credit for the absolute and independent *freedom* that is growing so fast

and frightening the bigots. Even dull and ignorant people start to open their eyes and to be influenced by the example and authority of so many able men.

**Euphranor:** It should seem by this account—or rather by what Crito last said—that your sect extend their discoveries beyond religion, and that the minute philosopher regards loyalty to his king and reverence for the laws as low-down things.

**Lysicles:** Very low-down. We are too wise to think there is anything *sacred* about the king or the constitution, or indeed about anything else. A man of sense may *seem* to show an occasional deference to his king; but that's as hollow as his deference to God when he kneels at the sacrament so as to qualify himself for an office [= 'government job']. 'Fear God' and 'Honour the King' are two slavish maxims that had for a long time cramped human nature, and awed not only weak minds but even men of good understanding, until their eyes were opened by our philosophers.

**Euphranor:** It's easy to see that when the fear of God is quite extinguished, the mind must take a relaxed attitude to other duties. As soon as those other duties lose their hold on the conscience (which always presupposes the existence of a God), they become mere outward pretences and formalities. But I still thought that Englishmen of all schools of thought, however much they may differ on many details, agreed in the belief in God and accepted at least the propositions of so-called *natural religion*.

**Alciphron:** I have already told you my own opinion on those matters, and what I know to be the opinion of many others.

**Crito:** I think I know what has led you astray, Euphranor. The minute philosophers are sometimes called deists [see note on page 10], which has led you to imagine that they believe in and worship a God according to the light of nature. But if

you live among them you'll soon be convinced of the contrary. They have neither •time, nor •place, nor •form of divine worship; they don't offer prayers or praises to God in public; and in their private lives they show a disregard or dislike even of the duties of natural religion. For example, saying grace before and after meals: this is a plain point of natural worship, and there was a time when everyone did it; but in proportion as this sect of minute philosophers prevailed, it has been laid aside, not only by the minute philosophers themselves. . . .but also by others who are afraid of being thought fools by the minute philosophers.

**Euphranor:** Are you really saying that men who genuinely believe in a God decline to perform such an easy and reasonable duty for fear of being sneered at by atheists?

**Crito:** Yes, I am. Many people who believe in their hearts the truth of religion are afraid or ashamed to admit it, lest they should lose their standing in the eyes of those who have the •good luck to be regarded as great wits and men of genius.

**Alciphron:** We must make allowance for Crito's prejudice, Euphranor. He is a worthy gentleman, and means well; but doesn't it look like prejudice to ascribe the respect that is paid our ingenious free-thinkers to •good luck rather than to merit?

**Euphranor:** I'm sure their merit is very wonderful. It would take a great man to prove such paradoxes—e.g. that someone as knowledgeable as a minute philosopher should be a mere machine, or at best no better than a brute!

**Alciphron:** It is a true maxim that a man should *think with the learned, and speak with the vulgar*. [Berkeley had already famously said this in his *Principles of Human Knowledge*. Regarding 'the vulgar', see note on page 7.] I would be very reluctant to describe a gentleman of merit as 'a machine' to an audience of prejudiced and ignorant men. The doctrines of •our

philosophy have something in common with •many other truths in metaphysics, geometry, astronomy, and natural science, namely that vulgar ears can't bear them! All our discoveries and ideas are in themselves true and certain; but they are at present known only to the better people, and would sound strange and odd among the vulgar. It's to be hoped that this will eventually wear off.

**Euphranor:** I'm not surprised that vulgar minds should be startled by the ideas of your philosophy.

**Crito:** Truly a very curious sort of philosophy, and much to be wondered at!!

**13.** The deep thinkers in the minute philosophy camp have gone in exactly the opposite way to all the great philosophers of earlier ages, who tried •to raise and refine humanity, removing it as far as possible from the brute; •to moderate and subdue men's appetites; •to remind men of the dignity of their nature; •to awaken and improve their higher faculties, and direct them onto the noblest objects; •to fill men's minds with a high sense of God, of the supreme good, and of the immortality of the soul. . . . But our minute philosophers seem to go the opposite way from all other wise and thoughtful men; because they aim •to erase from the mind of man the sources of all that is great and good, •to disrupt the order of civil life, •to undermine the foundations of morality, and. . . •to bring us down to the maxims and way of thinking of the most uneducated and barbarous nations, and even to pull humanity down to the level of brute beasts. And through all this they want to be accepted by the world as men of deep knowledge. But all this *negative knowledge*—does it come down to anything better than downright savage *ignorance*? That there is no God, no spirit, no after-life, no moral duty: truly a fine system for an honest man to accept or for a clever man to be proud of!

Alciphron, who heard this discourse with some uneasiness, very gravely replied. ‘Disputes are not to be decided by the weight of authority,’ he said, ‘but by the force of reason. Call our notions brutish and barbarous if you please; but it’s a kind of ‘brutishness’ and ‘barbarism’ that few people would be capable of if men of the greatest genius hadn’t cleared the log-jam, because there’s nothing harder than to overcome one’s upbringing and conquer old prejudices. It takes great courage and great strength of faculties to pick out and cast off a heap of rubbish that has been gathering in the soul from our very infancy. So our philosophers thoroughly deserve to be called *esprits forts*, ‘men of strong heads’, ‘free-thinkers’ and so on, labels that indicate great strength and freedom of mind. The heroic labours of these men may be represented (for *anything* can be *misrepresented*) as piratically plundering and stripping the mind of its wealth and ornaments, when really they are only divesting it of its prejudices, and reducing it to its untainted original state of nature—beautiful, pure nature!

**Euphranor:** You seem to be impressed by the beauty of nature. Please, Alciphron, tell me what the things are that you regard as natural; how are we to recognize something as natural?

**14. Alciphron:** For a thing to be natural to the mind of man (to start with that special case), it must

- appear in the human mind originally [= ‘from the outset’ = ‘from birth’],
- be present universally in the minds of all men, and
- be invariably the same in all nations and ages.

These three—originalness, universality, invariability—exclude all the notions that humans have as results of custom and upbringing. This also holds for all other species of beings. A cat’s inclination to pursue a mouse is natural,

because it satisfies the above three criteria; but if a cat is taught to play tricks, you won’t say that the tricks are natural. For the same reason, if peaches and apricots are grafted onto a plum-tree, nobody will say they are the natural growth of that tree.

**Euphranor:** Let’s get back to the human case: it seems that the only things you’ll count as natural in mankind are ones that show themselves at the time of a person’s first entrance into the world—namely the senses, and such passions and appetites as reveal themselves as soon as their respective objects appear—e.g. hunger when there is milk, fear when there is a loud noise, and so on.

**Alciphron:** That is my opinion.

**[Q&A note.** Euphranor now asks Alciphron seven rhetorical questions, to the first six of which Alciphron gives the expected answers, including ‘It seems so’, ‘I do’, and ‘It is true’. To spare us the tedious question-and-answer routine, the questions will appear here as simple statements, with the first six answers omitted. This condensing device will be used on fourteen other occasions, each marked by •four or more statements by Euphranor labelled with roman numerals, and •a mention of this note.]

**Euphranor:** (i) The leaves, blossom and apples of an apple tree are natural to it, although it doesn’t have them from the outset. (ii) The appetite of lust and the faculty of reason are natural to a man even though they don’t shoot forth, open, and display themselves—as leaves and blossoms do in a tree—until long after his original infancy. (iii) So it seems that you were being rash when you said that the first criterion for something’s being natural to the mind was that it should appear in it *originally*. (iv) Also, it is natural for an orange tree to produce oranges. (v) But if you plant such a tree at the north end of Great Britain, you may if you work hard at it get a good salad [i.e. leaves but no fruit]; in the southern parts of the island, hard careful work may get it

to produce mediocre fruit; but in Portugal or Naples it will produce much better fruit with little or no trouble on the part of the farmer. (vi) The plant is the same in all these places, but it doesn't produce the same fruit; sun, soil, and cultivation make a difference. (vii) And since according to you it's the same story for every species, can't we conclude that some things may be natural to mankind although they are not found in all men and aren't invariably the same where they *are* found?

**Alciphron:** Hold on, Euphranor! You must explain yourself further. I shan't be rushed into conceding your points.

**Lysicles:** You're right to be wary, Alciphron. I don't like these ensnaring questions.

**Euphranor:** I don't want you to go along with me out of politeness. Just tell me what you think about each particular matter, so that we understand one another, know what we agree on, and proceed *together* in finding out the truth. . . .

**Alciphron:** Our opinions will stand the test. We fear no trial; proceed as you please.

**Euphranor:** [See Q&A note on page 17.] (i) We seem to have found that things may be *natural* to men without actually being on display in *all* men or not as completely on display, because differences of culture and other advantages affect what comes of human nature as much as they do with the nature of plants (I am using your own comparison). (ii) Men at all times and places, when they arrive at a certain age, express their thoughts by speech. (iii) So it seems that language is natural. (iv) Yet there is a great variety of languages. (v) From all this it follows that a thing may be natural and yet admit of variety. (vi) It seems to follow that a thing may be natural to mankind without having the marks of naturalness that you present—i.e. without being original, universal, and invariable. (vii) Consequently,

religious worship and civil government may be natural to man, despite the fact that they occur in a variety of forms and in different degrees of perfection. (viii) You have granted already that reason is natural to mankind. (ix) So whatever is agreeable to reason is agreeable to the nature of man. (x) Doesn't it follow from this that truth and virtue are natural to man?

**Alciphron:** Whatever is reasonable I admit to be natural.

**Euphranor:** The fruits that we value most are the ones that come from the most strongly growing and mature stock, in the choicest soil. Similarly, then, oughtn't we to value most the sublime truths that are the fruits of mature thought, and have been rationally deduced by men with the best and most developed minds? And if this is right, and these things are in fact reasonable, natural, and true, they oughtn't to be written off as unnatural whims, errors of upbringing, and groundless prejudices, just •because they are raised and developed by manuring and cultivating young human minds, i.e. •because they take root early, and bring forth early fruit, through the care and diligence of our instructors.

**Alciphron:** Agreed, provided that they *can* still be rationally deduced: but to take for granted that what men vulgarly call 'the truths of morality and religion' have a rational basis would be begging the question. [He means that it would be, in effect, including the conclusion of one's argument amongst its premises. That was the only meaning of 'beg the question' until late in the 20th century, when the vulgar—specifically the ones working as journalists—learned the phrase and *assumed* that it meant 'raise the question'.]

**Euphranor:** You're right about that; so I don't take for granted that the truths of morality and religion are rationally deduced. I only suppose that *if* they are, then they must be regarded as natural to man—i.e. that they fit with and grow from the

most excellent part of human nature, the part that other natural species don't have.

**Alciphron:** I have no objection to bring against this.

**Euphranor:** Then what are we to think of your former assertions? I mean your claims that

anything that is natural to man can be found in all men, in all nations and ages of the world;

and that

to obtain a genuine view of human nature, we must set aside all the effects of upbringing and instruction, and look only at the senses, appetites, and passions, that are to be found originally in all mankind;

and that therefore

the notion of a God can't be based in nature because it isn't originally in the mind, and isn't the same in all men.

How do you reconcile these opening statements of yours with your recent concessions—ones that the force of truth seems to have extorted from you?

**15. Alciphron:** Tell me, Euphranor, isn't truth a single uniform invariable thing? And if it is, isn't the existence of the many different and mutually inconsistent notions that men have of God and duty a plain proof there is no truth in them?

**Euphranor:** I freely grant that truth is constant and uniform, so that two opinions that contradict one another can't both be true; but it doesn't follow that they are both false! When there are conflicting opinions about the same thing, the one (if there is one) that is grounded on clear and evident reasons should be regarded as true, and others accepted only to the extent that they are consistent with that privileged one. Reason is the same at all times and places, and when it is used properly it will lead to the same conclusions. Two

thousand years ago Socrates seems to have reasoned himself into the same notion of a God that is entertained by the philosophers of our days (if you'll allow someone who isn't a free-thinker to be called 'philosopher!'). And consider Confucius's remark that a man should be on guard in his youth against lust, in manhood against quarrelsomeness, and in old age against greed—this morality is as current in Europe as in China.

**Alciphron:** But when opinions differ, that shows that there is uncertainty; so it would be good if all men thought the same way.

**Euphranor:** What do you think to be the cause of a lunar eclipse?

**Alciphron:** The earth's coming between the sun and moon, making a shadow on the moon.

**Euphranor:** Are you sure of this?

**Alciphron:** Certainly.

**Euphranor:** Are all mankind agreed in this truth?

**Alciphron:** By no means. Ignorant and barbarous people give different ridiculous explanations for this phenomenon.

**Euphranor:** So it seems that there are different opinions about the nature of an eclipse.

**Alciphron:** There are.

**Euphranor:** Yet one of these opinions is true.

**Alciphron:** It is.

**Euphranor:** Thus, when there are conflicting opinions about something, it may still be the case that the thing exists and one of the opinions about it is true.

**Alciphron:** I accept that.

**Euphranor:** Well, you argued from the variety of opinions about God's nature to the falsity of the opinion that he

•exists; and now it seems that this argument is not conclusive. And I don't see, either, how you can infer the falsity of any moral or religious tenet from men's conflicting opinions on the same subject. Isn't arguing like that on a par with arguing that no historical account of a matter of fact can be true if reports of it conflict with one another? Or arguing that because the various schools of philosophy maintain different opinions, none of them can be in the right—not even the minute philosophers?

During this conversation Lysicles seemed uneasy, like someone who profoundly *wanted* there to be no God. 'Alciphron,' he said, 'I think you are sitting tamely on the side-lines while Euphranor undermines the foundation of our tenets.'

'Don't be afraid', replied Alciphron: 'A skillful player of a game sometimes ruins his adversary by giving him some advantage at first. I am glad', he said, turning to Euphranor, 'that you're willing to argue and make your appeals to reason. For my part, I shan't be afraid to follow wherever reason leads. So let me say this openly, Euphranor: I freely concede the points you have been contending for. I don't value the success of a few crude notions thrown out in a casual conversation, any more than the Turks care about the loss of the rubbish-infantry that they position at the front of their armies so as to waste the gunpowder and blunt the swords of their enemies. I have kept a good half of my arguments in reserve, and I am ready to bring them forward. I will undertake to prove. . .'

**Euphranor:** I don't doubt your ability to *prove*, Alciphron! But, before I put you to the trouble of any more proofs, I'd like to know whether the notions of your minute philosophy are *worth* proving. I mean, whether they are useful and helpful to mankind.

**16. Alciphron:** As to that, let me tell you: a thing can be useful to one man's views and not to another's; but truth is truth, whether or not it's useful, and it mustn't be evaluated by whether it is convenient for this or that man or sect.

**Euphranor:** But isn't *the general good of mankind* to be regarded as a rule, or guide to evaluation, of moral truths—indeed of all truths that direct or influence the moral actions [see note on page 14] of men?

**Alciphron:** It's not clear to me that that is right. I know of course that legislators, theologians and politicians have always maintained that it is necessary for 'the well-being of mankind' that men should be kept in awe by the slavish notions of religion and morality. But even if you are right about what is convenient or helpful, how does that prove these ·moral· notions to be true? Convenience is one thing, and truth is another; so a real philosopher will set aside •all advantages and consider only •truth itself.

**Euphranor:** Tell me, Alciphron, is your real philosopher a wise man or a fool?

**Alciphron:** Without question, he's the wisest of men.

**Euphranor:** As between •someone who acts with design and •someone who acts at random, which should we regard as the wiser?

**Alciphron:** The one who acts with design.

**Euphranor:** [See Q&A note on page 17.] Well then: (i) Whoever acts with design, acts for some end. (ii) And a wise man acts for a good end. (iii) And he shows his wisdom in his choice of means to the end he aims at. (iv) And so the more excellent the pursued end is, and the more appropriate the chosen means to it are, the wiser the person should be thought to be. Now, (v) a rational agent can't aim at a more excellent end than happiness. (vi) Of good things, the greater good is

most excellent. (vii) The general happiness of mankind is a greater good than the private happiness of one man, or of some particular class of men. (viii) So the general happiness of mankind is the most excellent end. (ix) So those who pursue this end by the most appropriate methods should be regarded as the wisest men. (x) A wise man is governed by wise notions rather than foolish ones. (xi) It seems to follow that someone who promotes the general well-being of mankind by the proper necessary means is truly wise, and acts on wise grounds. (xii) Furthermore, folly is the opposite of wisdom. (xiii) So mightn't we infer that men who try to dislodge principles that have a necessary connection with the general good of mankind are foolish?

**Alciphron:** Perhaps this might be granted: but at the same time I have to say that it is in my power to deny it.

**Euphranor:** What? You admit the premises, so surely you won't deny the conclusion!

**Alciphron:** I want to know what the rules are for our debate. In this process of question and answer, if a man makes a slip is he allowed to recover? For, if you are on the lookout for every advantage that you can snatch, without allowing for surprise or inattention on my part, I have to tell you that this is not the way to convince me of your views.

**Euphranor:** I'm not aiming at triumph, Alciphron! All I want is truth. So it's completely open to you to unravel all that has been said, and to correct any slip you have made. But then you must point it out clearly; otherwise we can't ever arrive at any conclusion.

**Alciphron:** I am also sincerely devoted to truth, and agree with you on these terms to proceed together in search of it. In the course of our present inquiry, I think I slipped when I acknowledged that the general happiness of mankind is a greater good than the particular happiness of one man. In

fact, the individual happiness of each man alone constitutes his own entire good. The happiness of other men is not a part of my happiness, so from my standpoint it isn't a good—I mean a true natural good. So it can't be a reasonable end for me to aim at, because no wise man will pursue an end that doesn't concern *him*. (I am talking about true, natural ends, not the ends one might announce as political pretences). This is the voice of nature—the fountain, source and pattern of all that is good and wise.

**Euphranor:** So would you like to follow nature, and accept her as a guide and as a pattern for you to imitate?

**Alciphron:** I want that more than anything.

**Euphranor:** Where do you get this respect for nature from?

**Alciphron:** From the excellence of its productions.

**Euphranor:** For example, you say that there is usefulness and excellence in a plant, because its many parts are connected and fitted to each other in such a way as to protect and nourish the whole plant, make the individual grow, and propagate the species, and also because we get pleasure and benefit from it—grapes from a vine, shade or timber from an oak.

**Alciphron:** Just so.

**Euphranor:** Similarly, don't you infer the excellence of animal bodies from observing the structure and fitness of their many parts, which enables the parts to work together for the well-being of each other as well as of the whole animal? Don't you also notice a natural union and co-operation between animals of the same species, and that even animals of different species have certain qualities and instincts through which they contribute to the exercise, nourishment, and delight of each other? Even inanimate inorganic materials seem to have an excellence relative to each other. Why would water be excellent if it didn't cause herbs and vegetables to spring

from the earth, and put forth flowers and fruit? And what would become of the beauty of the earth if it weren't warmed by the sun, moistened by water, and fanned by air? [Note the four 'elements' of ancient Greek philosophy.] Throughout the whole system of the visible and natural world, don't you see a mutual connection and correspondence of parts? And isn't that the basis for your idea of the perfection, and order, and beauty of nature?

**Alciphron:** I accept all this.

**Euphranor:** Now, didn't the Stoics (who were no more bigots than you are) say—and didn't *you* say a few minutes ago—that this pattern of natural order is one that rational agents ought to imitate?

**Alciphron:** I don't deny that this is true.

**Euphranor:** So oughtn't we infer the same union, order, and regularity in the moral world that we see in the natural world?

**Alciphron:** We ought.

**Euphranor:** Shouldn't it seem to follow from this that reasonable creatures were . . . made for one another, and consequently that a man who wants live according to nature ought to consider himself not as an independent individual whose happiness is unconnected with the happiness of others, but rather as the part of a whole, for whose common good he ought work together with the other parts, .i.e. other men?

**Alciphron:** Supposing this to be true, what then?

**Euphranor:** Won't it follow that a wise man should consider and pursue his own private good in the light of and in combination the good of other men?—you granted this point, but later said that that was a slip. Indeed, the point doesn't need a fancy argument by me, because it has always

been seen to be clearly proved by how we feel for one another's pain and pleasure, and by the mutual affections by which mankind are knit together; and because it was the constant doctrine of those who were thought the wisest and most thoughtful men among the ancients—Platonists, Aristotelians, and Stoics—not to mention Christians, whom you pronounce to be an unthinking prejudiced sort of people.

**Alciphron:** I shan't dispute this point with you.

**Euphranor:** Well, then, since we are in agreement up to here, shouldn't it seem to follow from the premises that *if* the beliefs in a God, a future state, and moral duties are necessarily connected with the well-being of mankind, *then* those beliefs are the only wise, right, and genuine sources of human conduct. You have been led to this conclusion by your own concessions, and by the analogy of nature [i.e. by the thesis that human conduct ought to fall into patterns that natural events do fall into].

**Alciphron:** I have been drawn into it step by step through many preliminaries, and I can't now remember them all clearly. But I would point out that you rely on the thesis that those religious and moral principles are necessarily connected with the well-being of mankind—and that's something that you haven't proved and I haven't granted. [Berkeley's text, like this version of it, leaves unclear what *direction* of 'necessary connection' in question: either (a) the beliefs in God etc. inevitably contribute to human well-being, or (b) without them human well-being is impossible.]

**Lysicles:** I think it's a great big fundamental *prejudice*; and if I had time I could show you that that's what it is. But it's late now; shall we put off this subject till tomorrow?

With that, we put an end to our conversation for that evening.



## Second dialogue (Tuesday)

[In the original work, though not in this version, this dialogue is the second-to-longest of the set. It's not very interesting philosophically; and (a connected fact) in it the free-thinking side is upheld only by Lysicles, with Alciphron silent throughout.]

1. Next morning Alciphron and Lysicles said that the weather was so fine that they would like to spend the day outside, having a picnic meal under a shade in some pleasant part of the countryside. So we went to a nearby beach and walked on the sands. . . .until the sun became too hot to be comfortable. We then went in among the trees and sat down; and immediately Lysicles addressed himself to Euphranor: 'I'm now ready to make good on my undertaking to show there is nothing in the 'necessary connection' that some men imagine there to be between •the principles you are defending and •the public good. If the question were to be decided by the authority of legislators or philosophers, *of course* it would go against us. That's because those men generally take it for granted that

- vice is harmful to the public, and that
- the only way to keep men from vice is through their fear of God, and their sense of an after-life;

from which they infer that

- the belief in such things is necessary to the well-being of mankind.

This false notion has held sway for centuries, and has done an infinite amount of mischief. It has been the real cause of religions' being *established* within states, and of the way laws and magistrates have protected and encouraged the clergy and their superstitions. Even some of the wisest ancient philosophers—ones who agreed with our sect in denying the existence of a God and the immortality of the

soul—were weak enough to accept the common prejudice that vice is hurtful to human societies. But England has recently produced great philosophers who have undeceived the world, and conclusively shown that *private vices are public benefits*. [This was the subtitle of Mandeville's notorious *Fable of the Bees*. Lysicles will now devote about a page to presenting arguments taken from Mandeville.] It wasn't until now that this discovery was made, and our sect of free-thinkers has the glory of it.

**Crito:** [back to sarcasm!] It may be that some men with fine intellects did in former ages have a glimpse of this important truth; but probably they lived at ignorant times and in bigoted countries that weren't ripe for such a discovery.

**Lysicles:** Men of few talents and short sight, being able to see no further than •one link along a chain of consequences, are shocked at small evils that come with vice. But those who can take in more, and look along •a lengthy series of events, can see thousands of examples of happiness resulting from vice, and of good growing out of evil. I shan't trouble you with authoritative writers or elaborate arguments; let's just look at some plain matters of fact. Take each particular vice and track it through all its effects and consequences, and you clearly see the advantage it brings to the public.

2. Drunkenness, for instance, is a harmful vice, according to your sober moralists; but that's because they didn't take into account the good effects that flow from it. [Lysicles goes on to describe some of these. For 'vulgar drunkenness': income from a tax on malt, and employment for many different kinds of workers in the beer industry. For 'drunkenness caused by wine and spirits': admittedly that sends money into foreign countries, but it creates employment in the home country—vastly increased and proliferated by the need for

ships. Then there are all the trades involved in making things that ships export to pay for the wine and spirits. And *every* trade is supported by, and supports, yet further trades; so that there's no end to the good that comes from drunkenness. Then:]

Equally stupidly, your half-witted folk are given to condemning gaming [here = 'playing cards for money']. . . . On the face of it, card-playing seems to be a very idle and useless occupation; but if you dig down *below* the face of it you'll see that this idle pastime employs the card-maker, who provides work for the paper-mills, which support the poor man who collects discarded rags; not to mention the. . . workers who are employed in building and equipping those mills. Look still deeper and you'll find that •candles ·to light the games· and the hiring of sedan-chairs ·to take the players to the game· employ the industrious and the poor; in this way they are helped by card-sharpers and gentlemen who wouldn't give a penny in charity. You may object that many gentlemen and ladies are ruined by gaming, but if you do, you aren't taking into account that what one man loses another gets, so that as many are enriched as are ruined. Money changes hands; that's what the life of business and commerce consists in—the circulation of money. When money is spent, the public doesn't care *who* spends it. Suppose an upper-class fool is cheated by a very low-bred fellow who has more brains—what harm does this do to the public? Poverty is relieved, ingenuity is rewarded, the money stays at home. . . . You may object that a man made poor by gaming may resort to some desperate conduct that will be hurtful to the public. [Lysicles goes on to speak of the good a highwayman can do, mainly by spending extravagantly during his 'short and merry life', but also through the reward that may go to a poor family that turns him in to the police.]

My topic was gaming, which smoothly led me to the advantages of highway robbery. Oh the beautiful and never-enough-admired connection of vices! It would take too long to show how they all hang together, and what an infinite amount of good arises from each of them. I'll add just a few words now on a favourite vice, then I'll leave you to work out the rest of the story for yourself—I've shown you how. Consider a poor girl who doesn't have what you would call an 'honest' half-crown a week to spend: she has the good luck to become someone's kept mistress, and immediately she employs milliners, laundresses, dressers, fabric-sellers, and a number of other trades, all to the benefit of her country. We could go on for ever tracking every particular vice through its consequences and effects, showing the vast advantage they all bring to the public. The true springs that drive the great machine of commerce and make the state flourish have been little understood until now. Your moralists and theologians have •long been corrupting the genuine sense of mankind, filling men's heads with •absurd principles—so •long and so •absurd that few men now can look at life with an unprejudiced eye. And fewer still have the talents and intelligence to pursue a long chain of consequences, relations and dependences, which is what you must do if you want to form a sound and complete notion of the public welfare. . . .

**3.** 'Oh!' said Euphranor, who had listened to this speech very attentively, 'you are the very man I wanted, Lysicles—eloquent and able, well-informed about the principles of your sect, and willing to impart them to others! Tell me, is it easy to get these principles accepted in the world?'

**Lysicles:** It is easy among very able men and people of fashion, though you'll sometimes meet with strong prejudices against them in people of the middle sort, an effect of ordinary talents and low breeding.

**Euphranor:** I'd be surprised if men were *not* shocked at such surprising notions, so contrary to all laws, education, and religion.

**Lysicles:** They'd have been even more shocked if it hadn't been for the skillful writing style of our philosophers. Knowing that most men are influenced by •names rather than by •things, they have introduced a certain cleaned-up way of speaking, which lessens much of the revulsion and prejudice against vice.

**Euphranor:** Explain this for me.

**Lysicles:** Well, in our dialect an immoral man is a 'man of pleasure', a card-sharper is one who 'plays the whole game', an •adulterous• lady is said to 'have an affair', an •adulterous• gentleman is said to be 'gallant', a rogue in business is said to be one who 'knows the world'. By this means we have no such things as 'drunkards', 'womansiers', 'whores' or 'rogues' in the fashionable world, whose inhabitants can enjoy their vices without having nasty labels attached to them.

**Euphranor:** So it seems that vice is a fine thing with an ugly name.

**Lysicles:** Be assured it is.

**Euphranor:** Plato was afraid that young people might be corrupted by the myths that represent the gods as vicious. According to you, it seems, that attitude was an effect of his weakness and ignorance.

**Lysicles:** It was, take my word for it.

**Euphranor:** Yet Plato had kept good company, and lived in a court. And Cicero, who knew the world well, had a deep respect for him.

**Crito:** Plato and Cicero may have looked good in ancient Athens or Rome: but if they returned to life today they would

be regarded as underbred pedants. At most coffee-houses in London there are several able men who could convince Plato and Cicero that they knew nothing about morals and politics—the very topics that they are valued so much for!

**Lysicles:** [Not the most sharp-witted of men, Lysicles hasn't picked up the note of sarcastic scorn in what Crito has just said.] I know ever so many shrewd men, both in •royal• court circles and in the business parts of the city, who have five times Plato's sense and don't care in the slightest what notion their sons have of God or virtue.

**4. Crito:** I can illustrate this doctrine of Lysicles by •two• examples that will make you perceive its force. [The examples are fictional. •In the first, a minute philosopher turns his son into a member of that sect, which leads to the son's murdering him and then squandering his estate until he goes bankrupt. •In the second, a minute philosopher converts his wife to his way of thinking (he rightly thinks this will stop her from giving to charity); and this leads her to adopt an extravagant way of life, including playing cards for high stakes, thus using up most of her husband's wealth. In each case, Crito recites the Mandevillian 'public benefits' of the behaviour in question: •the murderous son's recklessness spreads his inherited wealth more widely than his miserly father ever would have done; •the extravagant wife, through her gaming, transferred a considerable share of her husband's fortune 'to a number of sharp-witted men who needed it more and circulated it faster than her husband would have done'.]

Crito maintained a straight face while he told these stories, but I couldn't help smiling, which Lysicles noticed. 'Superficial minds', he said, 'may find something to ridicule in these accounts; but anyone who is really competent in rational thinking must see that a wise commonwealth ought

to encourage maxims that bring benefit to everyone and do harm only to particular private persons or families.'

'Speaking for myself,' said Euphranor, 'I declare that I'm dazzled and bewildered, rather than convinced, by your reasoning. As you yourself pointed out, it takes a great deal of thought to grasp the connections of many distant points. So—*please* put up with my slowness and allow me to take to pieces something that is too big to be taken in all at once; and when I can't match your speed, allow me to *follow* you step by step, as fast as I can.

**Lysicles:** That is reasonable. It's not everyone who can all in one swoop take in a long chain of argument.

**5. Euphranor:** [See Q&A note on page 17.] (i) Your various arguments seem to centre on this: vice circulates money and promotes industry, which causes a people to flourish. (ii) And vice produces this effect by causing extravagant consumption, which is the most beneficial to the manufacturers—giving them a quick demand and high price. (iii) So you think that a drunkard, because he drinks more than other men, brings more benefit to the brewer and the vintner than other men do. (iv) A healthy man drinks more than a sick man. (v) A sober man is healthier than a drunkard. So (vi) a sober man in good health may drink more than a drunkard when he is sick. (vii) A man will consume more meat and drink in a long life than in a short one. (viii) So a sober healthy man may in a long life circulate more money by eating and drinking than a glutton or drunkard circulates in a short life?

**Lysicles:** What of it?

**Euphranor:** Well, it seems that the sober healthy man may be more beneficial to the public—I mean beneficial through how he eats and drinks—than the glutton or the drunkard is.

**Lysicles:** You'll never get me to agree that temperance is the way to promote drinking!

**Euphranor:** But you will agree that sickness lessens drinking, and that death puts an end to it? The same argument will hold, so far as I can see, for every vice that harms men's health and shortens their lives. And if that is so, the 'public benefits' of vice won't be so sure.

**Lysicles:** Granted *some* makers or traders might be as well encouraged by the sober men as the vicious, what about the ones whose livelihood depends entirely on vice and vanity?

**Euphranor:** If there are people like that, couldn't they be employed in some other way, without loss to the public? Tell me, Lysicles, is there anything in the nature of vice *in itself* that makes it a public blessing, or is it only the consumption it causes?

**Lysicles:** I have already shown how it benefits the nation by the consumption of things the nation manufactures.

**Euphranor:** And you have agreed that a long and healthy life consumes more than a short and sickly one; and you won't deny that *many* consume more than *one*? You do the math: which is more likely to promote the industry of his countrymen, •a virtuous married man with healthy children of his own who also feeds and clothes the orphans in his neighbourhood, or •a fashionable loose-living man about town? Doesn't innocently spent money circulate as well as money spent on vice? And if it does so, doesn't your line of thought imply that innocent activities benefit the public as much as vicious ones?

**Lysicles:** What I have proved, I proved clearly, and nothing more needs to be said about it.

**Euphranor:** I can't see that you have proved *anything* unless you can show that it is impossible to spend a fortune innocently! I'd have thought that the public welfare of a

nation consists in the number and good condition of its inhabitants; have you anything to object to this?

**Lysicles:** I think not.

**Euphranor:** Which would contribute more to this end—  
•employing men in outdoor manly exercise, or •employing them in sedentary business within doors?

**Lysicles:** The former, I suppose.

**Euphranor:** Doesn't it seem to follow that building, gardening, and agriculture would employ men more usefully to the public than if tailors, barbers, perfumers, distillers, and the like were multiplied?

**Lysicles:** Agreed, but this goes against you, because what incites men to build and plant is vanity, and vanity is a vice.

**Euphranor:** But, if a man were to build and plant [meaning 'to employ people to build and plant'] •for his convenience or pleasure, •in proportion to his fortune, •without foolish ostentation, and •without exaggerating the value of his house and garden, they *wouldn't* be the effect of vice; and how do you know that this can't happen?

[The economic argument about whether and to what extent private vices are public benefits continues through many not very interesting pages, with Lysicles continuing to be stubborn, and continuing not to understand the spirit in which Crito extravagantly 'supports' the minute philosophers' position—e.g. talking of all the good that had been done by the 1666 fire in London, and the injustice done to a free-thinker who in a purely principled way murdered his father, and was hanged for it. They discuss a little the question of whether it is dangerous to publish such views, the answer being that it is safe on the anti-religious side of the minute-philosophy doctrine, less so on the pro-vice legal and political side. Lysicles says that he wants the whole governmental and legal structure overhauled in the light of

the pro-vice principles that free-thinkers have discovered. Then:]

**9. Euphranor:** You are, it seems, in favour of bringing about a thorough reformation?

**Lysicles:** As for what is commonly called 'the Reformation', I could never see how the world was the better for it. Protestantism is much the same as Popery, except for being more prudish and disagreeable. A noted writer of ours calculates that the benefit of hooped petticoats is nearly equal to the benefit of the •Reformation, but I think he is flattering •it. •Coming back to your question: Thorough reformation is thorough liberty. Leave nature absolutely free to work her own way, and all will be well. That's what we aim at; our principles won't let us settle for less.

Crito is a zealous Protestant, and when he heard Lysicles' passing jab at the Reformation he couldn't refrain from joining in, speaking his own mind rather than parodying the free-thinkers. 'The worst effect of the Reformation', he said, 'was that it rescued wicked men from a darkness that had kept them in awe. This has turned out to be holding out light to robbers and murderers. And the light brought by the Reformation may have done harm in another way too, namely by encouraging free-thinking. It didn't *have* to do that: light in itself is good, and the light that shows a man the folly of •popish• superstition might also show him the truth of •Protestant• religion and the madness of atheism. But some people have used the light only to see the evils on one side (Roman Catholicism), and to run blindly into the arms of the worse evils of the opposite extreme (atheism). That was to make the best of things produce evil in the way that you show the worst things producing good—namely accidentally or indirectly. . . .'

Lysicles was a little disconcerted by Crito's emphatic tone; but after a short pause he replied briskly that not everyone has the talent to think about the public good.

'True', said Euphranor. 'I also think that not everyone can frame a notion of the public good, much less make good judgments about how to promote it.'

**10.** 'But you, Lysicles, who are a master of this subject, please tell me: doesn't the public good of a nation imply the particular good of its individuals?'

**Lysicles:** It does.

**Euphranor:** And doesn't the good or happiness of a man consist in his having both soul and body sound and in good condition, enjoying the things that their natures require, and free from things that are odious or hurtful to them?

**Lysicles:** I don't deny that all this is true.

**Euphranor:** Well, it seems worthwhile to consider whether the regular decent life of a virtuous man mightn't be as conducive to this as the mad sallies of intemperance and debauchery.

**Lysicles:** I'll admit that without the aid of vice a nation may merely survive, be kept alive, but it can't possibly flourish. To get money and goods into rapid circulation in a State, there must be extravagant and irregular motions in the appetites and passions.

**Euphranor:** The more people a nation contains, and the happier they are, the more that nation can be said to flourish. I think we are agreed on this.

**Lysicles:** We are.

**Euphranor:** So you concede that riches are not an ultimate end, but should be considered only as a means to happiness?

**Lysicles:** I do.

**Euphranor:** It seems that means can't be useful unless we know what the end is and how to apply the means to it.

**Lysicles:** It seems so.

**Euphranor:** Doesn't it follow that in order to make a nation flourish it isn't enough to make it wealthy, without knowing •what the true end and happiness of mankind is, and •how to apply wealth towards achieving that end? To the extent that these points are known and practised, I think the nation would be likely to flourish. But for a people who don't know or practise them, gaining riches seems to me on a par with letting a sick man have plenty of food and drink, which it will harm him to consume.

**Lysicles:** This is just sophistry; it is arguing without persuading. Look into how in general people live their lives, examine the pursuits of men, have a due respect for the people's ways of interacting and getting on with one another, and you'll soon be convinced that a nation can be made flourishing and happy through riches—*just* through riches. Give them wealth and they will make themselves happy, without that political invention, that trick of governments and philosophers, called virtue.

[In the next few pages, which are not philosophically very nourishing, the main topics of discussion are these. •Whether virtue is a 'trick of governments'. •Which segment of the population should be listened to with respect (Lysicles responds to Euphranor's suggestion of 'country gentlemen, and farmers, and the better sort of tradesmen' with blundering rudeness). •If people in general are so open to prejudice, mightn't there be some prejudice in the minute philosophers' position? •Bodily health is a real, objective state which can be driven up or down by what is done to the body; why not an analogous view of spiritual (or mental) health? Here is how this last theme develops:]

**Euphranor:** Can't we suppose that there is such a state as a healthy constitution of the soul—the state it is in when its notions are right, its judgments true, its will regular, its passions and appetites kept moderate and directed to the right objects? . . . And the man whose mind is so constituted, isn't he properly called virtuous? And shouldn't every good man try to produce this healthy disposition in the minds of his countrymen? If these things have any appearance of truth, as they seem to me to have, it isn't so obvious that virtue is a mere whim or fashion or trick, as you choose to say it is. You took me by surprise when you said this, I must admit, given the conversation we had about this yesterday evening. If you call that back to your mind, it might perhaps save both of us some trouble.

**Lysicles:** Frankly, Euphranor, I admit to having *forgotten* everything you said about virtue, duty, and all that; the points you made were of an airy notional nature, which made them apt to vanish without leaving any trace in a mind that is accustomed to receiving impression only from realities.

**13.** At this Euphranor looked at Crito and me and said, smiling, 'I have been getting out of line; my role was to learn, and his to instruct.'

[Then we have several pages about happiness and (especially) pleasure, human pleasures versus animal ones, higher pleasures versus lower ones, transient pleasures versus more lasting ones, and so on. Euphranor alludes to 'the sincerity, the intensity, and the duration of pleasures'. At one point Lysicles rhapsodizes about the pleasures of card-playing:]

**Lysicles:** People of fashion couldn't live without cards. They provide the most delightful way of passing an evening for an assemblage of gentlemen and ladies who otherwise wouldn't know what to say or do with themselves. And a pack of cards

doesn't merely give them something to do when they *are* together; it also *draws* them together. Square-dancing gives them a pleasure to look forward to during the dull hours of the day, they reflect on it with delight, and it is something to talk about when it is over.

**Crito:** So the chief amusement of these people of fashion is an activity that any manual labourer can engage in, being as well qualified to get pleasure from cards as a peer is! It looks as though life is a drag for these people of fashion, and that their fortunes aren't doing them much good. I can well imagine that when people of a certain sort are brought together, they would prefer doing anything to the boredom of their own conversation; but it isn't easy to think that there's any great *pleasure* in this. . . .

**Lysicles:** Play [here = 'playing cards for money'] is a serious amusement that brings relief to a man of pleasure after the more lively and affecting enjoyments of sense. It kills time better than anything, and is a most admirable antidote to redirect or prevent thoughts that might otherwise prey on the mind.

**Crito:** I can easily see that no man on earth ought to value antidotes for irritable boredom more than a man of fashion and pleasure! An ancient sage, speaking of someone of that sort, says 'he is made wretched by disappointments and appetites'. And if this was true of the Greeks, who lived in the sun and had so much spirit, I'm inclined to think it's even truer of our modern Englishmen. There's something in our climate and our make-up that makes it especially true of *us* that idleness its own punishment: an uneducated fine gentleman pays for his momentary pleasures with long and cruel intervals of being bored and out of sorts; to relieve these he is driven into sensual excesses which further depress his spirits. His low condition, while creating a greater need for pleasures, lessens his ability to enjoy them. An Englishman's

cast of mind makes him the most unsuccessful rake in the world. [A 'rake'—a term that we'll meet several times more—is a man whose way of life is •stylish and fashionable but also •promiscuous and dissolute.] He is, in Aristotle's phrase, 'at odds with himself'. He isn't brute enough to enjoy his appetites, or man enough to govern them. He knows and feels that what he pursues is not his true good; and when he looks inwards, all he finds is the misery that his habitual sluggishness and idleness won't allow him to remedy. Eventually, having grown odious to himself and hating his own company, he joins any idle group that he can, not in the hope of pleasure but merely to relieve the pain of his own mind. Listless and uneasy in the present, he has no delight in reflecting on what is past, or in the prospect of anything to come. When, after a wretched lifetime of vanity and woe, his animal nature is worn to the stumps, this man of pleasure alternates between wanting death and dreading it; he is sick of living, without ever having tried or known the true life of man.

**Euphranor:** [ironically] It's just as well that this sort of life, which is of so little benefit to its owner, brings so much benefit to the public! . . .

[Then some discussion of courage, and of why there aren't more disillusioned minute philosophers who commit suicide. (Crito's answer: Because they aren't sure they are right about God and the after-life.) Then:]

**18. Euphranor:** Socrates, who was no country parson, suspected that your men of pleasure were such [i.e. were men of pleasure] through ignorance.

**Lysicles:** Ignorance! Of what?

**Euphranor:** Of the art of computing [= 'calculating', as it were mathematically]. He thought that rakes can't do their sums, and that because of this lack in their intellects they make •wrong judgments about pleasure, where their happiness

depends on their making •right ones.

**Lysicles:** I don't understand you.

**Euphranor:** Do you agree that the senses perceive only •sensible things?

**Lysicles:** I do.

**Euphranor:** And the senses perceive only things that are •present?

**Lysicles:** I accept that too.

**Euphranor:** So •pleasures of the understanding and •future pleasures aren't to be judged by the senses?

**Lysicles:** They are not.

**Euphranor:** So people who judge pleasures by the senses may find themselves mistaken at the bottom line. [He quotes some lines from the Latin satirical poet Persius, about someone ending up with his joints ruined by gout, so that his limbs are like brittle beech-tree branches, lamenting the way he has spent his life and depressed at the thought of the kind of life that lies ahead of him. Then:] To get the computation right, shouldn't you consider *all* the faculties, and *all* the kinds of pleasure, taking the future into account as well as the present, and rating them all according to their true value?

**Crito:** The Epicureans held that

a pleasure that produces a greater pain, or that hinders a greater pleasure

should be regarded as a pain; and that

a pain that produces a greater pleasure, or prevents a greater pain

is to be accounted a pleasure. Thus, if we are to make a true estimate of pleasure—that great spring of action from which the conduct of life gets its direction—we have to compute •intellectual pleasures and •future ones, as well as •sensible



pleasures and •present ones. And in estimating each particular pleasure, we have to take into account all the pains and evils, all the disgust, remorse and shame that come with it. And we ought to take account of the *kind* as well as the *quantity* of each pleasure. Let a free-thinker merely consider how little human pleasure consists in •actual sensation, and how much in •prospect! Then let him then compare the prospect of a virtuous believer with that of an unbelieving rake.

[Euphranor briefly joins in, and Lysicles responds sharply that the free-thinkers ‘calculate that what you call a good Christian. . . . must be unfit for the world’s affairs. Thus, while you compute yourselves out of pleasure, others compute you out of business.’ Then further conversation about the personal characters of minute philosophers; and then about how they spread their word—the role of writers in this. The effects on the young of free-thinking ideas—savage anecdotes about this by Crito. Then:]

**Lysicles:** . . . Wouldn’t there always be rakes and rogues even if we didn’t make them? Believe me, the world always was and always will be the same, as long as men are men.

**Crito:** I deny that the world is always the same. Human nature, to use Alciphron’s comparison, is like land, better or worse depending on how it is managed and what seeds or principles are sown in it. I agree there might be bad men through the force of corrupt appetites and unruly passions, even if nobody accepted your tenets; but when to the force of appetite and passion men *add* the force of opinion, and are *wicked on principle*, there will be more men who are wicked and they will be more incurably and outrageously wicked. The error of a •lively rake lies in his passions, and may be reformed; but the •dry rogue who sets himself up in judgments is incorrigible.

[More discussion of the characters of minute philosophers, their place in history, and other related topics. then:]

**Lysicles:** We have a maxim, namely that each should take care of one—i.e. should take care of himself.

**Crito:** Alas, Lysicles, you wrong your own character. You minute philosophers want to get the world *and yourselves* to accept you as cunning self-interested men; but can anything be more disinterested [= ‘not *self*-interested’] than to give up all concern with the theoretical pursuit of truth? Can anything be *less* cunning than to publish your discoveries to the world, teach others to play the whole game, and arm mankind against yourselves? [Re ‘play the whole game’: see Lysicles’ speech ‘Well, in our dialect. . .’ on page 25.]

**22.** To you folk who are fired with •love of truth and •love of liberty and •grasping the whole extent of nature, I suggest that to those loves you add •love of your country (forgive me for introducing such a low-down thought!). I would urge you to be cautious, in the same way that all other discoverers, projectors, and makers of experiments are; they never risk everything on the first trial. Wouldn’t it be prudent to try the success of your principles on a small model in some remote corner of the earth? For instance, set up a colony of atheists in Monomotapa ·in southern Africa· and see how it prospers, before you proceed any further at home; half-a-dozen shiploads of minute philosophers could easily be spared for such a good plan. In the meantime, you gentlemen who have discovered that •there’s nothing to be hoped or feared in an after-life, that •conscience is a nagging pest, that •the bands of government and the cement of human society are rotten things that can be dissolved and crumbled into nothing by the arguments of any minute philosopher: be so good as to keep these sublime discoveries to yourselves, and allow all the rest of us to continue in the

beliefs and ways of thinking established by the laws of our country. Speaking seriously, I do wish you would try your experiments among the Hottentots or Turks.

**Lysicles:** We think well of the Hottentots, believing them to be an unprejudiced people; but I'm afraid their diet and customs wouldn't agree with our philosophers. As for the Turks, they are bigots who have a notion of God and a respect for Jesus Christ. I doubt if it would be safe to venture among them.

**Crito:** Then make your experiment in some other Christian country.

**Lysicles:** We think that all other Christian nations are much under the power of prejudice: even our neighbours the Dutch are too much prejudiced in favour of their religion, which their law has established, for a prudent man to attempt innovations under their government. On the whole, it seems that no country can offer as much security and prospect of success for our schemes as England does. Not to mention the fact that we have *already* made good progress. . . .

**23.** The right way to start this experiment was to wipe out the prejudices of individual persons. We have carried on this work for many years, working hard and skillfully, at first secretly. . . . As our principles gained acceptance and as our numbers grew, we gradually revealed ourselves and our opinions; and I needn't tell you where we have now come to. We have grubbed and weeded and cleared human nature so thoroughly that before long you'll see natural and sound ideas sprout up by themselves, without any labouring or teaching.

[Crito reports the view of a wise man, whom he doesn't name, 'that the worst and most unwholesome weed was this same minute philosophy'. From there he moves to recounting a 'fable' about a contest in hell to select the devil who could

do most harm to humanity. The runner-up appeared as gunpowder, producing great noise and destruction and fear. The winner set up as a pharmacist, thus:] He passed as a friend and a physician through the world, disguised himself with sweets and perfumes and drugs, made his way into pharmacies and ladies' cabinets, and, under a pretence of helping digestion, comforting the spirits, and cheering the heart, he produced direct contrary effects and, quietly and invisibly, pushed great numbers of mankind into a fatal decay [i.e. a decay that was 'fatal' in the sense of being fated, inevitable, unstoppable]. He populated hell and the grave so fast that he earned the post of ruler of hell, which he still holds.

**24. Lysicles:** Those who please may amuse themselves with fables and allegories. This is plain English: liberty is a good thing, and we are the support of liberty.

**Crito:** It seems to me that •liberty and •virtue were made for each other. If someone wants to enslave his country, the best preparation for that is vice, and nothing leads to vice so surely as irreligion does. I simply can't understand (and I have *tried*) how this hostility to religion can be an effect of honest views regarding a just and legal liberty. . . . Let us examine what good your principles have done: who has been the better for the instructions of these minute philosophers? Let us compare what we •are in respect of learning, loyalty, honesty, wealth, power and public spirit with what we •have been. Free-thinking (as it is called) has grown amazingly in recent years. Let us see what has grown up along with it or as a result of it. I shan't list all the resultant ills (that would be a nasty task), and on the other side there is the only blessing that the minute philosophy can claim, namely *luxury*—the same 'blessing' that opened up ancient Rome to the world's revenge, the same luxury that makes a nation look full and fat when it actually has one foot in the grave.

**Lysicles:** You have this wrong. Our sect think and argue better than *anyone* about the public good of a State; and we have invented [here = 'discovered'] many things that are conducive to the public good but can't yet conveniently be put into practice.

**Crito:** But the public has received one advantage from the spread of your principles, namely the old Roman practice of self-murder. This puts an end to all distress, stopping miserable people from going on being a burden to the world and to themselves.

**Lysicles:** You chose to make some remarks about this custom a little while ago [page 30], and to laugh at the irresolution of our free-thinkers ·who couldn't make up their minds to kill themselves·. But I can tell you as a matter of fact that they have often recommended it by their example as well as by arguments; and that it is solely because of *them* that this practice, useful and magnanimous as it is, has been •taken out of the hands of lunatics and •restored to the status among men of sense that it had in ancient times. In whatever light you may look at it, this is in fact a solid benefit. But the *best* effect of our principles is the light and truth that they have so visibly spread through the world. The number of prejudices, errors, perplexities, and contradictions that we have cleared out of the minds of our fellow-subjects! The number of hard words and intricate absurd notions that possessed the minds of men before our philosophers appeared in the world! Now even women and children have right and sound notions of things. What do you say to this, Crito?

**Crito:** I say, regarding these great advantages of destroying men and notions, that I doubt that the public gains as much by the destruction of notions as it loses by the destruction of men. Speaking for myself, I had rather my wife and

children all had beliefs with no real thoughts behind them and daily pronounced words without a meaning, than that any one of them should cut her throat, or leap out of a window. The public doesn't care much about errors and nonsense, as such; it is less concerned with whether a notion is metaphysically true than with whether it will tend to produce good or evil. Truth itself *is* valued by the public, because it does have an influence and is felt in the course of life. . . . But the minute philosophers are not the men to whom we owe most for discoveries of *that* kind. I'm making this point on the basis that your notions are in fact true; and in fact I don't think they are. Candidly, I think they are ·not only •harmful but also •false·. The •tendency of your opinions is so bad that no good man can endure them, and your •arguments for them are so weak that no wise man will accept them.

**Lysicles:** Hasn't it been proved—as clear as the midday sun—that since the spreading of our principles the more smoothly civilised sort of men have led much happier lives, and have been swimming in pleasure? But I don't want to repeat things that I have already proved, so I'll add just one point: our principles bring advantages even to very small children, and to women; they deliver children from terrors by night, and ladies from intensely bored hours by day.

[Crito fiercely attacks this, saying that we should compute what a 'liberated' lady will •give up against what she will •get through the minute philosophy, and that at the bottom line 'you shall find that empty, giddy, gaudy, fluttering thing, not half so happy as a butterfly or a grasshopper on a summer's day'. Similarly for the 'liberated' man, ending with this: 'When his sense and appetite fade, and he seeks refuge from his conscience in the minute philosophy, the real truth about him is that he •affects much, •believes little, •knows nothing.'

Lysicles makes couple of short interventions, in the second of them saying that none of this ‘will make our principles less true’. Crito snaps back:]

**Crito:** Their •truth is not what we are talking about; our present topic is the •usefulness of your principles. And to decide this, all we need is to get an overview of them, fairly stated and laid side by side:

- There is no God or providence.
- Man is as the beasts that perish.
- Man’s happiness, like that of the beasts, consists in obeying animal instincts, appetites, and passions.
- All stings of conscience and sense of guilt are prejudices and errors of upbringing.
- Religion is a State trick.
- Vice is beneficial to the public.
- The soul of man is corporeal, and dissolves like a flame or vapour.
- Man is a machine, driven according to the laws of motion.
- So he does not *act*, and can’t be guilty of anything.
- A wise man evaluates and chooses all his actions in this life on the basis of his own individual self-interest.

It seems that these opinions and others like them are the tenets of a minute philosopher—who is himself, according to his own principles, an organ played on by perceptible objects, a ball swatted about by appetites and passions. He is so acute-minded that he can maintain all this by skillful reasoning, so sharp-sighted and penetrating and *deep* that he can discover that the only true wisdom is the most self-interested secret cunning. To round out this character-sketch: this ingenious piece of clockwork, having no source of action within itself and denying that it has or can have a single free thought or motion, sets itself up as the protector of liberty, and argues earnestly for free-thinking!

The moment Crito stopped speaking, Lysicles addressed himself to Euphranor and me: ‘Crito’, he said, ‘has taken a vast amount of trouble but has convinced me of only one solitary thing, namely that I haven’t a hope of convincing him. Never in my whole life have I met with a man so deeply immersed in prejudice; I leave it others to pull him out ·of the mire·. But I have better hopes of ·convincing· you.

‘Speaking for myself,’ I said, ‘I can answer that my eyes and ears are always open to conviction; I attend to everything that is said, and my over-all final judgment, whether right or wrong, will ·at least· be quite impartial.’

**Euphranor:** Crito is bolder than I am, undertaking in this way to scold and lecture a philosopher! For my part, I always find it easier to learn than to teach. So I’ll ask for your help in ridding me of some worries about the practical effects of your opinions—a topic that I haven’t been able to get on top of, though ever so willing. When this is done, perhaps we still won’t tread in exactly the same steps, perhaps we won’t even walk on the same road; but we shan’t keep coming into direct collision with one another.

[He then presents a set of feeble examples in support of the general thesis that extremes lead to opposite extremes, in the natural world and also—he adds—in the civil world—where ‘power produces licence, and licence produces power; bigots make atheists, and atheists make bigots’. The threat is that if the success of the minute philosophy leads to lax government and great licentiousness, there will be a reaction taking the country to the opposite extreme of something like what *we* might call ‘fascism’. Euphranor then launches into ‘another worry that I have about the tendency of your opinions’. It is than an England cleansed of Protestant Christianity would create a spiritual vacuum (not his phrase) that would be filled by many subtle and effective covert

missionaries for Roman Catholicism. Lysicles replies that the minute philosophers don't prefer any religion to any other, and that if Roman Catholicism became the enforced orthodoxy of England they would all go along with it. And what about their minute philosophy? 'Oh! we should have more than ever of that, for we should keep it all to ourselves.' Crito remarks that the minute philosophers tend to make friends of the Jesuits, ignorantly unaware that the Jesuits are subtle and sophisticated enough to 'make dupes of the minute philosophers'. Then:]

Here Crito paused and fixed his eyes on Alciphron, who

during this whole conversation had sat thoughtful and attentive, without saying a word, sometimes seeming dissatisfied at what Lysicles advanced, at other times apparently serene and pleased, as though approving some better thought of his own. But the day was now far advanced, and Alciphron proposed to adjourn the argument till the following day. 'Then', he said, 'I shall put matters on a new foundation, and in a light that is so full and clear that I am sure it will give entire satisfaction.' So we switched to talk about other things, ate our picnic meal, strolled on the beach, and returned to Crito's home in the cool of the evening.