Dialogue between a Priest and a Dying Man

By the Marquis de Sade

PRIEST. Now that the fatal hour is upon you wherein the veil of illusion is torn aside only to confront every deluded man with the cruel tally of his errors and vices, do you, my son, earnestly repent of the many sins to which you were led by weakness and human frailty?

DYING MAN. Yes, I do so repent.

PRIEST. Then in the short space you have left, profit from such timely remorse to ask that you be given general absolution of your sins, believing that only by considering the reverence of the most comfortable and holy sacrament of penitence may you hope for forgiveness at the hand of Almighty God our Eternal Father.

DYING MAN. I understand you no better than you have understood me.

PRIEST. What's that?

DYING MAN. I said I repented.

PRIEST. I heard you.

DYING MAN. Yes, but you did not understand what I meant.

PRIEST. But what other interpretation...?

DYING MAN. The one I shall now give. I was created by Nature with the keenest appetites and the strongest of passions and was put on this earth with the sole purpose of placating both by surrendering to them. They are components of my created self and are no more than mechanical parts necessary to the functioning of Nature's basic purposes. Or if you prefer, they are incidental effects essential to her designs for me and conform entirely to her laws. I repent only that I never sufficiently acknowledged the omnipotence of Nature and my remorse is directed solely against the modest use I made of those faculties, criminal in your eyes but perfectly straightforward in mine, which she gave me to use in her service. I did at times resist her, and am heartily sorry for it. I was blinded by the absurdity of your doctrines to which I resorted to fight the violence of desires planted in me by a power more divinely inspired by far, and I now repent of having done so. I picked only flowers when I could have gathered in a much greater harvest of ripe fruits. Such is the proper cause of my regret; respect me enough to impute no other to me.

PRIEST. To what a pass have you been brought by your errors! How misled you have been by such sophisms! You attribute to the created world all the power of the Creator! Do you not see that the lamentable tendencies which have misdirected your steps are themselves no more than effects of that same corrupt Nature to which you attribute omnipotence?

DYING MAN. It seems to me that your reasoning is as empty as your head. I wish that you would argue more rationally or else just let me alone to die in peace. What do you mean by 'Creator'? What do you understand by 'corrupt Nature'?

PRIEST. The Creator is the Master of the Universe. All that was created was created by Him, everything was made by His hand, and His creation is maintained as a simple effect of His omnipotence.

DYING MAN. Well now, He must be a very great man indeed! In which case, tell me why this man of yours, who is so powerful, nevertheless made Nature 'corrupt', as you put it.

PRIEST. But what merit would men have had if God had not given them free will? What merit would there be in its exercise if, in this life, it were not as possible to choose good as it were

to avoid evil?

DYING MAN. So your God proceeded to make the world askew simply to tempt and test man. Did He then not know His creature? And did He not know the outcome?

PRIEST. Of course He knew His creature but, in addition, He wished to leave him the merit of choosing wisely.

DYING MAN. But what for? He knew all along what His creature would choose and it was within His power— for you say that He is all-powerful—well within His power, say I, to see to it that he chose correctly?

PRIEST. Who can comprehend the vast and infinite purpose which God has for man? Where is even the man who understands all things visible?

DYING MAN. Anyone who sees things simply, and especially the man who does not go looking for a multiplicity of causes with which to obscure the effects. Why do you need a second difficulty when you cannot explain the first? If we admit it is possible that Nature alone is responsible for creating what you attribute to your God, why do you insist on looking for a master hand? The cause of what you do not comprehend may be the simplest thing there is. Study physics and you will understand Nature better; learn to think clearly, cast out your preconceived ideas and you will have no need of this God of yours.

PRIEST. Miserable sinner! I understood you were no more than a Socinian[1] and came armed with weapons to fight you. But since I see now that you are an atheist whose heart is closed to the authentic and innumerable proofs which are daily given us of the existence of the Creator, there is no point in my saying anything more. Sight cannot be restored to a blind man.

DYING MAN. Admit one thing: is not the blinder of two men surely he who puts a blindfold on his eyes, not he who removes it? You edify, you fabricate reasons, you multiply explanations, whereas I destroy and simplify the issues. You pile error on error, and I challenge all errors. So which of us is blind?

PRIEST. So you do not believe in God?

DYING MAN. No, and for a very simple reason: it is impossible to believe what one does not understand. There must always be an obvious connection between understanding and belief. Understanding is the prime condition of faith. Where there is no understanding, faith dies and those who do not understand yet say they believe are hypocrites. I defy you to say that you believe in the God whose praises you sing, because you cannot demonstrate His existence nor is it within your capacities to define His nature, which means that you do not understand Him and since you do not understand you are incapable of furnishing me with reasoned arguments. In other words, anything which is beyond the limits of human reason is either illusion or idle fancy, and since your God must be either one or the other, I should be mad to believe in the first and stupid to believe in the second.

Prove to me that matter is inert, and I shall grant you a Creator. Show me that Nature is not sufficient unto herself, and I shall gladly allow you to give her a Master. But until you can do this, I shall not yield one inch. I am convinced only by evidence, and evidence is provided by my senses alone. Beyond their limits, I am powerless to believe in anything. I

[1] Socinianism was the doctrine of two Italian heresiarchs, Lælus Socinus (1525-62) and his nephew Faustus (1539-1604), which, with some differences, resembles that of modern Unitarianism. It argued that the only foundation on which Protestantism should be based was human reason, and Faustus combated the principal dogmas of the church: the divinity of Christ, original sin, propitiatory sacrifice, and everything which could not be justified in rational terms.

believe the sun exists because I can see it: I take it to be the centre where all of Nature's flammable matter is gathered together and I am charmed but in no wise astonished by its regular courses. It is a phenomenon of physics, perhaps no more complex than the workings of electricity, which it is not given to us to understand. Need I say more? You can construct your God and set Him above such phenomena, but does that take me any further forward? Am I not required to make as much effort to understand the workman as to define His handiwork?

Consequently, you have done me no service by erecting this illusion of yours. You have confused but not enlightened my mind and I owe you not gratitude but hatred. Your God is a machine which you have built to serve your own passions and you have set it to run according to their requirements. But you must see that I had no choice but to jettison your model the instant it fell out of step with my passions? At this moment, my weak soul stands in need of peace and philosophy: why do you now try to alarm it with your sophistry which will strike it with terror but not convert it, inflame it without making it better? My soul is what it pleased Nature to be, which is to say a consequence of the organs which Nature thought fit to implant in me in accordance with her purposes and needs. Now, since Nature needs vice as much as she needs virtue, she directed me towards the first when she found it expedient, and when she had need of the second, she filled me with the appropriate desires to which I surrendered equally promptly. Do not seek further than her laws for the cause of our human inconsistency, and to explain her laws look not beyond her will and her needs.

PRIEST. And so everything in the world is necessary?

DYING MAN. Of course.

PRIEST. But if all is necessary, there must be order in everything?

DYING MAN. Who argues that there is not?

PRIEST. But who or what is capable of creating the order that exists if not an all-powerful, supremely wise hand?

DYING MAN. Will not gunpowder explode of necessity when lit by a match?

PRIEST. Yes.

DYING MAN. And where is the wisdom in that?

PRIEST. There isn't any.

DYING MAN. So you see it is possible that there are things which are necessary but were not wisely made, and it follows that it is equally possible that everything derives from a first cause in which there may be neither reason nor wisdom.

PRIEST. What are you driving at?

DYING MAN. I want to prove to you that it is possible that everything is simply what it is and what you see it to be, without its being the effect of some cause which was reasonable and wisely directed; that natural effects must have natural causes without there being any need to suppose that they had a non-natural origin such as your God who, as I have already observed, would require a good deal of explaining but would not of Himself explain anything; that therefore once it is conceded that God serves no useful purpose, He becomes completely irrelevant; that there is every likelihood that what is irrelevant is of no account and what is of no account is as nought. So, to convince myself that your God is an illusion, I need no other argument than that which is supplied by my certain knowledge that He serves no useful purpose.

PRIEST. If that is your attitude, I cannot think that there is any reason why I should discuss religion with you.

DYING MAN. Why ever not? I know nothing more entertaining than seeing for myself to what extravagant lengths men have taken fanaticism and imbecility in religious matters—excesses so unspeakable that the catalogue of aberrations, though ghastly, is, I always think, invariably fascinating to contemplate. Answer me this frankly, and above all, do not give self-interested responses! If I were to be weak enough to let myself be talked into believing your ludicrous doctrines which prove the incredible existence of a being who makes religion necessary, which form of worship would you advise me to offer up to Him? Would you have me incline towards the idle fancies of Confucius or the nonsense of Brahma? Should I bow down before the Great Serpent of the Negro, the Moon and Stars of the Peruvian, or the God of Moses' armies? Which of the sects of Muhammad would you suggest I join? Or which particular Christian heresy would you say was preferable to all the others? Think carefully before you answer.

PRIEST. Can there be any doubt about my reply?

DYING MAN. But that is a self-interested answer.

PRIEST. Not at all. In recommending my own beliefs to you, I love you as much as I love myself.

DYING MAN. By heeding such errors, you show little enough love for either of us.

PRIEST. But who can be blind enough not to see the miracles of our Divine Redeemer?

DYING MAN. He who sees through Him as the most transparent of swindlers and the most tiresome of humbugs.

PRIEST. *0 Lord, thou hearest but speakest not with a voice of thunder!*

DYING MAN. Quite so, and no voice is heard for the simple reason that your God, perhaps because He cannot or because He has too much sense or for whatever other reason you care to impute to a being whose existence I acknowledge only out of politeness or, if you prefer, to be as accommodating as I can to your petty views, no voice, I say, is heard because this God, if He exists as you are mad enough to believe, cannot possibly have set out to convince us by using means as ludicrous as those employed by your Jesus.

PRIEST. But what of the prophets, the miracles, the martyrs? Are not all these proofs?

DYING MAN. How, in terms of strict logic, can you expect me to accept as proof something which itself first needs to be proved? For a prophecy to be a proof, I must first be completely convinced that what was foretold was in fact fulfilled. Now since prophecies are part of history, they can have no more force in my mind than all other historical facts, of which three-quarters are highly dubious. If to this I were to add further the possibility, or rather the likelihood, that they were transmitted to me solely by historians with a vested interest, I should be, as you see, more than entitled to be sceptical. Moreover, who will reassure me that such and such a prophecy was not made after the event, or that it was not just politically or self-fulfillingly contrived, like the prediction which foretells a prosperous reign under a just king or forecasts frost in winter? If all this is in fact the case, how can you argue that prophecies, which stand in dire need of proof, can themselves ever become a proof?

As for your miracles, I am no more impressed bythem than by prophecies. All swindlers have worked miracles and the stupid have believed in them. To be convinced of the truth of a miracle, I should have to be quite certain that the event which you would call miraculous ran absolutely counter to the laws of Nature, since only events occurring outside Nature can be deemed a miracle. But there, who is so learned in her ways to dare state at what point Nature ends and at what precise moment Nature is violated? Only two things are required to accredit an alleged miracle: a mountebank and a crowd of spineless lookers-on. There is absolutely no

point looking for any other kind of origin for your miracles. All founders of new sects have been miracle-workers and, what is decidedly odder, they have always found imbeciles who believed them. Your Jesus never managed anything more prodigious than Apollonius of Tyana, and it would never enter anyone's head to claim that he was a god. As to your martyrs, they are by far the weakest of all your arguments. Zeal and obstinacy are all it takes to make a martyr and if an alternative cause were to furnish me with as many martyred saints as you claim for yours, I should never have proper grounds for believing the one to be any better than the other but, on the contrary, should be very inclined to think that both were woefully inadequate.

My dear fellow, if it were true that the God you preach really existed, would He need miracles, martyrs, and prophecies to establish His kingdom? And if, as you say, the heart of man is God's handiwork, would not men's hearts have been the temple He chose for His law? Surely this equitable law, since it emanates from a just God, would be equally and irresistibly imprinted in all of us, from one end of the universe to the other. All men, having in common this same delicate, sensitive organ, would also adopt a common approach to praising the God from whom they had received it. They would all have the same way of loving Him, the same way of adoring and serving Him, and it would be as impossible for them to mistake His nature as to resist the secret bidding of their hearts to praise Him. But instead of which, what do I find throughout the whole universe? As many gods as there are nations, as many ways of serving them as there are brains and fertile imaginations. Now, do you seriously believe that this multiplicity of opinions, among which I find it physically impossible to choose, is really the handiwork of a just God?

No, preacher, you offend your God by showing Him to me in this light. Allow me to deny Him altogether, for if He exists, I should offend Him much less by my unbelief than you by your blasphemies. Think, preacher! Your Jesus was no better than Muhammad, Muhammad was no better than Moses, and none of these three was superior to Confucius, though Confucius did set down a number of perfectly valid principles whereas the others talked nonsense. But they and their ilk are mountebanks who have been mocked by thinking men, believed by the rabble, and should have been strung up by due process of law.

PRIEST. Alas, such was only too true in the case of one of the four.

DYING MAN. Yes, He who deserved it most. He was a seditious influence, an agitator, a bearer of false witness, a scoundrel, a lecher, a showman who performed crude tricks, a wicked and dangerous man. He knew exactly how to set about hoodwinking the public and was therefore eminently punishable in the type of kingdom and state of which Jerusalem was then a part. It was a very sound decision to remove Him and it is perhaps the only case in which my principles, which are incidentally very mild and tolerant, could ever admit the application of the full rigour of Themis. I forgive all errors save those which may imperil the government under which we live; kings and their majesty are the only things that I take on trust and respect. The man who does not love his country and his King does not deserve to live.

PRIEST. But you do admit, do you not, that there is something after this life? It hardly seems possible that your mind has not on occasion turned to piercing the mystery of the fate which awaits us. What concept have you found to be more convincing than that of a multitude of punishments for the man who has lived badly and an eternity of rewards for the man who has lived well?

DYING MAN. Why, my dear fellow, the concept of nothingness! The idea never frightened me; it strikes me as consoling and simple. All other answers are the handiwork of pride, but mine

is the product of reason. In any case, nothingness is neither ghastly nor absolute. Is not Nature's never-ending process of generation and regeneration plain for my eyes to see? Nothing perishes, nothing on this earth is destroyed. Today a man, tomorrow a worm, the day after a fly—what is this if not eternal life? And why do you believe that I should be rewarded for virtues I possess through no merit of my own, and punished for criminal acts over which I have no control? How can you reconcile the goodness of your alleged God with this principle? Can He have created me solely in order to enjoy punishing me—and punish me for choosing wrongly while denying me the freedom to choose well?

PRIEST. But you are free to choose.

DYING MAN. I am—but only according to your assumptions which do not withstand examination by reason. The doctrine of free will was invented solely so that you could devise the principle of Divine Grace which validated your garbled presuppositions. Is there a man alive who, seeing the scaffold standing next to his crime, would willingly commit a crime if he were free not to commit it? We are impelled by an irresistible power and are never, not for a single instant, in a position to steer a course in any direction except down the slope on which our feet are set. There are no virtues save those which are necessary to Nature's ends and, reciprocally, no crime which she does not need for her purposes. Nature's mastery lies precisely in the perfect balance which she maintains between virtue and crime. But can we be guilty if we move in the direction in which she pushes us? No more than the wasp which punctures your skin with its sting.

PRIEST. So it follows that even the greatest crimes should not give us cause to fear anything?

DYING MAN. I did not say that. It is enough that the law condemns and the sword of justice punishes for us to feel aversion or terror for such crimes. But once they have, regrettably, been committed, we must accept the inevitable and not surrender to remorse which is pointless. Remorse is null since it did not prevent us from committing the crime, and void since it does not enable us to make amends: it would be absurd to surrender to it and absurder still to fear punishment in the next world if we have been fortunate enough to escape it in this. God forbid that anyone should think that in saying this I seek to give enouragement to crime! Of course we must do everything we can to avoid criminal acts—but we must learn to shun them through reason and not out of unfounded fears which lead nowhere, the effects of which are in any case neutralized in anyone endowed with strength of mind. Reason, yes reason alone must alert us to the fact that doing harm to others can never make us happy, and our hearts must make us feel that making others happy is the greatest joy which Nature grants us on this earth. All human morality is contained in these words: *make others as happy as you yourself would be*, and never serve them more ill than you would yourself be served. These, my dear fellow, are the only principles which we should follow. There is no need of religion or God to appreciate and act upon them: the sole requirement is a good heart.

But, preacher, I feel my strength abandon me. Put aside your prejudices, be a man, be human, have no fear and no hope. Abandon your divinities and your creeds which have never served any purpose save to put a sword into the hand of man. The mere names of horrible gods and hideous faiths have caused more blood to be shed than all other wars and scourges on earth. Give up the idea of another world, for there is none. But do not turn your back on the pleasure in this of being happy yourself and of making others happy. It is the only means Nature affords you of enlarging and extending your capacity for life. My dear fellow, sensuality was ever the dearest to me of all my possessions. All my life, I have bowed down before its idols and always wished to end my days in its arms. My time draws near. Six

women more beautiful than sunlight are in the room adjoining. I was keeping them all for this moment. Take your share of them and, pillowed on their bosoms, try to forget, as I do, the vain sophisms of superstition and the stupid errors of hypocrisy.

NOTE

The Dying Man rang, the women entered the room, and in their arms the priest became a man corrupted by Nature— and all because he had been unable to explain what he meant by Corrupted Nature.