

Alfonse-Donatien
de Sade
"Dialogue between
a Priest & a
Dying Man

PRIEST—Come to this the fatal hour when at last from the eyes of deluded man the scales must fall away, and be shown the cruel picture of his errors and his vices—say, my son, do you not repent the host of sins unto which you were led by weakness and human frailty?

DYING MAN—Yes, my friend, I do repent.

PRIEST—Rejoice then in these pangs of remorse, during the brief space remaining to you profit therefrom to obtain Heaven's general absolution for your sins, and be mindful of it, only through the mediation of the Most Holy Sacrament of penance will you be granted it by the Eternal.

DYING MAN—I do not understand you, any more than you have understood me.

PRIEST—Eh?

DYING MAN—I told you that I repented.

PRIEST—I heard you say it.

DYING MAN—Yes, but without understanding it.

PRIEST—My interpretation—

DYING MAN—Hold. I shall give you mine. By Nature created, created with very keen tastes, with very strong passions; placed on this earth for the sole purpose of yielding to them and satisfying them, and these effects of my creation being naught but necessities directly relating to Nature's fundamental designs or, if you prefer, naught but essential derivatives proceeding from her intentions in my regard, all in accordance with her laws, I repent not having

acknowledged her omnipotence as fully as I might have done, I am only sorry for the modest use I made of the faculties (criminal in your view, perfectly ordinary in mine) she gave me to serve her; I did sometimes resist her, I repent it. Misled by your absurd doctrines, with them for arms I mindlessly challenged the desires instilled in me by a much diviner inspiration, and thereof do I repent: I only plucked an occasional flower when I might have gathered an ample harvest of fruit—such are the just grounds for the regrets I have, do me the honor of considering me incapable of harboring any others.

PRIEST—Lo! where your fallacies take you, to what pass are you brought by your sophistries! To created being you ascribe all the Creator's power, and those unlucky penchants which have led you astray, ah! do you not see they are merely the products of corrupted nature, to which you attribute omnipotence?

DYING MAN—Friend—it looks to me as though your dialectic were as false as your thinking. Pray straighten your arguing or else leave me to die in peace. What do you mean by Creator, and what do you mean by corrupted nature?

PRIEST—The Creator is the master of the universe, 'tis He who has wrought everything, everything created, and who maintains it all through the mere fact of His omnipotence.

DYING MAN—An impressive figure indeed. Tell me now why this so very formidable fellow did nevertheless, as you would have it, create a corrupted nature?

PRIEST—What glory would men ever have, had not God left them free will; and in the enjoyment thereof, what merit could come to them, were there not on earth the possibility of doing good and that of avoiding evil?

DYING MAN—And so your god bungled his work deliberately, in order to tempt or test his creature—did he then not know, did he then not doubt what the result would be?

PRIEST—He knew it undoubtedly but, once again, he wished to leave to man the merit of choice.

DYING MAN—And to what purpose, since from the outset he knew the course affairs would take and since, all-mighty as you tell me he is, he had but to make his creature choose as suited him?

PRIEST—Who is there can penetrate God's vast and infinite designs regarding man, and who can grasp all that makes up the universal scheme?

DYING MAN—Anyone who simplifies matters, my friend, anyone, above all, who refrains from multiplying causes in order to confuse effects all the more. What need have you of a second difficulty when you are unable to resolve the first, and once it is possible that Nature may all alone have done what you attribute to your god, why must you go looking for someone to be her overlord? The cause and explanation of what you do not understand may perhaps be the simplest thing in the world. Perfect your physics and you will understand Nature better, refine your reason, banish your prejudices and you'll have no further need of your god.

PRIEST—Wretched man! I took you for no worse than a Socinian—arms I had to combat you. But 'tis clear you are an atheist, and seeing that your heart is shut to the authentic and innumerable proofs we receive every day of our lives of the Creator's existence—I have no more to say to you. There is no restoring the blind to the light.

DYING MAN—Softly, my friend, own that between the two, he who blindfolds himself must surely see less of the light than he who snatches the blindfold away from his eyes. You compose, you construct, you dream, you magnify and complicate; I sift, I simplify. You accumulate errors, pile one atop the other; I combat them all. Which one of us is blind?

PRIEST—Then you do not believe in God at all?

DYING MAN—No. And for one very sound reason: it is perfectly impossible to believe in what one does not understand. Between understanding and faith immediate connections must subsist; understanding is the very lifeblood of faith; where understanding has ceased, faith is dead; and when they who are in such a case

proclaim they have faith, they deceive. You yourself, preacher, I defy you to believe in the god you predicate to me—you must fail because you cannot demonstrate him to me, because it is not in you to define him to me, because consequently you do not understand him—because as of the moment you do not understand him, you can no longer furnish me any reasonable argument concerning him, and because, in sum, anything beyond the limits and grasp of the human mind is either illusion or futility; and because your god having to be one or the other of the two, in the first instance I should be mad to believe in him, in the second a fool. My friend, prove to me that matter is inert and I will grant you a creator, prove to me that Nature does not suffice to herself and I'll let you imagine her ruled by a higher force; until then, expect nothing from me, I bow to evidence only, and evidence I perceive only through my senses: my belief goes no farther than they, beyond that point my faith collapses. I believe in the sun because I see it, I conceive it as the focal center of all the inflammable matter in Nature, its periodic movement pleases but does not amaze me. 'Tis a mechanical operation, perhaps as simple as the workings of electricity, but which we are unable to understand. Need I bother more about it? when you have roofed everything over with your god, will I be any the better off? and shall I still not have to make an effort at least as great to understand the artisan as to define his handiwork? By edifying your chimera it is thus no service you have rendered me, you have made me uneasy in my mind but you have not enlightened it, and instead of gratitude I owe you resentment. Your god is a machine you fabricated in your passions' behalf, you manipulated it to their liking; but the day it interfered with mine, I kicked it out of my way, deem it fitting that I did so; and now, at this moment when I sink and my soul stands in need of calm and philosophy, belabor it not with your riddles and your cant, which alarm but will not convince it, which will irritate without improving it; good friends and on the best terms have we ever been, this soul and I, so Nature wished it to be; as it is, so she expressly modeled it, for my soul is the result of the dispositions she formed in me pursuant to her own ends and needs; and as she has an equal need of vices and of virtues, whenever she was pleased to move me to evil, she did so, whenever she wanted a good deed from me, she

roused in me the desire to perform one, and even so I did as I was bid. Look nowhere but to her workings for the unique cause of our fickle human behavior, and in her laws hope to find no other springs than her will and her requirements.

PRIEST—And so whatever is in this world, is necessary.

DYING MAN—Exactly.

PRIEST—But if everything is necessary—then the whole is regulated.

DYING MAN—I am not the one to deny it.

PRIEST—And what can regulate the whole save it be an all-powerful and all-knowing hand?

DYING MAN—Say, is it not necessary that gunpowder ignite when you set a spark to it?

PRIEST—Yes.

DYING MAN—And do you find any presence of wisdom in that?

PRIEST—None.

DYING MAN—It is then possible that things necessarily come about without being determined by a superior intelligence, and possible hence that everything derive logically from a primary cause, without there being either reason or wisdom in that primary cause.

PRIEST—What are you aiming at?

DYING MAN—At proving to you that the world and all therein may be what it is and as you see it to be, without any wise and reasoning cause directing it, and that natural effects must have natural causes: natural causes sufficing, there is no need to invent any such unnatural ones as your god who himself, as I have told you already, would require to be explained and who would at the same time be the explanation of nothing; and that once 'tis plain your god is superfluous, he is perfectly useless; that what is useless would greatly appear to be imaginary only, null and therefore non-existent; thus, to conclude that your god is a fiction I need no other argument than that which furnishes me the certitude of his inutility.

PRIEST—At that rate there is no great need for me to talk to you about religion.

DYING MAN—True, but why not anyhow? Nothing so much amuses me as this sign of the extent to which human beings have been carried away by fanaticism and stupidity; although the prodigious spectacle of folly we are facing here may be horrible, it is always interesting. Answer me honestly, and endeavor to set personal considerations aside: were I weak enough to fall victim to your silly theories concerning the fabulous existence of the being who renders religion necessary, under what form would you advise me to worship him? Would you have me adopt the daydreams of Confucius rather than the absurdities of Brahma, should I kneel before the great snake to which the Blacks pray, invoke the Peruvians' sun or Moses' Lord of Hosts, to which Mohammedan sect should I rally, or which Christian heresy would be preferable in your view? Be careful how you reply.

PRIEST—Can it be doubtful?

DYING MAN—Then 'tis egoistical.

PRIEST—No, my son, 'tis as much out of love for thee as for myself I urge thee to embrace my creed.

DYING MAN—And I wonder how the one or the other of us can have much love for himself, to deign to listen to such degrading nonsense.

PRIEST—But who can be mistaken about the miracles wrought by our Divine Redeemer?

DYING MAN—He who sees in him anything else than the most vulgar of all tricksters and the most arrant of all impostors.

PRIEST—*O God, you hear him and your wrath thunders not forth!*

DYING MAN—No my friend, all is peace and quiet around us, because your god, be it from impotence or from reason or from whatever you please, is a being whose existence I shall momentarily concede out of condescension for you or, if you prefer, in order to accommodate myself to your sorry little perspective; because this

god, I say, were he to exist, as you are mad enough to believe, could not have selected as means to persuade us, anything more ridiculous than those your Jesus incarnates.

PRIEST—What! the prophecies, the miracles, the martyrs—are they not so many proofs?

DYING MAN—How, so long as I abide by the rules of logic, how would you have me accept as proof anything which itself is lacking proof? Before a prophecy could constitute proof I should first have to be completely certain it was ever pronounced; the prophecies history tells us of belong to history and for me they can only have the force of other historical facts, whereof three out of four are exceedingly dubious; if to this I add the strong probability that they have been transmitted to us by not very objective historians, who recorded what they preferred to have us read, I shall be quite within my rights if I am skeptical. And furthermore, who is there to assure me that this prophecy was not made after the fact, that it was not a stratagem of everyday political scheming, like that which predicts a happy reign under a just king, or frost in wintertime? As for your miracles, I am not any readier to be taken in by such rubbish. All rascals have performed them, all fools have believed in them; before I'd be persuaded of the truth of a miracle I would have to be very sure the event so called by you was absolutely contrary to the laws of Nature, for only what is outside of Nature can pass for miraculous; and who is so deeply learned in Nature that he can affirm the precise point where her domain ends, and the precise point where it is infringed upon? Only two things are needed to accredit an alleged miracle, a mountebank and a few simpletons; tush, there's the whole origin of your prodigies; all new adherents to a religious sect have wrought some; and more extraordinary still, all have found imbeciles around to believe them. Your Jesus' feats do not surpass those of Apollonius of Tyana, yet nobody thinks to take the latter for a god; and when we come to your martyrs, assuredly, these are the feeblest of all your arguments. To produce martyrs you need but have enthusiasm on the one hand, resistance on the other; and so long as an opposed cause offers me as many of them as does yours, I shall never be sufficiently authorized to believe one better than another, but rather very much

inclined to consider all of them pitiable. Ah my friend! were it true that the god you preach did exist, would he need miracle, martyr, or prophecy to secure recognition? and if, as you declare, the human heart were of his making, would he not have chosen it for the repository of his law? Then would this law, impartial for all mankind because emanating from a just god, then would it be found graved deep and writ clear in all men alike, and from one end of the world to the other, all men, having this delicate and sensitive organ in common, would also resemble each other through the homage they would render the god whence they had got it; all would adore and serve him in one identical manner, and they would be as incapable of disregarding this god as of resisting the inward impulse to worship him. Instead of that, what do I behold throughout this world? As many gods as there are countries; as many different cults as there are different minds or different imaginations; and this swarm of opinions among which it is physically impossible for me to choose, say now, is this a just god's doing? Fie upon you, preacher, you outrage your god when you present him to me thus; rather let me deny him completely, for if he exists then I outrage him far less by my incredulity than do you through your blasphemies. Return to your senses, preacher, your Jesus is no better than Mohammed, Mohammed no better than Moses, and the three of them combined no better than Confucius, who did after all have some wise things to say while the others did naught but rave; in general, though, such people are all mere frauds: philosophers laughed at them, the mob believed them, and justice ought to have hanged them.

PRIEST—Alas, justice dealt only too harshly with one of the four.

DYING MAN—If he alone got what he deserved it was he deserved it most richly; seditious, turbulent, calumniating, dishonest, libertine, a clumsy buffoon, and very mischievous; he had the art of overawing common folk and stirring up the rabble; and hence came in line for punishment in a kingdom where the state of affairs was what it was in Jerusalem then. They were very wise indeed to get rid of him, and this perhaps is the one case in which my extremely lenient and also extremely tolerant maxims are able to

allow the severity of Themis; I excuse any misbehavior save that which may endanger the government one lives under, kings and their majesties are the only things I respect; and whoever does not love his country and his king were better dead than alive.

PRIEST—But you do surely believe something awaits us after this life, you must at some time or another have sought to pierce the dark shadows enshrouding our mortal fate, and what other theory could have satisfied your anxious spirit, than that of the numberless woes that betide him who has lived wickedly, and an eternity of rewards for him whose life has been good?

DYING MAN—What other, my friend? that of nothingness, it has never held terrors for me, in it I see naught but what is consoling and unpretentious; all the other theories are of pride's composition, this one alone is of reason's. Moreover, 'tis neither dreadful nor absolute, this nothingness. Before my eyes have I not the example of Nature's perpetual generations and regenerations? Nothing perishes in the world, my friend, nothing is lost; man today, worm tomorrow, the day after tomorrow a fly; is it not to keep steadily on existing? And what entitles me to be rewarded for virtues which are in me through no fault of my own, or again punished for crimes wherefor the ultimate responsibility is not mine? how are you to put your alleged god's goodness into tune with this system, and can he have wished to create me in order to reap pleasure from punishing me, and that solely on account of a choice he does not leave me free to determine?

PRIEST—You are free.

DYING MAN—Yes, in terms of your prejudices; but reason puts them to rout, and the theory of human freedom was never devised except to fabricate that of grace, which was to acquire such importance for your reveries. What man on earth, seeing the scaffold a step beyond the crime, would commit it were he free not to commit it? We are the pawns of an irresistible force, and never for an instant is it within our power to do anything but make the best of our lot and forge ahead along the path that has been traced for us. There is not a single virtue which is not necessary to Nature and conversely not a single crime which she does not need and it is

in the perfect balance she maintains between the one and the other that her immense science consists; but can we be guilty for adding our weight to this side or that when it is she who tosses us onto the scales? no more so than the hornet who thrusts his dart into your skin.

PRIEST—Then we should not shrink from the worst of all crimes.

DYING MAN—I say nothing of the kind. Let the evil deed be proscribed by law, let justice smite the criminal, that will be deterrent enough; but if by misfortune we do commit it even so, let's not cry over spilled milk; remorse is inefficacious, since it does not stay us from crime, futile since it does not repair it, therefore it is absurd to beat one's breast, more absurd still to dread being punished in another world if we have been lucky to escape it in this. God forbid that this be construed as encouragement to crime, no, we should avoid it as much as we can, but one must learn to shun it through reason and not through false fears which lead to naught and whose effects are so quickly overcome in any moderately steadfast soul. Reason, sir—yes, our reason alone should warn us that harm done our fellows can never bring happiness to us; and our heart, that contributing to their felicity is the greatest joy Nature has accorded us on earth; the entirety of human morals is contained in this one phrase: *Render others as happy as one desires oneself to be*, and never inflict more pain upon them than one would like to receive at their hands. There you are, my friend, those are the only principles we should observe, and you need neither god nor religion to appreciate and subscribe to them, you need only have a good heart. But I feel my strength ebbing away; preacher, put away your prejudices, unbend, be a man, be human, without fear and without hope forget your gods and your religions too: they are none of them good for anything but to set man at odds with man, and the mere name of these horrors has caused greater loss of life on earth than all other wars and all other plagues combined. Renounce the idea of another world; there is none, but do not renounce the pleasure of being happy and of making for happiness in this. Nature offers you no other way of doubling your existence, of extending it.—My friend, lewd pleasures were ever dearer to me than anything

else, I have idolized them all my life and my wish has been to end it in their bosom; my end draws near, six women lovelier than the light of day are waiting in the chamber adjoining, I have reserved them for this moment, partake of the feast with me, following my example embrace them instead of the vain sophistries of superstition, under their caresses strive for a little while to forget your hypocritical beliefs.

NOTE

The dying man rang, the women entered; and after he had been a little while in their arms the preacher became one whom Nature has corrupted, all because he had not succeeded in explaining what a corrupt nature is.