

PHILOSOPHIC THOUGHTS

Quis leget hæc.—PERS. Sat. 1. 2.

I WRITE of God ; I count on a very few readers ; and do not hope to find many in agreement with me. If these thoughts please nobody, they are certainly bad, but I should count them sorry stuff if they were to everybody's taste.

I

People are for ever declaiming against the passions ; they attribute to them all the pains that man endures, and forget that they are also the source of all his pleasures. It is an ingredient in man's constitution which cannot sufficiently be blessed and banned. It is considered as an affront to reason if one ventures to say a word in favour of its rivals ; yet it is passions alone, and strong passions, that can elevate the soul to great things. Without them, there is no sublime, either in morality or in achievement ; the fine arts return to puerility, and virtue becomes a pettifogging thing.

II

Sober passions make men commonplace. If I hang back before the enemy, when my country's

safety is at stake, I am but a poor citizen. My friendship is but self-regarding if my friend's peril leaves me considering my own danger. If life is dearer to me than my mistress, I am a poor lover.

III

Deadened passions degrade men of extraordinary quality. Constraint annihilates the grandeur and energy of nature. Look at that tree; it is to the luxury of its branches that you owe the coolness and breadth of its shade, which you may enjoy until winter despoils it of its leafy honours. There is no more excellence in poetry, in painting, and in music when superstition has wrought upon the human temperament the effect of old age.

IV

It would be fortunate, people will say to me, for a man to have strong passions? Certainly, if they are all in harmony. Establish a just harmony among them, and you need fear no convulsions and disorders. If hope be balanced by fear, the point of honour by love of life, the taste for pleasure by consideration for health, there will be no libertines, nor rufflers, nor poltroons.

V

It is the very height of madness to propose the ruin of the passions. A fine design, truly, in your devotee, to torment himself like a convict in order to desire nothing, love nothing, and feel nothing.

He would end by becoming a monster, if he were to succeed.

VI

Can what is the object of my respect in one man be the object of my scorn in another? Certainly not. Truth, independently of my caprices, should be the rule of my judgments, and I shall not call that quality a crime in one man which I admire as a virtue in another. Am I to think that the practice of self-improvement is to be restricted to some few, when nature and religion inculcate it on all alike? Whence comes this monopoly? If Pachomius did well in separating himself from the human race and burying himself in a wilderness, I may follow his example, and in imitating him I shall be equally virtuous; and I see no reason why a hundred others may not have the same right. Yet it would be a strange sight to see an entire province, dismayed at the dangers of society, dispersed in forests, the inhabitants living like wild beasts to sanctify themselves, and a thousand pillars rising above the ruins of all social affections; a new race of Stylites stripping themselves from religious motives of all natural feelings, ceasing to be men and becoming statues in order to be true Christians.

VII

What voices, what cries, what groans! Who has shut up in dungeons all these piteous wretches? What crimes have all these creatures committed?

Some beat their breasts with stones, others lacerate their body with iron nails, all express in their eyes regret, pain, and death. Who condemns them to such torments? *The God whom they have offended.* Who then is this God? *A God full of goodness.* But would a God full of goodness take pleasure in bathing himself in tears? Are not these fears an insult to his kindness? If criminals had to appease the fury of a tyrant, what more could they do?

VIII

These are people of whom we ought not to say that they fear God, but that they are mortally afraid of him.

IX

Judging from the picture they paint of the Supreme Being, from his tendency to wrath, from the rigour of his vengeance, from certain comparisons of the ratio between those he abandons to perish and those to whom he deigns to stretch out a hand, the most upright soul would be tempted to wish that such a being did not exist. We would be happy enough in this world, if we were assured we had nothing to fear in another. The thought that a God did not exist has never terrified humanity, but the idea that a God such as is represented exists.

X

God must be imagined as neither too kind nor too cruel. Justice is the mean between clemency and

cruelty, just as finite penalties are the mean between impunity and eternal punishment.

XI

I am aware that the sombre ideas of superstition are more generally approved of than accepted ; that there are pietists who do not think it necessary to hate themselves in order to love God, or to live as desperate wretches, in order to be religious ; their devotion is a smiling one, their wisdom very human ; but whence comes this difference in sentiment between people who prostrate themselves before the same altars ? Can piety thus be subject to the law of temperament ? Alas ! it must be so. Its influence is only too apparent in the same devotee : he sees, in accordance with its variations, a jealous or a merciful God, and hell or heaven opening before him ; he trembles with fear or burns with love ; it is a fever with its hot and cold fits.

XII

Yes, I maintain that superstition is more of an insult to God than atheism. "I would rather," said Plutarch, "that people thought that a Plutarch never existed, than that they thought of Plutarch as unjust, choleric, inconstant, jealous and revengeful, and such as he would be sorry to be."

XIII

Only the deist can oppose the atheist. The superstitious man is not so strong an opponent.

His God is only a creature of the imagination. Besides difficulties of a material nature, he is exposed to those which result from the falsity of his notions. A C— and a S— would have been a thousand times more embarrassing to a Vanini than all the Nicoles and Pascals in the world.¹

XIV

Pascal was an upright man, but he was timid and inclined to credulity. An elegant writer and a profound reasoner, he would doubtless have enlightened the world, if Providence had not abandoned him to people who sacrificed his talents to their own antipathies. How much it is to be regretted that he did not leave to the theologians of his day the task of settling their own disputes; that he did not give himself up to the search for truth without reserve and without fear of offending God, by using all the intellect God had given him! How regrettable that he took for his masters men who were not worthy to be his disciples! One could say of him, as La Mothe said of La Fontaine, that he was foolish enough to think Arnauld, de Sacy, and Nicole better men than himself.

XV

“I tell you that there is no God; that Creation is a fiction; that the eternity of the universe is no

[¹ Vanini, 1585-1619, was executed at Toulouse in 1619, on the charge of atheism. The initials C and S stand for the two English deists, Cudworth and Shaftesbury.]

more of a difficulty than the eternity of spirit ; that because I do not see how motion could have caused this universe (though it keeps it going), it is ridiculous to solve the difficulty by supposing the existence of a being of whom I can have no real conception ; that if the wonders of the physical universe show some intelligence, the confusions in the moral order are the negations of a Providence. I tell you if everything is the work of a God, everything should be the best possible : for if everything is not the best possible, it is impotence or malevolence on the part of God. Therefore it is fortunate that I am not better informed as to his existence. If it were proved satisfactorily (and it is by no means proved) that all evil is the source of good, that it was for the best that Britannicus, the best of princes, perished, and that Nero, the worst of men, should reign, how is it possible to prove that it was impossible to attain the same ends without using such means ? To allow vice in order to throw virtue into relief is a poor advantage in comparison with its real disadvantage."

That, says the atheist, is my case ; what have you to say to it ? "*That I am a miserable wretch, and that if I had nothing to fear from God, I should not be disputing his existence.*" Let us leave such an answer to orators ; it may be untrue ; politeness forbids it and it has no savour of charity about it. Because a man is mistaken in his denial of God, should we insult him ? People only take refuge in invective when they run short of proofs. Of two

engaged in argument, it is a hundred to one that the man in the wrong will become angry. "You thunder instead of answering," says Menippus to Jupiter; "are you then in the wrong?"

XVI

One day somebody asked a man if real atheists existed. Do you think, he responded, that real Christians exist?

XVII

None of the vain speculations of metaphysics have the cogency of an argument *ad hominem*. In order to convince, it is sometimes only necessary to rouse the physical or moral instinct. The Pyrrhonist was convinced by a stick that he was wrong in doubting his own existence. Cartouche, pistol in hand, might have taught Hobbes a similar lesson: "Your money or your life; we are alone, I am the stronger, and between us there is no question of justice."

XVIII

It is not from the metaphysician that atheism has received its most vital attack. The sublime meditations of Malebranche and Descartes were less calculated to shake materialism than a single observation of Malpighi's. If this dangerous hypothesis is tottering at the present day, it is to experimental physics that the result is due. It is only in the works of Newton, of Muschenbroek, of

Hartzoeker, and of Nieuwentit, that satisfactory proofs have been found of the existence of a reign of sovereign intelligence. Thanks to the works of these great men, the world is no longer a God ; it is a machine with its wheels, its cords, its pulleys, its springs, and its weights.

XIX

The subtilities of ontology have at best made sceptics, and it was reserved for the knowledge of nature to make true deists. The discovery of germs alone has destroyed one of the most powerful arguments of atheism. Whether motion be essential or accidental to matter, I am now convinced that its effects are limited to developments ; all experiments agree in proving to me that putrefaction alone never produced any organism. I can allow that the mechanism of the vilest insect is not less marvellous than that of man ; and I am not afraid of the inference that as an intestinal agitation of molecules is able to produce the one, it is probable that it has produced the other. If an atheist had maintained, two hundred years ago, that some day perhaps people would see men spring full-formed from the bowels of the earth just as we see a mass of insects swarm in putrefying flesh, I would like to know what a metaphysician would have had to say to him ?¹

¹ Diderot here alludes to Redi's experiments about the generation of insects, and in the preceding Thought he alludes to the discoveries due to the telescope and microscope.—(A)

XX

It was in vain that I made use of scholastic subtilities against the atheist ; he found among his feeble reasons one argument of some validity. "A multitude of useless verities are proved to me without any doubt," he said, "and the existence of God, the reality of moral good and moral evil, and the immortality of the soul are still problems for me. What ! Is it less important for me to be informed on these subjects than to be sure that the three angles of a triangle are together equal to two right angles ?" While like a skilful orator he made me taste the full bitterness of this reflection, I joined battle with him again with a question which must have appeared singular to a man flushed with his first success. "Are you a thinking being ?" I asked. "Can you doubt it ?" he answered with a pleased air. "Why not ? What have I seen to prove it ? Sounds and movements ? But the philosopher sees the same in an animal to whom he denies the faculty of thought ; why should I allow you what Descartes refuses the ant ? Externally, your actions are designed to give me that impression ; I should be tempted to maintain that you do think, but reason suspends my judgment. Between external actions and thought my reason tells me there is no essential connection ; it is possible that your antagonist thinks no more than his watch ; must one take for a thinking being the first animal taught to speak ? Who has informed you that all

men are not so many well-trained parrots?" "That is very ingenious," he returned, "but it is not by motion or sounds but by the continuity of ideas, the connection between propositions, and the links of the argument that one must judge if a creature thinks. If there was a parrot which could answer every question, I should say at once that it was a thinking being. But what has this to do with the existence of a God? If you were to prove to me that the most intelligent man were perhaps but an automaton, should I be the more disposed to recognise an intelligent Being in nature?" "That is my affair," said I; "but admit that it would be madness not to credit your brother men with the faculty of thought?" "Of course, but what follows?" "It follows that if the universe—but why drag in the universe?—if a butterfly's wing shows me proofs of an intelligence a thousand times stronger than the proof you have that your fellow-man thinks, it would be a thousand times more foolish to deny that God exists than to deny that your fellow-man thinks. I appeal to your knowledge, to your conscience! Have you ever observed in any man more intelligence, order, wisdom, and reasonableness than in the mechanism of an insect? Is not the Deity as clearly apparent in the eye of a flesh-worm as in the works of the great Newton? What, does the formation of the world afford less proof of intelligence than its explanation? What a position!" "But," you reply, "I admit the faculty of thought in another the more

readily as I myself think." That is an analogy I admit I cannot use, but against this must be set the superiority of my proofs to yours. Is not the intelligence of a first cause more conclusively proved in nature by his works than the faculty of reasoning in a philosopher by *his* writings? Remember, I only adduced a butterfly's wing, a flesh-worm's eye, when I could crush you with the weight of the entire universe. I am greatly deceived if this proof is not well worth the best that has ever issued from the schools. It is by this argument, and others equally simple, that I am convinced of the existence of a God, and not by those tissues of dry and metaphysical ideas which are better calculated to give to truth an air of falsity than to unveil it.

XXI

I open the pages of a celebrated professor¹ and I read: "Atheists, I concede to you that movement is essential to matter; what conclusion do you draw from that? That the world is the result of a fortuitous concourse of atoms? You might as well tell me that Homer's *Iliad* or Voltaire's *Henriade* is the result of a fortuitous concourse of written characters." I should be very sorry to use that argument to an atheist; he would make quick work of the comparison. According to laws of the analysis of chances (he would say) I ought not

¹ Brière in his edition says that Rivard, who was then professor of philosophy, is here meant, but the argument which follows is a well-known one.—(A)

to be surprised that a thing happens, when it is possible and the difficulty of the result is compensated by the number of throws. There is a certain number of throws in which I would back myself to bring 100,000 sixes at once with 100,000 dice. Whatever the definite number of letters with which I am invited fortuitously to create the *Iliad*, there is a certain definite number of throws which would make the venture advantageous to me ; indeed, my advantage would be infinite if the number of throws permitted me were infinite. You grant me that matter exists from all eternity and that movement is essential to it. In return for this concession, I will suppose, as you do, that the world has no limits, that the multitude of atoms is infinite, and that this order which causes you astonishment nowhere contradicts itself. Well, from these mutual admissions there follows nothing else unless it be that the possibility of fortuitously creating the universe is very small but that the quantity of throws is infinite ; that is to say, that the difficulty of the result is more than sufficiently compensated by the multitude of throws. Therefore, if anything ought to be repugnant to reason, it is the supposition that—matter being in motion from all eternity, and there being perhaps in the infinite number of possible combinations an infinite number of admirable arrangements,—none of these admirable arrangements would have ensued, out of the infinite multitude of those which matter took on successively. Therefore the mind ought to be more

astonished at the hypothetical duration of chaos than at the actual birth of the universe.

XXII

I divide atheists into three classes. There are some who tell you openly there is no God, and are convinced of this ; these are genuine atheists : there is a fairly large number of people who do not know what to think and would be glad to decide the question by tossing up ; these are sceptical atheists : and a still larger number who wish there were no God, and who pretend to be convinced of his non-existence and live in harmony with this conviction ; these are the braggadocios of the party. I detest braggarts ; they are dishonest : I pity genuine atheists ; all consolation is dead to them : and I pray God for the sceptics ; they lack knowledge.

XXIII

The deist maintains the existence of God, the immortality of the soul and its consequences ; the sceptic has not decided on these points ; the atheist denies them. The sceptic, therefore, has one more motive for practising virtue than the atheist, and less than the deist. If it were not for fear of the laws, the natural tendency of a man's character, and the knowledge of the actual benefits of virtue, the probity of the atheist would be lacking in foundation, and that of the sceptic would be built upon a " perhaps."

XXIV

Scepticism does not suit everybody. It supposes a profound and careful examination. He who doubts because he is not acquainted with the grounds of credibility is no better than an ignoramus. The true sceptic has counted and weighed his reasons. But it is no easy matter to weigh arguments. Which of us knows their value with any exactness? Out of a hundred proofs of the same truth, each one will have its partisans. Every mind has its own telescope. An objection which is invisible to you is a colossus to my eyes, and you find an argument trivial that to me is crushing in its efficacy. If we dispute about their intrinsic value, how shall we agree upon their relative? Tell me how many moral proofs are needed to balance a metaphysical conclusion? Are my spectacles in fault, or yours? If, then, it is so difficult to weigh reasons, and if there are no questions which have not two sides, and nearly always in equal measure, how come we to cut knots with such rapidity? How do we come by this convinced and dogmatic air? Have we not a hundred times experienced how revolting is dogmatic presumption? "I have been brought to detest probabilities," says the author of the *Essays*,¹ "when they are foisted on me as infallible; I love words which soften and moderate the temerity of our propositions, *per-adventure, in no wise, some people say, methinks,*

¹ Montaigne, book iii, ch. xi.

and the like ; and if I had to teach children I should so train them to answer in this hesitating and undecided manner : ‘ *What does that mean ? I do not understand ; maybe ; is it true ?* ’ that they would have the appearance of apprentices at sixty years of age, rather than of doctors at ten, as at present.”

XXV

What is God ? A question we ask children, and that philosophers have much trouble in answering.

We know the age when a child ought to learn to read, to sing, to dance, to begin Latin or geometry. It is only in religion that we take no account of his capacity. He hardly hears what you say before he is asked, “What is God ?” It is at the same moment, and from the same lips, that he learns of the existence of ghosts, goblins, were-wolves—and a God ! He is taught one of the most important truths in a manner adapted to bring it into disrepute one day before the bar of reason. Would it be at all surprising if, at twenty years of age, finding the existence of God confounded in his mind with a host of idle prejudices, he were to treat it as our judges treat an honest fellow who has fallen into bad company by some accident ?

XXVI

People begin to speak to us of God too soon, and another mistake is that his presence is not sufficiently insisted upon. Men have banished God

from their company and have hidden him in a sanctuary; the walls of a temple shut him in, he has no existence beyond. Fools that you are, break down these limitations that hamper your ideas; *set God free*; see him everywhere, as he is everywhere, or say that he is non-existent. If I had a child to bring up, I would make his God his companion in such a real sense that he would perhaps find it less difficult to become an atheist, than to escape his presence. Instead of confronting him with a fellow-man (whom maybe he knows to be worse than himself) I would say outright: "God hears you and you are lying." Young people are influenced by their senses. I would multiply about him symbols indicating the divine presence. If there were a gathering at my house, I would leave a place for God, and I would accustom him to say: "We were four—God, my friend, my tutor, and myself."

XXVII

Ignorance and incuriosity are two soft pillows, but to find them so we must have a head as well contrived as Montaigne's.¹

XXVIII

Vigorous minds and ardent imaginations do not take kindly to the indolence of scepticism. They would rather risk a choice than make none; be deceived than live in doubt. Whether they do not

¹ "Oh, que c'est un doux et mol chevet, et sain, que l'ignorance et l'incuriosité, à reposer une teste bien faicte," *Essais*, liv. iii, ch. xiii.

trust their arms, or whether they fear deep waters, we see them always clinging to branches they know to be fragile. They would rather be caught on these branches than abandon themselves to the torrent. They are sure of everything, though they have investigated nothing carefully ; they question nothing because they have neither the patience nor the courage. They make their way by broken lights, and if by chance they come across the truth, it is not by searching, but suddenly and, as it were, by revelation. They are among the dogmatic group what the illuminati are among the pietists. I have seen individuals of this restless type, who could not conceive how tranquillity of mind could be allied with scepticism. "How can one live happily without knowing what one is, whence one comes, whither one goes, why we are here?" "I make a point of my ignorance on all these questions, and am not distressed," replies the sceptic coolly ; "it is not my fault if my reason is mute when questioned on my state. All my life I shall live in ignorance of what it is impossible for me to know, and be none the worse for it. Why should I regret knowledge which I could not attain, and which is doubtless unnecessary to me, since I have it not? I would as soon make myself wretched, says one of the greatest geniuses¹ of our age, because I am not equipped with four eyes, four feet, and two wings."

¹ Voltaire.

XXIX

A search for truth should be required of one, but not its attainment. May not a sophism affect me as deeply as a solid proof? I am obliged to admit the falsehood that I take to be the truth, and to reject the truth that I take for a falsehood; but how am I to blame, if I am deceived from no fault of mine? We are not rewarded in the next world for using our intelligence in this; ought we to be punished for a lack of it? To damn a man for foolish reasoning is to forget that he is a fool, and to treat him as a criminal.

XXX

What is a sceptic? A philosopher who has questioned all he believes, and who believes what a legitimate use of his reason and his senses has proved to him to be true. Do you want a more precise definition? Make a Pyrrhonist sincere, and you have the sceptic.

XXXI

What has never been put in question has not been demonstrated. What people have not examined without prepossession has never been examined thoroughly. Scepticism is thus the first step towards truth. It must be applied generally, for it is the touchstone. If to ascertain the existence of God the philosopher begins by questioning it, is there any proposition which should not be so tested?

XXXII

Incredulity is sometimes the vice of a fool, and credulity the defect of a man of intelligence. The latter sees far into the immense ocean of possibilities, the former scarcely sees anything possible but the actual. Perhaps this is what produces the timidity of the one, the temerity of the other.

XXXIII

It is as hazardous to believe too much as too little. The danger of being a polytheist is neither greater nor less than the danger of being an atheist; now scepticism is the only defence, in any period and in any place, against these two opposite extremes.

XXXIV

A half-hearted scepticism is the mark of a feeble understanding which reveals a pusillanimous reasoner who permits himself to be alarmed by consequences, a superstitious creature who thinks to honour God by imposing fetters on his reason, a species of unbeliever who is afraid of unmasking himself to himself. For if truth has nothing to lose by examination, as is the demi-sceptic's conviction, what does he think in the bottom of his heart of those privileged notions which he fears to investigate, and which are hidden in a recess of his brain, as in a sanctuary which he dares not approach?

XXXV

I hear cries against impiety on every side. The Christian is impious in Asia, the Mussulman in Europe, the papist in London, the Calvinist in Paris, the Jansenist at the top of the rue St Jacques, the Molinist at the bottom of the faubourg St Médard. What is an impious person, then? Either everybody, or nobody.

XXXVI

When the pious declaim against scepticism, it seems to me that they either do not understand their own interest, or are inconsistent. If it is certain that a true faith, to be embraced, and a false faith, to be abandoned, need only be fully known, surely it must be highly desirable that universal doubt should spread over the surface of the earth, and that every race should consent to the examination of the truth of its religion. Our missionaries would find a good half of their work already accomplished.

XXXVII

He who does not deliberately embrace the faith in which he has been bred can no more plume himself on being a Christian or a Mussulman than upon not being born blind or lame. It is his luck, not his merit.

XXXVIII

He who would die for a faith whose falsity he was aware of, would be a madman. He who dies

for a false faith, which he thinks a true one, or for a true faith of whose truth he has not been convinced by proofs, is a fanatic.

The true martyr is he who dies for a true faith, whose truth has been clearly proved to him.

XXXIX

The true martyr waits for death, the enthusiast rushes towards it.

XL

He who at Mecca would insult the ashes of Mahomet, overturn his altars and disturb a mosque, would be certainly impaled and perhaps would not be canonised. Such zeal is not now in fashion. Polyucte in our days would be a madman.

XLI

The age of revelations, of prodigies, and of extraordinary missions is no more. Christianity has no longer need of this scaffolding. A man who took it into his head to play the part of Jonah amongst us, and rushed about the streets crying, "In three days Paris will be no more. Parisians, repent, cover yourselves with sackcloth and ashes, or in three days you will perish," would be seized at once, and taken before a judge, who would certainly send him to the lunatic asylum. It would be no use his saying to us, "Does God love you less than the men of Nineveh : are you less guilty ?" No one would waste his time in answering him, nor would

wait until the date of his prophecy expired before treating him as a visionary.

Elijah may return from the other world when he pleases ; men are such that it would be a miracle indeed if he were well received in this.

XLII

When a dogma which contradicts the dominant religion, or some event which is inconsistent with the tranquillity of the public, is announced, even if the mission is justified by miracles, the government does well in dealing rigorously, and the people in crying "Crucify." How dangerous to abandon the people to the seductions of an impostor, or the dreams of a visionary ! If the blood of Jesus Christ cried for vengeance against the Jews, 'tis because in shedding it they turned a deaf ear to Moses and the Prophets who foretold the Messiah. If an angel came down from heaven and supported his arguments by miracles, and yet preached against the law of Christ, Paul would call him anathema. It is not, therefore, by miracles that a man's mission is to be judged, but by the conformity of his doctrine with that of the people to whom he declares himself sent, *especially when the doctrine of that people is proved to be true.*

XLIII

Every innovation in a government is to be feared. The holiest and best of religions, even Christianity, did not make its way without causing some dis-

turbances. The first sons of the Church more than once exceeded the limits of the patience and moderation recommended to them. Let me here quote some fragments of an edict of the Emperor Julian which are very characteristic of the genius of that philosophic prince and of the humours of the zealots of that day.

“I had imagined,” says Julian, “that the leaders of the Galileans would be sensible of the difference between my methods and those of my predecessor, and that they would be grateful. Under his reign they suffered exile and imprisonment and a number of those they called heretics were put to the sword. Under my reign the exiles were recalled, the prisoners released, and the proscribed given again the possession of their goods. But such is the restlessness and fury of this sect that since they have lost the privilege of mutual destruction, of tormenting those who are attached to their belief and those who belong to the religion authorised by the laws, they spare no effort and let pass no occasion to stir up revolt. They are people without regard for true piety and without respect for our ordinances. . . . Yet we do not drag them to our altars, nor do them violence. . . . As to the poorer classes, it seems that they are stirred to sedition by their leaders, who are enraged at the limits we have set to their powers; for we have excluded them from our courts of law, and they have no longer the power to make away with wills and supplant the legitimate heirs, and take possession of inheritances. . . . That is why we forbid the

people to assemble factiously and to intrigue at the homes of its seditious priests. . . . Let this edict strengthen the hands of our magistrates who have been more than once insulted by these insurgents, and ran the risk of being stoned. Let them meet peaceably at their leaders, and pray there, let them there receive instruction and conform to their religion; we permit this so long as they refrain from all sedition. If their meetings are an opportunity for revolt and faction, they and their property will suffer, I warn them. Unbelievers, live in peace . . . and you who have remained faithful to the religion of your country and the gods of your fathers, do not persecute your fellow-men, your fellow-citizens, who are rather to be pitied for their ignorance than blamed for their wickedness. It is by reason and not by violence that men should be brought to the truth. We enjoin therefore upon you all, our faithful subjects, to leave the Galileans in peace."

Such were the sentiments of this prince who can be accused of paganism, but not of apostasy. He passed the early years of his life under different masters and in different schools, and made an unhappy choice in later life. He unfortunately decided in favour of the faith of his ancestors and the gods of his country.

XLIV

I am astonished that the works of this learned Emperor have been preserved to us. They contain passages which, though they do not affect the truth

of Christianity, are by no means complimentary to certain Christians of his time, and the Fathers of the Church paid the works of their enemies the singular attention of suppressing them. It is apparently from his predecessors that Gregory the Great derived the barbarous zeal against art and letters which inflamed him. If this Pontiff had had his way we should be in the plight of the Mahometans, who have only the Koran to read. What would have been the fate of the writers of antiquity at the hands of a man who committed solecisms from religious motives, who thought that to observe grammatical rules was to set Jesus Christ below Donatus,¹ and who thought himself obliged to complete the ruins of antiquity ?

XLV

The divinity of the Holy Scriptures is not, however, so clearly apparent therein, that the authority of the sacred historians is completely independent of the testimony of profane authors. Where should we be, if we had to find the finger of God in the literary form of our Bible? What sorry stuff is the Latin translation! And even the originals are not exactly masterpieces of composition. The prophets, apostles and evangelists wrote as they pleased. If we were permitted to regard the history of the Jews purely as a production of the human mind, Moses and his continuators are no rivals of Livy, Sallust, Cæsar, and Josephus, who

¹ A Latin grammarian.

are not suspected of being inspired. Is not the Jesuit Berruyer preferred to Moses? In our churches there are preserved pictures which we are assured are the work of angels and of the Deity himself. If these pictures were actually the work of Le Sueur or Le Brun, what could I find to say against this immemorial tradition? Perhaps nothing at all. But when I look at these celestial works, and see the rules of painting violated at every moment both in design and execution, and the truth of art everywhere absent, since I cannot suppose the author an ignoramus, I must accuse the tradition of falsity. I might make use of this analogy between these pictures and Holy Writ, if I were not well aware that it is immaterial whether their contents are well or ill written. The prophets' forte was telling the truth, not elegant composition. The Apostles died for the truth of what they preached and wrote, and for nothing else. But, to return to the matter under discussion, those profane writers should have been preserved who must have harmonised with sacred historians,—at any rate upon facts such as the existence and miracles of Christ, the qualities and character of Pontius Pilate, and the deeds and martyrdom of the early Christians.

XLVI

An entire nation, you will say, witnesses to this fact; dare you deny it? Yes, I dare, since it is not confirmed by the authority of someone not of your side, and I do not know whether that person

is free from fanaticism and delusion. Moreover, if an author of declared impartiality tells me that a chasm opened in the midst of a city, that the gods when consulted about this event answered that it would close if the most precious possession was thrown into it, and that a brave knight leapt in and that the oracle was fulfilled;—I should be far less inclined to believe him than if he had simply said that a chasm opened, and that considerable time and labour were required to fill it. The less probability a fact has the more does the testimony of history lose its weight. I should make no difficulty in believing a single honest man who should tell me that His Majesty had just won a complete victory over the allies; but if all Paris were to assure me that a dead man had come to life again at Passy, I should not believe a word of it. That a historian should impose upon us, or that a whole nation should be deluded—there is no miracle in that!

XLVII

Tarquin proposed to increase the corps of cavalry that Romulus had formed. An augur declared all change in the army sacrilegious, unless authorised by the gods. Angered at the opposition of the priest and determined to make an end of him and of an art which opposed his will, Tarquin had him summoned to the market-place, and said to him, "Soothsayer, is what I am thinking of possible? If your knowledge is what you

boast it to be, you will be able to answer me." The augur was not embarrassed, but consulted the birds and made answer: "Yes, Prince, what you propose is possible." Then Tarquin, drawing a razor from beneath his gown and taking a pebble, said to the augur, "Come here and cut me this pebble with this razor, for I thought *this* possible." Navius, for this was the augur's name, turned to the people and said composedly, "Strike the pebble with the razor, and may I be dragged to torture on the spot if it is not immediately divided." People saw, with surprise, the hardness of the pebble yield to the blade; it was divided so promptly that the razor reached Tarquin's hand and drew blood. The astonished people applauded, and Tarquin renounced his scheme, and declared himself the protector of augurs. The razor and the fragments of the pebble were buried beneath an altar. A statue was put up to the augur, which was still in existence in the reign of Augustus, and both sacred and profane writers bear witness to the truth of this event, in the writings of Lactantius, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, and Saint Augustine.

You have heard the story; now for superstition. "What do you say to that?" says the superstitious Quintus to his brother Cicero. "You must either admit it as a fact, or take refuge in a monstrous Pyrrhonism, treat nations and historians as fools, and burn their annals. Will you deny everything rather than allow that the gods interfere in our affairs?"

Hoc ego philosophi non arbitror testibus uti, qui

*aut casu veri aut malitia falsi fictique esse possunt. Argumentis et rationibus oportet ; quare quidquid ita sit docere, non eventis, iis præsertim quibus mihi non liceat, credere. . . . Omitte igitur lituum Romuli, quem in maximo incendio negas potuisse comburi? Contemne cotem Accii Navii? Nihil debet esse in philosophia commentitiis fabellis loci. Illud erat philosophi totius augurii primum naturam ipsam videre, deinde inventionem, deinde constantiam. . . . Habent Etrusci exaratum puerum auctorem disciplinæ suæ. Nos Quem? Acciumne Navium? . . . Placet igitur humanitatis expertes habere Divinitatis auctores? (Cicero, *De divinat.*, lib. ii, cap. lxxx, lxxxi).*

But kings, peoples, nations, and the whole world believe it. *Quasi vere quidquam sit tam valde quam nihil sapere vulgare? Aut quasi tibi ipsi in judicando placeat multitudo.*¹ This is the philosopher's reply. Tell me a single prodigy to which it does not apply. The Fathers of the Church, who doubtless found it exceedingly inconvenient to follow Cicero's principles, have preferred to accept Tarquin's adventure, and attribute the art of Navius to the Devil. A very convenient invention, the Devil.

¹ "I think a philosopher ought not to rely on evidence which either by accident or design may be false or deceptive. He ought to explain by argument and reasoning why each circumstance happens as it does, rather than by events, especially when they are such as I am unable to credit. Let us therefore dispose of Romulus's staff, which you say resisted the action of the hottest fire, and make light of Navius' flint. There should be no place in philosophy for such fabrications. A philosopher ought to look into the whole matter of augury and its origin. The Etruscans set up a boy turned up by a ploughshare as the author of their discipline. Whom have we? Accius Navius?" . . . "What is commoner than the ignorance of the multitude? Do you yourself trust the common herd in a judicial case?"

XLVIII

Every nation has stories like this, which would be miraculous if true ; which are never proved, but which serve to prove everything ; which it were impious to deny, and folly to believe.

XLIX

Romulus, struck by lightning, or murdered by the senators, disappeared from Rome. The people and the soldiers murmured, the orders of the state rose one against the other, and Rome in its infancy, divided against itself and surrounded by enemies, stood on the edge of a precipice, when a certain Proculus came forward gravely, and said : “Romans, this prince whom you regret is not dead: he has ascended to heaven, where he sits at the right hand of Jupiter. ‘Go,’ he said to me, ‘and calm your fellow-citizens ; tell them that Romulus is with the gods and assure them of my protection ; let them know that the forces of their enemies shall never prevail against them ; their destiny is to be one day the lords of the earth. Let them hand down this prediction from age to age, and to their most distant posterity.’” Some circumstances favour imposture ; and if we consider the state of things in Rome at that time, we shall agree that Proculus was a man of intelligence and that he chose his time well. He introduced into their minds a feeling which was not without its effect in determining the future greatness of his country. *Mirum est quantum illi*

*viro hæc nuntianti fidei fuerit; quamque desiderium Romuli apud plebem facta fida immortalitatis, lenitum sit. Famam hanc admiratio viri et pavor præsens nobilitavit; deinde a paucis initio facta, Deum, Deo natum salvere universi Romulum jubent.*¹

That is to say, the people believed in this apparition; the senators pretended to believe, and Romulus had altars raised to him. But this was not all. Soon it was not only to a single individual that Romulus appeared; he showed himself to more than a thousand people in a single day. He had not been struck by lightning, the senators had not made away with him during a storm, but he had ascended to heaven in the midst of lightnings and thunders in the sight of the people; and this story became encrusted after a time with such a quantity of additions that the thinkers of the following century must have found them highly inconvenient.

L

A single proof is more conclusive to me than fifty occurrences. Thanks to the great confidence I have in my reason, my faith is not at the mercy of the first juggler I meet with. Priest of Mahomet, you may cure the lame, make the dumb speak, give sight to the blind, cure the palsied, and raise the dead, nay, even restore to the mutilated the limbs.

¹ ["It was strange how the man who announced these tidings was believed, and how the people's longing for Romulus was appeased when they believed in his immortality. Admiration of the hero, and terror, added lustre to the story; then, little by little, Romulus is hailed as god, and the son of a god, by all."]

they have lost (a miracle hitherto unattempted), and to your great surprise my faith will not be shaken. Do you wish me to become your proselyte? Then leave these prodigies and let us reason. I trust my judgment more than my eyes.

If the religion that you announce to me is true, its truth can be demonstrated by unanswerable arguments. Find these arguments. Why pursue me with prodigies, when a syllogism serves to convince me? Do you find it easier to make a cripple stand upright than to enlighten me?

LI

A man lies on the ground, without feeling, without warmth and without movement. They turn him over and over, shake him, burn him, and nothing stirs him. A red-hot iron does not draw from him any sign of life. Is he dead? No. He is the priest of Calama, *qui quando ei placebat ad imitatas quasi lamentantis hominis voces, ita se auferebat a sensibus et jacebat simillimus mortuo, ut non solum vellicantes atque pungentes minime sentiret, sed aliquando etiam igne uretur admoto, sine ullo doloris sensu nisi post modum ex vulnere.*¹ If certain people had found such a case in our times, they would have made a fine use of him; we should have seen a corpse revived on the ashes of one of the

¹ "Who, when he pleased, became remote from all feeling and lay like a corpse, so that he did not feel those who pinched and pricked him, and was even quite insensible to being burnt by fire, except for the after effect."—St Augustine, *Civii. Dei*, lib. xiv, ch. xxiv.

elect, and the collection of a Jansenist magistrate¹ would have included a resurrection, and the supporters of the famous constitution² would perhaps have been put to confusion.

LII

We must admit, says the logician³ of Port-Royal, that Saint Augustine was right in maintaining, with Plato, that our judgment of truth and our criterion for discerning it belong not to the senses but to the mind: *non est veritatis iudicium in sensibus*. And even the degree of certainty we can obtain through the senses is not very extensive. There are many things which we think we learn through their medium and of which we have not a full assurance. When, therefore, the evidence of the senses is inconsistent with, or does not outweigh, the authority of reason, we have no choice; logically, we must decide for reason.

LIII

A certain street⁴ resounds with acclamations; the ashes of one of the elect⁵ work more miracles

¹ *La Vérité des miracles opérés par l'intercession de M. de Paris, démontrée contre M. L'archevêque de Sens. Ouvrage dédié au Roy par M. de Montgeron.* Utrecht, 1737. There was a continuation in 1741 and in 1748.—(A)

² [*I.e.* the constitution or Bull Unigenitus, which Louis XIV obtained from Clement XI in 1713. It was an anti-Jansenist measure, and was made a law of the land in 1730.]

³ Arnaud and Nicole, in their *La Logique, ou l'art de penser*, Amsterdam, 1675.—(Br)

⁴ The faubourg St Marcel, in which stands the Church of St Médard.—(A)

⁵ The Deacon Paris, upon whose tomb the convulsionaries came for cures which Carré de Montgeron collected, and which the Jesuits denied more passionately and obstinately than the philosophers.—(A)

in one day than Jesus Christ during his whole life. Men run, or are carried thither, and I follow the multitude. I am no sooner arrived than I hear cries of "A miracle, a miracle!" I come nearer, and looking about I see a little cripple¹ who walks with the aid of three or four charitable persons who hold him up; and the people, in astonishment, cry out on a miracle. Fools, where is the miracle? Do you not see the rogue has but changed his crutches? It is the same story with miracles as with spirits. I would wager that all who have seen spirits are afraid of them beforehand, and that all those who saw miracles there had made up their minds to see them.

LIV

We have a vast collection² of these so-called miracles which may bid defiance to the most determined incredulity. The author is a senator, a serious man who made profession of a not very intelligent materialism, but who had nothing to gain by his conversion.³ An eye-witness of the events

¹ Cripples are of all sick folk the most readily subject to miraculous influence, if we are to judge by the enormous number of crutches which fill sanctuaries sacred to miraculous cures. In the text the Abbé Becheran may be the person referred to; but he leaped like a carp, a detail which Diderot does not give: or Philippe Sergent, stricken by a total paralysis of the right leg and thigh, and by almost complete paralysis of the right arm and hand; affected by ankylosis of the knee; affected by a continual tremor in the left side; and afflicted by imperfect sight so that he was only able to see objects dimly, who was cured in a single moment of all his maladies at the tomb of the Deacon Pâris on July 10th, 1731.—(A)

² The collection of Montgeron referred to in note 1, page 60.

³ Montgeron, who makes this confession, had been suddenly converted at St Médard, and his conversion is the first miracle he records.—(A)

which he relates, and which he had the opportunity of examining without prejudice or bias, his evidence is accompanied by that of thousands of others. All say that they have *seen*, and their depositions are as authentic as possible ; the original documents are preserved in the public archives. What is to be said? Simply that these miracles prove nothing, so long as the question of his *bona fides* is not decided.

LV

Every argument which is used by two opposing factions cuts both ways. If fanaticism has its martyrs like true religion, and if there have been fanatics among those who died for the true faith, we must either count up (if we can) the number of dead of each camp, and believe ; or look for other grounds of credibility.

LVI

Nothing is more apt to confirm men in their irreligion than false inducements to conversion. Every day unbelievers are told : " Who are you to attack a religion that men such as Paul, Tertullian, Athanasius, Chrysostom, Augustine, Cyprian, and a host of illustrious persons so courageously defended? Doubtless you have observed some difficulty which has escaped these great geniuses ; show that you know more than they, or else, if you admit that they are the wiser, submit your doubts to their verdict." This is a frivolous argument.

The knowledge of its priests is no proof of the truth of a religion. What faith was more absurd than the Egyptians? And what priesthood was more enlightened? "No, I cannot worship this onion; in what is it superior to other vegetables? I should be mad indeed to bow down before objects destined for my nourishment! A strange divinity, a plant that I water, and which grows and dies in my kitchen garden." "Silence, you wretch, your blasphemies fill me with horror. Who are you to argue? Do you know more than the sacred college? Who are you to attack the gods, and preach wisdom to their ministers? Are you wiser than the oracles that the whole world comes to question? Whatever your answer, I shall be amazed at your pride and temerity!" Will Christians never know their strength, and will they never abandon such unhappy sophisms to those who have no better argument? *Omittamur ista communia quæ ex utraque parte dici possunt, quanquam vere ex utraque parte dici non possint.*¹ Example, prodigies and authority may make dupes or hypocrites; reason alone can make believers.

LVII

People agree that it is of the first importance to employ none but solid arguments for the defence of a faith; yet they would gladly persecute those who attempt to cry down bad arguments. What, then, is it not enough to be a Christian? Am I also to

¹ ["Let us leave all these common arguments which may be used by either party, although really they cannot be used by either."]

be a Christian upon mistaken grounds? Zealots, I give you fair warning, I am not a Christian because Saint Augustine was, but because it is reasonable to be one.

LVIII

I know the zealots well, and they are quick to take alarm. If they once make up their minds that this work contains something repugnant to their ideas, I shall expect all the calumnies they have spread about a hundred better men than myself. If they only call me a deist and a wretch, I shall get off lightly. They have long since damned Descartes, Montaigne, Locke and Bayle; and I hope that they will damn many others. I tell them that I do not pretend to be a better man nor a better Christian than most of these philosophers. I was born in the Roman, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, and I whole-heartedly submit to its decisions. I wish to die in the faith of my fathers, and I respect it as far as is possible for a man who has never held immediate intercourse with the Deity, and has never witnessed a miracle. That is my confession of faith, and I am persuaded that they will find fault with it, though perhaps not a man among them can make a better.

LIX

I have occasionally read Abbadie, Huet,¹ and the rest. I am sufficiently well acquainted with the

¹ Abbadie, *Traité de la vérité de la religion chrétienne*, 1723. Huet, *Traité philosophique de la faiblesse de l'esprit humaine*, 1723. — (A)

evidences of my religion, and I admit that they are important ; but were they a hundred times more so, Christianity would not be demonstrated to me to be true. Why then demand that I should believe that there are three Persons in one God as firmly as I believe that the three angles of a triangle are together equal to two right angles? Every proof ought to produce in me a certainty proportionate to its conclusiveness, and the effect of geometrical, moral and physical proofs upon my mind must be different, or else this distinction is a frivolous one.

LX

You offer an unbeliever a volume of writings of which you claim to show him the divinity. But before examining your proofs, he will be sure to put some questions about this collection. Has it always been the same? Why is it less ample now than it was some centuries ago? By what right has this or that work been banished, which another sect reveres ; and this or that work been preserved, which the other has rejected? On what grounds have you preferred this manuscript? Who guided you in your choice among so many varying copies, which are a proof that these sacred authors have not come down to you in their original purity? But if the ignorance of copyists or the malice of heretics has corrupted the text, as you will have to admit, you must restore the text to its original condition before you prove its divinity ; for your proofs and my faith cannot rest upon a collection

of mutilated documents. To whom will you entrust this reform? The Church. But I cannot agree to the infallibility of the Church, until the divinity of the Scriptures is proved. I am therefore reduced to scepticism.

Your only answer to all these difficulties is by the confession that the first foundations of the faith are purely human; that the choice between manuscripts, the restoration of passages, finally the collection, has been made in accordance with the rules of criticism. Well, I do not refuse the divinity of the sacred books a degree of faith proportioned to the certainty of these rules.

LXI

It was during my search for proofs that I found difficulties. The books which contain the motives of my belief offer at the same time inducements to unbelief. They are arsenals from which either party may draw weapons. I have seen the deist arm himself there against the atheist; the deist and the atheist attack the Jew; the atheist, the deist and the Jew combine against the Christian; the Christian, the deist, the atheist and the Jew oppose the Mussulman; the atheist, the deist, the Jew, and the Mussulman, and a multitude of Christian sects, attack the Christian; and the sceptic with his hand against every man. I was the umpire, and held the balance between the adversaries. It rose or fell in sympathy with the weight thrown into the scales. After long hesitation, the balance dipped

in favour of the Christian, but simply by way of reaction. I can bear witness to my own impartiality. I might have made more of this surplus. I call God to witness my sincerity.

LXII

This diversity of opinions has led the deists to imagine an argument which is perhaps more curious than solid. Cicero, having to prove that the Romans were the most warlike people in the world, skilfully extracts this admission from the lips of their rivals. Gauls, to whom, if any, do you yield the palm in courage? To the Romans. Parthians, after you, who are the bravest of men? The Romans. Africans, whom would you fear, if you were to fear any? The Romans. Let us, say the deists, interrogate the religionists in a like manner. Chinese, what religion would be the best, if yours were not the best? Naturalism. Mussulmans, what religion would you embrace if you abjured Mahomet? Naturalism. Christians, what is the true religion if it be not Christianity? Judaism. But you, O Jews, what is the true religion, if Judaism be false? Naturalism. Now, those, continues Cicero, to whom the second place is unanimously awarded and who in their turn do not cede the first place to anyone—it is those who incontestably deserve that place.