

## CORRESPONDENCE

TO THE EDITOR OF *Philosophy*

DEAR SIR,

I have occupied so much space of your magazine recently that I wish to make my reply to Mr. Mossner's criticism of my article on Hume's *Dialogues* as brief as possible.

Terms like "ingenious," "unfortunate," "widely accepted" are in my opinion merely blunders in elementary logic. "Making the wicked pious" is, I think, something which Mr. Mossner does with considerable effect himself in his *Bishop Butler and the Age of Reason*. Questions about originality are no doubt a matter of opinion and interpretation. I pass over his own identification of Butler and Cleanthes with the remark that it makes Hume's request for help "to bolster up" the argument of Cleanthes somewhat strange and not exactly complimentary to Butler. The reference to a letter from Hume to Henry Home containing an admission to being an infidel is, so far as I can learn, erroneous and should be to a letter to Oswald of Dunnikier (No. 58 in Greig); the comment I make on the passage is that in view of Hume's experience on several occasions prior to this of being called deist, atheist, sceptic, the phrase "from the character of an infidel" does not necessarily imply an admission of being an infidel; and in a later letter to Blair (No. 188 in Greig) he objects to being called an infidel. Mr. Mossner's assertion that scepticism *did seize* Hume is, so far as I can make out, once more an interpretation of Hume's remarks and not *prima facie* original evidence.

The main objection raised by Mr. Mossner turns on the supposedly *unhistorical basis* of my argument. I refuse to allow the historical basis to be limited according to Mr. Mossner's requirements—to the Anglican Church or, as he seems to do, to what he calls the representative, sometimes most distinguished, Anglican theologians. Such limitations raise questions which I am not prepared to discuss here. I emphasize as an essential element of the historical basis the outcome of the controversy in the eighteenth century to which writers called Deists, concerned also with Natural Religion, contributed. As Mr. Mossner has dealt with this issue in his *Bishop Butler and the Age of Reason* which I have read with pleasure and profit, may I use it and give some quotations to illustrate his view of the historical situation? In doing so I am following a method adopted also by Mr. Mossner in dealing with my argument.

(a) Speaking of Pope (p. 72) he says "*The Universal Prayer* . . . is not distinctly a Christian prayer. It is rather a prayer of Natural Religion." Thus Mr. Mossner admits a distinction not merely between Christianity and Deism but between Christianity and Natural Religion. (b) He refers to "the rising heresy of Unitarianism and rationalism in general" (p. 62). The statement that rationalism is heretical is Mr. Mossner's. Deism which was rationalistic and was concerned with Natural Religion was recognized to be unorthodox and caused alarm at Oxford and in orthodox circles (p. 70). "Infallible reason proved in the event a Nessus shirt poisoning the theology that wore it" (p. 125). Rationalism is here admitted to have been dangerous to theology. (c) "So in repudiating the certainty guaranteed by an infallible and universal reason, the apologist arrived jointly at philosophical scepticism and theological faith" (p. 126). Philosophical scepticism therefore did not necessarily lead to the discarding of faith; and Mr. Mossner admits that there were persons who held this position. He quotes Law to the effect that "the infidelity which is now openly declared for pretends to support itself upon the sufficiency, excellency and absolute perfection of reason or Natural Religion" (p. 126). That Law is not representative of the Anglican Church is irrelevant to my argument. (d) "Orthodoxy, now driven to its last defences, clung desperately to probability and the external evidences" (p. 145). On the other hand, the apologists were driving the Deists into

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open scepticism and in doing so "were doing the inevitable" (p. 151). "The fall of reason meant the fall of Natural Religion and this was true for both parties" (p. 151). "The court of reason was no longer held sovereign; its cases were remanded to the realm of faith or to the realm of fact" (p. 152). "Not that the apologists forfeited all claim to a Natural Religion, but in the course of time they discreetly and quietly let the subject sink into abeyance" (p. 151).

Thus rationalism in religion ended in a somewhat strange result, and according to Mr. Mossner the idea of a Natural Religion was gradually dropped. Why, I should like to ask him, was it dropped if my contention, objected to by him, is wrong? Also, does he maintain that the discarding of Natural Religion meant the rejection of religion? And does he contend that the basis of such religion had to be found wholly anew on the failure of rationalism and was not already existent while rationalism was being tried out? Had all this result come about by the middle of the century when Deism, according to Mr. Mossner, had run its course? If so, Hume's *Dialogues*, published in 1779, in no way contributed to this result. The conclusion I emphasize is that his cavil at my historical basis has no justification in view of his own evidence, and that reference to it tells neither against my interpretation nor for his own. I add that he does not seem to have studied my argument very closely, for the historical basis is not the foundation of my argument; the statement he quotes is not even a loose brick in the building, but at the worst only a bit of loose plaster sticking to the structure.

Yours sincerely,

B. M. LAING.

SHEFFIELD,

March 10, 1938.

(This correspondence is now closed.—ED.)

TO THE EDITOR OF *Philosophy*

SIR,

Professor Muirhead's article, "Where is Philosophy Going?" in the October issue of *Philosophy*, needs reiterating. This season those of us who attended the Institute Lectures at University Hall and University College have had a good dose of analytical philosophy, and I for one (a very common reader of philosophy, to use Professor Stebbing's phrase) have found it very unsatisfying.

If indeed philosophy is just an intellectual pastime on a level with chess or some parlour game with no relevance to the understanding and living of life, I am persuaded that the interest in it of the majority of common readers will evaporate. "Distress of mind is the great awakener of mind," writes Professor Macneile Dixon in his delightful Gifford Lectures, "The Human Situation." How true that is. It is intensified men and women who have endured some pain or grief or who have seen anew, freshly and imaginatively, the enigma of existence, who seek for a philosophy of life. And it is just here that the analysts wound by suggesting that such incentives to philosophy are both misleading and shameful.

There is in some men's minds an obstinate conviction that the business of philosophy is to make, not only science, but life intelligible. If philosophy holds off from this effort and spends itself in small analysis issuing in scepticism, men like myself will cease to look to it for help and guidance and try to live our lives without it. Those of us who have been knocked about by life find such philosophy both irrelevant and trivial.

Yours faithfully,

P. D. ELLIS.

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