

FIRST MEDITATION

About the Things We May Doubt

IT is some time ago now since I perceived that, from my earliest years, I had accepted many false opinions as being true, and that what I had since based on such insecure principles could only be most doubtful and uncertain; so that I had to undertake seriously once in my life to rid myself of all the opinions I had adopted up to then, and to begin afresh from the foundations, if I wished to establish something firm and constant in the sciences. But as this undertaking seemed to me very great, I waited until I had attained an age sufficiently mature that I could not hope, at a later stage in life, to be more fit to execute my plan; and this has made me delay so long that I should henceforth consider that I was committing a fault if I were still to use in deliberation the time which remains to me for action.

Now therefore, that my mind is free from all cares, and that I have obtained for myself assured leisure in peaceful solitude, I shall apply myself seriously and freely to the general destruction of all my former opinions. Now it will not be necessary, in order to accomplish this aim, to prove that they are all false, a point which perhaps I would never reach; but inasmuch as reason persuades me already that I must avoid believing things which are not entirely certain and indubitable, no less carefully than those things which seem manifestly false, the slightest ground for doubt that I find in any, will suffice for me to reject all of them. And to this end there will be no need for me to examine each one individually, which would be an endless task; but because the destruction of the foundations necessarily brings down with it the rest of the edifice, I

shall make an assault first on the principles on which all my former opinions were based.

Everything I have accepted up to now as being absolutely true and assured, I have learned from or through the senses. But I have sometimes found that these senses played me false, and it is prudent never to trust entirely those who have once deceived us.

But, although the senses sometimes deceive us, concerning things which are barely perceptible or at a great distance, there are perhaps many other things about which one cannot reasonably doubt, although we know them through the medium of the senses, for example, that I am here, sitting by the fire, wearing a dressing-gown, with this paper in my hands, and other things of this nature. And how could I deny that these hands and this body belong to me, unless perhaps I were to assimilate myself to those insane persons whose minds are so troubled and clouded by the black vapours of the bile that they constantly assert that they are kings, when they are very poor; that they are wearing gold and purple, when they are quite naked; or who imagine that they are pitchers or that they have a body of glass. But these are madmen, and I would not be less extravagant if I were to follow their example.

However, I must here consider that I am a man, and consequently that I am in the habit of sleeping and of representing to myself in my dreams those same things, or sometimes even less likely things, which insane people do when they are awake. How many times have I dreamt at night that I was in this place, dressed, by the fire, although I was quite naked in my bed? It certainly seems to me at the moment that I am not looking at this paper with my eyes closed; that this head that I shake is not asleep; that I hold out this hand intentionally and deliberately, and that I am aware of it. What happens in sleep does not

seem as clear and distinct as all this. But in thinking about it carefully, I recall having often been deceived in sleep by similar illusions, and, reflecting on this circumstance more closely, I see so clearly that there are no conclusive signs by means of which one can distinguish clearly between being awake and being asleep, that I am quite astonished by it; and my astonishment is such that it is almost capable of persuading me that I am asleep now.

Let us suppose, then, that we are now asleep, and that all these particulars, namely, that we open our eyes, move our heads, hold out our hands, and such like actions, are only false illusions; and let us think that perhaps our hands and all our body are not as we see them. Nevertheless, we must at least admit that the things which appear to us in sleep are, as it were, pictures and paintings which can only be formed in the likeness of something real and true; and that therefore these general things at least, namely, eyes, head, hands and all the rest of the body are not imaginary things but are real and existent. For indeed painters, even when they study with the utmost skill to represent Sirens and Satyrs by strange and extraordinary shapes, cannot attribute to them entirely new forms and natures, but only make a certain mixture and compound of the limbs of various animals; or if perhaps their imagination is extravagant enough to invent something so new that we have never seen the like of it, and that, in this way, their work presents us with something purely fictitious and absolutely false, at least the colours of which they have composed it are real. And by the same reasoning, although these general things, viz. eyes, head, hands and the like, may be imaginary, we have to admit that there are even simpler and more universal things which are true and exist, from the mixture of which, no more or less than from the mixture of certain real colours, all the images of things, whether true and real or fictitious and fantastic,

which dwell in our thoughts, are formed. Corporeal nature in general, and its extension, are of this class of things: together with the figure of extended things, their quantity or size, and their number, as also the place where they are, the time during which they exist, and such like.

This is why perhaps that, from this, we shall not be wrong in concluding that physics, astronomy, medicine, and all the other sciences which depend on the consideration of composite things, are most doubtful and uncertain, but that arithmetic, geometry and the other sciences of this nature, which deal only with very simple and general things, without bothering about their existence or non-existence, contain something certain and indubitable. For whether I am awake or sleeping, two and three added together always make five, and a square never has more than four sides; and it does not seem possible that truths so apparent can be suspected of any falsity or uncertainty.

Nevertheless, I have for a long time had in my mind the belief that there is a God who is all-powerful and by whom I was created and made as I am. And who can give me the assurance that this God has not arranged that there should be no earth, no heaven, no extended body, no figure, no magnitude, or place, and that nevertheless I should have the perception of all these things, and the persuasion that they do not exist other than as I see them? And, further, as I sometimes think that others are mistaken, even in the things they think they know most certainly, it is possible that God has wished that I should be deceived every time I add two and three or count the sides of a square, or form some judgement even simpler, if anything simpler than that can be imagined. But perhaps God has not wished me to be deceived in this way, for he is said to be supremely good. However, if it were in contradiction to his goodness to have made me in such a way that I always

deceived myself, it would seem also to be contrary to his goodness to allow me to be wrong sometimes, and nevertheless it is beyond doubt that he permits it.

There will be some perhaps who would prefer to deny the existence of a God so powerful than to believe that all other things are uncertain. But let us not oppose them for the moment, and let us suppose in their favour that everything said here about a God is a fable. Nevertheless, however they suppose that I reached the state and being which I possess, whether they attribute it to some destiny or fate, or to chance or to a continuous sequence and conjunction of events, it is certain that, because fallibility and error are a kind of imperfection, the less powerful the author to whom they attribute my origin, the more probable it will be that I am so imperfect as to be deceived all the time. I have certainly nothing to say in reply to such reasonings, but am constrained to avow that, of all the opinions that I once accepted as true, there is not one which is not now legitimately open to doubt, not through any lack of reflection or lightness of judgement, but for very strong and deeply considered reasons; so that if I wish to find anything certain and assured in the sciences, I must from now on check and suspend judgement on these opinions and refrain from giving them more credence than I would do to things which appeared to me manifestly false.

But it is not enough to have made these observations; I must also take care to remember them; for those old and customary opinions still recur often in my mind, long and familiar usage giving them the right to occupy my mind against my will and, as it were, to dominate my mind. And I shall never rid myself of the habit of acquiescing in them and of having confidence in them so long as I look upon them as what in fact they are, that is to say, in some degree doubtful, as I have just shown, and yet highly

probable, so that it is more reasonable to believe than to deny them. This is why I think I shall proceed more prudently if, taking an opposite course, I endeavour to deceive myself, pretending that all these opinions are false and imaginary, until, having so balanced my prejudices that they may not make my judgement incline more to one side than to another, my judgement may no longer be overpowered as hitherto by bad usage and turned from the right path which can lead it to the knowledge of truth. For I am assured that, meanwhile, there can be no danger or error in this course, and that, for the present, it would be impossible to press my distrust too far, for it is not now action I seek as my end but simply meditation and knowledge.

I shall suppose, therefore, that there is, not a true God, who is the sovereign source of truth, but some evil demon, no less cunning and deceiving than powerful, who has used all his artifice to deceive me. I will suppose that the heavens, the air, the earth, colours, shapes, sounds and all external things that we see, are only illusions and deceptions which he uses to take me in. I will consider myself as having no hands, eyes, flesh, blood or senses, but as believing wrongly that I have all these things. I shall cling obstinately to this notion; and if, by this means, it is not in my power to arrive at the knowledge of any truth, at the very least it is in my power to suspend my judgement. This is why I shall take great care not to accept into my belief anything false, and shall so well prepare my mind against all the tricks of this great deceiver that, however powerful and cunning he may be, he will never be able to impose on me.

But this undertaking is arduous, and a certain indolence leads me back imperceptibly into the ordinary course of life. And just as a slave who was enjoying in his sleep an imaginary freedom, fears to be awakened when he begins

to suspect that his liberty is only a dream, and conspires with these pleasant illusions to be deceived by them longer, so I fall back of my own accord into my former opinions, and fear to awake from this slumber lest the laborious wakeful hours which would follow this peaceful rest, instead of bringing me any light of day into the knowledge of truth, would not be sufficient to disperse the shadows caused by the difficulties which have just been raised.