DIALOGUES CONCERNING NATURAL RELIGION

By David Hume

PART 10

It is my opinion, I admit, replied Demea, that each man somehow feels in his heart the truth of religion, and that what leads him to seek protection from God, the being on whom he and all nature depend, is not any reasoning but rather his consciousness of his own weakness and misery. Even the best scenes of life are so troubling or so unpleasant that all our hopes and fears look to the future. We incessantly look forward, and try through prayers, adoration and sacrifice to appease those unknown powers who, we find by experience, can so thoroughly afflict and oppress us. Wretched creatures that we are! What help would there be for us amid the innumerable ills of life if religion didn’t suggest some ways of reconciling ourselves with God and soothe those terrors with which we are incessantly agitated and tormented?

I am indeed convinced, said Philo, that the best and indeed the only method of bringing everyone to a proper sense of religion is by making them see clearly the misery and wickedness of men. And for that purpose a talent for eloquence and strong imagery is more needed than a talent for reasoning and argument. What need is there to prove something that everyone feels within himself? It is only necessary to make us feel it, if possible, more strongly and intimately.

Indeed, replied Demea, the people are sufficiently convinced of this great and melancholy truth. These phrases:

the miseries of life
the unhappiness of man

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1 This document has been excerpted, with permission, from a manuscript translated and edited by Jonathan Bennett. Bennett’s translations of this and other early modern texts can be found online at: http://www.earlymoderntexts.com. Bennett’s text includes the following introductory comments: “Square [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.”
the general corruptions of our nature
the unsatisfactory enjoyment of pleasures, riches, honours

have become almost proverbial in all languages. And who can doubt something that all men declare from their own immediate feeling and experience?

On this point, said Philo, the learned are in perfect agreement with the common people; and in all literature, religious and otherwise, the topic of human misery has been stressed with the most pathetic eloquence that sorrow and melancholy could inspire. The works of the poets - whose testimony has extra authority because they speak from feeling, without a system - abound in images of this sort. From Homer down to Dr. Edward Young, the whole inspired tribe of poets have always been aware that if they are to present human life in a way that fits what each individual person sees and feels it as being like, they will have to represent it in that way.

As for authorities, replied Demea, you need not hunt for them. Look around this library of Cleanthes. I venture to guess that - except for authors of particular sciences such as chemistry or botany, who have no occasion to treat of human life - almost every one of those innumerable writers has, somewhere or other, been led by his sense of human misery to testify to it and complain of it. At any rate, the odds are that almost all of them have written in that way; and as far as I can remember no author has gone to the opposite extreme of denying human misery.

There you must excuse me, said Philo: Leibniz has denied it. He is perhaps the first who ventured on such a bold and paradoxical opinion; or, anyway, the first who made it essential to his philosophical system.²

Given that he was the first, replied Demea, mightn’t that very fact have made him realize that he was wrong? For is this a subject on which philosophers can claim to make discoveries, especially as late in history as this? And can any man hope by a simple denial to outweigh the united testimony of mankind, based on sense and consciousness? (I say ‘a simple denial’ because the subject scarcely admits of reasoning.)

And, he added, why should man claim to be exempt from the fate of all the other animals? The whole earth, believe me, Philo, is cursed

² It was maintained by Dr. King and a few others, before Leibniz, but not by any as famous as that German philosopher.
and polluted. A perpetual war goes on among all living creatures. Need, hunger, and deprivation stimulate the strong and courageous: fear, anxiety and terror agitate the weak and infirm. The first entrance into life brings distress to the new-born infant and to its wretched mother; weakness, impotence and distress accompany each stage of that life: and eventually it reaches its end in agony and horror.

Observe too, says Philo, nature’s intricate devices for embittering the life of every living being. The stronger ones prey on the weaker, and keep them in perpetual terror and anxiety. The weaker, in their turn, often prey on the stronger, and vex and trouble them, giving them no respite. Think of the innumerable race of insects which either are bred on the body of an animal or, flying about, put their stings into him. These insects are themselves tormented by others that are even smaller. And thus on every hand, before and behind, above and below, every animal is surrounded by enemies which constantly seek his misery and destruction.

Man alone, said Demea, seems to be a partial exception to this rule. For by coming together in society men can easily master lions, tigers, and bears, whose greater strength and agility naturally enable them to prey upon him.

On the contrary, exclaimed Philo, it is just here that we can most clearly see how uniform and equal nature’s maxims are! It is true that man can by combining surmount all his real enemies and become master of the whole animal kingdom; but doesn’t he immediately conjure up imaginary enemies, the demons of his imagination, who haunt him with superstitious terrors and blast every enjoyment of life? He imagines that they see his pleasure as a crime, and that his food and rest annoy and offend them. Even his sleep and dreams bring him new materials for anxious fear; and death, his refuge from every other ill, presents only the dread of endless and innumerable woes. The wolf’s molestation of the timid flock is no worse than what superstition does to the anxious feelings of wretched mortals.

Besides, Demea, think about this very society through which we get the upper hand over those wild beasts, our natural enemies: what new enemies it raise against us! What woe and misery it causes! Man is the greatest enemy of man. Oppression, injustice, contempt, disrespect, violence, sedition, war, slander, treachery, fraud - men use these to torment one another, and they would soon dissolve the society they had formed if they were not afraid that even greater ills would come from their doing so.
These external injuries, said Demea, that we suffer from animals, from men, and from all the elements, do indeed form a frightful catalogue of woes; but they are nothing in comparison to the ones that arise within ourselves from the illnesses of our mind and body. How many people lie under the lingering torment of diseases? Hear the pathetic list of the great poet.

Intestine stone and ulcer, colic-pangs,  
Demoniac frenzy, moping melancholy,  
And moon-struck madness, pining atrophy,  
Marasmus, and wide-wasting pestilence.  
Dire was the tossing, deep the groans: DESPAIR  
Tended the sick, busiest from couch to couch.  
And over them triumphant DEATH his dart  
Shook: but delay’d to strike, though oft invok’d  
With vows, as their chief good and final hope.  

[Milton, Paradise Lost 11]

The disorders of the mind, continued Demea, though they are more secret may be no less dismal and vexatious. Remorse, shame, anguish, rage, disappointment, anxiety, fear, dejection, despair; who has ever passed through life without cruel attacks from these tormentors? Many people have scarcely ever felt any better sensations than those! Labour and poverty, so hated by everyone, are the certain fate of the vast majority, and the privileged few who enjoy leisure and wealth never reach contentment or true happiness. All the goods of life put together would not make a very happy man; but all the ills together would make a wretch indeed! Indeed life can be made unsatisfactory by almost any one of the ills (and who can be free from every one?), or indeed by the lack of any one good (and who can possess all?).

If an alien suddenly arrived in this world, I would show him, as a specimen of its ills, a hospital full of diseases, a prison crowded with criminals and debtors, a field of battle with corpses all over it, a fleet of ships sinking in the ocean, a nation suffering under tyranny, famine, or plague. To turn the cheerful side of life to him and give him a notion of its pleasures, where should I take him? to a ball, to an opera, to court? He might reasonably think that I was only showing him a diversity of distress and sorrow.

There is no way to escape such striking instances, said Philo,
except by explaining them away - and that makes the indictment even more severe. Why, I ask, have all men in all ages complained incessantly of the miseries of life? Someone replies: ‘They have no good reason: they complain only because they are disposed to be discontented, regretful, anxious.’ I reply: what greater guarantee of misery could there be than to have such a wretched temperament?

‘But if they were really as unhappy as they claim,’ says my antagonist, ‘why do they stay alive?’


This is the secret chain that holds us, I reply. We are terrified, not bribed, into continuing our existence.

‘It is only a false delicacy’, he may insist, ‘which a few refined spirits permit themselves, and which has spread these complaints among the whole race of mankind.’ And what is this delicacy, I ask, which you blame? Isn’t it just a greater awareness of all the pleasures and pains of life? And if the man of a delicate, refined cast of mind, by being so much more alive than the rest of the world, is only made so much more unhappy, what conclusion should we reach about human life in general?

‘If men remained at rest’, says our adversary, ‘they would be at ease. Through all their busy, ambitious activity they are willing makers of their own misery.’ No! I reply: leisure makes them anxious and slack. Not that it would do any good for them to give up leisure, for activity and ambition bring disappointment, vexation, and trouble.

I can see something like what you have described in some others, replied Cleanthes: but I confess that I feel little or nothing of it in myself, and I hope it is not as common as you make it out to be.

If you don’t feel human misery yourself, exclaimed Demea, I congratulate you on your happy uniqueness! Others, seemingly the most prosperous, have not been ashamed to give voice to their complaints in the saddest tones. Let us attend to the great, the fortunate emperor Charles V when, tired with human grandeur, he resigned all his extensive dominions into the hands of his son. In the last speech he made on that memorable occasion, he publicly testified that the greatest prosperities he had ever enjoyed had been mixed with so many adversities that he could truly say that he had never enjoyed any satisfaction or contentment. But did the retired life in which he hoped to shelter give him any greater
happiness? If we can believe his son’s account, he started to regret his
abdication on the very day he abdicated.

Cicero’s fortune rose from small beginnings to the greatest glory
and fame; yet his letters to friends as well as his philosophical
discourses contain ever so many pathetic complaints about the ills of
life. And suitably to his own experience, he introduces Cato - the great,
the fortunate Cato - protesting in his old age that if a new life were his
for the asking, he would turn it down.

Ask yourself, ask anyone you know, whether they would be
willing to live over again the last ten or twenty years of their lives. No!
but the next twenty, they say, will be better;

And from the dregs of life, hope to receive
What the first sprightly running could not give. [Dryden]

Human misery is so great that it reconciles even contradictions! And so
people eventually come to complain about the shortness of life and, in
the same breath, complaining of its pointlessness and sorrow.

And is it possible, Cleanthes, said Philo, that after all these
reflections, and countless others that might be suggested, you still stick
to your anthropomorphism, and assert that the moral attributes of God -
his justice, benevolence, mercy, and uprightness - are of the same nature
as these virtues in human creatures? We grant that his power is infinite:
whatever he wills to happen does happen. But neither man nor any
other animal is happy; therefore God does not will their happiness. His
knowledge is infinite: he is never mistaken in his choice of means to any
end. But the course of nature doesn’t lead to human or animal
happiness; therefore nature is not established for that purpose. Through
the whole range of human knowledge, there are no inferences more
certain and infallible than these. Well, then, in what respect do his
benevolence and mercy resemble the benevolence and mercy of men?

Epicurus’s old questions have still not been answered. Is he willing
to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. Is he able, but not
willing? then he is malevolent. üIs he both able and willing? then where
does evil come from?

You ascribe a purpose and intention to nature, Cleanthes, and I
think you are right about that. But what, I ask you, is the aim of all the
intricately designed machinery that nature has displayed in all animals?
·Here is my answer to that·. The aim is simply the preservation of
individuals, and the continuance of the species. It seems enough for
nature’s purpose if the species is merely enabled to stay in existence, without any care or concern for the happiness of its individual members. No means for this are provided, no machinery aimed purely at giving pleasure or ease, no store of pure joy and contentment, no gratification without some lack or need to go with it. Or perhaps not quite none, but at least the few phenomena of this nature are outweighed by opposite phenomena of still greater importance.

Our sense of music, harmony, and indeed beauty of all kinds, gives satisfaction without being absolutely necessary to the preservation and propagation of the species. But contrast that with the racking pains that arise from gouts, gravels, migraines, toothaches, rheumatisms, where the injury to the animal machinery is either small or incurable! Joy, laughter, play, frolic, seem to be gratuitous satisfactions which don’t lead to anything further; and spleen, melancholy, discontent, superstition, are pains which also lead nowhere. How then does God’s benevolence display itself according to you anthropomorphites? It is only we ‘mystics’ (as you were pleased to call us) who can account for this strange mixture of phenomena, by deriving it from divine attributes that are infinitely perfect but incomprehensible.

At last, Philo, said Cleanthes with a smile, you have let us see what you have been up to! Your long agreement with Demea surprised me a little, but now I see that all along you were preparing to train your guns on me. And I must admit that you have now come to a subject that is worthy of your notable spirit of opposition and controversy. If you can make good on your present point, and prove mankind to be unhappy or corrupted, there is an immediate end to all religion. For what is the point of establishing the natural attributes of God while his moral attributes are still doubtful and uncertain?

You are very quick to object, replied Demea, to innocent opinions that are the most widely accepted, even among religious and devout people. themselves. I am immensely surprised to find this theme of the wickedness and misery of man being charged with, of all things, atheism and profaneness. Haven’t all pious divines and preachers who have indulged their rhetoric on this rich topic given a solution for any difficulties that may come with it? This world is a mere point in comparison with the universe; this life is a mere moment in comparison with eternity. The present evil phenomena, therefore, are set right in other regions and at some future time. And when that happens, the eyes of men, being then opened to broader views of things, will see the whole connection of general laws, and with adoration trace God’s benevolence and justice through all the mazes and intricacies of his
providence.

No! replied Cleanthes, No! These arbitrary suppositions can never be admitted; they are contrary to visible and unchallenged facts. How can any cause be known except from its known effects? How can any hypothesis be proved except from the experienced phenomena? To base one hypothesis on another is to build entirely in the air; and the most we ever achieve through these conjectures and fictions is to show that our opinion is possible; we can never in this way establish that it is true.

The only way to support divine benevolence - and it is what I willingly accept - is to deny absolutely the misery and wickedness of man. Your pictures of the human condition are exaggerated; your melancholy views are mostly fictitious; your conclusions are contrary to fact and experience. Health is more common than sickness; pleasure than pain; happiness than misery. I calculate that for each vexation that we meet with we get a hundred enjoyments.

Your position is extremely doubtful, replied Philo, but even if we allow it you must at the same time admit that if pain is less frequent than pleasure it is infinitely more violent and lasting. One hour of pain is often able to outweigh a day, a week, a month of our ordinary tepid enjoyments; and some people pass days, weeks, and months in the most acute torments! Pleasure hardly ever rises to the height of ecstasy and altitude. The spirits evaporate, the nerves relax, the body is out of order, and the enjoyment quickly degenerates into fatigue and uneasiness. But pain often - good God, how often! - rises to torture and agony; and the longer it continues the more thoroughly it becomes genuine agony and torture. Patience is exhausted, courage languishes, melancholy seizes us, and nothing puts an end to our misery except the removal of its cause - or another event which is the sole cure of all evil, but which our natural foolishness leads us to regard with still greater horror and consternation.

All this is obvious, certain, and important, continued Philo, but I shan’t go on about it. I do take the opportunity to warn you, Cleanthes, that you have taken your stand on most dangerous ground, and without realizing it have introduced a total scepticism into the most essential articles of natural and revealed theology. What! no way to give religion a sound basis unless we allow the happiness of human life, and maintain that a continued existence even in this world - with all our actual pains, infirmities, vexations, and follies - is satisfactory and desirable! This is contrary to everyone’s feeling and experience; which
means that it is contrary to an authority so well established that nothing can undercut it. No decisive proofs can ever be produced against this authority; nor is it possible for you to compute, estimate, and compare all the pains and all the pleasures in the lives of all men and of all animals; and so when you rest the whole system of religion on a claim which from its very nature must for ever be uncertain, you tacitly admit that that system is equally uncertain.

*Animal happiness, or at least human happiness, in this life exceeds its misery* – no one will ever believe this, or at any rate you’ll never be able to prove it. But even if we grant it to you, your argument has still achieved nothing; for this is far from what we expect from infinite power, infinite wisdom, and infinite goodness. Why is there any misery at all in the world? Not by chance, surely. From some cause, then. Is it from the intention of God? But he is perfectly benevolent. Is it contrary to his intention? But he is almighty. Nothing can shake the solidity of this reasoning, so short, so clear, so decisive - unless we say that these subjects exceed all human capacity, and that our common measures of truth and falsehood are not applicable to them; a thesis I have all along insisted on, but which you have from the outset rejected with scorn and indignation.

But I will be contented to shift back from this position - doing this voluntarily, for I deny that you can ever force me out of it. I will allow for purposes of argument that pain or misery in man is compatible with infinite power and goodness in God, even when these attributes are understood in your way: what help do all these concessions give to your position? A mere possible compatibility is not sufficient. You must prove the existence of these pure, unmixed, and uncontrollable attributes from the present mixed and confused phenomena, and from these alone. A hopeful undertaking! Even if the phenomena were ever so pure and unmixed, because they are finite they would be insufficient for your purpose. How much more inadequate when they are also so jarring and discordant!

Here, Cleanthes, I find I can relax in my argument. Here I triumph! When we argued earlier about the natural attributes of intelligence and design, I needed all my sceptical and metaphysical subtlety to escape your grasp. In many views of the universe and of its parts, particularly its parts, the beauty and fitness of final causes strike us with such irresistible force that all objections seem to be (as I think they really are) mere fault-finding and trickery; and then we can’t imagine how we could ever give weight to them. But there is no view of human life or of the condition of mankind from which we can smoothly infer the moral
attributes of God, or learn about that infinite benevolence, conjoined with infinite power and infinite wisdom, which we must discover by the eyes of faith alone. But now the tables are turned! It is now your turn to tug the labouring oar, and to defend your philosophical subtleties against the dictates of plain reason and experience.