

The Excellence of Theology, compared with Natural Philosophy

Discoursed of in a letter to a friend

Robert Boyle

1674

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth. Longer omissions are reported between brackets in normal-sized type. Unnumbered subsection-headings are not in the original. —This version rather radically alters much of Boyle’s wording. **See *The Excellencies of Robert Boyle*, edited by J.J.MacIntosh (Broadview Press, 2008), for a *much* more lightly edited version and for a superb apparatus of explanatory notes, including all the biblical references that are omitted here.** —Boyle has a Latin epigraph to the work, meaning: ‘Philosophers search for happiness, theologians find it, but only the sincerely religious possess it.’

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Glossary

adore, adorable: Worship, worthy of being worshipped.

agenda: Things requiring to be done.

antiperistasis: Resistance or reaction aroused—according to Aristotelian physics—by the action of an opposite force or quality.

arbitrary: In early modern uses, this means ‘chosen’, resulting from someone’s decision, or the like. There’s no implication that there weren’t good reasons for the choice.

canonical: The ‘single volume of canonical Scripture’ is the officially recognised Bible.

compare: On page 22 comparing prophecies with the natural world is just aligning them in one’s mind to see how they relate; there may be no question of their being alike.

couched: For something to be ‘couched’ in a biblical text is for it to be somewhat hidden or buried there, not so thoroughly that it cannot be discovered.

credenda: Things requiring to be believed.

curious, curiosity: In the present work these words are used wholly favourably. They refer to the spirit of scientific or theological inquiry, the desire to *know more*.

featureless matter: This replaces Boyle’s ‘adiaphorous matter’. It means: ‘matter that has no qualities except size, shape and motion’.

gross: On page 20, ‘gross’ bodies are lumpy visible ones like pebbles and human bodies, ‘spirituous’ bodies are very finely divided, like air.

intellectual: On page 21 the ‘three intellectual communities’ are the three kinds of creatures—humans, good angels, bad angels—that can think.

justification: The justification of humans towards God is their being freed from the penalty of sin and accounted righteous by God.

moral certainty: A degree of certainty that is high enough for practical purposes, high enough to make practical doubt unreasonable. (In this phrase ‘moral’ is being used in its old sense of ‘having to do with human behaviour’.

naturalist: Natural scientist, suggesting physics and chemistry rather than (as in today’s sense of the word) biology.

patience: On page 33 and perhaps a few other places it means ‘ability to put up with hardship without losing one’s equanimity’.

pathetic: This is used on page 16 in its old sense of ‘producing an effect on the emotions’.

philosophy: In early modern times this was standardly used to cover natural science as well as what counts as philosophy these days; similarly ‘philosopher’; sometimes with the adjective ‘natural’.

Physeophilus: It means ‘lover of nature’. Boyle uses it once in the Preface as a general term, then on page 36 and in Part II chapter 5 as a *name* for the person otherwise referred to as ‘your friend’ or ‘Mr N.’.

physiology: The study of nature, especially physics.

Satisfaction: On page 16 this refers to Christ’s atonement for the world’s sins by his suffering.

supralapsarian: Someone who holds that God’s decision to choose only some for everlasting life was made before the creation and the fall.

virtuoso: In the present work a virtuoso is someone who is intelligently dedicated to practical and theoretical work in the natural sciences.

vulgar: Commonplace, run-of-the-mill, drearily ordinary.

wit: High intelligence; a person possessed of high intelligence.

Publisher's notice

When I tell you that the following work was written in 1665, while the author (like many others) was avoiding the great plague that was then raging in London by going into the country, often having to go from place to place without most of his books, you presumably will not think it strange that in the mention of passages from other writers—as his memory suggested them—he did not provide exact references. And for the same reason it ought not to seem strange that he has not mentioned some recent discoveries and books that might have been relevantly taken notice of, and would fit well with some parts of the work; because things that may seem to have been omitted are of too recent a date to have been known to him when he wrote. But if you ask ‘Then why was a work finished so long ago not published much sooner?’ I must tell you that the main reason why he kept these papers to himself was his real concern for the welfare of the study—namely physical science—that he seems to depreciate in them. He suppressed this work for several years, resisting the desires of persons who have much influence on him, for as long as he was afraid that it might be misapplied by some enemies to experimental philosophy [see Glossary] who were then making a noise against it. But now the attempts of these envious or misinformed persons seem likely to fail: the Royal Society’s reputation can hardly be in danger after so many foreign virtuosi [see Glossary] have written to it, praised it, and wanted to join it. And to this reason must be added the author’s reluctance to go public with a work of an unusual nature, which is one of his reasons for refusing to have his name prefixed to it; though now that the book is printed he finds reason to fear that his name will not be concealed for long, because the book includes references to some of his other writings; he

originally included them for his own private use and then, all these years later, did not remove them because he had forgotten that they were there. [The publisher seems not to have known that Boyle’s Preface assumes that the attempt at anonymity has failed.]

Preface

I am well enough acquainted with the spirit of this age, and of the persons who are most likely to read the following work, to see that probably some will ask why a work of this nature was written at all, and others will be displeased that it has been written by me.

Those who would like to know what induced me to write on this subject may be in great part informed by the work itself. In several places, especially near the beginning and at the close, my motives for putting pen to paper are sufficiently expressed. And though several of those things are directly aimed at the person the letter is addressed to, the attitude I want to dissuade him from—namely the undervaluation of the study of sacred things—is not confined to him but has become so common among many otherwise able persons, especially ones who study physics, that the present work is quite seasonable; I wish it were less so.

But I suspect that some readers who would not think a work of this nature needless or useless may still not be pleased at its being written by me. I am talking about people who think that the physical sciences may well deserve to be ranked above all other sorts of learning, and who object to this ranking’s being opposed in a work written by someone who has had a good reception of his own endeavours in those sciences, a reception that gives him—they think—an *obligation* to spend his whole time promoting them.

I am aware of the favourable reception that the philosophical papers I have so far published have had the happiness to receive from the curious [see Glossary]; but I hope they will not be displeased if I proclaim that I am no lecturer or professor of physics, and have never made any promise to the public to confine myself to writing on any other subject; nor is it reasonable that what I did or may write to gratify other men's curiosity should deprive me of my own liberty and confine me to one subject; especially since several persons for whom I have great esteem and kindness think •they have as much right to solicit me for works like this one. . . .as •the virtuosi have to demand of me my physiological [see Glossary] pieces. And though I realise that the following work, which seems to depreciate the study of nature, may at first sight appear somewhat improper for a person who has written specifically to show the excellence and usefulness of it, I confess that on a more attentive consideration of the matter I cannot reject—or resist!—the reasons of those who are of a quite differing judgment.

One of the reasons is this. My being a member of the nobility and my not being a clergyman are regarded as possible advantages for an author who is to write on such a subject as this. As regards religious books in general it has been widely noticed that those penned by laymen, and especially by gentlemen, have *caeteris paribus* been better received and more effective than those of ecclesiastics. It is no great wonder that exhortations to piety, and dissuasions from vice and from the lusts and vanities of the world, should be more effective when they are pressed by those who *have*, but *decline*, the opportunities to luxuriate in the pleasures they dissuade others from. And (to come yet closer to our present purpose) though I will not venture to say, as an excellent divine did, that whatever comes out of the pulpit counts with many people as nothing but 'the foolishness

of preaching' [1 Corinthians 1:21], it really cannot be denied that if all other circumstances are equal the fittest person to commend divinity is one whose profession it is not; and that it will somewhat add to the reputation of almost any study, and consequently to that of things divine, if it is praised and preferred by those whose condition and course of life exempts them from having any particular calling in the commonwealth of learning, which frees them from the usual temptations to partiality to this or that sort of study that others may magnify because it is their trade or their interest or because it is expected from them; whereas these gentlemen are obliged to commend it only because they really love and value it.

There is another thing that seems to make it even more appropriate that a treatise on such a subject should be written by the author of this one. Professed divines are supposed to be engaged in studies that are of another nature—indeed a higher one—than those that deal with physical things. Now, our modern natural scientists (who are conscious of the excellence of the science they cultivate) are *very* apt to undervalue those who are trained only in other parts of knowledge; so it is much to be feared that what would be said about divinity's ranking above physiology by preachers. . . .would be looked on as the decision of a judge who was incompetent as well as self-interested; and their undervaluing of the advantages of the study of created things would be thought to come—as their depreciating the enjoyment of created things too often does come—merely from their not having had sufficient opportunities to taste the pleasures of them. But these prejudices will not hold against a person who

- has made the investigation of nature something more than a secondary work (as it is thought to be for clerics who know anything about it),

- has shown by long energetic work how much he loves and can enjoy the delight it provides, and
- has had the good fortune to make some discoveries in it, and the honour to have them publicly (and with too many compliments!) taken notice of by the virtuosi.

And it may be relevant to add that those who make natural philosophy their mistress will probably be less offended to find her represented here if not as a handmaid to divinity yet as a lady of a lower rank, given that the lower status of the study of nature is maintained by a person who, even while he asserts it, continues to court nature assiduously (if not passionately). So that his example can show that just as on the one side

a man can be acquainted with and able to enjoy the lessons taught us in •the book of created things while still thinking them less excellent than those that can be learned in •the book of the Scriptures,

so on the other side

a preference for the latter book is very consistent with a high esteem for, and assiduous study of, the former.

If anyone here objects that there are some passages (I hope only a few) that seem a little too unfavourable to the study of natural things, I might excuse myself on the grounds of **(i)** the great difficulty there must be, in comparing two sorts of studies both of which one much esteems, to conduct oneself so as to split a hair between them and never offend either of them. But I will defend myself differently. **(ii)** In works like the present one it may justly be hoped that fair-minded readers will consider not only what is said but why it is said and on what occasion. Now it is plain by the way the argument goes in this work that the Physeophilus [see Glossary] to whom it most relates is looked on by me as being •very partial to the study of nature *and* •somewhat prejudiced against that of the Scripture; so that I was not

always to deal with him as though he had no bias, but was. . . (to use Aristotle's expression) to bend the crooked stick the opposite way so as to make it straight, depreciating the study of nature somewhat beneath its true value so as to reduce a great over-valuer to a just estimate of it. And to gain the more upon him I allowed myself now and then to make use of his contempt for the Aristotelian and common philosophy, and in some passages to speak of it more slightly than my usual attitude permits, and than I would do on another occasion; so that by going along with his opinions I could argue with him from them.

But to return to the motives that induced me to publish this work: I have not named them all, but all of them together would hardly have been effective if they had not been made more powerful by my indignation at the sight of men—even ones devoted to inquiry—depreciating the kind of knowledge that does the most to elevate mankind as well as the most to bless it, and looking on the noblest and wisest employments of the understanding as signs of weakness in it.

I do not expect that what I say in this work (or indeed anything that *can* be said) will make converts of those who are resolved against being made so and would rather deny themselves the most excellent kinds of knowledge than allow that there can be any more excellent than the kind they think they are masters of. But I have some hope that what I say here may serve to fortify in a high esteem for divine truths people who already have a just veneration for them, and preserve others from being seduced—by insulting though sometimes 'clever' insinuations—into undervaluing the kind of knowledge that is the most excellent in itself as well as the most conducive to man's happiness. This makes me less displeased to see that the work has swollen to a size far greater than its being a mere *letter* promises, and than I first intended. For I confess that when the event occurred

that made me put pen to paper I happened to be in a very unsettled condition (which I fear has had too much influence on what I have written), so I did not plan to go on with my subject anywhere near as long as I have done; but new things kept springing up under my pen (so to speak), and I was content to allow them room on my pages because—writing for my own satisfaction as well as for my friend’s—I thought it might be useful to lay before my own eyes as well as his the considerations that seemed to justify my preference for divine truths over physiological ones and to confirm me in the esteem I had for them. And though I freely confess that the work does not consist of nothing but reasonings, and consequently is not of an altogether uniform texture, I hope that will be thought fitting in a work that is designed not only to convince but to persuade. If it has the good fortune to do so, I hope the reader will have no cause to regret the trouble of reading it, as I shall not regret the trouble of writing it.

Introduction

Sir, I hoped you knew me better than to seriously wonder how I liked the discourse your learned friend entertained us with last night. And I am the more troubled by your question because your way of asking how much I approved of your friend’s discourse gives me cause to fear that you give it more of your approval than I could wish. But before I can safely answer your question about my sense of your friend’s works I must remind you that they were not all on one subject or of the same nature; and I am enough his servant to acknowledge without the least reluctance that he is apt to show a great deal of intelligence when he speaks only about purely physical things; and when he is in the right he seldom wrongs a good cause by his way of managing it. But as for the episodes where he gave himself the liberty

of disparaging the learned Dr N. only because that doctor cultivates theological as well as physical studies and often reads books of devotion and sometimes writes them—I am not so much a courtier as to pretend that I liked them. It is true that he did not deny the doctor to be a learned and a clever man. Some men would be easily tempted to imagine, and more easily to proclaim, that none are philosophers except those who (like themselves) desire to be nothing else; but the wise providence of God has arranged to stop their bold mouths. Our nation is happy in having several men who are as eminent for human learning as they are studious of divine learning, and who—great as their veneration is for Moses and St. Paul—are as well versed in the doctrines of Aristotle and Euclid, indeed of Epicurus and Descartes too, as those who choose not to study anything else. But though for this reason your friend Mr N. did not have the impudence to despise the doctor and some of his like whom he chose to mention, he too plainly showed himself to be one of those who, though they will not deny that some who value theology are able men, talk as if such persons were gifted *in spite of* their religious commitment, which they regard as such a blemish that a man must have very great abilities to make up for the disadvantage of valuing sacred studies. . . . So: since this disdainful attitude begins to spread much more than I wish it did among differing sorts of men, among whom I would be glad not to find any naturalists [see Glossary]; and since the question you asked me—and your esteem for your friend—makes me fear that you may look on it with very favourable eyes; I shall not decline the opportunity you put into my hands of giving you along with a statement of my dislike of this attitude some of my reasons for that dislike. And I am encouraged in this because I can do it without too much exceeding the limits of a letter or the limits set by the haste with which I must write this. For your friend does not

oppose theology but only undervalues it, and professes to believe the Scriptures (which I credit to the extent of thinking that he believes himself when he says it), so that I am not to dispute with him as against an atheist who *denies the author* of nature but only against a naturalist who *over-values the study* of it. And the truths of theology are things that I need not bring arguments for, but am allowed to draw arguments from them.

But though I plan to be brief, the fruitfulness and im-

portance of my subject may suggest enough things to me to create a risk of confusion unless I follow some little method; so I shall divide the following letter into two Parts: one in which I shall offer you the chief positive reasons for considering the study of divinity as preferable to that of physics, and a second in which I shall consider the claims that I foresee your friend may make in favour of natural philosophy. . . .

Part I

Positive reasons for studying theology

A rational man can hardly have better reasons to engage in any study than that **(1)** the subject is noble, that **(2)** it is his duty to apply himself to it, and **(3)** his proficiency in it will bring him great advantages; so these three inducements combine to provide a very strong case for the study of theological truths. I shall give them a section each.

1. The nobility of theology's object

The excellence and sublimity of the object we are invited to contemplate is such that no-one who truly acknowledges a deity can think there is any speculation whose object is comparable in nobleness to the nature and attributes of God.

The souls of inquiring men are commonly so anxious to learn the nature and condition of spirits that some of them—the over-greedy ones—have wanted to discover that there are spiritual substances other than the souls of men, which has led too many of

them to explore forbidden ways of getting answers: they have preferred •putting themselves within the power of demons to •not knowing whether there are any such beings. I have learned about this from private acknowledgements made me of such unhappy (though not unsuccessful) attempts by various learned men (physicists and others) who had themselves made them, these being men who were neither timorous nor superstitious. (But this only an aside.)

Anyone who thinks he is entitled to despise the investigation of the divine perfections, or even thinks that he is fully equipped for such an investigation, must have a notion of the Deity that is as wrong as it is mean, and must be as inattentive to •the nature and attributes of that infinitely perfect being as to •the nature and infirmities of man. The Scripture tells us that God's greatness is incomprehensible and his wisdom inscrutable, that he humbles himself to look into (or upon) the heavens and the earth, and that not

only this or that man but all the nations of the world are in comparison to him like a drop in a bucket or a smaller speck of dust on a balance; and even the heathen philosopher who wrote that eloquent book *De Mundo* (ascribed to Aristotle in his later years) speaks of God's power, wisdom and amiableness in terms almost as lofty, though necessarily inferior to such an infinitely sublime subject. Those who think they can sufficiently understand it, especially without revelation, have very little understanding of themselves.

But perhaps your friend will object that for the knowledge of God only *natural* theology is needed; and I readily admit—being warranted by an apostle—that the knowledge of God was not unknown to the heathen philosophers; and that some knowledge of God is attainable by the light of nature, properly employed—enough indeed to encourage men to exercise themselves more than most of them do in that noblest of studies, and to make their not being experts in it insulting to themselves as well as to their maker. But despite this, just as God knows himself infinitely better than a purblind man knows him, so the information he chooses to give us concerning his own nature and attributes are exceedingly preferable to any account of him that we can give ourselves without his aid. And I think the differing views we can have of the heavens may be a fairly good indication of the differing discoveries we may make of the attributes of their maker. For just as

though a man may with his naked eye see the heavens to be a very glorious object, ennobled with radiant stars of several sorts, when his eye is assisted by a good telescope •he can discover a number of stars and planets that his naked eye would never have shown him and •the planets that he could see before will appear to him much bigger and more distinct,

so also

though bare reason well improved will suffice to make a man behold many glorious attributes in the Deity, when that same reason is assisted by revelation •he can discover far more excellences in God and •the ones he contemplated before will be presented to him much greater and more distinct.

And to show how much **(i)** a dim eye illuminated by the scriptures can discover of the divine perfections, and how unobvious they are to **(ii)** the most piercing philosophical eyes that are helped only by the dim light of nature, we need only consider how much more suitable conceptions and expressions concerning God are to be found in the writings of **(i)** the fishermen and others who penned the New Testament and the illiterate Christians who received it than among **(ii)** the most civilised nations of the world (such as the ancient Greeks and Romans, and the present Chinese and East-Indians) and among the most eminent of the wise men and philosophers themselves (such as Aristotle, Homer, Hesiod, Epicurus, and others).

It is not just that the book of Scripture discloses to us much more of God's attributes than the book of nature does; there is also another object of our study for which we must rely entirely on theology—i.e. to revealed rather than natural religion. For although we may know something of the nature of God by the light of reason, we must owe the knowledge of his will, i.e. of the laws he has laid down, to his own revelation. And on the basis of •the frequent travels of the ancient sages and philosophers into foreign countries to observe their laws and government and to bring home their learning, and of •the enormous expense that the great and learned monarch Ptolomeus Philadelphus thought worthwhile to procure an authentic copy of the law of Moses, whom he regarded only as an eminent legislator, we can guess how anxious great princes and wise men have been to

inform themselves of the constitutions established by wise and eminent legislators. But certainly Moses' laws and other laws recorded in the Bible must appear more noble and worthy objects of curiosity to us Christians, who know them to come from an omniscient deity who—being the author of mankind, as well as of the rest of the universe—must have a much more complete knowledge of the nature of man than can be conceived to have been had by any other of the law-givers, or by all of them put together.

There is a further discovery of divine matters in which we are also gratified by theology. As well as what it teaches us about the nature and the will of God, the Scripture contains *historical* accounts (if I may so call them) of his thoughts and actions. Alexander the Great thought himself nobly employed when he read about the Greek actions in Homer's verses; the Queen of Sheba has been more praised than wondered at for coming from the remoter parts of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, which is a sign of how laudable—and how and worthy of an inquisitive soul—is the desire to know the sentiments of great and wise persons on particular occasions. Well, the Scripture does in many places give our curiosity a nobler employment, and thus a higher satisfaction, than could be enjoyed by the King of Macedon or the Queen of Sheba; for in many places it gives us, with great clearness and intelligence, accounts of what God himself has declared of his own thoughts about various particular persons and things, and relates what he who knows and commands all things was pleased to say and do on particular occasions. Examples of this include the things recorded to have been said by God to Noah about the sinful world's ruin and that just man's preservation, and to Moses about the case of the daughters of Zelophehad; and in the conversations said to have taken place

- between God and Abimelech concerning Abraham's wife,
- between God and Abraham regarding the destruction of Sodom,
- between God and Solomon about that king's happy choice, and
- between God and Jonah about the fate of the greatest city of the world.

And above all these, two strange and matchless passages,

- one in the first book of Kings concerning the seducing spirit that undertook to seduce Ahab's prophets [1 Kings 22:19–24] and
- the still more wonderful account of what passed between God and Satan, in which the Deity condescends not only to praise a mortal but also (if I may so speak with reverence) to glory in him [Job 1:6–7, 2:3].

Being admitted to the knowledge of these transactions of another world (if I may so call them) in which God has been pleased to disclose himself so very much is an advantage that the Scripture gives us. . . .

I must not neglect another advantage that we have from some discourses made for us in the Bible; because it concerns us too highly not to be a very great advantage. It is that the scripture declares to us the judgment God is pleased to make of some particular men on the strength of their life and conduct. For

although reason alone—and the grounds of religion in general—may somewhat satisfy us that God is good and merciful, and therefore *likely* to pardon the sins and frailties of men and accept their imperfect services, **nevertheless** we do not know whether he *will* pardon unless we have his promise that he will;

and

although by virtue of general revelation such as

is claimed in various religions we may be assured that God will accept, forgive, and reward those who sincerely obey him and fulfill the conditions of the covenant, whether explicit or implicit, that he condescends to make with them, **nevertheless** a concerned conscience may rationally wonder whether in God's estimate any particular man was sincere enough to be accepted, because he is the judge of whether the conditions were fulfilled and whether the person was sincere, and because he is omniscient and a 'knower of hearts' and so may know more that is bad in us than even we know of ourselves.

But when he himself is pleased to give eulogies (if I may with due respect so style them) to David, Job, Noah, Daniel etc. while they were alive, and to others after they were dead (and thus, having finished their course, had passed into an irreversible state), we may learn with comfort •that the performance of an obedience such as God will accept is something men really can achieve, and •that even great sins and misdemeanours are not (if repented of early enough) certain evidence that a man will never be happy in the future life. And it seems that the lapses of holy persons are so frequently recorded in the scriptures to offer this kind of consolation to frail men and not at all to encourage licentious ones. And setting aside those divine writings, I know of no books in the world that can—even with all of them taken together—give to a considering Christian who is properly aware of the inexpressible happiness or misery of an immortal state in heaven or in hell such a great and well-grounded consolation as can be derived from three or four lines in St. John's Apocalypse, where he says that he saw in heaven [the bracketed insertion is Boyle's]

a great multitude, not to be numbered, of all nations and tribes and people and tongues, standing before

the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white Robes, with Palms [the ensigns of victory] in their hands; and the praises of God and of the Lamb in their mouths.

From this we may learn that heaven is not reserved only for prophets, apostles, martyrs and such extraordinary persons, whose sanctity the Church admires, but that through God's goodness multitudes of his more imperfect servants also have access to it.

Though the infinite perfections and prerogatives of the Deity are such that theology itself cannot—any more than philosophy can—provide us with any other object for our studies anywhere near as sublime and excellent as what it discloses to us concerning God, theology does favour us with some other discoveries—namely, about angels, the universe, and our own souls—which though they are of course inferior to the knowledge of God himself are, for the nobleness of their objects or for their importance, highly preferable to any that natural philosophy has been able to provide its devotees.

But before I proceed to name any more particulars disclosed to us by revelation, I should remark—to prevent or remove a prejudice—that we should not estimate the worth of the things we owe to revelation on the basis of the impressions they now make on us Christians who learned various of them in our catechisms, and perhaps have several times met with most of the rest in sermons or theological books. For it is not surprising that we should not be strongly affected at the mention of truths which (however valuable in themselves) were for the most part taught to us when we were children or too young to discern and prize their excellence and importance, so that when they were later presented to our adult understanding they still did not make any vigorous impressions on us because by that time they had become

familiar and we did not remember that once we did not know them. Whereas if the same things had been revealed (along with circumstances testifying to their truth) to some heathen philosopher or other virtuous and inquiring man who valued important truths and had nothing but his own reason to attain them with, he would doubtless have received them with wonder and joy. We have several examples of this in the records of the primitive times and in the recent accounts of the conversion of men to Christianity among the people of China, Japan, and other literate nations. For though bare reason cannot reveal these truths, when revelation has once sufficiently proposed them to her she can readily embrace and highly value many of them. Having made this point here, once for all, I now proceed to name some of the revelations themselves.

Angels

I will not now question whether bare reason can even assure us that there are such beings as angels in the natural world. Reason may assure us that their existence is not impossible—perhaps even that it is not improbable—but I question whether those heathen philosophers who believed that there were separate spirits other than human owed that conviction to mere reasoning or clear experience, or to anything but *revelation*, conveyed to them by imperfect tradition. Especially with regard to good angels: I question whether those ancient sages had any strong reasons, any convincing historical proofs—in short, any one unquestionable evidence of any kind—to satisfy an intellectually cautious person of the existence of those excellent spirits, much less to give a further account of them. Whereas theology is enabled by the Scripture to inform us that

- there are such spirits, and indeed a vast multitude of them;
- that they were made by God and Christ, and are immortal, and do not propagate their species;
- that they have their chief residence in heaven, and enjoy the vision of God, whom they constantly praise and precisely obey, without having sinned against him;
- that they are very intelligent beings, and have such power that one of them was able in a night to destroy a vast army;
- that they have ranks among themselves, are enemies to the devils, and fight against them;
- that they can assume bodies shaped like ours, and yet disappear in a trice;
- that they are sometimes employed about human affairs, not only for the welfare of empires and kingdoms, but also to protect and rescue single good men.

And though they customarily appear in dazzling splendour and astonishing majesty, they are all ministering spirits [= *servant*] spirits, employed for the good of the designated heirs of salvation. And they not only refuse men's adoration [see Glossary], and admonish them to pay it to God, but because they are in a sense made by Jesus Christ, who was true man as well as God, they not only worship him and call him 'the Lord' as his own followers did but describe themselves as fellow-servants to his disciples [meaning 'servants who are fellows of, on a par with, his disciples'].

As for the other angels—the bad ones—though gentile philosophers as well as other gentiles were commonly so far mistaken about them as •to adore them as true gods, and yet (many of them) •to question whether they were immortal, the Scripture informs us

- that they are not self-originated but created beings;
- that however much of mankind worships them, they are wicked and impure spirits, enemies to mankind and seducers of our first parents to their ruin;
- that though they create and promote confusion among men, they have some order among themselves, as having one chief or leader;
- that they are evil spirits not by nature but by choice;
- that their power is very limited, so that a legion of them cannot invade something as negligible as a herd of swine without special permission from God;
- that not only good angels but good *men* can by resisting them put them to flight, and the sincere Christians who defeated them here will be among those who will judge them hereafter;
- that their being immortal will make their misery immortal too;
- that they do themselves believe and tremble at the truths they try to persuade men to reject;

And that they are so far from being able to confer the happiness that their worshippers expect from them that they themselves are wretched creatures, reserved in chains of darkness to the judgment of the great Day at which they will be doomed to suffer everlasting torments, in the company of the wicked men they will have prevailed on.

The universe

As regards the corporeal things that the naturalist tackles as his special theme, we can name particulars—ones of the most comprehensive nature and greatest importance—that the naturalist can know about only from theology. I shall content myself with giving examples of a few of these concerning the

world itself—the universal aggregate of corporeal things—because that is looked on as the noblest and most important object that physics gives us to contemplate.

First, those who admit the truths revealed by theology generally allow that God is not only the *author* but the *creator* of the world. I am not ignorant of what Anaxagoras taught (and Tully mentions) about what he called *nous* [= 'mind'] in the production of the world; and that what many other Greeks later taught about the world's eternity is solely due to Aristotle, who does little less than *brag* that all the philosophers before him were of another opinion. Nor will I here (as I do elsewhere) examine what if anything merely physical arguments can show about the creation of the world. But whether or not mere natural reason *can* reach such a sublime truth, it seems that it *did not* actually do so where it was not prompted by revelation. For though many of the ancient philosophers believed *the world* to have had a beginning, they all took it for granted that *matter* had none; nor does any of them that I know of seem to have so much as *imagined* that any substance could be produced out of nothing. Those who ascribe much more to God than Aristotle does hold him only to have given form, not matter, to the world, and to have merely worked pre-existent matter into this orderly system we call 'the universe'—i.e. to have been the author but not the creator of the world.

Next, whereas many of the philosophers who succeeded Aristotle suppose the world to have been eternal; and those who believed it to have been *not eternal but produced* did not have the confidence to claim to know how old it was; except for some extravagant ambitious people such as those fabulous Chaldaeans, whose foolish account reached up to 40,000 or 50,000 years. Theology teaches us that the world is 30 or 40 thousand years short of being as old as they have presumed, and very many ages younger than various

others have thought; and from the Scripture it give us an account of the age of the world that sets us certain limits to how long it can have existed, without mistakes in our calculation. Whereas philosophy leaves us to the vastness of indeterminate duration, without any certain limits at all. [Boyle is presumably relying on Archbishop Ussher's calculation, based on Old Testament figures, that the world began in 4004 BCE.]

Bare reason obviously cannot inform us of particulars that preceded the origin of the first man; so we owe to revelation what we know about the time, the order, and various other facts about the manner in which the fabric of the world was completed. I do not think religion is as much concerned with this as it is thought to be by many who in their opinion and conduct want to deduce particular theorems of natural philosophy from this or that expression in a book that seems designed to instruct us about spiritual rather than corporeal things. But I see no sound reason to embrace some people's opinion that would so turn the first two chapters of Genesis into an allegory as to overthrow their literal and historical sense. And though I take the Scripture to be mainly designed to teach us nobler and better truths than those of philosophy, I do not condemn those who think that the beginning of Genesis contains various details concerning the origin of things which—though not to be brought into physics incautiously or unsupported—may still provide very considerable hints to an attentive and inquiring reader.

As for the duration of the world: the old philosophers held it to be interminable; and the Stoics' opinion (which they held from the Jews) that the world will be destroyed by fire was not soundly based on physics; but theology teaches us expressly from divine revelation that the present course of nature will not last always and that one day this world (or at least this vortex of ours [here = 'our solar system']) will

either •be abolished by annihilation or, much more probably, •be innovated—as it were, *transfigured*—this being done by the intervention of a fire that will dissolve and destroy the present frame of nature; so that either way—•annihilation or transfiguration—•the present state of natural and political things will have an end.

As theology provides us with this information about created things in general, revelation very plainly reveals various important things concerning the most prominent and noblest of visible things, namely men—things about which reason must necessarily be in the dark.

The human body

First, concerning the body of man: •the Epicureans attributed its original (like the origin of everything else) to the random coming-together of atoms, •the Stoics absurdly and insultingly enough (but more pardonably than their follower in this, Mr Hobbes) maintained that men sprang up like mushrooms out of the ground, and •other philosophers maintain concerning it fantasies too wild to be recited here. But the book of Genesis assures us that the body of man was first formed by God in a special way out of terrestrial matter, and it is described there as having been perfected before the soul was united to it. And along with teaching us how the body of man had its first beginning, theology assures us of what will become of the body after death, though bare natural reason will hardly be claimed to reach such an abstruse and difficult doctrine as that of a resurrection, which produced nothing but wonder or laughter among the Athenian philosophers when St. Paul reported it to them.

Not to mention that theology teaches us various other things about the origin and condition of men's bodies:

- that all mankind is the offspring of one man and one woman,
- that the first woman was not made of the same matter as the first man or made in the same way, but was afterwards taken from his side,
- that both Adam and Eve were not (as many Epicureans and other philosophers fancied the first men to be) at first infants, growing by degrees to be mature and complete human persons, but were made so all at once, and
- that hereafter, as all men's bodies will rise again, so will they all (or at least all the bodies of the just) be kept from ever dying a second time.

The human soul

As for the human soul, though I willingly grant that much can be deduced from the light of unaided reason concerning its existence, properties, and duration, still divine revelation teaches us this more clearly—and with greater authority because he that made and upholds our souls can surely best know what they are and how long he will have them last. Along with Scripture's teaching us that the rational soul is distinct from the body because it is not going to be destroyed by the enemies that kill the body, theology addresses the origin of this immortal soul (about which philosophers can give us only broad unsupported conjectures), assuring us that the soul of man did not originate in the same way as the souls of other animals, but was God's own immediate workmanship, and was united to the body already formed; but only united in such a way that when they divorce the soul will survive and pass into a state in which death will have no power over it.

I expect you will here object:

We need not owe to the Scripture our knowledge of the perpetual duration of separate souls, because the immortality of the soul can be sufficiently proved by the sole light of nature, and particularly has been demonstrated by the great Descartes.

But let me tell you two things. **(1)** A matter of that weight and importance to us cannot be too well proved; so we ought to welcome all good kinds of proof. **(2)** I suspect that many Cartesians (and some others) mistake •the difficulty under consideration and •the **scope** of Descartes's work.

I grant that by natural philosophy alone the immortality of the soul can be proved against its usual enemies, atheists and Epicureans. Here is how. The ground on which these men think the soul to be mortal, namely that

it is not a true substance but only a modification ·or state· of body, and must therefore perish with the breakdown of the frame or structure of the body it belongs to;

so if we can point to some intellectual operations of the rational soul that matter (however modified) is incapable of, thereby proving that the soul is a substance distinct from the human body, there is no reason why the dissolution of the body should imply the destruction of the soul, which is a simple substance and as real a substance as matter itself, which the adversaries affirm to be indestructible.

But though by the mental operations of the rational soul and perhaps in other ways it can be proved—against the Epicureans and other mere naturalists who will not allow God to have anything to do with this—that the soul is immortal in the sense newly proposed (·i.e. being simple (= without parts) and therefore proof against destruction by being taken apart·), the same proofs do not show that absolutely it will never cease to exist, if we have on our side

philosophers who admit as the Cartesians and many others do that God is the sole creator and preserver of all things. For how are we sure that the following is not the case:

Though the soul of man could by the continuance of God's ordinary and upholding concourse survive the body, God has ordained that it will be annihilated when it parts with the body, withdrawing at death the supporting influence which alone kept it from relapsing to its first nothing.

(That would be in line with what is generally believed, that the soul is not created until it is on the point of being infused into the body.) We see from this that despite the physical proofs of the spirituality and separableness of the human soul, we owe to divine revelation our assurance that its duration will be endless.

And now to make good what I was intimating above concerning the **scope** of Descartes's demonstration, I appeal to his own words to show that he considered this matter mainly as I have done, and claimed to demonstrate that the soul is a substance distinct from the body, but not that absolutely speaking it is immortal [Boyle gives this quotation in Descartes's Latin]:

'I explained in the Synopsis of my *Meditations* why I wrote nothing about the immortality of the soul. And I *have* adequately proved that the soul is distinct from every body. But there remains your point that the soul's distinctness from the body doesn't imply that it is immortal, because God may have given it a nature such that it goes out of existence at just the moment when the body dies. I admit that I can't refute this. I don't undertake to use the power of *human* reason to settle matters that depend on the free will of *God*. Our natural knowledge tells us... etc. But if it's a question about the absolute power of God—"Might

God have decreed that human souls are to cease to exist precisely when the bodies he has joined to them are destroyed?"—then only God can answer that.'

And if he would not undertake to demonstrate by unaided natural reason even the *existence* of the soul after death, we may well presume that he would be even further from undertaking to determine what the *condition* of that soul will be after it leaves the body. And to remove any doubts you may have about this I will give it you as it his own confession, as he freely wrote it in a private letter to that admirable lady the Princess Elisabeth (first daughter to Frederick King of Bohemia) who seems to have wanted his opinion on that important question and had cited Kenelm Digby's opinions about it. Here is his answer:

'As for the state of the soul after this life, I am not so well informed as M. Digby! Leaving aside what faith tells us, I agree that unaided natural reason alone can't give us any certainty about this; we can of course make many favourable conjectures and have fine hopes.'

And accordingly in the next clause he explains why according to natural reason we are never to seek death, namely because it is imprudent to quit what is certain for an uncertainty.

Is immortality desirable?

I am not surprised that that is his view. For all that mere reason can demonstrate comes down to these two things:

- (1) Because the rational soul is an incorporeal substance there is no necessity that it should perish with the body; so that it may survive the body and last for ever unless God has otherwise appointed.
- (2) Because (according to Descartes) the nature of the soul consists in its being a substance that thinks,

we can conclude that although death separates it from the body it will nevertheless retain the power of thinking.

I think it may be justly questioned whether either or both of these two things are sufficient to *endear* the state of separation after death to a thoughtful man. Considered in itself, immortality or perseverance in duration is required for felicity rather than being a part of it; and being in itself a neutral thing it takes on the nature of the state or condition to which it is joined; it does not make that state happy or miserable, but makes the possessors of it more happy or more miserable than otherwise they would be. And though some scholastics on airy metaphysical notions maintain that being wretched is preferable to not existing at all, we can oppose to their speculative subtleties the sentiments of mankind and the far more considerable testimony of the Saviour of mankind who says of the disciple that betrayed him that it had been good for that man if he had never been born. Also, eternity is generally conceived to worsen the miseries of hell as much as it heightens the joys of heaven.

And here we may consider two lines of thought. **(1)** Mere reason cannot so much as assure us absolutely that the soul will survive the body. In addition to Descartes's admission, quoted above, we have a probable argument drawn from the nature of the thing, namely:

The body and soul were brought together not by any mere physical agents, and their association and union while they continued together was made on conditions that depended solely on God's free and arbitrary [see Glossary] decision; so for anything reason can tell us to the contrary, the conditions of that association may be that the body and soul should not survive each other.

(2) Supposing that the soul is permitted to outlive the body, mere reason cannot tell us what will become of it in its separate state—whether it will be vitally united to some other kind of body or vehicle and, if it is, what kind of body that will be and what the terms of the union will be. It might be united to an unorganised or very imperfectly organised body in which it cannot exercise the same functions that it did in its human body. We see that even in this life the souls of natural fools are united to bodies in which they cannot speak, or at least cannot philosophise. And it is evident that some souls are introduced into bodies which, by reason of paralytical and other diseases, they cannot move, though that does not always prevent them from being vulnerable to feeling pain. So that for all we naturally know a human soul separated from the body may be united to a portion of matter which it cannot move and from which it does not receive any agreeable intake because the union between the two gives the soul no sense except that of pain.

If I grant ·for purposes of argument· that the soul will not be made miserable by being thus wretchedly matched, let us consider what follows from that. We are supposing then that the soul is left free to enjoy whatever belongs to its own nature, which is only the power of *always thinking*. It may well be doubted whether the exercise of that power will suffice to make it happy. You may easily believe that I love as well as the next man to entertain myself with my own thoughts, and to enjoy them undisturbed by visits and other distractions; I would, accompanied only by a servant and a book, go to dine at roadside inn to enjoy my thoughts more freely for that day. But I think that the most contemplative men would eventually grow weary of thinking if they

- received no supply of objects from outside themselves, by reading, seeing, or conversing;

and if they also lacked the opportunity

- to apply their thoughts by moving the limbs of their bodies, or
- to impart them by discoursing or writing books or making experiments.

I knew a gentleman who was—for a State-crime in Spain, which he thought an heroic action—kept close prisoner for a year in a place where he was not permitted the benefit of any light, either of the day or candles, and was not approached by any human creature except at certain times by the jailer who brought him food and drink. (He was allowed a diet appropriate for a person of note, as he was.) This gentleman appeared by his discourse to be a man of a lively humour, but when I asked him what he could do to pass the time in that sad solitude, he confessed to me that

though he was free to walk to and fro in his prison, and though he tried to give his mind as much variety of employment as he could by often calling to mind all the adventures and other episodes of his former life, and by variously combining and diversifying his thoughts, this would not serve his turn and he was often reduced to drinking large draughts of wine and throwing himself on his bed, trying to drown the melancholy that the lack of new objects cast him into.

And I can easily accept that he found a great deal of difference between the sense he had of thinking when he was at liberty, and that which he had when he was confined to the thinking whose delightfulness, like fire, cannot last long when it is denied both fuel and air, as his was. And, in a word, though I most readily grant that thinking interwoven with conversation and action may be a very pleasant way of passing one's time, because man is by nature a sociable creature, thinking *alone* would be a dry and wearisome activity to spend eternity in.

Other things known only through revelation

Before I proceed to the next section I must not omit to remark that though my desire for brevity keeps me from discussing any theological subjects except those I have touched on concerning the divine attributes and the things I have mentioned concerning the universe in general and the human soul, there are various other things that are knowable with the help of revelation and not without it and are of such a noble and sublime nature that the greatest intelligences may find their best abilities •fully exercised and •highly gratified by making enquiries into them. I shall not mention as evidence of this the adorable [see Glossary] mystery of the Trinity, in which (it is acknowledged) the most soaring speculators find themselves baffled or lost. Instead I shall mention **(i)** the redemption of mankind and **(ii)** God's decrees concerning men. These seem to be *less* out of the reach of our natural faculties. It is into some aspects of **(i)** that the Scripture tells us 'the angels desire to pry'; and it was considering **(ii)** that made someone who had been caught up into the mansion of the angels cry out in bewilderment 'O the depth of the riches both of wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!' [Romans 11:33]

Nor are these the only things that the Scripture itself calls 'mysteries', though for brevity's sake instead of specifying any of the others I shall content myself with putting to you the general point that since God's wisdom is boundless it can surely have more than one way to display itself. And though the material world is full of the productions of •his wisdom, that does not prevent the Scripture from being ennobled with many excellent impresses—signatures, as it were—of •the same attribute. For, as I was beginning to say, it cannot but be highly insulting to the Deity, in whom all

other true perfections as well as omniscience are united and transcendent, to think that

- the only way he can contrive to disclose his perfections is through the ordering of matter and motion, and that
- the only way he can deserve to be the object of men's studies and their admiration is in his capacity as a creator.

And I think I might safely add that besides the grand and mysterious matters I have just mentioned there are many other noble and important things over which unassisted reason leaves us in the dark. They are not so clearly revealed in the Scripture, but they are in an inviting measure uncovered there, and consequently deserve the investigation of a curious and philosophical soul. Shall we not think it worth inquiring whether the satisfaction [see Glossary] of Christ was necessary to appease the God's justice and purchase redemption for mankind? Or whether God, as absolute and supreme governor of the world, might have freely cancelled the penalties of sin? Shall we not think it worth inquiring into how and on what terms the justification [see Glossary] of men towards God is transacted, especially considering how important it is for us to know this, and how confusingly the doctrine about it—not in itself abstruse—is usually presented? Shall we not inquire into whether the souls of men pre-existed in a happier state before being united to their bodies, as many of the ancient and modern Jews and Platonists and (besides Origen) some learned men of our times do believe? And shall we not be curious to know whether when the soul leaves the body it

- immediately passes to heaven or hell (as it is commonly believed), or
- remains asleep (as it were) in an insensible and inactive state until it regains its body at the Resurrection (as many Socinians and others maintain), or

- is conveyed into secret recesses where—though it be in a good or bad condition according to what it did in the body—it is reprieved from the flames of hell and restrained from the Beatific Vision till the day of judgment (which seems to have been the opinion of many if not most of the early Fathers and Christians)?

Shall we not be curious to know whether at the final day of judgment this vast fabric of the world, which all admit must have its structure quite shattered, will •be allowed to relapse into its first Nothing (as several divines assert) or will •be renewed into a better state—transfigured, as it were? And shall we not inquire whether in that future state of things that will never have an end we will know one another (as Adam when he awoke out of his profound sleep knew Eve whom he never saw before)? And whether those personal friendships and affections we had for one another here, and the pathetic [see Glossary] consideration of the relations (e.g. father and son, husband and wife, chaste mistress and virtuous lover, prince and subject) on which many of them were based will continue? Or whether all those things will be treated as antiquated and slight, and be obliterated and (as it were) swallowed up? (In the way the former relation of a cousin a great way off—e.g. second cousin once removed—is hardly considered when the persons come to change their state by being united by the strict bonds of marriage.)

But it would be tedious to propose all the other things that fall within the scope of the divine and that highly merit an inquiring man's curiosity—things about which all the writings of the old Greek and other heathen philosophers put together will give us far less information than the single volume of canonical [see Glossary] Scripture. I foresee that it may be objected that in some of these inquiries revelation burdens reason by delivering things that reason is then

obliged to make its hypotheses consistent with. But this cannot even be claimed—let alone justified—about all of them. And anyway, if you consider

how much unassisted reason leaves us in the dark about these matters, not being able even to form probable conclusions about them, especially in comparison with the probabilities that reason can deduce from what it finds delivered, in one way or another, in the Scripture,

you will allow me to say, I think, that the revealed truths that reason is obliged to comply with, if they are burdens to it, are like the feathers that 'burden' a hawk! Instead of hindering his flight by their weight, they enable him to soar toward heaven and get a wider view of things than he could possibly do if he did not have feathers.

Criticising the commentators

I owe greater reverence to the Scripture itself than to its expositors; and this leads me to tell you freely that you will not do right to theology or to (the greatest repository of its truths) the Bible, if you imagine that there are no considerable additions to be made to the theological discoveries that have already been made, and no clearer expositions of many texts of Scripture, or better reflections on that matchless book, than are to be met with in the general run of commentators and preachers, without excepting the ancient Fathers themselves. In my opinion two things are required to qualify a commentator to do right to his theme: **(i)** a competency of critical knowledge, and **(ii)** a concern for the honour and interest of Christianity in general, aided by a good judgment to discern and select the things that may most conduce to it. I fear that there are not many so-called expositors of the Scripture who are not deficient in one or

other of these particulars, and I wish there were not so many that are defective in both.

Knowledge of at least Greek and Hebrew is required for anyone who takes on himself to expound writings penned originally in those languages. If this were not obvious from the nature of the case, you might easily be persuaded to believe it by considering what gross mistakes have often blemished the interpretations of the schoolmen and others, and even those of the venerable Fathers of the Church, because of their ignorance of languages. Generally they were worthy men, and highly to be regarded as the grand witnesses of the doctrines and government of the ancient Churches; most of them were very pious, many of them very eloquent, and some of them (especially the two critics Origen and Jerome) very learned; **but** so few of the Greek Fathers were skilled in Hebrew, and so few of the Latin Fathers either in Hebrew or Greek, that many of their homilies and even comments leave difficult texts as obscure as they found them; and sometimes, misled by bad translations, they give the texts senses exceeding wide of the true. The result is that many times in their writings they appear to be far better •divines than •commentators, and in an excellent work on a text you will find only a very poor exposition of it. Many of their eloquent and devout sermons do much better in praising the divine mysteries than of unveiling them. Some modern translations deserve praise for being very useful and less inaccurate than the ones the Latin Fathers used; but when I read the Scriptures (especially some books of the Old Testament) in their originals, I confess that I sometimes cannot help wondering what came into the mind of some even of our modern translators, that they should so greatly mistake—and sometimes insult—certain texts; and I am inclined to think that there is hardly a chapter in the Bible (especially the part of it written in Hebrew) that could not be

better translated and consequently more to the credit of the book itself.

It misses this credit not only through men's lack of **(i)** sufficient skill in critical learning but also through their lack of **(ii)** judgment enough to observe, and concern enough to propose, the things in the Scripture and in theology that tend to the reputation of either. I fear there are too many commentators and other divines who (though otherwise perhaps pious men), having espoused a Church or party and become hostile to all dissenters, are concerned when they read the Scripture to take notice chiefly—if not *only*—of things that may suggest arguments against their adversaries or answers to their objections. I meet with many fewer than I could wish who

make it their business to search the Scriptures for things (such as unheeded prophecies, overlooked mysteries, and strange harmonies) which, being clearly and judiciously proposed, may make the Bible appear worthy of the high origin it lays claim to (and consequently of the veneration of thoughtful men)

and who

are concerned to discern and understand—in the way of governing and of saving men, revealed by God—such an excellent economy, deep contrivances, and wise dispensations as may bring credit to religion, not as Roman, Protestant or Socinian, but as *Christian*.

But (as I indicated earlier) these good affections for the repute of religion in general need to be assisted by deep judgment. Men who lack that, or lack a good stock of critical learning, may easily overlook the best observations (which usually are not obvious) or propose as 'mysteries' things that are either not grounded, or not weighty enough; and so (despite their good intentions) may bring discredit on what they desire to recommend. I am willing to grant that

it is lack of good skill and good judgment, rather than lack of good will, that explains why there are so few who have been careful to do right to the reputation of the Scripture as well as to its sense. When I consider how much more to the advantage of those sacred writings and of Christian theology in general various texts have been explained and discussed in their different ways by the excellent Grotius, Episcopius, Masius, Joseph Mede, Sir Francis Bacon and some other late great wits [see Glossary] (to name now no living ones) than the same texts have been handled by vulgar [see Glossary] expositors and other divines; and when I remember too that *only* one of the *five* worthies I have just named was at once a great philosopher and a great critic—the first three being not so well versed in philosophical learning, and the last being unacquainted with the eastern languages—I can only hope that when it pleases God to stir up persons of philosophical genius, well furnished with critical learning and the principles of true philosophy, and gives them a hearty concern for the advancement of his truths, these men—by exercising on *theological* matters the same inquiringness and sagacity that has in our times made such happy progress in *philosophical* ones—will make explanations and discoveries that will justify more than I have said in praise of the study of our religion and the divine books that contain the articles of it. For these books do not lack excellences but only skilful unveilers. And if I do not tell you that

you should no more *measure* the wisdom of God couched [see Glossary] in the Bible by the glosses or systems of common expositors and preachers than *estimate* the wisdom he has expressed in the structure of the world by *the discredited Aristotelian physics* of Magirus or Eustachius,

I shall boldly tell you that

you should no more •think that there are no mysteries in the books of Scripture except those that the school-divines and vulgar commentators have taken notice of and unfolded than •think that there are no mysteries in the book of nature except those that the same schoolmen (who have taken it on themselves to interpret Aristotle and nature too) have observed and explained.

All the fine things that poets, orators, and even lovers have extravagantly said in praise of the beauty of *eyes* will not recommend them to a philosopher's esteem nearly as much as the sight of one eye skillfully dissected, or the unadorned account given of its structure and the admirable uses of its various parts in Scheiner's *Oculus* and Descartes's excellent *Dioptrics*. And though I do not think myself bound to accept and admire everything that is proposed as mysterious and rare by many interpreters and preachers, I think I may safely compare several things in the books we call the Scripture with several others in the book of nature in (at least) one respect. Although I do not believe all the wonders, that Pliny, Aelian, Porta and other writers of that stamp relate concerning the generation of animals, still by reading

such faithful and accurate accounts as sometimes Galen (*De usu Partium*), sometimes Vesalius, sometimes our Harvey (*de Ovo*) and our more recent anatomists, and sometimes other true naturalists, give of the generation of animals and of the admirable structure of their bodies, especially those of men, and other parts of zoology of which Pliny and the others I named with him could make nothing considerable,

I receive more pleasure and satisfaction, and am induced more to admire the works of nature, than by all the romantic and superficial narratives ·of poets, orators and lovers·. Similarly, applying this to our present subject of theology,

a close and critical account of the more veiled and pregnant parts of Scripture and theological matters, with such thoughts about them as their nature and their interrelations would suggest to a philosophical as well as critical theorist,

would far better please a rational thinker, and give him a higher as well as better-grounded veneration for the things explained than many of those slighter or ill-founded remarks through which the florid and 'clever' expositions and works of superficial writers gain the applause of men of the less discerning sort.

We could use Scripture more than anyone has so far

I venture to add at this point that I have some hope that a further use may be made of the Scripture that neither our divines or our philosophers seem to have thought of. A few theologians have indeed got the name of 'supralapsarians' [see Glossary] for venturing to look back before the fall of Adam for God's decrees of election and reprobation. But their boldness has been disliked by most divines as well as other Christians, and anyway the object of their speculation is much too narrow to be anywhere near the kind of hypothesis I am talking about. For I don't think that the encyclopedias and pansophias [= 'books of all knowledge'] that even men with very high abilities have aimed at cast a wide enough net to take in all that the reason of a man who is improved by philosophy and elevated by the revelations already extant in the Scripture could learn in this life with the help of free reasoning and the hints contained in those pregnant ·scriptural· writings (with the assistances of God's spirit that he is still ready to offer to those who duly seek them). The gospel indeed contains and unfolds as much of the whole mystery of man's redemption as we need to know for our

salvation; and the corpuscularian or mechanical philosophy tries to deduce all the phenomena of nature from featureless [see Glossary] matter and motion in space. But neither •the fundamental doctrine of Christianity nor •the doctrine of the powers and effects of matter and motion seems to be more than an epicycle (if I may so call it) of the great and universal system of God's contrivances, and the two are only a part of the more general theory of things knowable by the light of nature improved by the information of the Scriptures. So both these doctrines, though very general relative to the subordinate parts of theology and philosophy, seem to be merely limbs of the universal hypothesis whose objects I conceive to be the nature, counsels, and works of God, as far as they are discoverable by us (for I do not say *to us*) in this life.

Those to whom God has given the privilege of mature reason seem not to enlarge their thoughts enough if they think that the omniscient and almighty God has limited the operations of his power, wisdom and goodness to the use that could be made of them for some ages in the production and government of •matter and motion and of •the inhabitants of the terrestrial globe, which we know to be a mere physical *point* in comparison of the portion of universal matter that we have already discovered.

For there are (by my count) *four* grand communities of creatures, of which merely corporeal things are only one; the other three, differing from these, are distinct also from one another. Of the first sort are the race of mankind, where thinking beings are vitally associated with gross [see Glossary] and organic bodies. The second are demons, or evil angels; and the third, good angels. In the case of the two kinds of angels, it may be that the rational beings are perfectly free from union with any sort of matter, however finely divided, or they may be united to bodily vehicles that are not gross

but spirituous and ordinarily invisible to us.

We should not think that, because 'angels' and 'devils' are two names quickly uttered, and those spirits are seldom or never seen by us, there are few of them and they are not a considerable topic of speculation. For, just as their excellence is great (as I will show later), so is their number: they are represented in Scripture as a heavenly *host* standing on the right and left hand of the throne of God. And our Saviour speaks of the good angels, saying that he has more than twelve *legions* of them at his command. . . . And the gospel informs us that enough evil angels to call them a 'legion' (which you know is usually conservatively reckoned as consisting of between 6000 and 7000) possessed one single man. For my part, when I consider that matter, however vastly extended and intricately shaped, is

- only a brute thing that is capable of nothing but motion in space and the effects of that on other bodies, or on the brain of man, without being capable of any true (or at least any intellectual) perception or any true love or hatred,

and when I consider the rational soul as

- an immaterial and immortal being that bears the image of its divine maker, being endowed with a capacious intellect and a will that no creature can force,

this contrast disposes me to think the soul of man to be a nobler and more valuable being than the whole corporeal world. I readily acknowledge that world to be admirably contrived, and worthy of its almighty and omniscient author, yet it consists in nothing but of an aggregate of portions of brute matter, variously shaped and connected by motion in space (as dough and rolls and loaves and cakes and vermicelli, wafers, and pie-crust are all diversified *meal*), but without any knowledge of the nature of themselves, or of

their author, or of their fellow-creatures. And as the rational soul is something more noble and wonderful than anything merely corporeal (however big), and is of a more excellent nature than the human body, which is the most intricate piece of mechanism in the world, so to enquire what will become of it—what fate it is like to undergo hereafter—better deserves a man's curiosity than to know what will befall the corporeal universe. . . . And as man is entrusted with a will of his own, whereas all material things *move* only as they *are moved*, and have no self-determining power enabling them to resist the will of God; and as also at least some orders of angels are of a higher quality (if I may so speak) than human souls; so it is very probable that the government of good or bad angels (agents possessing intellect and will) requires greater displays of God's wisdom, power, and goodness than does the guidance of featureless matter; and the method of God's conduct in the government of these is a far nobler topic for men's contemplation than the laws according to which the parts of matter hit against and jostle one another, and the effects or results of such motions.

And accordingly we find in Scripture that whereas

- for the production of the material world and the setting of the frame of nature God employed only a few commanding words, which speedily had their full effects,
- to govern the race of mankind, even for their own happiness, he employed not only laws and commands but revelations, miracles, promises, threats, exhortations, mercies, judgments, and various other methods and means;

and yet often, when he might well say (as he did once by his prophet ·Isaiah·) 'What could I have done more to my vineyard that I have not done it?', he had just cause to exclaim (as he did in the same place) 'Why when I looked that it should bring forth grapes did it bring forth wild grapes?' and to complain of men (as he did through that very prophet complain of Israel) 'I have spread out my hands all the day to a rebellious people'. But not to wander too far in this digression, what I have said about men may make it probable that the grand attributes of God are more notably exercised and made more conspicuous •in the making and governing of each of the three intellectual [see Glossary] communities than •in the framing and upholding of the community of mere bodily things. And since all immaterial substances are for that reason naturally immortal, and universal matter is believed to be so too,¹ possibly those revolutions that will happen after the day of judgment,

in which though probably not •the matter but •the state and constitution of it that makes it constitute *this world* will be destroyed, and make way for quite new frames and sets of corporeal things, and the beings that compose each of these intellectual communities will (in the countless ages they will last) travel through I know not how many successive changes and adventures,

will display and bring glory to the divine attributes just as much as the contrivance of the world and the economy of man's salvation, though these are rightly the objects of the naturalist's and the divine's contemplation.

¹ [He means that immaterial things, just because they are immaterial (and so do not have parts), cannot be destroyed by coming to pieces; and that 'universal matter'—i.e. matter *as such*—is thought not to be 'naturally' destructible because that would be a mere process of dismantling it, and dismantling any portion of matter still leaves its parts, which are also matter.

And some passages in the prophetic part of the Scripture, and especially in the book of the Apocalypse [= Revelation], seem to indicate that as God will perform great and noble things that mechanical philosophy never reached to and that the general run of divines seem not to have thought of, so various of those great things may be to some extent discovered by an attentive searcher into the Scriptures, bringing so much advantage to the devout investigator that St. John, near the beginning of his revelations, says that they are 'happy' who read the matters contained in this prophecy and observe the things written therein. This implies that by carefully comparing [see Glossary] •the indications couched in those prophetic writings with •events and occurrences in the affairs of the world and the church, we may discover much of the admirable economy of Providence in the governing of both. I am inclined to think that the early discoveries of such great and important things are meant by God as considerable favours, not only because the title 'happy' is here given to anyone who attains them, but also because of the two persons to whom such great discoveries were first made

- the first, the prophet Daniel, is said by the angel to be, on that account, a person highly favoured; and
- the other, St. John, is represented in the gospel as our Saviour's beloved disciple.

And you will the more easily think the foreknowledge of the divine dispensations gatherable from Scripture to be highly valuable if you consider that according to St. Paul the very angels that are called 'principalities and powers in heavenly places' learned *from the Church* some abstruse points of the manifold wisdom of God [*Ephesians* 3:10]. But I must no longer indulge speculations that would carry my curiosity beyond the bounds of time itself, and therefore beyond the limits that ought to be placed to this mere letter!

But although on the one side I shall not allow myself the presumption of forming conjectures about those remote dispensations most of which will not have a beginning before this world has an end, on the other side I would not discourage you or any pious inquirer from trying to advance in the knowledge of the attributes of God that can successfully be studied without prying into the secrets of the future.

We could make more discoveries in theology

Let me freely confess to you, Sir, that I am inclined to think that if men cared enough about God's glory and their own satisfaction, far more discoveries of the divine attributes would be made than have been achieved so far. When we consider the most simple or uncompounded essence of God we may easily be convinced that what belongs to any of his attributes (some of which thinking men generally admire) must be an exceedingly noble object of enquiry, and worthy of our knowledge. Yet the abstruseness of this knowledge is not in all respects so invincible as to remove my strong hope that a philosophical eye, illuminated by the revelations extant in the scripture, may pierce a great deal further than has yet been done into those mysterious subjects. Perhaps out of a mistaken reverence, they are too often so poorly handled by divines and schoolmen that what they have taught is not only •not worthy of God (for that is a necessary and therefore excusable deficiency), but too frequently •not worthy of men—I mean of rational creatures who take on themselves to treat of such high points and instruct others about them. And I am sure that your friend will be more inclined to agree with this if he calls to mind the new and handsome notions about some of God's attributes that his master Descartes, though only moderately knowledgeable about the Scriptures, has presented us with. I am also

sure that a much greater progress might be made in the discovery of subjects in which though we can never know all we may still know more than we do, if speculative geniuses [= 'people with high abilities in theory-making'] would propose to themselves particular doubts and enquiries about particular attributes, and form and examine hypotheses, establish theorems, infer corollaries and (in short) apply to this study the same intelligence, assiduity and attention of mind that they often employ in inquiries of a very much inferior nature. Two examples of that:

- Descartes, however profound a geometrician he was, admits in one of his letters that he employed no less than six weeks to find the solution of a problem or question of Pappus.
- Pythagoras was so addicted to and concerned for geometrical speculations that when he had found the famous proposition [now known as Pythagoras's Theorem] that is the 47th proposition in Euclid's Book I he is reported to have offered a great public sacrifice to express his joy and gratitude for the discovery, though it was the discovery of only one property of one sort of triangle.

And certainly if Christian philosophers rightly estimated what noble and fertile subjects the divine attributes are, they would find in them materials on which to exercise their best abilities as well as to recompense the employment of them. But the conduct I want to dissuade them from may come not only from laziness but also from the mistake of thinking that there is little to be known of such an incomprehensible object as God, except that in general all his attributes are infinite, as *he* is, and thus cannot be fully known by human understandings because they are finite; so I shall add that although it is true that because of God's infinity we cannot comprehend him—i.e. have a full

and adequate knowledge of him—we can nevertheless know very many things concerning him, and *may make endless progress in that knowledge*. Pythagoras knew very well what a triangle was, and was acquainted with many of its properties before he discovered that famous one. And though since him Euclid, Archimedes, and other geometricians have demonstrated I don't know how many other properties of the triangle, the subject is not yet exhausted, even today. And possibly I (who make no claim to be a mathematician) have now and then, in managing certain equations I had a use for, lighted on some theorems about triangles that had not occurred to any of them. The divine attributes are such fruitful themes, and so worthy of our admiration, that the whole fabric of the universe and all the phenomena exhibited in it are merely imperfect expressions of God's wisdom and a few of his other attributes. And I am not surprised that the angels themselves are represented in Scripture as employed in worshipping God and admiring his perfections. For even they (being merely finite) can form only inadequate conceptions of him, and consequently must try through many conceptions to make amends for the incompleteness of every one of them—which they can never perfectly do. Yet it is very wrong to let God's infinitude discourage us from enquiring into his nature and attributes. (I'll set aside the question of whether infinity, though the word is negative, is really a positive thing in God.) Despite his infinity we may discover as much of him as our nature *can* know. What harm is it to someone drinking in a river that he cannot drink up all the water, if he is free to quench his thirst and take in as much liquid as his stomach can contain? So infinity should not hinder us from a bold ambition to learn as much as we can of an object whose infinitude only makes our knowledge of it more noble and desirable, which indeed it *is* in such a degree that it's no wonder that the

angels are represented as never wearying of their activity of contemplating and praising God. For (I repeat) they can have only inadequate ideas of those boundless perfections, and no number of those ideas can enable them to make amends for their incompleteness; so it need not seem strange that in fresh discoveries of new parts (if I may so call them) of the same object, it being *infinite*, they should find nobler and happier entertainments than variety could provide them with in any other activity.

2. Our obligation to study theology

Having spoken of *some* of the many things that could be cited to show how noble the objects are that theology offers for contemplation, I now proceed to some considerations that may give us a sense of how great an obligation there lies on us to devote ourselves to the study of them.

I shall here name only two of the things on which this obligation may be grounded—they being indeed comprehensive ones—namely obedience and gratitude.

Obedience

Presumably there is no need for me to elaborately prove that it is God's will and command that men should learn the truths that he has been pleased to teach, whether concerning his •nature or attributes or •how he wants to be served and worshipped by man. Even if we did not have injunctions in Scripture to that purpose, your friend is too rational a man to believe that God would so solemnly cause his truths to be published to mankind by preaching and writing without intending to *oblige* people to enquire into some of them—at least people who have the capacity and opportunity to do this. And if it appears to be *his will* that a person so qualified

should search after the most important truths that he has revealed, it must be *their duty* to do so. Even if the nature of the thing itself did not lay any obligation on us, the authority of him who commands it would do so; because he, being the supreme and absolute lord of all his creatures, has as full a

- right to make what laws he thinks fit, and command what service he thinks fit, as a
- power to punish those who violate the laws or refuse the service;

and accordingly it is obvious that before Adam fell and forfeited his happy state by his own transgression he had imposed on him a law whose whole power of obliging came from the mere will and pleasure of the law-giver (because there was no right or wrong about eating or not eating from the tree of life, in itself). From this we learn •that man is subject to the laws of God not as being vulnerable to him but as being a rational creature, and •that something that is not a duty in its own nature may become an indispensable one barely by its being commanded. And indeed if

our first parent, in the state of innocence and happiness in which he tasted of God's bounty without yet standing in need of his mercy, was most strictly obliged out of mere obedience to conform to a law about something that was intrinsically neither good nor bad,

then surely we in our lapsed [= 'sinful'] condition must be under a high obligation to obey the declared will of God, by which we are commanded to study his truths and do something •that has so much intrinsic goodness in it that it would be a duty even if it were not commanded, and •that brings such recompenses that it is as much an advantage as a duty.

Gratitude

But it is not only obedience and self-interest that should draw us to the study of divine things, but also gratitude. And there are so many important reasons for gratitude that even he who said *Ingratum si dixeris, omnia dixeris* [= 'If you call someone ungrateful, you have said everything'] could not think ingratitude to be worse than ordinary vices by as much as neglect of the duty I am pressing would be worse than ordinary ingratitude.

It would not be hard to show here that we are extremely great debtors to God, both as he is the author and the preserver of our very beings and as he (immediately or mediately) fills up the measure of the continual benefits, prerogatives and other favours we receive from him as men, and the higher blessings which (if we don't let ourselves down) we may receive from him as Christians. But to show in how many ways and to how high a degree God is our benefactor would be to launch out into too immense a subject; and anyway I have already discussed those matters in other papers.

So I will single out a reason for gratitude that will be specially pertinent to our present purpose. For whereas your friend takes so much pride in the study of natural philosophy, and despises not only divines but also statesmen and even the most learned men in other parts of philosophy and knowledge because they are not skilled in physics, he owes that very skill of his, among many other favours, to God. For it is God who made man unlike the horse and the mule, who have no understanding, and endowed him with the noble power of reason by the use of which he acquires whatever knowledge he has of natural things above the beasts that perish. For it can fairly be said about our other acquisitions what Moses, by God's appointment, told the Israelites about

the acquisition of riches:

He warns the people to beware that when their herds, and flocks, and other treasures are multiplied their heart be not lifted up and prompt them to say '*My power, and the might of my hand hath gotten me this wealth*'. He tells them. . . .to 'remember the Lord thy God, for it is he that giveth thee power to get wealth'.

But making men rational creatures is not all that God has done towards making them philosophers. For the knowledge of particular things requires *objects* as well as *faculties*; and if we accept the probable opinion of divines who teach that

the angels were created before the material world, this being what is meant by 'the sons of God' and 'morning stars' that 'shouted for joy' when celebrating the foundations of the earth [Job 38:6-7],

we must allow that there were many creatures endowed with at least as much reason as your friend who were not yet acquainted with the mysteries of nature because nature itself had not yet come into existence. Thus, because God made the world and gave man the faculties that enable him to contemplate it, naturalists are as much obliged to God for their knowledge as we are for our information to those who write us secrets in code and teach us the skill of deciphering things so written, or to those who write what would fill a page in the space of a single penny and give us a microscope to enable us to read it. The naturalist not only has special inducements to gratitude for the endowment of knowledge but also his intelligence gives him a special obligation to express his gratitude in the way I have been recommending; it is one of the most acceptable ways it can be expressed in, especially since in this way philosophers can not only exercise their own gratitude towards God but procure him the gratitude of others. How pleasing men's hearty praises are to God is shown among other things by what is said and

done by the royal poet whom God was pleased to declare a man after his own heart; for he introduces God pronouncing 'Whoso offereth praise glorifieth me', where the word our interpreters translate as 'offereth' in the Hebrew signifies to *sacrifice*, which agrees with the fact that elsewhere those who pay God their praises are said to sacrifice 'to him the calves of their lips'. And the excellent person to whom God gave such a particular testimony was so assiduous in this exercise that the book that we (following the Greek) call 'Psalms' is in the original called 'Sepher Tehillim', i.e. *The book of praises*, because praises are what it most abounds with. And to let you see that many of his praises were of a kind that the naturalist may best give, he exclaims in one place:

How manifold are thy works, O Lord! how wisely hast thou made them. . . .

and elsewhere

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth his handiwork etc.

and in another place

I will praise thee, because I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Marvellous are thy works, and that my soul knoweth right well.

And not content with many such expressions he several times, in a devout rapture and poetic strain, invites the heavens and the stars and the earth and the seas and all the other inanimate creatures to join him in celebrating their common maker. This may seem to be merely a poetical figure of speech, but in a way it might be a suitable thing for a naturalist to say. By

- seeing the power, wisdom, and goodness of the creator, and by
- reflecting on the particulars in which those attributes shine

he engages in a devout consideration of created things which may make them (in a sense) join in glorifying their author.

In any other context, I dare say, your friend is well-natured enough to think it an unkind piece of ingratitude if after some great and excellent prince had freely and transcendently obliged him he did not •concern himself to know what manner of man his benefactor is, and •be anxious to inform himself of the details concerning the person and affairs of that obliging monarch that were not only in themselves worthy of any man's curiosity but that the prince had solemnly declared he was very desirous to have men inquire into. And surely it is very wrong-headed to undervalue or neglect •the knowledge of God himself in favour of •a knowledge which we cannot attain without him and by which he designed to bring us to the study we are neglecting for it. This is not only

- not to treat him as a benefactor, but
- to treat him as if we meant to punish him (if I may so speak) for having done good to us, because we so abuse some of his favours as to make them inducements to our ungrateful disregard of his intentions in the rest.

And this ingratitude is the more culpable because the laws of decency and of justice itself command us to glorify the maker of all things visible, not only on our own account but on account of all his other works. Because God endowed none but man here below with a reasonable soul, not only is he the sole visible being that can return thanks and praises in the world, and thereby is obliged to do so for himself and for the rest of the creation, but also it is for man's advantage that God has left no other visible beings in the world by which he can be studied and celebrated. Why? Because reason is such a ray of divinity that if God had given it to other parts of the universe besides man, the absolute dominion of man

over the rest of the world would have to have been shared or abridged. So that he for whom it would have been as easy to make creatures superior to man (as the Scripture tells us of 'legions' and 'myriads' of angels) as to make them inferior to him dealt so obligingly with mankind as to •trust (if I may so speak) our honesty to bring him celebrations from created things we converse with rather than to •lessen our dominion over them or our prerogatives above them.

Knowing the Apostles' Creed is not enough

But I fear that despite all the excellence of revealed truths—and thus of the only authentic repository of them, the Scripture—you and I have both met with *some* (I hope there are not *many*) virtuosi [see Glossary] who think they can excuse their neglect of the study of it by claiming that to them who are laymen, not ecclesiastics, the explicit knowledge required for Salvation consists in a very few points that are so plainly summed up in the Apostles' Creed, and are so often and conspicuously set down in the Scripture, that one does not need to search or study it much to find them there.¹ In answer to this claim I readily grant that through the great goodness of God, who is willing to have all men saved and come to the knowledge of the truth that is necessary to be so, there are many fewer articles •of faith• absolutely necessary to be distinctly believed by all men than are to be found in various long confessions of faith (some of which have, I fear, less promoted knowledge than impaired charity). But then there are four points to bear in mind. **(1)** A rational man

who will not trouble himself to enquire any further than the Apostles Creed will find it hard to satisfy himself on good grounds that all the fundamental articles of Christianity *are* contained in it. **(2)** The Creed proposes only the credenda [see Glossary] and not the agenda [see Glossary] of religion; whereas the Scriptures were designed not only to teach us what truths we are to believe but what rules we are to live by—obedience to Christianity's laws being as necessary to salvation as belief in its mysteries. **(3)** In addition to the things that are absolutely necessary, there are several that are highly useful in making us more clearly understand, more rationally and firmly believe, and more steadily practise the points that *are* necessary. **(4)** [Boyle introduces, in a rather complicated way, Jesus's 'What I do thou. . . shalt know hereafter' [John 13:7], saying that 'know' may be a mistranslation for Greek meaning 'search [the scriptures] for', and that there's a question about whether this was meant as a prediction or a command; and he goes on to say that either way there is no doubt about the imperative nature of Paul's 'Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly' [Colossians 3:16]. He continues:] This teaches us that searching into the matters of religion may become necessary as a duty even if it were not otherwise necessary as a means of attaining salvation. And indeed it is far more pardonable to lack or miss the knowledge of truths than to despise or neglect it. God's goodness to illiterate or mistaken persons should be taken as pity for our frailties, not encouragement for our laziness. He who pardons seekers of his truths who miss them will not necessarily excuse despisers who will not seek them.

¹ [As given in the Book of Common Prayer, 1662, the Apostles' Creed reads thus: 'I believe in God the father almighty, maker of heaven and earth; and in Jesus Christ his only son our lord, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the father almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. —I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.'

The call of intelligence and intellectual energy

Whether or not by this deliberate neglect of theology the persons I am discussing are careful enough about their own safety, I do not think their conduct says much for their decency. To have received from God a greater measure of intellectual abilities than the general run of Christians, and yet willingly to come short of very many of them in knowledge of the mysteries and other truths of Christianity—which he often invites us, if not expressly commands us, to search after—is conduct that doesn't suggest excessive gratitude! Is it an instance of gratitude and of decency

- to receive one's understanding and one's hopes of eternal felicity from the goodness of God without being solicitous of what can be known of his nature and purposes by so excellent a way as his own revelation of them?
- to dispute anxiously about the properties of an atom and be careless about the inquiry into the attributes of the 'great God who formed all things'?
- to investigate the spontaneous generation of such lowly creatures as insects more than the mysterious generation of the adorable son of God?

and, in short,

- to be more concerned to know everything that makes a corporeal part of the world than to know about the divine and incorporeal author of the whole?

And when these men put so little value on truths that God thought fit to send sometimes prophets and apostles, sometimes angels, and sometimes his only son himself to reveal

that rather than taking trouble to study them they will implicitly (and riskily!) believe whatever is (truly or falsely) said about them by the society of Christians they happen to be born and bred in, do you think they are showing vast respect? And does it show a due regard for points of religion when those who would not believe a proposition in statics (perhaps about a mere point, the centre of gravity) or in geometry (about the properties of some nameless curve or the like)—things ignorance of which is usually not a blemish, and error about which is even more usually without danger—should yet take up the articles of faith, concerning matters of great and everlasting consequence, on the authority of men as fallible as themselves, when satisfaction can be had without them from the infallible word of God? . . .

Again, if a man refused to learn to read any more than just as much as may serve his turn by entitling him to the benefit of the clergy to save him from hanging,¹ would these men think so small a measure of literacy as he had acquired for such a reason could prove that man to be a lover of learning? Similarly, someone who neglects the study of all not-absolutely-necessary divine truths during his life because believing the articles of the creed may manage to keep him from being doomed to hell for ignorance after his death will not be qualified by that degree of knowledge—a *pitiful* one by the standards of a learned man—to count as having the honest love for God and his truths that is appropriate for a rational creature and a Christian.

The ancient prophets, though honoured by God with direct illuminations, were yet very anxious to find out and learn the very circumstances of the evangelical dispensations, which they did not yet know. And some of the

¹ [i.e. to learn to read well enough to count (for legal purposes) as a cleric, and therefore to be tried in a clerical court (with no death penalty) rather than a civil court in which the death penalty was possible.]

gospel mysteries are so noble and excellent that ‘the angels themselves desire to look into them’. And though not all the evangelical truths are precisely necessary to be known, it may be both a duty not to despise the study of them and a happiness to engage in that. It was the earnest prayer of a great king, who was equally a prophet, that his eyes might be opened to behold (not the obvious and necessary truths, but) ‘the wondrous things of God’s law’. At the beginning of the Apocalypse [= book of Revelation] it is said that he is *happy* who reads and observes the things contained in that dark and obscure part of Scripture. And it was not only the truths that make articles of the creed but various other doctrines of the gospel that Christ himself judged worthy to be rounded off with this final sentence: *He that hath ears to hear, let him hear*, for which the excellent Grotius offers this just paraphrase: ‘Intelligence was given to us by God above all so that we might contemplate him in the writings that belong to piety.’

3. Advantages accruing from a study of theology

I come now to our third and last [see page 5] inducement to the study of divine things, namely that the advantages of that study surpass those of all other contemplations by as much as divine things transcend all other objects. And indeed the utility of this study is so powerful a motive and contains in it so many invitations that your friend must have as little sense of self-interest as of gratitude if he can neglect such powerful and such engaging invitations!

Delight

In the first place, theological studies ought to be highly endeared to us by the *delightfulness* of considering such noble and worthy objects as it proposes.

The famous answer given by an excellent philosopher who was asked what he was born for and replied ‘To contemplate the sun’ implies approval for the choice of those who spend their time in contemplating the maker of the Sun, of whom that glorious heavenly body itself is but a shadow. And perhaps that philosopher’s general point was better than his instance of it; for his answer implies that man’s end and happiness consists in the exercise of his noblest faculties on the noblest objects. Surely the seat of formal happiness is the soul, so that happiness consists in the operations of the soul’s faculties; just as the supreme faculty of the mind is the understanding, so the highest pleasures may be expected from the appropriate exercise of the understanding on the sublimest and worthiest objects. Therefore I am not surprised that though some schoolmen assign the will a larger share in man’s felicity than they will allow the intellect, most of them are quite of another opinion and ascribe the pre-eminence in point of felicity to the superior faculty of the soul. But whether or not this is true in all cases, it may at least be admitted in ours. For the chief objects of a Christian philosopher’s contemplation, being God’s infinite goodness as well as his other boundless perfections, are naturally fitted to excite in his mind •an ardent love of that adorable [see Glossary] being and •those other joyous affections and virtuous dispositions that have made some men think that happiness is chiefly seated in the will.

But having intimated this much by the way, I pass on to add that the contentment provided by the assiduous discovery of God and divine mysteries has so much affinity

with the pleasures that will make up men's blessedness in heaven itself that they seem to differ in degree rather than in kind. For the happy state even of angels is represented by our Saviour as consisting in the fact that 'they continually see the face of his father who is in heaven'. And elsewhere the same infallible teacher, intending to express the celestial joys that are reserved for those who for their own sake denied themselves sensual pleasures, employs the vision of God as an emphatic way of referring to *felicity*: 'Blessed are the pure in heart,' he said, 'for they will see God.' And just as Aristotle teaches that the soul does in a way *become* that which it thinks about—because the *form* of the thing will enter the soul.—St. Paul and St. John assure us that God is a *transforming* object, and that in heaven we will be like him because we will see him as he is. And though I readily admit that this beatific vision of God of which the understanding is the proper instrument includes various other things that will jointly contribute to the complete felicity of the future life, I think we may be allowed to argue that that ravishing contemplation of divine objects will make a considerable part of the happy condition these texts refer to in language implying that this contemplation is the whole of it.

I have indicated that the Scripture attributes to the angels themselves transports of wonder and joy in contemplating •God and •the exercises of his wisdom, justice, or other attributes. You may think that in referring you to the angels I am laying aside the person of a naturalist [see Glossary] in favour of divines. If so, I refer you to Descartes himself, whom I am sure your friend will admit to have been a strict philosopher if ever there was one. In that treatise—the *Meditations*—where he thinks he employs a more than mathematical rigour, the impressions made on him by the transcendent excellence of the object he contemplated forced him to utter these (I had almost said *passionate*) words:

'But before examining this point more carefully and investigating other truths that may be derived from it, I want to pause here and spend some time contemplating God; to reflect on his attributes and to gaze with wonder and adoration on the beauty of this immense light, so far as the eye of my darkened intellect can bear it. For just as we believe through faith that the supreme happiness of the next life consists in contemplating the divine majesty, so experience tells us that this same contemplation, though much less perfect, yields the greatest joy we can have in this life.'

Satisfied conscience

But high as the satisfaction is that the study of divine things provides by the nobleness of its object, that same study yields nearly as much contentment through a man's sense of having, in it, performed his duty. To make actions of this nature satisfactory to us there is no need for the things we are employed about to be in themselves excellent or delightful; the inward gratification of conscience for having done our duties is able to gild the bitterest pills and, like the wood that grew by the waters of Marah, to correct and sweeten the liquid that before was the most distasteful. Those ancient pagan heroes whose virtues may make us blush, being guided only by natural reason and innate principles of moral virtues, could find the most difficult and most troublesome duties not only tolerable but pleasant, merely on account of their being duties. And though in our saviour's estimation denying some lusts is as unpleasant as plucking out your right eye or cutting off your right hand, even ladies—such as the Christian martyr Theodora—have with satisfaction chosen not only to deny themselves the greatest pleasures of the senses but even to sacrifice the

seat of them, the body itself, to preserve the satisfaction of being chaste. Nor is it only the dictates of obedience that we comply with in this study, but those of gratitude; and that is a virtue that has so much power over honest minds that some people whose principles and aims were not elevated by religion have, in acknowledgement to their parents and their country, courted the greatest hardships, hazards and sufferings, as if they were as great delights and advantages. And a grateful person spends no part of his life in greater satisfaction than that which he ventures or employs for those to whom he is obliged for his life; and often finds a greater contentment in even the most difficult acknowledgements of a favour than he did in receiving it.

Self-improvement

Another advantage, and not a small one, that may arise from the contemplation of theological truths is the improvement of the contemplator himself in respect of piety and virtue. For just as the gospel is called ‘the mystery of godliness’, and St. Paul elsewhere calls what it teaches ‘the truth which is according to godliness’—i.e. a doctrine formed and fitted to promote the interests of piety and virtue in the world—so this description and praise belongs (though perhaps not equally) to •the more inconspicuous truths discovered by speculation [here = ‘theological research’] as well as to •the more obvious ones that are familiarly taught in catechisms and confessions of faith. I would by no means lessen the excellence and prerogatives of fundamentals; but since the grand and noblest engagements to piety and virtue are a high veneration for God and his Christ and an ardent love of them, I cannot help thinking that the particular inquiries that tend to make greater discoveries of

the attributes of God, the nature and offices and life of our saviour, and the wisdom and goodness they have displayed in planning and bringing about man’s redemption

also tend to increase our admiration and inflame our love for the possessors of such divine excellencies and the authors of such invaluable benefits. . . . Nor is it likely that he who discerns more of the depth of God’s wisdom and goodness will not, other things being equal, be more disposed than others to admire him, to love him, to trust him, and so to allow himself to be governed by him; and this frame of mind •is itself a great part of the worship of God and •directly tends to the production and increase of the virtues without the practice of which (the Scripture plainly tells us) we can neither obey God nor express our love to him. And from this bettering of the mind by the study of theology will incidentally flow another benefit, namely that by giving us a higher value for God and his truths it will endear heaven to us, helping us to get there *and* heightening our felicity when we are there.

I know it may be said that the improvement of the mind is only a moral advantage. But give me leave to answer that •it is a moral advantage that presupposes an intellectual improvement from which it results, and also that •a moral benefit may be great enough, even in the judgment of a mere philosopher and an Epicurean, to deserve as much study as natural philosophy itself. And so that you won’t think that I say this only because in this letter I am writing only as a friend to divines, I will tell you that Epicurus himself, who has nowadays such a numerous sect of naturalists to follow him, studied physics and wrote many treatises about physical matters for this •moral• purpose: so that the mind, by knowing the natural causes of thunder, lightning and other dreadful phenomena, might be freed from the disquieting fears men commonly had that such strange and

formidable things came from some angry deity, and so might trouble the mind as well as the air. This account I have been giving of Epicurus's design seems plainly enough indicated by his own words, preserved for us by Laertius near the end of his letter on physics to Herodotus, where, recommending to him the consideration of what he had said about physical principles in general and meteoric phenomena in particular, he adds: 'If we attend to these things we will give a correct and complete causal account of the source of our disturbance and fear, and so dissolve them.' This fits with what he says at the end of his letter on meteorology to Pythocles; according to his best interpreter, Gassendi, he says: 'Most important, devote yourself to the contemplation of the basic principles from which everything follows, and the nature of the infinite, and things related to them; attend also to the criteria and the feelings and the purpose for which we reason about these things—tranquility and an unperturbed mind.' But this is not all the testimony to the same effect that I can give you from Epicurus himself, for among his *Principal Doctrines*, preserved for us by Laertius (himself reputed to be an Epicurean), I find one that goes further: 'If our suspicions about heavenly phenomena and about death did not trouble us at all and were never anything to us, and if not knowing the limits of aims and desires did not trouble us, then we would have no need for natural science.' Although I do not at all agree with Epicurus's view that the only considerable purpose for physiology [see Glossary] is to free the mind from the belief in a provident deity and the soul's immortality, we can get something from these declarations that in Epicurus's opinion a moral advantage that relates to the government of feelings may reward the trouble of inquiring into nature.

It appears that a mere philosopher who admitted no providence might think it worth his efforts to search into the most abstruse parts of physics and the most difficult phenomena

of nature, only to ease himself of one troublesome feeling, fear; so it need not be thought unphilosophical to pursue a study that will not only •restrain one undue passion but •advance all virtues, free us from all *servile* fears of the Deity, tend to give us a strong well-grounded hope in him, making us view God's greatest power not with terror but with joy.

Consolation

The study of divine truths has yet another advantage, which is too great to be omitted here. While we inhabit our 'cottages of clay' and dwell in this vale of tears, there is hardly anything we encounter more than *afflictions*; so it should considerably endear to us a study that can be easily made to provide us with very powerful consolations in that otherwise unhappy state.

I know it may be said that the speculations about which the naturalist is busied are pleasing diversions as well as noble employments of the mind. And I do not deny that they are often so, when the mind is not hindered from applying itself attentively to them; so that slight and short afflictions may well be weathered out by these philosophical activities; but the greater and sharper sort of afflictions, and the approaches of death, require more powerful remedies than these diversions can afford us. For in such cases, the mind is usually too much discomposed to apply the attention needed for finding pleasure in theorising in physics; and in sicknesses the soul often has as little taste for the pleasures of merely human studies as the languishing body has for the food which at other times was delightful. And few can take any great pleasure in studying the world when they apprehend themselves to be on the point of being driven out of it and in danger of losing all their share in the objects of their contemplation. Knowing that

- the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right ones, or that
- heat is not a real quality (as the schoolmen say) but a special case of the motion of the insensible parts of matter
- and pain not a distinct, inherent quality in the things that produce it but a state of the pained person's sensibility,

will not have much effect on our feeling of the burning heat of a fever or the painful gripes of the colic! The naturalist's activities bring him no consolations that are especially addressed to or exclusive to the state of affliction; and the occupations they present him with •distract his mind from attention to lesser evils rather than •bringing it any advantages to remove or compensate for them; so they work in the manner of opiates rather than of true medicines.

But now if such a person as Dr N. [see page 4] falls into adversity, the case is much otherwise; for when the study of divine things is such as it ought to be, though that study is in itself •an act or exercise of reason, its being engaged in out of obedience, gratitude and love to God makes it—on account of its motives and its aim—•an act of religion; and because it comes from obedience, thankfulness and love to God it is most acceptable to him; and because of his own appointment as well as his goodness it is a most proper and effective means of obtaining his favour; and then I presume it will easily be granted that someone who is so happy as to enjoy *that* can hardly be made miserable by affliction. For—setting aside for now the commonplace of the benefits of afflictions to those who love God and to those who are loved by him—it may suffice that he who (as the Scripture says) 'knows our frame', and has promised those who are his that they will not be 'overburdened', is disposed and accustomed to give his afflicted servants comforts that are

both •extraordinary and •appropriated to that state. Whereas on the one hand

natural philosophy is like its brightest object, the stars, which, however much pleasure the astronomer gets from contemplating them, are mere **natural agents** and so cannot provide him with a kinder influence than usual if he is ill in bed or in prison,

on the other hand

the almighty and compassionate maker of the stars, being a **voluntary agent** (and indeed the most free one), can suit and proportion his reliefs to our needs and alleviate our heaviest afflictions by consolations giving us so much support that the afflictions can never surmount our patience [see Glossary] and are often unable so much as to hinder our joy;

and when death, that 'king of terrors' presents itself, whereas the mere naturalist sadly expects to be deprived of the pleasure of his knowledge by losing the senses and the world that are the instruments and the objects of it; and perhaps (discovering beyond the grave nothing but a state either of eternal destruction or of eternal misery) fears either to be confined for ever to the sepulchre or exposed to torments that will make even such a condition desirable;

on the other hand

the pious student of divine truths is not only •freed from the wracking fears of having his soul annihilated or cast into hell but •enjoys a comfortable expectation of finding far greater satisfaction than ever in the study he now rejoices to have pursued; because the change that others rightly find to be formidable will merely bring him much nearer to the divine objects of his devout curiosity, and strangely elevate and enlarge his faculties to take them in.

Prospect of reward

This leads me to the mention of the last advantage of the study I would persuade you to, which is indeed the highest advantage that can recommend any study or invite men to any undertaking. It is no less than the everlasting enjoyment of the divine objects of our studies •hereafter and the comfortable expectation of it •here. For the employment of one's time and abilities in admiring the nature and providence of God and contemplating the divine mysteries of religion is not only

- one of the chief of those homages and services by which we venerate and obey God, but also
- one of those to which he has been pleased to assign no less a reward than the enjoyment of himself—the greatest reward there can be.

Various saints and angels in heaven have been employed to convey the truths of theology, and are anxious to look into those sacred mysteries; and God has chosen to ordain that those men who study here the same lessons that they do there will study them in their company hereafter. And doubtless though heaven will abound with inexpressible joys, it will not be a minor component of the happiness even of that place that the knowledge of divine things that was so zealously pursued here will be completely attained there. For the things that most excite our desires and quicken the curiosity and industry of our searches here will not only continue there but will be improved to a far greater measure of attractiveness and influence. That is because all those interests, passions and lusts that here below either

- hinder us from clearly discerning, or
- keep us from sufficiently valuing, or
- divert us from attentively enough considering

the beauty and harmony of divine truths will there be either abolished or transfigured. And as the object will be unveiled, so our eye will be enlightened; that is, as God will there disclose those worthy objects of the angels' curiosity, so he will enlarge our faculties to enable us to gaze on those sublime and radiant truths without being dazzled, truths whose harmony and splendour we will then be qualified to discover and consequently to rapturously admire. And this enlargement and elevation of our faculties will proportionately increase our satisfaction at the discoveries it will enable us to make. For theology is like a heaven that has more stars than appear in it to our eyes, which are not quick-sighted and piercing enough to reach them. And as the milky way and other whiter parts of the firmament have been full of immortal lights from the beginning, and our new telescopes have not placed them there but found them there; so when our Saviour after his glorious resurrection instructed his apostles to teach the gospel, it is not said that he altered anything in the Scriptures of Moses and the prophets but only opened and enlarged their intellects so that they could understand the Scriptures. And the royal prophet makes it his prayer 'that God would be pleased to open his eyes, that he might see wonderful things out of the law'; being. . . .so well satisfied that the word of God did not lack admirable things that he is only concerned for the improvement of his own eyes so that they would be qualified to discern them.

Reward for attempt, not for success

I had almost forgotten one aspect of the advantages of theological studies that is too considerable to be left unmentioned. I have spoken of the great benefits arising from the knowledge of divine truths; but to endear theological studies I can safely add that to procure us these benefits the actual attainment

of that knowledge is not always absolutely necessary, and a hearty endeavour after it may suffice to entitle us to them. The patient alchemist who consumes himself and his wealth in seeking after the ·mythical· philosopher's stone, if he does not find his idolised elixir he would have done as well—indeed better—never to have sought it, and remains as poor in effect as he was rich in expectation. The farmer who employs his seed and time to obtain from the ground a plentiful harvest must, if an unkind season happens, see his toil made fruitless—'the long labours of the year are vain' [Ovid].

Too many patients who have punctiliously done and undergone all that physicians could prescribe for recovery meet at last with death instead of health. You know how skilful geometricians have been entertained by the laborious attempts even of such famous writers as Scaliger, Longomontanus, and other tetragonists [= 'would-be squarers of the circle']; and that their successor Mr Hobbes, after all the methods he has adopted (and others he has proposed) to square the circle and double the cube, by failing in his various attempts has come off not only with disappointment but with disgrace. And (to give an example even in things celestial) how much trouble has been taken to find out longitudes and make astrological predictions with some certainty, the failure in which has have been useless if not prejudicial to the attempters.

But God (to speak with St. Paul on another occasion) 'who made the world and all things therein, and is Lord of heaven and earth, seeks not our services as though he *needed* anything, seeing he giveth life and breath and all things'. His self-sufficiency and bounty are such that he seeks in our obedience the occasions of rewarding it, and prescribes us

services because the practice of them is not only suitable to our rational nature but such as will prevail with his justice to let his goodness make our persons happy. Agreeably to this doctrine we find in the Scripture that Abraham is said to have been justified by faith when he offered his son Isaac on the altar (though he did not actually sacrifice him), because he tried to do so; and God, accepting the will for the deed, accepted the blood of a ram instead of Isaac's.

And thus we know that it was not David but Solomon who built the temple of Jerusalem, and yet God says to David (as we are told by Solomon) 'For as much as it was in thine heart to build a house for my name, thou didst well in that it was in thine heart; notwithstanding thou shalt not build the house' etc. And if we look to the other details of this story, as they are presented in the second book of Samuel, we will find that on David's declaration of a design to build God a house, God himself condescends to honour him, as he once did Moses, with the unique title of his 'servant', and commands the prophet to say to him 'Also the Lord tells thee that he will make thee a house', to which is added one of the most gracious messages that God ever sent to any man.¹

From this we can learn that God approves and accepts even the endeavours (of his servants) that never come to be actually accomplished, if they are real and sincere. Good designs and endeavours are our part, but the outcomes of those—as of all other things—are in the all-disposing hand of God who if we are true to what lies in us will not •allow us to be losers by the defeating dispositions of his providence but will •crown our endeavours either with success or with some other recompense that will keep us from being losers by missing success.

¹ [It is several verses long, and ends with: 'And thine house and thy kingdom shall be established for ever before thee: thy throne shall be established for ever' (2 Samuel 7:16).]

And indeed if we consider the great eulogies that the Scripture, frequently as well as justly, gives to God's goodness (which it represents as over, or as above, all his works) and consider that his 'purer eyes' see *and punish* the murder and adultery of the heart when those intentional sins are hindered from advancing into actual ones, we can hardly doubt that he whose justice punishes sinful aims will allow his infinite goodness to recompense pious attempts. And therefore our Saviour pronounces 'blessed' those who 'hunger and thirst after righteousness', assuring them that they will be satisfied, thereby sufficiently intimating to us that an earnest desire after a spiritual grace (such as the knowledge of divine things) may entitle a man to the complete possession of it, if not in this life then in the next. *There* we will no longer 'walk by faith but by sight', and obtain knowledge as well as other endowments befitting that glorious state in which (we are assured by him who purchased it for us) we will be equal to, or like, the angels.

I hope that the considerations I have so far laid before you to recommend the study of divine truths have persuaded you, Sir, that it is on many accounts both noble and eligible

in itself; and therefore I shall here conclude Part I of this work. And because the undervaluation that Physeophilus [see Glossary] expresses for that excellent employment seems to flow mainly from his fondness and partiality for natural philosophy, it will next concern us to *compare* the study of theology with that of physics, and show that the advantages your friend alleges in favour of the latter are partly •much lessened by disadvantageous circumstances and partly •much out-weighed by the transcendent excellencies of theological contemplations, the study of which will thereby appear to be not only eligible in itself but preferable to its rival. I must warn you to expect to find Part II, which undertakes to make this comparison, a good deal longer than Part I, not only •because it often requires more trouble and more words to detect and disprove an error than to make out a truth, but also because various things tending to the credit of divinity, which consequently might have been brought into Part I, were thought more fit to be interwoven with other things in the answers made to the objections examined in Part II.