A LETTER FROM GOD INTENDED FOR THE GENERAL PUBLIC

In this letter to the general public, received by Think *some time ago, God complains that the growth of science has made it progressively more difficult to communicate with everyone as much as he would like. He then apologizes for not anticipating that scientific explanations would always be preferable to appeals to miracles in accounting for strange or unusual phenomena.*

Up by the throne at the end of the path
St Peter's Main Gate
Heaven

Dear all,

As you'll have noticed, it has been some time since I last made contact. This has been, I'll admit, partly my own fault (as most things are). I would hate for you all to come to the conclusion that this has been a deliberate act of neglect on my part. Rather, some unforeseen circumstances have made any communication between us quite impossible for some time. Let me explain.

It all began around 3,000 years ago. Back then, it was relatively easy to alert you to my presence. You saw plenty of my interventions. You know, those things you call 'miracles'. It was quite fun for a time. I once plucked the moon from the sky. You were all gobsmacked! Yes, that was a good one. Another time, I turned a forest upside down, and then, just as the birds began to build their nests in the roots, I flipped it right way up again. Ha ha! Yes, there was a lot of praise *that* year, I can tell you. My mailbox was always full of prayers, and miracles were a

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surefire way to collect them. The only trouble was, there were also lots of strange events that were *not* due to my interventions at all. They were just rare events that nevertheless made up part of the common course of nature. I remember the day you all first saw a solar eclipse. Goodness me! It scared the bejesus out of you all. The prayers were so numerous, I could barely keep up. But what could I do? Tell you all not to be scared; that it was just a normal part of the common course of nature? That sometimes weird things just happened? But if I did, then how would you be able to tell the difference between, say, a run of the mill eclipse and, say, my plucking the moon from the sky? I figured it was a problem best left unmentioned.

Fast forward a few hundred years or so, and along comes this fellow called Thales. He was a Greek, if I remember rightly (and I usually do). You all call him a 'pre-Socratic philosopher', but I call him a right pain in the bottom. You see, before Thales, earthquakes had always been a *massive* source of prayers. Honestly, you have no idea. If I woke up with a million or so more prayers in my mailbox than usual, I would always say to myself: 'Oh, looks like there's been an earthquake today.' And do you know what, I'd always be right too (and yes to all you nay-sayers, I may be omniscient, but I'm still entitled to gloat).

But then, one day, I wake up and I can tell there's been an earthquake, see, but there are only a handful more prayers in my mailbox than usual; not much difference at all. 'What gives?' I wondered. Well I'll be blowed if it wasn't this Thales bloke's doing. As I already made clear, earthquakes were my real money-maker, and along comes Thales and says that earthquakes aren't any kind of intervention at all. 'No,' he says, 'earthquakes are caused by waves.' Waves, he says! That's right. The fool thought that the Earth was like a giant ship floating on the water. And just as a ship rocks and jitters when it encounters big waves, so too, he thought, the Earth rocks and jitters when it hits the whitecaps of this giant cosmic ocean. What a berk!

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Trouble is, the more I thought about it, the more I realized that Thales' explanation for earthquakes was more sensible to believe than the claim that I caused them anyway. After all, everyone knows that ships rock about on high water, and many people have had first-hand experience of it. So, Thales had actually managed to give an explanation for something mysterious (the way the earth rocks) in terms of something non-mysterious (the way a ship rocks). I felt a bit embarrassed, to be frank. His explanation for earthquakes was more satisfying than any explanation invoking me. Why more satisfying? Because any explanation invoking me as a cause of earthquakes would be an attempt to explain the mysterious in terms of the *even more mysterious*. I realized I had made a very grave mistake.

A whole host of philosophers followed Thales: Anaximander, Anaxagoras, Democritus, Aristotle, Aristarchus, Archimedes, and so on. With each new philosopher, a little more of the mysterious was demystified. Explanations were available for the strange and the wonderful, and my mailbox started receiving fewer and fewer prayers, year on year. It didn't really matter that the theories of these philosophers were often false. What mattered was that their explanations were more believable than any appeal to my actions. It came to be the case that even when I had performed a miracle, it was no longer rational to believe that I had done it. I had made a world in which believability and truth had come apart. The rational and the real were out of step. I was a nervous wreck. I even took up smoking.

After a brief interlude in which my mailbox started filling up again (a period which you call 'the Dark Ages', but which I remember rather fondly) more philosophers started proffering explanations for this and that and the other thing. Galileo, Newton, Boyle, Hutton, Darwin, the list goes on. Any time I did something extraordinary, the event was either subsumed under some new-fangled 'scientific law', or (and this would be the best-case scenario) it was simply left unexplained altogether. The strange event was left for

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some future, yet unconjectured, scientific law to explain. And don't even get me started on that brat David Hume, who argued that verbal reports of miracles could never justify the belief that a miracle had actually occurred, since it was always more likely that the testimony be false than that the laws of nature be disrupted. Honestly, it makes you want to tear your hair out. Eventually, I gave up on miracles altogether. I gave up trying to communicate at all. In fact, I became something of a recluse.

So, I suppose you can see why I have been out of touch for so long. On some level, I want to apologize. It was my own fault. I should have anticipated that we could never really communicate in any reasonable way. And indeed, the more successful your mortal scientific explanations have become, the less reason you have to think there is much use for an old-timer like me. Once upon a time, I could dazzle you better than David Copperfield, but now you just take anything I do to be some kind of trick, explicable by some known or as yet unknown natural process. Serves me right, I guess. I was the one who set up a lawful universe to begin with. I made explanatory scope and predictive power the epistemic virtues that they are. I should have guessed that it would always be preferable to explain the mysterious by the non-mysterious, not the other way around. So, I am truly sorry.

But it is hard not to feel just a touch of resentment. For, and this really stings, I bet you'll even say that this very letter was written by some known or as-yet-unknown philosopher, and not by me at all. I can only sigh and shake my head. It's simply not true; not true at all. But I understand how it looks from where you're standing. Philosophers write letters all the time, and when did you ever see a letter written by a god? You have to believe what seems to you most sensible, I suppose.

Mine with eternal benevolence,

God

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