

Letter From A Gentleman To His Friend In Edinburgh, A
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Editor's note: In 1744-1745 Hume was a candidate for the Chair of Moral Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh. The position was to be vacated by John Pringle, and the leading candidates were Hume and William Cleghorn. The Edinburgh Town Council was responsible for electing a replacement; consequently, politics was a key factor in the decision. Loyalties were drawn chiefly along the two key political party lines: the Argathelians (Hume's party), and the Squadrones (Cleghorn's party). Pringle, a Squadrone, procrastinated in stepping down, thus allowing the Squadrones to unify their opposition to Hume by condemning his anti-religious writings. Chief among the religious critics was clergyman William Wishart (d. 1752), the Principal of the University of Edinburgh. Although Wishart was an Argathelian, his dislike of Hume's philosophy rose above political allegiance; it is also relevant that Wishart too sought the position for which Hume was applying. Lists of allegedly dangerous propositions from Hume's Treatise circulated, presumably penned by Wishart. In the face of such strong opposition, Hume's Argathelian support weakened. The religious dimension of the competition also compelled the Edinburgh Town Council to consult the Edinburgh ministers. Hoping to win over the clergy, Hume composed a point by point reply to the circulating lists of dangerous propositions. This was sent to Henry Home, and published as A Letter from a Gentleman to his Friend in Edinburgh. The clergy were not dissuaded, and 12 of the 15 ministers voted against Hume. Hume quickly withdrew his candidacy. A month later Hume reflected in a letter that the matter of his vocational opportunities "was brought to an issue, and by the cabals of the Principal [i.e. Wishart], the bigotry of the clergy, and the credulity of the mob, we lost it." In 1751-1752 Hume sought a philosophy chair at the University of Glasgow, and was again unsuccessful. Hume's lesson, perhaps, was to seek civil employment through his Argathelian supporters, rather than academic employment. The following is from the 1745 edition of A Letter from a Gentleman.

A LETTER FROM A GENTLEMAN TO

HIS FRIEND IN Edinburgh:

CONTAINING

Some OBSERVATIONS ON

A Specimen of the Principles concerning RELIGION and MORALITY,
said to be maintain'd in a Book lately publish'd, intituled, A
Treatise of Human Nature, &c.

EDINBURGH,

{3}

SIR,

I Have read over the Specimen of the Principles concerning Religion and Morality, said to be maintain'd in a Book lately published, intituled, A Treatise of Human Nature; being an Attempt to introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects. I have also read over what is called the Sum of the Charge. Which Papers, as you inform me, have been industriously spread about, and were put into your hands some few Days ago.

I was perswaded that the Clamour of Scepticism, Atheism, &c. had been so often employ'd by the worst of Men against the best, that it had now lost all its Influence; and should never have thought of making any Remarks on these maim'd Excerpts, if you had not laid your Commands on me, as a piece of common Justice to the Author, and for undeceiving some well-meaning People, on whom it seems the enormous Charge has made Impression. {4}

I shall insert the Accusation at full Length, and then go regularly through what is called the Sum of the Charge; because it is intended, I suppose, to contain the Substance of the whole. I shall also take notice of the Specimen as I go along.

Specimen of the Principles concerning Religion and Morality, &c.

THE Author puts on his Title-page (Vol. I printed for J. Noon, 1739) a Passage of Tacitus to this Purpose; "Rare Happiness of our Times, that you may think as you will, and speak as you think."

He expresses his Deference to the Publick in these Words (Advertisement, p. 2.) The Approbation of the Publick I consider as the greatest Reward of my Labours; but am determined to regard its Judgment, whatever it be, as my best Instruction."

He gives us the summary View of his Philosophy from p. 458. to 470. --

"I am confounded with that forlorn Solitude, in which I am placed in my Philosophy. {5} -- I have exposed myself to the Enmity of all Metaphysicians, Logicians, Mathematicians, and even Theologians. -- I have declared my Disapprobations of their Systems. -- When I turn my Eye inward, I find nothing but Doubt and Ignorance. All the World conspires to oppose and contradict me; tho' such is my Weakness, that I feel all my Opinions loosen and fall of themselves, when unsupported by the Approbation of others. -- Can I be sure, that, in leaving all established Opinions, I am following Truth? and by what Criterion shall I distinguish her, even if Fortune should at last guide me on her Footsteps? After the most accurate and exact of my Reasonings, I can give no Reason why I should

assent to it; and feel nothing but a strong Propensity to consider Objects strongly in that View under which they appear to me. -- The Memory, Senses, and Understanding, are all of them founded on the Imagination. -- No Wonder a Principle so inconstant and fallacious should lead us into Errors, when implicitly followed (as it must be) in all its Variations. -- I have already shown, that the Understanding, when it acts alone, and according to its most general Principles, entirely subverts itself, and leaves {6} not the lowest Degree of Evidence in any Proposition either in Philosophy or common Life. -- We have no Choice left, but betwixt a false Reason and none at all. -- Where am I, or what? From what Causes do I derive my Existence, and to what Condition shall I return? Whose Favour shall I court, and whose Anger must I dread? What Beings surround me? On whom have I any Influence, or who have any Influence on me? I am confounded with all these Questions, and begin to fancy myself in the most deplorable Condition imaginable, invironed with the deepest Darkness, and utterly deprived of the Use of every Member and Faculty. -- If I must be a Fool, as all those who reason or believe any Thing certainly are, my Follies shall at least be natural and agreeable. -- In all the Incidents of Life, we ought still to preserve our Scepticism: If we believe that Fire warms, or Water refreshes, 'tis only because it costs us too much Pains to think otherwise; nay, if we are Philosophers, it ought only to be upon sceptical Principles. -- I cannot forbear having a Curiosity to be acquainted with the Principles of moral Good and Evil, &c. I am concerned for the Condition of the learned World, which lies under such a deplorable {7} Ignorance in all these Particulars. I feel an Ambition arise in me of contributing to the Instruction of Mankind, and of acquiring a Name by my Inventions and Discoveries. -- Should I endeavour to banish these Sentiments, I feel I should be a Loser in point of Pleasure; and this is the Origin of my Philosophy."

Agreeable to this summary View, he tells us, p. 123.

"Let us fix our Attention out of ourselves as much as possible. -- We really never advance a Step beyond ourselves; nor can conceive any Kind of Existence, but these Perceptions which have appeared in that narrow Compass: This is the Universe of the Imagination, nor have we any Idea but what is there produced."

Accordingly,

"An Opinion or Belief may be most accurately defined, A lively Idea related or associated with a present Impression; and is more properly an Act of the sensitive than of the cognitive Part of our Natures."

And,

"Belief in general consists in nothing but the Vivacity of an Idea. Again, the Idea of Existence is the very same with the Idea of what we conceive to be existent. -- Any Idea we please to form is the Idea of a Being; and the Idea of a Being is any Idea we please to form. And as to the {8} Notion of an external Existence, when taken for something specifically different from our

Perceptions, we have shown its absurdity: And what we call a Mind is nothing but a Heap or Collection of different Perceptions united together by certain Relations, and supposed, tho' falsly, to be endowed with a perfect Simplicity."

And,

"The only Existence, of which we are certain, are Perceptions. When I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular Perception or other. -- I never can catch myself at any Time without a Perception, and never can observe any Thing but the Perception. -- If any one think he has a different Notion of himself, I must confess I can reason no longer with him. -- I may venture to affirm of the rest of Mankind, that they are nothing but a Bundle of Perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable Rapidity, and are in a perpetual Flux and Movement." --

And lest the Reader should forget to apply all this to the Supreme Mind, and the Existence of the First Cause, he has a long Disquisition concerning Causes and Effects, the Sum of which amounts to this, That all our Reasoning concerning Causes and Effects are derived from nothing but Custom: That {9}

"if any pretend to define a Cause by saying it is something productive of another, 'tis evident he would say nothing; for what does he mean by Production? That we may define a Cause to be an Object precedent and contiguous to another, and where all the Objects resembling the former are placed in like Relations of Precedency and Contiguity to these Objects that resemble the latter; or, a Cause is an Object precedent and contiguous to another, and so united with it, that the Idea of the one determines the Mind to form the Idea of the other, and the Impression of the one to form a more lively Idea of the other."

From these clear and plain Definitions he infers,

"That all Causes are of the same Kind; and there is no Foundation for the Distinction betwixt efficient Causes, and Causes sine qua non; or betwixt efficient Causes, and formal and material, and exemplary, and final Causes: And that there is but one Kind of Necessity, and the common Distinction betwixt Moral and Physical is without any Foundation in Nature: And that the Distinction we often make betwixt Power, and the Exercise of it, is equally without Foundation: And that the Necessity of a Cause to every Beginning of Existence, is not founded on any Arguments demonstrative {10} or intuitive: And in fine, That any Thing may produce any Thing; Creation, Annihilation, Motion, Reason, Volition; all these may arise from one another, or from any other Object we can imagine."

The curious Nostrum he often repeats, p. 430, 434. Again he tells us,

"That when we talk of any Being, whether of a Superior or Inferior Nature, as endowed with a Power or Force proportioned to any Effect, -- We have really no distinct Meaning, and make use only of common Words, without any clear and determinate Ideas. And if we have really no Idea of Power or Efficacy in any Object, or of any real connection betwixt Causes and Effects, 'twill be to

little Purpose to prove that an Efficacy is necessary in all Operations. We do not understand our own Meaning in talking so, but ignorantly confound Ideas which are intirely distinct from each other."

Again he says,

"The Efficacy or Energy of Causes is neither placed in the Causes is neither placed in the Causes themselves, nor in the Deity, nor in the Concurrence of these two Principles, but belongs entirely to the Soul (or the Bundle of Perceptions) which considers the Union of two or more Objects in all past Instances: 'Tis here that the real Power of Causes is {11} placed, along with their Connection and Necessity. And in fine, we may observe a Conjunction or a Relation of Cause and Effect between different Perceptions, but can never observe it between Perceptions and Objects."

'Tis impossible therefore, that, from the Existence or any of the Qualities of the former, we can ever form any Conclusion concerning the Existence of the latter, or ever satisfy our Reason in this Particular with regard to the Existence of a Supreme Being. 'Tis well known that this Principle, Whatever begins to exist must have a Cause of Existence, is the first Step in the Argument for the Being of a Supreme Cause; and that, without it, 'tis impossible to go one Step further in that Argument. Now this Maxim he is at great Pains from p.141. to explode, and to show, "That it is neither intuitively nor demonstratively certain;" and he says,

"Reason can never satisfy us that the Existence of any Object does ever imply that of another. So that, when we pass from the Impression of one to the Idea and Belief of another, we are not determined by Reason, but by Custom."

In a marginal Note on the preceeding Page he says,

"In that Proposition, God is, or indeed any other which regards Existence, the Idea of Existence is no distinct Idea {12} which we unite with that of the Object, and which is capable of forming a compound Idea by the Union."

Concerning this Principle, That the Deity is the prime Mover of the Universe, who first created Matter, and gave its original Impulse, and likewise supports its Existence, and successively bestows on it its Motions; he says,

"This Opinion is certainly very curious, but it will appear superfluous to examine it in this Place. --For, if the very Idea be derived from an Impression, the Idea of a Deity proceeds from the same Origin; and, if no Impression implies any Force or Efficacy, 'tis equally impossible to discover, or even imagine, any such active Principle in the Deity. --Since Philosophers therefore have concluded, that Matter cannot be endowed with any efficacious Principle, because it is impossible to discover in it such a Principle; the same Course of Reasoning should determine them to exclude it from the Supreme Being: Or if they esteem that Opinion absurd and impious, as it really is, I shall tell them how they may avoid it, and that is, by concluding from the very first, that they have no adequate Idea of Power of Efficacy in any

Object; since neither in Body nor Spirit, neither in Superior nor {13} Inferior Natures, are they able to discover one single Instance of it."

And says he, "We have no Idea of a Being endowed with any Power, much less of one endowed with any infinite Power."

Concerning the Immateriality of the Soul (from which the Argument is taken for its natural Immortality, or that it cannot perish by Dissolution as the Body) he says,

"We certainly may conclude that Motion may be and actually is the Cause of Thought and Perception: And no wonder, for any Thing may be the Cause or Effect of any Thing; which evidently gives the Advantage to the Materialists above their Adversaries."

But yet more plainly,

"I assert, says he, that the Doctrine of the Immateriality, Simplicity, and Indivisibility of a thinking Substance, is a true Atheism, and will serve to justify all these Sentiments for which Spinoza is so universally infamous."

This hideous Hypothesis is almost the same with that of the Immateriality of the Soul, which has become so popular. And again he endeavours to prove, that all the Absurdities which have been found in the Systems of Spinoza, may likewise be discovered in that of the Theologians: And concludes, that

"We cannot advance one Step towards the establishing the Simplicity and Immateriality {14} of the Soul, without preparing the Way for a dangerous and irrecoverable Atheism."

The Author's Sentiments in Morality we have in Vol. 3. printed for T. Longman, 1740. He there tells us, that

"Reason has no Influence on our Passions and Actions: Actions may be laudable or blameable, but they cannot be reasonable or unreasonable. That all Beings in the Universe, considered in themselves, appear entirely loose and independent of each other; 'Tis only by Experience we learn their Influence and Connection, and this Influence we ought never to extend beyond Experience."

He takes great Pains to prove, from p.37. That Justice is not a natural, but an artificial Virtue; and gives one pretty odd Reason for it:

"We may conclude, that the Laws of Justice, being universal and perfectly inflexible, can never be derived from Nature. I suppose (says he) a Person to have lent me a Sum of Money, on Condition that it be restored in a few Days; and also suppose, that, after Expiration of the Term agreed on, he demands the Sum: I ask, What Reason or Motive have I to restore the Money? Publick Interest is not naturally attach'd to the Observation of the Rules of Justice, but {15} is only connected with it, after an artificial Convention, for Establishment of these Rules.

Unless we will allow that Nature has established a Sophistry, and rendered it necessary and unavoidable; we must allow that the Sense of Justice and Injustice is not derived from Nature, but arises artificially, tho' necessarily, from Education and human Conventions. Here is a Proposition which I think may be regarded as certain, That it is only from the Selfishness and confined Generosity of Men, along with the scanty Provision Nature has made for his Wants, that Justice derives its Origin. These Impressions, which give Rise to this Sense of Justice, are not natural to the Mind of Man, but arise from Artifice and human Conventions. Without such a Convention, no one would ever have dreamed that there was such a Virtue as Justice, or have been induced to conform his Actions to it. Taking any single Act, my Justice may be pernicious in every Respect: And 'tis only upon the Supposition that others are to imitate my Example, that I can be induced to embrace that Virtue; since nothing but the Combination can render Justice advantageous, or afford me any Motive to conform myself to its Rules. {16} And in general it may be affirmed, that there is no such Passion in human Minds, as the Love of Mankind merely as such, independent of personal Qualities, of Service or of Relation to ourself."

Mr. Hobbs, who was at Pains to shake loose all other natural Obligations, yet found it necessary to leave, or pretended to leave, the Obligation of Promises or Pactions; but our Author strikes a bolder Stroke:

"That the Rule of Morality (says he) which enjoins the Performance of Promises, is not natural, will sufficiently appear from these two Propositions, which I proceed to prove, viz. That a Promise would not be intelligible before humans Conventions had established it; and that, even if it were intelligible, it would not be attended with any moral Obligation."

And he concludes, "That Promises impose no natural Obligation." And, p.115.

"I shall further observe, That since every new Promise imposes a new Obligation of Morality upon the Person who promises, and since this new Obligation arises from his Will, it is one of the most mysterious and incomprehensible Operations that can possible be imagined, and may even be compared to Transubstantiation or Holy Orders, where a certain Form of Words, along with a {17} certain Intention, changes entirely the Nature of an external Object, and even of a human Creature. In fine (says he) as Force is supposed to invalidate all Contracts, such a Principle is a Proof that Promises have no natural Obligation, and are mere artificial Contrivances, for the Conveniency and Advantage of Society."

Sum of the Charge.

From the preceding Specimen it will appear, that the Author maintains,

1. Universal Scepticism. See his Assertions, p.458, --470.

where he doubts of every Thing (his own Existence excepted) and maintains the Folly of pretending to believe any Thing with Certainty.

2. Principles leading to downright Atheism, by denying the Doctrine of Causes and Effects, p.321, 138, 298, 300, 301, 303, 430, 434, 284. where he maintains, that the Necessity of a Cause to every Beginning of Existence is not founded on any Arguments demonstrative or intuitive.

3. Errors concerning the very Being and Existence of a God. For Instance, Marginal Note, p.172. as to that Proposition, God is, he says (or indeed as to any other Thing which regards Existence)

"The Idea {18} of Existence is no distinct Idea which we unite with that of the Object, and which is capable of forming a compound Idea by Union."

4. Errors concerning God's being the first Cause, and prime Mover of the Universe: For as to this Principle, That the Deity first created Matter, and gave it its original Impulse, and likewise supports its Existence, he says,

"This Opinion is certainly very curious, but it will appear superfluous to examine it in this Place, &c."

5. He is chargable with denying the Immateriality of the Soul, and the Consequences flowing from this Denial, p.431, 4, 418, 419, 423.

6. With sapping the Foundations of Morality, by denying the natural and essential Difference betwixt Right and Wrong, Good and Evil, Justice and Injustice; making the Difference only artificial, and to arise from human Conventions and Compacts, Vol. 2. p.5, 19, 128, 41, 43, 48, 69, 70, 73, 4, 44.

[Observations]

You see, Dear Sir, that I have concealed no Part of the Accusation, but have inserted the Specimen and Charge, as transmitted to me, without the smallest Variation. I shall now go regularly thro' what is called the Sum of the Charge, because it {19} is intended, I suppose, to contain the Substance of the whole; and shall take Notice of the Specimen as I go along.

1st, As to the Scepticism with which the Author is charged, I must observe, that the Doctrine of the Pyrrhonians or Scepticks have been regarded in all Ages as Principles of mere Curiosity, or a Kind of Feux d' esprit, without any Influence on a Man's steady Principles or Conduct in Life. In Reality, a Philosopher who affects to doubt of the Maxims of common Reason, and even of his Senses, declares sufficiently that he is not in earnest, and that he intends not to advance an Opinion which he would recommend as Standards of Judgment and Action. All he means by these Scruples is to abate the Pride of mere human Reasoners, by showing them, that even with regard to Principles which seem the clearest, and which they

are necessitated from the strongest Instincts of Nature to embrace, they are not able to attain a full Consistence and absolute Certainty. Modesty then, and Humility, with regard to the Operations of our natural Faculties, is the Result of Scepticism; not an universal Doubt, which it is impossible for any Man to suppose, and which the first and most trivial Accident in Life must immediately disconcert and destroy. {20}

How is such a Frame of Mind prejudicial to Piety? And must not a Man be ridiculous to assert that our Author denies the Principles of Religion, when he looks upon them as equally certain with the Objects of his Senses? If I be as much assured of these Principles, as that this Table at which I now write is before me; Can any Thing further be desired by the most rigorous Antagonist? 'Tis evident, that so extravagant a Doubt as that which Scepticism may seem to recommend, by destroying every Thing, really affects nothing, and was never intended to be understood seriously, but was meant as a mere Philosophical Amusement, or Trial of Wit and Subtily.

This is a Construction suggested by the very Nature of the Subject; but he has not been contented with that, but expressly declared it. And all those Principles, cited in the Specimen as Proofs of his Scepticism, are positively renounced in a few Pages afterwards, and called the Effects of Philosophical Melancholy and Delusion. These are his very Words; and his Accuser's overlooking them may be thought very prudent, but is a Degree of Unfairness which appears to me altogether astonishing.

Were Authorities proper to be employed in any Philosophical Reasoning, I could cite you that of Socrates the wisest and {21} most religious of the Greek Philosophers, as well as Cicero among the Romans, who both of them carried their Philosophical Doubts to the highest Degree of Scepticism. All the antient Fathers, as well as our first Reformers, are copious in representing the Weakness and Uncertainty of mere human Reason. And Monsieur Huet the learned Bishop of Avaranches (so celebrated for his Demonstration Evangelique which contains all the great Proofs of the Christian Religion) wrote also a Book on this very Topick, wherein he endeavours to revive all the Doctrines of the antient Skepticks or Pyrrhonians.

In Reality, whence come all the various Tribes of Hereticks, the Arians, Socinians and Deists, but from too great a Confidence in mere human Reason, which they regard as the Standard of every Thing, and which they will not submit to the superior Light of Revelation? And can one do a more essential Service to Piety, than by showing them that this boasted Reason of theirs, so far from accounting for the great Mysteries of the Trinity and Incarnation, is not able fully to satisfy itself with regard to its own Operations, and must in some Measure fall into a Kind of implicate Faith, even in the most obvious and familiar Principles?

II. The Author is charged with Opinions {22} leading to downright Atheism, chiefly by denying this Principle, That whatever begins to exist must have a Cause of Existence. To

give you a Notion of the Extravagance of this Charge, I must enter into a little Detail. It is common for Philosophers to distinguish the Kinds of Evidence into intuitive, demonstrative, sensible, and moral; by which they intend only to mark a Difference betwixt them, not to denote a Superiority of one above another. Moral Certainty may reach as high a Degree of Assurance as Mathematical; and our Senses are surely to be comprised amongst the clearest and most convincing of all Evidences. Now, it being the Author's Purpose, in the Pages cited in the Specimen, to examine the Grounds of that Proposition; he used the Freedom of disputing the common Opinion, that it was founded on demonstrative or intuitive Certainty; but asserts, that it is supported by moral Evidence, and is followed by a Conviction of the same Kind with these Truths, That all Men must die, and that the Sun will rise To-morrow. Is this any Thing like denying the Truth of that Proposition, which indeed a Man must have lost all common Sense to doubt of?

But, granting that he had denied it, how is this a Principle that leads to Atheism? {23} It would be no difficult Matter to show, that the Arguments a posteriori from the Order and Course of Nature, these Arguments so sensible, so convincing, and so obvious, remain still in their full Force; and that nothing is affected by it but the metaphysical Argument a priori, which many Men of Learning cannot comprehend, and which many Men both of Piety and Learning show no great Value for. Bishop Tillotson has used a Degree of Freedom on this Head, which I would not willingly allow myself; 'tis in his excellent Sermon concerning the Wisdom of being religious, where he says, That the Being of a God is not capable of Demonstration, but of moral Evidence. I hope none will pretend that pious Prelate intended by these Assertions to weaken the Evidences for a Divine Existence, but only to distinguish accurately its Species of Evidence.

I say further, that even the metaphysical Arguments for a Deity are not affected by a Denial of the Proposition above-mentioned. It is only Dr. Clark's Argument which can be supposed to be any way concerned. Many other Arguments of the same Kind still remain; Des Cartes's for Instance, which has always been esteemed as solid and convincing as the other. I shall add, that a great Distinction ought always to be {24} made betwixt a Man's positive and avowed Opinions, and the Inferences which it may please others to draw from them. Had the Author really denied the Truth of the foregoing Proposition, (which the most superficial Reader cannot think ever entered his Head) still he could not properly be charged as designing to invalidate any one Argument that any Philosopher has employed for a Divine Existence; that is only an Inference and Construction of others, which he may refuse if he thinks proper.

Thus you may judge of the Candor of the whole Charge, when you see the assigning of one Kind of Evidence for a Proposition, instead of another, is called denying that Proposition; that the invalidating only one Kind of Argument for the Divine Existence is called positive Atheism; nay, that the weakning only of one individual Argument of that Kind is called

rejecting that whole Species of Argument, and the Inferences of others are ascribed to the Author as his real Opinion.

'Tis impossible ever to satisfy a captious Adversary, but it would be easy for me to convince the severest Judge, that all the solid Arguments for Natural Religion retain their full Force upon the Author's Principles concerning Causes and Effects and that there is no Necessity even for altering {25} the common Methods of expressing or conceiving these Arguments. The Author has indeed asserted, That we can judge only of the Operations of Causes by Experience, and that, reasoning a priori, any thing might appear able to produce any thing. We could not know that Stones would descend, or fire burn, had we not Experience of these Effects; and indeed, without such Experience, we could not certainly infer the Existence of one Thing from that of another. This is no great Paradox, but seems to have been the Opinion of several Philosophers, and seems the most obvious and familiar Sentiment on that Subject; but, tho' all Inferences are noway weakened by such an Assertion, but on the contrary will be found to acquire more Force, as long as Men are disposed to trust to their Experience rather than to mere human Reasoning. Wherever I see Order, I infer from Experience that there, there hath been Design and Contrivance. And the same Principle which leads me into this Inference, when I contemplate a Building, regular and beautiful in its whole Frame and Structure; the same Principle obliges me to infer an infinitely perfect Architect, from the infinite Art and Contrivance which is display'd in the whole {26} Fabrick of the Universe. Is not this the Light in which this Argument hath been placed by all Writers concerning Natural Religion?

III. The next Proof of Atheism is so unaccountable, that I know not what to make of it. Our Author indeed asserts, after the present pious and learned Bishop of Cloyne, That we have no abstract or general Ideas, properly so speaking; and that those Ideas, which are called general, are nothing but particular Ideas affixed to general Terms. Thus, when I think of a Horse in general, I must always conceive that Horse as black or white, fat or lean, &c. and can form no Notion of a Horse that is not of some particular Colour or Size. In Prosecution of the same Topick, the Author hath said, That we have no general Idea of Existence, distinct from every particular Existence. But a Man must have strange Sagacity, that could discover Atheism in so harmless a Proposition. This, in my Opinion, might be justified before the University of Salamanca, or a Spanish Inquisition. I do indeed believe, that, when we assert the Existence of a Deity, we do not form a general abstract Idea of Existence, which we unite with the Idea of God, and which is capable of forming a compound Idea by Union; but this is {27} the Case with regard to every Proposition concerning Existence. So that, by this Course of Reasoning, we must deny the Existence of every Thing, even of ourselves, of which at least even the Accuser himself will admit our Author is perswaded.

IV. Ere answering the fourth Charge, I must use the Freedom to deliver a short History of a particular Opinion in Philosophy. When Men considered the several Effects and Operations of

Nature, they were led to examine into the Force or Power by which they were performed; and they divided into several Opinions upon this Head, according as their other Principles were more or less favourable to Religion. The Followers of Epicurus and Strato asserted, That this Force was original and inherent in Matter, and, operating blindly, produced all the various Effects which we behold. The Platonick and Peripatetick Schools, perceiving the Absurdity of this Proposition, ascribed the Origin of all Force to one primary efficient Cause, who first bestowed it on Matter, and successively guided it in all its Operations. But all the antient Philosophers agreed, that there was a real Force in Matter, either original or derived; and that it was really Fire which burnt, and Food that nourished, when we observed any of these {28} Effects to follow upon the Operations of these Bodies: The Schoolmen supposed also a real Power in Matter, to whose Operations however the continual Concurrence of the Deity was requisite, as well as to the Support of that Existence which had been bestowed on Matter, and which they considered as a perpetual Creation. No one, till Des Cartes and Malbranche, ever entertained an Opinion that Matter had no Force either primary or secondary, and independent or concurrent, and could not so much as properly be called an Instrument in the Hands of the Deity, to serve any of the Purposes of Providence. These Philosophers last-mentioned substituted the Notion of occasional Causes, by which it was asserted that a Billiard Ball did not move another by its Impulse, but was only the Occasion why the Deity, in pursuance of general Laws, bestowed Motion on the second Ball. But, tho' this Opinion be very innocent, it never gained great Credit, especially in England, where it was considered as too much contrary to received popular Opinions, and too little supported by Philosophical Arguments, ever to be admitted as any Thing but a mere Hypothesis. Cudworth, Lock and Clark make little or no mention of it. Sir Isaac Newton (tho' some of his Followers have taken {29} a different Turn of thinking) plainly rejects it, by substituting the Hypothesis of an AEtheral Fluid, not the immediate Volition of the Deity, as the Cause of Attraction. And, in short, this has been a Dispute left entirely to the Arguments of Philosophers, and in which Religion has never been supposed to be in the least concerned.

Now it is evidently concerning this Cartesian Doctrine, of secondary Causes, the Author is treating, when he says, (in the Passage referred to in the Charge) That it was a curious Opinion, but which it would appear superfluous to examine in that Place.

The Topick there handled is somewhat abstract: But I believe any Reader will easily perceive the Truth of this Assertion, and that the Author is far from pretending to deny (as asserted in the Charge) God's being the first Cause and prime Mover of the Universe. That the Author's Words could have no such Meaning as they stand connected, is to me so evident, that I could pledge on this Head, not only my small Credit as a Philosopher, but even all my Pretensions to Trust or Belief in the common Affairs of Life.

V. As to the fifth Article; The Author has not anywhere that I remember denied {30} the Immateriality of the Soul in the common Sense of the Word. He only says, That that Question did not admit of any distinct Meaning; because we had no distinct Idea of Substance. This Opinion may be found everywhere in Mr. Lock, as well as in Bishop Berkley.

VI. I come now to the last Charge, which, according to the prevalent Opinion of Philosophers in this Age, will certainly be regarded as the severest, viz. the Author's destroying all the Foundations of Morality.

He hath indeed denied the eternal Difference of Right and Wrong in the Sense in which Clark and Woolaston maintained them, viz.. That the Propositions of Morality were of the same Nature with the Truths of Mathematicks and the abstract Sciences, the Objects merely of Reason, not the Feelings of our internal Tastes and Sentiments. In this Opinion he concurs with all the antient Moralists, as well as with Mr. Hutchison Professor of Moral Philosophy in the University of Glasgow, who, with others, has revived the antient Philosophical Discourse, in order to throw an Odium on the Author!

When the Author asserts that Justice is an artificial not a natural Virtue, he seems {31} sensible that he employed Words that admit of an invidious Construction; and therefore makes use of all proper Expedients, by Definitions and Explanations, to prevent it. But of these his Accuser takes no Notice. By the natural Virtues he plainly understands Compassion and Generosity, and such as we are immediately carried to by a natural Instinct, a certain Reflection on the general Interests of Human Society, and a Combination with others. In the same Sense, Sucking is an Action natural to Man, and Speech is artificial. But what is there in this Doctrine that can be supposed in the least pernicious? Has he not expressly asserted, That Justice, in another Sense of the Word, is so natural to Man, that no Society of Men, and even no individual Member of any Society, was ever entirely devoid of all Sense of it? Some Persons (tho' without any Reason, in my Opinion) are displeas'd with Mr. Hutchison's Philosophy, in sounding all the Virtues so much on Instinct, and admitting so little of Reason and Reflection. Those should be pleas'd to find that so considerable a Branch of the Moral Duties are founded on that Principle.

The Author has likewise taken care in {32} positive Terms to assert, That he does not maintain that Men ly under no Obligation to observe Contracts, independent of Society; but only, that they never would have formed Contracts, and even would not have understood the Meaning of them, independent of Society. And whereas it is observed in the Specimen, That our Author offers further to prove, that, suppose a Promise was intelligible before Human Conventions had established it, it would not be attended with any Moral Obligation. The most careless Reader must perceive that he does not understand Moral in such an extended Sense, as to deny the Obligation of Promises, independent of Society; seeing he not only asserts what is above-represented, but likewise that the Laws of Justice are universal, and perfectly inflexible. It is

evident, that suppose Mankind, in some primitive unconnected State, should be some Means come to the Knowledge of the Nature of those Things which we call Contracts and Promises; that this Knowledge would have laid them under no such actual Obligation, if not placed in such Circumstances as give rise to these Contracts.

I am sorry I should be obliged to cite from my Memory, and cannot mention Page and Chapter so accurately as the Accuser. I came hither by Post, and brought no {33} Books along with me, and cannot now provide myself in the Country with the Book referred to.

This long Letter, with which I have troubled you, was composed in one Morning, that I might gratify your Demand of an immediate Answer to the heavy Charge brought against your Friend; and this, I hope, will excuse any Inaccuracies that may have crept into it. I am indeed of Opinion, that the Author had better delayed the publishing of that Book; not on account of any dangerous Principles contained in it, but because on more mature Consideration he might have rendered it much less imperfect by further Corrections and Revisals. I must not at the same Time omit observing, that nothing can be wrote so accurately or innocently, which may not be perverted by such Arts as have been imployed on this Occasion. No Man would undertake so invidious a Task as that of our Author's Accuser, who was not actuated by particular Interests; and you know how easy it is, by broken and partial Citations, to pervert any Discourse, much more one of so abstract a Nature, where it is difficult, or almost impossible, to justify one's self to the Publick. The Words which have been carefully pickt out from a large Volume will no doubt have a dangerous Aspect to careless {34} Readers; and the Author, in my Apprehension, cannot fully defend himself without a particular Detail, which it is impossible for a careless Reader to enter into. This Advantage of the Ground has been trusted to by his Accuser, and surely never more abused than on the present Occasion. But he has one Advantage, I trust, which is worth a Hundred of what his Opposers can boast of, viz. that of Innocence; and I hope he has also another Advantage, viz. that of Favour, if we really live in a Country of Freedom, where Informers and Inquisitors are so deservedly held in universal Detestation, where Liberty, at least of Philosophy, is so highly valu'd and esteem'd. I am,

Sir,

Your most obedient

humble Servant.

May 8th 1745.

Notes

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Author-Name-v1: Hume, David
Copyright: 1996
Creation-Date: 1745
Size: 45542
Format: text/html
Description:
Genres: (No genres supplied)
Keywords: (No subjects supplied)
Subject-Descriptor-v1: 000
Subject-Descriptor-Scheme-v1: LCSH
URI-v1: <http://www.utm.edu/research/hume/wri/gentle.htm>
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