

Part Two

I was in Germany then, where the wars—which are still continuing there—called me;<sup>1</sup> and while I was returning to the army from the coronation of the emperor, the onset of winter held me up in quarters where, finding no conversation with which to be diverted and, fortunately, otherwise having no worries or passions which troubled me, I remained for a whole day by myself in a small stove-heated room, where I had complete leisure for communing with my thoughts. Among them, one of the first that I thought of considering was that often there is less perfection in works made of several pieces and in works made by the hands of several masters than in those works on which but one master has worked. Thus one sees that buildings undertaken and completed by a single architect are commonly more beautiful and better ordered than those that several architects have tried to patch up, using old walls that had been built for other purposes. Thus these ancient cities that were once merely straggling villages and have become in the course of time great cities are commonly quite poorly laid out, compared to those well-ordered towns that an engineer lays out on a vacant plain as it suits his fancy. And although, upon considering one by one buildings in the former class of towns, one finds as much art or more than one finds in buildings of the latter class of towns, still, upon seeing how the buildings are arranged— here a large one, there a small one—and how they make the streets crooked and uneven, one will say that it is chance more than the will of some men using their reason that has arranged them thus. And if one considers that there have nevertheless always been officials responsible for seeing that private buildings be made to serve as an ornament for the public, one will know that it is difficult to produce a finely executed product by laboring only on the works of others. Thus I imagined that peoples who, having once been half savages and having been

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<sup>1</sup> The Thirty Years War (1618–1648).

civilized only gradually, have made their laws only to the extent that the inconvenience caused by crimes and quarrels forced them to do so, would not be as well ordered as those who, from the very beginning of their coming together, have followed the fundamental precepts of some prudent legislator. Thus it is quite certain that the state of the true religion, whose ordinances were fixed by God alone, ought to be incomparably better governed than all the others. And, speaking of matters human, I believe that if Sparta flourished greatly in the past, it was not because of the goodness of each of its laws taken by itself, since some of them were very strange and even contrary to good morals, but because, having been invented by only one person, they all tended toward the same goal. And thus I thought that book learning, at least the kind whose arguments are merely probable and have no demonstrations—having been built up from and enlarged gradually by the opinions of many different people—does not draw as near to the truth as the simple reasonings that can be made naturally by a man of good sense concerning what he encounters. And thus again I thought that, given the fact that we were all children before being adults and that for a long time it was our lot to be governed by our appetites and our teachers (both were often in conflict with one another, and perhaps none of them consistently gave us the best advice), it is almost impossible for our judgments to be as pure or solid as they would have been had we the full use of our reason from the moment of our birth and had we never been led by anything but our reason.

It is true that one does not see people pulling down all the houses in a city simply to rebuild them some other way and to make the streets more attractive; but one does see that several people do tear down their own houses in order to rebuild them, and that even in some cases they are forced to do so when their houses are in danger of collapsing and the foundations are not very steadfast. Taking this example to heart, I was persuaded that it was not really likely

that a single individual might plan to reform a state by changing everything from the very foundations and by toppling it in order to set it up again; nor even also to reform all of the sciences or the order established in the schools for teaching them; but that I could not do better than to try once and for all to get all the beliefs I had accepted from birth out of my mind, so that once I have reconciled them with reason I might again set up either other, better ones or even the same ones. And I firmly believed that by this means I would succeed in conducting my life much better than were I to build only on old foundations or to lean only on the principles of which I permitted myself to be persuaded in my youth without ever having examined whether or not they were true. For although I noticed various difficulties in this operation, still they did not seem irremediable or comparable to those difficulties arising in the reformation of the least things which affect the public. These great bodies are too difficult to raise up once they have been knocked down or even to maintain once they have been shaken; and their falls can only be very violent. Now as to their imperfections, if they have any (and the mere fact of their diversity suffices to assure one that many of them are imperfect), usage has doubtlessly mitigated them and has even imperceptibly averted or corrected a great number of them, for which deliberate foresight could not have provided so well. And finally, these imperfections are almost always more tolerable than what it takes to change them; similarly, the great roads that wind around mountains become gradually so level and suitable by dint of being used frequently, that it is much better to follow these roads than to try to go by a more direct route, climbing over rocks and descending to the bottom of precipices. . . .

And since the multiplicity of laws often provides excuses for vices, so that a state is much better when, having but a few laws, its laws are strictly observed; so, in place of the large

number of rules of which logic is composed, I believed that the following four rules would be sufficient, provided I made a firm and constant resolution not even once to fail to observe them:

The first was never to accept anything as true that I did not know evidently to be so; that is, carefully to avoid precipitous judgment and prejudice;<sup>2</sup> and to include nothing more in my judgments than what presented itself to my mind with such clarity and distinctness that I would have no occasion to put it in doubt.

The second, to divide each of the difficulties I was examining into as many parts as possible and as is required to solve them best.

The third, to conduct my thoughts in an orderly fashion, commencing with the simplest and easiest to know objects, to rise gradually, as by degrees, to the knowledge of the most composite things, and even supposing an order among those things that do not naturally precede one another.

And last, everywhere to make enumerations so complete and reviews so general that I would be sure of having omitted nothing. . . .

But what pleased me the most about this method was that by means of it I was assured of using my reason in everything, if not perfectly, then at least as best as I can. Moreover, I felt that in practicing this method my mind was gradually getting into the habit of conceiving its object more rigorously and more distinctly and that, not having subjected it to any particular matter, I promised myself to apply the method just as profitably to the problems of the other sciences, as I had done to problems in algebra.<sup>3</sup> Not that, on account of this, I dared immediately to undertake an examination of whatever presented itself; for even that would have been contrary to the order prescribed by the method. But having noticed that their principles must all be borrowed from

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<sup>2</sup> That is, prejudgment before relevant evidence has been reviewed.

<sup>3</sup> The optimism of arriving at a method that will successfully provide epistemic certainty in every area of human knowledge is characteristic of the early Enlightenment.

philosophy, in which I still found nothing certain, I thought that I ought, above all, to try to establish therein something certain; and I thought that, this being the most important thing in the world, where precipitous judgment and prejudice were most to be feared, I ought not to have tried to succeed at doing so until I had reached a much more mature age than merely twenty-three, which I was then; and I thought that I should previously spend much time preparing myself, as much in rooting out of my mind all the wrong opinions that I had accepted before that time as in accumulating many experiences—later to be the stuff of my reasonings—and in always exercising myself in the method I had prescribed for myself so as to be stronger and stronger in its use.

#### Part Four

I do not know whether I ought to tell you about the first meditations I made there; for they are so metaphysical and so out of the ordinary, that perhaps they would not be to everyone's liking. Nevertheless, so that one might be able to judge whether the foundations I have laid are sufficiently firm, I am in some sense forced to speak. For a long time I have noticed that in moral matters one must sometimes follow opinions that one knows are quite uncertain, just as if they were indubitable, as has been said above; but since then I desired to attend only to the search for truth, I thought it necessary that I do exactly the opposite, and that I reject as absolutely false everything in which I could imagine the least doubt, so as to see whether, after this process, anything in my set of beliefs remains that is entirely indubitable. Thus, since our senses sometimes deceive us, I decided to suppose that nothing was exactly as our senses would have us imagine. And since there are men who err in reasoning, even in the simplest matters in geometry, and commit paralogisms, judging that I was just as prone to err as the next man, I rejected as false all the reasonings that I had previously taken for demonstrations. And finally, taking into

account the fact that the same thoughts we have when we are awake can also come to us when we are asleep, without any of the latter thoughts being true, I resolved to pretend that everything that had ever entered my mind was no more true than the illusions of my dreams. But immediately afterward I noticed that, during the time I wanted thus to think that everything was false, it was necessary that I, who thought thus, be something. And noticing that this truth—*I think, therefore I am*—was so firm and so certain that the most extravagant suppositions of the sceptics were unable to shake it, I judged that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking. . . .

[*Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress  
(Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980)]

René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641)

Meditation One: Concerning Those Things that Can Be Called into Doubt

. . . Yet to this end it will not be necessary that I show that all my opinions are false, which perhaps I could never accomplish anyway. But because reason now persuades me that I should withhold my assent no less carefully from things which are not plainly certain and indubitable than I would to what is patently false, it will be sufficient justification for rejecting them all, if I find in each of them some reason for doubt. Nor therefore need one survey each opinion one after the other, a task of endless proportion. Rather—because undermining the foundations will cause whatever has been built upon them to fall down of its own accord—I will at once attack those principles which supported everything that I once believed. . . .

But perhaps, although the senses sometimes deceive us when it is a question of very small and distant things, still there are many other matters which one certainly cannot doubt,

although they are derived from the very same senses: that I am sitting here before the fireplace wearing my dressing gown, that I feel this sheet of paper in my hands, and so on. But how could one deny that these hands and that my whole body exist? Unless perhaps I should compare myself to insane people whose brains are so impaired by a stubborn vapor from a black bile that they continually insist that they are kings when they are in utter poverty, or that they are wearing purple robes when they are naked, or that they have a head made of clay, or that they are gourds, or that they are made of glass. But they are all demented, and I would appear no less demented if I were to take their conduct as a model for myself.

All of this would be well and good, were I not a man who is accustomed to sleeping at night, and to undergoing in my sleep the very same things—or now and then even less likely ones—as do these insane people when they are awake. How often has my evening slumber persuaded me of such customary things as these: that I am here, clothed in my dressing gown, seated at the fireplace, when in fact I am lying undressed between the blankets! But right now I certainly am gazing upon this piece of paper with eyes wide awake. This head which I am moving is not heavy with sleep. I extend this hand consciously and deliberately and I feel it. These things would not be so distinct for one who is asleep. But this all seems as if I do not recall having been deceived by similar thoughts on other occasions in my dreams. As I consider these cases more intently, I see so plainly that there are no definite signs to distinguish being awake from being asleep that I am quite astonished, and this astonishment almost convinces me that I am sleeping. . . .

But it is not enough simply to have made a note of this; I must take care to keep it before my mind. For long-standing opinions keep coming back again and again, almost against my will; they seize upon my credulity, as if it were bound over to them by long use and the claims of

intimacy.<sup>4</sup> Nor will I get out of the habit of assenting to them and believing in them, so long as I take them to be exactly what they are, namely, in some respects doubtful as by now is obvious, but nevertheless highly probable, so that it is much more consonant with reason to believe them than to deny them. Hence, it seems to me, I would do well to turn my will in the opposite direction, to deceive myself and pretend for a considerable period that they are wholly false and imaginary, until finally, as if with equal weight of prejudice on both sides, no bad habit should turn my judgment from the correct perception of things. For indeed I know that no danger or error will follow and that it is impossible for me to indulge in too much distrust, since I now am concentrating only on knowledge, not on action.

Thus I will suppose not a supremely good God, the source of truth, but rather an evil genius, as clever and deceitful as he is powerful, who has directed his entire effort to misleading me. I will regard the heavens, the air, the earth, colors, shapes, sounds, and all external things as nothing but the deceptive games of my dreams, with which he lays snares for my credulity. I will regard myself as having no hands, no eyes, no flesh, no blood, no senses, but as nevertheless falsely believing that I possess all these things. I will remain resolutely fixed in this meditation, and, even if it be out of my power to know anything true, certainly it is within my power to take care resolutely to withhold my assent to what is false, lest this deceiver, powerful and clever as he is, have an effect on me. But this undertaking is arduous, and laziness brings me back to my customary way of living. I am not unlike a prisoner who might enjoy an imaginary freedom in his sleep. When he later begins to suspect that he is sleeping, he fears being awakened and conspires slowly with these pleasant illusions. In just this way, I spontaneously fall back into my old beliefs, and dread being awakened, lest the toilsome wakefulness which follows upon a

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<sup>4</sup> Descartes here reflects a first principle of Enlightenment thought: “long-standing opinions” (that is, tradition) in all fields of knowledge, including religion, are similarly to be rejected. As he goes on to write, his solution in this thought experiment is to think the opposite of that tradition.

peaceful rest, have to be spent thenceforward not in the light but among the inextricable shadows of the difficulties now brought forward.

Meditation Two: Concerning the Nature of the Human Mind: That the Mind Is More Known  
than the Body

Yesterday's meditation filled my mind with so many doubts that I can no longer forget about them—nor yet do I see how they are to be resolved. But, as if I had suddenly fallen into a deep whirlpool, I am so disturbed that I can neither touch my foot to the bottom, nor swim up to the top. Nevertheless I will work my way up, and I will follow the same path I took yesterday, putting aside everything which admits of the least doubt, as if I had discovered it to be absolutely false. I will go forward until I know something certain—or, if nothing else, until I at least know for certain that nothing is certain. Archimedes sought only a firm and immovable point in order to move the entire earth from one place to another.<sup>5</sup> Surely great things are to be hoped for if I am lucky enough to find at least one thing that is certain and indubitable.

Therefore I will suppose that all I see is false. I will believe that none of those things that my deceitful memory brings before my eyes ever existed. I thus have no senses: body, shape, extension,<sup>6</sup> movement, and place are all figments of my imagination. What then will count as true? Perhaps only this one thing: that nothing is certain.

But on what grounds do I know that there is nothing over and above all those which I have just reviewed, concerning which there is not even the least cause for doubt? Is there not a God (or whatever name I might call him) who instills these thoughts in me? But why should I think that, since perhaps I myself could be the author of these things? Therefore am I not at least

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<sup>5</sup> Archimedes (ca. 287–ca. 212 BC) was the ancient Greek mathematician who said that, with a lever, he could move the earth from one fixed position. The Archimedean point represents a place of objective truth and certainty.

<sup>6</sup> “Extension” is the property of something taking up space.

something? But I have already denied that I have any senses and any body. Still, I hesitate; for what follows from that? Am I so tied to the body and to the senses that I cannot exist without them? But I have persuaded myself that there is nothing at all in the world: no heaven, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Is it not then true that I do not exist? But certainly I should exist, if I were to persuade myself of something. But there is a deceiver (I know not who he is) powerful and sly in the highest degree, who is always purposely deceiving me. Then there is no doubt that I exist, if he deceives me. And deceive me as he will, he can never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I shall think that I am something. Thus it must be granted that, after weighing everything carefully and sufficiently, one must come to the considered judgment that the statement “I am, I exist” is necessarily true every time it is uttered by me or conceived in my mind. . . .

But now what am I, when I suppose that some deceiver—omnipotent and, if I may be allowed to say it, malicious—takes all the pains he can in order to deceive me? Can I not affirm that I possess at least a small measure of all those traits which I already have said pertain to the nature of the body? I pay attention, I think, I deliberate—but nothing happens. I am wearied of repeating this in vain. But which of these am I to ascribe to the soul? How about eating or walking? These are surely nothing but illusions, because I do not have a body. How about sensing? Again, this also does not happen without a body, and I judge that I really did not sense those many things I seemed to have sensed in my dreams. How about thinking? Here I discover that thought is an attribute that really does belong to me. This alone cannot be detached from me. I am; I exist; this is certain. But for how long? For as long as I think. Because perhaps it could also come to pass that if I should cease from all thinking I would then utterly cease to exist. I now admit nothing that is not necessarily true. I am therefore precisely only a thing that thinks; that is, a mind, or soul, or intellect, or reason—words the meaning of which I was ignorant

before. Now, I am a true thing, and truly existing; but what kind of thing? I have said it already: a thing that thinks.

What then? I will set my imagination going to see if I am not something more. I am not that connection of members which is called the human body. Neither am I some subtle air infused into these members, not a wind, not a fire, not a vapor, not a breath—nothing that I imagine to myself, for I have supposed all these to be nothing. The assertion stands: the fact still remains that I am something. But perhaps is it the case that, nevertheless, these very things which I take to be nothing (because I am ignorant of them) in reality do not differ from that self which I know? This I do not know. I shall not quarrel about it right now; I can make a judgment only regarding things which are known to me. I know that I exist; I ask now who is this “I” whom I know. Most certainly the knowledge of this matter, thus precisely understood, does not depend upon things that I do not yet know to exist. Therefore, it is not dependent upon any of those things that I feign in my imagination. But this word “feign” warns me of my error. For I would be feigning if I should “imagine” that I am something, because imagining is merely the contemplation of the shape or image of a corporeal thing. But I know now with certainty that I am, and at the same time it could happen that all these images—and, generally, everything that pertains to the nature of the body—are nothing but dreams. When these things are taken into account, I would speak no less foolishly were I to say: “I will imagine so that I might recognize more distinctly who I am,” than were I to say: “Now I surely am awake, and I see something true, but because I do not yet see it with sufficient evidence, I will take the trouble of going to sleep so that my dreams might show this to me more truly and more evidently.” Thus I know that none of what I can comprehend by means of the imagination pertains to this understanding that I

have of myself. Moreover, I know that I must be most diligent about withdrawing my mind from these things so that it can perceive its nature as distinctly as possible.

But what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, and which also imagines and senses. . . .

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(Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980)]