

Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason, and Seeking Truth in the Sciences

by

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PREFATORY NOTE BY THE AUTHOR

1 If this Discourse appear too long to be read at once, it may be divided into six Parts: and, in the first, will be found various considerations touching the Sciences; in the second, the principal rules of the Method which the Author has discovered, in the third, certain of the rules of Morals which he has deduced from this Method; in the fourth, the reasonings by which he establishes the existence of God and of the Human Soul, which are the foundations of his Metaphysic; in the fifth, the order of the Physical questions which he has investigated, and, in particular, the explication of the motion of the heart and of some other difficulties pertaining to Medicine, as also the difference between the soul of man and that of the brutes; and, in the last, what the Author believes to be required in order
5 to greater advancement in the investigation of Nature than has yet been made, with the reasons that have induced him to write.

PART I

10 Good sense is, of all things among men, the most equally distributed; for every one thinks himself so abundantly provided with it, that those even who are the most difficult to satisfy in everything else, do not usually desire a larger measure of this quality than they already possess. And in this it is not likely that all are mistaken the conviction is rather to be held as testifying that the power of judging aright and of distinguishing truth from error, which is properly what is called good sense or reason, is by nature equal in all men; and that the diversity of our opinions, consequently, does not arise from some being endowed with a larger share of reason than others, but solely from this, that we conduct our thoughts along different ways, and do not fix our attention on the same objects. For to be possessed of a vigorous mind is not enough; the prime requisite is rightly to apply it. The greatest minds, as they are capable of the highest excellences, are open likewise to the greatest aberrations; and those who travel very slowly may yet make far greater progress, provided they keep always to the
15 straight road, than those who, while they run, forsake it.

1 For myself, I have never fancied my mind to be in any respect more perfect than those of the
generality; on the contrary, I have often wished that I were equal to some others in promptitude of
thought, or in clearness and distinctness of imagination, or in fullness and readiness of memory. And
besides these, I know of no other qualities that contribute to the perfection of the mind; for as to the
reason or sense, inasmuch as it is that alone which constitutes us men, and distinguishes us from the
brutes, I am disposed to believe that it is to be found complete in each individual; and on this point
to adopt the common opinion of philosophers, who say that the difference of greater and less holds
only among the accidents, and not among the forms or natures of individuals of the same species.

5 I will not hesitate, however, to avow my belief that it has been my singular good fortune to have very
early in life fallen in with certain tracks which have conducted me to considerations and maxims, of
which I have formed a method that gives me the means, as I think, of gradually augmenting my
knowledge, and of raising it by little and little to the highest point which the mediocrity of my
talents and the brief duration of my life will permit me to reach. For I have already reaped from it
such fruits that, although I have been accustomed to think lowly enough of myself, and although
when I look with the eye of a philosopher at the varied courses and pursuits of mankind at large, I
find scarcely one which does not appear in vain and useless, I nevertheless derive the highest
satisfaction from the progress I conceive myself to have already made in the search after truth, and
cannot help entertaining such expectations of the future as to believe that if, among the occupations
of men as men, there is any one really excellent and important, it is that which I have chosen.

10 After all, it is possible I may be mistaken; and it is but a little copper and glass, perhaps, that I take
for gold and diamonds. I know how very liable we are to delusion in what relates to ourselves, and
also how much the judgments of our friends are to be suspected when given in our favor. But I shall
endeavor in this discourse to describe the paths I have followed, and to delineate my life as in a
picture, in order that each one may also be able to judge of them for himself, and that in the general
opinion entertained of them, as gathered from current report, I myself may have a new help towards
instruction to be added to those I have been in the habit of employing.

15 My present design, then, is not to teach the method which each ought to follow for the right
conduct of his reason, but solely to describe the way in which I have endeavored to conduct my own.
They who set themselves to give precepts must of course regard themselves as possessed of greater
skill than those to whom they prescribe; and if they err in the slightest particular, they subject
themselves to censure. But as this tract is put forth merely as a history, or, if you will, as a tale, in
which, amid some examples worthy of imitation, there will be found, perhaps, as many more which
it were advisable not to follow, I hope it will prove useful to some without being hurtful to any, and
that my openness will find some favor with all.

20 From my childhood, I have been familiar with letters; and as I was given to believe that by their help
a clear and certain knowledge of all that is useful in life might be acquired, I was ardently desirous of
instruction. But as soon as I had finished the entire course of study, at the close of which it is
customary to be admitted into the order of the learned, I completely changed my opinion. For I
found myself involved in so many doubts and errors, that I was convinced I had advanced no farther
in all my attempts at learning, than the discovery at every turn of my own ignorance. And yet I was
studying in one of the most celebrated schools in Europe, in which I thought there must be learned

1 men, if such were anywhere to be found. I had been taught all that others learned there; and not
contented with the sciences actually taught us, I had, in addition, read all the books that had fallen
into my hands, treating of such branches as are esteemed the most curious and rare. I knew the
judgment which others had formed of me; and I did not find that I was considered inferior to my
fellows, although there were among them some who were already marked out to fill the places of our
instructors. And, in fine, our age appeared to me as flourishing, and as fertile in powerful minds as
any preceding one. I was thus led to take the liberty of judging of all other men by myself, and of
concluding that there was no science in existence that was of such a nature as I had previously been
5 given to believe.

I still continued, however, to hold in esteem the studies of the schools. I was aware that the
languages taught in them are necessary to the understanding of the writings of the ancients; that the
grace of fable stirs the mind; that the memorable deeds of history elevate it; and, if read with
discretion, aid in forming the judgment; that the perusal of all excellent books is, as it were, to
interview with the noblest men of past ages, who have written them, and even a studied interview, in
which are discovered to us only their choicest thoughts; that eloquence has incomparable force and
beauty; that poesy has its ravishing graces and delights; that in the mathematics there are many
refined discoveries eminently suited to gratify the inquisitive, as well as further all the arts an lessen
10 the labour of man; that numerous highly useful precepts and exhortations to virtue are contained in
treatises on morals; that theology points out the path to heaven; that philosophy affords the means of
discoursing with an appearance of truth on all matters, and commands the admiration of the more
simple; that jurisprudence, medicine, and the other sciences, secure for their cultivators honors and
riches; and, in fine, that it is useful to bestow some attention upon all, even upon those abounding
the most in superstition and error, that we may be in a position to determine their real value, and
guard against being deceived.

But I believed that I had already given sufficient time to languages, and likewise to the reading of the
writings of the ancients, to their histories and fables. For to hold converse with those of other ages
15 and to travel, are almost the same thing. It is useful to know something of the manners of different
nations, that we may be enabled to form a more correct judgment regarding our own, and be
prevented from thinking that everything contrary to our customs is ridiculous and irrational, a
conclusion usually come to by those whose experience has been limited to their own country. On the
other hand, when too much time is occupied in traveling, we become strangers to our native
country; and the over curious in the customs of the past are generally ignorant of those of the
present. Besides, fictitious narratives lead us to imagine the possibility of many events that are
impossible; and even the most faithful histories, if they do not wholly misrepresent matters, or
exaggerate their importance to render the account of them more worthy of perusal, omit, at least,
20 almost always the meanest and least striking of the attendant circumstances; hence it happens that
the remainder does not represent the truth, and that such as regulate their conduct by examples
drawn from this source, are apt to fall into the extravagances of the knight-errants of romance, and
to entertain projects that exceed their powers.

I esteemed eloquence highly, and was in raptures with poesy; but I thought that both were gifts of
nature rather than fruits of study. Those in whom the faculty of reason is predominant, and who
most skillfully dispose their thoughts with a view to render them clear and intelligible, are always the

1 best able to persuade others of the truth of what they lay down, though they should speak only in the language of Lower Brittany, and be wholly ignorant of the rules of rhetoric; and those whose minds are stored with the most agreeable fancies, and who can give expression to them with the greatest embellishment and harmony, are still the best poets, though unacquainted with the art of poetry.

I was especially delighted with the mathematics, on account of the certitude and evidence of their reasonings; but I had not as yet a precise knowledge of their true use; and thinking that they but contributed to the advancement of the mechanical arts, I was astonished that foundations, so strong and solid, should have had no loftier superstructure reared on them. On the other hand, I compared the disquisitions of the ancient moralists to very towering and magnificent palaces with no better foundation than sand and mud: they laud the virtues very highly, and exhibit them as estimable far above anything on earth; but they give us no adequate criterion of virtue, and frequently that which they designate with so fine a name is but apathy, or pride, or despair, or parricide.

I revered our theology, and aspired as much as any one to reach heaven: but being given assuredly to understand that the way is not less open to the most ignorant than to the most learned, and that the revealed truths which lead to heaven are above our comprehension, I did not presume to subject them to the impotency of my reason; and I thought that in order competently to undertake their examination, there was need of some special help from heaven, and of being more than man.

Of philosophy I will say nothing, except that when I saw that it had been cultivated for many ages by the most distinguished men, and that yet there is not a single matter within its sphere which is not still in dispute, and nothing, therefore, which is above doubt, I did not presume to anticipate that my success would be greater in it than that of others; and further, when I considered the number of conflicting opinions touching a single matter that may be upheld by learned men, while there can be but one true, I reckoned as well-nigh false all that was only probable.

15 As to the other sciences, inasmuch as these borrow their principles from philosophy, I judged that no solid superstructures could be reared on foundations so infirm; and neither the honor nor the gain held out by them was sufficient to determine me to their cultivation: for I was not, thank Heaven, in a condition which compelled me to make merchandise of science for the bettering of my fortune; and though I might not profess to scorn glory as a cynic, I yet made very slight account of that honor which I hoped to acquire only through fictitious titles. And, in fine, of false sciences I thought I knew the worth sufficiently to escape being deceived by the professions of an alchemist, the predictions of an astrologer, the impostures of a magician, or by the artifices and boasting of any of those who profess to know things of which they are ignorant.

20 For these reasons, as soon as my age permitted me to pass from under the control of my instructors, I entirely abandoned the study of letters, and resolved no longer to seek any other science than the knowledge of myself, or of the great book of the world. I spent the remainder of my youth in traveling, in visiting courts and armies, in holding intercourse with men of different dispositions and ranks, in collecting varied experience, in proving myself in the different situations into which fortune threw me, and, above all, in making such reflection on the matter of my experience as to secure my improvement. For it occurred to me that I should find much more truth in the reasonings of each individual with reference to the affairs in which he is personally interested, and the issue of which

1 must presently punish him if he has judged amiss, than in those conducted by a man of letters in his study, regarding speculative matters that are of no practical moment, and followed by no consequences to himself, farther, perhaps, than that they foster his vanity the better the more remote they are from common sense; requiring, as they must in this case, the exercise of greater ingenuity and art to render them probable. In addition, I had always a most earnest desire to know how to distinguish the true from the false, in order that I might be able clearly to discriminate the right path in life, and proceed in it with confidence.

5 It is true that, while busied only in considering the manners of other men, I found here, too, scarce any ground for settled conviction, and remarked hardly less contradiction among them than in the opinions of the philosophers. So that the greatest advantage I derived from the study consisted in this, that, observing many things which, however extravagant and ridiculous to our apprehension, are yet by common consent received and approved by other great nations, I learned to entertain too decided a belief in regard to nothing of the truth of which I had been persuaded merely by example and custom; and thus I gradually extricated myself from many errors powerful enough to darken our natural intelligence, and incapacitate us in great measure from listening to reason. But after I had been occupied several years in thus studying the book of the world, and in essaying to gather some
10 experience, I at length resolved to make myself an object of study, and to employ all the powers of my mind in choosing the paths I ought to follow, an undertaking which was accompanied with greater success than it would have been had I never quitted my country or my books.

PART II

15 I was then in Germany, attracted thither by the wars in that country, which have not yet been brought to a termination; and as I was returning to the army from the coronation of the emperor, the setting in of winter arrested me in a locality where, as I found no society to interest me, and was besides fortunately undisturbed by any cares or passions, I remained the whole day in seclusion, with full opportunity to occupy my attention with my own thoughts. Of these one of the very first that occurred to me was, that there is seldom so much perfection in works composed of many separate parts, upon which different hands had been employed, as in those completed by a single master. Thus it is observable that the buildings which a single architect has planned and executed, are generally more elegant and commodious than those which several have attempted to improve, by making old walls serve for purposes for which they were not originally built. Thus also, those ancient cities which, from being at first only villages, have become, in course of time, large towns, are usually
20 but ill laid out compared with the regularity constructed towns which a professional architect has freely planned on an open plain; so that although the several buildings of the former may often equal or surpass in beauty those of the latter, yet when one observes their indiscriminate juxtaposition, there a large one and here a small, and the consequent crookedness and irregularity of the streets, one is disposed to allege that chance rather than any human will guided by reason must have led to such an arrangement. And if we consider that nevertheless there have been at all times certain officers whose duty it was to see that private buildings contributed to public ornament, the difficulty of

1 reaching high perfection with but the materials of others to operate on, will be readily
acknowledged. In the same way I fancied that those nations which, starting from a semi-barbarous
state and advancing to civilization by slow degrees, have had their laws successively determined, and,
as it were, forced upon them simply by experience of the hurtfulness of particular crimes and
disputes, would by this process come to be possessed of less perfect institutions than those which,
from the commencement of their association as communities, have followed the appointments of
some wise legislator. It is thus quite certain that the constitution of the true religion, the ordinances
of which are derived from God, must be incomparably superior to that of every other. And, to speak
5 of human affairs, I believe that the pre-eminence of Sparta was due not to the goodness of each of its
laws in particular, for many of these were very strange, and even opposed to good morals, but to the
circumstance that, originated by a single individual, they all tended to a single end. In the same way
I thought that the sciences contained in books (such of them at least as are made up of probable
reasonings, without demonstrations), composed as they are of the opinions of many different
individuals massed together, are farther removed from truth than the simple inferences which a man
of good sense using his natural and unprejudiced judgment draws respecting the matters of his
experience. And because we have all to pass through a state of infancy to manhood, and have been of
necessity, for a length of time, governed by our desires and preceptors (whose dictates were
10 frequently conflicting, while neither perhaps always counseled us for the best), I farther concluded
that it is almost impossible that our judgments can be so correct or solid as they would have been,
had our reason been mature from the moment of our birth, and had we always been guided by it
alone.

It is true, however, that it is not customary to pull down all the houses of a town with the single
design of rebuilding them differently, and thereby rendering the streets more handsome; but it often
happens that a private individual takes down his own with the view of erecting it anew, and that
people are even sometimes constrained to this when their houses are in danger of falling from age, or
when the foundations are insecure. With this before me by way of example, I was persuaded that it
15 would indeed be preposterous for a private individual to think of reforming a state by fundamentally
changing it throughout, and overturning it in order to set it up amended; and the same I thought
was true of any similar project for reforming the body of the sciences, or the order of teaching them
established in the schools: but as for the opinions which up to that time I had embraced, I thought
that I could not do better than resolve at once to sweep them wholly away, that I might afterwards
be in a position to admit either others more correct, or even perhaps the same when they had
undergone the scrutiny of reason. I firmly believed that in this way I should much better succeed in
the conduct of my life, than if I built only upon old foundations, and leaned upon principles which,
in my youth, I had taken upon trust. For although I recognized various difficulties in this
undertaking, these were not, however, without remedy, nor once to be compared with such as attend
20 the slightest reformation in public affairs. Large bodies, if once overthrown, are with great difficulty
set up again, or even kept erect when once seriously shaken, and the fall of such is always disastrous.
Then if there are any imperfections in the constitutions of states (and that many such exist the
diversity of constitutions is alone sufficient to assure us), custom has without doubt materially
smoothed their inconveniences, and has even managed to steer altogether clear of, or insensibly
corrected a number which sagacity could not have provided against with equal effect; and, in fine,
the defects are almost always more tolerable than the change necessary for their removal; in the same
manner that highways which wind among mountains, by being much frequented, become gradually

1 so smooth and commodious, that it is much better to follow them than to seek a straighter path by climbing over the tops of rocks and descending to the bottoms of precipices.

Hence it is that I cannot in any degree approve of those restless and busy meddlers who, called neither by birth nor fortune to take part in the management of public affairs, are yet always projecting reforms; and if I thought that this tract contained aught which might justify the suspicion that I was a victim of such folly, I would by no means permit its publication. I have never contemplated anything higher than the reformation of my own opinions, and basing them on a foundation wholly my own. And although my own satisfaction with my work has led me to present here a draft of it, I do not by any means therefore recommend to every one else to make a similar attempt. Those whom God has endowed with a larger measure of genius will entertain, perhaps, designs still more exalted; but for the many I am much afraid lest even the present undertaking be more than they can safely venture to imitate. The single design to strip one's self of all past beliefs is one that ought not to be taken by every one. The majority of men is composed of two classes, for neither of which would this be at all a befitting resolution: in the first place, of those who with more than a due confidence in their own powers, are precipitate in their judgments and want the patience requisite for orderly and circumspect thinking; whence it happens, that if men of this class once take the liberty to doubt of their accustomed opinions, and quit the beaten highway, they will never be able to thread the byway that would lead them by a shorter course, and will lose themselves and continue to wander for life; in the second place, of those who, possessed of sufficient sense or modesty to determine that there are others who excel them in the power of discriminating between truth and error, and by whom they may be instructed, ought rather to content themselves with the opinions of such than trust for more correct to their own reason.

For my own part, I should doubtless have belonged to the latter class, had I received instruction from but one master, or had I never known the diversities of opinion that from time immemorial have prevailed among men of the greatest learning. But I had become aware, even so early as during my college life, that no opinion, however absurd and incredible, can be imagined, which has not been maintained by some one of the philosophers; and afterwards in the course of my travels I remarked that all those whose opinions are decidedly repugnant to ours are not in that account barbarians and savages, but on the contrary that many of these nations make an equally good, if not better, use of their reason than we do. I took into account also the very different character which a person brought up from infancy in France or Germany exhibits, from that which, with the same mind originally, this individual would have possessed had he lived always among the Chinese or with savages, and the circumstance that in dress itself the fashion which pleased us ten years ago, and which may again, perhaps, be received into favor before ten years have gone, appears to us at this moment extravagant and ridiculous. I was thus led to infer that the ground of our opinions is far more custom and example than any certain knowledge. And, finally, although such be the ground of our opinions, I remarked that a plurality of suffrages is no guarantee of truth where it is at all of difficult discovery, as in such cases it is much more likely that it will be found by one than by many. I could, however, select from the crowd no one whose opinions seemed worthy of preference, and thus I found myself constrained, as it were, to use my own reason in the conduct of my life.

But like one walking alone and in the dark, I resolved to proceed so slowly and with such circumspection, that if I did not advance far, I would at least guard against falling. I did not even

1 choose to dismiss summarily any of the opinions that had crept into my belief without having been introduced by reason, but first of all took sufficient time carefully to satisfy myself of the general nature of the task I was setting myself, and ascertain the true method by which to arrive at the knowledge of whatever lay within the compass of my powers.

Among the branches of philosophy, I had, at an earlier period, given some attention to logic, and among those of the mathematics to geometrical analysis and algebra,--three arts or sciences which ought, as I conceived, to contribute something to my design. But, on examination, I found that, as
5 for logic, its syllogisms and the majority of its other precepts are of avail--rather in the communication of what we already know, or even as the art of Lully, in speaking without judgment of things of which we are ignorant, than in the investigation of the unknown; and although this science contains indeed a number of correct and very excellent precepts, there are, nevertheless, so many others, and these either injurious or superfluous, mingled with the former, that it is almost quite as difficult to effect a severance of the true from the false as it is to extract a Diana or a Minerva from a rough block of marble. Then as to the analysis of the ancients and the algebra of the
10 moderns, besides that they embrace only matters highly abstract, and, to appearance, of no use, the former is so exclusively restricted to the consideration of figures, that it can exercise the understanding only on condition of greatly fatiguing the imagination; and, in the latter, there is so complete a subjection to certain rules and formulas, that there results an art full of confusion and obscurity calculated to embarrass, instead of a science fitted to cultivate the mind. By these considerations I was induced to seek some other method which would comprise the advantages of the three and be exempt from their defects. And as a multitude of laws often only hampers justice, so that a state is best governed when, with few laws, these are rigidly administered; in like manner, instead of the great number of precepts of which logic is composed, I believed that the four following would prove perfectly sufficient for me, provided I took the firm and unwavering resolution never in a single instance to fail in observing them.

15 The first was never to accept anything for true which I did not clearly know to be such; that is to say, carefully to avoid precipitancy and prejudice, and to comprise nothing more in my judgement than what was presented to my mind so clearly and distinctly as to exclude all ground of doubt.

The second, to divide each of the difficulties under examination into as many parts as possible, and as might be necessary for its adequate solution.

20 The third, to conduct my thoughts in such order that, by commencing with objects the simplest and easiest to know, I might ascend by little and little, and, as it were, step by step, to the knowledge of the more complex; assigning in thought a certain order even to those objects which in their own nature do not stand in a relation of antecedence and sequence.

And the last, in every case to make enumerations so complete, and reviews so general, that I might be assured that nothing was omitted.

The long chains of simple and easy reasonings by means of which geometers are accustomed to reach the conclusions of their most difficult demonstrations, had led me to imagine that all things, to the knowledge of which man is competent, are mutually connected in the same way, and that there is

1 nothing so far removed from us as to be beyond our reach, or so hidden that we cannot discover it,
provided only we abstain from accepting the false for the true, and always preserve in our thoughts
the order necessary for the deduction of one truth from another. And I had little difficulty in
determining the objects with which it was necessary to commence, for I was already persuaded that it
must be with the simplest and easiest to know, and, considering that of all those who have hitherto
sought truth in the sciences, the mathematicians alone have been able to find any demonstrations,
that is, any certain and evident reasons, I did not doubt but that such must have been the rule of
their investigations. I resolved to commence, therefore, with the examination of the simplest objects,
5 not anticipating, however, from this any other advantage than that to be found in accustoming my
mind to the love and nourishment of truth, and to a distaste for all such reasonings as were unsound.
But I had no intention on that account of attempting to master all the particular sciences commonly
denominated mathematics: but observing that, however different their objects, they all agree in
considering only the various relations or proportions subsisting among those objects, I thought it
best for my purpose to consider these proportions in the most general form possible, without
referring them to any objects in particular, except such as would most facilitate the knowledge of
them, and without by any means restricting them to these, that afterwards I might thus be the better
able to apply them to every other class of objects to which they are legitimately applicable. Perceiving
10 further, that in order to understand these relations I should sometimes have to consider them one by
one and sometimes only to bear them in mind, or embrace them in the aggregate, I thought that, in
order the better to consider them individually, I should view them as subsisting between straight
lines, than which I could find no objects more simple, or capable of being more distinctly
represented to my imagination and senses; and on the other hand, that in order to retain them in the
memory or embrace an aggregate of many, I should express them by certain characters the briefest
possible. In this way I believed that I could borrow all that was best both in geometrical analysis and
in algebra, and correct all the defects of the one by help of the other.

15 And, in point of fact, the accurate observance of these few precepts gave me, I take the liberty of
saying, such ease in unraveling all the questions embraced in these two sciences, that in the two or
three months I devoted to their examination, not only did I reach solutions of questions I had
formerly deemed exceedingly difficult but even as regards questions of the solution of which I
continued ignorant, I was enabled, as it appeared to me, to determine the means whereby, and the
extent to which a solution was possible; results attributable to the circumstance that I commenced
with the simplest and most general truths, and that thus each truth discovered was a rule available in
the discovery of subsequent ones Nor in this perhaps shall I appear too vain, if it be considered that,
as the truth on any particular point is one whoever apprehends the truth, knows all that on that
point can be known. The child, for example, who has been instructed in the elements of arithmetic,
and has made a particular addition, according to rule, may be assured that he has found, with respect
20 to the sum of the numbers before him, and that in this instance is within the reach of human genius.
Now, in conclusion, the method which teaches adherence to the true order, and an exact
enumeration of all the conditions of the thing sought includes all that gives certitude to the rules of
arithmetic.

But the chief ground of my satisfaction with thus method, was the assurance I had of thereby
exercising my reason in all matters, if not with absolute perfection, at least with the greatest
attainable by me: besides, I was conscious that by its use my mind was becoming gradually

1 habituated to clearer and more distinct conceptions of its objects; and I hoped also, from not having
restricted this method to any particular matter, to apply it to the difficulties of the other sciences,
with not less success than to those of algebra. I should not, however, on this account have ventured
at once on the examination of all the difficulties of the sciences which presented themselves to me,
for this would have been contrary to the order prescribed in the method, but observing that the
knowledge of such is dependent on principles borrowed from philosophy, in which I found nothing
certain, I thought it necessary first of all to endeavor to establish its principles. And because I
observed, besides, that an inquiry of this kind was of all others of the greatest moment, and one in
5 which precipitancy and anticipation in judgment were most to be dreaded, I thought that I ought
not to approach it till I had reached a more mature age (being at that time but twenty-three), and
had first of all employed much of my time in preparation for the work, as well by eradicating from
my mind all the erroneous opinions I had up to that moment accepted, as by amassing variety of
experience to afford materials for my reasonings, and by continually exercising myself in my chosen
method with a view to increased skill in its application.

10

PART III

And finally, as it is not enough, before commencing to rebuild the house in which we live, that it be
pulled down, and materials and builders provided, or that we engage in the work ourselves,
according to a plan which we have beforehand carefully drawn out, but as it is likewise necessary that
we be furnished with some other house in which we may live commodiously during the operations,
so that I might not remain irresolute in my actions, while my reason compelled me to suspend my
judgement, and that I might not be prevented from living thenceforward in the greatest possible
felicity, I formed a provisory code of morals, composed of three or four maxims, with which I am
15 desirous to make you acquainted.

The first was to obey the laws and customs of my country, adhering firmly to the faith in which, by
the grace of God, I had been educated from my childhood and regulating my conduct in every other
matter according to the most moderate opinions, and the farthest removed from extremes, which
should happen to be adopted in practice with general consent of the most judicious of those among
whom I might be living. For as I had from that time begun to hold my own opinions for nought
because I wished to subject them all to examination, I was convinced that I could not do better than
follow in the meantime the opinions of the most judicious; and although there are some perhaps
among the Persians and Chinese as judicious as among ourselves, expediency seemed to dictate that I
20 should regulate my practice conformably to the opinions of those with whom I should have to live;
and it appeared to me that, in order to ascertain the real opinions of such, I ought rather to take
cognizance of what they practised than of what they said, not only because, in the corruption of our
manners, there are few disposed to speak exactly as they believe, but also because very many are not
aware of what it is that they really believe; for, as the act of mind by which a thing is believed is
different from that by which we know that we believe it, the one act is often found without the
other. Also, amid many opinions held in equal repute, I chose always the most moderate, as much

1 for the reason that these are always the most convenient for practice, and probably the best (for all
excess is generally vicious), as that, in the event of my falling into error, I might be at less distance
from the truth than if, having chosen one of the extremes, it should turn out to be the other which I
ought to have adopted. And I placed in the class of extremes especially all promises by which
somewhat of our freedom is abridged; not that I disapproved of the laws which, to provide against
the instability of men of feeble resolution, when what is sought to be accomplished is some good,
permit engagements by vows and contracts binding the parties to persevere in it, or even, for the
security of commerce, sanction similar engagements where the purpose sought to be realized is
5 indifferent: but because I did not find anything on earth which was wholly superior to change, and
because, for myself in particular, I hoped gradually to perfect my judgments, and not to suffer them
to deteriorate, I would have deemed it a grave sin against good sense, if, for the reason that I
approved of something at a particular time, I therefore bound myself to hold it for good at a
subsequent time, when perhaps it had ceased to be so, or I had ceased to esteem it such.

My second maxim was to be as firm and resolute in my actions as I was able, and not to adhere less
steadfastly to the most doubtful opinions, when once adopted, than if they had been highly certain;
imitating in this the example of travelers who, when they have lost their way in a forest, ought not to
wander from side to side, far less remain in one place, but proceed constantly towards the same side
10 in as straight a line as possible, without changing their direction for slight reasons, although perhaps
it might be chance alone which at first determined the selection; for in this way, if they do not
exactly reach the point they desire, they will come at least in the end to some place that will probably
be preferable to the middle of a forest. In the same way, since in action it frequently happens that no
delay is permissible, it is very certain that, when it is not in our power to determine what is true, we
ought to act according to what is most probable; and even although we should not remark a greater
probability in one opinion than in another, we ought notwithstanding to choose one or the other,
and afterwards consider it, in so far as it relates to practice, as no longer dubious, but manifestly true
and certain, since the reason by which our choice has been determined is itself possessed of these
15 qualities. This principle was sufficient thenceforward to rid me of all those repentings and pangs of
remorse that usually disturb the consciences of such feeble and uncertain minds as, destitute of any
clear and determinate principle of choice, allow themselves one day to adopt a course of action as the
best, which they abandon the next, as the opposite.

My third maxim was to endeavor always to conquer myself rather than fortune, and change my
desires rather than the order of the world, and in general, accustom myself to the persuasion that,
except our own thoughts, there is nothing absolutely in our power; so that when we have done our
best in things external to us, all wherein we fail of success is to be held, as regards us, absolutely
impossible: and this single principle seemed to me sufficient to prevent me from desiring for the
20 future anything which I could not obtain, and thus render me contented; for since our will naturally
seeks those objects alone which the understanding represents as in some way possible of attainment,
it is plain, that if we consider all external goods as equally beyond our power, we shall no more regret
the absence of such goods as seem due to our birth, when deprived of them without any fault of
ours, than our not possessing the kingdoms of China or Mexico, and thus making, so to speak, a
virtue of necessity, we shall no more desire health in disease, or freedom in imprisonment, than we
now do bodies incorruptible as diamonds, or the wings of birds to fly with. But I confess there is
need of prolonged discipline and frequently repeated meditation to accustom the mind to view all

1 objects in this light; and I believe that in this chiefly consisted the secret of the power of such
philosophers as in former times were enabled to rise superior to the influence of fortune, and, amid
suffering and poverty, enjoy a happiness which their gods might have envied. For, occupied
incessantly with the consideration of the limits prescribed to their power by nature, they became so
entirely convinced that nothing was at their disposal except their own thoughts, that this conviction
was of itself sufficient to prevent their entertaining any desire of other objects; and over their
thoughts they acquired a sway so absolute, that they had some ground on this account for esteeming
themselves more rich and more powerful, more free and more happy, than other men who, whatever
5 be the favors heaped on them by nature and fortune, if destitute of this philosophy, can never
command the realization of all their desires.

In fine, to conclude this code of morals, I thought of reviewing the different occupations of men in
this life, with the view of making choice of the best. And, without wishing to offer any remarks on
the employments of others, I may state that it was my conviction that I could not do better than
continue in that in which I was engaged, viz., in devoting my whole life to the culture of my reason,
and in making the greatest progress I was able in the knowledge of truth, on the principles of the
method which I had prescribed to myself. This method, from the time I had begun to apply it, had
10 been to me the source of satisfaction so intense as to lead me to, believe that more perfect or more
innocent could not be enjoyed in this life; and as by its means I daily discovered truths that appeared
to me of some importance, and of which other men were generally ignorant, the gratification thence
arising so occupied my mind that I was wholly indifferent to every other object. Besides, the three
preceding maxims were founded singly on the design of continuing the work of self-instruction. For
since God has endowed each of us with some light of reason by which to distinguish truth from
error, I could not have believed that I ought for a single moment to rest satisfied with the opinions
of another, unless I had resolved to exercise my own judgment in examining these whenever I should
be duly qualified for the task. Nor could I have proceeded on such opinions without scruple, had I
supposed that I should thereby forfeit any advantage for attaining still more accurate, should such
15 exist. And, in fine, I could not have restrained my desires, nor remained satisfied had I not followed
a path in which I thought myself certain of attaining all the knowledge to the acquisition of which I
was competent, as well as the largest amount of what is truly good which I could ever hope to secure
Inasmuch as we neither seek nor shun any object except in so far as our understanding represents it
as good or bad, all that is necessary to right action is right judgment, and to the best action the most
correct judgment, that is, to the acquisition of all the virtues with all else that is truly valuable and
within our reach; and the assurance of such an acquisition cannot fail to render us contented.

Having thus provided myself with these maxims, and having placed them in reserve along with the
truths of faith, which have ever occupied the first place in my belief, I came to the conclusion that I
20 might with freedom set about ridding myself of what remained of my opinions. And, inasmuch as I
hoped to be better able successfully to accomplish this work by holding intercourse with mankind,
than by remaining longer shut up in the retirement where these thoughts had occurred to me, I
betook me again to traveling before the winter was well ended. And, during the nine subsequent
years, I did nothing but roam from one place to another, desirous of being a spectator rather than an
actor in the plays exhibited on the theater of the world; and, as I made it my business in each matter
to reflect particularly upon what might fairly be doubted and prove a source of error, I gradually
rooted out from my mind all the errors which had hitherto crept into it. Not that in this I imitated

1 the sceptics who doubt only that they may doubt, and seek nothing beyond uncertainty itself; for, on
the contrary, my design was singly to find ground of assurance, and cast aside the loose earth and
sand, that I might reach the rock or the clay. In this, as appears to me, I was successful enough; for,
since I endeavored to discover the falsehood or incertitude of the propositions I examined, not by
feeble conjectures, but by clear and certain reasonings, I met with nothing so doubtful as not to yield
some conclusion of adequate certainty, although this were merely the inference, that the matter in
question contained nothing certain. And, just as in pulling down an old house, we usually reserve the
ruins to contribute towards the erection, so, in destroying such of my opinions as I judged to be ill-
5 founded, I made a variety of observations and acquired an amount of experience of which I availed
myself in the establishment of more certain. And further, I continued to exercise myself in the
method I had prescribed; for, besides taking care in general to conduct all my thoughts according to
its rules, I reserved some hours from time to time which I expressly devoted to the employment of
the method in the solution of mathematical difficulties, or even in the solution likewise of some
questions belonging to other sciences, but which, by my having detached them from such principles
of these sciences as were of inadequate certainty, were rendered almost mathematical: the truth of
this will be manifest from the numerous examples contained in this volume. And thus, without in
appearance living otherwise than those who, with no other occupation than that of spending their
lives agreeably and innocently, study to sever pleasure from vice, and who, that they may enjoy their
10 leisure without ennui, have recourse to such pursuits as are honorable, I was nevertheless prosecuting
my design, and making greater progress in the knowledge of truth, than I might, perhaps, have made
had I been engaged in the perusal of books merely, or in holding converse with men of letters.

These nine years passed away, however, before I had come to any determinate judgment respecting
the difficulties which form matter of dispute among the learned, or had commenced to seek the
principles of any philosophy more certain than the vulgar. And the examples of many men of the
highest genius, who had, in former times, engaged in this inquiry, but, as appeared to me, without
success, led me to imagine it to be a work of so much difficulty, that I would not perhaps have
15 ventured on it so soon had I not heard it currently rumored that I had already completed the
inquiry. I know not what were the grounds of this opinion; and, if my conversation contributed in
any measure to its rise, this must have happened rather from my having confessed my Ignorance
with greater freedom than those are accustomed to do who have studied a little, and expounded
perhaps, the reasons that led me to doubt of many of those things that by others are esteemed
certain, than from my having boasted of any system of philosophy. But, as I am of a disposition that
makes me unwilling to be esteemed different from what I really am, I thought it necessary to
endeavor by all means to render myself worthy of the reputation accorded to me; and it is now
exactly eight years since this desire constrained me to remove from all those places where
interruption from any of my acquaintances was possible, and betake myself to this country, in which
20 the long duration of the war has led to the establishment of such discipline, that the armies
maintained seem to be of use only in enabling the inhabitants to enjoy more securely the blessings of
peace and where, in the midst of a great crowd actively engaged in business, and more careful of
their own affairs than curious about those of others, I have been enabled to live without being
deprived of any of the conveniences to be had in the most populous cities, and yet as solitary and as
retired as in the midst of the most remote deserts.

PART IV

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I am in doubt as to the propriety of making my first meditations in the place above mentioned matter of discourse; for these are so metaphysical, and so uncommon, as not, perhaps, to be acceptable to every one. And yet, that it may be determined whether the foundations that I have laid are sufficiently secure, I find myself in a measure constrained to advert to them. I had long before remarked that, in relation to practice, it is sometimes necessary to adopt, as if above doubt, opinions which we discern to be highly uncertain, as has been already said; but as I then desired to give my attention solely to the search after truth, I thought that a procedure exactly the opposite was called for, and that I ought to reject as absolutely false all opinions in regard to which I could suppose the least ground for doubt, in order to ascertain whether after that there remained aught in my belief that was wholly indubitable. Accordingly, seeing that our senses sometimes deceive us, I was willing to suppose that there existed nothing really such as they presented to us; and because some men err in reasoning, and fall into paralogsms, even on the simplest matters of geometry, I, convinced that I was as open to error as any other, rejected as false all the reasonings I had hitherto taken for demonstrations; and finally, when I considered that the very same thoughts (presentations) which we experience when awake may also be experienced when we are asleep, while there is at that time not one of them true, I supposed that all the objects (presentations) that had ever entered into my mind when awake, had in them no more truth than the illusions of my dreams. But immediately upon this I observed that, whilst I thus wished to think that all was false, it was absolutely necessary that I, who thus thought, should be somewhat; and as I observed that this truth, I think, therefore I am (COGITO ERGO SUM), was so certain and of such evidence that no ground of doubt, however extravagant, could be alleged by the sceptics capable of shaking it, I concluded that I might, without scruple, accept it as the first principle of the philosophy of which I was in search.

In the next place, I attentively examined what I was and as I observed that I could suppose that I had no body, and that there was no world nor any place in which I might be; but that I could not therefore suppose that I was not; and that, on the contrary, from the very circumstance that I thought to doubt of the truth of other things, it most clearly and certainly followed that I was; while, on the other hand, if I had only ceased to think, although all the other objects which I had ever imagined had been in reality existent, I would have had no reason to believe that I existed; I thence concluded that I was a substance whose whole essence or nature consists only in thinking, and which, that it may exist, has need of no place, nor is dependent on any material thing; so that "I," that is to say, the mind by which I am what I am, is wholly distinct from the body, and is even more easily known than the latter, and is such, that although the latter were not, it would still continue to be all that it is.

After this I inquired in general into what is essential to the truth and certainty of a proposition; for since I had discovered one which I knew to be true, I thought that I must likewise be able to discover the ground of this certitude. And as I observed that in the words I think, therefore I am, there is nothing at all which gives me assurance of their truth beyond this, that I see very clearly that in order

1 to think it is necessary to exist, I concluded that I might take, as a general rule, the principle, that all the things which we very clearly and distinctly conceive are true, only observing, however, that there is some difficulty in rightly determining the objects which we distinctly conceive.

In the next place, from reflecting on the circumstance that I doubted, and that consequently my being was not wholly perfect (for I clearly saw that it was a greater perfection to know than to doubt), I was led to inquire whence I had learned to think of something more perfect than myself; and I clearly recognized that I must hold this notion from some nature which in reality was more perfect. As for the thoughts of many other objects external to me, as of the sky, the earth, light, heat, and a thousand more, I was less at a loss to know whence these came; for since I remarked in them nothing which seemed to render them superior to myself, I could believe that, if these were true, they were dependencies on my own nature, in so far as it possessed a certain perfection, and, if they were false, that I held them from nothing, that is to say, that they were in me because of a certain imperfection of my nature. But this could not be the case with the idea of a nature more perfect than myself; for to receive it from nothing was a thing manifestly impossible; and, because it is not less repugnant that the more perfect should be an effect of, and dependence on the less perfect, than that something should proceed from nothing, it was equally impossible that I could hold it from myself: accordingly, it but remained that it had been placed in me by a nature which was in reality more perfect than mine, and which even possessed within itself all the perfections of which I could form any idea; that is to say, in a single word, which was God. And to this I added that, since I knew some perfections which I did not possess, I was not the only being in existence (I will here, with your permission, freely use the terms of the schools); but, on the contrary, that there was of necessity some other more perfect Being upon whom I was dependent, and from whom I had received all that I possessed; for if I had existed alone, and independently of every other being, so as to have had from myself all the perfection, however little, which I actually possessed, I should have been able, for the same reason, to have had from myself the whole remainder of perfection, of the want of which I was conscious, and thus could of myself have become infinite, eternal, immutable, omniscient, all-powerful, and, in fine, have possessed all the perfections which I could recognize in God. For in order to know the nature of God (whose existence has been established by the preceding reasonings), as far as my own nature permitted, I had only to consider in reference to all the properties of which I found in my mind some idea, whether their possession was a mark of perfection; and I was assured that no one which indicated any imperfection was in him, and that none of the rest was wanting. Thus I perceived that doubt, inconstancy, sadness, and such like, could not be found in God, since I myself would have been happy to be free from them. Besides, I had ideas of many sensible and corporeal things; for although I might suppose that I was dreaming, and that all which I saw or imagined was false, I could not, nevertheless, deny that the ideas were in reality in my thoughts. But, because I had already very clearly recognized in myself that the intelligent nature is distinct from the corporeal, and as I observed that all composition is an evidence of dependency, and that a state of dependency is manifestly a state of imperfection, I therefore determined that it could not be a perfection in God to be compounded of these two natures and that consequently he was not so compounded; but that if there were any bodies in the world, or even any intelligences, or other natures that were not wholly perfect, their existence depended on his power in such a way that they could not subsist without him for a single moment.

1 I was disposed straightway to search for other truths and when I had represented to myself the object
of the geometers, which I conceived to be a continuous body or a space indefinitely extended in
length, breadth, and height or depth, divisible into divers parts which admit of different figures and
sizes, and of being moved or transposed in all manner of ways (for all this the geometers suppose to
be in the object they contemplate), I went over some of their simplest demonstrations. And, in the
first place, I observed, that the great certitude which by common consent is accorded to these
demonstrations, is founded solely upon this, that they are clearly conceived in accordance with the
rules I have already laid down In the next place, I perceived that there was nothing at all in these
5 demonstrations which could assure me of the existence of their object: thus, for example, supposing
a triangle to be given, I distinctly perceived that its three angles were necessarily equal to two right
angles, but I did not on that account perceive anything which could assure me that any triangle
existed: while, on the contrary, recurring to the examination of the idea of a Perfect Being, I found
that the existence of the Being was comprised in the idea in the same way that the equality of its
three angles to two right angles is comprised in the idea of a triangle, or as in the idea of a sphere, the
equidistance of all points on its surface from the center, or even still more clearly; and that
consequently it is at least as certain that God, who is this Perfect Being, is, or exists, as any
demonstration of geometry can be.

10 But the reason which leads many to persuade them selves that there is a difficulty in knowing this
truth, and even also in knowing what their mind really is, is that they never raise their thoughts
above sensible objects, and are so accustomed to consider nothing except by way of imagination,
which is a mode of thinking limited to material objects, that all that is not imaginable seems to them
not intelligible. The truth of this is sufficiently manifest from the single circumstance, that the
philosophers of the schools accept as a maxim that there is nothing in the understanding which was
not previously in the senses, in which however it is certain that the ideas of God and of the soul have
never been; and it appears to me that they who make use of their imagination to comprehend these
ideas do exactly the some thing as if, in order to hear sounds or smell odors, they strove to avail
15 themselves of their eyes; unless indeed that there is this difference, that the sense of sight does not
afford us an inferior assurance to those of smell or hearing; in place of which, neither our
imagination nor our senses can give us assurance of anything unless our understanding intervene.

Finally, if there be still persons who are not sufficiently persuaded of the existence of God and of the
soul, by the reasons I have adduced, I am desirous that they should know that all the other
propositions, of the truth of which they deem themselves perhaps more assured, as that we have a
body, and that there exist stars and an earth, and such like, are less certain; for, although we have a
moral assurance of these things, which is so strong that there is an appearance of extravagance in
doubting of their existence, yet at the same time no one, unless his intellect is impaired, can deny,
20 when the question relates to a metaphysical certitude, that there is sufficient reason to exclude entire
assurance, in the observation that when asleep we can in the same way imagine ourselves possessed of
another body and that we see other stars and another earth, when there is nothing of the kind. For
how do we know that the thoughts which occur in dreaming are false rather than those other which
we experience when awake, since the former are often not less vivid and distinct than the latter? And
though men of the highest genius study this question as long as they please, I do not believe that
they will be able to give any reason which can be sufficient to remove this doubt, unless they
presuppose the existence of God. For, in the first place even the principle which I have already taken

1 as a rule, viz., that all the things which we clearly and distinctly conceive are true, is certain only because God is or exists and because he is a Perfect Being, and because all that we possess is derived from him: whence it follows that our ideas or notions, which to the extent of their clearness and distinctness are real, and proceed from God, must to that extent be true. Accordingly, whereas we not infrequently have ideas or notions in which some falsity is contained, this can only be the case with such as are to some extent confused and obscure, and in this proceed from nothing (participate of negation), that is, exist in us thus confused because we are not wholly perfect. And it is evident that it is not less repugnant that falsity or imperfection, in so far as it is imperfection, should proceed from God, than that truth or perfection should proceed from nothing. But if we did not know that all which we possess of real and true proceeds from a Perfect and Infinite Being, however clear and distinct our ideas might be, we should have no ground on that account for the assurance that they possessed the perfection of being true.

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But after the knowledge of God and of the soul has rendered us certain of this rule, we can easily understand that the truth of the thoughts we experience when awake, ought not in the slightest degree to be called in question on account of the illusions of our dreams. For if it happened that an individual, even when asleep, had some very distinct idea, as, for example, if a geometer should discover some new demonstration, the circumstance of his being asleep would not militate against its truth; and as for the most ordinary error of our dreams, which consists in their representing to us various objects in the same way as our external senses, this is not prejudicial, since it leads us very properly to suspect the truth of the ideas of sense; for we are not infrequently deceived in the same manner when awake; as when persons in the jaundice see all objects yellow, or when the stars or bodies at a great distance appear to us much smaller than they are. For, in fine, whether awake or asleep, we ought never to allow ourselves to be persuaded of the truth of anything unless on the evidence of our reason. And it must be noted that I say of our reason, and not of our imagination or of our senses: thus, for example, although we very clearly see the sun, we ought not therefore to determine that it is only of the size which our sense of sight presents; and we may very distinctly imagine the head of a lion joined to the body of a goat, without being therefore shut up to the conclusion that a chimaera exists; for it is not a dictate of reason that what we thus see or imagine is in reality existent; but it plainly tells us that all our ideas or notions contain in them some truth; for otherwise it could not be that God, who is wholly perfect and veracious, should have placed them in us. And because our reasonings are never so clear or so complete during sleep as when we are awake, although sometimes the acts of our imagination are then as lively and distinct, if not more so than in our waking moments, reason further dictates that, since all our thoughts cannot be true because of our partial imperfection, those possessing truth must infallibly be found in the experience of our waking moments rather than in that of our dreams.

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PART V

I would here willingly have proceeded to exhibit the whole chain of truths which I deduced from these primary but as with a view to this it would have been necessary now to treat of many questions in dispute among the learned, with whom I do not wish to be embroiled, I believe that it will be better for me to refrain from this exposition, and only mention in general what these truths are, that the more judicious may be able to determine whether a more special account of them would conduce to the public advantage. I have ever remained firm in my original resolution to suppose no other principle than that of which I have recently availed myself in demonstrating the existence of God and of the soul, and to accept as true nothing that did not appear to me more clear and certain than the demonstrations of the geometers had formerly appeared; and yet I venture to state that not only have I found means to satisfy myself in a short time on all the principal difficulties which are usually treated of in philosophy, but I have also observed certain laws established in nature by God in such a manner, and of which he has impressed on our minds such notions, that after we have reflected sufficiently upon these, we cannot doubt that they are accurately observed in all that exists or takes place in the world and farther, by considering the concatenation of these laws, it appears to me that I have discovered many truths more useful and more important than all I had before learned, or even had expected to learn.