The Reverend Mark Twain
Fulton, Joe B.

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Fulton, Joe B.
The Reverend Mark Twain: Theological Burlesque, Form, and Content.
The Ohio State University Press, 2006.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/28190.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/28190
CHAPTER 6

Q: WHAT DO SOCRATES AND THE SHORTER CATECHISM HAVE IN COMMON?

A: Dialogic Influences on Mark Twain’s What Is Man?

Shakespeare, like any artist, constructed his works not out of inanimate elements, not out of bricks, but out of forms that were already heavily laden with meaning, filled with it. We may note in passing that even bricks have a certain spatial form and, consequently, in the hands of the builder they express something.

—MIKHAIL BAKHTIN, “Response to a Question from Novy Mir” (5)

No, you mean Shakspeare’s imitations. Shakspeare created nothing.

—MARK TWAIN, What Is Man? (130)

ON MAY 9, 1875, Olivia Clemens, wife of writer Mark Twain, sat writing a letter to her mother. “Mr. Clemens is reading aloud in ‘Plato’s Dialogues,’” she began, “so if I write incoherently you must excuse it” (Gribbon, Mark Twain’s Library 2: 549). This “polyphony in the parlor” is emblematic of the sometimes unexpected influences on Twain’s work; far from causing Twain to “write incoherently,” as it may have for Mrs. Clemens, the writer thrived on a plurality of voices and influences. In the last decade, scholars have increasingly examined minority and female voices in Twain’s writing, analyzing the extent to which these voices contribute to a dialogic form. Scholars have been far more reluctant to analyze the literary influences on Twain’s writing, however, even
though his reading was one of his greatest sources of “voices” and dialogic writing. The culprit may be, as scholar Alan Gribben contends in *Mark Twain's Library: A Reconstruction*, the “widely accepted representation of him as an unread man” (xvii). After Gribben’s work, however, and the work of those who have followed, it is impossible to view Twain as an unread, uneducated, literary idiot savant; still, many critics persist. Doubtless, too, the tendency of critics to analyze content as distinct from form is partly to blame as well. Like the other chapters in this study, this analysis is not an exercise in neoformalism, though such an approach has much to recommend it as a corrective to strictly social, political, and ethical approaches, but is rather along the lines of a Bakhtinian and New Critical organic approach that attends to form and content at the same time. Like any reasonable being, and any successful writer, Twain concerned himself with questions of content and form.

Indeed, one of the most influential sources of dialogic writing in Twain was the dialogue itself, a genre that highlights both form and content. From the very earliest stages of his writing career, Twain found the dialogue form compelling. His early notebooks, written when he was piloting a riverboat on the Mississippi, contain transcriptions of Voltaire's dialogues. Reading Voltaire to learn French, Twain found he enjoyed studying the dialogues, sometimes using them as a starting point for his own literary creativity (see especially MTNJ 1: 59). All in all, Twain copied portions of three of Voltaire's dialogues into his notebook: “Dialogue entre un Plaideur et un Avocat,” “Dialogue entre un Philosophe et un Contrôleur Général des Finances,” and “L'A, B, C, ou Dialogues entre A, B, C” (MTNJ 1:51–53, 56–57, 59–60). Throughout his career, Twain himself selected the dialogue form frequently, employing it in such diverse works as “The Winner of the Medal” (1867), “The Revised Catechism” (1871), “An Encounter with an Interviewer” (1874), “Colloquy between a Slum Child and a Moral Mentor” (circa 1860s/1880s), “The Dervish and the Offensive Stranger” (1902), “Dialogue on the Philippines” (1902–3), “The Recurrent Major and Minor Compliment” (circa 1903), “Concerning Copyright” (1905), “A Helpless Situation” (1905), large portions of “3,000 Years among the Microbes” (1905), and of course the infamous “Little Bessie” dialogues (1908–9).

Albert Bigelow Paine notes that Twain favored the dialogue “for polemic writing,” and there is a good bit of truth to this statement, particularly when one considers his dialogues on copyright reform (III:1158). Twain’s comments about the “Socratic catch,” by which one might lead others into adopting one’s point of view, demonstrate that he
did see the polemical value of dialogue as a form that transfers content (MTNJ 2:274). One can “catch” an opponent, but one can also play “Socratic catch,” tossing words and ideas back and forth like players on a baseball field. More than polemic, the dialogue form fascinated Twain because above all it is philosophical theater and announces itself as philosophy by its very form. Deciding to write “a dialogue” virtually ensures that what one writes will be recognized as philosophy of one sort or another. Dialogue, too, is essentially plotless narrative, and imitates the realistic dialogue at which Twain excelled. One suspects that Twain’s interest in the Socratic dialogues had at least as much to do with the interplay between characters in a formal dialogue setting as it did with the development of the philosophical ideas. What happens when two people bump into each other and start talking is, for Twain, the stuff of life and hence the stuff of art.

What Is Man? expresses Twain’s attraction to the dialogue form more obviously than any other work. In this work, Twain creates a dialogue between an “Old Man” and a “Young Man” discussing such heady topics as “God,” “Free Will,” and “Man the Machine.” Historically, critics have tended to understate the influence of literary genres and forms on the writer’s works, and criticism of What Is Man? is no exception. Lewis Simpson, for example, criticizes the “tendency to discover in [Twain’s works] more structure or pattern than is truly present in the thought of the author who wrote What Is Man?” (617). More positively, Linda Wagner-Martin identifies the “implicit models” for Twain’s dialogue as the “popular ‘conversations’ so important in the intellectual circles comprised of his peers” (6). Doubtless, this environment of dialogue was important, but the informal conversations were hardly the real “models” for Twain’s dialogue. Symptomatic of the critical misunderstanding of What Is Man? is that many critics ignore its form completely. So convinced is she that Twain’s influences were extraliterary, Wagner-Martin refers to Twain’s dialogue as an “essay” (2). Nor is she alone in this. Intentionally or otherwise, many critics call What Is Man? an “essay.” William Spengemann, without any explanation, dubs What Is Man? an “essay” (129). Sherwood Cummings in Mark Twain and Science labels it a “philosophical essay” (45). Eberhard Alsen tags the dialogue a “long essay” (12). While What Is Man? is “a singular essay” for Carl Dometsch (232), Hyatt Howe Wagoner deems it “that much derided essay” (364). Most recently, Chad Rohman has stated that the “essay’s key aspect is uncertainty,” employing the term at other points in his own essay as well (“What” 60).
Dialogic Influences on Mark Twain’s *What Is Man?*

What Is Man? was at one time an essay. When Twain read his piece “What Is Happiness?” to the Monday Evening Club in 1883, it was in essay form, but Twain reports that in 1898, “I wrote out and completed one chapter, using the dialogue form in place of the essay form” (MTE 241). Possibly that explains why even Twain’s daughter Clara referred to What Is Man? as an “article” and not as a dialogue (208). First published anonymously in 1906, when the dialogue was finally collected and published with Twain’s other work, it appeared under the title *What Is Man? and Other Essays,* perhaps leading some to count it as an essay itself.

Legitimately, one may think of Twain’s dialogue in the literary context of an “essay” akin to Pope’s “Essay on Man.” Twain, after all, quotes Pope’s line, “An honest man’s the noblest work of God” (quoted in WIM? 164). Calling Pope’s poem an essay, however, does not make it prose, anymore than calling Twain’s dialogue an essay renders it an article. In the absence of any discussion connecting Pope and Twain, labeling *What Is Man?* an “essay” ignores the implications of the dialogue form Twain employs. Even so notable a scholar as Henry Nash Smith, who sets out to discuss “the problems of style and structure Mark Twain faced” (vii), unaccountably refers to *What Is Man?* as a “philosophical treatise” (171). Cummings, for example, looks closely at many of the influences on Twain’s *What Is Man?* such as Lecky, Paine, Darwin, and Oliver Wendell Holmes, but analyzes content, not form. Even the fact that Holmes’s *Autocrat of the Breakfast Table* is essentially a dialogue receives barely a nod from Cummings in his analysis. Twain found the *form* itself compelling, so one ought not to ignore it.

Twain’s dialogue was part of his ongoing religious dialogue, and it is appropriate, then, that the Socratic dialogues were not the only important formal influence on *What Is Man?* The *Shorter Catechism* of the Presbyterian Church is a particular variant of dialogue form that influenced Twain’s life from an early age. When he put pen to paper in 1871 to satirize Boss Tweed and the Tammany gang, he entitled it “The Revised Catechism” (Vogelback 69–70). Twain drew on the catechetical form he had memorized in his childhood, changing it for the purposes of satire:

What is the chief end of man?

A. To get rich. (539)

Twain was “brought up, from the cradle, an old-time, boiler-iron, Westminster-Catechism Christian,” as he described Mary Baker Eddy’s early
training, and the catechism form was one that he returned to often (Christian Science 356). In “Colloquy between a Slum Child and a Moral Mentor” (circa 1860s/80s), Twain creates a catechetical situation from the first line: “Who made the grass?” (106). Twain similarly structures chapter 14 of 3,000 Years among the Microbes (1905) after such a situation by including a “clergyman” who quizzes the cholera germ narrator named Huck:

“You are a Christian.”
“I am.”
“What is a creature?”
“That which has been created.” (495–96)

The exchange parodies the language of the catechism and burlesques the catechetical situation. The late “Little Bessie” dialogues function in a similar way, with the titular character asking questions of the adult, directly parodying certain prompts from the Shorter Catechism, such as when Bessie asks, “Mamma, is Christ God?” (43). Along with the Socratic dialogues that bothered Olivia Clemens, the Shorter Catechism was one of the important formal influences on What Is Man?

In Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, Mikhail Bakhtin asserts that the dialogue is a “means of seeking truth [that] is counterposed to official monologism, which pretends to possess a ready-made truth” (110). The form, Bakhtin asserts, is inherently dialogic, even when, as in some dialogues, the speaker tries to create a monologic worldview. Mark Twain’s What Is Man? follows this pattern. Twain’s work dramatizes the attempts by the character the “Old Man” to subvert the monology of the catechism by substituting his own “ready-made truth”; that is, he attempts to substitute his own catechism for the existing one. Twain’s What Is Man? becomes, as Bakhtin says of such attempts at monologic dialogue, a “catechism” that adopts the “question-and-answer form for training neophytes” (PDP 110). The Old Man’s efforts fail, however, as the dialogue form forces a dialogue over content. The contest between form and content, between dialogue and monologue, is visible at several points in What Is Man? ultimately creating a true dialogue. This chapter will demonstrate that Twain obtained his dialogue structure from Socrates and the Shorter Catechism, and that the form he chose influenced the content, the theological debate evident in his work What Is Man? The truth that emerges from What Is Man? belongs neither to the
Old Man or to Old Man Twain; rather, the truth is a dialogic truth produced by the conflict of warring forms.

**THE INFLUENCE OF THE SHORTER CATECHISM:**

“Y. M. IS THAT A NEW GOSPEL?” (169)

It was specifically the conjunction of the sacred form with the dialogue form that created *What Is Man?* When discussing his dialogue, Twain most often employed language freighted with religious connotations. In letters to friends, in conversations, in many autobiographical writings, and even in the dialogue itself, Twain referred to *What Is Man?* as “my gospel” (e.g., MTE 239–41; WIM? 169). In letters to William Dean Howells and the Reverend Joe Twichell, Twain referred to the manuscript as “my Bible” (MTHL II: 689; Paine Letters 2:705). Twain also describes his work as “unfamiliar doctrine,” fearing “it would not make a single convert” (MTE 241).

To a great extent, Twain’s conception of *What Is Man?* as a “gospel,” “Bible,” or “doctrine” explains one of the most compelling features of the dialogue. For in *What Is Man?* Twain establishes a catechism for his new gospel. The situation is inherently catechetical, with the Old Man instructing the Young Man. As Josef Andreas Jungmann asserts, the purpose of a catechism is clear: “Catechetics must never lose sight of the fact that catechesis means the transference of the content of Christian doctrine to those who are maturing and that, as a consequence, the task of education cannot be divorced from it” (xii). The purpose of the catechetical form, then, is to transfer content. The *Shorter Catechism* with its question-and-answer format was something Twain knew intimately from what he called “my Presbyterian Training.” It appears as a dialogue, but is in fact monologic, as the “Truth” is not something searched for, but dictated. This is, arguably, the purpose of church doctrine, although in reality the history of the *Shorter Catechism* has been one of vigorous dialogue. Generally, a catechism is a good example of how form has memory and how form itself conveys content. Bakhtin’s idea that even bricks have form and thus “express something” is a crucial one. Because bricks have form, they convey meaning, and more complex forms, such as literary genres, likewise “express something” apart from content. “Genres (of literature and speech),” Bakhtin asserts, “throughout the centuries of their life accumulate forms of seeing and interpreting particular aspects
of the world” (“Response” 5). The epic form has a certain collection of ways of viewing the world, for example, and so too does the catechetical form. The question-and-answer format is founded on certain assumptions about the nature of truth and the relationship of one person to another. If one vigorously shook a copy of the Shorter Catechism until the content fell out and only the form remained, the content would yet remain. It would still be the same question-and-answer form, and a person would still have his or her role dictated. There truly is a “law of genre,” as Derrida argues. Despite Derrida’s attempts to undermine genre as “an authoritarian summons,” genre remains the law and provides its own sheriff for enforcement (203). No one, not even Derrida, can deconstruct genre; even his acolytes refer to his work “The Law of Genre” as—what else!—an essay. So, too, even without the content, the catechism would still convey its essential theology: Every question has an answer; one is placed (even predestined) in a certain role as either questioner or answerer; a higher power has dictated the form that the discussion will follow. Looked at in this way, one can say that the entire structure of a catechism responds to the question “What Is Man?” and enforces the Calvinist concept of the sovereignty of God as its answer.

Because Twain’s Old Man seeks to establish a catechism, really a burlesque catechism, parallel to the traditional one, there are many monologic qualities to What Is Man? When Twain first presented his “gospel” to the “Monday Evening Club,” he reports that “there was not a man there that didn’t scoff at it, jeer at it, revile it, and call it a lie, a thousand times a lie!” (MTE 240). Twain’s attitude toward his audience is telling: “those able men were such children, such incompetents, in the presence of an unfamiliar doctrine” (MTE 241). One might say that they were “children” needing catechesis in his new “gospel.”

In What Is Man? Twain creates a catechetical situation in its own right, but he also patterns his dialogue after the question-and-answer form of the Shorter Catechism, mirroring certain questions used in the catechism and even referring to it at one point. While Twain’s work is not an encyclopedic treatment of theology, it does share the following elements with the Shorter Catechism: The question of man; The Creation; The Fall and Depravity; Infant Salvation (deleted portion); Trinitarian questions (deleted); and Free Will. The form the questions take parallels the form used in the Shorter Catechism. The title of Twain’s dialogue, for example, parallels the opening question of the catechism, “What is the chief end of man?” “To glorify God and enjoy him forever” is the prop-
er catechetical response. The title Twain selects asks the same sort of question and provides an answer differing only slightly in emphasis.

In five places in the Bible, the question “What is man?” is asked, always in similar contexts. Most frequently, Twain is seen as alluding to Psalms 8:3–4 “When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?” One of the five biblical iterations of the phrase is Paul’s quoting of this verse from Psalms in Hebrews 2:6. There is indeed warrant for identifying this particular passage in Psalms as the source for the title, for Twain had quoted it in early 1870 in a letter to his future wife, Olivia Langdon:

How insignificant we are, with our pigmy little world!—an atom glinting with uncounted myriads of other atom worlds in a broad shaft of light streaming from God’s countenance—& yet prating complacently of our speck as the Great World, & regarding the other specks as pretty trifles made to steer our schooners by & inspire the reveries of “puppy” lovers. Did Christ live 33 years in each of the millions & millions of worlds that hold their majestic courses above our heads? . . . I do not see how astronomers can help feeling exquisitely insignificant, for every new page of the Book of the Heavens they open reveals to them more & more that the world we are so proud of is to the universe of careering globes as is one mosquito to the winged & hoofed flocks & herds that darken the air & populate the plains & forests of all the earth. If you killed the mosquito, would it be missed? Verily, What is Man, that he should be considered of God? (MTL 4:12)

The insignificance of humans when compared to the enormity of creation is the text, so to speak, of Reverend Twain’s sermon. Likewise, if we look toward the other iterations of the question “What is man?” in the Bible, we see a similar attitude expressed. Later in the book of Psalms, we again hear, “Lord, what is man, that thou takest knowledge of him! or the son of man, that thou makest account of him!” (144: 3).

The book of Job, however, is the most likely source for the title of What Is Man? In Job, the rhetorical device “What is man?” is used twice, both in contexts similar to Psalms and Hebrews. The first is a question by Job, wondering why God would take notice of him. “What is man, that thou shouldest magnify him? And that thou shouldest set thine heart upon him?” (7:17). The second iteration is by Eliphaz the
Temanite, later called by Job one of the “forgers of lies . . . physicians of no value” (13:4). Eliphaz the Temanite queries, “What is man, that he should be clean? And he which is born of a woman, that he should be righteous?” (Job 15:14). In both cases, the question is part of an attempt to understand the relationship between God and man; the answer Twain provides with his allusion differs from the catechetical response, suggesting that our ability as humans to glorify God is strictly limited. Another connection is that, like Twain’s work, Job is a philosophical dialogue, even a catechism. “Teach me,” Job declares, sounding much like a catechumen seeking enlightenment, “and I will hold my tongue” (6: 24). Twain may have relied on Job for the title to comment on the relationship between teacher and student in a catechetical environment and to establish the form and content his own dialogue would take. The Old Man in Twain’s dialogue may, like Eliphaz the Temanite, be a poor teacher.

After the title, Twain opens his dialogue with the question, “What are the materials of which a steam-engine is made?” (125). It seems a strange question to begin with, given that the subject is supposed to be humankind. There is method here, however, and eventually, Twain’s Old Man proceeds to connect the analysis of base elements of machine construction with the construction of human beings. In this he follows the Shorter Catechism with its questions about the creation of man:

Q. 9. What is the work of creation?
A. The work of creation is God’s making all things of nothing, by the word of his power, in the space of six days, and all very good.

Q. 10. How did God create man?
A. God created man male and female, after his own image, in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness, with dominion over the creatures. (229)

Like What Is Man? the catechism approaches the matter of creation first in a general way, following the broad question with one specifically relating the question of creation to human creation. The difference, however, is telling. Doctrinally, the discussion of ex nihilo creation magnifies God, and the creation of humans “after his own image” magnifies humanity. The Old Man, in contrast, presents the work of creation as a mechanical process of mining ore, purifying it, and producing a steam engine. While God in Twain’s work is depicted somewhat less positively than in the catechism, it is man that is truly disparaged. William Macnaughton rightly notes that the purpose of What Is Man? is “to make human pride look ridiculous” (84). In this sense, Twain’s work is very
like Pope’s “Essay on Man” as well as the book of Job, to which it owes its title. The Old Man proceeds to draw an analogy between the construction of a steam engine and the construction of man. From how a steam engine is made, the question turns to “Man the machine—man, the impersonal engine” (128). The Old Man's connection of the creation of a steam engine to the creation of human beings prompts the Young Man to blurt out: “You have arrived at man, now?” (127).

Although it might seem strange to expect Twain to discuss Adam in his dialogue, he in fact introduces the question of Adam at the same rhetorical moment that the Shorter Catechism does, immediately following the general questions of creation and the narrowing of focus to the creation of humans. In What Is Man? the Young Man raises the question of Adam, maintaining that our common ancestor must be an exception to the Old Man's idea that “[n]o man ever originates anything. All his thoughts, all his impulses, come from the outside” (129). As the Young Man contends, “The first man had original thoughts, anyway; there was nobody to draw from” (129). The Old Man counteracts this argument by going to the heart of the Eden story, the entrance of Death into the world. This issue covers questions 12–19 in the Shorter Catechism, which Twain encapsulates in one long paragraph. The crux of the Old Man's argument is that Adam “had not a shadow of a notion of the difference between good and evil—he had to get the idea from the outside. Neither he nor Eve was able to originate the idea that it was immodest to go naked: the knowledge came in with the apple from the outside” (130).

Following the discussion of Adam and the Fall of Man, one logically proceeds, as do both What Is Man? and the Shorter Catechism, to a discussion of total depravity. The catechism asks, “Did all mankind fall in Adam's first transgression?” (230). The affirmative answer does not, however, end the discussion, either in the catechism or in Twain's dialogue. In fact, it leads in both cases to a discussion of what some felt was the worst implication of the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity and one that concerned Twain deeply: Infant Damnation.

Properly speaking, there is no Calvinist doctrine of infant damnation, but rather of infant salvation, and the actual baptism has, in the Presbyterian view, no salvific effect. Whether performed on infant or adult, baptism is a sign only of a grace bestowed by God, not conferred by the ritual. As Calvin puts it, “The only purification which baptism promises is by means of the sprinkling of the blood of Christ” (II:513). Nevertheless, Twain was concerned throughout his entire life about this issue. Such concern may seem peculiar today, but Twain lived in an era that
took theology seriously, and it bears repeating that he himself took theology seriously. Contrary to the claims of Sherwood Cummings, who states that “the idea of predestination simply made no impression on him,” Twain was deeply involved in the issue (109), for this concept lies at the heart of the question of where unbaptized infants would spend eternity. Twain wrote about the issue many times in his life in such diverse works as the *Connecticut Yankee* manuscript (1889), “Aix-Les-Bains” (1891), “My First Lie and How I Got Out of It” (1899), and his sardonic advice to Paine that when in heaven he should not try to “smuggle water” to the “little unbaptised Presbyterian and Roman Catholic children roasting in the red fires” (“Etiquette” 209). In “Moral and Intellectual Man” (circa 1903), Twain commented that, “Man thinks he is not a fiend. It is because he has not examined the Westminster Catechism which he invented. He and the Polecat.—But it is not fair to class them together, the polecat has not invented a Westminster Catechism.”

In *What Is Man?* Twain follows his discussion of Adam with the Young Man’s criticism “It is an infamous doctrine,” and then proceeds to give all manner of references to babies, not specifically linking them yet to the issue of unbaptized infants. He talks about the “baby born with a billion dollars,” “the baby born with nothing” (131), the mother that would “suffer torture to save [her child] from pain; die that it may live” (139), and most tellingly the section entitled “A Little Story” (143–47) and the anecdote from Darwin (181–82) that bring to the forefront the issue of what—according to Twain’s understanding of Calvinist doctrine—happens to unbaptized children when they die. As *What Is Man?* exists today, the debate over infant salvation is sublimated, with many oblique references to pagan (and hence unbaptized) children dying. The “God” dialogue, which corresponds to questions 4–8 of the catechism, beginning with “What is God?” was removed by Twain from *What Is Man?* in 1905, as Baender notes. Twain left the direction “NOT TO BE USED” appended to it (See the California Edition of *What Is Man?* Supplement 476). This section contains the most direct reference to the catechism and to the doctrine of Infant Salvation, with the Old Man asking

O.M. Do you believe that God sends unbaptised children to eternal torture by fire?
Y.M. I do not merely believe it, I know it. All Christians know it, and they solemnly state it when they enter upon Church membership.
O.M. Have you friends who have children in hell?
Y.M. Yes, several.

{ 150 }
The discussion continues for four pages. It is not quite true that “All Christians know it, and they solemnly state it when they enter upon Church membership,” for the doctrine is peculiar to Reformed churches, such as the Presbyterian church, and also to Roman Catholicism, though for different theological reasons. Twain once referred to the doctrine of infant salvation as a “Roman-Catholic-Presbyterian Belief” (“Emendations of the Copy-Text,” Connecticut Yankee 669). It is also misleading to suggest that the Shorter Catechism demands that a “right-hearted Christian sees his unoffending child broiling on the red-hot grates of hell, and proclaims from the housetops that the Author of this unspeakable atrocity is made up all of goodness, mercy and loving-kindness,” as the Old Man puts it (482–83). Nevertheless, the Old Man refers directly to the Catechism and it is true that in most Presbyterian churches one applying for church membership was examined on these questions. The Catechism itself treats the issue in questions 94 and 95, “What is Baptism?” and “To whom is Baptism to be administered?” but it was the convergence of several questions that created—and still creates—a misunderstanding of the doctrine. When the answers to the two questions about baptism, that it is a sacrament of grace and that infants should be baptized, are put into conversation with the earlier questions about Adam and the fall of man, one begins to sense the causes of the controversy. The answer to the latter question from the Shorter Catechism reads like Twain’s diatribe against the doctrine:

Q. 19. What is the misery of that estate whereinto man fell?
A: All mankind, by their fall, lost communion with God, are under his wrath and curse, and so made liable to all miseries of this life, to death itself, and to the pains of hell forever. (230)

When revising his manuscript in 1905, Twain removed his own treatment of these issues, which he had entitled simply “God,” but which might have borne the title used by the Catechism’s question, “What is God?” What led him to remove the passage? While it is here that the Old Man states his belief in God, this portion of the dialogue also contains some of the most vitriolic attacks on God (477). It is safe to say that the excised “God” passage demonstrates that Twain’s Old Man, if not Old Man Twain himself, does believe in God, he just doesn’t like him very much. Was Twain concerned that these passages were too vitriolic even for anonymous publication? The Young Man labels the Old Man’s ideas about God “gross blasphemy, and I will not answer you” (482).
Certainly, Twain may have been concerned that his ability to convince his readers might be lessened if he were too savage with their beliefs.

As a practical matter, too, much of the impetus behind the “God” dialogue was removed by a 1903 change in the doctrine of the Presbyterian Church. Debate over the question of infant salvation had raged for years. Several times, the Presbyterian Synods had attempted to amend the doctrine. Twain followed these discussions with interest, writing in “Aix-Les-Bains” that “[i]t was, without doubt, a mistake and a step backward when the Presbyterian Synods of America lately decided, by vote, to leave [God] still embarrassed with the dogma of infant damnation” (4). In 1903, the Presbyterian Church (USA) added a declaratory statement to the Westminster Confession of Faith, stating that “We believe that all dying in infancy are included in the election of grace, and are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit, who works when and where and how he pleases” (216). With this change or clarification of church doctrine, much of the material in the “God” dialogue was rendered moot. Still, removing it left a hole in Twain’s dialogue, for he had covered every other “What is _____?” question from the Shorter Catechism, such as “What is Man?” “What is Sin?” and so on. The most glaring absence is a discussion of Christ, who is present in the finished dialogue only obliquely. In the excised portion, there is one element following the Shorter Catechism that discusses the nature of God and Christ.

O. M. Are the Savior and God one Person, or two?
Y. M. One. He is God. (480)

This correlates to the question from the Shorter Catechism:

Q. 6. How many Persons are there in the Godhead?

Specifically, this is interesting because Twain, like his source, capitalizes Person, using it in the technical theological sense of “aspect” or “attribute.” Calvin, in the Institutes of the Christian Religion, defines “Person” as “a subsistence in the Divine essence,—a subsistence which, while related to the other two, is distinguished from them by incommunicable properties” (I: 114). Twain uses this theological term and definition here and, as he follows the Shorter Catechism in the form the question takes, one ought to note that the Young Man supplies the correct content, or answer. Leaving out the entire “God” section left a gaping hole that Twain may have intended to later repair, excising some of the
discussion of infant salvation, and returning the larger passage to its rightful place in *What Is Man?*

Another excised passage is likewise telling, both for what it reveals of Twain’s methods of composition, but also for how the excised passage relates to the entire dialogue. The passage, bearing the title “Further about Training,” relies heavily on Twain’s reading of Jonathan Edwards’s theological treatise *Freedom of the Will.* Twain’s Old Man mentions Edwards’s volume by name, citing it as an example of poor reasoning and its author as a person with “no more sense of humor than a tombstone” (See the Textual Notes to *What Is Man?* 625–26). Even with such direct references, many critics still insist Twain relied exclusively on his own experiences and intuition rather than research. Typically, then, the intellectual sources of *What Is Man?* are frequently minimized. “It must be insisted,” asserts John Frederick in his much-cited work *The Darkened Sky,* “that there is no Calvinism in any accurate sense in Twain’s determinism, as has been sometimes suggested” (170). Frederick goes on to mention that “[i]n 1902 Twichell loaned Mark his copy of Jonathan Edwards’ *On the Freedom of the Will,* for reasons I can only guess at” (170). Neither Frederick nor anyone else need guess; Twain borrowed the book to consult as he wrote *What Is Man?* Twain tells us plainly, in a letter to Joe Twichell, that reading *Freedom of the Will* gave him “a strange & haunting sense of having been on a three days’ tear with a drunken lunatic,” yet he still recognized that Edwards “could have written Chapters III & IV of my suppressed Gospel” (Paine, Biography, III: 1157). As he did with his other works, Twain engaged in research while writing *What Is Man?* He borrowed Twichell’s copy of *Freedom of the Will* for research, and the “Further about Training” section proves this. Any determinism in Twain’s thinking has deep roots in his Calvinist inheritance, and did not crop up with Darwin, Marx, and Freud.

Interestingly, in the excised passage, the Old Man accepts several fundamental premises of Calvinism: the absolute sovereignty of God, election, damnation, and predestination. What he rejects, however, is as important as what he accepts: Free Will. In the *Shorter Catechism,* free will is discussed as the common state of all people, but also as a state that results in sin. The preeminent examples are Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. The mystery of how the Calvinist concepts of predestination, God’s foreknowledge, and human free will work together remains a thorny issue. Twain, with his “free will” versus “free choice” discussion, follows both the *Shorter Catechism* and his readings in Edwards.
Y. M. What is your opinion regarding Free Will?
O. M. That there is no such thing. (199)

The Old Man’s rejection of Free Will is crucially a part of the “man as machine” philosophy he propounds. Essentially, the Old Man rejects not the idea that people make no decisions, but that they have any real say in the matter. External conditions cause them inevitably to give or not to give money to a person in need, to choose one profession over another, or to befriend one person over another. The true machine would be a person programmed inevitably to do right and who could do no wrong. Quite the contrary, the Old Man asserts. “The fact that man knows right from wrong proves his intellectual superiority to the other creatures,” states the Old Man, “but the fact that he can do wrong proves his moral inferiority to any creature that cannot” (198–99).

In response to his dilemma, the Old Man dispenses with the term “Free Will” entirely, substituting the term “Free Choice,” which he defines as “nothing beyond a mere mental process” (200). With “Free Choice,” one enjoys no “untrammeled power to act as you please,” but rather has only the ability to observe the differences among various choices (200). For the Old Man, the point d’appui is a person’s “born disposition and the character which has been built around it by training and environment” (200). One should note the passive construction of the Old Man’s statement.

If a human “must obey the laws of his construction,” so too must the writer of an alternate catechism obey the laws of the genre. Having laid the groundwork for a catechism for a new gospel of man as machine, Twain returns in the end to the catechetical form with a discussion of the soul. Following the section on “Free Will,” Twain places another small section entitled “A Difficult Question.”

Y. M. Maybe the Me is the Soul?
O. M. Maybe it is. What is the Soul?
Y. M. I don’t know.
O. M. Neither does any one else. (205–6)

With this exchange, Twain follows the Shorter Catechism closely, using the Old Man to ask the questions and the young man to answer them. At the same time, Twain renders it as conversation, with the Young Man’s hesitant “maybe” violating the form—the hallmark of a catechism is spiritual certainty. The Old Man repeats the hesitant “maybe,” but then
follows with the catechetical form we have seen repeatedly throughout the dialogue: “What is the Soul?” The answer, however much it seems like a nonanswer, leading toward inconclusion, really leads to a truly catechetical conclusion by asserting the sovereignty of God.

In the end, too, with a rapid-fire succession of questions, the Old Man catechizes the Young Man, asking question after question that will provoke the response, the solid answer, that emerges from a catechism:

O. M. Who manufactures them, then?
Y. M. God.
O. M. Where does the credit of it belong?
Y. M. To God.
O. M. And the glory of which you spoke, and the applause?
Y. M. To God. (210)

With this conclusion, the Old Man returns to the first answer of the Shorter Catechism, “The chief end of man is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” Having taken so much away from humanity, from “Man the Machine,” the Old Man has to place the glory somewhere; he returned the glory to the God who created Man. Perhaps Twain’s burlesquing “new gospel” is in some respects conservative theology, after all, for it responds to the old one, which powerfully reasserts itself through the form the questions take. The Young Man says “I know your whole catalogue of questions, and I could answer every one of them without your wasting the time to ask them” (172). He knows the catalogue because, like those who “solemnly state it when they enter upon Church membership,” he has seen it before, memorizing the answers when he learned the catechism. While the Old Man sought to deride humanity, the formal influences of the catechism glorify the creator, producing the same answer to every question: God, God, God.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE SOCRATIC DIALOGUES:
“THE UTTERER OF A THOUGHT ALWAYS UTTERS A SECOND-HAND ONE” (WHAT IS MAN? 148)

The difference between the beginning of What Is Man? and a Socratic dialogue is stark. While Socrates tends to ask probing questions and grill his interlocutor, he is also frequently grilled in turn. In early portions of Twain’s dialogue, the Old Man, however, sets the agenda and dominates
the discussion. The catechetical purpose of the *Shorter Catechism* is clearly felt in the question-and-answer format of portions of *What Is Man?* leading critics to comment on the lack of true dialogue. Hamlin Hill famously deemed Twain’s dialogue “rigged” in the Old Man’s favor (133). Carl Dolmetsch, too, avers that “Y. M. never discovers he is playing with loaded dice” (230). Niles Buchanan Thomas, Justin Kaplan, and Chad Rohman all label the dialogue “one-sided” (82; 340; “What” 60). J. Harold Smith delves deeper when he observes that *What Is Man?* is a “Socratic-like dialogue with the Old Man the message-bearer and the Young Man, representing conventional viewpoints, the learner” (166). S. Ramaswamy notes the inequality of the two speakers in *What Is Man?* comparing it to the “Dialogue of the Guru and Sishya,” the teacher and pupil (33).

Twain does not stick to this pattern, however. As the dialogue proceeds, the Old Man and Young Man begin to interact much more dialogically and more naturally, as two characters might. This results from aesthetic choices Twain makes that create a true dialogue, in classical Socratic form. Perhaps the most obvious way in which Twain moves from catechism to dialogue is by providing names for the interlocutors. Admittedly, in *What Is Man?* those names are the ultrageneric “Old Man” and “Young Man.” Twain may even be making a joking biblical allusion, referring to Ephesians 4:22–24, in which Paul counsels the Ephesians to “put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts” so that they might “put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.” Still, while the “Old Man” and “Young Man” monikers are not as personal as the names in the Socratic dialogues, such as Glaucon, Adeimantus, or Socrates, they are characters. Imagine how different *What Is Man?* would be if it were truly catechetical in form, with successive questions and answers, each relatively distinct and separate from the previous. Twain used such a form numerous times, including two parodies of catechetical situations, “The A B C Lesson” and “The Revised Catechism.” The *Shorter Catechism* was never intended to have personality, but rather to allow for the one learning it to step into the catechetical role and provide the correct answers. By contrast, Twain’s dialogue becomes a narrative because the names help to create narrative.

Twain creates the Socratic situation, too, by closely patterning his own use of language after Platonic examples. One of the most common devices in dialogue is the use of rejoinders, interjections, and responses to dramatize the dialogue and keep it moving forward. In comparing Twain’s dialogue to Platonic examples, this study employs the Jowett
Dialogic Influences on Mark Twain’s *What Is Man?*

translation, the text that Twain owned. Just as one hears echoes of the *Shorter Catechism* in Twain’s work, one recognizes many ideas and concepts that Twain obtains from the Socratic dialogues generally and *The Republic* in particular, such as the discussion of “gold men, and tin men, and copper men, and leaden men, and steel men” (*WIM?* 127) that compares to similar discussions in Plato (681, 804–5). Twain was also influenced by the discussion of Platonic “forms” (compare *WIM?* 202–3 to *The Republic* 772). “The Secret History of Eddypus, the World-Empire” that Twain was working on during 1901–2 even as he composed parts of his dialogue contains a clear allusion to the “Myth of the Cave” from book VII of *The Republic* in Twain’s tale of “prisoners born and reared in the stench and gloom of a dungeon” who then discovered that there was another world beyond (360). In the deleted “Moral Courage” section, as well, Twain bases the formal aspects of his dialogue on a passage from book III of *The Republic*.

O.M. What is moral courage—a talent, or an acquisition?
Y.M. A talent, of course. It is born in a man, else he is without it.
O.M. Like a talent for mathematics, languages, billiards, poetry, and so on?
Y.M. Yes.
O.M. Can a man have a talent for mathematics and none for poetry, languages and billiards?
Y.M. Certainly. (495)

The Old Man sounds very like Socrates in this exchange. Lastly, there are even bizarre connections in *The Republic* to Twain’s ongoing theological interest in infant damnation when Jowett glosses the discussion of “Young children dying almost as soon as they were born” with the phrase “unbaptized infants” (873).

It is the formal influence, however, that is most crucial. Beginning with the description of the setting in the epigraph to *What Is Man?* the formal influence of the Socratic dialogues revolutionizes the monologic contribution of the *Shorter Catechism*.

One of the most basic features of dialogue is the use of “rejoinders,” defined by Bakhtin as “the utterances of the interlocutors or partners in dialogue” that facilitate the movement from one speaker to the other (SG 72). Interestingly, of the sixty-nine different rejoinders used by Twain, forty-two of them were used by Socrates in *The Republic*. These run the gamut from those indicating assent and dissent to those that are

{ 157 }
interrogative. Rejoinders of assent common to both *The Republic* and *What Is Man?* include: yes; indeed; of course; go on; one cannot doubt it; I see; I have; I am not denying it; I suppose not; unquestionably; right; certainly; undoubtedly; explain; perhaps; that is what I fully believe; proceed; I do; Illustrate; and so—; very good; yes, I know it; I think so; true; correct; without a question. Those of dissent include: no; certainly not; I am not convinced; hardly; well, I don’t know. Interrogative rejoinders include: whose then? what is that? how do you mean? in what way; why? which one? how? Then what do you mean? what others? what is the difference? Twain may have internalized these important words and phrases, but he may also have compiled lists of them from his reading, as he did so frequently during his writing projects. Twain once wrote “Mother” Fairbanks that “the end & aim of my ambition is to be authentic,” and his habitual awareness of the formal attributes of language was part of that mission (MTL 2: 189). When he was writing *The Prince and the Pauper*, for example, he compiled long lists of language that would make his novel sound authentic; it should hardly surprise us to find that he did this for *What Is Man?* Regardless of how he acquired them, the effect is startling, for the rejoinders create an energetic dialogue. They are, as Bakhtin says, “link[s] in the chain of speech communion” (SG 76). As such, they help to unify the dialogue from beginning to end, making the enterprise an authentic dialogue.

Similarly, there are many narrative techniques Twain employs that were probably influenced by his reading of the dialogues. Techniques such as anadiplosis, interruption, and the completion of dangling sentences are crucial to the aesthetic success of *What Is Man?* Like the rejoinders, they interweave the two characters in a realistic, natural dialogue.

Y.M. Do you really believe that mere public opinion could force a timid and peaceful man to—
O.M. Go to the wars? Yes—public opinion can force some men to do anything.
Y.M. Anything?
O.M. Yes—anything.
Y.M. I don’t believe that. Can it force a right-principled man to do a wrong thing?
O.M. Yes.
Y.M. Can it force a kind man to do a cruel thing?
O.M. Yes. (137)
Above all, it bears commenting that this dialogue sounds real. Twain’s goal, here as elsewhere, is authenticity of form that links with authenticity of content. It is not only authentically Socratic, it is authentically human. Notice how the Young Man has taken over the position of questioner but that the Old Man reaches out and completes his sentence, attempting to reclaim the authority denied him by the dialogue form. The repetition of “Anything” by the Young Man turns the Old Man’s statement into a question, forcing his interlocutor to repeat his assertion. The Young Man responds by rejecting the response before asking a follow-up question. Twain crafts a truly beautiful dialogue here, as effective as the greatest passages in his Socratic models. In addition, the form has fostered an interaction between the two men that undermines the dogmatic assertions the Old Man is sometimes prone to as he develops a catechism for his “new gospel.”

Another significant formal Socratic contribution parallels the influence of the Shorter Catechism. The Socratic question uses the form What is $F$? where $F$ can be any quantity. This is, again, a very obvious borrowing from Socrates. In the course of What Is Man? the Old Man asks such questions as “What is instinct?” (189), “What is thought?” (190), “What is the soul?” (205). These forms are, to quote Bakhtin, “already heavily laden with meaning,” and one may answer the questions in two primary ways. One may opt for the catechetical response, thus ending the exchange. A catechism allows for no discussion—nor does it require one. Or, one may do as the Young Man does and engage in an exploration of the question in the way fostered by the Socratic inheritance of this form. The What is $F$? question is a Bakhtinian “brick” that conveys a history of the dispute between two forms of interaction: catechism and dialogue. What Is Man? is best understood as a dialogue between the related but warring genres of catechism and dialogue, each asserting a different set of imperatives.

The Socratic elenchus, too, or cross-examination, is crucial to both the Socratic dialogues and What Is Man? Gregory Vlastos views the elenchus as central to the Socratic enterprise, defining the cross-examination techniques as essentially a “search” (39). “In elenchus,” Vlastos maintains, “the prime object is to search for truth,” not win an argument (43). An elenchus typically begins when Socrates questions an assertion his interlocutor has made, subjecting it to one probing question after another. There are many examples of the elenchus in What Is Man? but one of the most vigorous comes from the section “A Difficult Question.”
Y.M. Now when I speak of a man, he is the whole thing in one, and easy to hold and contemplate.

O.M. That is pleasant and convenient, if true. When you speak of “my body,” who is the “my?”

Y.M. It is the “me.”

O.M. The body is a property, then, and the Me owns it. Who is the Me?

Y.M. The Me is the whole thing; it is a common property; an undivided ownership, vested in the whole entity.

O.M. If the Me admires a rainbow, is it the whole Me that admires it, including the hair, hands, heels and all?

Y.M. Certainly not. It is my mind that admires it.

O.M. So you divide the Me yourself. Everybody does; everybody must.

What, then, definitely, is the Me? (203–4)

This is really great fun. The Old Man’s cross-examination reveals the insufficiency of the Young Man’s conception, but even as he delivers the judgment “So you divide the Me yourself,” he proceeds to continue the search by asking further questions. The dialogue continues, as it always does, for one can always ask another question. As Socrates asserts in The Apology, seeking truth is the reason for his method, the motive force behind his incessant questioning. Twain’s Old Man, too, derides the idea that even the “Seekers after Truth” can ever adequately conclude the search. Like Socrates, the Old Man will continue his questioning.

In What Is Man? we encounter just the sorts of elements we might expect to have in an authentic conversation: stories, humor, irritation, impatience, and everything that is human. Vincent Carretta rightly notes that “Twain even tried to imitate the tone of the typical Socratic dialogue with its elements of irony, comedy, and skepticism” (47). The result is a relativity of truth that accounts for the tone that so many have characterized as pleasant, conversational, and, to quote Alexander Jones, “almost jaunty” (“Mark Twain” 2). That relativity is crucial to the influence of the dialogue form. Repeating the tired criticisms of the New Historicists, for whom any aesthetic problem becomes a revealing “tension,” Chad Rohman argues that “While What Is Man? does exhibit formal problems, its inconsistency of thought may be its strongest feature, indicative of Twain’s real thought process, which was often ambivalent and contradictory” (“What” 60). Where one sees confusion, another sees dialogue. The very point of dialogue, its raison d’être, is the exploration of truth’s relativity, just as criticism should discuss both aesthetics and ethics, form and content, at one and the same time. Gregory Vlas-
tos brilliantly summarizes the Socratic mission as a “relentless polemic against dogmatism” (52). Ironically, dialogues such as What Is Man? are polemics and also antipolemics; dogma asserting the insufficiency of dogma. One could even say that the Socratic dialogue is a form that champions a certain formlessness both of structure and of thought, for the attributes of dialogue militate against dogmatism of both form and content. Far from imposing certain messages or doctrines, its very structure is as free ranging and varied as human conversation; encouraged by form, the content follows in the same indeterminate pattern. Dialogue is, then, antimechanistic, antideterministic, for we cannot know where the dialogue will go and when it might end. It will never conclude.

“BE YE NOT TROUBLED . . . THE END SHALL NOT BE YET” (MARK 13:7)

What Is Man? is in a sense a dialogue of forms, a dialogue between a catechism on the one hand and an intellectual inquiry on the other. One proclaims Truth; One explores Truth. Certainly the contribution of the Shorter Catechism was great. But Twain did not end there. He put the catechism into dialogue with the Socratic dialogues. The result was—voilà!—dialogue. In a letter to Livy in 1894, Twain described a conversation that changed its tenor abruptly: “At this juncture, dialogue died. Monologue inherited its assets & continued the business at the old stand” (MTHL 2:658). The trajectory of What Is Man? is just the opposite, for dialogue drives monologue out of business, setting up shop in its place. What Is Man? is good-natured philosophical talk written by a writer who adored talking philosophically. The questions are ubiquitous, but the answers that Mark Twain offers in the end are these: Inquire, Question, Seek the Truth. Perhaps surprisingly, given the Old Man’s mechanistic philosophy, the two characters of the dialogue are not in fact Q&A machines. The catechism of the “new gospel” is disrupted both by the Shorter Catechism, which asserts traditional truths, and by the Socratic dialogue form, which asserts traditional intellectual inquiry after Truth.

Both the Shorter Catechism and the Socratic dialogues create a classical, formal presence along the lines of Krauth’s “Proper Mark Twain,” for one sees in What Is Man? the tug and pull, the dialogue, between conservative and subversive elements. The presence of form “means something” and is a voice for the conservative genres and catechisms of
Twain’s “new gospel.” Krauth observes that Twain “worried over his place in Victorian American culture and often tried to align himself with it” (4). The dialogue form allowed Twain to be both “aligned” by employing traditional, classic genres and still have the subversive influence that, as Bakhtin observes, the dialogue form allows, encourages, and even demands. Iconostasis and iconoclasm unite in the burlesque persona of the Reverend Mark Twain. Twain’s gospel brings not peace but a word, a word that will continue well after his dialogue ceases, a dialogue that continues today.

Mark Twain ends his great dialogue *What Is Man?* with the biblical injunction “I beg you not to be troubled,” resonating with passages in the books of Matthew, Peter, Acts, and John’s “Let not your heart be troubled” (14:1, 14:27). Of course, it is not too much to suppose that Twain was alluding to Mark 13:7, creating an emblem of dialogue out of his own identity: “Be ye not troubled . . . the end shall not be yet.” After all, during the years he composed *What Is Man?* Twain and Andrew Carnegie jokingly referred to each other as “Saint Mark” and “Saint Andrew” respectively, with Twain sometimes signing his letters “† Mark” (See *What Is Man?* Explanatory Notes 550). The irony of the allusion then gets to the heart of the dialogue form, for the end is not yet, not ever yet. Or, as Socrates states in Plato’s great political catechism, *The Republic*, “With these words I was thinking that I had made an end of the discussion; but the end, in truth, proved to be only a beginning” (621).