The Philosophical Writings of
DESCARTES

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VOLUME I

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honest pastime in order to enjoy their leisure without boredom, I never stopped pursuing my project, and I made perhaps more progress in the knowledge of the truth than I would have if I had done nothing but read books or mix with men of letters.

Those nine years passed by, however, without my taking any side regarding the questions which are commonly debated among the learned, or beginning to search for the foundations of any philosophy more certain than the commonly accepted one. The example of many fine intellects who had previously had this project, but had not, I thought, met with success, made me imagine the difficulties to be so great that I would not have dared to embark upon it so soon if I had not noticed that some people were spreading the rumour that I had already completed it. I cannot say what basis they had for this opinion. If I contributed anything to it by my conversation, it must have been because I confessed my ignorance more ingenuously than is customary for those with a little learning, and perhaps also because I displayed the reasons I had for doubting many things which others regard as certain, rather than because I boasted of some learning. But as I was honest enough not to wish to be taken for what I was not, I thought I had to try by every means to become worthy of the reputation that was given me. Exactly eight years ago this desire made me resolve to move away from any place where I might have acquaintances and retire to this country, where the long duration of the war has led to the establishment of such order that the armies maintained here seem to serve only to make the enjoyment of the fruits of peace all the more secure.1 Living here, amidst this great mass of busy people who are more concerned with their own affairs than curious about those of others, I have been able to lead a life as solitary and withdrawn as if I were in the most remote desert, while lacking none of the comforts found in the most populous cities.

Part Four

I do not know whether I should tell you of the first meditations that I had there, for they are perhaps too metaphysical and uncommon for everyone's taste. And yet, to make it possible to judge whether the foundations I have chosen are firm enough, I am in a way obliged to speak of them. For a long time I had observed, as noted above, that in practical life it is sometimes necessary to act upon opinions which one knows to be quite uncertain just as if they were indubitable. But since I now wished to devote myself solely to the search for truth, I thought it necessary to do

1 Descartes settled in Holland in 1639. The war was that conducted by the United Provinces against Spain from 1572 to 1648.

the very opposite and reject as if absolutely false everything in which I could imagine the least doubt, in order to see if I was left believing anything that was entirely indubitable. Thus, because our senses sometimes deceive us, I decided to suppose that nothing was such as they led us to imagine. And since there are men who make mistakes in reasoning, committing logical fallacies concerning the simplest questions in geometry, and because I judged that I was as prone to error as anyone else, I rejected as unsound all the arguments I had previously taken as demonstrative proofs. Lastly, considering that the very thoughts we have while awake may also occur while we sleep without any of them being at the time true, I resolved to pretend that all the things that had ever entered my mind were no more true than the illusions of my dreams. But immediately I noticed that while I was trying thus to think everything false, it was necessary that I, who was thinking this, was something. And observing that this truth 'I am thinking, therefore I exist' was so firm and sure that all the most extravagant suppositions of the sceptics were incapable of shaking it, I decided that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking.

Next I examined attentively what I was. I saw that while I could pretend that I had no body and that there was no world and no place for me to be in, I could not for all that pretend that I did not exist. I saw on the contrary that from the mere fact that I thought of doubting the truth of other things, it followed quite evidently and certainly that I existed; whereas if I had merely ceased thinking, even if everything else I had ever imagined had been true, I should have had no reason to believe that I existed. From this I knew I was a substance whose whole essence or nature is simply to think, and which does not require any place, or depend on any material thing, in order to exist. Accordingly this 'I'—that is, the soul by which I am what I am—is entirely distinct from the body, and indeed is easier to know than the body, and would not fail to be whatever it is, even if the body did not exist.

After this I considered in general what is required of a proposition in order for it to be true and certain; for since I had just found one that I knew to be such, I thought that I ought also to know what this certainty consists in. I observed that there is nothing at all in the proposition 'I am thinking, therefore I exist' to assure me that I am speaking the truth, except that I see very clearly in order to think it is necessary to exist. So I decided that I could take it as a general rule that the things we conceive very clearly and very distinctly are all true; only there is some difficulty in recognizing which are the things that we distinctly conceive.

Next, reflecting upon the fact that I was doubting and that consequently my being was not wholly perfect (for I saw clearly that it is a
greater perfection to know than to doubt), I decided to inquire into the
source of my ability to think of something more perfect than I was; and I
recognized very clearly that this had to come from some nature that was
in fact more perfect. Regarding the thoughts I had of many other things
outside me, like the heavens, the earth, light, heat and numerous others,
I had no such difficulty in knowing where they came from. For I observed
nothing in them that seemed to make them superior to me; and so I
could believe that, if they were true, they depended on my nature in so far as it
had any perfection, and if they were not true, I got them from nothing –
in other words, they were in me because I had some defect. But the same
could not hold for the idea of a being more perfect than my own. For it
was manifestly impossible to get this from nothing; and I could not have
got it from myself since it is no less contradictory that the more perfect
should result from the less perfect, and depend on it, than that something
should proceed from nothing. So there remained only the possibility that
the idea had been put into me by a nature truly more perfect than I was
and even possessing in itself all the perfections of which I could have any
idea, that is – to explain myself in one word – by God. To this I added
that since I knew of some perfections that I did not possess, I was not the
only being which existed (here, by your leave, I shall freely use some
scholastic terminology), but there had of necessity to be some other, more
perfect being on which I depended and from which I had acquired all that
I possessed. For if I had existed alone and independently of every other
being, so that I had got from myself what little of the perfect being I
participated in, then for the same reason I could have got from myself
everything else I knew I lacked, and thus been myself infinite, eternal,
immutable, omniscient, omnipotent; in short, I could have had all the
perfections which I could observe to be in God. For, according to the
arguments I have just advanced, in order to know the nature of God, as
far as my own nature was capable of knowing it, I had only to consider,
for each thing of which I found in myself some idea, whether or not it
was a perfection to possess it; and I was sure that none of those which
indicated any imperfection was in God, but that all the others were. Thus
I saw that doubt, inconstancy, sadness and the like could not be in God,
since I myself would have been very glad to be free from them. Besides
this, I had ideas of many corporeal things capable of being perceived by
the senses; for even if I were to suppose that I was dreaming and that
whatever I saw or imagined was false, yet I could not deny that the ideas
were truly in my mind. But since I had already recognized very clearly
from my own case that the intellectual nature is distinct from the
corporeal, and as I observed that all composition is evidence of depend-
ence and that dependence is manifestly a defect, I concluded that it could
not be a perfection in God to be composed of these two natures, and
consequently that he was not composed of them. But if there were any
bodies in the world, or any intelligences or other natures that were not
wholly perfect, their being must depend on God’s power in such a
manner that they could not subsist for a single moment without him.

After that, wishing to seek other truths, I considered the object studied
by geometers. I conceived of this as a continuous body, or a space
indefinitely extended in length, breadth and height or depth, and divisible
into different parts which may have various shapes and sizes, and may be
moved or transposed in every way; for all this is assumed by geometers in
their object of study. I went through some of their simpler demonstra-
tions and noted that the great certainty which everyone ascribes to them
is founded solely on their being conceived as evident (in accordance with
the rule stated above). I noted also that there was nothing at all in these
demonstrations which assured me of the existence of their object. For
example, I saw clearly that the three angles of any given triangle must
equal two right angles; yet for all that, I saw nothing which assured me
that there existed any triangle in the world. Whereas when I looked again
at the idea I had of a perfect being, I found that this included existence in
the same way as – or even more evidently than – the idea of a triangle
includes the equality of its three angles to two right angles, or the idea of
a sphere includes the equidistance of all the points on the surface from
the centre. Thus I concluded that it is at least as certain as any
geometrical proof that God, who is this perfect being, is or exists.

But many are convinced that there is some difficulty in knowing God,
and even in knowing what their soul is. The reason for this is that they
ever raise their minds above things which can be perceived by the
senses: they are so used to thinking of things only by imagining them
(a way of thinking specially suited to material things) that whatever is
unimaginable seems to them unintelligible. This is sufficiently obvious
from the fact that even the scholastic philosophers take it as a maxim that
there is nothing in the intellect which has not previously been in the
senses; and yet it is certain that the ideas of God and of the soul have
never been in the senses. It seems to me that trying to use one’s
imagination in order to understand these ideas is like trying to use one’s
eyes in order to hear sounds or smell odours – though there is this
difference, that the sense of sight gives us no less assurance of the reality
of its objects than do the senses of smell and hearing, while neither our
imagination nor our senses could ever assure us of anything without the
intervention of our intellect.

Finally, if there are still people who are not sufficiently convinced of
the existence of God and of their soul by the arguments I have proposed,
I would have them know that everything else of which they may think themselves more sure—such as their having a body, there being stars and an earth, and the like—is less certain. For although we have a moral certainty about these things, so that it seems we cannot doubt them without being extravagant, nevertheless when it is a question of metaphysical certainty, we cannot reasonably deny that there are adequate grounds for not being entirely sure about them. We need only observe that in sleep we may imagine in the same way that we have a different body and see different stars and a different earth, without there being any of these things. For how do we know that the thoughts which come to us in dreams are any more false than the others, seeing that they are often no less lively and distinct? However much the best minds study this question, I do not believe they will be able to give any reason sufficient to remove this doubt unless they presuppose the existence of God. For in the first place, what I took just now as a rule, namely that everything we conceive very clearly and very distinctly is true, is assured only for the reasons that God is or exists, that he is a perfect being, and that everything in us comes from him. It follows that our ideas or notions, being real things and coming from God, cannot be anything but true, in every respect in which they are clear and distinct. Thus, if we frequently have ideas containing some falsity, this can happen only because there is something confused and obscure in them, for in that respect they participate in nothingness, that is, they are in us in this confused state only because we are not wholly perfect. And it is evident that it is no less contradictory that falsity or imperfection as such should proceed from God than that truth or perfection should proceed from nothingness. But if we did not know that everything real and true within us comes from a perfect and infinite being then, however clear and distinct our ideas were, we would have no reason to be sure that they had the perfection of being true.

But once the knowledge of God and the soul has made us certain of this rule, it is easy to recognize that the things we imagine in dreams should in no way make us doubt the truth of the thoughts we have when awake. For if one happened even in sleep to have some very distinct idea (if, say, a geometer devised some new proof), one's being asleep would not prevent the idea from being true. And as to the most common error of our dreams, which consists in their representing various objects to us in the same way as our external senses do, it does not matter that this gives us occasion to doubt the truth of such ideas, for often they can also mislead us without our being asleep—as when those with jaundice see everything coloured yellow, or when stars or other very distant bodies appear to us much smaller than they are. For after all, whether we are awake or asleep, we ought never to let ourselves be convinced except by the evidence of our reason. It will be observed that I say 'our reason', not 'our imagination' or 'our senses'. Even though we see the sun very clearly, we must not judge on that account that it is only as large as we see it; and we can distinctly imagine a lion's head on a goat's body without having to conclude from this that a chimera exists in the world. For reason does not insist that what we thus see or imagine is true. But it does insist that all our ideas or notions must have some foundation of truth; for otherwise it would not be possible that God, who is all-perfect and all-truthful, should have placed them in us. And our reasonings are never so evident or complete in sleep as in waking life, although sometimes our imaginings in sleep are as lively and distinct as in waking life, or more so. Hence reason also demands that, since our thoughts cannot all be true because we are not wholly perfect, what truth they do possess must inevitably be found in the thoughts we have when awake, rather than in our dreams.

Part Five

I would gladly go on and reveal the whole chain of other truths that I deduced from these first ones. But in order to do this I would have to discuss many questions that are being debated among the learned, and I do not wish to quarrel with them. So it will be better, I think, for me not to do this, and merely to say in general what these questions are, so as to let those who are wiser decide whether it would be useful for the public to be informed more specifically about them. I have always remained firm in the resolution I had taken to assume no principle other than the one I have just used to demonstrate the existence of God and of the soul, and to accept nothing as true which did not seem to me clearer and more certain than the demonstrations of the geometers had hitherto seemed. And yet I venture to say that I have found a way to satisfy myself within a short time about all the principal difficulties usually discussed in philosophy. What is more, I have noticed certain laws which God has so established in nature, and of which he has implanted such notions in our minds, that after adequate reflection we cannot doubt that they are exactly observed in everything which exists or occurs in the world. Moreover, by considering what follows from these laws it seems to me that I have discovered many truths more useful and important than anything I had previously learned or even hoped to learn.

I endeavoured to explain the most important of these truths in a