

Enthusiasm

Letter to a friend

Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth. Longer omissions are reported between brackets in normal-sized type.—All the quotations from Latin writers were given in the original in Latin.—The Lord Somers to whom this work is addressed was the Lord Chancellor of England, the most highly placed official in the legal system.—This work is the first of the five Treatises in Shaftesbury's *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*.

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Glossary

affection: In the early modern period, ‘affection’ could mean ‘fondness’, as it does today; but it was also often used, as it is in this work, to cover every sort of pro or con attitude—desires, approvals, likings, disapprovals, dislikings, etc.

education: In early modern times this word had a somewhat broader meaning than it does today. It wouldn’t have been misleading to replace it by ‘upbringing’ on almost every occasion

enthusiasm: In early modern times this word usually meant something like ‘extravagant religious emotion’, often with the suggestion that the ‘enthusiastic’ person’s emotion comes from his belief that he is in immediate touch with God. It overlaps with ‘fanaticism’; but in the present version, every occurrence of ‘fanatic(ism)’ is Shaftesbury’s.

formal: On page 3 Shaftesbury applies this word to anyone whose thought and conduct are stiffly rule-governed, prim.

genius: Sometimes used to mean nothing much more than ‘intellect’; more often meaning ‘very high-level intellect’. In early modern times ‘genius’ wasn’t given the very strong meaning it has today.

humour: In ancient Greek medicine it was held that the human body contains four basic kinds of fluid (‘humours’), the proportions of which in a given body settled that person’s physical and mental qualities. By the early modern period this theory was dead; but the use of ‘humours’ to refer to bodily states, character-traits, moods, lingered on. On page 7 at least Shaftesbury uses the word in our present sense; and he is using it in our sense when he speaks of ‘good humour’ and ‘ill humour’.

imposture: Willful and fraudulent deception.

knight-errant: Medieval knight wandering through the world in search of chivalrous adventures. A ‘saint-errant’ (Shaftesbury’s joking invention) would be a holy person wandering through the human scene looking for chances to save people’s souls.

magistrate: In this work, as in general in early modern times, ‘a magistrate’ is anyone with an official role in government; ‘the magistrate’ usually means ‘the government’ or ‘the ruler’. The ‘magistracy’ is also just the government, or the collective of all the senior officials in the government.

morals: In early modern times, ‘moral’ could mean roughly what it does today, but also had a use in which it meant ‘having to do with intentional human action’. In Cambridge University philosophy was officially ‘moral science’ until the last third of the 20th century, presumably having received this name at a time when much of philosophy was armchair psychology. Shaftesbury’s reference to ‘plain honest morals’ on page 13 means ‘human affairs (rather than divine ones)’.

patience: The passive virtue of uncomplainingly putting up with hardship. The ‘patience of Job’ [see page 11] is proverbial.

polite: Our meaning for this word came in fairly late in the early modern period. What it usually meant back then was ‘polished, cultivated, elegant, civilised’.

popular: It means ‘of the people’; in early modern times it seldom means ‘liked by the people’.

prince: As was common in his day, Shaftesbury uses ‘prince’ to mean ‘ruler’ or ‘chief of government’. It doesn’t stand for a *rank* that would distinguish ‘prince’ from ‘king’ or indeed from ‘commoner’.

principle: On page 16 and again shortly thereafter, Shaftesbury uses this word in a once-common but now-obsolete sense in which it means 'source', 'cause', 'driver', 'energizer', or the like.

providence: Sometimes this means 'God'; at other times—as on page 11 it means 'the hand that one has been dealt by God'.

raillery: Good-humoured witty ridicule or teasing, done with a light touch.

science: In early modern times this word applied to any body of knowledge or theory that is (perhaps) axiomatised and (certainly) conceptually highly organised. That is why on page 6 theology is implied to be a 'science'.

speculation: This has nothing to do with guess-work. It

means 'an intellectual pursuit that doesn't involve morality'. Ethics is a 'practical' discipline, chemistry is a 'speculative' one.

sympathy: Literally 'feeling with', as applied to any feeling. Sympathy is at work not only when your sadness saddens me but also when your happiness makes me happy.

vulgar: Applied to people who have no social rank, are not much educated, and (the suggestion often is) not very intelligent.

wit: This often meant about the same as 'intelligence'; but in Shaftesbury and some other writers it usually carries some suggestion of today's meaning; see the link on page 6 between 'wit' and 'raillery'.

Section 1

To my Lord Somers: Now that you have returned home, my Lord, and before the season comes which must engage you in the weightier matters of state, if you care to be entertained for a while with some idle thoughts that have no relation to business or affairs, and claim only to help you pass the time, you may skim through what you have before you and then read at your leisure anything in it that attracts you.

It has been an established custom for poets to introduce their work by addressing themselves to some muse; the ancient poets began this practice, but even in our days we find it almost constantly imitated. But I can't help thinking that this *imitation*, this fashionable revival, must sometimes have stuck a little with your Lordship, who is used to examining things by a better standard than that of fashion or the common taste. You must have noticed that *our* poets are remarkably uncomfortable when they're obliged to take on this character of Poet Addressing his Muse; and you may have wondered why that air of enthusiasm that fits so gracefully with an ancient should be so spiritless and awkward in a modern. But it won't have taken your Lordship long to see the explanation; and this could only serve to put you in mind of something that has often occurred to you on other occasions as well, namely that *truth is the most powerful thing in the world*, because even fiction itself must be governed by it—the only way a work of fiction can be pleasing is by resembling the truth. Any representation of a passion can be agreeable only by appearing to be the real thing. And to be able to move others we must first be moved ourselves, or at least seem to be so. . . . Now, what possibility is there that a modern writer, who is known never to have worshipped Apollo or believed in any such deity as the Muses, should persuade us to enter into his pretended

devotion and move us by his fake zeal in a religion that no-one believes any more? The ancients, on the other hand, are known to have derived their religion and their political arrangements from the art of the Muses; so it must have seemed natural for anyone at that time—and especially a poet—to address himself in raptures of devotion to those acknowledged Patronesses of wit and science. Here the poet could plausibly feign an ecstasy that he didn't really feel; even if it was really mere posing, it would look like something natural, and couldn't fail to please.

But perhaps there was a further mystery in the case. Men, your lordship knows, are wonderfully good at deceiving themselves whenever they work hard at it; and a very small foundation of any passion will enable us not only to *act it* well but even to *work ourselves into it*—further into it than we could manage unaided. Thus. . . with the help of a romance or novel a boy of fifteen or a grave man of fifty may be sure to become a very natural idiot and feel the *belle passion* in earnest. A reasonably good-natured man who happens to be a little annoyed about something can polish his resentment so that he becomes a downright fury for revenge. Even a good Christian, who needs to be over-good and thinks he can never believe enough, may by carefully developing a small inclination extend his faith so broadly that it takes in not only all the Scriptural and traditional miracles but also a solid system of old wives tales. If I needed to, I could remind your Lordship of an eminent, learned, and truly Christian bishop whom you once knew, who could have given you a full account of his belief in fairies! This may be a clue to how far an ancient poet's faith might have been raised along with his imagination.

But we Christians, who have so much faith ourselves, won't allow the poor heathens anything, insisting that they must be *infidels*—non-believers—in every sense. We won't

allow them even to believe their own religion, which we protest is too absurd to have been accepted by any except the mere vulgar [see Glossary]. But if a reverend Christian bishop can be so great a volunteer in faith—willing to go so far beyond the ordinary prescription of the universal church that he believes in fairies—why can't a heathen poet in the ordinary way of his religion be allowed to believe in Muses? For these, your Lordship knows, were divine Persons in the heathen creed, and were essential in their system of theology. The goddesses had their temples and worship, the same as the other deities: and to disbelieve the holy nine ·Muses· or their Apollo was the same as denying Jove himself; and it must have been regarded as equally profane and atheistic by the most respectable people. What a mighty advantage it must have been to an ancient poet to be orthodox in this way, and to be able—with the help of his education [see Glossary] and a good will into the bargain—to work himself up to a belief in a divine presence and heavenly inspiration! It was surely never the business of poets in those days to express doubts about •revelation, when •it was evidently such a help for their art. On the contrary, they couldn't fail to *animate* •their faith as much as possible, when by a single act of •it they could raise themselves into such angelical company.

How much a genius [see Glossary] must be exalted by imagining such a •divine• presence can be gathered from the influence that an •ordinary presence has over men. How well our modern wits perform depends on the opinion they have of the company they are in—the idea they have of the persons to whom they are speaking. A common stage-actor will tell us how much better his performance is when the seats are all filled by people of the better sort. And you, my Lord, who are the noblest actor with the noblest role assigned to any mortal on this earthly stage, when you are acting for liberty and mankind; doesn't the presence of your

friends and the well-wishers to your cause add something to your thought and genius? Or is the sublime reason and power of eloquence that you reveal in public merely what you are equally master of in private—what you come up with at any time, alone or with dull listeners or in any easy or cool hour? This would indeed be more godlike, but I don't think that ordinary humanity reaches so high.

For my own part, my Lord, I have so much need for some considerable company to raise my thoughts on any occasion that when I'm alone I must try by strength of imagination to provide what I need; and because I don't have a Muse I have to look for some great man of a more than ordinary genius, whose imagined presence may inspire me with more than what I feel at ordinary times. And thus, my Lord, I have chosen to address myself to your Lordship. I shan't tell you my name, because I want to allow you as a stranger the full liberty of reading only what you choose to read; though I reserve to myself the privilege of imagining you reading it all, with the special attention that a friend would give it—a friend whom I may justifiably treat with the intimacy and freedom that I adopt towards you in these pages.

Section 2

If any virtue could be well enough secured by our *knowing how* to expose the corresponding infirmity or vice, what an excellent an age this would be! Our nation has never before been through a time when folly and extravagance of every kind were more sharply inspected or more wittily ridiculed than they are today. And from this good symptom one might at least hope that our age was not in a state of decline, because, whatever our infirmities may be, we are so well supplied with knowledge of remedies. The best sign that

an •individual person is •morally• on the mend is his being willing to be told of his faults, but it's not often that a •public is willing to undergo this. When criticism of a society comes down on it only partially, because

- self-protectiveness by the state, or
- the bad lives of the great people, or
- some other cause

is powerful enough to protect one part from censure, that in effect destroys the benefit of censure for the society as a whole. There can't be any impartial and free censure of manners if some special custom or national opinion is set apart, and not only exempted from criticism but even flattered with the highest art. It's only in a free nation such as ours that imposture [see Glossary] has no privilege, and the royal court, the nobility, and the Church are not sheltered from the most thorough investigation. This freedom of criticism admittedly may seem to run too far; we may be said to make poor use of it. That's what anyone will say when he himself is touched by it and some opinion of his is freely examined. But who is to judge what may and what may not be freely examined? Where liberty may be used and where it may not? What remedy shall we prescribe for this whole trouble? Can there be a better remedy than the very liberty that is complained of? If men are vicious, petulant or abusive, •the magistrate [see Glossary] may correct them, but if they reason badly it's •reason that must teach them to do better. Correctness of thought and style, refinement in manners, good breeding, and politeness [see Glossary] of every kind, can come only from the trial and experience of what is best. Only let the search go freely and the right measure of everything will soon be found. Whatever the mood or tone is at the outset, if it's unnatural it won't hold; and if the ridicule is not well directed at the outset, it will eventually fall as it deserves.

I have often wondered to see sensible men so greatly alarmed at the approach of anything like ridicule on certain subjects—as if they mistrusted their own judgment. What ridicule can hold its own against reason? How can anyone who is capable of any accuracy in his thought endure a ridicule aimed at a wrong target? Nothing is more *ridiculous* than this itself. It's true that the vulgar are apt to swallow any low joke, any mere guffawing fooling-around; but a finer and truer wit is needed to have any effect on men of sense and breeding. So why do we appear such cowards in reasoning, and are so afraid to stand the test of ridicule? 'Oh,' we say, 'the subjects are too grave •for ridicule to be appropriate•.' Perhaps so; but let us first see whether they really *are* grave; for they may be very •grave and weighty in our minds and yet very •ridiculous and trivial in their own nature. Gravity—•sober seriousness•—is of the very essence of imposture. It doesn't merely make us get other things wrong, but it is constantly apt almost to get itself wrong; because even in common behaviour it's difficult for a *grave* person not to shrink to a merely *formal* [see Glossary] one. We can never be too grave if we can be assured that we really are what we suppose ourselves to be. And we can never give too much honour or reverence to something's gravity if we are assured that the thing is as grave as we take it to be. The main thing is always to know true gravity from false; and we can do this only if we carry **the rule** constantly with us and freely apply it not only to •the things around us but also to •ourselves. •Why to ourselves?• Because if we lose the •seriousness•-measure in ourselves, we'll soon lose it in everything else. Now, •if we are to evaluate any idea, theory, religion, person, etc. we have to ask 'Is it truly serious, or is it really ridiculous?' And the only way to find the answer is to apply ridicule •to the item in question• and see whether it sticks. If we are afraid to apply **this rule**

to something, what is to protect us from the imposture of formality in everything? We have allowed ourselves to be formalists on one topic, and the same formality can rule us as it pleases in all other topics.

We aren't always in a frame of mind in which we can judge concerning things; so before we judge anything else we must judge our own temperament, and then go on to judge other things. But if we give up our preliminary right of judgment on ourselves, and go ahead on the basis of an *assumption* that we would pass the test for gravity, we are allowing ourselves to be most ridiculous; and in that case we should give up any claim to judge ourselves or anything else, because otherwise we may end up admiring profoundly the most ridiculous things in nature. At least we may do that, for all we know to the contrary; for having resolved never to test ourselves we can never be sure of whether we could pass the test. 'A joke often decides weighty matters better and more forcibly than can asperity' [Horace].

This, my Lord, is so true in itself, and so well known by the cunning formalists of our times, that they can better bear to have their impostures attacked with uttermost bitterness and intensity than to have them touched ever so gently in this other way. They know very well that opinions are like fashions in this respect: however ridiculous they are, they're kept up by solemnity; and they also know that formal notions that someone probably developed when he was in a bad mood, and that have been conceived in sober sadness, can't ever be removed except in a sober kind of cheerfulness and through a more relaxed and amusing way of thinking. All enthusiasm brings a kind of melancholy. Whether it's a matter of love or religion (for there are enthusiasms in both), nothing can put a stop to the growing mischief of enthusiasm in either until the melancholy is removed and the mind is freed to hear what can be said against the

ridiculousness of an extreme in either way.

It has been the wisdom of some wise nations to let people be fools as much as they pleased, and never to punish seriously anything that deserved only to be laughed at and was after all best cured by that innocent remedy. There are certain humours [see Glossary] in mankind which can't be suppressed. The human mind and body are both naturally subject to commotions; and just as **(a)** there are strange ferments in the blood which in many bodies lead to an extraordinary discharge, so **(b)** in reason too there are heterogeneous particles [= 'thought-elements that don't belong there'] which must be thrown off by fermentation. If **(a)** physicians tried to stop those ferments of the body absolutely, and attack the humours that reveal themselves in such eruptions, they might, instead of making a cure, risk starting an epidemic plague. **(b)** And there are equally bad physicians of the body politic. I'm referring to the ones who insist on tampering with these mental eruptions and, under the plausible pretence of healing this itch of superstition and saving souls from the contagion of enthusiasm, set all nature in an uproar and turn a few innocent carbuncles into an inflammation and fatal gangrene.

We read in the stories about such things that the Greek god Pan, when he accompanied Bacchus on an expedition to India, found a way to strike terror through a host of enemies: it involved having a small company of Pan's soldiers whose clamours he managed to good advantage among the echoing rocks and caverns of a woody vale. The hoarse bellowing from the caves, joined to the hideous look of such dark and desert places, gave the enemy so much horror that their imagination helped them to hear voices, and doubtless to see shapes that were more than human; while the uncertainty of what they feared increased their fear, and spread it faster through facial expressions than any verbal report could convey it.

This is what in later times men called a ‘panic’. The story gives a pointer to the nature of this passion, which can hardly occur without some mixture of enthusiasm and of superstitious horrors.

There’s good reason to label as a ‘panic’ every passion that is aroused in a multitude and conveyed from person to person in the crowd by how they *look*, i.e. by contact or by sympathy [see Glossary]. Thus popular [see Glossary] fury can be called ‘panic’, when—as we have sometimes seen—the people are beside themselves with rage, especially when religion comes into it. When people are in this state, their very *looks* are infectious. The fury flies from face to face—the disease is no sooner seen than caught. Onlookers who have witnessed a multitude under the power of this passion, while they themselves were in a better frame of mind, have admitted that they saw in men’s faces something more ghastly and terrible than is ever expressed by an individual on the most passionate occasion. That shows the force of society—of being together with other people—in bad passions as well as in good ones; it shows that any affection [see Glossary] is very much stronger when it is social and communicative.

Thus, my Lord, there are many *panics* in mankind in addition to the kind that only concerns fear. For example, religion is also panic; and panic occurs when enthusiasm of any kind is worked up, as often on sad occasions it is. For vapours naturally rise; and especially in bad times when men’s spirits are low—

- in public calamities,
- during periods of bad food and unhealthy air,
- when convulsions happen in nature: storms, earthquakes, or other amazing prodigies

—at those times the panic is bound to run high, and the magistrate has to give way to it. The alternative to that

is applying a serious remedy—using military force or civil punishments as a cure—which is bound to make things even sadder, increasing the cause of the social illness. Forbidding men’s natural fears and trying to overpower them by other fears—what an unnatural procedure that is! If the magistrate has any skill, he should have a gentler hand; and instead of using caustics, incisions, and amputations he should be using the gentlest ointments. He should with a kind of sympathy enter into the people’s concern and (as it were) take their passion on himself; and when he has soothed and satisfied it he should try by cheerful ways to divert and heal it.

This was ancient policy; and hence (as a notable author [James Harrington] of our nation expresses it) a people *must* have a public leading in religion. To deny the magistrate a worship, i.e. to take away a national church, is mere *enthusiasm*—as clear a case of being emotionally carried away as is the frame of mind that sets up the persecution in the first place. Why shouldn’t there be public walks as well as private gardens? Why not public libraries as well as private education and home-tutors?

- To set limits to imagination and speculation,
- to regulate men’s apprehensions and religious beliefs or fears,
- to suppress by violence the natural passion of enthusiasm, or
- to try to pin enthusiasm down, to reduce it to one species or bring it under any one definition

makes no better sense, and deserves no kinder description, than the stage-play gives to the corresponding project in the affair of love: ‘You will manage it no better than if you undertook to be rationally insane’ [Terence].

Not only the visionaries and enthusiasts of all kinds were tolerated by the ancients, as your Lordship knows, but on the

other side philosophy was allowed to run free and to act as a balance against superstition. It's true that some sects—e.g. the Pythagorean and later Platonic sects—joined in with the superstition and enthusiasm of the times; but the Epicurean, the academic, and others were allowed to use all the force of wit and raillery [see Glossary] against superstition. And thus matters were happily balanced; reason had fair play; learning and science flourished. A wonderful harmony arose from all these contrarities. Superstition and enthusiasm were mildly treated; and because they were left alone they never raged intensely enough to lead to bloodshed, wars, persecutions and devastations. But a new sort of policy, which looks to another world, and considers the lives and happiness of men in the after-life rather than the here and now, has made us leap the bounds of •natural humanity and out of a •supernatural charity has taught us to plague one another most devoutly! It has created a hostility which no •temporal interest could ever do, putting us into mutual hatred that is supposed to last for all •eternity. And the only way out of this evil that people can see now is uniformity in opinion (a likely project!). The heroic passion of exalted spirits is now *the saving of souls*; it has become in a way the chief concern of the magistrate and the very purpose of government itself.

If the government were to be so *kind* as to interfere this much in other sciences [see Glossary], our logic and mathematics and every kind of philosophy would be as bad as theology is in many countries where a precise orthodoxy is settled by law. It's hard for a government to set rules governing wit. If government merely keeps us sober and **honest**, we'll probably be as capable in our •spiritual as in our •this-worldly affairs; and if we can merely be trusted, we'll have **wit** enough to save ourselves when no prejudice lies in the way. But if honesty and wit are not sufficient for

this saving work, the magistrate won't do any good by getting involved in it; because however virtuous or wise he is, he's as likely to be mistaken as anyone else. I'm sure that the only way to save men's sense, or preserve wit at all in the world, is to set wit free. And wit can never be free while the freedom of raillery [see Glossary] is taken away; for against serious extravagances and explosions of bad temper raillery is the only remedy.

We have indeed full power over all other types of passion: we're allowed to treat other enthusiasms as we please, ridiculing love, or gallantry, or knight-errantry [see Glossary] to the utmost; and we find that. . . the mood or feeling of love/gallantry/knight-errantry, which was once so prevalent, has nearly died out. [Shaftesbury says that 'in these latter days of wit' this decline has taken place; perhaps he means this causally: latter-day wit has pretty well killed the tradition of courtly love.] The Crusades, the rescuing of holy lands and other such devout gallantries are less in demand than they used to be; but if there does still exist

- something* of this militant religion,
- something of this soul-rescuing spirit,
- some amount of saint-errantry,

we shouldn't be surprised, when we consider how solemnly we treat this illness—how preposterously we set about curing enthusiasm.

Suppose we had a sort of Inquisition or formal judicial court with grave officers and judges, set up •to restrain poetic licence and in general •to suppress the imaginative mood of versification and especially that most extravagant passion of *love* as it is presented by poets in its heathenish dress of Venuses and Cupids. And suppose that the poets, as ringleaders and teachers of this heresy, were under grievous penalties forbidden to enchant the people by this kind of rhyming; and that the people were under corresponding

penalties forbidden to listen to any such charm or attend to any love-story, even in a play, a novel, or a ballad. I can't help thinking that in that case we would see a new arcadia arising out of this heavy persecution: old people and young would be seized with a versifying spirit; we would have gatherings of lovers and poets in the meadows; forests would be filled with romantic shepherds and shepherdesses; and rocks would resound with echoes of hymns and praises offered to the powers of love. With this management of affairs, we might even have a fair chance to bring back the whole train of heathen gods, and set our cold northern island burning with as many altars to Venus and Apollo as there used to be in Cyprus, Delos, or any of those warmer Greek climates.

Section 3

But, my Lord, you may be surprised that I, having been drawn into such a serious subject as religion, should forget myself so far as to give way to raillery and humour. I must admit, my Lord, that this didn't happen merely by chance. The fact is that I don't much like even *thinking* about this subject, let alone *writing* about it, without first trying to put myself in as good a mood as is possible. People indeed who can endure no middle temper, but are all air and humour [the sentence up to here is verbatim Shaftesbury], know little of the doubts and scruples of religion, and are safe from any immediate influence of devout melancholy or •enthusiasm, because •that requires more deliberation and thoughtful practice to settle itself in a person's temperament and become habitual with him. But I wouldn't want to be rescued from *any* habit at such a cost as thoughtlessness or madness. I would rather take my chances with religion than try to get rid of the thoughts of it by side-tracking myself. All

I contend for is thinking about religion in the right frame of mind; and what I shall try to demonstrate is that this goes more than half-way towards thinking rightly—i.e. having true thoughts—about it.

Good humour is not only the best protection against enthusiasm but also the best foundation for piety and true religion: for if right thoughts and worthy understandings of the supreme being are fundamental to all true worship and adoration, it's more than probable that we'll never go wrong about this except solely through ill humour. Nothing but ill humour, whether natural or forced, can get a man to think seriously that the world is governed by some devilish or malicious power. I very much doubt whether anything but ill humour can be the cause of atheism. For a man in good humour there are so many arguments to persuade him that in the main all things are kindly and well disposed that one would think he *couldn't* be so far out of touch with the events of the world as to imagine that •they all happened by chance, and that •the world, with its venerable and wise face, had neither sense nor meaning in it. But I am outright convinced of this: nothing but ill humour can give us dreadful or ill thoughts of a supreme Manager. Nothing can persuade us of sullenness or sourness in such a Being except the actual feeling of something like that within ourselves; and if we're afraid of bringing good humour into religion, or thinking with freedom and pleasantness on such a subject as God, that has to be because we •think of the subject as so like ourselves, and •can hardly have a notion of majesty and greatness without haughty gloom accompanying it.

But this is the exact opposite of the character that we acknowledge to be most divinely good when we see it, as we sometimes do, in men of highest power among us. If they count as truly good, we dare to treat them freely—speak to them in an informal and almost familiar manner—and

are sure that they won't be displeased with our taking this liberty. They are doubly the gainers by this goodness of theirs. •The more that is learned about them in these informal and familiar encounters, the more their worth appears; and the •discoverer of that worth esteems and loves his superior more than ever when he has revealed this additional goodness in him and reflects on that candor and generosity he has experienced. Your Lordship may know more of this mystery than anyone. How else could you have been so beloved when you were in power, and loved even more and loyally supported when you were out of power?

There are—thank heaven!—even in our own age some examples of this. In earlier times there have been many: we have known mighty princes [see Glossary], and even emperors of the world, who could bear unconcernedly, not only the free censure of their actions but the most spiteful reproaches and libels, even to their faces. . . . It was a misfortune for mankind in general more than for Christians in particular that some of the earlier Roman emperors were such monsters of tyranny, and persecuted not only •religious men but •everyone who was suspected of worth or virtue. What could have been a higher honour or advantage to Christianity than to be persecuted by the likes of Nero? But better princes who came later were persuaded to soften these severities. It's true that •in the early Christian days the magistrate may have been taken by surprise by the newness of a notion that he might think would not only •destroy the sacredness of his power but also •treat as profane, impious, and damned everyone (including the magistrate) who didn't worship in one particular way. (Before Christianity there had been so many thousands of forms of worship, all of them compatible and sociable.) However, such was the wisdom of some of the later ministries that the edge of persecution was blunted; and even the prince [the Roman emperor known to Christians as

Julian the Apostate] who was regarded as the greatest enemy of the Christian sect, and who himself had been educated in it, was a great restrainer of persecution, and wouldn't allow persecution to go further than the confiscation of church lands and schools, leaving intact the goods or persons even of those who condemned the state religion and made a merit of insulting the public worship.

It's a good thing that we have the authority of a sacred author in our religion [Paul in *Corinthians* 13:3] to assure us that the spirit of love and humanity is above the spirit of the martyrs. Despite that assurance, one might be a little scandalised by the history of many of our earliest confessors and martyrs, even according to our own accounts of them. There can't be many Christians alive today who are so *good* (if this is indeed the mark of a good one) that if they happened to live in an Islamic city would think it fitting or decent to disturb their mosque worship. And suppose that someone carried his hatred of Roman Catholic idolatry to the point of interrupting high mass (where mass perhaps was established by law), or physically attacking the images and relics—you and I, my Lord, good protestants as we are, would regard him as little better than a rank enthusiast [here = 'fanatic'].

It seems that some of our good brethren, the French protestants who have recently come among us, are strongly attracted to this primitive way •in which the early martyrs virtually invited their own deaths. They have done a wonderful job of launching the spirit of martyrdom in their own country; and they long to try it out here, if only we will give them leave and provide them with the occasion—i.e. if only we will

- do them the favour of hanging or imprisoning them;
- be so obliging as to break their bones for them, in the way this is done in their own country,
- inflate their zeal, and stir the coals of persecution.

But so far they haven't been able to get this favour from us. We're so hard-hearted that although their own Frenchmob are willing to bestow kind blows upon them, and fairly stone them now and then in the open street; and although the priests of their own nation would gladly inflict on them the punishment they desire, and are eager to light their probationary fires for them; we English men, who are masters in our own country, won't allow the enthusiasts to be treated in that way. . . .

But we tolerant Englishmen are even more barbarous still—more than heathenishly cruel—because we don't merely deny these prophesying enthusiasts the honour of a persecution, we have delivered them over to the cruelest contempt in the world. I am told that they are at this very moment the subject of a choice doll- or puppet-show at Bartholomew Fair, where presumably their strange voices and involuntary agitations are admirably well acted by the motion of wires and hooting of pipes. That's because bodies of the prophets when they are prophesying are not in their own power but are (as they say themselves) mere passive organs, driven by an exterior force, having nothing natural or life-like in any of their sounds or motions—so that however awkwardly a puppet-show may imitate other actions, it must represent *this* passion—the enthusiasm expressed by someone when he is 'prophesying'—to the life. And while Bartholomew Fair is allowed to put on such shows, I'll bet that within our national Church no sect of enthusiasts, no new salesmen offering prophecy or miracles, will ever get started and put her to the trouble of battling with them.

It was a happy thing for us that when popery took over, Smithfield was used in a more unpleasant way. [The Bartholomew Fair was held every summer in Smithfield, which for many years was *also* the location of the executions of Protestant (Catholic) martyrs when a Catholic (Protestant) was on the throne.] I'm afraid

that many of our first reformers were little better than enthusiasts; and God knows whether a warmth of this kind didn't considerably help us in throwing off that Roman Catholic spiritual tyranny. So that if the priests hadn't put their love of blood ahead of all other passions (as they usually do), they might in a more cheerful way have dodged the greatest force of our reforming spirit. [Shaftesbury means that when the Catholic Queen Mary was on the throne, she'd have done a better job of suppressing Protestantism through mockery than through persecution. That's why it was 'a happy thing for us [Protestants]' that she didn't take that route.] I've never heard that the ancient heathens, in their bad attempt to suppress the Christian religion when it first arose, had the good sense to make use of this Bartholomew Fair method. But I'm convinced that if it was possible in any way to overcome the truth of the gospel, they would have had a much better chance of silencing it if they had chosen to bring our first founders before the public in a pleasanter way than by feeding them to wild animals or burning them to death.

The Jews were naturally a very gloomy people, who wouldn't endure much raillery in anything, especially in things relating to any religious doctrines or opinions. Religion was looked on with a sullen eye; and for anything that looked like setting up a new revelation the only remedy they could prescribe was hanging. The victorious argument was always *Crucify!, Crucify!*. But with all their malice and hostility to our Saviour and his apostles after him, if it had occurred to them to put on puppet-shows in contempt of him—as at this very moment the papists are putting on in honour of him—I'm inclined to think they might have done our religion more harm in that way than they did by all their other ways of severity.

I believe our great and learned apostle Paul *gained* less from the easy treatment that his Athenian antagonists gave

him than from the surly and malignant spirit of the most persecuting Jewish cities.¹ He improved more from the candor and civility of his Roman judges than from the zeal of the synagogue and the vehemence of his national priests. Though when I think of this apostle as appearing either before the witty Athenians or before a Roman judicial court in the presence of their great men and ladies, and see how handsomely he fits himself to the views and temperaments of those more polished people, I don't see him refusing the way of wit or good humour; rather, I see him as being so confident of the rightness of his cause that he is willing to subject it to this test, trying it against the sharpness of any ridicule that might be offered.

But although the Jews were never pleased to try their wit or malice in this way against our Saviour or his apostles, the irreligious part of the heathens had tried it, long before that, against the best doctrines and best men that had ever arisen amongst them. And in the long run this did no harm to the men and doctrines that had been mocked. Quite the opposite: by surviving this test they emerged as solid and just. The most divine man who had ever appeared in the heathen world lived at the height of witty times, and the wittiest of all poets ridiculed him abominably in a comedy that was written and acted for that purpose. [This refers to the lampooning of Socrates in Aristophanes' play *The Clouds*.] But this was so far from sinking his reputation or suppressing his philosophy that they were each increased by it; and he apparently grew to be more the envy of other teachers. He was not only willing to be ridiculed; he even gave Aristophanes what help he could by presenting himself openly on the stage, so that his real appearance (which was far from impressive) could be compared with

what the poet had represented him by in the play. . . . There couldn't be better evidence of the invincible goodness of Socrates, and of there being no imposture either in his character or opinions. It's not surprising that imposture will risk confrontation with a solemn enemy, because she—i.e. imposture—knows that a solemn attack isn't much of a danger to her. There is nothing she hates or dreads like pleasantness and good humour.

Section 4

In short, my Lord, I think that the melancholy way of treating religion is what makes it so *sad*, and leads it to produce such dismal tragedies in the world. My idea is that provided we treat religion with good manners we can never use too much good humour or examine it with too much freedom and familiarity. Why? Because if it is genuine and sincere, it will not only pass the test but thrive and profit from it; and if it is spurious or mixed with any imposture, that will be detected and exposed.

The gloomy way in which we have been taught religion makes it hard for us to think of it in a good-humoured way. We turn to it mainly in times of

adversity,
ill-health,
affliction,
disturbance of mind, or
emotional upset,

though in fact we are never so *unfit* to think of it as at such a heavy and dark hour. We can never be fit to contemplate

¹ What advantage Paul made of his sufferings, and how pathetically his bonds and stripes were displayed, and often used rhetorically to raise his character and advance the interests of Christianity, can easily be seen by anyone who reads his Epistles and is well acquainted with his manner and style.

anything above us when we are in no condition to look into ourselves and calmly examine the state of our own mind and passions. For it's at those times,

when we are full of disturbances and fears within,
and have been led by our suffering and anxiety to
lose much of the natural calm and easiness of our
temperament,

that we see anger, fury, revenge, and terrors in the Deity.

To understand well •what true goodness is, and •what is really meant by the attributes that we ascribe with such applause and honour to the Deity, we must be not merely in ordinary good humour but in the best of humours, and in the sweetest and kindest disposition of our lives. *That's* when we'll be best able to see whether

the forms of justice,
the degrees of punishment,
the mood of resentment, and
the offended and indignant behaviour

that we commonly suppose in God are suitable to the basic ideas of goodness that the same divine Being (or nature under him) has implanted in us, and which we *must* assume apply to that Being if we are to give him praise or honour of any kind. This, my Lord, is how to protect oneself from all superstition: to remember that there is nothing in God but what is God-like; and that he either doesn't exist or is truly and perfectly good. But when we're afraid to use our reason freely, even on the question 'Does he really exist?', we then actually presume him bad, and flatly contradict that pretended character of goodness and greatness; whilst we discover this mistrust of his temper, and fear his anger and resentment, in the case of this freedom of Inquiry.

We have a notable instance of this freedom in one of our sacred authors: Job is said to be very patient [see Glossary], but it can't be denied that he confronts God boldly enough

and *challenges* his providence [see Glossary]. His friends plead hard with him, and use every argument they can find, right or wrong, to patch up objections and get the affairs of providence squared away. They make a merit of saying all the good things they can about God, taking this to the utmost limits of their reason and sometimes quite beyond them. But Job holds that this is not paying God any compliments. And he's right; for what merit can there be in believing in God or his providence upon frivolous and weak grounds? What virtue is there in assuming an opinion that is contrary to the appearance of things, and deciding not to listen to anything that is said against it? Job's comforters envisage

a God who will be •offended at us if we refuse to treat our understandings as liars as much as we can, and will be •satisfied with us if we believe—a leap in the dark in defiance of our reason—something that could be the greatest falsehood in the world, for anything we can show to the contrary!

What a splendid characterisation of the God of truth!

Only an ill-natured man could *want* there not to be a god; because that would be wishing against the public good and even against his private good too, if that is rightly understood. But a man who doesn't have any such ill-will to stifle his belief must have a miserable opinion of God, and believe Him to be nowhere near as good as he knows himself to be, if he thinks that

- an impartial use of his reason in any matter of speculation [see Glossary] whatsoever can expose him to danger in the after-life, and that
- a mean denial of his reason, and a pretence of belief in anything that is too hard for his understanding, can entitle him to any favour in another world.

... This is treating God in the way crafty beggars treat those they approach when they don't know what their social rank

is. A beginner may innocently come out with a ‘Good sir’ or a ‘Good forsooth!’ [apparently meaning a ‘Good [whatever]’], but experienced beggars will address anyone whom they meet descending from a coach with ‘Good your honour!’ or ‘Good your Lordship!’ or ‘. . . your Ladyship!’. They explain it this way: ‘If the person really is a Lord, we would be in trouble for not using the proper title; and if the person is not a Lord, he won’t be offended by being addressed as though he were.’

And that’s how it is in religion. We are highly concerned about how to *beg* properly; and we think that everything depends on getting the title right—making a good guess at it. Consider this:

We should strive to have faith, and believe to the utmost; because if after all there’s no truth in religion, there will be no harm in being thus deceived, whereas if there is truth in it, it will be fatal for us not to have believed to the full.

This has been loudly praised, and many able men regard it as a great maxim. In fact, it is the most beggarly refuge imaginable. And those who accept it are mistaken, because as long as we have this thought we can’t possibly have beliefs that will •bring us satisfaction and happiness in this world or •improve our chances of faring well in the next world. For one thing, •our reason will know that we are cheating and won’t let us sail smoothly in such a craft, but will often turn us adrift and toss us in a sea of doubt and perplexity; and also •our religious state will grow worse, and we’ll hold a less favourable opinion of the supreme Deity when our belief is based on such an insulting thought of him.

To love the public, to care about universal good, and to do whatever we can to promote the interests of the whole world—this is surely the height of goodness, and makes the temperament that we call ‘divine’. With this temperament. . . we naturally wish that others should have it too, by

being convinced of the sincerity of our example. We naturally wish our merit to be known; particularly if we’ve had the good fortune •to serve a nation as a good minister; or as a prince or father of a country •to have made happy a considerable part of mankind under our care. But suppose that some of our beneficiaries

- are brought up in such ignorance and live so far out in the back-blocks that they have never heard of us or our actions; or
- have heard of our name and actions but are so puzzled with odd and contrary stories told up and down concerning us that they don’t know what to think—don’t even know whether there really is in the world any such person as ourself.

Wouldn’t it be simply *ridiculous* for us to take offence at this? Wouldn’t we count as extravagantly morose and bad-tempered if, instead of treating the matter jokingly, we seriously thought about revenging ourselves on the offending parties—people who had detracted from our renown because of their rustic ignorance, bad judgment, or incredulity?

What are we to say, then? Does it really deserve praise, to be thus concerned about praise? Is doing good for glory’s sake such a divine a thing? Isn’t it more divine to do good even •where it may be thought inglorious, even •to the ungrateful, even •to people who are wholly unaware of the good they are receiving? Then how does it come about that what is so divine in us should lose its character in the divine being? and that the Deity is represented to us in a way that makes him resemble the weak, womanish, and impotent part of our nature rather than the generous, manly, and divine part? [Those six adjectives are Shaftesbury’s.]

Section 5

One would think it was pretty easy for us to know our own weaknesses at first sight, and distinguish the features of human frailty with which we are so well acquainted! One would think it was easy to understand that

provocation and offendedness,
anger,
revenge,
jealousy in point of honour or power,
love of fame and glory

and the like belong only to limited beings, and can't be possessed by a being that is perfect and universal. But if we have no settled notion of what is morally excellent; or if we can't trust our reason's declaration that nothing beside what is morally excellent can have place in the Deity; then we can't trust, either, anything we are told about him by other people or through revelations by the Deity himself. We must be satisfied in advanced that he is good and cannot deceive us. Otherwise there can be no real religious faith or confidence. Now, if there really is some demonstration of reason, prior to revelation, to assure us that God exists and that he is so good as not to deceive us, that same reason—if we will trust to it—will demonstrate to us that God is so good as to be **better than the very best of us**. This will free us from upsetting fears and suspicions, because it is only malice, not goodness, that can make us afraid.

There's an odd line of thought that some people find very compelling when they are in certain frames of mind very sovereign to those who can apply it. It goes like this:

‘There can't be malice except where interests are opposed. A universal being can't have interests that are opposed by any other interests; therefore a universal being can't have malice.’

If there is a •general mind, it can't have any •particular interests. For such a mind, its own private good must be exactly the same as the general good, i.e. the good of the whole. It can't intend anything besides the general good, or aim at anything beyond it, or be provoked to do anything contrary to it. So we have only to consider whether there really is such a thing as a mind that has relation to the whole [Shaftesbury's phrase]. For if **(a)** unhappily there isn't any ·universal· mind, we can at least comfort ourselves with the thought that nature has no malice; and if **(b)** there really is a ·universal· mind, we can rest satisfied that it is the best-natured mind in the world. One would think that **(b)** is the more comfortable option, with the notion of a common parent being less frightful than that of •forlorn nature and a fatherless world. Though as religion stands among us these days, many good people would have less fear in being thus •exposed, and might be more at peace if they were sure that they had only mere chance to trust to. [Shaftesbury presumably meant **forlorn** (= ‘deserted’, ‘abandoned’) to link with **exposed**—at some times and places the standard method of infanticide was to expose the unwanted child to the elements and to predators.] For nobody trembles at the thought that there may be no god; but people do tremble at the thought that there may be one. This would be otherwise, though, if deity were thought as kindly of as humanity is, and we could be persuaded to believe that if there really is a god he must have the highest goodness, without any of the defects of passion, any of the meannesses and imperfections that we acknowledge in ourselves, doing our best to rise above them and finding that over the course of time we can do so.

I think it would be well for us, my Lord, if before ascending into the higher regions of divinity we descended a little into ourselves and gave some poor thoughts to plain honest morals [see Glossary]. After looking into ourselves and getting

a clear view of the nature of our own affections [see Glossary], we would probably •be better judges of the divineness of a character and •have a clearer view of what affections are suitable or unsuitable for a perfect being. We might understand how to love and praise after we had acquired a consistent notion of what is praiseworthy or lovely. Without those preparations, we might chance to do God little honour when we intended him the most. It's hard to imagine what honour can come to the Deity from the praises of creatures who can't see what is praiseworthy or excellent in humans. [Shaftesbury adds a paragraph making the point that there would be something wrong with a musician who was pleased by the praises of listeners who had no ear for music, and second paragraph amplifying that.]

It's not the same with goodness as with other qualities, which we may understand very well and yet not possess. We may have an excellent ear in music without being able to perform in any way. We can be good judges of poetry, without being poets or having the least talent that way. But we can't have a tolerable notion of goodness without being tolerably good. So if the praise of a divine Being is such a great part of the worship of Him, I think we should learn goodness, if only so that we might learn in some tolerable manner how to praise. The praise of goodness from an unsound hollow heart must make the greatest dissonance in the world.

Section 6

There are also other reasons, my Lord, why this plain homespun philosophy of looking into ourselves may do us great service in correcting our errors in religion. There's a sort of *enthusiasm at second hand*: when men who find no original commotions in themselves, no consuming panic

that bewitches them, are still apt to be imposed on by the testimony of others, and led credulously into believing in many false miracles. This habit can make them variable, with a very inconstant faith, easy to be carried away with every wind of doctrine and attached to every upstart sect or superstition. But

- knowing about our passions in their very seeds,
- measuring well the growth and progress of enthusiasm, and
- judging rightly its natural force and what command it has even over our senses

may teach us to resist more successfully those delusions that come armed with the glittering *pretext* of moral certainty and matter of fact.

The new prophesying sect that I mentioned earlier [page 8] apparently claim to have produced many miracles including a most notable one, performed deliberately and with advance warning of it, in the presence of many hundreds of people who actually testify to the truth of it. My only question is this:

Among those hundreds of spectators, was there *one* person who had never belonged to that sect or been drawn to its beliefs and practices, and who would give the same testimony as the rest of them do?

I'm asking not merely for someone who had been wholly free of that particular enthusiasm; I want someone who before that time was thought to have such a sound judgment and clear head that he was wholly free of melancholy and in all likelihood incapable of any kind of enthusiasm. For someone who isn't as mentally sturdy as that, the panic could have been *caught*, •like an infection•—the evidence of the senses lost, as in a dream, and the imagination inflamed so much that in a moment it burned up every particle of judgment and reason. •In a person like that•, the combustible materials

lie prepared within, ready to catch fire at a spark, especially in a multitude who are all in the grip of the same spirit. No wonder the blaze springs up so suddenly: countless eyes glow with the passion, and heaving breasts are labouring with inspiration; not only men's faces but also their very breath and panting are infectious, and the **inspiring** disease spreads by insensible **transpiration**—i.e. the disease that drives *in* also spreads *across*. [Shaftesbury is here playing with 'inspire' and its cognates: the worshippers' 'inspiration' is both •the entry into them of some divine spirit and •their breathing in.] I am not a skilled enough theologian to discover what 'spirit' it was that proved so catching among the ancient prophets that even the worldly Saul was taken by it [see *Acts* 26:12–18]. But I learn from holy scripture that there was an evil spirit of prophecy as well as the good one. And I find by present experience, as well as by all histories, sacred and profane, that the operation of this spirit is everywhere the same, as to the bodily organs. [He means: What I see around me, and what I read in holy books and secular histories, shows me that the physical manifestations of 'inspiration' are the same when the inspiring spirit is evil as when it is good.]

A gentleman who recently wrote in defence of revived prophecy, and has since then fallen himself into prophetic ecstasies, tells us:

'The ancient prophets had the spirit of God upon them in ecstasy, with various strange gestures of body marking them as madmen (or enthusiasts). We can see this in the examples of Balaam, Saul, David, Ezekiel, Daniel, and so on.'

And he proceeds to justify this by the practice of the apostolic times, and by the rules that the apostle himself applies to these seemingly unruly gifts that were (our author claims) so frequent and ordinary in the early church when Christianity was first arising and spreading. I leave it to him to do the best

he can to liken his own kind of inspiration to the apostolic kind. I only know that the symptoms he describes, and which he himself (poor gentleman!) labours under, are as heathen-like as he can possibly claim them to be Christian. And when I saw him recently in an agitation (as they call it), uttering prophecy in a pompous Latin style of which he seems to be wholly incapable when out of his ecstasy, it put into my mind the Latin poet's description of the Sibyl [prophetess, mythical but believed in by the ancient Greeks], whose agonies were so perfectly like these [quoted from Virgil's *Aeneid*]:

'Immediately her face changes, her colour flies, her hair falls in disorder, her breast heaves and her heart swells with mad passion; she seems to grow taller and her voice doesn't sound mortal, for she is breathed upon by the god who is now coming in on her.'

And again shortly after that:

'The prophetess rages monstrously in the cave, seeking to cast from her breast the mighty god; so much the more he compels the rabid mouth, ruling the wild heart, and moulds her by his force.'

Which is the very style of our experienced author! 'For the inspired', he says, 'undergo a probationary period in which the spirit by frequent agitations shapes the organs; this ordinarily goes on for a month or two before utterance' [meaning: '... before anything inspired is said'].

A Roman historian [Livy], writing about a horrible enthusiasm that broke out in Rome before his time, describes this spirit of prophecy: 'Men foretell the future with fanatical convulsions of the body, as if they were out of their minds.' I'm not willing to write down the detestable things that are also reported of these enthusiasts, but I can't pass up the Senate's mild decree regarding this execrable behaviour. You must know it already, but I include it here so that you can read and re-read it with admiration:

‘As for the future, the Senate decreed that if anyone should believe that such a cult was religiously necessary to him—that he couldn’t forgo it without irreligion and impiety—he should inform the Praetor of the city, who would consult the Senate. If the Senate (with at least a hundred Senators present) gave permission, the rites could be performed; but with at most five people assisting at the sacrifice, with no common fund, no master of the rites, no priests.’

It’s a sign of how necessary it is to give way to this illness of enthusiasm that even •the philosopher who directed the whole force of his philosophy against superstition seems to have left room for visionary fancy, and to have indirectly tolerated enthusiasm. We can’t think that someone with as little religious faith as •Epicurus would be so vulgarly credulous as to *believe* those accounts of armies and castles in the air, and other such visionary phenomena. Yet he allows them; and then thinks he can explain them by his ‘effluvia’ and ‘aerial looking-glasses’ and I don’t know what other stuff. His Latin poet presents that beautifully, as he does everything :

‘Many simulacra [= ‘copies’] of things, thin and various in form, wander about in all sorts of ways; and when they meet in the air they easily conjoin like cobwebs or gold-leaf. . . Thus we see centaurs and limbs of Scylla, and shapes of dogs like Cerberus, and the ghosts of dead people whose bones the earth contains; because everywhere float simulacra of every kind, some spontaneously shaped by the air within itself and others thrown off by various things •of which they are simulacra.’ [Lucretius]

This philosopher evidently believed that there was a good stock of visionary spirit originally in human nature. He was so sure that men were inclined to see •visions that,

rather than depriving men of •them, he chose to put •them within reach. Although he denied the principles of religion to be natural, he was forced to allow, tacitly, that mankind had a wondrous disposition towards supernatural objects; and that these empty ideas were in a way innate—i.e. were such as men were really born to and could hardly by any means avoid. From this concession, I think, a theologian could raise a good argument against him—an argument for the •truth of religion as well as its •usefulness. Either way, whether the content of an apparition is true or false, the symptoms are the same, and the passion is of equal force in the vision-struck person. The *lymphatici* of the Latins were the *nympholepti* of the Greeks. They were said to have seen some species of divinity, as either some rural deity, or nymph; which threw them into convulsions that overcame their reason. The ecstasies expressed themselves outwardly in quakings, tremblings, tossings of the head and limbs, agitations and (as Livy calls them) fanatical throws or convulsions, impromptu prayer, prophecy, singing, and the like. All nations have their lymphatics of some kind or other; and all churches, heathen as well as Christian, have had their complaints against fanaticism.

One might expect that the ancients thought of this disease as having some relation to what they called *hydrophobia*. I can’t discover for sure whether the ancient lymphatics had any way, like the biting by hydrophobics, to communicate the rage of their disease. But since the time of the ancients there have been certain fanatics who made a good living getting people to use their teeth. For since the snappish spirit first arose in religion, all the sects have been at it (as the saying is) *tooth and nail*. They are never better pleased than when they are mercilessly *worrying* one another •as a cat *worries* a mouse that it has caught•.

The innocent kind of fanaticism spreads because when a person is struck by the apparition, there always follows an itch to impart it and kindle the same fire in other breasts. So poets are fanatics too. And the Latin poet Horace is or pretends to be lymphatic, showing what an effect the vision of the nymphs and of Bacchus had on him:

‘Bacchus have I seen in far-off stony places teaching his songs. . . .and the nymphs learning them. . . . *Evae!* my heart trembles with the still-felt fear, and wildly exults in a breast filled with Bacchus.’

No poet, as I ventured to say to your Lordship at the outset, can do anything great in his own way without imagining or supposing a divine presence, which may raise him to some degree of this passion we are speaking of. [Look back at the opening: it doesn’t say this, or anything like it!] Even the cold Lucretius makes use of inspiration when he writes against it; and is forced to raise an apparition of nature in a divine form to drive and guide him in his very work of degrading nature and robbing her of all her seeming wisdom and divinity:

‘Life-giving Venus, who under the gliding signs of heaven fill with life the ship-bearing sea and the fruitful lands. . . .since you alone rule the nature of things, and without you nothing would rise above the ground into the light, and nothing good or lovable would grow, please help me to compose my song. . . .’

Section 7

The only thing I would infer from all this, my Lord, is that

- enthusiasm is amazingly powerful and widespread;
- it is a matter of precise judgment, and
- it is the hardest thing in the world to know fully and distinctly, because even atheism isn’t free from it!

I am not the first to have noted that there have been enthusiastical atheists. And it’s not easy to distinguish their enthusiasm from divine inspiration by any outward signs: the difference is simply that divine inspiration is a real feeling of the divine presence, and atheistic enthusiasm is a false one. But the passion they raise is much alike. For when the mind is taken up in vision, and fixes its view either on a real object or on a mere illusion of divinity; when it sees or thinks it sees something prodigious and more than human; its horror, delight, confusion, fear, amazeentdmiration, or whatever passion belongs to it or is uppermost on this occasion will have about it something vast, monstrous, and (as painters say) ‘beyond life’ . . .

There will always be some kind of extravagance and fury when the ideas or images received are too big for the narrow human vessel to contain. So inspiration can fairly be called divine ‘enthusiasm’: for the word itself signifies *divine presence*, and was used by the philosopher whom the earliest Christian fathers called divine, to express whatever was sublime in human passions.² This was the spirit he allotted to heroes, statesmen, poets, orators, musicians,

² [In each of these quotations from Plato’s Dialogues, iSocrates is speaking.] •Don’t you see that I shall clearly be possessed by those nymphs into whose clutches you deliberately threw me? (*Phaedrus* 241e). •Statesmen too. . . are to be considered as acting under divine influence, inspired and possessd by the divinity.’ (*Meno* 99 d). •So I soon made up my mind about the poets too. I decided that what enabled them to write their poetry was not wisdom but a kind of instinct or inspiration’ (*Apology* 22 c). In particular as to philosophers, Plutarch tells us, it was the complaint of some of the sour old Romans, when learning first came to them from Greece, that in their youth they were enthusiastic with philosophy. ‘He put a spell on young men, under which they gave up other pleasures and amusements, and were possessed by philosophy’ (Plutarch, *Cato Major*).

and even philosophers themselves; and we too can't help attributing any great performance by any of these to a noble enthusiasm. Thus, most of us already know something of this principle [see Glossary]. But to know it as we should do, and recognise the various kinds of it in ourselves and in others—that is the great work, and we have to do it if we are to have any hope of avoiding delusion. To be able to judge whether spirits are from God, we must first judge concerning our own spirit:

- Is it from reason and sound sense?
- Is it calm, cool, and impartial?
- Is it free of every biasing passion, every giddy vapor, or melancholy fume?

Only if each answer is Yes is our spirit fit to judge at all. We can't know anything unless we *first understand ourselves*

and know what spirit we are of. Then we can judge the spirit in others, consider what their personal merit is, and test the validity of their testimony by ·testing· the solidity of their brain. In this way we can prepare ourselves with some antidote against enthusiasm. And this is what I have ventured to say is best performed by keeping to good humour; for otherwise the remedy itself—·censorious gloom·—may become the disease.

And now, my Lord, having to some extent defended enthusiasm and aligned myself with it, if I seem to have gone too far in addressing you in the way I have done, allow me to plead an *impulse!* Take me to be—as indeed I am—most passionately yours; and with the kindness that has been natural to you on other occasions please tolerate your enthusiastic friend. . . .