

René Descartes
Meditations on First Philosophy

Baruch de Spinoza

Ethics



Essential Classics of Liberal Studies



全国百佳出版社
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Rene Descartes
Translated by John Veitch
Meditations on First Philosophy

Cambridge University Press, 1996

Baruch Spinoza
Translated by R. H. M. Elwes
The Ethics

MTSU Philosophy Web Works Hypertext Edition, 1997

图书在版编目(CIP)数据

第一哲学沉思录 / (法)笛卡尔著. 伦理学 / (荷)斯宾诺莎著. —北京:中央编译出版社, 2012. 1

ISBN 978-7-5117-1081-9

I. ①第… ②伦… II. ①笛… ②斯… III. ①哲学-英文 ②伦理学-英文 IV. ①B

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字(2011)第 231523 号

第一哲学沉思录·伦理学(英文版)

出版人: 和龔

责任编辑: 韩慧强

责任印制: 尹珺

出版发行: 中央编译出版社

地址: 北京西城区车公庄乙5号鸿儒大厦B座(100044)

电话: (010)52612345 (总编室) (010)52612363 (编辑室)
(010)66130345 (发行部) (010)66509618 (读者服务部)
(010)66161011 (团购部) (010)52612332 (网络销售部)

网址: www.cctpbook.com

经销: 全国新华书店

印刷: 北京瑞哲印刷厂

开本: 880 × 1230 毫米 1/32

字数: 340 千字

印张: 11.75 插页: 4

版次: 2012 年 1 月第 1 版第 1 次印刷

定价: 30.00 元

本社常年法律顾问: 北京大成律师事务所首席顾问律师 鲁哈达
凡有印装质量问题, 本社负责调换, 电话: 010-66509618



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RENE DESCARTES
MEDITATIONS ON FIRST PHILOSOPHY

TRANSLATED BY JOHN VEITCH(1901)



INTRODUCTION

TO THE VERY SAGE AND ILLUSTRIOUS
THE DEAN AND DOCTORS OF THE SACRED FACULTY
OF THEOLOGY OF PARIS

GENTLEMEN,

§ 1

THE MOTIVE which impels me to present this Treatise to you is so reasonable, and when you shall learn its design, I am confident that you also will consider that there is ground so valid for your taking it under your protection, that I can in no way better recommend it to you than by briefly stating the end which I proposed to myself in it.

§ 2

I have always been of the opinion that the two questions respecting God and the Soul were the chief of those that ought to be determined by help of Philosophy rather than of Theology; for although to us, the faithful, it be sufficient to hold as matters of faith, that the human soul does not perish with the body, and that God exists, it yet assuredly seems impossible ever to persuade infidels of the reality of any religion, or almost even any moral virtue, unless, first of all, those two things be proved to them by natural reason. And since in this life there are frequently greater rewards held out to vice than to virtue,

few would prefer the right to the useful, if they were restrained neither by the fear of God nor the expectation of another life; and although it is quite true that the existence of God is to be believed since it is taught in the sacred *Scriptures*, and that, on the other hand, the sacred *Scriptures* are to be believed because they come from God (for since faith is a gift of God, the same Being who bestows grace to enable us to believe other things, can likewise impart of it to enable us to believe his own existence), nevertheless, this cannot be submitted to infidels, who would consider that the reasoning proceeded in a circle. And, indeed, I have observed that you, with all the other theologians, not only affirmed the sufficiency of natural reason for the proof of the existence of God, but also, that it may be inferred from sacred Scripture, that the knowledge of God is much clearer than of many created things, and that it is really so easy of acquisition as to leave those who do not possess it blameworthy. This is manifest from these words of the *Book of Wisdom*, chap. xiii., where it is said, Howbeit they are not to be excused; for if their understanding was so great that they could discern the world and the creatures, why did they not rather find out the Lord thereof? And in *Romans*, chap. i., it is said that they are without excuse; and again, in the same place, by these words, That which may be known of God is manifest in them—we seem to be admonished that all which can be known of God may be made manifest by reasons obtained from no other source than the inspection of our own minds. I have, therefore, thought that it would not be unbecoming in me to inquire how and by what way, without going out of ourselves, God may be more easily and certainly known than the things of the world.

§ 3

And as regards the Soul, although many have judged that



its nature could not be easily discovered, and some have even ventured to say that human reason led to the conclusion that it perished with the body, and that the contrary opinion could be held through faith alone; nevertheless, since the Lateran Council, held under Leo X. (in session viii.), condemns these, and expressly enjoins Christian philosophers to refute their arguments, and establish the truth according to their ability, I have ventured to attempt it in this work.

§ 4

Moreover, I am aware that most of the irreligious deny the existence of God, and the distinctness of the human soul from the body, for no other reason than because these points, as they allege, have never as yet been demonstrated. Now, although I am by no means of their opinion, but, on the contrary, hold that almost all the proofs which have been adduced on these questions by great men, possess, when rightly understood, the force of demonstrations, and that it is next to impossible to discover new, yet there is, I apprehend, no more useful service to be performed in Philosophy, than if some one were, once for all, carefully to seek out the best of these reasons, and expound them so accurately and clearly that, for the future, it might be manifest to all that they are real demonstrations. And finally, since many persons were greatly desirous of this, who knew that I had cultivated a certain Method of resolving all kinds of difficulties in the sciences, which is not indeed new (there being nothing older than truth), but of which they were aware I had made successful use in other instances, I judged it to be my duty to make trial of it also on the present matter.

§ 5

Now the sum of what I have been able to accomplish on the subject is contained in this Treatise. Not that I here essayed

to collect all the diverse reasons which might be adduced as proofs on this subject, for this does not seem to be necessary, unless on matters where no one proof of adequate certainty is to be had; but I treated the first and chief alone in such a manner that I should venture now to propose them as demonstrations of the highest certainty and evidence. And I will also add that they are such as to lead me to think that there is no way open to the mind of man by which proofs superior to them can ever be discovered for the importance of the subject, and the glory of God, to which all this relates, constrain me to speak here somewhat more freely of myself than I have been accustomed to do. Nevertheless, whatever certitude and evidence I may find in these demonstrations, I cannot therefore persuade myself that they are level to the comprehension of all. But just as in geometry there are many of the demonstrations of Archimedes, Apollonius, Pappus, and others, which, though received by all as evident even and certain (because indeed they manifestly contain nothing which, considered by itself, it is not very easy to understand, and no consequents that are inaccurately related to their antecedents), are nevertheless understood by a very limited number, because they are somewhat long, and demand the whole attention of the reader: so in the same way, although I consider the demonstrations of which I here make use, to be equal or even superior to the geometrical in certitude and evidence, I am afraid, nevertheless, that they will not be adequately understood by many, as well because they also are somewhat long and involved, as chiefly because they require the mind to be entirely free from prejudice, and able with ease to detach itself from the commerce of the senses. And, to speak the truth, the ability for metaphysical studies is less general than for those of geometry. And, besides, there is still this difference that, as in geometry, all are persuaded that nothing is usually



advanced of which there is not a certain demonstration, those but partially versed in it err more frequently in assenting to what is false, from a desire of seeming to understand it, than in denying what is true. In philosophy, on the other hand, where it is believed that all is doubtful, few sincerely give themselves to the search after truth, and by far the greater number seek the reputation of bold thinkers by audaciously impugning such truths as are of the greatest moment.

§ 6

Hence it is that, whatever force my reasonings may possess, yet because they belong to philosophy, I do not expect they will have much effect on the minds of men, unless you extend to them your patronage and approval. But since your Faculty is held in so great esteem by all, and since the name of SORBONNE is of such authority, that not only in matters of faith, but even also in what regards human philosophy, has the judgment of no other society, after the Sacred Councils, received so great deference, it being the universal conviction that it is impossible elsewhere to find greater perspicacity and solidity, or greater wisdom and integrity in giving judgment, I doubt not, if you but condescend to pay so much regard to this Treatise as to be willing, in the first place, to correct it (for mindful not only of my humanity, but chiefly also of my ignorance, I do not affirm that it is free from errors); in the second place, to supply what is wanting in it, to perfect what is incomplete, and to give more ample illustration where it is demanded, or at least to indicate these defects to myself that I may endeavour to remedy them; and, finally, when the reasonings contained in it, by which the existence of God and the distinction of the human soul from the body are established, shall have been brought to such degree of perspicuity as to be esteemed exact demonstrations, of which I am assured they



admit, if you condescend to accord them the authority of your approbation, and render a public testimony of their truth and certainty, I doubt not, I say, but that henceforward all the errors which have ever been entertained on these questions will very soon be effaced from the minds of men. For truth itself will readily lead the remainder of the ingenious and the learned to subscribe to your judgment; and your authority will cause the atheists, who are in general sciolists rather than ingenious or learned, to lay aside the spirit of contradiction, and lead them, perhaps, to do battle in their own persons for reasonings which they find considered demonstrations by all men of genius, lest they should seem not to understand them; and, finally, the rest of mankind will readily trust to so many testimonies, and there will no longer be any one who will venture to doubt either the existence of God or the real distinction of mind and body. It is for you, in your singular wisdom, to judge of the importance of the establishment of such beliefs, who are cognisant of the disorders which doubt of these truths produces. But it would not here become me to commend at greater length the cause of God and of religion to you, who have always proved the strongest support of the Catholic Church.



PREFACE TO THE READER



§ 1

I HAVE already slightly touched upon the questions respecting the existence of God and the nature of the human soul, in the “Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason, and Seeking Truth in the Sciences,” published in French in the year 1637; not however, with the design of there treating of them fully, but only, as it were, in passing, that I might learn from the judgment of my readers in what way I should afterward handle them; for these questions appeared to me to be of such moment as to be worthy of being considered more than once, and the path which I follow in discussing them is so little trodden, and so remote from the ordinary route that I thought it would not be expedient to illustrate it at greater length in French, and in a discourse that might be read by all, lest even the more feeble minds should believe that this path might be entered upon by them.

§ 2

But, as in the “Discourse on Method,” I had requested all who might find aught meriting censure in my writings, to do me the favor of pointing it out to me, I may state that no objections worthy of remark have been alleged against what I then said on these questions except two, to which I will here briefly reply,



before undertaking their more detailed discussion.

§ 3

The first objection is that though, while the human mind reflects on itself, it does not perceive that it is any other than a thinking thing, it does not follow that its nature or essence consists only in its being a thing which thinks; so that the word ONLY shall exclude all other things which might also perhaps be said to pertain to the nature of the mind. To this objection I reply, that it was not my intention in that place to exclude these according to the order of truth in the matter (of which I did not then treat), but only according to the order of thought (perception); so that my meaning was, that I clearly apprehended nothing, so far as I was conscious, as belonging to my essence, except that I was a thinking thing, or a thing possessing in itself the faculty of thinking. But I will show hereafter how, from the consciousness that nothing besides thinking belongs to the essence of the mind, it follows that nothing else does in truth belong to it.

§ 4

The second objection is that it does not follow, from my possessing the idea of a thing more perfect than I am, that the idea itself is more perfect than myself, and much less that what is represented by the idea exists. But I reply that in the term idea there is here something equivocal; for it may be taken either materially for an act of the understanding, and in this sense it cannot be said to be more perfect than I, or objectively, for the thing represented by that act, which, although it be not supposed to exist out of my understanding, may, nevertheless, be more perfect than myself, by reason of its essence. But, in the sequel of this treatise I will show more amply how, from my possessing the idea of a thing more perfect than myself, it





follows that this thing really exists.

§ 5

Besides these two objections, I have seen, indeed, two treatises of sufficient length relating to the present matter. In these, however, my conclusions, much more than my premises, were impugned, and that by arguments borrowed from the common places of the atheists. But, as arguments of this sort can make no impression on the minds of those who shall rightly understand my reasonings, and as the judgments of many are so irrational and weak that they are persuaded rather by the opinions on a subject that are first presented to them, however false and opposed to reason they may be, than by a true and solid, but subsequently received, refutation of them, I am unwilling here to reply to these strictures from a dread of being, in the first instance, obliged to state them. I will only say, in general, that all which the atheists commonly allege in favor of the non-existence of God, arises continually from one or other of these two things, namely, either the ascription of human affections to Deity, or the undue attribution to our minds of so much vigor and wisdom that we may essay to determine and comprehend both what God can and ought to do; hence all that is alleged by them will occasion us no difficulty, provided only we keep in remembrance that our minds must be considered finite, while Deity is incomprehensible and infinite.

§ 6

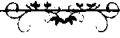
Now that I have once, in some measure, made proof of the opinions of men regarding my work, I again undertake to treat of God and the human soul, and at the same time to discuss the principles of the entire *First Philosophy*, without, however, expecting any commendation from the crowd for my endeavors, or a wide circle of readers. On the contrary, I

would advise none to read this work, unless such as are able and willing to meditate with me in earnest, to detach their minds from commerce with the senses, and likewise to deliver themselves from all prejudice; and individuals of this character are, I well know, remarkably rare. But with regard to those who, without caring to comprehend the order and connection of the reasonings, shall study only detached clauses for the purpose of small but noisy criticism, as is the custom with many, I may say that such persons will not profit greatly by the reading of this treatise; and although perhaps they may find opportunity for cavilling in several places, they will yet hardly start any pressing objections, or such as shall be deserving of reply.

§ 7

But since, indeed, I do not promise to satisfy others on all these subjects at first sight, nor arrogate so much to myself as to believe that I have been able to foresee all that may be the source of difficulty to each ones I shall expound, first of all, in the *Meditations*, those considerations by which I feel persuaded that I have arrived at a certain and evident knowledge of truth, in order that I may ascertain whether the reasonings which have prevailed with myself will also be effectual in convincing others. I will then reply to the objections of some men, illustrious for their genius and learning, to whom these *Meditations* were sent for criticism before they were committed to the press; for these objections are so numerous and varied that I venture to anticipate that nothing, at least nothing of any moment, will readily occur to any mind which has not been touched upon in them. Hence it is that I earnestly entreat my readers not to come to any judgment on the questions raised in the *Meditations* until they have taken care to read the whole of the Objections, with the relative Replies.



SYNOPSIS OF THE SIX FOLLOWING
MEDITATIONS

§ 1

IN THE First Meditation I expound the grounds on which we may doubt in general of all things, and especially of material objects, so long at least, as we have no other foundations for the sciences than those we have hitherto possessed. Now, although the utility of a doubt so general may not be manifest at first sight, it is nevertheless of the greatest, since it delivers us from all prejudice, and affords the easiest pathway by which the mind may withdraw itself from the senses; and finally makes it impossible for us to doubt wherever we afterward discover truth.

§ 2

In the Second, the mind which, in the exercise of the freedom peculiar to itself, supposes that no object is, of the existence of which it has even the slightest doubt, finds that, meanwhile, it must itself exist. And this point is likewise of the highest moment, for the mind is thus enabled easily to distinguish what pertains to itself, that is, to the intellectual nature, from what is to be referred to the body. But since some, perhaps, will expect, at this stage of our progress, a statement of the reasons which establish the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, I think it proper here to make such aware, that it was my aim to

