

# Dialogues on Metaphysics and Religion

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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. Larger omissions are reported, between brackets, in normal-sized type. The numbering of the segments of each dialogue is Malebranche's.

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## TWELFTH DIALOGUE

**Divine providence in the laws of the •union of soul and body, and God's uniting us through these •laws• to all his works. Laws of the •union of mind with reason. Societies are formed through these two sorts of laws. How God distributes worldly goods to men through angels, and distributes internal grace and all sorts of goods through Jesus Christ. The generality of providence.**

**Aristes:** [He exclaims over the wonderfulness of the divine foresight involved in the matters discussed in the tenth dialogue.]

**Theodore:** If the mere arrangement of matter and the necessary effects of certain very simple and general laws of motion strike us as so marvellous, what must we think of the various *societies* that are established and preserved through the laws of the union of soul and body? What judgments will we make concerning the Jewish people and their religion, and of the church of Jesus Christ? . . . Natural laws work through •collisions of bodies, and •such occasional causes—altogether blind and simple as they are—produce an infinity of wonderful works through the wisdom of the creator's providence. Well then, Aristes, what will be the beauty of God's house, the celestial Jerusalem? The nature of this is •not corporeal but• intellectual, enlightened by eternal wisdom and existing *in* that same wisdom. . . . How magnificent this temple of the true Solomon will be! Won't •it be as much more perfect than •this universe as •minds are nobler than •bodies? . . . God's wisdom is not exhausted by the marvels that he has •already• made. There is no doubt that he will derive from •spiritual nature beauties that will infinitely surpass everything he has made from •matter. What do you think of this, my dear Aristes?

**Aristes:** I think, Theodore, that you enjoy hurling me from abysses into abysses.

**Theodore:** Yes, from deep abysses into still deeper ones. Would you rather confine us to considering only the beauties of this visible world, only God's general providence in structuring bodies and setting them in motion? •That would be a poor choice•. This earth that we inhabit is made *only* for the societies that are formed on it. If men can form societies together, it is in order to serve God in a single religion. Everything is by nature related to the church of Jesus Christ, the spiritual temple that God is to inhabit eternally. So we shouldn't stop in this first abyss of God's providence regarding the division of matter and structure of bodies; we should leave it and go into a second, and from there into a third, until we have reached the final stage of all this, where everything is related by God. It isn't enough to *believe* and *say* that God's providence is incomprehensible; we must *know* this and *comprehend* it. And, to be quite sure that it is incomprehensible in every way, we must try to explore it in every way and to follow it everywhere.

**Aristes:** But we'll never finish the topic of providence if we follow it all the way to heaven.

**Theodore:** I agree, if we follow it the whole way there. But we will soon lose sight of it. We'll have to pass very lightly over things that deserve—for the magnificence of the work and for the wisdom of the action—much more attention. For God's providence over his church is an abyss where even a mind enlightened by faith discovers almost nothing. But let

us begin the subject.

1. You know, Aristes, that man is composed of two substances, mind and body, the states of which are correlated through the general laws that are causes of the union of these two natures; and these laws are nothing but the constant and always-effective volitions of the creator.

Let us look a little into the wisdom of these laws.

At the moment a torch is lit it spreads light in all directions, or rather it pushes out in all directions the matter surrounding it. Because of differences in their surfaces, bodies reflect the light differently—or rather they do different things with the pressure on them caused by the torch. (These ‘different things’ are probably just vibrations or shocks that the very tiny particles of matter ·of which the light consists· receive from ·fairly small· bodies that they brush past on their way to the ·larger· bodies that they illuminate. But that is by the way.) All these vibrations—these variations of pressure that are alternatively faster or slower—are passed out instantaneously in every direction, in loops, since everything is a plenum.

[Theodore is relying on Descartes’s (meta)physics. Descartes held that  
 •there is no empty space (everything is a plenum),  
 •no portion of matter can be compressed or expanded,  
 •no portion of matter goes out of existence in the ordinary course of events, and  
 •no two portions of matter can occupy the same location at the same time.

From these premises he validly inferred that when a portion of matter  $p_1$  moves it must *instantaneously* make portion  $p_2$  move (to make room for  $p_1$ ), at that same instant portion  $p_3$  must move (to make room for  $p_2$ ); and so on, to infinity unless a *closed moving loop* of matter forms, with  $p_n$  moving into  $p_1$ ’s initial space *while*  $p_1$  moves out of it, with no time-lag. Hence ‘instantaneously. . . in loops’.]

Thus, as soon as our eyes are open all the light-rays reflected

from the surface of bodies and entering through the pupil of the eye spread out through the eye’s fluids and come together again in the optic nerve. (How the eye works in relation to the action of light is a wonderful thing, but we mustn’t stop for it; if you want to study it, consult Descartes’s *Optics*.) The optic nerve is then moved in various different ways by differences in the pressure-vibrations that are reaching it; and the movement of this nerve is passed along to the part of the brain that is closely united to the soul. What happens then is the result of laws of the union of soul and body.

2. (1) How we are informed of the presence of objects. Although bodies are invisible in themselves, the sensation of colour that they occasion in us (whether we want it or not) persuades us that we see the bodies themselves, because no part of God’s operation in us—the goings-on within the eye, that I have just described—is detectable by the senses. And because colours affect us ·only· slightly, instead of regarding them as sensations of ours we attribute them to objects. Thus we judge that objects •exist and that they •are as we see them—black and white, red and blue, and so on.

- (2) Although differences of light reflected from objects consist only in differences in the rate of pressure-vibration, the sensations of colour corresponding to these changes in vibrations have essential differences, to make it easier for us to distinguish objects from one another.

- (3) Thus, with the aid of •sensible differences of colours that exactly mark the boundaries of the •intelligible parts that we find in the idea of space or extension, we discover at a glance countless different objects—their sizes, shapes, positions, and motion or rest. Our intake of all this is exactly right for our survival, but it is very confused and doesn’t suffice for any other purpose. Remember that the senses aren’t given us to discover the truth, or exactly how objects relate to one another, but to preserve our bodies

and provide everything that can be useful to them. For example, we have to sort out the things that we see into those that are good for our health and those that are bad for it; and we can't do this securely just on the basis of colour, because light may be reflected in the same way by two bodies whose natures are different; so sensations of colour don't make a big impact on our lives. They are useful to us in distinguishing objects from one another, rather than in taking them to ourselves or keeping them at a distance. So we refer our colour-sensations to the external objects rather than to the eyes that receive the light, because we always refer sensations to whatever it is better for our body to refer them to. (This is something we do naturally; we have no choice about it.) We refer the pain of a jab not to a pin but to the finger pricked. We refer heat, smell, and taste to the sense-organs and to the objects. And we refer colour only to objects. It is clear that all of this must be for the good of the body, and there's no need for me to explain it to you.

3. There, Aristes, are what seem to be the simplest and most general truths about sensations of colours. Let us now look into how all this comes about. It seems to me that infinite wisdom is needed to regulate the details of colours in such a way that objects near and far are seen approximately according to their size. (Not *extremely* far, for when bodies are so small or so far away that they can do us neither good nor harm, we don't see them.)

**Aristes:** Certainly, infinite wisdom is needed to bring it about that whenever I open my eyes, colours are distributed across the idea I have of space, in such a way that there is formed in my soul a new world (as it were)—a world that *is in me* and relates well enough to the world that *I am in*. But I doubt that God is quite exact in the sensations he gives us, for I know that the sun doesn't shrink as it moves away from the

horizon, and yet it appears to me to do so.

**Theodore:** Still, you're sure that God is always *exact* in making you see the sun as smaller in *exact* proportion to its distance from the horizon. This exactness signifies something.

**Aristes:** I believe it. But how does it come about?

**Theodore:** It is because God, abiding by the laws governing the union of body with soul, gives us—snap!, with no delay—the sensations of colour that *we* would give *ourselves* if we had a God-like knowledge of optics and if we knew exactly the network of relations among the shapes of bodies that are projected onto the back of our eyes. For God has set himself to act in our souls purely on the basis of what is happening in our bodies. *He acts in the soul as if he knew nothing of what is going on outside except what he knows through his knowledge of what is taking place in our organs.* That is the principle; let us follow it.

Now, when the sun is rising or setting, there are two reasons why it appears further from us than it does at midday: one is that we observe a great deal of terrain between us and the horizon where the sun is at sunrise and sunset; the other is that the sky looks like a slightly flattened dome. [The remainder of this speech slightly amplifies what Theodore says, in ways that the apparatus of little dots can't easily record.] If the sky *were* a flattened dome, an object at its edge would be further from us than an object high above us; so the sky's appearing like a flattened dome has the result that the sun looks further away at sunrise and sunset than at other times. Now, if it *were* further away at those two times than at noon, the image of it traced at the back of the eye would be smaller at those two times than at noon. (Quite generally, the more distant a body is, the smaller the image of it that is traced at the back of the eye.) But at those times the image *isn't*

smaller than it is at noon; it is near enough to the same size. And so we have the sun, at sunrise or sunset, •producing the same-sized image as at noon and yet for two different reasons •appearing to be further away than it is at noon. Putting these to together, we get the inevitable result that at those two times the sun *appears larger* than it does at noon.

**Theotimus:** [He describes an experiment with smoked glass which, he says, confirms Theodore's point that the rising or setting sun seems further away because •one sees so much of the earth between oneself and it. He calls •this '*the reason*' for the phenomenon; the flattened-dome point disappears from the conversation.]

**4. Theodore:** Bear this in mind, Aristes: although you are convinced that the sun isn't smaller at midday than at sunset, you see it as much smaller. And judge from this that the sensation of a shining circle that represents the sun to you gets its precise size only through relations to the colours of all the objects you see between yourself and the sun, since it is your *view* of these objects that makes you think the sun to be distant. Judge from this also that the basis I have shown you for the different appearances of the size of the sun must also be the basis for the apparent sizes of everything we see. And try to grasp the wisdom of the creator who, the *instant* your eyes are open, gives you an infinity of different sensations of colour of an infinity of objects, sensations that show you their size-differences not •on the basis of the size-differences amongst the images traced at the back of the eye but—extraordinarily—•determined by the most exact possible reasonings of optics.

**Aristes:** In this matter, I don't wonder so much at the wisdom, exactitude, and uniformity of the creator as the stupidity or pride of the philosophers who think it's the soul itself that forms ideas of all the objects in our environment.

Still, I acknowledge that an infinite wisdom is necessary to produce in our souls, as soon as our eyes are open, the distribution of colours that shows us something of how things are in the world. But I would be glad if our senses never deceived us, at least in things of consequence or in such a very obvious way. The other day, when I was going very quickly downstream, it seemed to me that the trees on the bank were moving; and a friend of mine often sees everything revolving in front of him, so that he can't stand up. These illusions are most obvious and most troublesome.

**5. Theodore:** God couldn't do anything better, Aristes, because he wants to act in us in accordance with certain general laws. Recall the principle that I just gave you:

The occasional causes of what occurs in the soul must occur in the body, because it is the soul and the body that God chose to unite together. Thus, God must be led to do such-and-such in our soul purely by various changes occurring in our body. He is to act in our soul as though he knew nothing about our environment except what can be inferred from what happens in our bodily organs.

I repeat, Aristes, *this is the principle*. Pretend that your soul knows exactly everything that happens to its body, and that it gives itself all the sensations most suitable for the preservation of life. This will be exactly how God acts in the soul. [Theodore goes to explain the moving-trees phenomenon, and another of his own (looking at a clock through your legs, and *not* seeing it as upside down), arguing that this is all wonderfully to God's credit. He acknowledges that the dizzy spells of Aristes' friend are probably due to pathology, the animal spirits going astray, and continues:] But what can you expect? The laws of the union of soul and body are infinitely wise and always exactly followed; but the

occasional causes that bring these laws into play (·i.e. the relevant bodily events·) are sure to let us down quite often because now (·i.e. since sin came into the world·) the laws of the communication of motion are not under the command of our will.

**Aristes:** What order and wisdom there is in the laws of the union of soul and body! As soon as our eyes are open, we see an infinity of different objects and their different inter-relations; and we get this without putting any work into it. Even if no-one thinks about this, it is utterly wonderful.

**6. Theodore:** By this means God doesn't just *reveal* his works to us—he also *connects* us with them in thousands upon thousands of ways. Here's an example:

I see a child about to fall. Just this glimpse—this one agitation of the optic nerve—releases certain springs in my brain that will make me run forward to help it and shout for others to help; at the same time, my soul will be affected and moved, as it should be for the good of any human being.

If I look a man in the face, I take in whether he is sad or joyful, whether he looks up to me or thinks I am trash, whether he wishes me well or ill; and I get all of this through certain movements of the eyes and lips that have no relation to what they signify. When a dog shows me its teeth, I judge that it is angry; but when a man show me his teeth I don't think he wants to bite me. The man's laugh inspires confidence in me, but a similar sound from a dog makes me afraid. ·These associations of bodily traits with mental states come to us smoothly and naturally; when we try to think them out, we don't do so well, as is shown by the fact that· painters who want to express the passions find themselves in difficulties. They often take one look or facial expression for another. But ·in everyday life· when a man is agitated by some passion,

everyone who sees him is aware of it, though they may not notice what exactly is happening with his lips, his eyes, his nose. This is because God unites us ·with one another· by means of the laws of the union of soul and body.

·Through those laws, God correlates ·your passion with ·your facial expression, and ·events in my eyes and brain with ·beliefs about your mental state. In this four-item sequence, the second and third items are of course linked by the laws of the communication of motion·.

Not only are men united with men in this way, but each creature is united with all those that are useful to it, each in its own way. For example:

I see my dog behaving in an ingratiating way, wagging its tail, arching its back, lowering its head. This sight connects me to the dog, producing a kind of friendship in my soul and also certain motions in my body that also attach the dog to me in return.

There you have it: *that* is what produces a man's liking for his dog and the dog's devotion to its master! A little light releases certain springs in the two machines—the bodies of the man and the dog—that have been assembled by the creator's wisdom in such a way that they can help one another to survive. That much of the story applies to both; but man, in addition to the machine of his body, has a soul and consequently has sensations and motions corresponding to the changes that occur in his body; while the dog is a mere machine whose movements directed to their end should make us wonder at the infinite intelligence of him who constructed it.

**Aristes:** I understand, Theodore, that the laws of the union of soul and body serve to unite each mind not only to a certain portion of matter but also to all the rest of the

universe—to some parts more than to others, though, depending on how necessary they are to us. My soul spreads out (so to speak) through my body, by means of pleasure and pain. It goes outside my body by means of other less vigorous sensations. And by light and colours it spreads out everywhere, right up to the heavens. . . . How marvellous this linkage is!

**7. Theodore:** You will be even more impressed if you consider instead the results of these laws in the establishment of societies, in the education of children, in the growth of the sciences, in the formation of the church. **Society:** How do you know me? You see only my face, a certain arrangement of matter that is visible solely by its colour. I move the air with my speech; this air strikes your ear, and you know what I am thinking! **Education:** We don't just train children as we do horses and dogs; we also inspire in them a sense of honour and honesty. **Sciences:** You have in your library the opinions of the philosophers and the history of all the past; but without the laws of the union of soul and body your entire library would be at best white and black paper. Track these laws into **religion**. How does it come about that you are a Christian? It's because you aren't deaf! Faith is instilled in our hearts through our ears. Our certainty about things we don't see comes from miracles that were seen. What enables a minister of Jesus Christ to move his tongue to announce the Gospel and absolve us from our sins is the power we get from these laws of the union of soul and body. It is obvious that these laws are all-important in religion, in morality, in the sciences, in societies, for the public good and for the private. So this is one of the greatest means that God employs in the ordinary course of his providence for conserving the universe and carrying out his plans.

**8.** Now think about how many relations and networks of relations had to be sorted out to establish these wonderful laws and apply them in such a way that all the results were the best and the most worthy of God possible. [Theodore adds details of God's care and foresight—e.g. dogs don't smell flowers because they don't need to, and so on.]

**Aristes:** The mind gets lost in these sorts of reflections.

**Theotimus:** True, but nevertheless it comprehends that God's wisdom in his general providence is in every way incomprehensible.

**9. Theodore:** Then let's move on. The mind of man is united to his body in such a way that his body relates him to everything around him—not only objects he can see, touch, etc. but invisible substances as well, since men are connected not only in their bodies but also in their minds. All this comes from the general laws God uses in governing the world—it's what is marvellous about providence. The mind of man is also united to God—that is, to the eternal wisdom, the universal reason, that enlightens all intellects. And here again the uniting is done by general laws that are brought into play by *our attention*, this being the relevant occasional cause. Movements stirred up in my brain are the occasional or natural cause of my sensations. But it's my attention that is the occasional cause of the presence of ideas to my mind. [Note that the ideas are present *to* the mind, not present *in* the mind. As the first dialogue makes clear, Theodore holds that all these ideas are *God's*; they are not states of *our* minds; we get to contemplate them and use them in our thinking, but they are no more parts or aspects of ourselves than is the saw that we grip and use for cutting wood.] I think of whatever I want to. It is because of me that we are discussing this topic rather than some other, because I chose to focus my attention on it and then drew you in. But it isn't up to me whether I feel pleasure, hear



music, simply see blue. Here is why:

We are not constructed so as to be able to know how sensible objects relate to one another and to our body. It wouldn't be right if our sheer survival required the soul to attend to everything that might threaten us, so an alternative way of informing it had to be found. The soul gets the needed information from the short and sure evidence of instinct and sensation, which frees it to be totally occupied in doing its duties to God and looking for the true goods, the goods of the mind.

It is true that now our sensations cast darkness and confusion on our ideas, so that we *don't* always think of what we want to. But that is a result of sin. [Theodore repeats things he has said earlier about why God permitted sin, declaring them to be irrelevant to the present topic.]

**10.** Our attention, then, is the occasional and natural cause of the presence of ideas to our mind in consequence of general laws of its union with universal reason. God had to set it up in this way, and I shall now explain why.

God willed that we be free—so as to make us capable of deserving heaven, and also so as to use free causes as satisfactorily as necessary ones in carrying out his plans, thus making *shine out* the wisdom of his providence and his role as searcher of hearts. Now, just as we can love only through love of the good, we necessarily always decide to do what appears best to us at the moment of decision. And what appears best to us at a given moment depends upon what ideas we are contemplating at that moment. So if we had no command over our attention, or if our attention was not the natural cause of our ideas, we would not be free or worthy of merit or demerit; because we would have no control over what ideas were present

to us, and thus no command over how we acted. We couldn't even *hold back* from deciding, because we wouldn't be able to consider reasons that might lead us to hold back. For example, if Adam hadn't been in command of his ideas through his attention, his distraction—his wavering away from the good, the initiating cause of his disobedience—wouldn't have been voluntary.

And so, as I said, it was essential to God's over-all plan that he give us command over our own attention, and make that the occasional cause of the presence to us of this or that idea.

For you should know that God forms all societies and governs all nations—the Jewish people, the present church, the future church—by the general laws of the union of minds with eternal wisdom. [Theodore goes on at some length about how these laws enable good kings to govern well and bad ones to govern badly. And about how the same laws are of service to 'the angels and all the blessed spirits' as well as to 'the malice of demons'. In the course of this speech he refers to the union of minds 'with wisdom' and 'with reason', clearly making these fall under a single set of general laws.]

**11. Aristes:** It seems to me, Theodore, that you are considering the wisdom of God's providence only as shown in the establishment of general laws and in the linkage of causes with their effects, letting all created things act according to their own nature, the free freely and the compelled in accordance with the power that the general laws give them. . . . This is certainly the most beautiful part of providence, but it isn't the most satisfactory. God's infinite foreknowledge is the foundation of the generality and uniformity of action that express his wisdom and the unchangeableness; but it seems to me *not* to express his goodness toward men or the

severity of his justice against the wicked. It isn't possible that God should—just by *general* providence—•give us revenge against those who harm us or •provide for all our needs. And how are we to be satisfied when there is something missing? So I admire your providence, Theodore, but I'm not very satisfied with it. It is excellent for God but not so good for us. I want God to provide for all his creatures.

**Theodore:** He does provide for them Aristes, lavishly. Do you want me to display the good deeds of the creator?

**Aristes:** I know that every day God does thousands of things for us. It seems that the whole universe exists only for us.

**Theodore:** What more do you want?

**Aristes:** I want us to lack *nothing*. God made all created things *for us*; yet this or that person doesn't have bread. A providence that provided an equal supply to all things of the same kind, or that distributed good and evil exactly according to merits—now, *that* would be a real providence! What good is this infinite number of stars? What does it matter to us that the motions of planets are so well ordered? I wish God would leave all that, and think a little more about *us*. The earth is devastated by the wickedness and malignity of its inhabitants. God should make himself feared; it seems that he doesn't interfere in the details of our affairs. The simplicity and generality of his ways brings this thought to my mind.

**Theodore:** I understand, Aristes; you are presenting yourself as someone who rejects •providence and thinks that here below everything is made and ruled by •chance. And I understand how, from that standpoint, you want to dispute the generality and uniformity of God's action in governing the world because this conduct doesn't meet our needs or our wants. But please note that I am reasoning from established

facts and from the idea of the infinitely perfect being. I grant you that the sun rises equally on the good and on the wicked, and often scorches the lands of good men while making the lands of the impious fertile. In short, men are not miserable in proportion to their guilt. That is what has to be reconciled with a providence worthy of the infinitely perfect being.

[In the first half of this next paragraph, Theodore takes the question to be: Given the world as it is, does it result from God's frequently intervening in particular situations? This misunderstanding of what Aristes has said is odd, given that one man wrote all of this.] Hail wrecks the crops of a good man, Aristes. Either •this distressing effect is a natural result of general laws or •God produces it by special providence. If he produces it by special providence, then far from providing for everyone he positively wants and brings it about that the best man in the district lacks bread. So it is far better to maintain that this miserable effect is a natural result of general laws. And this is what we usually mean when we say that God 'permitted' a certain misfortune. Another point: you agree that to govern the world by general laws is to proceed in a way that is fine and great, worthy of the divine attributes; your only complaint is that it doesn't sufficiently convey the character of God's fatherly goodness toward good people and the severity of his justice toward the wicked.

**what Theodore says next:** *C'est que vous ne prenez point garde à la misère de gens de bien, et à la prospérité des impiés. Car les choses étant comme nous voyons qu'elles sont, je vous soutiens qu'une Providence particulière de Dieu porterait nullement le caractère de sa bonté, puisque très souvent les justes sont accablés des maux, et que les méchants sont comblés de biens.*

**conservatively translated:** This is because you don't take into account the misery of good men and the prosperity of

the impious. For, things being as we see they are, I put it to you that a special providence on the part of God wouldn't at all convey the character of his goodness and his justice, since very often the righteous are crushed by misfortunes and the wicked are laden with goods.

**what he's getting at:** ???

But on the supposition that God's conduct should convey the character of his wisdom as well as his goodness and his justice, although goods and evils are not now proportioned to the merits of men, I find no harshness in his general providence. In support of this I have two things to say. **(1)** From an infinity of possible combinations of causes with their effects, God has chosen the one that best reconciled the physical with the moral; and that when he chose to cause that hailstorm he was motivated not by its predictably falling on the land of a certain good man but rather by its predictably falling on the land of a certain wicked man. Note the signification of the word 'motivated': if God afflicts the just, it is because he wants to test them and make them deserve their reward; *that* is his motive. **(2)** Since all men are sinners, none of them merits God's abandoning the simplicity and generality of his ways in order on this earth to proportion goods and evils to their merits and their demerits. In due course God will give to each according to his deeds, at the latest on the day when he will come to judge the living and the dead and enact general laws of punishment that will stand for ever.

**12.** Yet, Aristes, don't think I'm claiming that God *never* acts by special volitions, and that *all* he does now is to follow the natural laws that he initially set up. I am claiming only that God never abandons the simplicity of his ways or the uniformity of his conduct without weighty reasons, because the more general providence is, the more it conveys the character of the divine attributes.

**Aristes:** But *when* does he have these great reasons? Perhaps never!

**Theodore:** [He repeats what he said in the ninth dialogue, about cases where the claims of uniformity are outweighed by something else. He knows nothing about *when* this occurs.] But I do know that it *does* sometimes happen, because faith tells me so. Reason makes me know that it is possible, but it doesn't assure me that it actually happens.

**Aristes:** I understand your thought, Theodore, and I see that it perfectly fits reason as well as experience. I agree with the part about needing *faith* to know that God sometimes departs from his laws because actually we see that all the effects that are known to us have natural causes, and thus that—so far as experience can tell—God governs the world according to general laws that he established for that purpose.

**13. Theotimus:** True, but scripture is filled with miracles that God worked for the Jewish people, and I don't think he neglects his church so much as to forsake it so as to maintain the generality of his conduct.

**Theodore:** Certainly, Theotimus, God works infinitely more miracles for his church than for the synagogue. The Jewish people were accustomed to see what are called miracles. An enormous number of them had to occur, because the abundance of their lands and the prosperity of their armies were tied to and limited by their scrupulous observance of the commandments of the law. For it isn't likely that the physical and the moral could be correlated so exactly that Judaea was always fertile to the extent that its inhabitants were good men; and so among the Jews there were countless miracles. [Footnote by Malebranche: By 'miracle' I mean: effects depending on general laws that are not naturally known to us.] But I think there are even more miracles

among us—not to apportion •worldly goods and evils to our works, but to distribute freely among us •true goods or help that we need in acquiring them. But all this happens without God’s departing at every moment from the generality of his conduct. This is what I must explain to you, for it is certainly what is most wonderful in providence.

**14.** [The remainder of the dialogue—about one third of the whole—is almost purely theological, with little philosophical interest. Adam’s sin gave us difficulties and needs and limitations that he didn’t have before he sinned. God’s general providence operates in a world of sinners, in pretty much the way described in this and earlier dialogues. Three episodes in this long discourse are philosophically significant.

[(1) In section 4 of the eleventh dialogue Theodore has implied that the movements of our bodies are tied to our volitions *and to those of angels*; in section 16 of this twelfth dialogue he says explicitly that angels ‘have power’ over our bodies, and then he amplifies (or corrects) that to the statement that angelic volitions are *occasional* causes of our bodily movements: ‘Nothing happens in bodies except through motion, and it would be a contradiction for the angels to be true causes of motion (see section 6 etc. in the seventh dialogue). So the power of angels over bodies and consequently over us derives solely from a general law that God made for himself to move bodies according to what the angels will. Hence, God does not abandon the generality of his providence when he uses the services of angels to govern nations, because angels act only through the efficacy of a general law.’ Theodore doesn’t discuss any interplay amongst the *three* occasional causes of our bodily movements: •movements already occurring in our bodies, •our volitions, •the volitions of the angels.

[(2) Also in section 16, he gives an account of the sources of Jesus Christ’s volitions, and various relations between the divine son and his father. In the course of discussing the unfailing success of the requests that Jesus makes to God the father, Theodore says this: ‘What Jesus presents to God the father’ is not in truth a moral intercession like that of one man pleading on behalf of another, but rather an intercession that is powerful and invariably unfailing in virtue of the general law that God made to refuse nothing to his son. ‘If it is comparable with anything in the human condition, it is’ like the intercession involved in our practical desires when we decide to move our arms, walk, or speak. ‘I speak of ‘intercession’ here’ because all the desires of creatures

are powerless in themselves,  
are effective only through the power of God,  
do not act independently,  
are basically nothing but prayers.’

That last clause [*ce ne sont au fonds que des prières* is a strikingly dramatic and at the same time perfectly accurate summing up of Malebranche’s account of human action.]

[(3) This passage from section 18 is noteworthy: ‘Compare your idea of providence with mine. Which of the two shows more wisdom and foreknowledge? Mine bears the character of God’s most unfathomable quality, namely his ability to foresee free acts of a creature in every sort of circumstance. On my view, God makes just as good use of free causes as of necessary ones in carrying out his plans. On my view, God doesn’t form his wise plans blindly: before forming them (I speak in human terms), he compares all possible works with all possible ways of carrying them out. On my view, God must derive an infinite glory from the wisdom of his conduct, yet *his* glory takes nothing away from the glory of the free causes to whom he communicates his power

without depriving them of their freedom. God gives them a part in the glory of his work and of theirs by letting them act freely according to their nature; and in doing this he increases his own glory. For it is infinitely more difficult to

execute his plans surely through free causes than through necessary causes.' [The point of the aside 'I speak in human terms' is that Theodore doesn't think of God as *first* investigating possibilities and *then* drawing up plans, because he doesn't take God to be *in time*.]

### THIRTEENTH DIALOGUE

**The ordinary way of speaking of providence is not necessarily to be criticized. The principal general laws by which God governs the world. His providence in keeping his church infallible.**

**1. Aristes:** [He offers an excited sketch of the wonderful things he has been learning.]

**Theodore:** I see that you have followed closely and approvingly the principle I have been presenting these last days, for you seem to be still quite moved by it. But have you really grasped it, made yourself master of it? I still have doubts about that, because you have hardly had time to meditate enough to put yourself in complete possession of it. Share some of your reflections with us, please, so that I may shake off my doubt and be at peace. ·I ask this because I think that· the more useful and fertile a principle is, the more likely it is to be somewhat misunderstood.

**2. Aristes:** I think so too, Theodore; but what you told us is so clear, your way of explaining providence so perfectly squares with the idea of the infinitely perfect being, and with everything we see happen, that I really *know* it to be true. What joy I feel in seeing myself freed of the superficial opinion that I see befalls the ordinary man and even many philosophers! The moment something bad happens to a wicked man (or one reputed to be wicked), everyone makes a

snap judgment about God's plans, rushing to the conclusion that God wanted to punish him. But what if—as only too often happens—a rogue and scoundrel meets with success or a good man is defeated by the slanders of his enemies? Do they say that this is because God wants to reward the one and punish the other? Not at all! Some say that •it's because God wants to test the virtue of the good man; others say that •the good man's misfortune is something that God merely *permits* and that he didn't deliberately cause it. ·None of these people are *thinking* well! They aren't reasoning as cogently as someone who argues like this:

God leaves unfortunate people in their misery.

So he hates and despises them.

So I take pride in hating and despising them also.

What gets people into having opinions about God's plans? Shouldn't their falling into contradictions at every moment teach them that they know nothing of God's plans?

**Theodore:** Is *that* how you understand my principles, Aristes? Is that how you apply them? I find those whom you condemn to be more right than you are.

**Aristes:** What, Theodore! You're joking, or you are having fun by contradicting me.

**Theodore:** Not at all.

**Aristes:** *What?* Do you endorse the irresponsibility of the impassioned historians who record the death of a monarch and then pronounce judgment on what God planned for him, doing this on the basis of their feelings and the interests of their nation? You *can't* approve of how they go on: in their accounts of the death of Phillip II of Spain, either the Spanish historians or the French ones must be wrong, or both, when they describe the death of Philip II and give conflicting accounts of God's purpose in it. Don't kings have to die, as well as the rest of us, and isn't *that* the rock-bottom fact of the matter?

**Theodore:** Those historians are wrong, but you are not right. There's no need to judge that God deliberately harms an enemy monarch whom we hate—that's true. But we can and should believe that he aims to punish the wicked and reward the good. Those who form judgments of God on the basis of their idea of *the strict justice of an infinitely perfect being* judge well, while those who attribute to him plans that favour their unruly inclinations judge very badly.

**3. Aristes:** True. But when someone is crushed in the ruins of his house, that is just a consequence of natural laws, and the best of men wouldn't have escaped.

**Theodore:** Who would question that? But have you already forgotten that it is *God* who established these natural laws? The false idea of an imaginary *nature* still occupies part of your mind and prevents you from getting hold of the principle I explained to you. Pay attention now. Since it is God who established these natural laws, he must have combined the physical with the moral in such a way that the results of

these laws are the best possible—I mean the most worthy of his justice and his goodness as well as of his other attributes. So we are *right* when we say that the terrible death of a brutal or impious person is due to God's vengeance. For although such a death is usually just a result of the natural laws that God established, he established them only for effects like this. On the other hand, if some misfortune comes upon a good man when he is just about to do a good deed, we should *not* say that *God* wanted to punish him, since God didn't establish general laws with an eye to effects like that. We should say either that *God* has permitted this misfortune because it is a natural result of the laws that he established for other effects that are better, or that *he* planned by this means to test this good man and have him deserve his reward. For we must certainly take into account, when thinking about God's motives in combining the physical with the moral in the particular way he did, the great goods that he foresaw us extracting from our present miseries with the help of his grace. So men are right in attributing to God's justice the ills that come to the wicked. But I think they are also mistaken about this in two ways. *First*, they make these judgments only for punishments that are extraordinary and striking; if a rascal dies of fever, they don't ordinarily think of this as punishment by God. For *that* he must die by lightning or at the hands of the hangman! *Second*, they imagine that remarkable punishments are effects of a special volition on God's part. . . . In fact, infinitely more wisdom is required to *combine* the physical with the moral in such a way that this wicked person is justly punished as a consequence of the causal network than to *punish* him by a special and miraculous providence.

**Aristes:** That is how I too understand it, Theodore. But what you say doesn't justify the arrogance of those who think they see God's plans in everything they see happen.

**4. Theodore:** But I don't claim that •they are always right. I only say that •they are right when their judgments are free from passion and bias and are grounded in the idea we all have of the infinitely perfect being. Also I don't claim that they do well when they assert too positively that God had such and such a plan. For example, when a great affliction comes upon a good man, they will be sure that God merely *permitted* this to occur; •but they could be quite wrong about that, because• I am sure that if God foresaw that this affliction would bring great merit to the man, that will have been part of his reason for setting up the general laws in the way he did. . . . Never mind! What does it matter if minds fall into contradiction and perplexity with their false ideas, provided that basically they aren't mistaken on essential matters? Provided that men don't attribute to God plans contrary to his attributes, and don't represent him as acting so as to cater to their passions, I think we should listen to them calmly. Instead of tangling them in contradictions that can't be sorted out on their principles, we should in charity accept what they say so as to confirm them in the idea they have of providence since they aren't capable of having a better one. For it is indeed better to attribute a human providence to God than to think that everything happens by chance.

[Theodore develops this point at length, also maintaining that the plain person's simple views about providence have more truth in them than one might at first think. The conversation, in which Theotimus plays a large part, concerns those two themes and Aristes' question about how much harm is done to someone's life by his having a 'human' idea of how God's providence works, e.g. not preparing for a lawsuit he is involved in because he trusts God to bring him through it safely. All this occupies the rest of this section, the whole of sections 5 and 6, and the start of:]

**7. Theotimus:** . . . .For bringing plain people to virtue, a confused idea of providence is as useful as *yours* is, •Aristes•. It can't meet the problems that impious people raise; it can't be defended without falling into countless contradictions; I agree. But plain folk don't trouble themselves with such things. Faith sustains them; and their simplicity, their humility, shelters them from the attacks of the ungodly. So I think that when we are addressing the public at large, we should speak of providence according to the commonly accepted idea of it, reserving what Theodore has taught us for •silencing self-styled freethinkers and for •reassuring those who might be shaken by the thought of events that seem to contradict the divine perfections. Even with them, however, we must •have reason to• suppose that they can attend well enough to follow. Otherwise, if they are Christians, it would be better to stop their worries simply by the authority of scripture.

**Aristes:** I give in, Theotimus. We must speak to men in terms of their own ideas if they can't examine matters thoroughly. If we criticized their confused views about providence, that might lead to their downfall. It would be easy to tangle them in contradictions, and hard to get them out of the tangle. . . . I think that this, mainly, is why Jesus Christ and the apostles didn't explicitly teach us the principles of reason that theologians use to support the truths of faith. . . . So I am quite resolved to leave people free to speak of providence in their own ways, provided that they don't •say anything that openly offends against the divine attributes, •assign weird and wrong plans to God, or •have him aiming to satisfy *their* disordered inclinations. As for philosophers—and especially those self-styled freethinkers—I shall certainly not endure their impertinent mockery! I hope to have my turn and to discomfit them mightily. They have sometimes reduced me

to silence, but I am going to silence *them*. For I now have the means of replying to all the strongest and most plausible objections they have raised against me.

**8. Theodore:** Take care, Aristes, that vanity and self-esteem aren't contributing to your zeal! Don't *look for* opponents, so as to have the glory and pleasure of defeating them; what is needed is for those who have resisted the truth to be laid low ·not by you but· by *the truth* itself. If you set out to confound them you won't win them over, and maybe instead *they* will confound *you*. You do indeed have the means of forcing them to silence; but only if they are willing to listen to reason, which they certainly *won't* do if they sense you are trying to defeat them. If they make fun of you, they will lead others to laugh in support of them. If you scare them off, they will see to it that others are scared off also: you will be left alone with your principles that no-one will understand in the slightest. Here is a better way to proceed:

With the people whom you especially have in mind, propose your opinion to them ·not *as* your opinion, but· as though you wanted to ask them what you should think about it. In order to answer you, *they* will have to think about it, and perhaps its evidentness will convince them. Above all, don't let them think you are playing with them. Speak as a would-be pupil in good faith, so that they won't see that you are (for their own good) pretending. But, when you see that they have taken in the truth and made it their own, then you can argue *against* it, with no fear that you will talk them out of it.

They will regard the truth as a good that belongs to them, acquired by them through their own intellectual efforts. They'll be motivated to defend it, if not because they love it truly then because their self-esteem will be at stake. In

this way you will bring them in on the side of truth, and will create bonds of interest between them and the truth—bonds that won't be easily broken. Most men regard the truth as a useless piece of clutter, or rather as a very troublesome and inconvenient one. But, when they have found it for themselves, and regard it as something good that others want to take away from them, they attach themselves to it so strongly, and examine it so attentively, that they'll never be able to forget it.

**Aristes:** . . . I'll try to follow your good advice; but do you think I have a good enough grasp of your principles to be able to convince others of them and to reply to all their objections?

**Theodore:** If you approach them in the manner of a would-be learner, you don't need a more exact knowledge of these principles. The principles themselves will teach you as well as I can.

**Aristes:** What? As well as you can?

**Theodore:** Better! You'll see by experience. Just remember the principal truths that I have explained to you and that you must bring to bear on all the questions you will put to them. •Remember that God can act only according to his nature, only in a way that testifies to his attributes; that he therefore chooses both what he is going to make and how he is going to make it on the basis that both—the work and the way to it—shall jointly express his perfections better than would any other work done in any other way. That, Aristes, is the most general and the most fertile principle. •Remember that the more simple, uniform and general the ways of providence are the more (other things being equal) it bears the character of God, and thus that God governs the world by general laws so as to display his wisdom in the



network of causes. •But remember that created things don't act on one another through their own efficacy, and that God passes his power along to them only by taking their states to be the occasional causes that bring into play the general laws that he has prescribed. Everything depends on this principle.

9. Here, Aristes, are the five sets of general laws through which God governs the ordinary course of his providence.

1. General laws of the communication of motion, for which collisions are the occasional or natural cause. It is by setting up these laws that God gave the sun the power of shining, to fire the power of burning, and similarly other powers that bodies have of acting on one another. Everything that 'second causes' do—that is, everything brought about by created things such as bodies—is actually something that *God* does by obeying his own laws.

2. Laws of the union of soul and body, the states of which are occasional causes of changes in each other. It is through these laws that I have the power of speaking, of walking, of sensing, of imagining, and the rest; and that objects have the power of affecting me and moving me by way of my organs. It is through these laws that God unites me to all his works.

3. Laws of the union of soul with God. Because God is the intelligible substance of reason—that is, because whenever we use our reason we consult *reason*, the eternal and unchanging *reason* which is an attribute of the substance we call God—these are the laws that enable us to think rationally. It is because of these laws, which are brought into play by our *attention*, the occasional cause, that the human mind has the power to turn its thought in whatever direction it chooses, and to discover the truth. These three general laws are the only ones we learn from reason and experience; but the authority of scripture makes us aware of two others as well. They are:

4. General laws that give to good angels and to bad ones power over bodies, these being substances that are inferior to them. . . .

5. Finally, the laws by which Jesus Christ received sovereign power in heaven and on earth. . . .

There, Aristes, are the most general laws of nature and of grace that God follows in the ordinary course of his providence. . . . (There are also others, which I needn't go into, such as the laws through which hell's fire has the power of tormenting demons, baptismal waters have the power of purifying us, . . . and so on.) Although God prescribed these general laws for himself and doesn't abandon the generality of his conduct without good reasons, remember that he *does* abandon them in any case where he receives more glory by doing so than by following them. •But *only* in such extraordinary cases. Don't think of God as abandoning his laws at the drop of a hat, so to speak. For all you need in reconciling the apparent contradictions in the effects of providence is to maintain that ordinarily God does and must act through general laws. Take hold then of these principles, and in discussion with anyone you mean to convert proceed in such a way that he comes to think of the principles for himself.

**Aristes:** . . . Suppose that I succeed—with the help of your advice—in my plan, and have convinced the people of the truth of our principles, how am I to get them to recognize the authority of the church? For they are born into heresy, and I should like to get them out of it.

**Theodore:** . . . You may think that to convert heretics you need only give good proofs of the infallibility of the church, •but in fact• it is necessary for God to get involved. When someone is unfortunately caught in some sectarian error, this will *daily* form so many hidden bonds in his heart that he

will be blinded and shut off from the truth. If someone urged you to become a protestant, you certainly wouldn't listen to him willingly. Well, you should know that protestants may be more ardent in their conviction than we are in ours, because they are engaged more often than we are in urging one another to *show* how firm they are in their faith. Thus they are kept in their sect by countless attachments, bonds, prejudices, and considerations of self-esteem. Think what skill we would need to make them examine fairly the proofs we can give them that they are in error!

**Aristes:** I know, Theodore, that on the subject of religion they are extremely sensitive and touchy. But don't worry. The people I have in mind are not as sensitive as many of the others are; and I shall make such a good show of wanting to *learn* that they, in order to respond to me, ·i.e. to my assumed needs·, will have to examine the doubts I shall put to them. Just give me some proofs of the infallibility of the church consonant with the idea that you have given me of providence.

**10. Theodore:** Scripture, which heretics dare not reject, makes it certain that God 'will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth' (1*Timothy* 2:4). So we must find in the order of providence good means for giving every man access to knowledge of the truth. . . . I don't say that God wills to do everything needed for all men to be saved. He doesn't will to perform miracles at every moment, or to infuse irresistible grace in every heart. . . . He mustn't abandon the generality of his providence without sufficient reasons. . . . So all I am saying is that we must find in providence some *general* means corresponding to God's wish that all men should come to know the truth. Now, we can achieve this knowledge in only two possible ways—through inquiry or through authority.

**Aristes:** I take you to be saying, Theodore, that the way of inquiry may correspond to God's wish to save learned people, but that he also wants to save the poor, the simple, the ignorant, those who don't know how to read. . . . [He goes on to say that even the learned haven't all got the true message, and continues:] The way of inquiry is quite insufficient. Now that the reason of man is weakened, we must proceed by the way of authority. That way is perceptible, it is sure, it is general. It corresponds perfectly to God's wanting all men to have access to knowledge of the truth. But where are we to find this infallible authority, this safe road that we can follow without fear of error? The heretics claim that it is to be found only in the sacred books.

**11. Theodore:** It is to be found there, but it is by the authority of the church that we know this. St Augustine was right when he said that without the church he wouldn't believe the bible. How can simple men be certain that our four gospels have infallible authority? The ignorant have no proof that they were written by those who are named as their authors, or that the texts haven't been corrupted in essential matters; and I don't know whether even the scholars have really certain proofs of these two points. But even when we are certain that the gospel according to St Matthew (for example) really is by that apostle, and that it is today in the form in which he composed it, *unless an infallible authority tells us that St Matthew was divinely inspired* we still can't rest our faith on that gospel as we would on the words of God himself. Some people maintain that we can't read the sacred books without perceiving—*sensing*—that they are divine in origin; but what is this claim based on? If we are to regard them as infallible, we need something other than guesswork or shallow impressions. We need in fact one of two things:

- the Holy Spirit reveals this to us, one person at a time; or
- the church reveals it to us, with one revelation for everyone.

Now the latter is much simpler, more general, more worthy of God's providence than the former.

But that is not the only role the church has in what we take from the bible. Suppose that of the above two options, the former is the right one, meaning that the church doesn't come in at that point, and that everyone who reads scripture can know by a special revelation that the gospel is a divine book and that it hasn't been corrupted by malice or negligence on the part of the copyist. *Who will give them an understanding of it?* Don't say that their reason will provide it; because reason doesn't suffice always to capture the true sense. Here are a couple of examples, to prove the point:

- The Socinians are rational, as other men are, yet they find in the bible that the son is not the same substance as the father.
- The Calvinists are men, and so are the Lutherans; and they claim that the words 'Take, eat, this is my body', taken in the context in which they occur, mean that what Jesus Christ gives to his apostles is merely something that *represents* his body.

Who will undeceive either of these groups? Who will lead them to knowledge of the truth that God wants us all to reach? On *their* view of how matters stand, there would have to be help from the Holy Ghost at every moment for each individual person—help of the sort they say is *not* given to the church as a whole when it is assembled to decide these matters. What folly, what blindness, what pride! They fancy that an individual can understand scripture better

does the universal church—the church that is the sacred storehouse of tradition, and that deserves, more than does any individual, to be protected (by its chief, Jesus Christ) against the powers of hell.

**12.** Most men are persuaded that God guides them by special providence, or rather that he so guides those whom they hold in great esteem. They tend to think that a certain person is so dear to God that God won't let him fall into error or lead others into it. They credit him with having a kind of infallibility, and take their stand on this. [Theodore continues at length about the absurdity of this, given how unreliable individual men are. There are, he says, things that God could do to produce belief through special providence, but he doesn't do them. He continues:] Why should God enlighten a certain scholar specially so that he may capture the sense of a passage of scripture? The authority of the church suffices to keep us from going astray. Why would anyone be unwilling to submit to it? Jesus Christ entrusts his infallibility to the church, and that is all that is needed to preserve at the same time the faith of humble and obedient children in their mother. . . .

**Aristes:** . . . It is indeed infinitely simpler and more in conformity with reason that Jesus Christ should assist his church so as to prevent it from falling into error rather than assisting each person individually, especially individuals who have the impudence to call established matters into question and thereby accuse the saviour either of having abandoned his bride, the church, or of having been unable to defend her! . . .

**Theodore:** It is true, Aristes. For the apostolic Roman church is visible and recognizable. It is everlasting for all times and universal for all places; at any rate it is the society most exposed to the eyes of all the earth and most venerable

for its antiquity. None of the particular sects have any sign of truth, any mark of divinity. Those that appear now to have some lustre began a long time after the church. Everyone knows this, including those who let themselves be dazzled by that small flash that hardly goes beyond the boundaries of their own country. . . .

**Theotimus:** [He exclaims at length over the fact that some people doubt that the church of Rome is infallible. 'Provided we have the idea of Jesus Christ that we must have of him, we can't conceive of his church becoming the mistress of error. For that we needn't engage in great inquiry; it is a truth that jumps to the eyes of the simplest and the most primitive people.' And so on. Theodore then starts on a different tack, arguing that even if the church were not infallible you would have to be crazy not to believe its central doctrines. Thus:]

**Theodore:** Just suppose, Aristes, that Jesus Christ is neither head nor husband of the church, that he doesn't watch over it, that he isn't at its centre until the end of time to guard it against the powers of hell. In that case, it doesn't have the divine infallibility that is the unshakeable foundation of our faith. Even then, it seems evident to me that someone would have to have lost his mind or become utterly obsessed to prefer the opinions of heretics to the decisions of the church's councils. As an example, let us consider the nature of the Eucharist on the supposition that the church is not infallible. [In this context, 'the Eucharist' refers not to the sacrament, the ceremony, but to the elements used in it, the sacramental bread and wine.]

What do we have in the Eucharist—the body of Jesus Christ or the symbol of his body? We are at a loss to know. We all agree that the apostles knew the answer to our question. We agree that what they taught about this must have been believed in all

the churches that they founded. What do we do to clear up this contested matter? We convene the most general assemblies that we can. We bring together into one place the best witnesses we can have of what is believed in different countries. A bishop is well aware of whether in the church he presides over it is or isn't believed that the body of Jesus Christ is in the Eucharist. We ask the bishops then what *they* think of this. They declare it to be an article of *their* faith that the bread is changed into the body of Jesus Christ. They pronounce anathema—excommunication, removal from membership in the church—on those who maintain the contrary. The bishops of other churches who couldn't get to the assembly express approval of the decision; or if they are out of touch with those at the council they remain silent and show well enough by their silence that they are of the same opinion. . . .

That being so—and it is what happened—I maintain that even if Jesus Christ had abandoned his church we would have to renounce common sense to prefer the opinion of Calvin or of Zwingli to that of all these witnesses who attest a fact that they couldn't possibly not know.

**Aristes:** That is utterly evident. But it will be objected that the bishops, who have to know what *is* at present believed about the Eucharist in their churches, may fail to know what *was* believed about it a thousand years ago, and that it can happen that all the particular churches have imperceptibly fallen into error.

**Theodore:** On the supposition that Jesus Christ is not governing his church, I agree that it can happen that all churches generally fall into error. But it's a practical impossibility that they should all fall into the *same* error. That they should fall into error without leaving an obvious

historical record of their disputes is also virtually impossible. Finally, that they should all fall into an error like the one the Calvinists attribute to us is *absolutely* impossible. For what has the church decided? ·That is, what *is* this supposed error that the churches have fallen into?·

- That the body of a man is in an infinity of places at the same time.
- That the body of a man is in a space as small as that of the Eucharist.
- That after the priest has pronounced certain words the bread is changed into the body of Jesus Christ and the wine into his blood.

What? This extravagant folly (as a heretic would call it) got into the heads of Christians of *all* the churches? You'd have to be mad to maintain *that*, it seems to me. We won't get a single error becoming widespread unless it is in general conformity with the dispositions of the mind. All peoples have been able to worship the •sun. Why? Because that star dazzles all men generally. But if one mad people worshipped •mice, others will have worshipped •cats! If Jesus Christ had abandoned his church, all Christians might have gradually given in to Calvin's heresy about the Eucharist—·namely that it *symbolizes* the body of Jesus Christ—because that view, wrong as it is, doesn't shock either reason or the senses. But that all the Christian churches should have come to accept an opinion that outrages the imagination, shocks the senses, and amazes reason, and have done this so imperceptibly that it wasn't noticed—I say it again: to believe *that*, we would have to renounce common sense, to have no knowledge of man and no thoughts about his inner dispositions.

Now I concede ·for purposes of argument, at least· that if God abandoned his church it is possible that all Christians should fall into the same error, a shocking error quite contrary to the dispositions of the human mind, and that

they should do this without even noticing that they were doing so. I contend that even on *this* supposition we can't refuse to submit to the decisions of the church unless we are absurdly prejudiced. According to the supposition, it is possible that the church is mistaken. That is true. But we don't need to bring in any *suppositions* to conclude that it can much more naturally happen that a particular person falls into error. The 'error' in question doesn't concern a truth involving principles of metaphysics; it is a matter of *fact*—the question of what Jesus Christ meant by the words 'This is my body'—and it can't be better answered than by the testimony of those who came ·immediately· after the apostles. . . .

To confine ourselves to the point that the council's decision is contrary to reason and to good sense, I again submit that the •more offensive it appears to reason and to good sense •the more certain it is that it conforms to the truth. For, after all, weren't the men of past centuries made like those of today? Our imagination rebels when we are told that the body of Jesus Christ is at the same time in heaven and on our altars, but does anyone seriously think there may have been an age when men were *not* struck by such a frightening thought? Yet, in all the Christian churches this terrible mystery has been believed. The fact is established by the testimony of those who are best placed to know it, namely by the declaration of the bishops. That is how men have been instructed by a higher authority, an authority that they thought to be infallible and that can be seen at a glance to be infallible if we have the idea of Jesus Christ and his church that we ought to have. Make any suppositions you like, there can't be any doubt about what we should believe when we see •the decision of a council ranged against •the dogmas of a particular individual or assembly that the church hasn't approved.

**Aristes:** . . . . So those who remove from the church of Jesus Christ the infallibility that is essential to it don't free themselves thereby of the obligation to accept its decisions. To be free and clear of that obligation, they would have to renounce common sense! Still, we often see that the most common opinions are not the truest, and we're quite prepared to believe that what is advanced by one learned man is much more sure than what everyone else thinks.

**Theodore:** Aristes, you touch on one of the chief causes of the heretics' error and obstinacy: they don't properly distinguish dogmas of faith from truths that can be discovered only through intellectual effort. Anything that depends on an abstract principle is out of reach for most people, so that good sense tells us not to trust the multitude on such a matter, because they are much less likely to be right about it than a

single man who applies himself assiduously to the search for truth about it. So it is true—and we often see this—that the most common opinions are not the truest. But in matters of faith the opposite holds. The more witnesses there are who attest to a fact, the more certainty it has. Dogmas of religion are learned not from theoretical thinking but from authority, from the testimony of those who preserve the sacred storehouse of tradition. What everyone believes, what everyone has always believed, is what we must continue to believe eternally. For in matters of faith, of revealed truths, of accepted dogmas, the common opinions are the true ones. . . . [Theodore continues with a criticism of the moral character of those who don't see this. The dialogue ends on a note of hope that Aristes will succeed in converting his heretical acquaintances.]

## FOURTEENTH DIALOGUE

**The same subject continued. The incomprehensibility of our mysteries is certain proof of their truth. How to clarify the dogmas of faith. The incarnation of Jesus Christ. Proof of his divinity against the Socinians. No creature, not even angels, can worship God except through Jesus Christ. How faith in him makes us acceptable to God.**

**1. Aristes:** [He expresses rapturous happiness over 'the state you have put me in'. He has been despondent over the depth and darkness of the Christian doctrines, but now:] The more obscure our mysteries are—what a paradox!—the more credible I now find them. Yes, Theodore, I find in the very obscurity of our mysteries, accepted as they are now in so many different nations, an invincible proof of their truth.

How, for example, are we to reconcile •unity with •trinity, a society of •three different persons in the nature of •one God who is in no way divided? This is incomprehensible, all right, but it isn't incredible. It is beyond us, it is true. But if we bring a little good sense to bear we will believe it; or at least we will if we want to be of the religion of the apostles. For if they didn't know this inexpressible mystery or if they didn't teach it to their successors, it couldn't possibly have gained

in our minds the universal belief that it gets throughout the church and among so many different nations. [Aristes then reports at some length the argument that Theodore has used for this conclusion. One notable episode in this: 'If Jesus Christ didn't watch over his church, the unitarians would soon outnumber the true catholics. . . .for there is nothing in these heretics' opinions that doesn't enter the mind naturally.']

**2. Theodore:** . . . I understand how you are in a state of great calm. Enjoy it, my dear Aristes. But please let us not think about the church of Jesus Christ in the way we think of merely human societies. It has a head who will never allow it to absorb error. Its infallibility is supported by the divinity of its leader. We don't have to judge purely through the rules of good sense that this or that one of our mysteries can't be an invention of the human mind. We have a decisive authority, a way even shorter and surer than that kind of inquiry. Let us humbly follow this way so as to honour by our trust and our submission the power, vigilance, goodness, and other qualities of the sovereign shepherd of our souls. For it is, in a way, to blaspheme against the divinity of Jesus Christ—or at least against his love for his spouse, the church—to require that the truths needed for our salvation be given proofs other than the ones drawn from the authority of the church.

If you believe some article of our faith because your investigation of it shows you clearly that it is in the apostolic tradition, your faith comes into this as well as your reason, because your faith shows in your honouring the mission and apostolate of Jesus Christ. Your faith, that is, expresses your judgment that God sent Jesus Christ to the world to teach it the truth. But if you believe only for this reason, without bringing in the infallible authority of the church, you aren't honouring the wisdom and generality of providence,

which furnishes simple, ignorant people a very sure and very natural means of learning the truths needed for salvation. You aren't honouring the power—or anyway the vigilance—of Jesus Christ over his church. You seem to suspect him of wishing to abandon it to the spirit of error. And so the faith of those who humbly submit to the authority of the church does much more honour to God and to Jesus Christ than your faith does, since it more exactly expresses the divine attributes and the qualities of our mediator. . . .

**3.** But remember that the humble and submissive faith of people who yield to authority is not blind or rash. It is based on reason. Certainly infallibility is contained in the idea of •divine religion, of •a society headed by a person whose nature is that of eternal wisdom, of •a society established for the salvation of the simple and the ignorant. Good sense dictates that we believe the church to be infallible. We must therefore blindly yield to its authority; but that is because reason shows us that •there is no danger in this, and that •if any Christian refuses to submit blindly his refusal belies the judgment that he should make concerning the qualities of Jesus Christ.

Our faith is perfectly rational in its source. What established it was not quick shallow opinions, but right reason. For Jesus Christ proved his mission and his qualities in an irresistible way. His glorious resurrection is testified to in such a way that we would have to renounce common sense in order to call it in doubt. It hardly ever happens these days that the truth gets itself respected through the show and majesty of miracles. That is because it is upheld by the authority of Jesus Christ whom we recognize as infallible and who has promised his assistance. . . .and his vigilance. . . .

[Shortly after this Theotimus interrupts, saying that 'we are spending too much of our dwindling supply of time on the infallibility of the church', and asking Theodore to

expound his 'method' of getting a deeper understanding that will generate greater respect for the Christian religion and its morality. Theodore gives a short answer of which Aristes says he doesn't understand a word, because it is too general. Theodore agrees that. . . ]

**4. Theodore:** . . . some more explanation is needed. I always carefully distinguish •dogmas of faith from the •proofs and explanations that can be given of them. I look for the dogmas in the tradition and agreement of the universal church; and I find them better displayed in the definitions of the church councils than anywhere else. I think you'll agree that as the church is infallible we must adhere to what it has decided.

**Aristes:** But don't you also look to holy scripture for them?

**Theodore:** I think that is the shortest and surest way to find them, but it must be in holy scripture as explained by tradition, by which I mean: explained by the •general councils (i.e. the ones that are •generally accepted •everywhere), explained by the same mind that dictated them. . . . The councils interpret scripture better than I do. . . . Also, they teach us several truths that the apostles entrusted to the church and that have been disputed. These truths are not easily found in the bible, for ever so many heretics are able to find the exact opposite there. In short, Aristes, I try to be well assured of the dogmas on which I wish to meditate so as to have some understanding of them. And then I use my mind in the same way as those who study physics. I focus as hard as I can on the idea that my faith has given me of my subject. I always look for illumination in what appears to me to be simplest and most general, and when I find it I contemplate it. But I follow it only as far as it draws me irresistibly by the force of its evidentness. The least obscurity makes me fall back on dogma, which in my fear of error will always be my inviolable rule in questions regarding faith.

People who study physics never reason in a way that goes counter to experience, but nor do they infer from experience anything that is counter to reason. They have no doubts as to the certainty of experience or the evidentness of reason, but they are hesitant about how to reconcile the two because they don't see how to pass back and forth between them. Well, when I am doing theology my •equivalent of the •experiences •of the physicist• are the facts of religion, the established dogmas. I never call them into question. This is what guides me and leads me to understanding. But when I *think* I am following them but become aware of colliding with reason, I stop right there, knowing well that dogmas of faith and principles of reason must actually be in agreement even if they are in conflict in my mind. So I remain •submissive to authority, •full of respect for reason, and merely •convinced of the weakness of my mind and •perpetually in distrust of myself. Finally, if ardour for the truth revives I resume my investigations; and by switching my attention to and fro between the ideas that enlighten me and the dogmas that sustain and direct me, I discover how to pass to and fro between faith and understanding without having any particular method for doing so. But •that happens only rarely•. Usually I become weary from my efforts, conclude that I'm not capable of completing the investigation, and leave it to others who are more enlightened and more diligent than I am. •In these cases• my only reward for my work is becoming increasingly aware of the smallness of my mind, the depth of our mysteries, and the greatness of our need for an authority to lead us. . .

[Aristes is dissatisfied, and asks for an example—specifically the example of 'the fundamental truth of our religion'. Theodore somewhat reluctantly agrees.]



**5. Theodore:** . . . To discover by reason the one among all religions that God established, we must attentively consult the notion we have of God, the infinitely perfect being, for it is evident that whatever is produced by a cause must necessarily have some relation with its cause. . . . In God's case the relation is this: everything that he causes bears the character of his attributes. That is because he knows what these attributes are and glories in having them. (Men, in contrast, don't always act in accordance with their natures, because they are ashamed of themselves. I know an avaricious man whom you would take to be the most liberal man in the world!). . . . So when God acts he necessarily proclaims outwardly the unchangeable and eternal judgment he has of his attributes, since he delights in them and glories in possessing them.

**Aristes:** That is evident. But I don't see where all these generalities are leading.

**6. Theodore:** To this, Aristes. God *perfectly* proclaims his judgment about himself only through •the incarnation of his son, •the consecration of his high priest, and •the establishment of the religion we profess. Only in this •trio of works• can he find the worship and love that express his divine perfections and agree with his judgment about them. •We can look at his creative work as having four stages•. When God made chaos out of nothingness,  
     he proclaimed *I am the Almighty*.  
 When he formed the universe out of chaos,  
     he delighted in his wisdom.  
 When he created man free and capable of good and evil,  
     he expressed the judgment he has of his own justice  
     and his goodness.  
 But in uniting his word to his work,  
     he proclaims that •he is infinite in all his attributes,

that •this great universe is nothing in comparison to him, that •by the standard of *his* holiness, excellence, and sovereign majesty everything else is irreligious.

In short, he speaks *as God*, he acts according to what he is—and according to the *whole* of what he is. Compare our religion, Aristes, with that of the Jews, the Moslems, and all the others you know; and judge which is the one that most clearly proclaims the judgment that God has and *must* have of his attributes. . . .

**7.** . . . God is spirit, and wants to be worshipped in spirit and in truth. ['Spirit' here translates *esprit*, which in this text is often translated by 'mind'.] True worship doesn't consist in externals—what one says or physically does, e.g. the posture of our bodies in prayer—but in the posture of our minds in the presence of divine majesty. That is, it's a matter of the judgments and movements of the soul. Now, someone who worships God through Jesus Christ proclaims by his action a judgment similar God's own judgment concerning himself. Of all the judgments proclaimed by worship, *this* one—namely, that God is to be approached through Jesus Christ—is the one that most exactly expresses God's perfections and especially that excellence or infinite holiness that separates him from everything else and raises him infinitely above all creatures. Hence, faith in Jesus Christ is the true religion, access to God through Jesus Christ is the sole true worship, the sole way of putting our minds [*esprits*] in a posture for worshipping God. . . .

Consider someone who gives some of his goods to the poor, someone who risks his life to save his country, or someone who accepts death rather than commit an injustice, in each case acting as he does in the knowledge that God is powerful enough to reward him for the sacrifice he is making. Such a person proclaims by his action a judgment that does honour to divine justice. . . . Yet his action, full of merit though it

is, is not *perfect* worship of God if the person in question refuses to believe in •Jesus Christ and claims to have access to God without •his intervention. . . . And because it falls short of perfection in this particular way· this action that is otherwise so meritorious is of no use for the person's eternal salvation. [Theodore rather obscurely explains why, then allows Aristes to take over and put the point more clearly.]

**8. Aristes:** It seems to me that I understand what you have been saying. . . . Compared to God, the universe is nothing and must be counted as nothing. But it is only Christians, only those believing in the divinity of Jesus Christ, who truly count themselves and this vast admirable universe as *nothing*. Philosophers may *make* this judgment as a matter of •theory, but they belie it rather than proclaiming it in their •actions. They have the nerve to approach God as if they no longer knew that the distance from him to us is infinite. . . . It is only Christians who are permitted to open their mouths and give divine praise to the Lord. Only they have access to his sovereign majesty. It is because they truly count themselves and all the rest of the universe as *nothing* in relation to God when they maintain that their only way to any relation with him is through Jesus Christ. The *nothingness* to which their faith reduces them gives them true reality before God. . . . This is the unshakable foundation of our holy religion.

**9. Theodore:** Certainly, Aristes, you do understand my thought. There is an infinite distance between •finite and •infinite; it is even truer that there is an infinite distance between •the complete nothingness to which sin has reduced us and •divine holiness! [He continues this theme at very great length, aided by Aristes. Their central thesis is neatly stated, a little later, by Aristes: 'It is only the man-God who can join creature to creator'. The idea is that the infinite

or super-infinite 'distance' between man and God can't be bridged except through Jesus Christ, who as a man can relate to men and as divine can relate to God. To deny this essential mediating role of Jesus Christ is to imply that we can reach God directly, which implies a lessening of his infinite greatness, which is blasphemy. The point emerges nicely in a discussion of certain Christian heresies:]

**Theodore:** What do you say then, Aristes, of the Socinians and Arians and all those false Christians who deny the divinity of Jesus Christ and who nevertheless claim to have access through him to God?

**Aristes:** They are people who find some relation between infinite and finite, and who take themselves to be something—rather than *nothing*—in comparison with God.

**Theotimus:** No they don't, Aristes. They recognize that it is only through Jesus Christ that they have access to God.

**Aristes:** Yes, but their Jesus is a mere creature, and is therefore finite. So they *do* find some relation between finite and infinite; and they proclaim this false judgment, this insult to God, when they worship him through Jesus Christ. . . . Every cult founded on a supposedly non-divine Jesus assumes some relation between finite and infinite, and thereby· infinitely depreciates the majesty of God. It is a false 'worship', insulting to God and incapable of reconciling him with men. . . .

[Theotimus agrees, then raises the question of how Jesus Christ relates to the angels. In the quite long discussion of this topic, two main points emerge, both expressed here:]

**10. Theotimus:** . . . Without Jesus Christ, heaven itself isn't worthy of the majesty of the creator. Angels by themselves can't have relation or access to—can't associate with—the infinite being. Jesus Christ must get involved, must pacify

heaven as well as earth, in short must reconcile *everything* with God. It's true that he isn't the 'saviour' of angels in the same sense that he is of men: he didn't deliver them from their sins as he did us. But he *did* deliver them from the natural inability of any creature to have some relation with God, to be able to honour him divinely. So he is their head as well as ours, their mediator, their saviour. . . .

**11. . . .Theotimus:** Here is why there is so little on this topic in the bible. It's because scripture wasn't written for the angels, so it has no need to say over and over again that Jesus Christ has come in order to be •their head as well as •ours, and that we together with the angels will form a single church and a single chorus of praises. . . .

[After some more about angels, a new topic is introduced:]

**12. Aristes:** You told us [section 7], Theodore, •that God wants to be worshipped in spirit and in truth, i.e. by judgments and movements of the soul, and •that our worship and also our good deeds derive their moral goodness solely from the judgments they proclaim—judgments that are in conformity with God's attributes. . . . You know what I mean. But do you think that simple people have anything as rarefied as that in mind? Do you think that they make these judgments that worship God in spirit and in truth? If they don't make the right judgments about God's attributes and perfections, they won't proclaim them in their actions, so they won't be doing good deeds. Nor will they worship in spirit and in truth through their faith in Jesus Christ, if they don't know that

to approach the father through the son is to declare that creatures and especially sinners can't have any direct relation to God.

And this seems to me to be something that many Christians don't have in their thoughts at all—*good* Christians, whom I

don't think you would venture to condemn.

**Theodore:** In order to perform a good action, it isn't absolutely necessary to have a clear knowledge that in acting as we do we are proclaiming a judgment that honours God's attributes, or that is in accordance with the unchangeable order of the divine perfections. But in order for our actions to be good it is necessary •that the actions themselves *do* proclaim such judgments and •that the person acting have at least confusedly the idea of the order of God's perfections and that he love it, even if he doesn't know much about what it is. . . . Someone who gives alms, whatever his *thoughts* about what he is doing, does through his generosity proclaim the judgment that God is just; the clarity of his proclamation is great in proportion as what he gives away is of value to him. . . .; and the clearer his proclamation the greater the honour that he pays to divine justice, and the more he invites God to reward him, even if he has no actual thoughts about being rewarded. . . .

Since sin came into the world, our ideas have been so confused and the natural law so dulled in our minds that we need a written law to teach us through the senses what we ought to do or not to do. As most men don't enter into themselves, they don't hear the internal voice that cries out to them 'Thou shall not covet'. They needed to hear that voice externally, so that it could enter their minds through their senses. Still, they couldn't ever wipe out entirely the idea of order, that general idea corresponding to the words *We must, We ought to, It is right to*. For that indelible idea is awakened by the slightest of signs, even in children who are still at their mothers' breasts. Without *that*, men would be. . . .absolutely incapable of good and evil. . . . Let us come now to the objection about those good Christians who worship God in the simplicity of their faith.

**13.** . . . These people quite simply turn to God. I agree that they aren't *aware of* being in a situation of such great respect, i.e. one in which they relate to God across an infinite distance through the mediation of the man-God Jesus Christ. They don't know in the way you do that this is their situation. Nevertheless, it *is* their situation, and God sees very well that that's how they are situated, at least in the disposition of their hearts. They leave it to Jesus Christ, who is at their head and who speaks for them, to present them to God in the state that befits them. . . . It isn't necessary, Aristes, that •we have exact knowledge of reasons for our faith, i.e. reasons that metaphysics can supply, but it is absolutely necessary that •we profess our faith. Similarly, it isn't necessary that •we have clear thoughts about *what* gives our actions their moral status, but it is absolutely necessary that •we perform good actions. Still, exact knowledge and clear thoughts are good to have, and I don't think that those who are engaged in doing philosophy could employ their time more usefully than in trying to obtain some *understanding* of the truths that faith teaches us.

**Aristes:** Certainly, Theodore, there is no more intense pleasure—well, no more solid joy—than what comes from getting an understanding of the truths of our faith.

**Theotimus:** Yes, for those who love religion greatly and whose hearts are not corrupted. There are others—people to whom the light is painful, people who get angry at seeing truths that we might prefer were not so.

**Theodore:** There aren't many of those, Theotimus. But there are many who shy away from the philosophical exploration of the foundations of our faith for a different reason. It is because they are quite reasonably afraid of falling into some error and drawing others along with them. They would be like to have matters clarified and religion defended; but

people naturally mistrust those they don't know, so they are fearful, they get angry, and then they come out with emotional judgments that are invariably unfair and unkind. That silences many people who probably should have spoken and from whom I would have learned better principles than those I have put to you. But often it *doesn't* silence the thoughtless and rash authors who brazenly announce everything that comes to their minds! As for me, when a man has the principle of yielding only to evidentness and to authority, when I am aware that all he is trying to do is to find good proofs of accepted dogmas, I don't fear that he may go dangerously astray. Perhaps he will fall into some error, but what of that? The possibility of error is part of our wretched condition. If reasoning were allowed only to those who are infallible, reason would be banished from the world.

**Aristes:** Before our meeting, I held the view that we absolutely must banish reason from religion, because it could only cause trouble there. I see now that if we abandoned reason to the enemies of the faith, we would soon have our backs to the wall, and be derided as brainless. The person who has reason on his side is powerfully armed for the conquest of minds; for after all we *are* all rational—*essentially* so—and to claim to strip ourselves of our reason as though it were a ceremonial gown is to make ourselves ridiculous and to try pointlessly for the impossible. Thus, at the time I decided that reasoning was never necessary in theology I had a sense that I was requiring of theologians something they would never grant me. But now I understand, Theodore, that I was doing something much worse than that: I was succumbing to a very dangerous excess that did little honour to our holy religion that is founded on sovereign reason—reason granted to us so as to make us more rational. It is better to hold fast to the attitude you have adopted: to support dogmas on

the authority of the church and to look for proofs of these dogmas in the simplest and clearest principles that reason provides us. As for philosophy: the only part of it that can be of much use to religion is metaphysics; and what *it* should do is to serve religion, bathing the truths of our faith in light that will serve to strengthen the mind and put it in full agreement with the heart. In this way we shall preserve the character of rational men, despite our obedience and our submission to the authority of the church.

**Theodore:** Remain steadfast in that thought, Aristes, always submissive to the authority of the church and always ready to listen to reason. But don't take the opinions of certain doctors, of certain communities, even of an entire nation, for certain truths. Don't dismiss them too easily, either. As for the views of philosophers: accept them whole-heartedly only when their evidentness obliges and forces you to. I give you this advice as a remedy for any harm I may have done in our conversations. . . .