

# The Deism of Thomas Morgan

## Deizm Thomasa Morgana

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**Abstract:** Thomas Morgan was one of the eighteenth-century British deists. He started as an orthodox Christian, but soon steered toward Arianism rejecting along the way the inspired character of the Bible, making it a book filled with fabrications. He rejected the divine status of Christ and the belief that He died to atone for the sins of humanity. In the matter of religion, he relied only on reason accepting natural religion and considering Christianity to be only one version of it. In his rationalism, he constantly referred to the rule of fitness never making it clear what is its meaning and, curiously, he ultimately based the inerrancy of reason on the inspiration the reason obtains directly from God, which altogether invalidates his entire criticism of Christianity. Calling himself a Christian deist, but he only shared with Christianity physico-theology, that is, the proof of God from the design of the world.

**Keywords:** Thomas Morgan, deism, physico-theology, Arianism

**Abstrakt:** Thomas Morgan był jednym z osiemnastowiecznych deistów brytyjskich. Zaczynał jako ortodoksyjny chrześcijanin, ale szybko skierował się w stronę arianizmu. Odrzucił natchniony charakter Biblii, czyniąc z niej księgę pełną zmyśleń, odrzucił boski status Chrystusa i wiarę, że umarł za grzechy ludzi. W kwestii religii opierał się wyłącznie na rozumie, uznając religię naturalną i uważając chrześcijaństwo tylko za jedną z jej odmian. W swoim racjonalizmie stale odwoływał się do zasady przydatności, nigdy nie wyjaśniając, jakie jest jej znaczenie. Ciekawe, że ostatecznie nieomyślność rozumu oparł na inspiracji, którą rozum czerpie bezpośrednio od Boga, co w sumie unieważnia całą jego krytykę chrześcijaństwa. Nazywał siebie chrześcijańskim deistą, ale dzielił z chrześcijaństwem jedynie fizykoteologię, czyli teleologiczny dowód na istnienia Boga.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Thomas Morgan, deizm, fizykoteologia, arianizm

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## Introduction

The seventeenth century was a rapid progress of science due to two inventions made at the beginning of the century, the telescope and the microscope. The scope of the observable world was significantly expanded and the two lenses showed the ubiquity of orderliness of nature, through which natural laws could be established, and for theology, this orderliness was a clear indication that the world was not by any means the result of randomness. The harmony permeating on all the levels of the universe clearly pointed to the intelligence behind it, and this was a thrust of physico-theology which relied on the proof from design to prove the existence of God and also allowed to establish at least some attributes of God. Physico-theology used human reason to establish this theological truth, leaving to revelation the many theological aspects apparently inaccessible to the human mind. Thereby, physico-theologians wanted to elevate reason to the level of revelation using the rational tools reason could muster.

Physico-theology started in all seriousness in the mid-seventeenth century in Britain, showing the theological effectiveness of human reason. However, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, another movement started also in Britain, which was completely satisfied with the use of reason in theological matters—and nothing else beyond reason. It limited itself to natural religion and rejected revelation. This was deism with its many versions, some accepted afterlife, some did not, some saw God only as the Creator, some saw Him also as a providential God, some were hostile to Christianity, some tried to salvage some of its elements, in particular, its moral code. In many cases, deists concentrated on biblical criticism and they criticized the argument from design. Although they limited themselves to natural religion, they relied mainly of aprioristic rationalism.<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to see that physico-theology, by its nature involved in empirical investigations, was not altogether rejected by the British deism as manifested in the views of Morgan.

Thomas Morgan (1671/2–1743), a Welsh clergyman and physician was in 1715 an independent preacher in Bruton (Somerset); in 1716, he was ordained and became a Presbyterian minister in Marlborough (Wiltshire). He also studied medicine receiving a degree from the University of Glasgow. Dismissed from his pastoral duties for the Arian heresy, he relocated first to Bristol and then to London to practice medicine. Morgan authored two competent medicine books, but he is known today for his rejection of major tenets of Christianity expressed in the days of waning British deism.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> D. Lucci, *Scripture and deism: The Biblical criticism of the eighteenth-century British deists*, Bern 2008, pp. 22, 38, 68, 70.

<sup>3</sup> R. Williams, *A Biographical dictionary of eminent Welshmen*, Llandoverly 1852, p. 342; J. van den Berg, *A forgotten Christian deist: Thomas Morgan*, New York 2021, ch. 2.

## From Christianity to Christian Deism

Morgan's initial confession of faith made during his ordination places him squarely within orthodox Christianity. He expressed his belief in the infallibility of the Bible (CF 59)<sup>4</sup> and the fact that the truth of the Scriptures is confirmed by prophecies and "the most numerous and uncontrollable Miracles." He expressed his belief in "the Doctrine of the ever blessed and glorious Trinity, as contain'd in the sacred Writings," which includes the belief that Christ is God as is the Holy Spirit (59); by His death, Christ fully satisfied the demands of the offended justice (62) so that the redemption of the lost world was made possible by the sacrifice of Christ (58). Morgan believed in the sacramental significance of baptism and the Eucharist (63–64); he believed that Christ established the church for an effective propagation of the Gospel (64), and that after the last judgment those who kept the faith will enter the kingdom of God, whereas impenitent sinners will receive eternal punishment (65). Gradually, all these elements of orthodoxy were stripped away leading to what he called Christian deism. His theological views found the fullest expression in his work, *The moral philosopher*, particularly in the first volume, since the remaining two volumes are answers to criticisms of his views.<sup>5</sup>

Although Morgan was not explicitly "declaring for *Arianism*" (C 279), nevertheless he did say: "I am fully and clearly perswaded, that the *Athanasian Scheme* relating to the *Trinity* and *Incarnation* is unscriptural and self-contradictory" (300). And thus, Christ's statement that He and His Father are one means they are one in testimony, consent, will, and the agreement concerning the duties and happiness and humans (306), but saying that it is the unity of substance leads to "insuperable Difficulties" (307).

The vicarious death of Christ for the sins of the world is rejected. According to Morgan, Christ died for us in the same sense as any person who sacrifices his life for his country and his people. Thanks to Christ's death, the significance of the Gospel was increased (MP 1.164). Christ gave up His life in the cause of virtue and true religion (165), to get the highest reward (166). He is the only legislator who exemplified His own teachings in practice and sealed its truth by His

<sup>4</sup> References are made to the following writing of Thomas Morgan:

C — *A collection of tracts ... occasion'd by the late Trinitarian controversy*, London 1726.

CF — *The questions and confession of faith*, in: Nicholas Billingsley, *A sermon preach'd at the ordination of Mr. Thomas Morgan ... With Mr. Morgan's confession of faith*, London 1717, pp. 51–65.

MP — *The moral philosopher, in a dialogue between Philalethes, a Christian Deist, and Theophanes a Christian Jew*, London 1738<sup>2</sup> [1737, vol. 1]; London: 1739, vol. 2; London 1740, vol. 3.

PT — *Physico-theology, or a philosophico-moral disquisition concerning human nature, free agency, moral government, divine providence*, London 1741.

<sup>5</sup> At least 25 books were written against *Moral philosopher*, J. van den Berg, *A forgotten Christian deist...*, pp. 37, 118.

blood (167). His death showed that God is no respecter of persons (169). By His death, Christ exemplified the advantages of an absolute trust in God (178–179).

For Morgan, baptism is not a sign of personal sanctification but rather a social ritual (MP 1.111). In fact, there is no rational connection between rituals (201) and the inner virtue or true religion to mention only baptism and the Eucharist. External parts of these two sacraments were not instituted by Christ (202); both of them were previously practiced as national rites of the Jews (203). Christ used them as spiritual lessons and baptism and the Eucharist were not designed for personal holiness (204).

What remains from Christianity? Very little. First, in Morgan's words, "Religion is a clear, rational, intelligible Thing, most adequate to the natural Capacity, Reason, and Understanding of Man [...] It consists in the filial Love and Fear of God, and the brotherly Love of Mankind" practiced by fulfilling the duties of moral truth on account of God's rewards and punishments (2.xxiii, 55). In Morgan's view, Christianity is but a renewed and slightly enhanced version of this religion, that is founded on the belief in one supreme First Cause, one God, to which Christianity added the belief in one Priest, Prophet, Mediator, Advocate, one Lord and Judge of all (C xvii, 234).

The Christian revelation "is a Revival of the Religion of Nature, or a complete System and Transcript of moral Truth and Righteousness" (MP 1.412). Christianity is a revival of the religion of nature in which several duties of moral truth are more clearly stated, enforced by stronger motives, and encouraged with promises of more effective help of Christ than it was ever done before (392). And again, Christianity becomes

that complete System of moral Truth and Righteousness, Justice and Charity, which, as the best Transcript of the Religion of Nature, was preach'd to the World by Christ and the Apostles, as the Rule of Equity and Rectitude, by which Men were to be rewarded or punished in the final Judgment by God himself, as the most powerful, wise, and righteous Creator, Governor, and Judge of the World.

This Christianity "restores the eternal, immutable Rule of moral Rectitude, or the Religion of God and Nature, after it had been darken'd, confounded, and almost lost amidst the gross Ignorance, Idolatry, and Superstition of Mankind in general, both Jews and Gentiles" (439). Christianity depends on plain and necessary truths founded on the eternal, immutable reason and fitness of things; it consists in inner, spiritual worship of one true God and strict regard to all duties of moral truth in the expectation of immortality and a reward for obedience (393–394). In this theology, an undeniable principle is that in the last day God will reward or punish every individual according to his deeds (146, 175). It is clear from the Scripture and from reason that God will not condemn anyone whose chief desire is to serve

and please God (147); however, “far greater Part of Mankind” is not saved, but no eternal punishment, the immortality is only for the righteous (401).

“The original, true Religion, therefore, of God and Nature, consisted in the direct, immediate Worship of the one true God, by an absolute Resignation to, and Dependence on him in the Practice of all the Duties and Obligations of moral Truth and Righteousness” (C 230) and Morgan takes “Christianity to be that most complete and perfect Scheme of moral Truth and Righteousness, which was first preach’d to the World by Christ and his Apostles, and from them convey’d down to us under its own Evidence of immutable Rectitude, Wisdom and Reason” (MP 1.96–97). “Jesus Christ came into the World to save Sinners, by restoring the true justifying, immortalizing Righteousness, by which *Abraham, Noah, Enoch*, and all good Men, from the Beginning of the World, had been approved and accepted by God” (2.27). This deistic and purportedly original form of Christianity did not last for long. Paul is, except for Christ, very much the only New Testament figure who meets Morgan’s approval,<sup>6</sup> but even he sometimes acted inconsistently with his views. Morgan commends him for not requiring of converted gentiles to follow any elements of the Mosaic law the way other apostles and brethren did (1.72, 79, 361), although even Paul bowed to the prevailing sentiments; for instance, Paul was afraid of being stoned and, thus, did not tell the Jews that the principle that no atonement without shedding the blood was imposed by priests. To reconcile the Jews to the death of Christ as a common Savior upon their own principles, he used their sacrifices as foreshadowing the sacrifice of Christ (1.163–164), which was, in Morgan’s mind, at least misleading. Very soon, the character of Christianity changed with only a minority being the followers of Paul, namely the Gnostics (1.381) and then it is the divines who distorted the Gospel for at least the past 1400 years (1.177). It thus appears that the adherents of the true, original, natural religion could be found in the distant past, before Moses, then for a brief time in Jesus and very few of His followers. After 1400 years of what Morgan viewed as the reign of distorted Christianity, the true meaning of religion was purportedly rediscovered by Morgan himself, apparently one of very few if not the only one in his times who did it, and judging by the reaction of his critics, it was a very slim prospect for Morgan’s views to be continued. Morgan might have seen himself as a lone voice in the wilderness and that might have been the reason of his vehement treatment of his critics. It is often hard to read

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<sup>6</sup> In general, the British deists were hostile toward Paul. “Before and after Morgan almost all attacked him directly or indirectly, whereas the *Moral philosopher*, while criticizing him, exalts and refers to him,” É. Sayous, *Les déistes anglais et le christianisme principalement depuis Toland jusqu’à Chubb (1696–1738)*, Paris 1882, p. 166. As Marcion revered only Paul and accepted only the writings of Paul and Paulinian Luke, so Morgan can similarly be considered an extreme Paulinian and a modern Marcion, G.V. Lechler, *Geschichte des englischen Deismus*, Stuttgart 1841, p. 387.

without cringing his works full of name-calling and very inventive verbal abuse of his opponents, not infrequently running for entire paragraphs.

## **Biblical Criticism**

How can the veracity of the Scriptures be defended? The orthodox answer is: through the evidence of miracles. However, said Morgan, the power of performing miracles had no connection to the truth of the doctrines preached by miracle workers; miracles were often performed by seducers (MP 1.81), Egyptian sorcerers (2.26), or even evil spirits (C xi). False prophets used miracles and so “Miracles alone consider’d can prove nothing at all,” although, admittedly, they could “awaken and alarm Men” (98). Moreover, there is no rule to decide what is a miracle. Human testimony in that respect is always fallible (MP 2.31). Ultimately, Morgan rejected miracles as mere fabrications, as he considered much of the Scripture as fictional or explainable in purely naturalistic terms.

Except from truths derived from human reason and senses, the “spiritual Scholastics” also introduced truths from inspiration or immediate revelation (MP 2.18). However, inspiration is for Morgan an unacceptable proof of the validity of the Scripture. An inspiration is not a proof of truth since a person can be inspired by falsehood (3.172). People should judge events by themselves, since God gave them reason to use it and not submit to supernatural light and statements of theologians (PT 145).

However, even accepting the Scripture as the sole or main theological authority, there remains a problem of reading it or rather interpreting it. This is also one of the main points made by Morgan: when the Scripture is received, the only thing reason can do is to determine the original meaning of its words (C 192). And so, for instance, the problem with Christ’s self-offering comes from the fact that “figurative and allegorical Expressions come to be interpreted and applied in a literal Sense.” All mystery in religion is an allegory understood literally (MP 1.157). Sacramental bread and wine are called the body and blood of Christ in a figurative way using metonymical transposition (C xxviii-xxix). When Christ spoke in John 6 about the necessity of eating His flesh, “it must be evident” that “those carnal Jews” who heard it “having no Thought of Concern about any thing but their Bellies, and being too stupid to concern any thing of an abstract spiritual Nature, understood our Saviour all along in the gross literal Sense” which is a “stupid Error” since Christ spoke about “a figurative eating and drinking” and to interpret it otherwise is an “astonishing Abuse and Misapplication of this Scripture-Testimony” (169–170). Paul understood Moses and the prophets as to what relates to Christianity “in a figurative and allegorical, or mystical Sense, and

rejected their literal, obvious, and plain Sense, as false, absurd, and contrary to the true Reason and Spirit of the Gospel” (MP 1.330–331).

For Morgan, “it is evident in Fact that the Scripture in many Cases is capable of different Interpretations,” and there is no infallible judge to reconcile the different interpretations; the only guide is one’s own understanding and judgment (C 230). How can Morgan assure anyone that one’s own, private, independent understanding will not lead a person astray? And so, he applied to everyone else but not to himself a precept that a person’s interpretation of the Scriptures can take place when “his Understanding may be so far enslav’d to an Hypothesis, and his Mind darkened with general, confus’d, and ambiguous Sounds, that he may not see or observe the Inconsistency or Contradiction of his own Words” (363). When he stated that by using allegories and resemblances “any Consequence may be drawn from any Premises, according to every Man’s own fancy, or Imagination” (260), he hardly saw himself as being a victim of his own imagination.

A distinction has to be made between the Scriptures and the judgments or opinions about them “since the Scripture it self is supposed to be the certain infallible Word of God, which cannot possibly be false,” whereas judgment concerning faith are fallible (C 36). This is a sin of Morgan’s adversaries and of all interpreters of his times who rely on their opinion and the opinion of interpreters of previous generations; however, Morgan did not see any problem with the possibility that his own statements might be mere opinions. He advised one of his opponents: “that you would not be quite so positive and dogmatical in your Judgments for the future, nor so overforward to censure, and condemn others, till you can be more properly and strictly certain that you are not your self in the Wrong” (203). It is obvious that Morgan did not see in his own pronouncements anything suspiciously dogmatic.

Morgan advocated for methodological skepticism when he stated that a sceptic is “an Enquirer or Searcher after Truth, one who will believe no more than he can see Reason for” accepting only things that “appear reasonable or probable to his own Understanding”; without this attitude, no one can be wise or honest (355). Moreover, “the natural Improbability of Things must always outweigh the Credit of any Testimony” (3.174). As unreasonable and improbable to Morgan’s understanding, neither miracles nor prophecies can be trusted as arguments in favor of the veracity of revelation, the Bible should be read as any other literary work and if references are made to miracles or prophecies, they not only should not be allowed as possible arguments, but should be rejected outright as fabricated falsehoods. This is particularly clear from Morgan’s treatment of the Old Testament that he knew very well, but he used this knowledge to his deistic purposes. There is virtually no Old Testament figure he would consider praiseworthy. He saw the Old Testament as filled with cheats, philanderers, and murderers. Abraham is seen once as a positive figure, but

another time, as a schemer who through “the Artifice and Intrigues of him and his Wife [tried to] to gain Favour.”<sup>7</sup> Joseph was driven by a “Thirst of Wealth and Dominion” (3.7) and his ascendance led to the ruin of Egypt (11). Moses and Aaron wanted to establish a kingdom with the supreme power in their own hands and they cared about that more than about their people (70). Samuel plotted against Saul with the anointment of David being one element of his plot (1.298–299); David was used by others as a worthy example, but he was “the most bloody Persecutor that even had been known and his whole Life had been one continued Scene of Dissimulation, Falsehood, Lust and Cruelty,” but he was canonized by theologians because he destroyed idolatry (334).

Morgan’s denunciation of the Old Testament as “the most incredible Fiction and Forgery that ever was invented,” (MP 2.71) led him to the rejection of Judaism and the Mosaic law as “an intolerable Yoke of Darkness and Bondage, Tyranny and Vassalage, Wrath and Misery” (MP 1.29). Judaism was “the dead Weight of the most gross and carnal Institution” put on Christianity (142) and all distortions of original Christianity were caused by mixing with it elements of Judaism. In Morgan, the rejection of Judaism soon turned into virulent anti-Semitism<sup>8</sup>: Jews “had no Notion of any eternal immutable Law of Nature [...] They had Understandings, but little superior to the Beasts; they were always a grossly ignorant, and superstitious People, and their Pride and Superstition had separated them from the rest of the World” (MP 2.38); “this People from first to last, could scarce ever be said to be civilized at all; but notwithstanding the Goodness of their Moral Polity, were always a wild, fierce, ungovernable Mob. [...] they had little more Knowledge than their Sheep and Cattle” (57).

## The Fitness Rule

Morgan was convinced that the only principle for judging religion is “the natural immutable Reason of Things, appearing in the Moral Fitness of Actions, as they are constituent of the Publick Good” (C ix). There is one infallible mark of the divine truth (M 1.85): “the moral Truth, Reason or Fitness of the Thing itself, whenever it comes to be fairly proposed to, and considered by, the Mind or Understanding” (86). This fitness also somehow allows the mind to form abstract ideas, including the idea of God (431–432).

Morgan never defined what he meant by the fitness of the thing, the fitness of things, or the fitness of actions, but he referred to Clarke according to whom

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<sup>7</sup> T. Morgan, *Vindication of the Moral Philosopher, against the false accusations, insults, and personal abuses of Samuel Chandler*, London 1741, pp. 27, 44.

<sup>8</sup> “*The Moral Philosopher* constitutes one of the most emblematic examples of Enlightenment anti-Semitism,” D. Lucci, *Scripture...*, p. 195.



“an eternal, immutable Rule of Rectitude, natural Relation of Things, and moral Fitness of Actions, as founded in Nature and Reason, antecedent to all positive Will or Law whatever” (M 1.137).<sup>9</sup> Clarke is only slightly more helpful about the definition of fitness when he said that there are different relations between things; hence, there is a different fitness of the application of different things; there is also fitness or suitableness of certain circumstances to certain people founded in the nature of things “antecedent to will”, otherwise it would be equally fit and suitable in the nature and reason of things that an innocent person suffers eternal misery as that he should be free from it. There is just eternally, necessarily, and unchangeably fitness in the nature and reason of things. These relations are accessible to the understanding of rational being, unless the understanding is “very imperfect or very depraved” and toward these relation human actions are directed, unless the will is corrupted.<sup>10</sup> An observation was made that for Clarke, fitness means here “a congruity, proportion, or suitableness between an act and the relations, in which, as a moral being, the agent stands.”<sup>11</sup>

The concept of the fitness of things and actions was very often used in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, particularly in the discussions of morality; as one observer noted drily at that time,

nothing is more frequently talked of in this enlightened age, this age of politeness, reason and good sense, than *the nature and fitness of things*; or, *the reason and nature of things*; phrases which to many, at least, that use them, are unmeaning and unintelligible sounds; and serve only as a retreat, when they have been fairly beaten out of an argument by the superior force and evidence of divine revelation.<sup>12</sup>

In one attempt of a definition we can read that there is an eternal fitness of things in nature: “a Globe is not fit to fill up the Space of a hollow Cube; nor is a Triangle fit to fill up the Area of a Circle.” The eternal fitness is the same as eternal truths that are abstract ideas that exist in the mind of God. It is fitting that every rational being preserves itself, that it should seek its own happiness; “this Self-preservation and Self-felicitation are inwrought in our natural Constitution”. It is fitting for a rational being to make others happy, should do justice, should love one another. It is fitting for God to act according to the perfections of His nature.<sup>13</sup>

The idea of the existence of the rule of fitness of things may be theologically perilous when it is carried to the extreme. It has been stated that the difference

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. S. Clark[e], *A demonstration of the being and attributes of God*, London 1705, p. 234.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 233–236.

<sup>11</sup> W. Fleming, *The vocabulary of philosophy*, London 1858, p. 200.

<sup>12</sup> J. Gill, *The moral nature and the fitness of things considered*, London 1738, p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> [Isaac Watts], *Self-love and vertue reconciled only by religion*, London 1739, pp. 4–7, 31.

between good and evil is independent of the will of God, the eternal rule by which God determines His will is independent of and prior to the will of God. Things have a fitness of means or ends, their true reason which is antecedent even to the law of God.<sup>14</sup> However, the notion of the moral nature and fitness of things existing prior to and independently of the will of God leads to polytheism, deism, antinomianism, and libertinism; to deism, since is this fitness is the universal and perfect rule, no revelation is necessary; if fallible human reason cannot see fitness of things, they are rejected such as the Trinity or the expiation of sin.<sup>15</sup> This is exactly the direction chosen by Morgan who rejected revelation in favor of the fitness rule allowed to be recognizable by the human mind. It appears that Clarke treaded in the same direction by requiring the rule of fitness to be “antecedent to will” and stating that eternal different relations and the fitness of the application of things “always and necessarily *do* determine the Will of God,”<sup>16</sup> but Clarke never rejected revelation the way Morgan did.

The fitness rule requires that any statements must fit the thing, i.e., they must agree with the nature of things, that is, the nature of investigated things must be known before the things can be investigated. Such conceptual knowledge must exist in some kind of Platonic world, or in the mind of God, as, for instance, Augustine would agree, or it is inborn. The nature of a triangularity must be known before triangles are investigated empirically or demonstratively. With physical truths it may not be so obvious. It is certain that a sphere cannot perfectly fit a cubic space, but how, for instance, should we deal with investigation of liquids vs. solids? Is there a transcendental criterion specifying the nature of liquidity so that borderline cases between liquids and solids can be unambiguously demarcated? In the case of natural sciences, the fitness rule is really of dubious applicability. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries the knowledge of the micro and macro world was vastly expanded. When a new species was discovered or a new astronomical phenomenon, how could the fitness rule be applied to validate the discovery? And when Morgan said that boles or earths (that is, *terra sigillata*, stamped earth) are not fit to be given as medicine, was it because he analyzed their essences and decided

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<sup>14</sup> S. Chandler, *Sermon preached to the Societies for Reformation of Manners*, London 1738, pp. 10, 11, 31. Chandler is not alone; it is said that “Rectitude then or virtue is a [royal] law [Plato, *Minos* 317c: τὸ μὲν ὀρθὸν νόμος ἐστὶ βασιλικός]. And it is the *first* and *supreme* law, to which all other laws owe their force [...] It is an *universal law*. The whole creation is ruled by it: under it men and rational beings subsist. It is the source and guide of all the actions of the Deity himself, and on it his throne and government are founded,” R. Price, *A review of the principal questions and difficulties in morals*, London 1758, p. 189. See also A.R. Humphreys, “The eternal fitness of things”: an aspect of eighteenth-century thought, “The Modern Language Review” 42 (1947), pp. 188–198; Terence Irwin, *The development of ethics*, New York 2008, vol. 2, pp. 460–462.

<sup>15</sup> J. Gill, *The moral nature...*, pp. 38, 40.

<sup>16</sup> S. Clarke, *A demonstration...*, pp. 235, 256.

their unfitness to treat diseases or because his experience showed that they “always clog and foul the Stomach”? How easy it could be in such cases to be misled on the presumed theoretical knowledge of the fitness of things the way Sydenham was when he proposed an improper treatment being “led aside by the Prejudice and Prepossession of an Hypothesis, without the least Ground either in Reason or Fact.”<sup>17</sup> Empirical knowledge cannot replace mere investigation of concepts, which appears to mean that the fitness rules is of little use when it comes to building empirical knowledge; at best, in this case, the fitness of things can be established from experience and observation of nature.

How about ethical issues? The definition of virtue was frequently made in terms of the fitness of things, but can decisions be easily made about the virtuousness of particular actions? Should killing be always prohibited including the case of self-preservation? Is stealing always condemnable? Consider the Heinz dilemma as investigated in our age by Lawrence Kohlberg.<sup>18</sup> And how about the concept of God? The adherence to the fitness rule is a mark of the divine provenance of a particular truth. That is, the existence of God appears to be noncontroversial. By the rule of fitness, the existence is surely an attribute of the perfect supreme Being, and thus, the rule itself enforces the existence of God, which leads directly to the ontological proof.

Since reason is an ultimate guide in establishing the truth of anything, all should be done to reach this reason. How? In a rather extraordinary statement we read that a person should withdraw from the noise of the world to

the silent Solitude of his own Mind, there to advise and consult in all difficult Cases with his cool impartial Reason. When a Man does this, he converses with God; he derives Communications of Light and Knowledge from the eternal Father and Fountain of it; he receives Intelligence and Information from eternal Wisdom, and hears the clear intelligible Voice of his Maker and Former speaking to his silent, undisturb'd attentive Reason (1.429–430).

In his prayer to “the eternal Reason, Father of Light, and immense Fountain of all Truth,” Morgan expressed his inability of knowing anything if it were not for “a Communication from the supreme, eternal, independent Mind,” to the continuation of the irradiation of his understanding “with the Beams of immutable, eternal Reason,” to “a fatherly Correction” to set him right if he is in error (426–427). This prayer is said in the spirit not unlike Solomon’s prayer for wisdom and this sounds very much like the way of obtaining revelation from God, not only

<sup>17</sup> T. Morgan, *The mechanical practice of physick*, London 1735, pp. 258, 166.

<sup>18</sup> It is thus justified to say that there is an absolute goodness in God, but there is no absolute fitness or absolute relation; the question is, fitness for what, for whom?, H. Felton, *The Christian faith asserted against deists, Arians, Socinians in eight sermons*, Oxford 1732, p. xlii.

by listening to Him, but also conversing with the Almighty. So, at the foundation of Morgan's strict rationality, there is a firm belief in the divine inspiration, in the possibility of the unmediated contact with God from whom the truth can pour directly to the human mind. This is quite a reversal from his dismissive, even disdainful, treatment of "the new vain Pretence of an immediate Inspiration" (C 432). This reversal demolishes Morgan's entire criticism of the inspired character of the Scripture. Why, we may ask, such an ability was denied to the authors of the books of the Bible if those who sincerely seek truth and light "will be blessed and rewarded by him [God] with still farther and farther Degrees of Knowledge" (PT 325)? And since the sincere love of truth for its own sake is the true love of God and the only way to be enlightened by God (326), even a professed atheist may be a lover of God without knowing it (325), so, again, if an atheist may be enlightened by God, why not the scriptural writers?

Moreover, just the fact of relying on reason does not mean that the truthfulness of a statement is established. "All Men are liable to Error" (MP 2.3), but while directing this statement against his opponents Morgan seems to have exempted himself from it. In the end, as rather scurrilously, but not unjustifiably stated, "Christianity surely is very much obliged to this writer, who is so mightily concerned to take off the uncertain bottom of the writings of the apostles and prophets, and is for placing it upon an impregnable rock [...] viz. 'the eternal, immutable reason and fitness of things.'"<sup>19</sup>

### Physico-theology

The fitness rule can have any theological (and practical) significance when it is well established and readily available. However, it is frequently—maybe even most of the time—unavailable to be applied for particular cases, and the analysis of concepts to establish the essence of things and thereby their applicability may be too feeble a guide to arrive at certainty. And thus, Morgan is left with only one proof of the existence and the attributes of God, the proof by design. This fits the age in which physico-theology was blooming in Europe relying on the proof of the existence of God from the orderliness of nature on all its levels, from micro to macro. This fits very well Morgan's non-theological occupation, namely medicine. His two medical books present human anatomy, physiology, and pathology providing descriptions of diseases, their diagnoses, and their treatment at great detail relying on empirical data obtained during his own medical practice and the data provided by other physicians. These data

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<sup>19</sup> J. Leland, *The divine authority of the Old and New Testament asserted*, London 1837 [1739–1740], p. 5.

gave him a great appreciation for the complexity of the physical world, at least the world related to the human body.

The proof from design opens Morgan's first declaration of faith during his ordination, when he said:

When I take a general Survey of this stupendious Fabrick of a Universe, the beautiful and regular Frame of external Nature; when I look upwards to the expanded Heavens, and contemplate the numberless Systems of vast and glorious Bodies, which fill and adorn the immense Spaces, that every where surround us [...] [when I consider] the inimitable Skill and Contrivance discover'd in the Constitution of vegetable and animal Bodies, those finish'd Pieces of Nature, which are plainly in their Formation and Original, absolutely above and beyond all the Powers of Mechanism, and Laws of Motion, [I conclude that all of it is] the perfect Production of an Almighty Power, guided and directed by infinite, incomprehensible Wisdom,

that all of it cannot be the result of chance (CF 55–56). Interestingly, only afterwards he said that the Scriptures are “the infallible Word, and Law of God to Man” (59), that is, the source of theological truths, in particular, the existence of God and His creation. This may be a weak sign of Morgan's commitment to the Scripture: first, the testimony of nature, then the testimony of the Scripture. Gradually, Morgan rejected the latter, but to the end he maintained the former. Thus, we read that the intricate mechanism of the animal body is “a convincing Proof of the inimitable Wisdom and Contrivance of its Author and Former”. It is “the perfect Workmanship of Almighty God.” There is no power in human works to restore themselves as it is in the work of God”; and thus, the law of nature is “the continued regular Operation of the first Cause, or Author of Nature, acting constantly and uniformly, after this or that particular manner”.<sup>20</sup>

In self-contemplation, a person will find an inexhaustible source of wisdom, when a person knows the natural constitution of his mind and passions, the wonderful structure and mechanism of his body. Then, the contemplation of the vast stupendous fabric of the heaven and earth, all the creatures on earth under the case of an unseen hand, when looking at the microworld through a microscope, he will be more amazed by the discovered beauty and order (MP 1.422). And then the person will be even more intellectually delighted by the laws of order which govern celestial bodies, thereby despising inferior pleasures. All this will carry him to the prime Agent and a common Architect (423). There is a stupendous multiplicity of being in nature, and yet, all of it works in unison pointing to the unity of design.

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<sup>20</sup> T. Morgan, *Philosophical principles of medicine*, London 1730 [1725], pp. viii, ix, 376.

This perfect Unity, Order, Wisdom, and Design, by which every Individual is necessarily related to, and made a dependent Part of the Whole, necessarily supposes and implies a universal, designing Mind, and all-powerful Agent, who has contrived, adjusted, and disposed the Whole into such Order, Uniformity, concordant Beauty and Harmony, and who continues to support, govern, and direct the Whole (140).

Morgan very briefly touched on the problem of theodicy and he did not shun from seeing it from the lens of unity of design: The whole of creation “is a harmonious Mixture and Composition of Antiperistases: A Unity of Design in contriving, and adjusting contrary Elements and Qualities. [...] Evil is as necessary in Wisdom and Design, as Good” (333); for instance, all pleasure is the gratification of desire, which is the removal of pain (334), also, pain is an inducement to action (335). Particular evils stemming from ignorance and passions are under the direction of the Providence and, as such, “they are made subservient to the best and wisest Ends and Purposes” (347).

Observation clearly shows that “the material World is governed and directed by Reason, Wisdom, and active Power” (PT 57) and that there is “some active, intelligent Power continually exerted upon the whole material System” (58). It is important that for Morgan, this action is continuous, any other assumption leads to atheism (59). Thereby, Morgan disagreed with those who say that God created the world as a perfect machine which needs no adjustment and there is no need that God constantly oversees if this machine is properly working (25). God acts through the laws He created, the laws of nature that are the “free Agency in the Deity, who is the real efficient Mover and Director of all” (61); these laws of nature are “the Rules and Principles of eternal, immutable Wisdom and Reason, upon which the Deity, or Author of Nature, continues to act, and incessantly exerts his active Power and Energy” (77).

When Morgan said that he was a Christian,<sup>21</sup> then the most likely interpretation of this statement appears to be that he met Christianity through the acceptance of physico-theology. But this is where the commonality of Morgan’s views with orthodox Christianity ends. Morgan rejected all major Christian tenets: the Trinity, the meaning of Christ’s self-sacrifice, the sacraments, and the inspired provenance of the Scripture. He called himself a Christian deist (1.165, 392, 394; PT 353), but it is difficult to see how this designation would differ from an un-Christian deism. Possibly, at one point: unlike many—even most—deists, Morgan believed in the providential care of God for His creation. This care, apparently, could mainly be discovered in the nature where God sustains animals and maintains the operation of natural laws, but hardly in human history if, on

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<sup>21</sup> Id., *A letter to Mr. Thomas Chubb; occasioned by his two letters to a friend*, London 1727, p. 35; MP 2.220.

Morgan's terms, God was known only before Moses, then briefly in the New Testament times, and then for a fleeting moment only to Morgan...

Morgan showed his commonality with Christian religion but failed altogether to show the validity of his version of deism.<sup>22</sup> His deism, as any other deism, was supposed to rely entirely on reason, human reason, that is, which rather looked very much like Morgan's own reason; all supernatural aspects have been rule out out of hand. However, in the moment of candor, Morgan confessed that his rationality, his reason, was really the door opening the mind to the direct communication with God; his rationality was based on direct divine inspiration, on the spiritual meeting with God. In this way, either his rationalistic edifice is crushing down, since it is really based on suprarationality, and thus, his criticism of traditional Christianity, religion that recognizes revelation, is completely unjustified. Or, if he wanted to be consistent in his rejection of any views based on revelation, then he also should have rejected all his own criticisms, his alleged rationality along with the feeble firmness of the rule of fitness. Either way, physico-theology, an empirical endeavor, and as such, not affected by suprarationality, remains a strong link between his deism and traditional Christianity and the only element that he firmly maintained in his orthodox and deistic phases.

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<sup>22</sup> Incidentally, that would be the fourth kind of deism according to the categorization proposed early on by S. Clark[e], *Discourse concerning the unchangeable obligations of natural religion*, London 1706, pp. 34–37; deists of this category recognize all divine attributes including His providence, they say that people should worship God, that people should live according to high moral standards, and they should limit themselves to the precept of natural religion rejecting revelation; in Clarke's estimation, these are the only true deist, that is, the most amenable to the acceptance of Christian revelation; however, they are in the minority.

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