

The Moralists
a Philosophical Rhapsody
a recital of certain conversations on natural and moral subjects

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four point ellipsis indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth. Longer omissions are reported between brackets in normal sized type.—This work is the last of the five Treatises in Shaftesbury's *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*.—Starting at page 13 each speech will be prefaced by the speaker's name in small bold type. This replaces Shaftesbury's uses of 'said he' and 'replied I' etc. When there are paragraph breaks within a speech, each paragraph starts with the speaker's initial in small bold type. The only exceptions are five speeches by Theocles—on pages 26–31, 31–35, 40–42, 51–52, and 70–72.—When an editorial note speaks of Shaftesbury's words, it is referring to the very lightly modernised text given in the edition of the work by Lawrence E. Klein (Cambridge U.P. 1999), except for the Addendum starting at page 72.—The division into Parts and Sections is Shaftesbury's; their titles are not.

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Contents

Part I: Why the conversations are being reported	1
Section 1: A warning against philosophy	1
Section 2: Why is mankind so defective?	4
Section 3: Philocles pulls himself together	9
Part II: First day: Conversations among four	13
Section 1: Pleasure, love, suicide	13
Section 2: Temperance, moderation	20
Section 3: Defending Shaftesbury's <i>Inquiry concerning Virtue or Merit</i>	24
Section 4: Order and purpose in nature	31
Section 5: Believing in miracles	43
Part III: Second day: Conversation between two	49
Section 1: Nature as evidence of God	49
Section 2: Beauty	57
Section 3: Goodness	67
Addendum: Two flowery passages, undoctored	72

Glossary

amiable: This meant 'likable', 'lovable', 'very attractive'. A good deal stronger than the word's normal meaning today.

art: In Shaftesbury's time an 'art' was any human activity involving techniques or rules of procedure. 'Arts' in this sense include medicine, farming, and painting. The art/nature contrast is the artificial/natural contrast, with 'art' being taken to cover anything that is man-made.

contemn: This was and still is a standard English verb meaning 'have contempt for'.

disinterested: What this meant in early modern times is what it still means when used by literate people, namely 'not *self*-interested'.

distributive justice: Fairness in the sharing out of benefits. It contrasts with retributive justice = fairness in the assigning of punishments and rewards.

dogmatic: Confident, free from doubt, perhaps intellectually bullying.

empiric: An empiric relies on facts about observed regularities in the world while having no interest in what explains them. Shaftesbury's use of the word on page 2 is puzzling.

enthusiasm: The word can here be roughly equated with 'fanaticism'. That is why on page 12 Palemon takes 'My friend is an enthusiast' to be an insult.

fancy: This can mean 'liking', with a suggestion of 'whimsically thoughtless liking'; it can just mean 'whim'; and it was also a standard word for 'imagination'. In a passage starting at page 69 Shaftesbury seems to have all three meanings at work simultaneously or in quick succession.

gallantry: Conduct and literature marked by elaborately refined courtesy towards women.

generous: It had today's sense of 'free in giving' but also the sense of 'noble-minded, magnanimous, rich in positive emotions' etc.

knight errant: Medieval knight wandering through the world in search of chivalrous adventures.

luxury: This meant something like: *extreme* or *inordinate* indulgence in sensual pleasures. A 'luxurious' person was someone wholly given to the pleasures of the senses—mostly but not exclusively the pleasures of eating and drinking.

magistrate: In this work, as in general in early modern times, a magistrate is anyone with an official role in government; and 'the magistrate' (as on page 25) refers to the executive power of the government, not necessarily to any one person.

mandrake: A plant with a forked root (comparable with a human's two legs). According to a persistent and popular fable, the plant shrieks when it is uprooted.

motion: 'An inner prompting or impulse; a desire, an inclination; a stirring of the soul, an emotion.' (OED)

polite: Our meaning for this word came in fairly late in the early modern period. What it usually meant back then was 'polished, cultivated, elegant, civilised'.

principle: Shaftesbury here uses this word mainly in our sense, in which a principle is a certain kind of proposition. But some occurrences involve the sense—common back then but now obsolete—of 'source', 'cause', 'driver', 'energizer', or the like; for example in the phrase 'the principle, source, and fountain of all beauty' on page 61.

prodigy: ‘Something extraordinary regarded as an omen’ (OED).

Prometheus: A Greek demi-god who was credited with, among other things, making the first man and woman out of clay.

retirement: Withdrawal—perhaps for only a brief period—from the busy world of everyday affairs.

sagacity: It can mean ‘intelligence’ or even ‘wisdom’; but what Shaftesbury is attributing to the lower animals under this label is what we might loosely call ‘know-how’, and it could be regarded as instinctive.

simple: The uses of this word and its cognates on pages 49–50 and later all express the idea of •not having parts or of •being able to stay in existence through any amount of exchange of parts.

sympathy: Literally ‘feeling with’, as applied to any feeling. Sympathy is at work not only when your sadness saddens me but also when your happiness makes me happy.

ugly: Neither this word nor the cognate noun occurs in this work; in the present version they replace ‘deformed’ and ‘deformity’, which have a stronger and nastier sense today than they did in early modern times. In just one place (page 60) it has seemed better to leave ‘deformity’ untouched.

virtuoso: This word had two very different meanings in early modern times. In one of them a ‘virtuoso’ is a research scientist, and Shaftesbury uses the word in that sense in this work. But on pages 1 and 59 he uses it in its other sense, in which a ‘virtuoso’ is someone who has an informed and strenuous love for the fine arts.

Part I: Why the conversations are being reported

Philocles is writing to his friend Palemon

Section 1: A warning against philosophy

Someone who hadn't been told about your character, Palemon, would never think that an intellect fitted for the greatest affairs, and formed in courts and military camps, could have such a violent turn towards philosophy and the universities ·as you have·! Who could possibly expect someone of your rank and standing in the •fashionable world to be so thoroughly at home in the •learned world, and so deeply interested in the affairs of a people ·namely, philosophers· who are so much at odds with people in general and with the mood of our times?

I really believe that you are the only well bred man who would have had a whim to talk philosophy in such a circle of good company as we had around us yesterday, when we were in your coach together in the park. [The 'good company' evidently included attractive women; this is confirmed in the next section.] How you could reconcile what you had before you in the coach with such topics as these was unaccountable. I could only conclude that either you had an extravagant passion for philosophy, leaving so many charms in order to pursue it, or that some of those tender charms had an extravagant effect on you and that you went to philosophy for relief!

Either way, I pitied you, because I thought it better to be, like me, a more tepid lover of philosophy. As I said to you, it is better to admire ·intellectual and moral· beauty and wisdom a little more moderately; to engage so cautiously as to be sure of coming away with a whole heart, and as much taste as ever for all the pretty •entertainments and •diversions of the world. ['. . . with a whole heart' = '. . . not heartbroken if one is jilted

by philosophy, i.e. by one's failure to solve philosophical problems.] For •these seemed to me to be things one would not willingly part with in order to have a fine romantic passion of the sort had by one of those gentlemen called 'virtuosi' [see Glossary].

I used that word as a label for lovers and philosophers and anyone else who is in some way ·besottedly· in love with. . . well, anything: poetry, music, philosophy, pretty women. They are all in the same condition. You can see it, as I told you, in their looks, their dazed wonder, their profound thoughtfulness, their frequently waking up as though out of a dream, their always talking about one thing and hardly caring what they said about anything else. Sad symptoms!

But this warning didn't deter you because you, Palemon, are one of the adventurous people whom danger animates rather than discourages. And now you are insisting on having our philosophical adventures recorded. All must be laid before you and summed in one complete account, apparently to serve as a lasting monument to that unfashionable conversation, so opposite to the reigning spirit of gallantry [see Glossary] and pleasure.

I must admit that it has become fashionable in our nation to talk •politics in every company, and mix discussions of state affairs with conversations of pleasure and entertainment. But we certainly don't approve of any such freedom with •philosophy. And we don't regard politics as falling within philosophy or as being in any way related to her. That's a measure of how much we moderns have degraded philosophy and stripped her of her chief rights.

You must allow me, Palemon, to bemoan philosophy in this way, because you have forced me to engage with her at a time when her credit runs so low. She is no longer

active in the world, and can hardly get any benefit from being brought onto the public stage. We have walled her up, poor lady! in colleges and ·monastic· cells; and have set her to work on tasks as low-down and menial as those in the mines. Empirics [see Glossary] and pedantic logic choppers are her chief pupils. The scholastic syllogism and *essences* are the choicest of her products. She is so far from producing statesmen, as she used to do, that hardly any man with a public reputation cares to acknowledge the least debt to her. . . .

But low as philosophy has been brought, if morals is allowed to belong to her then politics *must* also be hers. For to understand the manners and constitutions of men in common, it is necessary to study man as an individual, to know the creature as he is in himself before we consider him in company through his involvement with the state or with some city or community. Plenty of people reason concerning man in his terms of how he relates to this or that state or society by birth or naturalization; but to consider him as a citizen or commoner of the world, to trace his pedigree a step higher and view his relations to nature itself, ·is something that is hardly ever done·; apparently it is regarded as involving intricate or over-refined theorising.

[Shaftesbury now has a paragraph saying that there's an excuse for the neglect of philosophy: those who have philosophised in public have done it in a way that repels the listeners or readers.]

But it must be admitted that our modern conversations suffer from one real disadvantage, namely that by fussing so much over fine details they lose the masculine helps of learning and sound reason. Even the fair sex, on whose behalf we claim to be talking down in this way, could reasonably despise us for this and laugh at us for aiming at their special softness. It's no compliment to them to adopt their manners

and talk in an effeminate way. Our sense, language, and style, as well as our voice and body, should have something of the male feature and natural roughness that are marks of our sex. And whatever claim we make to being *polite* [see Glossary], making our discourse delicate in this way is more a disfigurement of it than any real refinement.

No work of wit can be judged to be perfect without the strength and boldness of hand that gives it body and proportions. A good piece, the painters say, must have good •muscling as well as •colouring and •drapery. And surely no writing or discourse of any great significance can seem other than slack and passive if it isn't accompanied by

- strong reason,
- antiquity,
- the records of things,
- the natural history of man, or
- anything that can be called knowledge

except perhaps in some ridiculous garb that may give it an air of play and dalliance.

This brings to my mind a reason I have often looked for to explain why we moderns, who pour out treatises and essays, are so sparing with dialogues, which used to be regarded as the most civilised and best way of managing even the more solemn subjects. The reason is this: to present an hour-long conversation as proceeding steadily and coherently and full of good sense, until some one subject had been rationally examined, would be an abominable falsehood, a lie about the age in which we live!

To draw or describe against the appearance of nature and truth is a liberty that neither the painter nor the poet is permitted to take. Much less can the philosopher have such a privilege, especially on his own behalf. If he represents his philosophy as showing well in conversation—if he triumphs in the debate, and gives his own wisdom the victory over

that of the world—he may be laying himself open to justified mockery, and may possibly be made a fable of.

[Shaftesbury now tells a fable about a lion claiming to be stronger than a man, and refusing to back down when shown sculptures and pictures of men triumphing over lions.]

So we needn't wonder that the sort of moral painting that dialogue performs is so much out of fashion, and that these days we don't see any more of these philosophical portraiture. For where are the originals? And even if you or I, Palemon, happen to have come upon one and been pleased with the real thing, can you imagine it would make a good picture?

You know too that in this academic philosophy that I am to present you with there's a certain way of questioning and doubting that doesn't at all suit the spirit of our age. Men love to take sides instantly. They can't bear being kept in suspense. The examination, ·the inquiry·, torments them. They want to be rid of it as cheaply as possible. Whenever men dare trust to the current of reason they act as though they imagined they were drowning. They seem to be hurrying away, they don't know where to, and are ready to catch at the first twig. And they choose to continue hanging onto that, however insecurely, rather than trust their strength to hold them up in the water. Anyone who has grabbed hold of an hypothesis, however slight it may be, is satisfied. He can quickly answer every objection, and with the help of a few technical terms give an account of everything without trouble.

It's no wonder that in this age the philosophy of the alchemists prevails so much, because it promises such wonders and requires the labour of hands more than of brains. We have a strange ambition to be creators, a violent desire at least to know the knack or secret by which nature does everything. Something that our other philosophers

aim at only •in theorising our alchemists aim to achieve •in practice. (Some alchemists have actually thought about how to make a man artificially!) Every sect has a recipe. When you know it, you are master of nature; you explain all her events; you see all her designs, and can account for all her operations. . . .

So there are good reasons for our being thus superficial, and consequently thus dogmatic [see Glossary] in philosophy. We are too lazy and effeminate, and also a little too cowardly to risk *doubt*. The decisive ·doubt free· way fits best with our style. It suits our vices as well as it does our superstition. Whatever we are fond of is secured by it. If in favour of religion we have adopted an hypothesis on which we think our faith depends, we are superstitiously careful not to be loosened in it. If through our bad morals we have broken with religion, it's still the same situation: we are just as afraid of doubting. We must be sure to say 'It can't be' and 'It's demonstrable', for otherwise ·we might have to say· 'Who knows?' and not to know is to yield!

So we'll need to •know everything and not have the labour of •examining anything. Of all ·varieties of· philosophy, the absolutely most disagreeable must be the one that goes upon no established hypothesis, doesn't offer us any attractive and intellectually soothing theory, and talks only of

- probabilities,
- suspense of judgment,
- inquiry,
- search, and
- caution not to be imposed on, i.e. deceived.

This is the academic discipline in which the youth of Athens were once trained, when not only horsemanship and military arts had their public places of exercise, but philosophy also had its renowned wrestlers. Reason and wit had their academy, and underwent this trial not in a formal way apart

from the world, but openly, among the better sort, and as an exercise of a genteel kind. The greatest men weren't ashamed to practise this in the intervals of public affairs, in the highest stations and employments, right through to the last years of their lives. That is what gave rise to the method of dialogue—the method of *patience* in debate and reasoning—of which there is hardly a trace left in any of our conversations at this stage in the world's history.

Thus, Palemon, consider what our picture is likely to be, and how it will appear, especially in the light you have unluckily chosen for it. Who ·but you· would thus have brought philosophy up against the gaiety, wit, and humour of the age? However, if you can come out of this with credit, I am content. It's your project; it's you who have matched philosophy thus unequally [i. e. against a much stronger opponent, namely fashionable wit and humour.] Leaving you to answer for its success, I begin this unpromising work that my evil stars and you have assigned to me. . . .

Section 2: Why is mankind so defective?

O wretched state of mankind! Hapless nature, thus to have erred in your chief workmanship! What was the source of this fatal weakness? What chance or destiny shall we accuse? Or shall we listen to the poets, when they sing of your tragedy, Prometheus! [see Glossary]—you who with your stolen celestial fire mixed with vile clay •mocked heaven's countenance, and in abusive likeness to the immortals •made the compound *man*, that wretched mortal, evil to himself and a cause of evil to all.

What do you say now, on second thoughts, about this rant? Or have you forgotten, Palemon, that it was in just such a romantic tone that you broke out against human kind, on a day when everything looked pleasing, and the

'kind' itself (I thought) never looked better?

You weren't quarrelling with the whole creation, and you weren't so completely displeased by all beauty. The green of the field, the distant view, the gilded horizon and purple sky formed by a setting sun, had charms in abundance and made an impression on you. You allowed me, Palemon, to admire these things as much as I pleased, while at the same time you couldn't stand my talking to you about the nearer beauties of our own kind, which I thought more natural for men at our age to admire. But your severity couldn't silence me on this subject. I continued to plead the cause of the fair, and to advance *their* charms above all those other natural beauties. And when you took my opposition as an opportunity to argue that there was very little of •nature and a great deal of •art [see Glossary] in what I admired, I made the best defence I could; and, fighting for beauty, I kept up the fight for as long as there was one fair one present. [The 'nearer beauties', 'the fair', are pretty women.]

Considering how your mind has been inclined to poetry, I was very puzzled to find you suddenly displeased with our modern poets and gallant writers. I quoted them to you, as better authorities than any ancient writer, on behalf of the fair sex and their privileges, but you brushed this off. You agreed with some recent critics that gallantry [see Glossary] is a modern growth; and you thought that this didn't bring any dishonour to the ancients, who understood truth and nature too well to permit such a ridiculous invention.

So I achieved nothing by holding up this shield in my defence. When on behalf of the fair ·sex· I pleaded all the fine things that are usually said in this romantic kind of praise of them, I did my cause no service! You attacked the very fortress of gallantry, ridiculed the notion of *honour*, with all those fussy sentiments and ceremonials belonging to it. You damned even our favourite novels—those dear sweet natural

pieces, most of them written by the fair sex themselves. In short, you absolutely condemned—as false, monstrous, and gothic—this whole literary scheme of things in which wit looms large. Quite out of the way of nature, you said, and sprung from the mere dregs of chivalry or knight errantry [see Glossary]. You preferred knight errantry itself, as being in better taste than what now reigns in place of it. At a time when •this mystery of gallantry carried along with it the notion of resolute knighthood, when •the fair ·sex·

- were made witnesses to (and in a way participants in) feats of arms,
- entered into all the points of war and combat, and
- were won by means of lance and manly strength and skill,

it wasn't altogether absurd, you thought, to pay women homage and adoration, make them the standard of wit and manners, and bring mankind under their laws. But in a country where no female saints were worshipped with any authority from religion, it was as •impertinent and senseless as it was •profane to deify the sex, raise them to a height above what nature had allowed, and treat them in a manner that. . . .they themselves were the most apt to complain of. . . .

In the meanwhile our companions began to leave us. The *beau monde*, whom you had been thus severely censuring, left quickly, for it was growing late. I noticed that the approaching objects of the night were made more agreeable to you by the solitude they introduced; and that the moon and planets which began now to appear were really the only proper company for a man in your mood. For now you began to talk with much satisfaction of natural things, and of all orders of beauties—with one exception, *man*. [In what follows, 'luminaries' are things that beam light onto us: heavenly ones are stars and planets, earthly ones are pretty women.] I have never heard a finer description than the one you gave of the order

of the heavenly luminaries, the circles of the planets, and their attendant satellites. And you, who wouldn't concede *anything* to the fair earthly luminaries in the circles that we had just been moving in; *you*, Palemon, who seemed to overlook the pride of that ·earthly· theatre, ·i.e. the social scene of which we were a part·, now began to look out with ecstasy at the other ·theatre· and to triumph in the new philosophical scene of unknown worlds. When you had pretty well spent the first fire of your imagination, I wanted to get you to reason more calmly with me about that other part of the creation, your own kind; to which, I told you, you revealed so much aversion that one might think you to be a complete. . . . man-hater.

'Can you then, O Philocles,' you said in a high strain, and with a moving air of passion, 'can you believe me to be like that? Can you seriously think that I who am a man and conscious of my nature would have so little humanity that I don't feel the affections of a man? Or that I have natural feelings towards my kind but don't care about their interests, and am not much interested in what affects or seriously concerns them? Am I such a bad lover of my country? Or do you find me to be such a bad friend? For. . . . what do the ties of private friendship amount to if the tie to mankind doesn't bind?. . . . O Philocles, believe me when I say that I feel my bond to mankind, and am fully aware of its power within me. [In the rest of this speech, every occurrence of—is Shaftesbury's.] Don't think that I would willingly break that chain. Don't regard me as so degenerate or unnatural that while I have human form and wear [Shaftesbury's word] a human heart, I would throw off love, compassion, kindness, and not befriend mankind.—But oh! what treacheries! what disorders! and how corrupt everything is!. . . .—What charms there are in public companies! What harmony in courts and courtly places! How pleased is every face! How

courteous and humane the general way of behaving!—What creature capable of reflection, if he saw these aspects of our behaviour and didn't see anything else, wouldn't believe our earth to be a very heaven? What foreigner (the inhabitant, suppose, of some nearby planet) when he had travelled here and seen this outward face of things, would think of what was hidden beneath the mask?—But let him stay a while. Give him time to get a closer view, and to follow the members of our assemblies to their individual lairs so that he can see them in this new aspect.—Here he may see great men of the ministry, who not an hour ago in public appeared to be such friends, now craftily plotting each other's ruin, with the ruin of the state itself as a sacrifice to their ambition. Here he may also see those of a softer kind, who aren't ambitious and follow only love. But, Philocles, who would think it?

[Philocles reports that he laughed at this, because he began to suspect that his friend was in love and had been jilted. After he had explained his laughter, and been forgiven:] We naturally began coolly reasoning about the nature and cause of evil in general: through what

- contingency,
- chance,
- fatal necessity,
- will, or
- permission

it came upon the world; and given that it had once come, why it should still persist. . . . This gradually led us into a delicately searching criticism of nature, whom you sharply accused of many absurdities that you thought her guilty of, in relation to mankind in particular.

I wanted to persuade you to think more even-handedly about nature, and to proportion her defects a little better. I thought that the trouble didn't lie entirely in one part,

·the human part·, as you placed it; but that everything had its share of drawbacks. Pleasure and pain, beauty and ugliness, good and evil, seemed to me to be interwoven everywhere; and the resultant mixture seemed to me to be agreeable enough, in the main. I likened this to some of those rich fabrics where the flowers and background were oddly put together, with irregular work and contrary colours that looked •bad in the pattern but •excellent and natural in the fabric.

But you wouldn't have it. Nothing would serve to excuse the faults or blemishes of *this* part of the creation, mankind, even if everything else was beautiful and without a blemish. On your account of things, even storms and tempests had their beauty—except for the ones that occurred in human breasts! It was only for this turbulent race of mortals that you offered to accuse nature. And I now discovered why you had been so carried away by the story of Prometheus [see Glossary]. You wanted someone like him to be responsible for making mankind; and you were tempted to wish that the story could be confirmed in modern theology, thus clearing the supreme powers of any part in the poor workmanship and leaving you free to rail against it without offending God.

But this, I told you, was only a flimsy evasion by the ancient religious poets. It was easy to answer every objection by a Prometheus:

- Why did mankind have so much basic folly and perverseness?
- Why did it have so much pride, such ambition, such strange appetites?
- Why so many plagues, and curses on the first man and his posterity?

The answer was always 'Prometheus'. The sculptor with his unlucky hand solved everything. . . . They—the religious poets—thought they had won something if they could. . . .

put the evil cause one step further off. If the people asked a question, they answered them with a tale and sent them away satisfied. They thought that no-one apart from a few philosophers would be such busy-bodies as to look further or ask a second question.

And in reality, I continued, it's incredible how well a tale works to amuse adults as well as mere children; and how much easier it is to pay most men with this paper money than with sterling-silver- reason. We oughtn't to laugh so readily at the Indian philosophers who tell their people that this huge frame of the world is supported 'by an elephant'. And how is the elephant supported? A shrewd question! but one that shouldn't be answered. It's only here that our Indian philosophers are to blame. They should be contented with the elephant, and go no further. But they have in reserve a tortoise whose back, they think, is broad enough. So the tortoise must bear the new load, and the whole thing is worse than before.

The heathen story of Prometheus was, I told you, much the same as this Indian one, except that the heathen mythologists were wise enough not to go beyond the first step. A single Prometheus was enough to take the weight from Jove. They really made Jove a mere onlooker. He decided, it seems, to be neutral and to see what would come of this notable experiment; how the dangerous man-maker would proceed; and what the outcome would be of his tampering. An excellent account, to satisfy the heathen vulgar! But how do you think a philosopher would take this? It wouldn't take him long to come up with this:

Either the gods could have hindered Prometheus's creation, or they could not. If they could, they were answerable for the consequences; if they couldn't, they were no longer gods because they were thus limited and controlled. And their omnipotence was broken,

whatever Prometheus did, and whether 'Prometheus' was a name for chance, destiny, some creative agent, or an evil daemon.

You admitted that it wasn't wise or right for such a hazardous affair as *creation* to be undertaken by those didn't have perfect foresight as well as perfect command. But you stuck by foresight: you accepted that the consequences were understood by the creating powers when they undertook their work; and you denied that it would have been better for them not to have done that work, even though they knew what the outcome would be.

It was better that the project should be carried out, whatever might become of mankind and however hard such a creation was like to be for most members of this miserable race. For it was impossible, you thought, that heaven should have acted in any way except for the best; so that even from this misery and evil of man something good undoubtedly arose—something that outweighed all the rest and made full amends.

I wondered how I came to draw this confession from you; and soon afterwards I found you somewhat uneasy with it. For here I took up your previous side against you: presenting all those villainies and corruptions of mankind in the same light that you had done a few minutes earlier, I challenged you to say what advantage or good could possibly arise from this, or what excellence or beauty could result from the horrible pictures you yourself had drawn so realistically. Perhaps there's a very strong philosophical faith to persuade one that those dismal parts that you exhibited were only the necessary shades in a fine picture, to be reckoned among the beauties of the creation. Or perhaps a maxim that I was sure you didn't at all approve •in mankind seemed to you to be very fit •for heaven—I mean the maxim 'Do evil so that good may follow'.

This, I said, made me think of the manner of our modern Prometheuses, the hucksters who perform such wonders of many kinds here on our earthly stages. They could create diseases and do harm, in order to heal and to restore. But should we assign such a practice as this to heaven? Should we dare to represent the gods as quack ‘doctors’ of that sort, and poor nature as their patient? Was this a reason for nature’s sickliness? If not, then how *did* she come—poor innocent!—to fall ill or go awry? If she had been created healthy from the outset, she would have continued so. It was no credit to the gods to leave her destitute, or with a flaw that would be expensive to mend and would make them sufferers for their own work [Shaftesbury’s phrase].

I was going to bring Homer to witness for Jove’s many troubles: the death of his son Sarpedon, and the frequent interference with heaven’s plans by the fatal sisters—the Fates. But I saw that this discourse displeased you. I had by this time openly revealed my inclination to scepticism. [He goes on to say that Palemon objected to his (Philocles’s) way of defending first one thing and then its opposite.] This, you said, was my constant way in all debates: I was as well pleased with one side’s case as with the other’s; I never troubled myself about the outcome of the argument, but still laughed, whichever way it went; and even when I convinced others, I seemed never to be convinced myself.

I admitted to you, Palemon, there was truth enough in your accusation. Above all things (I explained) I loved ease and the philosophers who in reasoning were most at their ease and never angry or disturbed; and you agreed that this was true of the ones called *sceptics*. I regarded this kind of philosophy as the prettiest and most agreeable exercise of the mind that could be imagined. The other kind of philosophy, I thought, was painful and laborious: to keep always in the limits of one path, to drive always at a point, and to stick

exactly to what men happen to call ‘the truth’—something that seems very unfixd and hard to ascertain. Besides, my way hurt nobody. . . . In matters of religion I was further from profaneness and erroneous doctrine than anyone. I could never have the competence to shock my spiritual and intellectual superiors. I was the furthest from relying on my own understanding; and I didn’t exalt reason above faith, or insist much on what the dogmatic men call ‘demonstration’ and dare oppose to the sacred mysteries of religion. And to show you how impossible it is for us sceptics ever to stray from the universal catholic and established faith, I pointed out that whereas others pretend to see with their own eyes what is best and most proper for them in religion, we don’t claim to see with any eyes except those of our spiritual guides. And we don’t take it upon ourselves to judge those guides ourselves; they are appointed for us by our lawful superiors, so we submit to them. In short, you who are rationalists and are guided by reason in everything, claim to know everything, while you believe little or nothing; we sceptics know nothing and believe everything.

At that I stopped; and your only response was to ask me coldly: ‘With that fine scepticism of yours, is your failure to distinguish truth from falsehood and right from wrong in arguments matched by a refusal to distinguish sincerity from insincerity in actions?’

I didn’t dare ask what you were driving at, because I was afraid I saw that all too clearly. By my loose way of talking, which I had learned in some fashionable conversations in the social world, I had led you to suspect me of the worst sort of scepticism—the sort that spares nothing and overthrows all principles, moral and divine.

‘Forgive me, good Palemon’, I said. ‘You are offended, I see, and not without reason. But what if I try to compensate for my sceptical misbehaviour by using a known sceptical

privilege in strenuously defending the cause I previously opposed? Don't think that I dare to aim as high as defending revealed religion or the holy mysteries of the Christian faith! I am unworthy of such a task, and would profane the subject if I tried. I'll be talking of mere philosophy: my idea is only to see what I can get from that source to help me •oppose the chief arguments for atheism and •re-establish what I have offered to dismantle in the system of theism.

'Your project', you said, 'looks likely to reconcile me to your character, which I was beginning to distrust. Much as I dislike •the cause of theism, and •the name 'deist' when used in a sense that excludes revelation, I do nevertheless consider that strictly speaking theism is the root of everything, and that one can't be a settled Christian without first being a good theist—i. e. without being opposed to polytheism and to atheism. And I can't stand hearing the label 'deist' (the highest of all names •when properly understood•) decried and set in opposition to Christianity. As if our religion were a kind of *magic* that didn't depend on believing in a single supreme being. Or as if the firm and rational belief in such a being on philosophical grounds were an improper qualification for believing anything further. Excellent assumption for •those who are naturally inclined to disbelieve revelation and •those who through vanity affect a freedom of this kind!

'But let me hear', you went on, 'whether soberly and sincerely you intend to advance anything in favour of that opinion that is fundamental to all religion; or whether you are planning only to amuse yourself with the subject, as you did previously. Whatever your thoughts are, Philocles, I'm determined to force them from you. You can no longer plead that the time or place is unsuitable for such grave subjects. The gaudy scene has closed down with the sun; our company have long since left the field; and the solemn majesty of such a night as this may very well suit the profoundest meditation

or the most serious discussion.'

Thus, Palemon, you continued to urge me, until I was forcibly drawn into the following vein of philosophical enthusiasm [see Glossary].

Section 3: Philocles pulls himself together

'You'll find then', I said (adopting a grave air), 'that I *can* be serious, and that I am probably becoming permanently so. Your over-seriousness a while ago, at such an inappropriate time, may have driven me to a contrary extreme in opposition to your melancholy mood. But now I have a better idea of the melancholy that you exhibited; and... I'm convinced that it has a different foundation from any of those fanciful causes that I assigned to it this afternoon. No doubt love is at the bottom of it, but it's a nobler love than any that can be inspired by ordinary beautiful women.'

I now began to raise my voice and imitate the solemn way •of speaking that• you had been teaching me. [Everything from here to the asterisks on page 11 is being said by Philocles.] Knowledgeable and experienced as you are in all the degrees and orders of beauty, in all the mysterious charms of the different forms of it, you rise to a more general level; and with a larger heart and a more capacious mind you generously [see Glossary] seek the very highest beauty in mankind. Not captivated by •the features of a pretty face or •the well-drawn proportions of a human body, you view •the life itself, and embrace •the mind that adds the lustre and provides the biggest contribution to the person's being lovable.

But the enjoyment of such a single beauty doesn't satisfy an aspiring soul such as yours. It wants to know how to combine a number of such beauties and to know how to bring them together to form a beautiful society. It views communities, friendships, relations, duties; and it considers

what harmony of particular minds constitutes the general harmony and establishes the commonwealth.

Then, not satisfied even with public good in •one community of men, your soul conceives a nobler object and with enlarged affection seeks the good of •mankind. . . .

- Laws, constitutions, civil and religious rites (whatever civilizes or polishes raw mankind!);
- the sciences and arts, philosophy, morals, virtue;
- the flourishing state of human affairs, and
- the perfection of human nature

—these are its delightful prospects, and this is the charm of beauty that attracts it.

Still eager in this pursuit (such is its love of order and perfection), it doesn't stop here, settling for the beauty of a **part** of the universe. . . . It seeks the good of all, and has an affection towards the interest and prosperity of the **whole**. . . . It seeks order and perfection at this level of generality, wishing for the best and hoping still to find a just and wise administration.

And since all hope of this would be pointless and idle if no universal mind presided; since without such a supreme intelligence and providential care, the chaotic universe is condemned to suffer infinite calamities; it's here that the generous mind works to discover the healing cause by which the interests of the whole are securely established, and the beauty of things and the universal order are happily sustained.

This, Palemon, is the work of your soul. And this its melancholy when, unsuccessfully pursuing the supreme beauty, it meets with darkening clouds that block its sight. Monsters arise, not from Libyan **deserts** but from the more **fertile** heart of man; and with their ferocious faces cast an unseemly reflection on nature. She, helpless (as she is thought to be), and working thus absurdly, is condemned

[see Glossary], the government of the world is put on trial, and God is abolished.

Much has been said to show why nature errs, and how she came impotent and erring from an unerring hand. But I deny that she errs; and when she seems most ignorant or perverse in her productions, I say that even in those she is as wise and provident as she is in her best works. Let us look at what does go on in nature's operations. Various interests get mixed together and interfere with one another; various kinds of subordinate natures oppose one another, and in their different operations the higher ones are sometimes subjected to the lower. But this isn't what men complain of the world's order. . . . On the contrary, it's from this order of inferior and superior things that we admire the world's beauty, based as it is on oppositions, while from such various and disagreeing principles a universal harmony is established.

Thus at the various levels of terrestrial forms, a •resignation is required, a •sacrifice and mutual yielding of natures one to another. Plants by their death sustain the animals; and animal bodies decay and enrich the earth, enabling plants to rise again. The numbers of insects are kept down by the superior kinds of birds and beasts; and these again are checked by man, who in his turn submits to other natures and resigns his body as a sacrifice, just as all the other organisms do. And if the sacrifice of interests can appear so right in natures that are so low-down and so little above each other, how much more reasonable it is for all lower natures be subjected to the superior nature of the world! That world, Palemon, which you were recently carried away by when the sun's fading light gave way to these bright stars and left you this wide system to contemplate.

Here are the laws that can't and oughtn't to submit to anything below. The central powers that hold the lasting orbs in their right positions and movements mustn't be interfered

with to save a fleeting form—e.g. to rescue from the precipice a puny animal whose brittle body will soon dissolve, however it is protected. . . . Anything that helps to nourish or preserve this earth must operate in its natural course, and other constitutions must submit to the good habit and constitution of the all sustaining globe.

So we shouldn't wonder if earthquakes, storms, pestilential blasts, nether or upper fires, or floods often afflict animal kinds and may sometimes bring ruin to whole species. Much less should we think it strange if—either by outward shock, or by some interior wound from hostile matter—particular animals are deformed even in their first conception, when disease invades the places of generation, and seminal parts are injured and obstructed in their precise labours. It's only then that monstrous [here = 'deformed'] shapes are seen: nature is still working as before, and not perversely or erroneously; not faintly, or with feeble endeavours; but overpowered by a superior rival and by another nature's justly conquering force. [That is a tricky sentence. Shaftesbury is saying that nature—'she', the whole great big thing—is behaving as she ought to do; and that when something goes wrong with some smaller item (which he is thinking of as **a nature**, though he doesn't say so), that's because it has been overcome by some other small item, **another nature**. You'll see this double use of 'nature' more clearly at work just before the asterisks below.] And it shouldn't surprise us that the interior form—the soul and temperament—shares in this occasional deformity and often sympathizes [see Glossary] with its close partner. No-one can be surprised at the sicknesses of sense or the depravity of minds enclosed in such frail bodies and dependent on such vulnerable organs.

This, then, is the solution you require. This is the source of the seeming blemishes in nature; and everything in it is natural and good. *Good* is what predominates; and every corruptible and mortal nature, when it dies or is corrupted, is

merely yielding to some better nature; and all subordinate natures yield to the best and highest nature, which is incorruptible and immortal.

* * * * *

I had hardly ended these words when you broke out in astonishment, asking what had come over me to produce such a sudden change of character, and to draw me into thoughts which you supposed must have some foundation in me since I could express them with such seeming affection as I had done.

'O Palemon!', I said. 'If only it had been my fortune to have met you the other day, when I had just come back to town after a conversation with a friend who lives in the country—a conversation that had, in one day or two, made such an impression on me that I would have suited you miraculously well. You would have thought that I had indeed been cured of my scepticism and levity, so as never again to have gone in for teasing at that wild rate on any subject, let alone subjects as serious as these are.'

'Truly,' you said, 'I too wish I had met you at that time, or that the good and serious impressions of your friend had stayed with you without interruption until this moment.'

'Whatever they were, I wouldn't have lost touch with them, so as to find it hard (as you saw) to revive them on occasion, if I hadn't been afraid.' 'Afraid!' you said. 'Afraid for whose sake—mine or yours?' 'For both,' I replied. 'For although I seemed to be perfectly cured of my scepticism, it was by what I thought worse, downright enthusiasm. My friend in the country—you never knew a more agreeable enthusiast! [see Glossary]

'If he were *my* friend,' you said, 'I wouldn't be apt to talk about him in such an outspoken way; and perhaps I

wouldn't classify as "enthusiasm" the attitude that you so freely describe in that way. I have a strong suspicion that you are unfair to your friend. But I can't know for sure until I hear more about that serious conversation for which you accuse him of being enthusiastic. '

'I must admit', I said, 'that he had nothing of the savage air of the common run of enthusiasts. All was serene, soft, and harmonious. The manner of his discourse was more like •the pleasing raptures of the ancient poets that you are often charmed with than like •the fierce unsociable way of modern zealots—those starched gruff gentlemen who guard religion as a lover guards his mistress, adoring something that he won't allow others to inspect and doesn't care to inspect for himself in a good light, so that he gives us a low opinion of his lady's merit and of his intelligence! . . . There was nothing in the way of disguise or paint. Everything was fair, open, and genuine, as is nature herself. It was nature that he was in love with; it was nature that he sang. If anyone could be said to have a *natural mistress* my friend certainly could; that is how engaged his heart was. But I found that although the object was different, this was still *love*—like any other love. And although the object here was very fine, and the passion it created very noble, I still thought that liberty was finer than anything else (•my difficulty about love being precisely that it robs one of liberty•). I never cared to engage in more than a momentary love of anything

other •than liberty•; and I'm especially afraid of this love that had such a power with my poor friend that it made him seem to be the most perfect example of *enthusiast* in the world—except for the bad temper, •which he doesn't have•. This was remarkable in him: he had •all of the enthusiast and •nothing of the bigot. He heard everything with mildness and delight, and put up with me when I treated all his thoughts as visionary [= roughly 'as intellectual day-dreams'] and when, sceptic-like, I unravelled all his systems.'

This is the character and description that pleased you so much that you would hardly let me finish. I found that it was impossible to give you satisfaction without reciting the gist of what happened in those two days between my friend and me in our country retreat. I warned you repeatedly: you didn't know the danger of this philosophical passion; you hadn't considered what you might be pulling down on yourself, making me the cause of it! I had gone far enough already, and it was at your own risk that you were pushing me further.

Nothing I could say made the least impression on you. But rather than proceed any further at that time I promised for your sake to turn writer, and put down a record of those two philosophical days. I was to begin with yesterday's conversation between you and me; and you see that I have done that, by way of introduction to my story. . . .