

REFLECTIONS ON THE ARGUMENT OF PASCAL & LOCKE, CONCERNING THE POSSIBILITY OF A FUTURE LIFE

Translated by Kirk Watson

One of my friends, whose only vice was a general incredulity with regard to anything that is called religion or revealed truth, claims that there is no revealed truth which isn't completely destroyed by metaphysical reasoning, which, according to him, are the only infallible means to be sure of the truth or falseness of anything.

Our conversations always turn on one of the most essential points of Religion; such as the existence of God, the spirituality & immortality of the soul, the liberty of man, & he fights all of these principles of Religion with the most specious reasoning, & usually drives me to the point of calling on faith to support my arguments.

Having found, in Locke's excellent *Treatise on Human Understanding*¹, Pascal's famous Argument, thought up, as Bayle says, unless I'm mistaken, by Arnobius, & which Locke in turn explained brilliantly, I thought that, by this master-stroke, I would win the argument with my friend. Indeed, nothing is stronger than this argument.

The rewards & punishments of another life, which the Almighty has established as the enforcements of his law, are of weight enough to determine the choice against whatever pleasure or pain this life can show, when the eternal state is considered but in its bare possibility, which nobody can throw into doubt. He that will allow exquisite & endless happiness to be but the possible consequence of a good life here, & the contrary state the possible reward of a bad one, must own himself to judge very much amiss if he does not conclude, - That a virtuous life, with the certain expectation of everlasting bliss, which may come, is to be preferred to a vicious one, with the fear of that dreadful state of misery, which it is very possible may overtake the guilty ; or, at best, the terrible uncertain hope of annihilation. This is obviously so, though the virtuous life here had nothing but pain, & the vicious continual pleasure: which yet is, for the most part, quite otherwise, & wicked men have not much advantage to brag of, even in their present possession ; nay, all things rightly considered, they even have, I think, the worse part here. But when infinite happiness is put into one scale, against infinite misery in the other; if the worst that comes to the pious man, if he mistakes, be the best that the wicked can attain to, if he be in the right, who can without madness run the venture? Who in his wits would choose to come within a possibility of infinite misery; which if he miss, there is yet nothing to be got by that chance outcome? Whereas, on the other side, the sober man ventures nothing against infinite happiness to be got, if his expectation comes not to pass. If the good man is in the right, he is eternally happy; if he mistakes, he's not miserable, he feels nothing. On the other side, if the wicked man is in the right, he is not happy; if he mistakes, he is infinitely miserable. Must it not be a most

¹ Book II, Ch. 21, V. 7 [Book II, chap. 21, §38].

obvious wrong judgment that does not presently see to which side, in this case, the preference is to be given?

None of our unbelievers has so far dared to attack this argument. I put it to my friend, a man who is upright, chaste, charitable to his neighbor, whose morals are well-regulated, & who strictly fulfills all external duties in line with the demands of the utmost probity. As for what's under the surface, I can say nothing; only God, who searches all hearts & minds, can judge him. This man, after pausing to think, tells me:

Make the proposition of paying one piaster² to gain a blissful eternity & to avoid an endless misery, to a man who thinks like Virgil:

*Felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas.
Atque metus omnes, & inexorabile fatum.
Subjecit pedibus, strepitumque: acherontis avari³.*

- and who thinks it certain that there is no other life after this one, to speak in strict philosophical rigor, he will tell you that, although you're only asking him for a single piaster, it's still too much to pay for nothingness or chimeras; & that there's even less parity & proportionality between a *piaster* & a non-existent being than there is between a point & infinity.

Besides, continues my Philosopher, as to the possibility of an eternally happy or miserable state, the situation of the man whom Locke calls a good man & a wicked one isn't the only one you find in nature. There can also be men who have practiced Philosophy to the point that they enjoy a perfect tranquility in this life, without any persuasion of an afterlife, & even with a strong persuasion of the opposite. Try Locke's argument on such as these; they'll certainly tell you that it would be madness to leave their state of perfect tranquillity, in which the supreme happiness in this world consists, to return to another one which is as full of doubts, fears, & uncertainty as is that of a man who professes the Christian Religion on the Gospel's terms; they will tell you that, for them, it would be the height of extravagance to take the side of uncertainty & doubt only from hopes or fears of a future which they see as chimerical; in their persuasion that none of those who take up your option has attained, by his belief or faith, this point of tranquility which constitutes the supreme happiness of this world and which they themselves have achieved only by the aid of Philosophy & reason, freed from the prejudices of education & authority. I'll explain this idea more amply, my friend added, by presenting the argument of a pagan Philosopher.

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² I.e., a low-value coin.

³ Happy the Man, who, studying Nature's Laws, / Thro' known Effects can trace the secret Cause. / His Mind possessing, in a quiet state, / Fearless of Fortune, & resign'd to Fate. (Virgil, *Georgics*, Book 2 (Dryden translation))

Imagine a Chinese philosopher, who doesn't believe in an afterlife (almost none of them do), who, in addition to this way of thinking, believes in perfect happiness in this world, & who is morally certain that he will enjoy it throughout his entire life.

Now imagine a zealous Missionary, who tries to convert this Philosopher to the Christian Religion.

After exhausting himself with arguments proving the truth of his system, but without managing to lead the Chinese Philosopher where he wants him, the Missionary concludes by saying: even if all I've shown you concerning the certainty of an afterlife isn't as precisely true & evident as I've shown them to be; still you must agree that what I've just explained to you as true & obvious is at least possible. I could never doubt that this possibility would strike a man like you, a man of reflection & reason, & who is able to judge his true interests properly. Therefore, allow me to share what one of our greatest Philosophers thought about this possibility.

Now suppose that the Missionary, having shared the argument in question, in all its power, with the Chinese Philosopher, addresses him, speaking as a man who thinks victory is already assured: Is this argument not convincing & irrefutable? Can your reason refuse so much light & evidence?

Now imagine that the Chinese man replies to the Missionary as follows:

You, or your Philosopher, posit, in your argument, two propositions which seem equally dubious to me.

The first is that no one can doubt the possibility of the event you've just announced to me.

The second is that this merely presumed possibility will persuade me to take the path you've shown me.

But I'll tell you, continues the Chinese man, that it seems to me that, since we know neither the measure of the power nor of the will of the first cause, upon which, you say, all the contingents depend, & since the very nature of this first cause is completely unknown to us, therefore we can't decide either for or against the possibility of the contingents, & especially on matters which are beyond the reach of our reason; therefore, our mind must remain, in this respect, in a perfect equilibrium, or at most in doubt.

Now, that said, your argument naturally gives rise to this question: whether it's reasonable that, in my state of doubt, I should decide to turn right and not left.

As for me, I think that doubt neither can nor should have any other effect on a rational mind than to lead it to attentively examine whether it's more probable than the contingent which is presented to it, or which it sees for itself as possible, is a real or a fictive being, & that, if his happiness or misery depends on the reality of this contingent, he should only decide after

serious analysis & careful comparison in order to judge with full confidence, whether it's more probable that the contingent will happen or that it won't.

This is the only path to take, according to right reason, particularly since a person has a clear interest in not being mistaken, if he risks a real benefit by mistakenly changing his condition.

But, if there's nothing to lose & everything to gain by turning right instead of left, that is, by following the path indicated to him, he would obviously be totally misguided if he hesitated even a moment before taking this path, however uncertain he may be of thereby gaining the benefit offered to him.

If we were to suppose that in some lottery there was only one black ticket, worth the whole Chinese Empire, amid a hundred million white tickets; a man who was allowed to pull a ticket for free would be insane to refuse simply because he's unlikely to pull the black ticket.

This is not my situation with respect to your system. But, before I explain why, I have to make a second observation on the argument of your Philosophy. It divides men into good & wicked men. This division doesn't seem right to me, with respect to what it aims to establish: I think that, by such a division, it won't be able to prove anything against me. It would have done better to divide men into those who are persuaded of the truth of your system, into those who doubt it, & into those who think it false.

I agree, though, that to hear you speak, those of the first class are all thought to be good people. But I maintain that, in the second & third classes, there can be as many good as wicked people.

If, by the definition of a good man, you mean he who believes your system is true & a wicked as he who doubts or believes it false, I disagree with your definition, & on this basis it would be a waste of breath to argue further.

But if, judging without bias, you call a good man one who is humane, charitable, just, & a wicked man one who in all or part is stained with the vices contrary to these virtues, then we agree.

I now agree that a wicked man, if he thinks even a little, must realize that, in his wickedness, he essentially sins against the inspiration of natural reason.

If this wicked man believes your system true; if he thinks it is possible, or if he merely doubts while positing that an excellent & infinite happiness can be the result of living a good life on Earth, or that an opposite state, that is, an infinite misery, can be the punishment for an unruly life, I admit that he must necessarily agree that he would be a poor judge unless he concluded from this that a good life, along with the certain expectation of an eternal felicity thereafter, is preferable to a bad life along with the fear of this terrifying misery with which, in this supposition, he thinks it quite likely that the wicked man finds himself one day surrounded as punishment for his crimes.

But you see that this argument only carries weight against a wicked man who is persuaded of the truth of your system, or who at least entertains a doubt as to its possibility; who lives, consequently, in a state of uncertainty & fear. It has no sway with a good man who is absolutely sure of the falseness of your system, who consequently has nothing to fear, & who has no rational grounds to lead him to change a state of life with which he has every reason to be content.

I expect you will now object with two things consequent to your system.

1. That it's insufficient to be a good man in the sense in which I think I am one, in order to have nothing to fear with respect to another, future life.

2. That the question is whether, after the proofs you've shared in favor of the truth of your system, I can continue in my conviction of its falsehood so confidently as to risk the possibility of an eventuality as fearsome as what you're preaching.

I agree that the object you present to me is important enough to deserve the most serious attention. But I want to act wisely, and I can only decide or make a choice based on the validity or non-validity of the proofs you bring for your system.

Thus far you have in no way persuaded me, & the closer I look at the probability that this future life, which you preach as something certain, is even possible, the more I find myself led to believe that it's nothing but a fine & specious chimera. And in this state I consider that the argument based on the importance of the matter, that is, on what I stand to gain if I'm right & what I have to lose if I'm mistaken, is insufficient to make me adopt your system & change a way of life with which I have every reason to be content.

Ultimately, this is really a kind of game or a matter of chance, since the event of which you speak is very doubtful, at least that's how I see it, & it's a matter of choosing between two paths, whose outcomes nobody truly knows, which might be very different; & which are ultimately thought to lead to infinite gain or loss, according as one is mistaken, or not.

Let's now make a clear comparison and assume that we put into the hands of a child all 26 characters from the printing press, representing the 26 letters of the alphabet, and let him arrange them however he likes.

In this hypothesis, I ask who you think would make the least fair wager: our Emperor who bets his empire against a piaster that this child won't arrange these 26 letters of the alphabet at first try, or an individual, who, by accepting this wager, bets a piaster against this empire, by betting that he would?

Oh! that's not a question, will say a man who argues on the principles of your Philosopher: for if the Emperor wins this bet, he only gains a piaster, & if he loses, he loses an empire worth a hundred million piasters, without even counting all the pleasures & advantages attached to the possession of such a vast empire. It would therefore be extremely unwise for our Emperor to make such an unfair wager: meanwhile, if this individual loses, he only loses

which we've mentioned, that exists between what there is to be hoped or feared in this world, before we can finally choose that which sound reason & prudence must dictate to anyone who can reflect on their own true interests.

If, in this analysis, it turns out that the event you preach to me, is certain, or that there is somewhat more probability that it will happen than that it wouldn't happen, I will agree that it's clearly in my interest to follow your advice.

But if, on the other hand, it turns out that it's only a chimera, & an invention for governance, or some other selfish aim of those who preach it, that would change everything: for in that case, there would obviously be more disproportionality between this chimera & reality, as banal as it may be, which I would be fruitlessly sacrificing to chase after this nothingness, than there is between the object of fear & hope in this future life, & that of the same hopes & fears of the present life which are to be sacrificed, or not, to this first object.

I would add that there isn't even any comparison to be made, to claim to measure any proportionality between the least plain of realities & sheer nothingness, or chimera, whereas there is always some relation between one reality & another, no matter what disproportionality there may be between the measure or worth of each of these realities.

The goods of this world, by whatever names we may call them, are real things, at least in my way of thinking; but if all the [so-called] certainty concerning the goods of another, future life, which you insinuate are true or at least probable, is only a chimera, even you must agree that I would be insane to sacrifice the reality of this life, be it ever so inestimable a life, in favor of a chimera which is openly recognized as such, & that only because of the infinite disproportion you set between the goods & evils of this other life & those of this present life; you'll also agree that I'd be insane in proportion to the quantity or measure of reality I would sacrifice to this chimera or this nothingness.

Yet I maintain that, according to my system, & granting yours to be true, this would mean sacrificing all the reality I now have & enjoy, to chase after a chimera: it would mean setting everything to one side, while expecting nothing in return. This sort of wager would be even more extravagant & unfair than in the case of the individual who bets a piaster for the Empire of China on particular terms, & consequently, I would have to be completely out of my mind.

Look at me right now. I feel well, both in body & mind. I live independently & in abundance; I am confident my life will go on this way until I die. What I own is secure, should I live to a hundred, I neither desire nor hope for anything more; I am, therefore, perfectly happy: for I think happiness consists in this perfect tranquillity. You can't disagree that, at least, it's possible to have this assurance: & indeed I do have it.

Hope should be based on the probability of attaining what one desires; consequently, hope presupposes desire; but desire never comes without anxiety: anxiety is an evil; therefore, hope is also an evil.

Now, I confess that hope has its pleasant sides; but you'll also agree that it's only pleasant relative to the probability of attaining one's desires. The probability is therefore the measure of the pleasure which can be given to hope, & since that which is only probable is not certain, it follows that the pleasure which comes from a probable hope has a very uncertain foundation.

Finally, nobody doubts that it's much better to have what one wants than to be pleased by hope while desiring it: this is my present situation. Hope only flatters the imagination, whereas possession brings real happiness; consequently, the certainty of possessing is always preferable to the hope of acquiring, no matter how well founded it is, & no matter what it aims at.

I have today, to repeat, all I need to lead a tranquil life, which I see as the supreme happiness, until the end of my days.

You'll object, no doubt, that this certainty cannot be physical, that it is at most only moral, & that men are subject to accidents.

I agree, but all I need in order to prefer my system to all others, is to know that it contains more certainty & more reality than any other one.

As for the accidents you speak of, aren't all men equally vulnerable to them, no matter which system they adopt? This is proved by daily experience. But this truth can't ruin the happiness of a Philosopher. The fear of accidents doesn't worry him, especially when, like me, he is convinced that there's infinitely greater probability that these accidents won't happen to him, than there are reasons to fear that they will. And in the meantime, he continually enjoys the present peacefully, & continues to enjoy it until the end, & this is what I call perfect happiness.

Now you'll tell me that I'm unfairly confusing the present happiness, which I now enjoy, with the perfect happiness; that there is, however, a vast difference between the two: that permanence is the defining characteristic of true happiness, & that present happiness is not only very short lived; but that it can also (assuming your system merely possible, as I have agreed) produce, for a man who restricts himself to it, an infinity of the most fearsome miseries.

I agree that the happiness I now enjoy will end at some point, just as it had a beginning; I also agree that I see neither impossibility nor physical repugnance in assuming your system true; but none of this is enough to make me renounce this present happiness, which, such as it is, brings me real benefits, in hopes of a future which is very uncertain *per se*, & which I, for my part, regard as purely imaginary, although not absolutely impossible.

Even granting that this future life is as possible as you say; that the benefits you want me to envisage are as amazing as could ever be imagined, none of that would resolve anything between us, so long as you fail to prove that it is more likely that this other life is a reality, than that it's a human invention; & this is what you have yet to prove to me, & it's something

which I don't believe that either you or any of the partisans of your system can ever prove, at least with clear & sound arguments.

You also preach to me, as necessary means to merit this future happiness, vigils, fasting, mortifications, scruples, fears, uncertainty, & anxiety. In brief, you hint that I must renounce, for the love of this hope, everything on which I have previously based my happiness. And that's all the worse for me, since I know I'm the sort of man who isn't for acting half-heartedly on such an essential point. I'm tender, delicate, & literal. If I were to follow your system, I should never believe I've done enough: my life would, therefore, become a compound of fear, worries, trouble, doubt, & continual anxiety, which might end in total despair. In brief, where I had once considered myself perfectly happy, I would risk becoming the most miserable of all creatures; & if my hopes were ultimately vain, would I not have sacrificed all the reality that can be sacrificed, not only for nothingness, but also for complete misery? What a fine sign of wisdom!

You'll surely respond, in the tracks of your Philosopher, that the contentment which the certainty of this hope inspires in the soul will counterbalance & even far surpass all that it forsakes, & all it suffers for the love of this immense & infinite good which it hopes to enjoy for an eternity; so that, you say, even if this hope were ultimately vain; it would turn out, all things considered, that the state of this soul which would have enjoyed the pleasure given by such a pleasing hope, even an empty one, would have been even happier in this world than that of another who, amid all possible earthly prosperity & contentment, lived in fear or in doubt of this event of an afterlife.

I respond, firstly, that it may in fact be true that this soul of which you speak, & in the situation you suppose it to be in, through the comparison it will have made between the immense & infinite blessings it hopes for with certainty, according to its ideas, & what it abandons or suffers in this world, for the love of the great goods it hopes for in the other one, can in fact achieve a state of perfect happiness; for I myself have claimed that happiness is only where we seek it. But you must agree that, if this soul mistaken in its hope, it will have preferred a chimerical happiness, since it only consisted in its imagination, to the real comforts & blessings of this world; & that it will have sacrificed & abandoned a real happiness in favor of a chimerical happiness, & that it will have submitted to real & unquantifiable pain for the love of its vain hope, that is, to chase after a chimera.

I respond secondly that it is true that perfect happiness in this world depends on perfect contentment & perfect peace of mind. But by adopting your system a person cannot achieve this perfect contentment & this perfect mental peace, which is necessary for happiness, except by a persuasion of the highest degree of certainty that they will someday achieve all the sweet & great things which this system promises & leads them to hope for. But you'll allow me, arguing coherently according to this system, as you've explained it to me, to doubt that the soul can ever attain this degree of certainty.⁴

⁴ For many are called, & very few are chosen. Matt. 22:14. St. Paul, despite his orderly lifestyle & the austerities in which he lived, is so uncertain of his salvation that he says in his first Epistle to Corinth. 4:3: "For while I feel guilty myself of nothing, if I'm not justified for that, it's the Lord who judges me."

I respond, thirdly, that however it may be with the soul in the state you've supposed, & whatever happiness it enjoys due to its supposed certainty; all that still proves nothing against me; this is because the case you have assumed in your comparison between this soul which is convinced, and another which feels doubt & fear about an afterlife, which you hold for certain, is not my case, on the contrary, at this very moment, I am as certain as I am of the best established geometrical truths, that this afterlife is only a pure chimera.

But how can you be so certain? you object. What's is your certainty based on?

My answer is that everyone agrees that it pertains to right reason, & even that it's its most essential property, to seek the truth & seize onto it when it is found; since our true happiness depends only the knowledge of the truth, & of what we do consequent to it. I agree that it is impossible for error to make us happy.

The next question is to know whether this afterlife you've spoken of, & which you depict in such glowing terms, is a real thing or only a chimera. We must also judge the degrees of evidence or probability of the possibility or impossibility that it will come about.

I've already told you that it seems impossible to judge surely & with certainty, whether certain contingents are possible: I've given you, unless I'm mistaken, a very plausible argument.

But I think there's a certain rule of truth, or a certain & infallible criterion to judge what is absolutely impossible, or purely illusory.

The contingent you preach as possible is one of the latter: this I will prove.

The truth is simple & one.

Whatever contradicts this truth is absolutely impossible & chimerical.

If this afterlife which you proclaim is certain as you claim, it can only be so by consequence of & relative to your system.

But I'll say that I've noticed that this system contains, not only principles which are in contradiction with immutable reason, that is, with the axioms recognized as true & accepted by all who have the faculty of reason; but that it is also based on principles which openly contradict each other; hence, I think I can draw this conclusion, that your system is wrong.

The next question is to know whether the clear contradictions found in this system might amount to certainty as to the erroneous character of this system.

And in 9:27... "I strike & mortify my body, & make it pliable to the service, *for fear that it may somehow occur that, having preached to the others, I myself may be reprov'd.*

It's a question of knowing whether, if this system is false, & with me finding myself in my present situation, as I've explained it to you, I run any risk of believing it true & acting in consequence.

Allow me, with respect to my persuasion up to now, to say that I shouldn't doubt either of these.

I should expect you now to raise the objection, as you've already done in our previous conversations, that reason is not competent to judge the truth of this system, & that it must be embraced through what you call *Faith*.

I will respond that reason is a light which has been shared with us by the cause of our existence, whatever that may be, to be employed in making us happy, in pursuit of what might benefit us, & by avoiding what might harm us. Why would you have me refuse this light in an occurrence which relates to nothing less than all my happiness? If you profess authority against this light; if by this authority, which, at least as far as I'm concerned, is unproved, you claim to force my acquiescence, my assent to propositions which seem contradictory to this light of my reason, in my turn I'll cite the Philosopher, from whom you have taken your great argument; whose writings you've shared, & which I've read with great pleasure. Here, then, is what he thinks on this matter:

In propositions then, whose certainty is built upon the clear perception of the agreement or disagreement of our ideas, attained either by immediate intuition, as in self-evident propositions, or by evident deductions of reason in demonstrations, we need not the assistance of revelation, as necessary to gain our assent, and introduce them into our minds. Because the natural ways of knowledge could settle them there, or had done it already; which is the greatest assurance we can possibly have of any thing, unless where God immediately reveals it to us: and there too our assurance can be no greater, than our knowledge is, that it is a revelation from God. But yet nothing, I think, can, under that title, shake or over-rule plain knowledge; or rationally prevail with any man to admit it for true, in a direct contradiction to the clear evidence of his own understanding. For since no evidence of our faculties, by which we receive such revelations, can exceed, if equal, the certainty of our intuitive knowledge, we can never receive for a truth any thing that is directly contrary to our clear and distinct knowledge: v. g. the ideas of one body, and one place, do so clearly agree, and the mind has so evident a perception of their agreement, that we can never assent to a proposition, that affirms the same body to be in two distant places at once, however it should pretend to the authority of a divine revelation: since the evidence, first, that we deceive not ourselves, in ascribing it to God; secondly, that we understand it right; can never be so great, as the evidence of our own intuitive knowledge, whereby we discern it impossible for the same body to be in two places at once. And therefore no proposition can be received for divine revelation, or obtain the assent due to all such, if it be contradictory to our clear intuitive knowledge. Because this would be to subvert the principles and foundations of all knowledge, evidence, and assent whatsoever: and there would be left no difference between truth and falsehood, no measures of credible and incredible in the world, if doubtful propositions shall take place before self-evident; and what we certainly know give way to what we may possibly be mistaken in. In propositions therefore contrary to the clear perception of the agreement or disagreement of any of our ideas, it will be in vain to urge them as matters of faith. They cannot move our assent, under that or any other title whatsoever. For faith can never convince

us of any thing that contradicts our knowledge. Because though faith be founded on the testimony of God (who cannot lye) revealing any proposition to us; yet we cannot have an assurance of the truth of its being a divine revelation, greater than our own knowledge: since the whole strength of the certainty depends upon our knowledge that God revealed it, which in this case, where the proposition supposed revealed contradicts our knowledge or reason, will always have this objection hanging to it, viz. that we cannot tell how to conceive that to come from God, the bountiful Author of our being, which, if received for true, must overturn all the principles and foundations of knowledge he has given us; render all our faculties useless; wholly destroy the most excellent part of his workmanship, our understandings; and put a man in a condition, wherein he will have less light, less conduct than the beast that perisheth. For if the mind of man can never have a clearer (and perhaps not so clear) evidence of any thing to be a divine revelation, as it has of the principles of its own reason, it can never have a ground to quit the clear evidence of its reason, to give a place to a proposition, whose revelation has not a greater evidence than those principles have.⁵

I hold to this judgment, as decisive as it is, at least I find it so, against the two principal points of your objection, which are grounds for credibility which, you say, come from the revelations, & even faith, with respect to the propositions which seem obviously false to us by the simple natural lights of our reason.

I will, however, add another thought I've had on this subject.

What you call faith cannot be anything but a consent or acquiescence, an assenting, to certain truths which I cannot perceive with respect to any of my senses.

But is it not true that to for this assent to occur, my mind must be convinced? Consequently, it must be by virtue of a solid foundation, or by some sufficient ground, that my mind gives this assent. It's therefore necessary that, to judge the soundness, or not, of this foundation or these grounds, I must use the light of my own reason & not that of another; for another man's reason can only bring conviction to the mind of the other man. Obviously, that must be the case: you're therefore wrong to reject reason as incompetent.

Faith, without the consent of reason, is a building constructed haphazardly, without knowing whether it stands on stone or sand. But, again, how can this reason give its assent to a system which, in its judgment, contains contradictory propositions? Or how can it give it, as long as these propositions seem contradictory to it? That is impossible.

I observe further, with respect to your Philosopher's apparent horror at the prospect of the annihilation of our being, that, as for me, favored as I am with the support of my reason, I am far from sharing his opinion. I know that I began to exist at some point; I know that everything with a beginning also has an end: that is especially true with respect to sentient beings; they all come to an end, some sooner, some later. I am a daily witness of the deaths of those who came into the world before me, & also of those who entered it after me. I can see that it's no less necessary & no less inevitable that I, too, will cease to be, by reason of the same causes & effects that also led to my existence in the first place.

⁵ Translator: Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, Part 4, Ch. XVIII, §5.

Since, therefore, this is my nature & my destiny; why should it terrify me? I'm no more afraid of the final degrees of the cessation of my being than I was afflicted by the first ones. I have daily realizations of the diminution of my being, & I remain no less at ease in spite of them.

Still, it is true that, as content as I am with my present state in this world, if I could prolong the duration of my existence & make it eternal, I would not hesitate to do so: & that, as wonderful as my state is, I'd change it for a better one, for example, the one you've shown me from your system, if it truly were a reality; for you'd have to be insane not to sacrifice a certain present blessing for another, certain, future one which would be infinitely greater than the first; & especially if, as a result of failing to sacrifice it, one had reason to fear the most fearsome misery, as your system teaches.

But, as I've already observed, that wouldn't depend only on the consideration of the great disparity between the value of these two goods; one would have to also measure the degrees of probability concerning the certainty or uncertainty of the reality of the latter good, & finally, on the result of this analysis, make a final decision in keeping with right reason.

All I want to conclude, finally, by this long speech, is that I believe that, until you have done away with my scruples, & demonstrated with full evidence that there is nothing contradictory in your system, that the argument of your Philosopher, by which you want to impress me, neither can nor should make any impression on me, to make me change the way of life I've embraced & which brings me perfect contentment.

As long as I remain convinced that all you have to offer is a pure chimera, there would be even more disproportion in my risking or sacrificing my present happiness for what you would like me to hope for, than there would be to wager a piaster for the Empire on the suggested terms. In the latter case, there is, at least, some chance of winning. I know that the disproportion of a loss, there, is immense; but at least there isn't an utter absence of any hope of winning: chance might favor it, in the end. But to risk a real happiness, as trifling as it may be, against the most magnificent & flattering illusion the human mind can imagine, there is no proportionality, no hope of winning, nor, consequently, any argument capable of leading a sensible man to take it.

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This argument of my friend's, or rather of his Chinese Philosopher, seems decisive against the argument of Mr. LOCKE, with respect to a man who is persuaded, to a geometric degree of certainty, that the system of our Religion is wrong. It's a question of knowing whether such a persuasion is possible, & whether we can conceive that those who boast thereof, are acting in good faith.

Those who know the world don't doubt that there are men in it who, unfortunately for them, fall prey to this fatal error, & Locke's argument seems powerless to rescue them from it.

To heal the minds of some of these unbelievers, it takes the greatest efforts to prove that the Christian religious system contains no contradictions, & that, if it contains things which are above our reason, they still remain free from contradiction: These proofs seem hard to give; but they should not be impossible for a man who really understands this system & the rules of argumentation.

We must also agree that there are occasions where our reason can be quite disquieting to us, either because we follow it, or abandon it.

I'm of this view, & I haven't shared this argument of my friend's, or of his Chinese Philosopher, with my readers in order inspire in their own minds any new scruples, even about the other religions, but rather in the hope that someone more capable than me will take the trouble to refute it soundly. As for me, I have no fear that, after all my efforts, I won't be subject to the same treatment as others who have written on the immortality of the soul and who, having failed to prove it to the satisfaction of their most severe critics, have been suspected of not believing in it themselves.