The American Deists

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Elihu Palmer, along with a group of like-minded religious and political radicals, founded the Deistical Society of New York in the winter of 1796–97 for the grandiose purpose of systematically “promoting the cause of nature and moral truth” and “opposing . . . all schemes of superstition and fanaticism.” The fraternity initially limited its activities to regular private meetings and occasional public lectures. But as popular interest in its tenets grew, the Deistical Society decided to appeal to a larger audience. On 8 November 1800 it proudly launched a weekly entitled *The Temple of Reason.*

The newspaper’s first editor, Dennis Driscoll, was one of those curiously ephemeral Early Republic deists who suddenly emerged from obscurity and just as quickly faded back into it. We know nothing about him except that he had immigrated from Ireland shortly before *The Temple’s* inauguration and that he was a defrocked Jesuit. He rather clumsily nurtured the society’s fledgling weekly until 7 February 1801, when he sadly announced in its columns “the necessity of suspending the publication for a moment” and urgently pled that those “indebted to the paper will immediately come forward and pay what they owe.”

*The Temple’s* momentary suspension stretched into almost three months, until Palmer—Driscoll having left the scene—relocated its offices to Philadelphia and assumed the editorship. The first issue of the reborn *Temple* appeared on 22 April 1801. The paper continued in print, albeit sporadically toward the end, until 19 February 1803, when it again and finally shut down its presses. Although it appears to have drawn a wide readership throughout the middle Atlantic and New England states, it was plagued by chronic financial embarrassment.

Despite its short and debt-ridden existence, the weekly quickly became infamous as a bastion of “infidelity.” Its notoriety eventually even prompted the appearance in Baltimore of *The Temple of Truth,* a periodical that ran from 1 August to 31 October 1801 and was edited by John Hargrove, whose express purpose was to provide an antidote to the “gross and ungenerous misstatement of the Scriptures” perpetrated by the “atheistic” *Temple of Reason.* There was good cause for Hargrove’s (and others’) concern. *The Temple’s* inaugural issue unabashedly proclaimed its militancy in political as well as religious matters, insisting that religious bigotry was the bane of both spiritual and
social progress. It ran didactic pieces on rational religion, astronomy ("of sciences . . . the most sublime and best calculated to elevate men's minds to a proper understanding of the Creator and themselves"), and ethics, in addition to the standard deistic critiques of Christianity. Moreover, it regularly provided its readers with serializations from the writings of British and European freethinkers such as Jeremy Bentham, Locke, Hume, Voltaire, Volney, Helvétius, and d'Holbach. The prose in The Temple was complemented by poetry—most of it execrable, although charmingly fervent—and occasionally nestled within its pages were brief communications on political events of the day. As Palmer emphasized in the 22 April 1801 issue, The Temple sought to be more than merely a religious periodical. Its intention was to combine "Politics with Pure Religion. . . . Contrary to the opinion of most men, we hold, that Deism and Liberty should go hand in hand." Finally, The Temple—especially after Palmer assumed its editorship—served as a ready means to advertise the public lectures for which the Deistical Society had become notorious. The following announcement, for example, appeared in issue after issue and reflected the militancy of The Temple as well as its broad scope of concerns.

Mr. Palmer, still continues to deliver public discourses every Sunday evening at six o'clock, at Lovett's long room in Broadway. The object of these discourses, is to disclose and mark with discriminating precision, moral principles by which human existence ought to be governed—To develop some of the fundamental rules and laws of physical philosophy and astronomy—To prove that God is immutable, and that the working of miracles is inconsistent with the nature of his character—That a religion built upon a miraculous foundation is false—That Christian superstition has been one of the most scourges of the human race—That the powers of men are competent for human happiness—That the triumphant reign of pure morality and sound philosophy can alone restore to the species that dignity, energy and virtue, which superstition for ages past has destroyed.

The selections here are culled from original articles in The Temple written by Driscoll, Palmer, and their fellow American deists. As the newspaper entered its last year and a half, fewer original pieces and more serialized ones from European freethinkers filled its pages—to such an extent that there is little in the periodical after late 1801 truly representative of the American deistic tradition.

Driscoll probably wrote or at least collaborated in the composition of "To the American Reader" and "The Deists Creed." Both are conventional statements of deism's insistence on the natural and constitutional primacy of freedom of conscience, as well as the superiority of naturalistic religion and morality.
"A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God," which appeared in *The Temple's* first and second issues, is particularly interesting. Although published anonymously, it was probably largely or solely written by Driscoll, whose Jesuit training in Ireland would have centered around Thomistic scholasticism. Certainly more Thomistic elements emerge in this short catechism than in any other American deistic tract. Driscoll defends natural theology, but in a way more reminiscent of Catholic natural law than of Enlightenment rationalism. In discussing "proofs" for God's existence, he appeals to arguments from causation and necessity that are almost identical to Aquinas's second and third demonstrations in the *Summa Theologiae* (part I, question 2, article 3). Moreover, again, in keeping with the Thomistic tradition, Driscoll argues that God's essence or substance is intrinsically unknowable, even though divine attributes such as eternity, immutability, freedom, intelligence, goodness, and so on are logically deducible. In good deistic form, however, Driscoll parts company with Thomistic natural theology in his insistence that God is unitary rather than triune. He also relies more heavily than did Aquinas on design arguments in his analysis of divine attributes. "A Demonstration," then, is one of the most remarkable mixtures of orthodox natural theology and deistic rationalism to appear in the American tradition.

There is no clue as to who wrote "An Ode to Reason" and "A New Hymn for The Temple of Reason," although the two poems' clumsiness suggests an amateur author or authors. The former deprecates religious superstitions, concluding that "the philosophic eye" can "Discern in them aught but a lie." The latter deplores the irrationality of a Triune, dying God and applauds the normative and philosophical superiority of a naturalistic Creator "Who hung the Starry Worlds on high, / Whose wisdom shines through all his ways, / Whose goodness is for ever nigh."

"Christian Morality Compared with That of the Pagan Philosophers" and "Natural Ideas Opposed to Supernatural" are also anonymous, but it is likely they were contributed by Palmer. They are written in his style and reflect many of the central themes in the *Principles of Nature*. The first piece argues that the best of Christian morality was anticipated by pagan philosophers such as Plato and Cicero. Consequently, it is unwarranted to claim that scriptural moral principles are revelatory in origin or even unique. Indeed, Palmer goes so far as to call Jesus a "sincere and good Deist" whose original religion of nature was debased by subsequent supernaturalism. In the second piece, Palmer elucidates what for him and other deists was a recurring theme: that supernaturalism is bred from ignorance and fear, encourages ecclesial and social oppression, and impedes the progress of the individual as well as society. As such, orthodox theology is the "Kingdom of Darkness" that "has for its object only things incomprehensible," mutating light into darkness and good sense into madness. Such a "science," he concludes, "is a continual insult to the reason of man."
To the American Reader (8 November 1800)

The torrents of illiberal reflections and unqualified abuse poured forth every day, through the channels of bigotry and intolerance, against Deists, have provoked this publication. It is the settled maxim of the philosophic Deist, to let all men rest in peace and enjoy their speculative opinions, however absurd, without animosity or persecution: But it is, unfortunately, the settled maxim and practice of others, to abuse and revile all those who are not of their creed. This is certainly, a perverse disposition, and has ever been productive of very many evils to society. In justice to what we conceive, and are convinced, to be the Truth, we can no longer remain silent. We are determined to shew to the world, the purity of our doctrines and the soundness of our principles, exposing at the same time, the corruption of those of our adversaries.

If we were to conclude from the intemperance of over-heated bigots, whose constant study is to denounce and cry down Deism in America; we must think that the inquisition had been established, with all its terrors in the United States; and that the christian religion, in all its sects and branches, had been placed under its holy protection. But fortunately for the peace and prosperity of America, Mahometism is as much established by law, there, as christianity. The immortal framers of the constitution, wisely thought, that in matters of religion, all men have an equal right to private and public opinion; and therefore, left them all on the same level— On this level we stand; and if we shew our religion to be superior to that of others, it shall be by the force of Reason, not by scurrility, deception, or persecution.

... The Temple of Reason is not dedicated wholly to the investigation and defence of pure religion; in it will be found philosophical enquiries and moral disquisitions also.

The Deists Creed (8 November 1800)

I believe that there is one, eternal, infinite, intelligent, all-powerful and wise Being, the creator, preserver and governor of all things. That this supreme cause is a Being of infinite justice, goodness and truth, and all other moral as well as natural perfections. That he made the world for the manifestation of his power and wisdom, and to communicate his goodness and happiness to his creatures; that he preserves it by his continual all-wise providence, and governs it according to the eternal rules of infinite justice, equity, goodness, mercy and truth; That all created rational beings, depending continually upon him, are bound to adore, worship and obey him; and to praise him for all things they enjoy; That they are all obliged to promote in their proportion and according to the extent of their several powers and abilities, the general good and welfare of those parts of the world, wherein they are placed; in like manner as the divine goodness is continually promoting the universal benefit of the whole; That men in particular are every one obliged to make it their business by an
universal benevolence, to promote the happiness of all others; That in order to do this, every man is bound always to behave himself so towards others, as in reason he would desire they should in like circumstances deal with him; That therefore he is obliged to obey and submit to his superiors in all just and right things, for the preservation of society and the peace and benefit of the community; to be just, honorable, equitable and sincere in all his dealings with his equals, for the making inviolable the everlasting rule of righteousness, and maintaining an universal trust and confidence, friendship and affection amongst men; and towards his inferiors, to be gentle, easy and affable, charitable and willing to assist as many as stand in need of his help, for the promotion of universal love and benevolence amongst mankind, and in imitation of the goodness of God, who preserves and does good to all creatures, which depend entirely upon him for their very being and all that they enjoy: That in respect of himself, every man is bound to preserve as much as in him lies, his own being and the right use of all his faculties, so long as it shall please God who appointed him his station in this world, to continue him therein: That therefore he is bound to have an exact government of his passions, and carefully to abstain from all debaucheries and abuses of himself, which tend either to the destruction of his own being, or to the disordering of his faculties, and disabling him from performing his duty, or hurrying him into the practice of unreasonable and unjust things; Lastly, that according as men regard or neglect these observations, so they are proportionably acceptable or displeasing to God, who being supreme governor of the world, cannot but testify his favor or displeasure at some time or other; and consequently, since this is not done in the present state, therefore there must be a future state of rewards and punishments in a life to come.

All this reason tells me, and all this I do firmly believe. Now if men will act up to the foregoing Creed, they must be more happy, wise and virtuous, than the most exact observer of what is called divine revelation, in as much as they are free from idolatry and superstition, the disgrace of religion, and the gangrene of morality.

Such is the God that all enlightened Deists do worship in spirit and in truth—And such is the simple religion of nature, worthy of rational creatures, and becoming the majesty of a pure spirit, all-wise and omnipresent. Any other oblations are childish—Any other offerings are ridiculous—Any other incense is gross and unbecoming. Cakes are for children; Wine for drunkards; bullocks, rams and calves for epicures; but the holy and spiritual God of nature delighteth not in such mean and puerile ceremonies; nor can philosophers be so foolish or absurd as to offer them. The finest and most acceptable victim that can be presented to the Father of the Universe, is a grateful heart and a virtuous mind—and the priest the highest in his favor, must be an Honest Man.
A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God
(8 and 15 November 1800)

I. First then, it is absolutely and undeniably certain, that something has existed from all eternity. This is so evident and undeniable a proposition, that no Atheist in any age has ever presumed to assert the contrary; and therefore there is little need of being particular in the proof of it. For since something now is, 'tis evident that something always was: Otherwise the things that now are, must have been produced out of nothing, absolutely and without cause: Which is a plain contradiction in terms. For, to say a thing is produced, and yet that there is no cause at all of that production, is to say that something is effected, when it is effected by nothing; that is, at the same time when it is not effected at all. Whatever exists, has a cause, a reason, a ground of its existence; (a foundation, on which its existence relies; a ground or reason why it doth exist, rather than not exist;) either in the necessity of its own nature, and then it must have been of itself eternal: Or in the will of some other Being; and then that other Being must, at least in the order of nature and causality, have existed before it.

That something therefore has really existed from eternity, is one of the most certain and evident truths in the world; acknowledged by all men, and disputed by none. Yet as to the manner how it can be; there is nothing in nature more difficult for the mind of man to conceive, than this very first plain and self evident truth. For, how any thing can have existed eternally; that is, how an eternal duration can be now actually past; is a thing utterly as impossible for our narrow understandings to comprehend as any thing that is not an express contradiction can be imagined to be: And yet to deny the truth of the proposition, that an eternal duration is now actually past; would be to assert something still far more unintelligible, even a real and express contradiction.

II. There has existed from eternity, some one unchangeable and independent Being.

Either there has always existed some one unchangeable and independent Being, from which all other Beings have received their original; or else there has been an infinite succession of changeable and dependent Beings, produced one from another in an endless progression, without any original cause at all. According to this latter supposition; there is nothing, in the universe, self-existent or necessarily-existing. And if so; then it was originally equally possible, that from eternity there should never have existed any thing at all; as that there should from eternity have existed a succession of changeable and dependent Beings. Which being supposed; then, What is it that has from eternity determined such a succession of Beings to exist, rather than that from eternity there should never have existed any thing at all? Necessity it was not; because it was equally possible, in this supposition, that they should not have existed at all.
Chance, is nothing but a mere word, without any signification. And other Being, 'tis supposed there was none, to determine the existence of these. Their existence therefore was determined by nothing; neither by any necessity in the nature of the things themselves, because 'tis supposed that none of them are self existent; nor by any other Being, because no other is supposed to exist.

That is to say; Of two equally possible, (viz. whether any thing or nothing should from eternity have existed) the one is determined, rather than the other, absolutely by nothing: Which is an express contradiction. And consequently, as before, there must on the contrary, of necessity have existed from eternity, some one immutable and independent Being. Which, what it is, remains in the next place to be enquired.

III. That unchangeable and independent Being, which has existed from eternity, without any external cause of its existence; must be self-existent, that is, necessarily-existing. For whatever exists, must either have come into Being out of nothing, absolutely without cause; or it must have been produced by some external cause; or it must be self existent. Now to arise out of nothing, absolutely without any cause; has been already shewn to be a plain contradiction. To have been produced by some external cause, cannot possibly be true of every thing; but something must have existed eternally and independently; as has likewise been shewn already. It remains therefore, that that Being which has existed independently from eternity, must of necessity be self-existent. Now to be self-existent, is not, to be produced by itself; for that is an express contradiction. But it is, (which is the only idea we can frame of self-existence; and without which, the word seems to have no signification at all:)

It is, I say, to exist by an absolute necessity originally in the nature of the thing itself. And this necessity must be antecedent; not indeed in time, to the existence of the being itself; because that is eternal: But it must be antecedent in the natural order of our ideas, to our supposition of its Being. That is; This necessity must not barely be consequent upon our supposition of the existence of such a being; (for then it would not be a necessity absolutely such in itself, not be the ground or foundation of the existence of any thing, being on the contrary, only a consequent of it) but it must antecedently force itself upon us, whether we will or no, even when we are endeavoring to suppose that no such Being exists.

From this Third Proposition, it follows:

1st. That the only true idea of a self-existent or necessarily-existing Being, is the idea of a Being, the supposition of whose not-existing is an express contradiction.

If any one now asks, what sort of idea the idea of that Being is, the supposition of whose not-existing is thus an express contradiction: I answer, 'tis the first and simplest idea we can possibly frame; an idea necessarily and essentially included or pre-supposed, as a sine qua non, in every other idea whatsoever; an idea, which (unless we forbear thinking at all) we cannot possibly extirpate or
remove out of our minds; of a most simple Being, absolutely eternal and infinite, original and independent. For, that he who supposes there is no original independent Being in the Universe, supposes a contradiction; has been shewn already.

2d. From hence it follows, that there is no man whatsoever, who makes any use of his reason, but may easily become more certain of the Being of a supreme independent cause, than he can be of any thing else besides his own existence. For how much thought soever it may require to demonstrate the other attributes of such a Being, as it may do to demonstrate the greatest mathematical certainties: (of which more hereafter). Yet, as to its existence; that there is something eternal, infinite, and self-existing, which must be the cause and original of all other things; this is one of the first and most natural conclusions, that any man, who thinks at all, can frame in his mind: And no man can any more doubt of this, than he can doubt whether twice two be equal to four.

3d. Hence we may observe, that our first certainty of the existence of God, does not arise from this, that in the idea our minds frame of him, (or rather in the definition that we make of the word, God, as signifying a Being of all possible perfections) we include self-existence: But from hence, that it is demonstrable both negatively, that neither can all things possibly have arisen out of nothing, nor can they have depended one on another in an endless succession; and also positively, that there is something in the Universe, actually existing without us, the supposition of whose not existing plainly implies a contradiction.

4th. From hence it follows, that the material World cannot possibly be the first and original Being, uncreated, independent, and of itself eternal. For since it hath been already demonstrated, that whatever Being hath existed from eternity, independent, and without any external cause of its existence, must be self-existent; and that whatever is self-existent, must exist necessarily by an absolute necessity in the nature of the thing itself: It follows evidently, that unless the material World exists necessarily by an absolute necessity in its own nature, so as that it must be an express contradiction to suppose it not to exist; it cannot be independent, and of itself eternal. Now, that the material World does not exist thus necessarily, is very evident. For absolute necessity of existing, and a possibility of not existing, being contradictory ideas; ’tis manifest the material world cannot exist necessarily, if without a contradiction we can conceive it either not to be, or to be in any respect otherwise than it now is: Than which nothing is more easy. For whether we consider the form of the World, with the disposition and motion of its parts; or whether we consider the matter of it, as such, without respect to its present form; every thing in it, both the whole and every one of its parts, their situation and motion, the form and also the matter, are the most arbitrary and dependent things, and the farthest removed from necessity, that can possibly be imagined.
IV. What the substance or essence of that Being, which is self-existent, or necessarily-existing, is; we have no idea, neither is it at all possible for us to comprehend it. That there is such a Being actually existing without us, we are sure, (as I have already shewn) by strict and undeniable demonstration. Also what it is not; that is, that the material World is not it, as modern Atheists would have it; has been already demonstrated. But what it is, I mean as to its substance and essence: This we are infinitely unable to comprehend. Yet this does not in the least diminish the certainty of the demonstration of its existence. For ’tis one thing, to know certainly that a Being exists; and another, to know what the essence of that Being is. And the one may be capable of the strictest demonstration, when the other is absolutely beyond the reach of all our faculties to understand. A blind or deaf man has infinitely more reason to deny the Being, or the possibility of the Being, of light or sounds; than any Atheist can have to deny, or doubt of, the existence of God. For the one can at the utmost have no other proof, but credible testimony, of the existence of certain things, whereof ’tis absolutely impossible that he himself should frame any manner of idea, not only of their essence, but even of their effects or properties: But the other may, with the least use of his reason, be assured of the existence of a Supreme Being, by undeniable demonstration; and may also certainly know abundance of its attributes, (as shall be made appear in the following propositions) though its substance or essence be entirely incomprehensible.

V. Though the substance or essence of the self-existent Being, is itself absolutely incomprehensible to us; yet many of the essential attributes of his nature, are strictly demonstrable, as well as his existence. Thus, in the first place, the self-existent Being must of necessity be eternal. The ideas of eternity and self-existence are so closely connected, that because something must of necessity be eternal independently and without any outward cause of its Being, therefore it must necessarily be self-existent; and because ’tis impossible but something must be self-existent, therefore ’tis necessary that it must likewise be eternal. To be self-existent, is (as has been already shewn) to exist by an absolute necessity in the nature of the thing itself. Now this necessity being absolute, and not depending upon any thing external, must be always unalterably the same: Nothing being alterable, but what is capable of being affected by somewhat without itself. That Being therefore, which has no other cause of its existence, but the absolute necessity of its own nature; must of necessity have existed from everlasting, without beginning; and must of necessity exist to everlasting without end.

As to the manner of this eternal existence; ’tis manifest, it herein infinitely transcends the manner of the existence of all created Beings, even of such as shall exist forever; that whereas ’tis not possible for their finite minds to comprehend all that is past, or to understand perfectly all things that are at present, much less to know all that is future, or to have entirely in their power any thing
that is to come; but their thoughts, and knowledge, and power, must of necessity have degrees and periods, and be successive and transient as the things themselves: The eternal, supreme cause, on the contrary, (supposing him to be an intelligent Being, which will hereafter be proved in the sequel of this discourse) must of necessity have such a perfect, independent and unchangeable comprehension of all things, that there can be no one point or instance of his eternal duration, wherein all things that are past, present, or to come, will not be as entirely known and represented to him in one single thought or view: and all things present and future, be equally and entirely in his power and direction; as if there was really no succession at all, but all things were actually present at once. Thus far we can speak intelligibly concerning the eternal duration of the self-existent Being.

VI. The self-existent Being must of necessity be infinite and omnipresent. The idea of infinity or immensity, as well as of eternity, is so closely connected with that of self-existence that because 'tis impossible but something must be infinite, independent and of itself, (for else it would be impossible there should be any infinite at all, unless an effect could be perfecter than its cause;) therefore it must of necessity be self-existent: And because something must of necessity be self-existent, therefore 'tis necessary that it must likewise be infinite. To be self-existent, (as has already been shewn) is to exist by an absolute necessity in the nature of the thing itself. Now this necessity being absolute in itself, and not depending on any outward cause: 'tis evident it must be everywhere, as well as always, unalterably the same. For a necessity which is not everywhere the same, is plainly a consequential necessity only, depending upon some external cause, and not an absolute one in its own nature: For a necessity absolutely such in itself, has no relation to time or place, or any thing else. Whatever therefore exists by an absolute necessity in its own nature must needs be infinite as well as eternal. To suppose a finite Being, to be self-existent; is to say that 'tis a contradiction for that Being not to exist, the absence of which may yet be conceived without a contradiction. Which is the greatest absurdity in the world. For if a Being can without a contradiction be absent from one place, it may without a contradiction be absent likewise from another place, and from all places: And whatever necessity it may have of existing, must arise from some external cause, and not absolutely from itself; and consequently, the Being cannot be self-existent.

From hence it follows.

1st. That the infinity of the self-existent Being; must be an infinity of fullness as well as of immensity; that is, it must not only be without limits, but also without diversity, defect, or interruption.

2d. From hence it follows, that the self-existent Being, must be a most simple, unchangeable, incorruptible Being; without parts, figure, motion, divisibility, or any other such properties as we find in matter. For all these things
do plainly and necessarily imply finiteness in their very notion, and are utterly inconsistent with complete infinity.

'Tis evident therefore, that the self-existent Being must be infinite in the strictest and most complete sense. But as to the particular manner of his being infinite or everywhere present, in opposition to the manner of created things being present in such or such finite places; this is as impossible for our finite understandings to comprehend or explain, as it is for us to inform an adequate idea of infinity. Yet that the thing is true, that he is actually omnipresent, we are as certain, as we are that there must something be infinite; which no man, who has thought upon these things at all, ever denied.

VII. The self-existent Being, must of necessity be but one. This evidently follows from his being necessarily existent. For necessity absolute in itself, is simple and uniform and universal, without any possible difference, deformity, or variety whatsoever: And all variety or difference of existence, must needs arise from some external cause, and be dependent upon it, and proportional to the efficiency of that cause, whatsoever it be. Absolute necessity, in which there can be no variation in any kind or degree, cannot be the ground of existence of a number of Beings, however similar and agreeing: Because, without any other difference, even Number is itself a manifest deformity of inequality (if I may so speak) of efficiency or causality.

VIII. The self-existent and original cause of all things, must be an intelligent Being. In this proposition lies the main question between us and the Atheists. For that something must be self-existent; and that that which is self-existent, must necessarily be eternal and infinite and the original cause of all things, will not bear much dispute. But all Atheists, whether they hold the World to be of itself eternal both as to the matter and form, or contingent, or whatever hypothesis they frame: have always asserted and must maintain, either directly or indirectly, that the self-existent Being is not an intelligent Being, but either pure unactive matter, or (which in other words is the very same thing) a mere necessary agent. For a mere necessary agent must of necessity either be plainly and directly in the grossest sense unintelligent; which was the ancient Atheists notion of the self-existent Being: Or else its intelligence, (which is the assertion of Spinoza, and some moderns) must be wholly separate from any power of will and choice; which, in respect of any excellency and perfection, or indeed to any common sense, is the very same thing as no intelligence at all.

Now that the self-existent Being is not such a blind and unintelligent necessity, but in the most proper sense an understanding and really active Being; does not indeed so obviously and directly appear to us by considerations a priori; because, (through the imperfection of our faculties) we know not wherein intelligence consists, nor can see the immediate and necessary connexion of it with self-existence, as we can that of eternity, infinity, unity, etc. But a posteriori, almost every thing in the world, demonstrates to us this great
truth; and affords undeniable arguments, to prove that the world, and all things therein, are the effects of an intelligent and knowing Cause.

IX. The self existent and original cause of all things, is not a necessary agent, but a Being indued with liberty and choice. The contrary to this proposition, is the foundation and the sum of what Spinoza and his followers have asserted concerning the nature of God. What reasons or arguments they have offered for their opinion, I shall have occasion to consider briefly in my proof of the proposition itself. The truth of which appears, in that it is a necessary consequence of the foregoing proposition. For intelligence without liberty, (as I there hinted) is really (in respect of any power, excellence, or perfection) no intelligence at all. It is indeed a consciousness, but it is merely a passive one; a consciousness, not of acting, but purely of being acted upon. Without liberty, nothing can in any tolerable propriety of speech, be said to be an agent, or cause of any thing. For to act necessarily, is really and properly not to act at all, but only to be acted upon.

X. The self-existent Being, the supreme cause of all things, must of necessity have infinite power. This proposition is evident and undeniable. For since nothing (as has been already proved) can possibly be self-existent besides himself; and consequently all things in the Universe were made by him and are entirely dependent upon Him; and all the powers of all things are derived from Him, and must therefore be perfectly subject and subordinate to Him; 'Tis manifest that nothing can make any difficulty or resistance to the execution of his will; but he must of necessity have absolute power to do every thing he pleases, with the perfectest ease, and in the perfectest manner, at once and in a moment, whenever he wills it.

1st. That infinite power reaches to all possible things; but cannot be said to extend to the working any thing which implies a contradiction: As, that a thing should be and not be at the same time; that the same thing should be made and not be made, or have been and not have been; that twice two should not make four, or that which is necessarily false should be true. The reason whereof is plain: Because the power of making a thing to be, at the same time that it is not; is only a power of doing that which is nothing, that is, no power at all.

2d. Infinite power cannot fail to extend to those things, which imply natural imperfection in the Being to whom such power is ascribed: As, that it should destroy its own Being, weaken itself, or the like. These things imply natural imperfection, and are by all men confessed to be such as cannot possibly belong to the necessary self existent Being. There are also other things which imply imperfection in another kind, viz. moral imperfection: Concerning which, Atheism takes away the subject of the question, by denying wholly the difference of moral good and evil; and therefore I shall omit the consideration of them, 'till I come to deduce the moral attributes of God.

XI. The supreme cause and author of all things, must of necessity be infinitely
wise. This proposition is evidently consequent upon those that have already been proved: And those being established, this, as admitting no further dispute, needs not to be insisted upon. For nothing is more evident, than that an infinite, omnipresent, intelligent Being, must know perfectly all things that are; and that He who alone is self-existent and eternal, the sole cause and author of all things, and on whom they continually depend; must also know perfectly all the consequences of those powers, that is, all possibilities of things to come, and what in every respect is best and wisest to be done: And that, having infinite power, he can never be controlled or prevented from doing what he so knows to be fittest. From all which, it manifestly follows, that every effect of the supreme cause, must be the product of infinite wisdom. More particularly: The supreme Being, because he is infinite, must be every where present: And because he is an infinite mind or intelligence, therefore wherever he is, his knowledge is, which is inseparable from his Being, and must therefore be infinite likewise. And wherever his infinite knowledge is, it must necessarily have a full and perfect prospect of all things, and nothing can be concealed from its inspection: He includes and surrounds every thing with his boundless presence; and penetrates every part of their substance with his all seeing eye: So that the inmost nature and essence of all things, are perfectly naked and open to his view; and even the deepest thoughts of intelligent beings themselves, manifest in his sight. Further: All things being not only present to him, but also entirely depending upon him, and having received both their being itself, and all their powers and faculties from him; 'tis manifest that, as he knows all things that are, so he must likewise know all possibilities of things, that is, all effects that can be. For, being himself alone self-existent, and having alone given to all things, all the powers and faculties they are endued with; 'tis evident he must of necessity know perfectly what all and each of those powers and faculties, which are entirely from himself, can possibly produce: And seeing at one boundless view, all the possible compositions and divisions, variations and changes, circumstances and dependences of things; all their possible relations one to another, and their dispositions or fitnesses to certain and respective ends; he must, without possibility of error, know exactly what is best and properest in every one of the infinite possible methods of disposing things; and understand perfectly how to order and direct the respective means, to bring about what he knows to be, in its kind, or in the whole, the best and fittest in the end. And having before shown, (which indeed is also evident of itself) that the supreme cause is moreover all-powerful; so that he can no more be prevented by force or opposition, than he can be hindered by error or mistake, from effecting always what is absolutely fittest and wisest to be done: It follows undeniably, that he is actually and effectually, in the highest and most complete sense, infinitely wise; and that the world and all things therein, must be and are effects of infinite wisdom. This is demonstration a priori. The proof a posteriori, of the
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The infinite wisdom of God, from the consideration of the exquisite perfection and consummate excellency of his works; is no less strong and undeniable. But I shall not enlarge upon this argument, because it has often already been accurately and strongly urged, to the everlasting shame and confusion of Atheists, by the ablest and learned writers both of ancient and modern times. I shall here observe only one thing; that the older the world grows, and the deeper men enquire into things, and the more accurate observations they make, and the more and greater discoveries they find out; the stronger this argument continually grows: Which is a certain evidence of its being founded in truth. If Galen, so many ages since, could find in the construction and constitution of the parts of a human body, such undeniable marks of contrivance and design, as forced him to acknowledge and admire the wisdom of its author; what would he have said if he had known the late discoveries in anatomy and physic, the circulation of the blood, the exact structure of the heart and brain, the uses of numberless glands and valves for the secretion and motion of the juices of the body; besides several veins and other vessels and receptacles not at all known, or so much as imagined to have any existence, in his days; but, which now are discovered to serve the wisest and most exquisite ends imaginable? If the arguments against the belief of the being of an all-wise creator and governor of the world, which Epicurus and his follower Lucretius drew from the faults which they imagined they could find in the frame and constitution of the earth, were so poor and inconsiderable, that, even in that infancy of natural philosophy, the generality of men contemned and despised them as of no force; How would they have been ashamed, if they had lived in these days: when those very things, which they thought to be faults and blunders in the constitution of nature, are discovered to be very useful and of exceeding benefit to the preservation and well-being of the whole? And, to mention no more: If Tully, from the partial and very imperfect knowledge in astronomy, which his times afforded, could be so confident of the heavenly bodies being disposed and moved by a wise and understanding mind, as to declare, that, in his opinion, whoever asserted the contrary, was himself void of all understanding; What would he have said, if he had known the modern discoveries in astronomy? The immense greatness of the world; (I mean of that part of it which falls under our observation) which is now known to be as much greater than what in his time they imagined it to be, as the world itself, according to their system, was greater than Archimedes’ sphere? The exquisite regularity of all the planets’ motions, without epicycles, stations, retrogradations, or any other deviation or confusion whatsoever? The inexpressible nicety of the adjustment of the primary velocity and original direction of the annual motion of the planets, with their distance from the central body and their force of gravitation towards it? The wonderful proportion of the diurnal motion of the earth and other planets about their own centers, for the distinction of light and darkness; without that...
monstrously disproportionate whirling of the whole heavens, which the an­
cient astronomers were forced to suppose? The exact accommodation of the
densities of the planets, to their distances from the sun, and consequently to
the proportion of heat which each of them is to bear respectively; so that
neither those which are nearest to the sun, are destroyed by the heat; nor those
which are farthest off, by the cold; but each one enjoys a temperature suited
to its proper uses, as the earth is to ours? The admirable order, number, and
usefulness of the several moons (as I may very properly call them,) never
dreamt of by antiquity, but now by the help of telescopes clearly and distinctly
seen to move about their respective planets; and whose motions are so exactly
known, that their very eclipses are as certainly calculated and foretold, as those
of our own moon? The strange adjustment of our moon’s motion about its
own center once in a month, with its motion about the earth in the same
period of time, to such a degree of exactitude, that by that means the same face
is always obverted to the earth without any sensible variation? The wonderful
motions of the comets, which are now known to be as exact, regular, and
periodical, as the motions of other planets? Lastly, the preservation of the sev­
eral systems, and of the several planets and comets in the same system, from
falling upon each other; which in infinite past time, (had there been no intel­
ligent governor of the world) could not but have been the effect of the smallest
possible resistance made by the finest aether, and even by the rays of light
themselves, to the motions (supposing it possible there ever could have been
any motions) of those bodies; What, I say, would Tully, that great master of
reason, have thought and said; if these and other newly discovered instances of
the inexpressible accuracy and wisdom of the works of God, had been found
out and known in his time? Certainly Atheism, which then was altogether
unable to withstand the arguments drawn from this topic; must now, upon the
additional strength of these latter observations, (which are every one an unan­
swerable proof of the incomprehensible wisdom of the Creator) be utterly
ashamed to shew its head. We now see with how great reason the author of the
book of Ecclesiasticus, after he had described the beauty of the sun and stars,
and all the then visible works of God in heaven and earth; concluded, chap.
xliii, v. 31, (as we, after all the discoveries of later ages, now no doubt still truly
say) There are yet hid greater things than these, and we have seen but a few of
his works.

The supreme cause must in the first place be infinitely good; that is, he must
have an unalterable disposition to do and to communicate good or happiness:
Because, being himself necessarily happy in the eternal enjoyment of his own
infinite perfections, he cannot possibly have any other motives to make any
creatures at all, but only that he may communicate to them his own perfec­
tions; according to their different capacities, arising from that variety of na­
tures, which it was fit for infinite wisdom to produce; and according to their
different improvements, arising from that liberty which is essentially necessary to the constitution of intelligent and active beings. That he must be infinitely good, appears likewise further from hence; that being necessarily all sufficient, he must consequently be infinitely removed from all malice and envy, and from all other possible causes or temptations of doing evil; which 'tis evident, can only be effects of want and weakness, of imperfection or depravation. Again; The supreme cause and author of all things, must in like manner be infinitely just: Because, the rule of equity being nothing else but the very nature of things, and their necessary relations one to another; and the execution of justice, being nothing else but a suit of the circumstances of things to the qualifications of persons, according to the original fitness and agreeableness, which I have before shewn to be necessarily in nature, antecedent to will and to all positive appointment; 'tis manifest, that He who knows perfectly this rule of equity, and necessarily judges of things as they are; who has complete power to execute justice according to that knowledge, and no possible temptation to deviate in the least therefrom; who can neither be imposed upon by any deceit, nor swayed by any bias, nor awed by any power; must of necessity, do always that which is right; without iniquity, and without partiality; without prejudice, and without respect of persons. Lastly, That the Supreme Cause and Author of all things, must be true and faithful, in all his declarations and all his promises; is most evident for the only possible reason of falsifying, is either rashness or forgetfulness, inconstancy or impotency, fear of evil, or hope of gain; from all which, an infinite wise, all-sufficient and good Being, must of necessity be infinitely removed; and consequently, as 'tis impossible for him to deceive himself, so neither is it possible for him in any wise to deceive others. In a word: All evil and all imperfections whatsoever, arise plainly either from shortness of understanding, defect of power, or faultiness of will; And this last, evidently from some impotency, corruption, or depravation; being nothing else, but a direct choosing to act contrary to the known reason and nature of things. From all which, it being manifest that the supreme cause and author of all things, cannot but be infinitely removed; it follows undeniably, that he must of necessity be a Being of infinite goodness, justice and truth, and all other moral perfections.

To this argumentation a priori, there can be opposed but one objection that I know of, drawn on the contrary a posteriori, from experience and observation of the unequal distributions of Providence in the world. But (besides the just vindication of the wisdom and goodness of Providence in its dispensations, even with respect to this present world only, which Plutarch and other heathen writers have judiciously made) the objection itself is entirely wide of the question. For concerning the justice and goodness of God, as of any governor whatsoever, no judgment is to be made from a partial view of a few small portions of his dispensations, but from an entire consideration of the whole;
and consequently, not only the short duration of this present state, but moreover all that is past and that is still to come, must be taken into the account: And then every thing will clearly appear just and right.

From what has been said upon this argument, we may see how it comes to pass, that though nothing is so certain and undeniable as the necessary existence of God, and the consequent deduction of all his attributes; yet men, who have never attended to the evidence of reason, and to the notions that God hath given us of himself, may easily be in great measure ignorant of both. That the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right ones, is so certain and evident, that whoever affirms the contrary, affirms what may very easily be reduced to an express contradiction. Yet whoever turns not his mind to consider it at all, may easily be ignorant of this and numberless other of the like mathematical and most infallible truths.

Yet the notices that God has been pleased to give us of himself, are so many and so obvious; in the constitution, order, beauty, and harmony of the several parts of the world; in the frame and structure of our own bodies, and the wonderful powers and faculties of our souls; in the unavoidable apprehensions of our own minds, and the common consent of all other men; in every thing within us, and in every thing without us: That no man of the meanest capacity and greatest disadvantages whatsoever, with the slightest and most superficial observations of the works of God, and the lowest and most obvious attendance to the reason of things, can be ignorant of Him; but he must be utterly without an excuse. Possibly he may not indeed be able to understand, or be affected by nice and metaphysical demonstrations of the being and attributes of God; But then, for the same reason, he is obliged also not to suffer himself to be shaken and unsettled, by the subtle sophistries of Sceptical and Atheistical men; which he cannot perhaps answer, because he cannot understand. But he is bound to adhere to those things which he knows, and those reasonings he is capable to judge of, which are abundantly sufficient to determine and to guide the practice of sober and considering men.

An Ode to Reason (8 November 1800)

REASON DIVINE! thou gift of Heaven,
The greatest gift that e'er was given,
In human hearts resume thy throne,
Let all to thee subjection own.
To search for wisdom, be our pride,
And thou! O thou! our only guide:
Aided by thee our breasts shall burn
With indignation just, and spurn
At all the slavish fearful fools
Of priests, as well as priestly tools;
Nor dread the scept'r'd tyrant's frown;
(For tyrants, reason's sons disown.)
With perseverance, strong we'll grow,
And like a river onward flow,
Whose steady course obstructions brave,
Until it meets great ocean's wave.

For long have priests devoid of shame
Abused—Nay, spurned thy sacred name!
Their _triple Gods_, these Gods but _one_,
Their _married Virgin_, and her son;
How _snakes_ could _speak_, and _asses_ too,
What _wond'rous feats_ some _fish_ could do,
_Could swallow_ _prophets_ and _could bring_ _The cash_ for _taxes_ to a _King_!
How _Moses_ over Egypt's land,
_Dispers'd_ the _frogs_ by his command;
How _fleas_ and _lice_ came at his call,
And _plagu'd_ Egyptians one and all,
_How coat_ and _shoes_ for _forty year_ Though always _worn_—did never wear.
How _general Joshua_ _stopt_ the _sun_,
Until his men the battle _won_.
_How gates_ and _bulwarks_ _kiss'd_ the _ground_,
_When nought but horns_ and _trumpets sound_.
_How Endor's witch_ _could_ _raise_ the _dead_,
And _make_ _heroic_ _Saul_ _afraid_.
_How Babylon's king_ _with pride_ so _full_ Became at last a _lusty bull_!
And _thus_ for _seven_ long _years_ _remain'd_ E're he again _his shape_ _regain'd_;
(What _pity_ _kings_ _of modern_ _days_ Could _not_ be _sent_ as _long_ _to graze_.)
_How God_ bid _one_ _go_ _eat_ his _bread_,
_Bespread_ with _t_— _d_ in _butter's_ _stead_,
But _when_ at _this_ _his heart_ _did spurn _ Cow's _dung_, _God_ _said_, _would_ _serve_ _the_ _turn_,
_Such_ _foolish_ , _childish_ _tales_ _as_ _these_,
_A barbarous race of men_ _might_ _please_,
_But sure_ such _tales_ _can_ _never_ _claim_
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The Temple of Reason

From Reason’s sons, of Truth the name;
Nor can the philosophic eye
Discern in them aught but a lie.
Though raging priests aloud proclaim,
Damnation, Hell and endless flame,
To ev’ry son of man who dare
But doubt what they solemnly swear;
The God of Nature says not so,
He ne’er can doom a man to woe,
For disbelieving when he’s told
That silver is as yellow’s gold;
And sure where common sense prevails,
As foolish are those bible tales.

Fair Reason needs no aids like these,
Her simple rules are rules of ease.
To view the Universe around,
That work of Wisdom most profound!
The varying seasons as they go,
The summer’s heat—the winter’s snow;
These—these the Mighty God proclaim;
These cry aloud his mighty name;
These teach us equal love to shew
To wipe the tear of human woe,
To give misfortune quick relief,
To cheer the heart oppress’d with grief:
In short—Do ev’ry good we can
To all our brethren—fellow man.

Christian Morality Compared with That of the Pagan Philosophers (29 November 1800)
Far be it from us to find fault with christian morality, though some of its principles may be so refined, as that men in the present state of affairs, are not able fully to comply with them. We appeal to the sense, experience and practice of the most canting christians, how far they return good for evil—forgive their enemies, and reduce certain other precepts to operation, which they so earnestly recommend by the authority of Jesus Christ: All we wish to insist on and shew in this place is, that this branch of divine revelation is not of so modern a date as it is pretended.

The best morality of the new testament has been long known, taught and practiced before Jesus Christ or his disciples; and therefore cannot possibly be
considered as immediate and divine revelation, communicated to us by God the Son.

The advocates for revelation will not allow, nor do we want them to allow it, that Socrates, Plato, Cicero, Epictetus and many other philosophers in and before their times, had been inspired, by God the Holy Ghost!—It was not at all necessary: they had their morality from reason and their predecessors; for moral truths are as old as the creation: Christ may refine on them, but he did not invent, nor was he the first to promulgate them. The striking likeness that appears between the morality of the gospel, and that of Socrates and Plato, even in the most refined parts, shews that Jesus Christ was acquainted with the works of these Greek philosophers, and that he wished to introduce them among his country-men the Jews, who, it would appear from their own history even, had much need of them.

We may as well suppose and believe that Christ had travelled for his information, during the time there is no account of him in Judea, as that Solon, Lycurgus, and many other eminent patriots and philosophers of antiquity, had done the same for the benefit and improvement of their countries. It is somewhat more rational, and indeed more probable, to think that Jesus Christ had drawn his knowledge and morality from Greece and Egypt, than immediately from the celestial regions.

Having made these preliminary observations, leaving the reflecting reader to make many more to the same purpose, we shall quote a few moral precepts from some of the ancient philosophers, and then leave others to compare them with corresponding passages in the new testament.

Plato tells us in his Apology, that Socrates did nothing else but go continually about, persuading both old and young, not to be so much solicitous to gratify the appetites of the body: or to heap up wealth; or gain any outward advantage whatever: as to improve the mind by the continual exercise of all virtue and goodness; teaching them a man’s true value did not arise from riches, or from any outward circumstances in life; but that true riches and every real good, whether public or private, proceeded wholly from virtue.

It would be tedious to cite all the passages in the new testament, that are in sense, and nearly in expression, the same as this in Plato—To the sagacious reader it will certainly appear plain, that in his moral system, Jesus Christ had taken Socrates and Plato for his masters and models; and he could not have taken better.

Plato in Critone, says that no one ought to do willingly any hurt or mischief to any man; no, not even to those that have first injured him; but ought, for the public benefit, to endeavor to appease with gentleness, rather than exasperate with retaliations.—Here we have forgiveness to our enemies, and a return of good for evil preached about four hundred years before Christ was
born! and now what becomes of Christian morality, and the new commandments?

For a full and satisfactory elucidation of this subject, we must refer our readers to the works of Plato, which we could wish to be more generally known, that the public may see how clearly this illustrious philosopher and his master Socrates, treated of the existence of one God, of moral philosophy and the immortality of the soul. The new testament appears, as to these three subjects, to be a mere copy of Plato’s works.

It is evident, says Cicero, every man is bound by the law of his nature, to look upon himself as a part or member of that one universal body or community, which is made up of all mankind; to think himself born to promote the public good and welfare of all his fellow creatures; and consequently, obliged, as the necessary and only effectual means to that end, to embrace them all with universal love and benevolence; so that he cannot without acting contrary to the reason of his own mind, do willingly any hurt or mischief to any man—And to comprehend all in one word—for man to love his neighbour as himself: Thus far Cicero, who has expressed himself as distinctly on this head, as any Philosopher of the present day could possibly do.

As morality in its full extent, and in its niceties and refinements, has been known and taught many centuries before the christian era, it is evidently false to say, that it forms a part of divine revelation. The blindest bigots must see the truth of this and feel its force; let us not hear them any longer therefore, insult our understanding with the unparalleled purity of their morality, or with its novelty either. Until now, their best and only excuse could have been their ignorance; but if they still persist in their error, we shall very justly say to them, what the Jewish writer had said to his countrymen, “They have eyes, and they cannot see—ears, and they cannot hear!”

Having shewn that Christ’s moral system is not by divine revelation, we shall soon shew also, that there is nothing new in the theoretic or mysterious part of his religion, or the religion of his disciples and followers rather; for we are decidedly of opinion, and we have published our reasons for thinking so, that Christ was a sincere and good Deist: hence we must conclude, that Pagan theology had been introduced in his name, and that after his death. We say, Pagan theology; for we shall prove that the Egyptians, Greeks and Romans, long before the birth of Christ, had believed dogmas similar to those of the new testament—whether of Trinities, incarnations, metamorphoses—celestial love-intrigues—whether of feasts of bread and wine—of transfigurations—resurrections, ascensions to heaven, etc. etc. All these extravagant fables calculated to subjugate the mind to sacerdotal influence, to ignorance, blind obedience and superstition, were well known and successfully practiced, before Paul figured away in Asia, or Peter in Rome. And of course, cannot be new, or of divine origin, as pretended by the advocates for christianity.
A New Hymn for the Temple of Reason  
(16 September 1801)
While others sing a Triune God,
    Of Three in one—and one in three;
In Reason's Temple we have trod,
    And sing alone a Deity.

We sing the great Creator's praise,
    Who hung the Starry Worlds on high,
Whose wisdom shines through all his ways,
    Whose goodness is for ever nigh.

While others sing a changing God,
    And make his wrath and love their theme;
In Reason's Temple we have trod,
    And sing a God that's e'er the same.

E'en let them sing a Dying God,
    And to his blood for shelter fly;
In Reason's Temple we have trod,
    And say a God could never die.

Yet when they sing th' atoning blood
    Of him who knew himself no sin,
We ask, (tho' long their faith has stood,)
    Could reason e'er such faith begin?

Tho' bold fanatics sing aloud
    Of love from God to them alone,
And deal damnation to the crowd;
    A God so partial we disown.

Then lift ye sad unhappy souls,
    With hopes of heaven—and fears of hell;
The knell of superstition tolls,
    'Tis reason tolls her passing knell.

Natural Ideas Opposed to Supernatural (30 December 1801)
When we coolly examine the opinions of men, we are surprised to find, that in those, which they regard as the most essential, nothing is more uncommon than the use of common sense; or, in other words, a degree of judgment sufficient to discover the most simple truths, to reject the most striking absur-
dities, and to be shocked with palpable contradictions. We have an example of it in theology, a science revered in all times and countries, by the greatest number of men; an object they regard as the most important, the most useful, and the most indispensable to the happiness of societies. Indeed, with little examination of the principles, upon which this pretended science is founded, we are forced to acknowledge, that these principles, judged incontestable, are only hazardous suppositions, imagined by ignorance, propagated by enthusiasm or knavery, adopted by timid credulity, preserved by custom, which never reasons, and revered solely because not understood. Some, says Montaigne, make the world think, that they believe what they do not; others, in greater number, make themselves think, that they believe what they do not, not knowing what belief is.

Restless meditations upon an object, impossible to understand, in which, however, he thinks himself much concerned, cannot but put a man in a very ill humor and produce in his head dangerous transports. Let interest, vanity and ambition, cooperate ever so little with these dispositions, and society must necessarily be disturbed.—This is the reason that so many nations have often been the theatres of the extravagances of senseless dreamers, who, believing or publishing their empty speculations as eternal truths, have kindled the enthusiasm of princes and people, and armed them for opinions, which they represented as essential to the glory of the Deity, and the happiness of empires. In all parts of our globe, intoxicated fanatics have been seen cutting each other’s throats, lighting funeral piles, committing without scruple and even as a duty, the greatest crimes, and shedding torrents of blood.

Fierce and uncultivated nations, perpetually at war, have in their origin under divers names, adored some God, conformably to their ideas; that is to say, cruel, carnivorous, selfish, blood-thirsty. We find, in all religions of the earth, a God of armies, a jealous God, an avenging God, a destroying God, a God, who is pleased with carnage, and whom his worshippers, as a duty, serve to his taste.—Lambs, bulls, children, men, heretics, infidels, kings, whole nations are sacrificed to him. Do not the zealous servants of this so barbarous God, even think it a duty to offer up themselves as a sacrifice to him? We everywhere see madmen, who, after dismal meditations upon their terrible God, imagine, that to please him, they must do themselves all possible injury, and inflict on themselves for his honor invented torments. In short, the gloomy ideas of such a divinity, far from consoling men under the evils of life, have every where disquieted and confused their minds, and produced follies destructive to their happiness.

Infested with frightful phantoms, and guided by men, interested in perpetuating its ignorance and fears, how could the human mind have made any considerable progress? Man has been forced to vegetate in his primitive stupi-
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ity: nothing has been offered to his mind, but stories of invisible powers, upon whom his happiness was supposed to depend. Occupied solely by his fears, and unintelligible reveries, he has always been at the mercy of his priests, who have reserved to themselves the right of thinking for him, and direct his actions.

Thus man has been, and ever will remain, a child without experience, a slave without courage, a stupid animal, who has feared to reason, and who has never known how to extricate himself from the labyrinth, where his ancestors had strayed. He has believed himself forced to groan under the yoke of his gods, whom he has known only by the fabulous accounts of his ministers, who, after having bound him with the cords of opinion, have remained his masters; or rather have abandoned him, defenceless, to the absolute power of tyrants, no less terrible than the gods, whose representatives they have been upon earth.

Crushed under the double yoke of spiritual and temporal power, it was impossible for the people to know and pursue their happiness. As religion, politics, and morality became sanctuaries, into which the ungodly were not permitted to enter, men had no other morality, than what their legislators and priests brought down from the unknown regions of the Empyrean. The human mind, confused with its theological opinions, forgot itself, doubted its own powers, mistrusted experience, feared truth, disdained its reason, and abandoned her direction, blindly to follow authority. Man was a mere machine in the hands of his tyrants and priests, who alone had the right of directing his actions: always led like a slave, he ever had his vices and character. These are the true causes of the corruption of morals, to which superstition ever opposes only ideal barriers, and that without effect. Ignorance and servitude are calculated to make men wicked and unhappy. Knowledge, reason and liberty, can alone reform them, and make them happier; but every thing conspires to blind them, and confirm their errors. Priests cheat them, tyrants corrupt, the better to enslave them. Tyranny ever was, and ever will be, the true cause of the corruption of morals, and the habitual calamities of men; who, almost always fascinated with religious notions, and metaphysical fictions, instead of turning their eyes to the natural and obvious causes of their misery, attribute their vices to the imperfection of their nature, and their unhappiness to the anger of the gods. They offer up to heaven vows, sacrifices and presents, to obtain the end of their sufferings, which, in reality, are chargeable only to the negligence, ignorance and perversity of their guides, the folly of their institutions, their silly customs, false opinions, irrational laws, and above all, to the want of knowledge. Let men’s minds be filled with true ideas; let their reason be cultivated; let justice govern them; and there will be no need of opposing to the passions, such a feeble barrier, as a fear of devils. Men will be good, when they are well instructed, well governed, and when they are punished or despised for the evil and justly rewarded for the good, they do to their fellow creatures.
In vain should we attempt to cure men of their vices, unless we begin by
curing them of their prejudices. It is only by shewing them the truth, that they
will know their dearest interests, and the motives that ought to include them
to do good. Fatigued with an inconceivable theology, ridiculous fables, impen­
etrable mysteries, puerile ceremonies, let the human mind apply itself to the
study of nature, to intelligible objects, sensible truths, and useful knowledge.
Let the vain chimeras of men be removed and reasonable opinions will soon
come of themselves, into those heads, which were tho’t to be forever destined
to error.

To learn the true principles of morality, men have no need of theology, of
revelation, or gods: They have need only of reason. They have only to enter
into themselves, to reflect upon their own nature, consult their sensible inter­
ests, consider the object of society, and of the individuals, who comprise it; and
they will easily perceive, that virtue is the interest, and vice the unhappiness of
beings of their kind. Let us advise men to abstain from vice and crimes; not
because they will be punished in the other world, but because they will suffer
for it in this. — There are, says a great man, means to prevent crimes—these are
punishments; there are those to reform manners—these are good examples.

Truth is simple; error is complex, uncertain in its progress, and full of wind­
ings. The voice of nature is intelligible; that of falsehood is ambiguous, enig­
matical, mysterious; the way of truth is straight; that of imposture crooked and
dark. Truth, forever necessary to man, must necessarily be felt by all upright
minds; the lessons of reason are formed to be followed by all honest men.—
Men are unhappy only because they are ignorant; they are ignorant only be­
cause every thing conspires to prevent their being enlightened: they are so
wicked only because their reason is not yet sufficiently unfolded.

By what fatality, then, have the first founders of all sects given to their gods
the most ferocious characters, at which nature recoils? Can we imagine a con­
duct more abominable, than that ascribed by Moses to his God, towards the
Egyptians, where that assassin proceeds boldly to declare, in the name, and by
the order of his God, that Egypt shall be afflicted with the greatest calamities,
that can happen to man. Of all the different ideas, which they wish to give us
of a Supreme Being, of a God, creator and preserver of men, there are none
more horrible, than those of these imposters, who believed themselves inspired
by a divine spirit.

Why, O theologians! do you presume to rummage in the impenetrable
mysteries of a first being, whom you call inconceivable to the human mind?
You are the first blasphemers, in attributing to a Being, who must be infinitely
perfect, so many horrors, committed towards creatures, whom he has made
out of nothing.

There is a science, that has for its object only things incomprehensible.
Contrary to all other sciences, it treats only of what cannot fall under our
senses. Hobbes calls it the Kingdom of Darkness. It is a country, where every thing is governed by laws, contrary to those which mankind are permitted to know in the world they inhabit. In this marvelous region, light is only darkness; evidence is doubtful or false; impossibilities are credible; reason is a deceitful guide; and good sense becomes madness. This science is called theology, and this sort of theology is a continual insult to the reason of man.