

## Part 2

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Our ideas reach no further than our experience.

We have no experience of divine attributes and operations.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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