

The Age of Reason

As late as the beginning of this century, Theodore Roosevelt, the twenty-sixth President of the United States, chose to refer to Thomas Paine as a 'filthy little atheist'. He was mistaken on all counts, not least on the third. So far from being an atheist, Paine was an ardent deist: indeed his principal motive for hurrying to finish the first volume of his treatise on religion, *The Age of Reason*, before his arrest, was his fear that, in spite of Robespierre's Festival of the Supreme Being, the anti-clericalism of the French Republicans was leading them into atheism. What he was not, and with good reason, was a Christian. He made a special point of attacking Christianity because, in one form or another, it was the official religion of the countries in which he had lived, but, as we shall see, he was equally opposed to any religion which could, in his view, only have the effect of setting up a barrier between human beings and what he believed to be the benevolent deity who had created them.

The two volumes of *The Age of Reason*, though composed within a year of one another, differ considerably both in length and content. Though the first contains seventeen chapters and the second only two, entitled respectively 'The Old Testament' and 'The New Testament', the first is much the shorter, occupying sixty-three pages in Conway's edition of Paine's writings, whereas the second occupies one hundred and ten pages. As for the difference in content, while the first contains some sharp comments on the grosser absurdities of Christian theology, it is mainly devoted to pleading the cause of deism. The second volume has little to say directly in defence of deism, but mounts a sustained attack first on the Old Testament as purporting to be the word of God and second on the New Testament as purporting to establish the divinity of Jesus Christ.

The major reason for this difference is that Paine considered it to be of primary importance to defend deism against the threat of atheism and believed that he had achieved this in his first volume. A minor reason is that when he wrote the first volume he rather surprisingly lacked access to any copy of the Bible, so that in quoting from it he had to rely upon his memory. This did not lead him seriously astray. When he wrote the second volume, he was in possession of a Bible, no doubt supplied to him by the Monroes. As a result, one might have expected the second volume to be an improvement on the first, but in fact it goes the other way. For once he had the Bible in his grip, the procedure which Paine adopted was to go through the whole of the Old and New Testaments, book by book, pointing out the absurdities and contradictions which they contain, the unflattering picture which they give of the deity and his chosen people, and the ridiculous interpretations which Jewish and Christian apologists have put upon them.

The consequence of this approach is that the second volume of *The Age of Reason* is not likely to be of much interest to the modern reader who, if he makes use of his reason, will find very little in either Testament that he is able to regard as literally true, except perhaps for some brutal and pathetic episodes in early Jewish history. What makes the position worse is that Paine, having rightly identified the Bible as primarily a specimen of mythology, does not go on to appraise it as a work of art. For example he can find nothing better to say about the book of Ecclesiastes, which at least in the Authorized English translation is hauntingly poetic, than that 'it is written as the solitary reflections of a worn-out debauchee'.¹ The only parts of the Bible for which he has a good word are the 19th Psalm because of the deistic implications of its opening verse: 'The Heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth his handiwork', and, surprisingly, the book of Job. I say, surprisingly, because Paine regarded the god in whom he believed as a benevolent being, and the misfortunes which God is represented in the book of Job as allowing Satan to inflict upon Job, merely in order to test his faith, are indications, if not of positive malevolence, at least of a suspicious and ruthless insecurity, which is characteristic more of a tyrant than of a wholly powerful and benevolent deity. It is true that Job is said to have been eventually rewarded for his steadfastness by being endowed with more offspring and more animals than Satan had been permitted to destroy, but Paine had too much

¹ *Writings of Thomas Paine*, vol. IV, p. 127.

common sense to believe that virtue is made proportionate to property in this world, and while he did believe in an after-life, it was not a life in which the material losses which a good man might have suffered were compensated in kind, since he did not think of the after-life as physical: for instance, he characterizes the notion of the resurrection of the body as 'a miserable conceit'.¹

One reason why Paine may have excluded the book of Job from his general condemnation of the Bible is that he did not believe that it belonged there at all. He considered it to be a book of Persian or Chaldean origin, older in date than the Pentateuch, and translated into Hebrew at some date after the Jews returned from their captivity in Babylon. Paine's grounds for this view are set out at length in his answer to the Bishop of Llandaff, Richard Watson, whose *An Apology for the Bible*, published in 1796, had been a tolerably sympathetic rejoinder to *The Age of Reason*.

Put concisely, Paine's arguments were that Job is not a Jewish name, that Uz, where he was said to live, is not in Jewish territory, that there is no reference in the book to any Jewish law or ceremony, that the Jewish commentator, Aben-Ezra, had asserted that the book had been translated into Hebrew from another language, that Spinoza had expressed the belief that Job was a Gentile, that Origen speaks of the book as older than Moses, that in the Old Testament, as opposed to the New, Satan does not appear as a separate personage, all the evils which it records being perpetrated or commanded directly by God, that Job is represented as adoring and submitting to God but not as praying to him, and finally that the book contains 'astronomical allusions' which would be consistent with the learning of 'Persian magi', 'but foreign to the relatively illiterate Jews'.²

So far as Paine was concerned, the fact, if it be one, that the Book of Job had a Gentile origin should not have appeared a strong reason for excluding it from the biblical canon, since he rightly holds the same to be true of the two mutually inconsistent accounts of the world's creation which figure in the book of Genesis and, again rightly, finds pagan sources for every feature of the Christian myth. Admittedly, not all his attributions are well justified. For instance, I think it unlikely that the legend of Satan's revolt against God, immortalized by Milton, is historically connected with the Greek myth of the war waged by the race of giants against Zeus, or that the confinement of one of the giants to Mount Etna foreshadowed Satan's confinement in Hell.

¹ *Writings of Thomas Paine*, vol. IV, p. 285.

² *ibid.*, pp. 272ff.

However, the way in which Paine embroiders on these assumptions is effective.

The Christian mythologists, after having confined Satan in a pit, were obliged to let him out again to bring on the sequel of the fable. He is then introduced into the garden of Eden in the shape of a snake, or a serpent, and in that shape he enters into familiar conversation with Eve, who is in no way surprised to hear a snake talk; and the issue of this tête-à-tête is that he persuades her to eat an apple, and the eating of that apple damns all mankind.¹

Paine goes on to argue, very plausibly, that the Christian mythologists allow Satan not merely to emerge from his pit, in order to serve God's purpose of persuading Eve and, through Eve, Adam to disobey their creator, but to enjoy at least for a considerable time what well may be regarded as a victory over God. Not only did these mythologists fail to return Satan to his pit, or bury him under a mountain, after his original mission was accomplished, but 'they bribed him to stay. They promised him ALL the Jews, ALL the Turks by anticipation, nine-tenths of the world beside, and Mahomet into the bargain. After this,' says Paine, 'who can doubt the bountifulness of the Christian Mythology.'²

But the mythologists go further. Since God is represented as punishing not just the one serpent but the whole class of serpents for the temptation of Eve, condemning them to go on their bellies and eat dust, it follows, if God is presumed to be just, that the adoption of the disguise was Satan's own device, to which God feared that he might again resort. But what if God is also presumed to be omniscient? In that case he must have penetrated Satan's disguise, with the consequence that his punishment of serpents was unjust. Faced with this inconsistency in the myth, Paine chooses to interpret it as depriving God, at least temporarily, of his omniscience. Thus he is able to say of the mythologists:

Not content with this deification of Satan, they represent him as defeating by stratagem, in the shape of an animal of the creation, all the power and wisdom of the Almighty. They represent him as having compelled the Almighty to the *direct necessity* either of surrendering the whole of the creation to the government and sovereignty of this

¹ *ibid.*, p. 29.

² *ibid.*

Satan, or of capitulating for its redemption by coming down upon earth and exhibiting himself upon a cross in the shape of a man.

Had the inventors of this story told it the contrary way, that is, had they represented the Almighty as compelling Satan to exhibit *himself* on a cross in the shape of a snake, as a punishment for his new transgression, the story would have been less absurd, less contradictory. But instead of this they make the transgressor triumph, and the Almighty fall.¹

In fairness, it should here be said that it is nowhere stated, or even implied, in the book of Genesis that the serpent who brought about the downfall of Adam and Eve was Satan in disguise. Indeed, we have already remarked that the only book of the Old Testament in which Satan makes a personal appearance is the book of Job and that this was one of the reasons which Paine himself gave for excluding that book from the canon. I have no doubt that the author or authors of that part of the book of Genesis in which sin is attributed to Adam and Eve had been influenced by the Zoroastrian belief in an eternal struggle between a good spirit of light and an evil spirit of darkness; yet, in spite of some inconsistencies, it is sufficiently clear that the tendency of the Bible as a whole is to express belief in the supremacy of a God who, in the New Testament at least, is held to be good.

But, even if we dismiss Satan from the scene, what a strange story it is, stranger indeed than if we had allowed Satan to remain. For now we are faced with the question why an all-powerful and wholly beneficent deity should have burdened his human creatures with a disposition to sin. The stock answer is that he showed his beneficence by bestowing on them the gift of free will: it was only their own fault if they misused it. But even if the requisite notion of free will is coherent, which I doubt, and even if we refrain from asking the question what causes men to make bad choices, we can surely still ask why any of the possible choices needed to be bad. Why should not all the alternatives be beneficial? If I leave a child free to choose from a number of presents, I do not express my love for him by making sure that some of them are harmful.

Let us, however, let this objection pass, and let us not waste time on dissecting the pointless story of the Virgin Birth or analysing a theory of personal identity which permits God, the son of God and the Holy Ghost to be both three persons and only one. In whatever way he did it,

¹ *Writings of Thomas Paine*, vol. IV, pp. 30-31.

why was it necessary that God should turn himself into a man at all? The orthodox answer is that he displayed his great love for his creatures by suffering the agony of crucifixion and so expiating the original sin of Adam and Eve, which they mysteriously handed on to their descendants. Since he himself imposed the penalties for this sin, it is not easy to understand why he did not simply annul them. This would have been a loving act, and it would have had the advantage of applying to the whole human race, instead of making their salvation depend upon the late arrival and limited spread of Christianity, whereby most of them, according to the versions of Christianity that prevailed in Paine's lifetime, and even now are far from being extinct, at least run a serious risk of being eternally damned.

Moreover, the most serious of the penalties which Adam and Eve were supposed to have incurred through their disobedience was that of their eventual death, and this has not been abrogated. The crucifixion of Jesus has not made us immortal. It is true that the sayings attributed to him imply that there will be life after death, but this is by no means an assurance of universal bliss: it would appear that most persons are forced to remain in limbo, and that many are doomed to eternal suffering. The description of 'Gentle Jesu, meek and mild', which is commonly presented for our acceptance, does not fit the rather irascible character whom the Evangelists quite frequently portray. 'Forgive your enemies' is a good moral principle, but it is not one to which Jesus is represented as consistently adhering.

I do not press this point because it would take us too far afield to consider how far a coherent description can be extracted from the Gospels of a Jewish preacher, in whose actual existence it would be reasonable to believe. The gravamen of Paine's charge against Christianity is not that Jesus is himself a figure of legend, or even that he was not divine, which in fact there is no good evidence that he ever claimed to be, but rather that the principle in which the religion is grounded is morally objectionable. The principle in question is that of vicarious atonement. As Paine puts it, 'the theory or doctrine of redemption has for its basis an idea of pecuniary justice, and not that of moral justice.' 'If,' he continues,

I owe a person money, and cannot pay him, and he threatens to put me in prison, another person can take the debt upon himself and pay it for me. But if I have committed a crime, every circumstance of the case is changed. Moral justice cannot take the innocent for the guilty even if the innocent would offer itself. To suppose justice to do this, is

to destroy the principle of its existence, which is the thing itself. It is then no longer justice. It is indiscriminate revéngé.¹

For my own part, I am inclined to go still further than Paine. The idea that those who have caused suffering should themselves be made to suffer for it is, indeed, emotionally appealing. I find myself wishing that persons who have indulged in torture, especially the torture of children, should undergo retribution, not merely as a means of reforming them or deterring others, but retribution for its own sake. At the same time, my reason tells me that the notion of purely retributive punishment is not defensible. Somehow we have acquired the idea that wrongs are righted if harm is done to the person who perpetrated them; in some cases they can be: a thief, who has not got rid of it, can be obliged to return stolen property; but these cases are exceptional. If the thief is not in a position to make restitution, it is not clear how putting him in prison benefits his victim. There may be good utilitarian reasons for punishing murderers; but whatever form their punishment takes, and whatever effect it has, it does not have the effect of bringing the victim back to life. If pain is an evil, the infliction of more pain does not wipe the evil out. There is no such thing as squaring the account. Two wrongs do not make a right.

I am not the first person to reason in this fashion and I dare say that others who agree with me so far have sometimes found it difficult to follow the argument where it leads them. I am bound to admit that I often do so myself. My reason and my emotions come into conflict and my reason does not always win. I sometimes find myself wishing harm to others, either reacting to what I take to be a personal affront, or else more honourably out of moral indignation. It adds to the confusion, that at least in the second type of case, I cannot bring myself to be ashamed of my feelings, though I believe that the actual exercise of vengeance would be beyond me. This is not an objection to violence as such, for instance in self-defence or in the interest of a cause which one believes to be just. It is the shady concept of retribution, and the depth of one's emotional commitment to it, that are mentally disturbing.

I have been drawn into a digression, besides hovering on the fringes of a philosophical problem which I do not know how to solve. One thing which is clear to me, however, is that whichever view one takes of retribution in general, there is no justification of any sort for the principle of vicarious atonement, and this fact, as Paine perceived, is itself sufficient to demolish the claim of Christianity to be even a beneficent myth.

¹ *Writings of Thomas Paine*, vol. IV, p. 43.

At the time that Paine wrote *The Age of Reason*, the view of orthodox Christians was that the Bible was the word of God. For example, in the case of the Old Testament, it was believed that God dictated the books of the Pentateuch to Moses and the book of Samuel to Samuel, and that it was through divine inspiration that Solomon wrote his Proverbs and David his Psalms. As might be expected, Paine has no difficulty in discrediting all these attributions. His principal and decisive argument is that persons are not the authors of books which record in the past tense events that happened long after their deaths or actually consist in the deaths of the putative authors themselves. This applies in the case of both Moses and Samuel. There are Proverbs which refer retrospectively to Solomon and at least one of the best-known Psalms was evidently written after the Jews had returned from their captivity in Babylon, which occurred more than four hundred years after King David's death.

Admittedly, the fact that these books were not written by the authors to whom they were long attributed does not entail that the persons who did compile them were not divinely inspired. Paine makes much of the fact that the decision as to which books definitely constituted the Bible, as opposed to those that were apocryphal, was not taken until the fourth century AD and then at least to some extent by lot, but even this is not formally inconsistent with its being in its roundabout way the work of God. A stronger argument, assuming the conception of the deity that was shared by Paine and his opponents, is that if the Bible in its entirety were the word of God all of the statements in it must be true; but this at least is not logically possible since many of them are mutually inconsistent in the Old Testament as well as the New.

Another point on which Paine and his adversaries agreed was that God was morally good, but, as Paine repeatedly points out, this is not the conclusion that one would naturally draw if one took everything that was asserted of God in the Old Testament to be literally true. Or rather, it is not the conclusion that one would draw if one believed that such things as the barbarous treatment by the Jews of the captives that accrued to them in warfare were not only truly reported by God's own amanuenses, but also enacted in accordance with his instructions or at any rate with his approval. The line that Paine takes is that these barbarities were in fact committed by the Jews, but that they were not sanctioned by God.

Could we permit ourselves to suppose that the Almighty would distinguish any nation of people by the name of *his chosen people*, we must suppose that people to have been an example to all the rest of

the world of the purest piety and humanity, and not such a nation of ruffians and cut-throats as the ancient Jews were – a people who, corrupted by and copying after such monsters and imposters as Moses and Aaron, Joshua, Samuel and David, had distinguished themselves above all others on the face of the known earth for barbarity and wickedness. If we will not stubbornly shut our eyes and steel our hearts it is impossible not to see, in spite of all that long-established superstition imposes upon the mind, that the flattering appellation of *his chosen people* is no other than a LIE which the priests and leaders of the Jews had invented to cover the baseness of their own characters; and which Christian priests sometimes as corrupt, and often as cruel, have professed to believe.¹

Never mind if Paine's description even of the ancient Jews is not altogether fair. Even he may not have been exempt from the prejudice against the Jewish people which was widespread among his contemporaries and is not yet extinct. What is much more remarkable is Paine's failure to notice that the very existence of barbarity and wickedness which he attributes to the Jews presents a threat to his own religious beliefs. The problem of evil is just as much a problem for deists as it is for Christians, at least so long as the deists believe, as Paine did, that their Supreme Being is wholly benevolent as well as all-powerful. I also find it curious that while Paine addresses arguments, which we shall presently examine, to support his belief in a Creator, he takes the benevolence of this deity for granted. To put it more precisely, he looks for no further proof than the accomplishment of the Creation. But while Christianity may be a myth, the existence of human suffering is not.

For the most part, Paine is content to accept the books of Kings and Chronicles, so far as they are mutually consistent, as historically accurate, except when they record such untoward events as Elijah's transportation by a whirlwind into Heaven. Neither has he much of interest to say about the Old Testament prophets, beyond pointing out that of all of them only Isaiah and Jeremiah are mentioned in the historical books. The name of Jonah does occur in Kings but is not connected with the book of Jonah, which Paine, solely on internal evidence, chooses to regard as a Gentile satire.

There is perhaps one point worth noticing in Paine's rapid review of the prophetic books. The phrase 'Behold, a virgin² shall conceive, and

¹ *Writings of Thomas Paine*, vol. IV, pp. 114–15.

² In the original Hebrew, the word can be taken to mean no more than 'young woman'.

bear a son', occurring in the fourteenth verse of the seventh chapter of the book of Isaiah, had frequently been construed as a prediction of the Virgin Birth of Jesus Christ. Merely by examining the context in which the phrase appears, Paine is able to show that it is represented as a promise, reputedly given by Isaiah to Ahaz, King of Judah, that he would receive a sign from the Lord, assuring him of victory over the Kings of Syria and Israel who were allied against him. Isaiah had no difficulty in producing a child who was said to satisfy the necessary condition. It is only from the book of Chronicles that we learn that Ahaz was nevertheless defeated, his capital, Jerusalem, pillaged, a hundred and twenty thousand of his subjects killed, and two hundred thousand carried into captivity.

Paine deals more summarily with the New Testament than with the Old. Without the benefit of the biblical scholarship which began to flourish in the nineteenth century, he succeeds in making a good case for the view, now generally accepted by scholars of all persuasions, that the gospels were not written by the persons whose names they bear or compiled until many decades after the dates which they assign to the events that they claim to report. Apart from stressing the improbability of the entire story, and the absence of any corroborating evidence from contemporary sources, Paine relies mainly on the discrepancies in the four accounts of its principal episodes. Thus the Annunciation is not mentioned at all in the books ascribed to Mark and John and different accounts of it are given in Matthew and Luke. It is only in Matthew that Herod is represented as ordering the murder of all male children under two years of age, causing Joseph and Mary to flee with the infant Jesus into Egypt. Paine considers it worth remarking that John the Baptist, who was also under two years of age, survived the order, but his adversaries might retort that there is no evidence that Herod's order was carried out with total efficiency. This would, however, be a dangerous argument for them to use since such a proceeding would be likely to attract notice and there is no independent evidence that it ever took place at all.

The author of Matthew is again the odd man out when it comes to reporting the details of the crucifixion and the resurrection. He alone writes of an earthquake accompanying the crucifixion, of there being darkness over all the land from the sixth to the ninth hour, of the opening of graves and the emergence from them of saints, all of them phenomena which might have been expected to have attracted public notice. More importantly, the author of Matthew alone reports that the Jews persuaded Pilate to set a guard upon Jesus's sepulchre and alone

introduces another earthquake when an angel rolls back the stone from the door of the sepulchre and then sits upon it. The other Evangelical writers agree with him about the presence of angels though there is no general accord about their number and position, any more than there is about the identities of the women who visited the sepulchre and the times at which they did so.

Paine pays similar attention to the discrepancies in the gospel accounts of the posthumous appearances of Jesus to his disciples and the place and manner of his ascension into Heaven. Since his criticism is based upon a selection of the internal evidence, which it is open to anyone to peruse, I do not think it necessary to enter into all its details.

The only other parts of the New Testament of which Paine takes any notice are the Epistles of Paul. Here, again lacking the knowledge acquired through modern scholarship, he fails to identify these epistles as the earliest of Christian sources or to acknowledge the decisive part that Paul played in the diffusion and the doctrinal content of Christianity. This allows him to say that

Whether the fourteen epistles ascribed to Paul were written by him or not is a matter of indifference; they are either argumentative or dogmatical; and as the argument is defective and the dogmatical part is merely presumptive, it signifies not who wrote them.¹

The only point on which he explicitly joins issue with Paul concerns Paul's taking resurrection to be evidence of immortality. Paine's counter-argument is that the evidence goes the other way: 'If I have already died in this body, and am raised again in the same body in which I have died, it is presumptive evidence that I shall die again.'² This depends upon the assumption, which Paul presumably did not accept, that resurrection entails reincarnation: moreover if the idea of reincarnation makes any sense at all, which is open to dispute, it can accommodate immortality, so long as an infinite series of reincarnations of the same creature is allowed to be a possibility.

Paine's final assessment of Christianity is very harsh:

Of all the systems of religion that ever were invented, there is none more derogatory to the Almighty, more unedifying to man, more repugnant to reason, and more contradictory in itself, than this thing called Christianity. Too absurd for belief, too impossible to convince,

¹ *Writings of Thomas Paine*, vol. IV, pp. 180-81.

² *ibid.*, p. 177.

and too inconsistent for practice, it renders the heart torpid, or produces only atheists and fanatics. As an engine of power, it serves the purposes of despotism; and as a means of wealth, the avarice of priests; but so far as respects the good of man in general, it leads to nothing here or hereafter.¹

I do not know what to say to this. I do not find Christianity credible, but I am not sure that it is a more absurd myth than the religion of Zoroaster. Undoubtedly it has bred many fanatics, but so have the Hindu religions, and so has Islam. It would be difficult to find a more obnoxious cult than that of the Aztecs, of which human sacrifice on a large scale was an integral part. Even so, Christianity might be considered worse if its threat of damnation is understood to imply a probability of eternal suffering. Perhaps few Christians nowadays take such a literal view of Hell but many have done so in the past. I suppose that if one takes full account of the persecution of heretics, the frequency and savagery of the religious wars which Christianity had engendered, the harm caused, especially to children, by the pernicious doctrine of original sin, a case could be made for saying that the world would have been better off without Christianity. All the same, it is ridiculous for Paine to assert that it has never done any good at all. Quite apart from the magnificent music, painting and literature which it has inspired, many people have found comfort in believing it, and it has caused many people, however irrationally, to lead admirable lives. The truth is that it is futile to attempt to draw up balance sheets of this kind. There is just no telling what the course of history would have been if Constantine in the fourth century AD had chosen to make Mithraism or the cult of Isis, rather than Christianity, the official religion of the Roman Empire or if Julian the Apostate, a much finer character, had been able at a slightly later date to rehabilitate the pagan gods.

For my own part, since I do not count secular humanism as a religion, I abjure any religious belief, but this was far from being true of Thomas Paine. His hatred of Christianity, his determination to bring all its faults to light, arose from his conviction that the widespread influence which it commanded was a disservice to religion. God should be worshipped directly as the Creator of the Universe. We have no need of any intermediaries. As for our knowledge of him it can come to us only through his works:

We have only a confused idea of his power, if we have not the means of comprehending something of its immensity. We can have no idea

¹ *ibid.*, pp. 189-90.

of his wisdom, but by knowing the order and manner in which it acts. The principles of science lead to this knowledge; for the Creator of man is the Creator of science, and it is through that medium that man can see God, as it were, face to face.¹

Paine's confession of faith in the first chapter of *The Age of Reason* is short and moving:

I believe in one God and no more: and I hope for happiness beyond this life.

I believe in the equality of men, and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, having mercy, and endeavouring to make our fellow creatures happy.²

After going on to say that he does not believe in the creed proposed by any church that he knows of, Paine ends with the simple statement 'My own mind is my own church.'³

Paine's moral sentiments are unexceptionable. What remains in question is his deism itself. Does he supply us with any good reason for believing that God exists?

The arguments which he briefly put forward were not new. They were what Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason* had called 'The Cosmological Proof', and 'The Physico-Theological Proof', more popularly known as 'The Argument from Design'. Kant refuted both of them. It is, however, unlikely that Paine had heard of Kant, though *The Critique of Pure Reason* was published in 1781. Paine did not read German, and the book was not translated into English until 1855. He could have read David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, which was published in 1779, three years after Hume's death, but there is no evidence that he did so.

Paine's rendering of the Cosmological Proof is extremely brief.

The only idea man can affix to the name of God, is that of a *first cause*, the cause of all things. And, incomprehensibly difficult as it is for a man to conceive what a first cause is, he arrives at the belief of it from the tenfold greater difficulty of disbelieving it.⁴

¹ *Writings of Thomas Paine*, vol. IV, p. 191.

² *ibid.*, pp. 21-2.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 47.

After adding, irrelevantly, that there is more difficulty in conceiving of space and time as not coming to an end than their coming to an end, Paine goes on to assert that everything of which we are aware, including oneself, 'carries in itself the internal evidence that it did not make itself'.¹

The fact that nothing, whether organic or inorganic, makes itself is then supposed to lead us, compulsively, 'to the belief of a first cause eternally existing, of a nature totally different to any material existence we know of, and by the power of which all things exist; and this first cause, man calls God.'²

The flaws in this argument are obvious. If one starts with the premiss that everything has a cause, one cannot consistently arrive at the conclusion that there was a first cause; for a first cause, by definition, is something that does not have a cause. Even if it were the case, which I doubt, that every object displayed internal evidence that it did not make itself, it would not follow that something else made it; it might not have been 'made' at all. Presumably Paine held this to be true of God, but there again he succumbs to the contradiction of starting with the premiss that everything is made by something else and concluding with the existence of an unmade maker. He could, indeed, have avoided the contradiction by limiting his premiss to the proposition that everything physical is made by something else, but since the argument would then carry the implication that the maker was physical in its turn, it would have left him with no warrant for a transition to a purely spiritual first cause. This was, in fact, the mainstay of Kant's argument. He held that the concept of causality applied only to constituents of the phenomenal world: it lost its meaning when it was extended to an object that was supposed to transcend space and time.

One may, however, ask whether this was a supposition that Paine actually made. It is customary for deists, as indeed for persons adhering to any religion that incorporates belief in a Creator, to describe him as eternal but I have not discovered any arguments in favour of this proposition, or even any explanation of what it is supposed to mean. The one point that seems clear is that if there was an act of creation it must have taken place at some instant in time. I think that we have to agree with Kant that the notion of even a single descent into time on the part of a being who exists outside time is not intelligible. Suppose then that we construe eternal existence as equivalent to existence at every moment of time, perhaps with the implication that this series of

¹ *ibid.*

² *ibid.*

moments has neither beginning nor end. This very nearly brings the Creator into his universe, except that he is not endowed with spatial properties. We are left with the picture of a series of physical events accompanied by and, more importantly, preceded by an infinite series of purely psychical events. Let us grant, for the sake of argument, that this picture is intelligible. Then the question arises why the physical events are thought to require these predecessors. Since causality alone would not carry us beyond the physical series, the answer must be that the physical events are thought to furnish some overall explanation of the physical world. In this way the cosmological argument gives way to the argument from design.

I implied earlier that it was surprising to find Paine concerning himself only with the question whether space and time would ever come to an end, since the doctrine of creation, which he wished to uphold, bore rather on their having a beginning. The position which we have attributed to him, in an attempt to make his deism coherent, is that space had a beginning, in the sense that there was a time when space had not yet been created, but that time itself had not. The idea of there being series which are infinite in both directions, inasmuch as they lack both a first and last term, is familiar enough in mathematics: the series of fractions intervening between two cardinal numbers provides a simple example. Its application to time, however, is more dubious. The propositions that time had a beginning and that it did not are both easy to formulate. Either there is just one event that precedes every other, or there is no such event: for every event there is an event which precedes it. The trouble is that if one asks which of these propositions is true, our imaginations falter. Neither proposition is verifiable on its own. At best, one or other forms part of a scientific theory which as a whole accords better than its rivals with our current stock of observations. Currently, the theory which appears to be most strongly supported is one that allows for there having been a first event. I hope to have made it clear that this is not a first cause, in any sense that would have been acceptable to Paine.

I turn now to the argument from design. It is confidently supported throughout the first volume of Paine's book by references to Newtonian mechanics, especially in its dealings with astronomy, and to the successful applications of geometry to physical phenomena. The operation of the lever is one example. William Paley's *A View of the Evidences of Christianity*, which has become the standard text in the exposition of the argument from design, was not published until 1794, but it went beyond Paine only in laying greater stress upon the

adaptation of means to ends in the structure and behaviour of organisms and in developing an analogy with human artefacts. These additions do nothing to weaken the objections already raised by Kant and Hume.

Kant's objection once again is that there is no legitimate transition from empirical phenomena, however much their orderly arrangement may impress us, to the existence of a designer beyond the reach of our experience. We have no reason to suppose that things in the natural world are not capable on their own account of exhibiting the order and harmony and the obedience to universal laws that we discover in them. Hume, after putting into the mouth of one of the characters in his *Dialogues* a very strong statement of the argument from design, on the theme that 'The curious adapting of means to ends, throughout all nature, resembles exactly, though it much exceeds, the productions of human contrivance' with the consequence that 'the Author of nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man: though possessed of much larger faculties, proportional to the grandeur of the work, which he has executed',¹ supplies another character, Philo, with a set of objections which, to my mind, are even more convincing. I should add that I am in fundamental agreement with Hume's view that all causal judgements need to be ultimately based on regularities that occur within our experience.

Assuming this to be so, Philo has no difficulty in showing that the argument of his opponent, Cleanthes, is no stronger than an argument from analogy. But then, if we assume that like effects have like causes, which is a crucial move in Cleanthes's argument, we have no warrant for concluding that the Universe was planned by an infinite eternal incorporeal Being, since we have no experience of anything of this sort. Human artefacts are constructed by persons who are physically embodied and do not live for ever.

Viewed in this light the analogy is too strong to suit the apologist for deism, but in another aspect it is too weak. There is no denying that, in addition to human artefacts, the world contains many natural objects which resemble artefacts in that they or their parts perform some function, to which they are more or less well adapted. But this is not enough for the deist. He needs to show that the universe as a whole is like a machine: at least that there is some purpose which it serves. The world as a whole is no more like a machine than it is like an animal or vegetable organism, and there is no evidence whatsoever of there being any purpose which it serves.

¹ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Norman Kemp Smith (Bobbs Merrill, 12th ed. 1977), p. 143.

Philo is represented as making two further points of importance. The first is that if the features of the physical world which are thought to call for explanation are referred back to 'a similar universe of ideas',¹ why should we stop there? Why should not the series of ideas itself stand in need of explanation? It is obvious that this point is not weakened but only obscured if 'the universe of ideas' is deified.

The second point is a variant of the first. Experience has shown us, as Philo is made to say, that 'matter can preserve that perpetual agitation, which seems essential to it, and yet maintain a constancy in the forces, which it produces'.² Why then should it be thought incapable, without any supernatural assistance, of giving rise to 'all the appearing wisdom and contrivance which is in the universe'?³

In fairness to Paine it should be said at this point that his reading of Newton had led him to the conclusion that 'the natural state of matter, as to place, is a state of rest'.⁴ For there to be motion there has to be an external cause. I take the reference to be to Newton's concept of force. In my own opinion, the use of the term 'force' in physics is misleading, in so far as it suggests that something more 'active' is involved than relative changes of position. However this may be, there is no warrant in science for taking the causes of motion to be anything other than physical and I should want to take the further step of analysing these causes in terms of natural laws. Here, particularly, I should be at odds with Paine. 'Everything,' he writes, 'which has hitherto been discovered, with respect to the motion of the planets in the [solar] system, relates only to the laws by which the motion acts and not to the cause of motion.' And a little later he differentiates between the motion of matter on earth, in its states of decomposition or recomposition, and 'the motion that upholds the solar system [which] is of a entire different kind, and is not a property of matter'. I hope that I have said enough to show that even if this conclusion were acceptable, which I do not grant, it would not warrant the ascription of such motion to a supernatural cause.

These last quotations have been taken not from *The Age of Reason* but from a lecture entitled 'The Existence of God' which Paine delivered in January 1797 at the first public meeting in Paris of the Society of Theophilanthropists which Paine had helped to found in the previous September. Perhaps it is because the lecture is primarily devoted to recommending the study of natural philosophy as an antidote to

¹ *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, p. 162.

² *ibid.*, p. 183.

³ *ibid.*, p. 184.

⁴ *Writings of Thomas Paine*, vol. IV, p. 241.

atheism and contains no onslaught upon Christianity that Conway regards it as an early work, dating perhaps from the middle 1770s, when Paine was writing for the *Pennsylvania Magazine*, and polished up for the occasion. Not that Paine ever gave up his view that mathematics and the natural sciences should be taught in schools, rather than the Latin and Ancient Greek which dominated the curriculum, at least in the more prestigious establishments, not only in Paine's day but well into this century. Paine's objection to this practice is bluntly stated in the first part of *The Age of Reason*.

As there is nothing new to be learned from the dead languages, all the useful books being already translated, the languages are become useless, and the time expended in teaching and in learning them is wasted.¹

Consequently, he proceeds to argue, the study of these languages should be abolished.

Having myself received a predominantly classical education, and believing that I derived some benefit from it, I should feel obliged to attempt to rebut Paine's argument if I had actually continued the study of the classics. As it is, there are so many who are much better qualified than I to take up Paine's challenge that I am content to leave the task to them.

A remark, made by Conway, that Paine's lecture to the Theophilanthropists was based on Newton's letters to Bentley, in which Newton himself postulates a divine power as necessary to explain planetary motion, is one on which I do feel obliged to comment. There is no balking the fact that many intelligent thinkers have been deists, Voltaire as well as Paine, Newton indeed more nearly Christian. It has been suggested to me² that it was rational to be a deist until Darwin developed his theory of evolution. I cannot accept this suggestion, since, if my arguments are valid, deism would not supply us with an explanation for any natural phenomena, and I do not think it rational to accept a wholly vacuous hypothesis. At the same time, I acknowledge that a neo-Darwinian explanation of adaptive behaviour in terms of a well fortified theory of natural selection at least tends to diminish the initial attraction of the argument from design.

Though he remained a member of it, the Theophilanthropical

¹ *ibid.*, p. 56.

² By my former colleague Richard Dawkins; see his admirable *The Blind Watchmaker* (Longman 1986).

Society developed in a way that cannot have been entirely welcome to Paine. Its members took to singing humanitarian and even theistic hymns and to sponsoring ethical readings from the Bible, as well as from Chinese, Hindu and Greek authors. Not that Paine did not intend his deism to sustain morality but what he took to be its scientific basis was more important to him.

The Theophilanthropical Society ceased to exist in Paris as a consequence of the Concordat which Napoleon Bonaparte concluded with Pope Pius VII in July 1801, reinstating Catholicism in France. Napoleon is reported to have said that he himself did not believe that such a person as Jesus Christ ever existed, but if the people were superstitious, he saw no point in thwarting them. Paine revived the Theophilanthropical Society in New York and its journal *The Theophilanthropist* appeared for a short time after his death. The Society was a forerunner of the South Place Ethical Society which holds its meetings in London in Conway Hall, very suitably named after the American Moncure Conway, to whom we have seen that we owe so much for our knowledge of the life and works of Thomas Paine.

The Age of Reason did not provoke the same hostility in England as the *Rights of Man*. Even so a bookseller called Thomas Williams who had sold one copy of it was tried before a special jury in 1797 on a charge of blasphemy and sentenced by Lord Kenyon to a year's imprisonment. On this occasion, Thomas Erskine appeared for the prosecution, evoking a letter of protest from Paine, in which he claimed, truly, that if he criticized the Bible it was from religious motives.

Indeed, whatever logical objections there may be to Thomas Paine's deism, one cannot but admire the force and courage of his attack not only on Christianity but on any form of religious superstition.