

# Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion

David Hume

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis . . . . indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth. Longer omissions are reported with square brackets in normal-sized type.

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## Letter from Pamphilus to Hermippus

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Part 1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(Milton, *Paradise Lost* ii)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Part 2

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Our ideas reach no further than our experience.

We have no experience of divine attributes and operations.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

than it is to conceive that

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Part 3

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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