# REFLECTIONS ON THE EXISTENCE OF THE SOUL & ON THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

The prejudices our childhood education gives us about religion are the ones we find it hardest to get rid of, & some trace of them will always remain in us, often even after we have abandoned them completely; weary of being left to our own devices, an influence stronger than us drags us back to them. We change our style & the way we talk, there are a thousand things on which, unconsciously, we accustom ourselves to think differently than when we were children, our reason eagerly lends itself to these new forms; but the ideas it fashions for itself on religion, are of a kind that it regards as venerable, rarely does it dare to examine them, & the impression that these prejudices have made on man while still a child usually die only when he does. This shouldn’t shock anyone: the importance of the matter that these prejudices decide, as one can see by the example of all those we see who are truly convinced by them, constitute arguments that are more than sufficient to engrave themselves in our hearts, so that it becomes very difficult to erase them. Self-love has always existed, & it’s born with us; at every age we hope & fear; self-preservation has priority over self-knowledge: it’s not surprising that the prejudices founded on our fears & hopes should make a profound impression on a brand-new heart, opened to receive the first impressions that anyone cares to give it. Agitated by hope & fear, we are not so enlightened as to be able to direct these two passions, & on this point we defer to those who are wiser, whom we see putting the lessons they give us into practice, & thereby set the final seal on their work.

Moreover, when we can cast off the chains of these prejudices to follow our reason, the thick obscurity all around us drives us back to these principles which we had left behind; reason had shown us how absurd they are, but man wants to know who he is, & he doesn’t want to doubt, & in his unchecked desire to know himself, he imagines instead of reasoning: and then prejudices return, no contradiction upsets him, he thinks he is seeing the light, because he has escaped obscurity, but only to revisit the darkness.

Of all the beings that exist, none has a more intimate relation with man than man himself. If he wants to know his origins, he must interrogate himself; he has learned what he was, & he alone should learn what he is, without looking to external sources for a truth whose principle can only be in his heart.

In the light of that, it seems that everything relating to our being will always remain an unsolvable enigma for us.

Nature has given us the faculty of reason; reasoning means drawing conclusions from principles; but nature has not informed us of the principles; we have made up the difference, we’ve toiled, & by wanting to know everything, we’ve got lost in the woods. The mind, too weak for the ideas it sought to embrace, only conceived a fraction of them; but it thought it had seen everything, & worse still, it reasoned consistently with this presumption. Hence, the contradictions found in every hypothesis that has emerged; & hence, these eternal arguments where everyone has to succumb, each in turn, as if the truth didn’t establish victory for the party who had it on their side.

Let’s not try to know too much, & let’s rest content with what little light nature has given us. Let’s go no further, in the light of the illusion of all systems, & disentangle their contradictions; given that, from the one principle we do know, we only need to draw a few clear & plain conclusions, & form for ourselves, from all these ideas, a rule for moral conduct. Here, I think, is all that man can claim to do; it may be too little for his vanity, but it should be enough to satisfy his self-esteem.

All the religions start from two principles, that is, the distinction between two substances, the first material, the second spiritual, & the existence of a God. I will begin by examining the first of these two principles.

What idea are we given about the soul? It is, they say, a being who thinks, & nothing more. The body is a portion of matter, & the union of these two beings produces what we call a man. Thus, man unites in himself the faculty of intelligence & the properties of matter as divisible extension, susceptible to adopt all forms. Does this mean that it is limited to these qualities only, since they are the only ones it lets us perceive? Every day we discover properties that were previously unknown; it acquires, as it were, new qualities & appears before us in forms we didn’t think it could assume. The intelligence balks at extension, but, if our sight is limited, do we have a right to impose limits on its properties? It is a conventional axiom, that one should not multiply entities without necessity. If we conceive that the operations attributed to the mind can be the product of matter acting with unseen cogs, why should we imagine a vain entity, one which doesn’t make anything simpler for us?

It is easy to see that the properties of matter don’t exclude intelligence. Nobody can imagine how a being with no properties other than intelligence could use it. Indeed, how could this substance, which is in no way analogous to matter, ever perceive anything? To see something, it has to make an impression on us, there has to be some relationship between it & us; but what could this relationship be? It could only come from the intelligence, & this would simply beg the question.

Besides, what would the union of these two substances be like? What kind of knot could hold them together? How might the body be informed about the soul’s feelings? Would it share, in turn, the impressions it receives? But the soul only uses its intelligence when receiving these impressions.

For the soul to have ideas, all it should need is perceptible objects, & to be in a state fit to perceive them.

Why, then, does it need to be notified by material organs of what is presented to sight?

What is intelligence? It is, following the general notions, the faculty of understanding, it’s perceiving things, & perceiving them as they are. Intelligence, thus defined, doesn’t seem liable to different degrees, since it makes us perceive the truth precisely, & the truth is one. It should therefore be of the same nature in all men: then why do we see things so differently? It shouldn’t be subject to error; why do we so err often?

Our errors always come from a relationship we see between two ideas, & which doesn't exist; for example, when we say this woman is beautiful, & yet she is ugly; our error comes from the relation we see between the idea of this woman & the idea of beauty. Yet, this relation is an idea, it should therefore be an operation of the intelligence; but the intelligence sees things as they are: it cannot perceive in objects anything but what is really there. However, since we have seen this relationship, there must have been something that was perceived, either in the idea of the woman, or in that of beauty, something was [in reality] absent, but that cannot be so, since it would then cease to be intelligence.

I know that someone might reply that the soul, when united with the body, is there discomfited & as it were imprisoned; that this discomfort is the source of its errors, which originate less from itself than from the material organs, & that, since these organs are different in all men, intelligence, which is the same everywhere, therefore looks as different in each of them as their respective organs are in fact.

I find it hard to conceive how a being, such as the soul is thought to be, could be susceptible to ubication & could exist respectively in this & that portion of matter. I conceive even less how it might be made uncomfortable, & how this discomfort could lead it to make mistakes. If the soul has a false idea, the flaw in this idea must lie either in the object perceived, or in the soul who perceives it, the organs can certainly not place this flaw in the perceived object. It remains, then, to be examined whether the flaw can be placed in the soul. The bodily organs could only do this by acting on it; & what would this action look like? The action of matter is motion, & any impression it makes on another object is simply the communication of this motion to it: now, the soul is not liable to motion; & besides, I’ve already proved by the definition of intelligence that it is incapable of error & that it cannot make a false idea, since then it would cease to be intelligence.

Thus, by positing an intellectual substance united with a material body, the annihilation of intelligence would result from this union. Therefore, we must attribute only to matter the operations which we commonly attribute to a spiritual substance, since this substance is incapable of such. We now come to the question of the existence of a God.

I gave, back at the beginning of these reflections, plausible enough reasons for people’s attachment to the prejudices of religion. The existence of a God is the greatest & most deeply rooted of these prejudices, & I think I’ve found its source. Matter has always been present to our eyes, & we have always been too curious not to try to figure it out. Our self-esteem was too pained by our ignorance about ourselves, whose company we never leave, & who, therefore, had shown to us at every moment how little we knew; we then dreamed up a Creator God, the principle of all things: it is quite true that we understand His origin no better than we understand our own, but He is further from us, we aren’t obliged to always be with Him the way we are with ourselves, & in this way our vanity is preserved.

All men basically agree on this idea, because its principle is the same for everyone; & just as nobody has discovered anything analogous to it in nature, it was decided that it was a natural light, it became habitual to believe without examination. However, as if nature were different with men, this idea has varied with the different nations. The imagination has toyed with this very respectable idea, without noticing what it was doing, & each people has thought itself taught by nature in giving its God the properties of matter which it commonly saw, & the movements of its own heart, which it habitually felt.

Let’s examine the general idea which we’ve been given of this God: He’s the absolute master of all things, he made Heaven & Earth from nothing; an infinite being, who combines all perfections to an infinite degree; who made men, prescribed laws for them & promised them punishments & rewards.

What contradictions are implied by this idea! First: if it be true that there is a God, our Creator & our master, why would He punish us for an infraction of His laws? Why would he prescribe them? If observing these laws is useful, then this reasonable God should give us the means of observing them, & take from us those of infringing the. If they are useless, this just God should not prescribe them at all.

According to this idea, what we see is a wise being acting for no reason: after having been self-contained, as it were, for an eternity, he decided to leave this circle, but why? To perform finite works, unworthy of & useless to Himself. This being so, the very embodiment of intelligence & wisdom doesn’t know what is useful to Himself, or is unaware that His power shouldn’t be manifested in vain. But, it will be replied, He did these works for His glory. It would be very hard to say that this would be the glory of God with respect to men; is it to win their respect, or to show His power, by creating the universe? But he could have made or produced infinitely more perfect works. But if we grant the validity of this motivation for a moment, it must have been valid forever, & the reason why God created the universe would be as old as Himself, & the universe would be no less ancient.

Let me go further. To create is to give existence to a being, which did not exist before: to create matter was, as it were, to put it in place of nothing; for God to have created matter He must have known it, but how can you know something that didn't exist? To know something is to perceive its properties; has nothingness been known in this way? However, before creation, only God existed, & nothingness.

Being is the source of all properties, since it must be before it can be something in particular. Matter, which didn’t exist, couldn’t therefore be known, & God’s ideas must have been limited to Himself, who alone existed.

It is easy to conclude from these observations, that man does not owe his existence to anyone, that he is independent, but that he can’t subsist on his own, & the weakness of his nature drives him to renounce this state of independence: it was necessary for him to seek out other men, & to contract, while accepting their support, the reciprocal obligation to support them. It’s by this kind of trade in support that society exists, & this is the foundation of the laws, all of which are only specific commentaries on the general principle. The observation of laws therefore depends on this single principle, that one should fulfil one’s obligations; & this principle originates in our heart; self-regard doesn’t allow us to deceive anyone, it feels a secret shame in such a failure. This is to degrade oneself below one’s victim. By reasoning on such principles, we find that self-esteem always makes good deeds when heeded.

This is not to say that this morality isn’t dangerous in general, it’s only for the ears of good men, & the masses wouldn’t be held back because of the delicate feeling of self-respect, but is morality to blame here?