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René Descartes

DISCOURSE ON METHOD

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PART 6

It is now three years since I completed the treatise that contains all these things, and began to review it before putting it in the hands of the printer, when I learned that certain persons to whom I defer, and whose authority over my actions can scarcely be less than that of my own reason over my thoughts, had disapproved of a certain opinion in physics,³⁸ published shortly before by someone else.³⁹ I do not wish to say that I agreed with it, but since I had noticed nothing in it before their censure that I could imagine to be prejudicial either to religion or to the state, or consequently that would have prevented me from writing it if reason had so persuaded me, this made me fear that there might nevertheless be found among my thoughts some one that was mistaken, despite the great care I have always taken not to receive new ones among my beliefs of which I did not have very certain demonstrations, and to write nothing that could turn to the disadvantage of anyone. This sufficed to compel me to change the resolution that I had made to publish them. For although the reasons for which I had previously made it were very strong, my inclination, which had always made me hate the trade of producing books, immediately made me find enough other reasons to excuse me from it. And these reasons on both sides of the matter are such that not [61] only do I have some interest in stating them here, but perhaps the public will also have some interest in knowing them.

I have never made much of the things that came from my mind, and so long as the only fruits I gathered from the method I use were in satisfying myself regarding certain difficulties that belong to the speculative sciences or in trying to regulate my morals by the reasons that it taught me, I did not believe that I was obliged to write anything about it. For with regard to morals, everyone is so impressed with his own judgment that there would be found as many reformers as heads if others besides those whom God has established as sovereigns over his peoples, or to whom he has given enough grace and zeal to be prophets, were permitted to try to change anything in them. And although my speculations pleased me greatly, I believed that others also had some that pleased them perhaps more. But as soon as I had acquired certain general notions about physics, and after beginning to test them on various particular questions had noticed where they might

38 See Glossary, s.v. "Physics."

39 Galileo's *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems* (1632) was placed on the Index of Prohibited Books by the Congregation of the Holy Office of the Roman Catholic Church in 1633 (see note 32 above).

lead, and how much they differ from the principles in use up to the present, I believed that I could not keep them hidden without gravely sinning against the law that obliges us to procure, so much as we can, the general good of all men. For they have shown me that it is possible to attain knowledge that is very useful to life, and that in place of that speculative philosophy that is taught in the schools, we can find [62] a practical one, by which, because it knows the force and actions of fire, water, air, stars, the heavens, and all the other bodies that surround us as distinctly as we know the different trades of our artisans, we could employ them in the same way in all their proper uses, and thus make ourselves like masters and possessors of nature.⁴⁰ This is desirable not only for the invention of an infinity of artifices that would enable us to enjoy, without any pain, the fruits of the earth and all the goods to be found there, but also and principally for the conservation of health, which is without doubt the primary good and the foundation of all other goods of this life. For even the mind is so dependent on the temperament and on the arrangement of the organs of the body that, if it is possible to find some means that generally renders men more wise and more capable than they have been up to now, I believe that we must seek for it in medicine. It is true that the medicine now practiced contains little whose utility is so remarkable, but although I have no intention of deprecating it, I am sure that there is nobody, even among those who make a profession of it, who does not admit that all we now know is almost nothing in comparison with what remains to be known, and that we could be spared an infinity of diseases, of the body as well as of the mind, and even also perhaps the enfeeblement of old age, if we had enough knowledge of their causes and of all the remedies that nature has provided us. And because I intended [63] to use my whole life in the search for so necessary a science, and had found a path by following which it seemed to me that one must infallibly find it, unless prevented by the brevity of life or the lack of experiments [*expériences*], I judged that there was no better remedy against these two impediments than to communicate faithfully to the public all the little that I had found, and to urge good minds to try to go further by contributing, each according

40 The project of mastery of nature is notably anticipated by Francis Bacon (1561-1626) in the *Great Instauration* and *New Organon* of 1620; see especially *New Organon* 1.129, where Bacon speaks of establishing and extending "the power and dominion of the human race itself over the universe" (*Selected Philosophical Works*, ed. Rose-Mary Sargent [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999], 147). André Lalande arranges passages from Bacon and Descartes's *Discourse* side by side in "Some Texts of Bacon and Descartes," *The St. John's Review* 43/3 (1996): 51-75 (originally published as "Quelques textes de Bacon et de Descartes," *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 19 [1911]: 296-311).

to his inclination and power, to the experiments required, and also by communicating to the public everything that they learned, in order that later inquirers might begin where their predecessors had arrived. Thus we all together might go much further, joining the lives and labors of many, than each in particular could.

I also noted, with regard to experiments, that they are all the more necessary as one's knowledge is more advanced. For in the beginning it is better to use only those that present themselves to our senses, and of which we cannot be ignorant provided we make the slightest reflection whatever, rather than to seek for those that are more rare and elaborate. The reason for this is that the more rare often deceive when we do not yet know the more general causes, and the circumstances on which they depend are almost always so particular and so small that it is very difficult to discern them. But the order that I have maintained in this is the following. First, I have tried to find in general the [64] principles or first causes of all that is, or can be, in the world, without considering, for this purpose, anything but God alone, who has created it, or deriving them elsewhere than from certain seeds of truth that are naturally in our souls. After this, I examined which were the first and most ordinary effects that can be deduced from these causes. And in so doing, it seemed to me, I found the heavens, stars, an earth, and even, on the earth, water, air, fire, minerals, and other such things that are most general of all and most simple, and consequently the easiest to know. Then, when I sought to descend to those that were more particular, so many different ones presented themselves to me that I did not believe it possible for the human mind to distinguish the forms or species of bodies on the earth from an infinity of others that could be there, if it had been the will of God to put them there, or consequently to make them useful to us, unless we seek causes from effects, and make use of many particular experiments. Consequently, when my mind goes over all the objects that were ever presented to my senses, I dare to say that I have noticed nothing that I could not conveniently explain by the principles that I had found. But I must also admit that the power of nature is so plentiful and vast, and these principles are so simple and general, that I notice almost no particular effect that I do not at the outset recognize can [65] be deduced from them in several different ways, and my greatest difficulty is ordinarily to find in which of these ways it depends on them. For this I know no other expedient but again to seek more experiments that are such that their result cannot be the same if it must be explained in one way rather than another. Moreover, I am now at the point where, it seems to me, I see well enough what approach must be taken to make most of those that can serve this purpose. But I also see that they are

of such kind, and so many in number, that neither my hands nor my income, even if I had a thousand times more than I do, would suffice for them all. So that to the degree that I henceforth have the capacity to make more or less of them, I shall also advance more or less in the knowledge of nature. This was what I promised to make known through the treatise I had written, and to show there so clearly the utility that the public can obtain from it that I would oblige all those who desire in general the good of men, that is to say, all those who are in fact virtuous and do not falsely seem so, to communicate to me the experiments they have already made, as well as to help me in the search for those that remain to be made.

But I have had, since that time, other reasons that have made me change my opinion and think that I ought really to go on writing all the things that I judged to be of some importance, so far as I discovered the truth about them, and to devote to them the same care as if I wished to print them, [66] so as to have all the more opportunity to examine them well, since we doubtless always look more carefully at what we believe will be seen by others than at what we only do for ourselves, and often the things that have seemed true to me when I started to conceive them have appeared false when I sought to put them on paper. Also, I did not want to lose any occasion to benefit the public, if I am capable of doing so; and if my writings are of some worth, those who will have them after my death may so use them as will seem appropriate. But I thought that I should in no way consent for them to be published during my life, so that neither the opposition and controversy to which they would perhaps be subject nor even such reputation as they could gain me should occasion any loss of the time I intended to use to instruct myself. For although it is true that each man is obliged to procure, as much as is in him, the good of others, and that to be useful to nobody is strictly to be worth nothing, it is nevertheless also true that our cares must extend beyond the present time, and that it is good to omit the things that would perhaps benefit the living when it is with the intention of doing others that benefit still more our posterity. And indeed, I would like it to be known that the little that I have learned up to now is almost nothing in comparison with what I do not know and do not despair of being able to learn. For it is almost the same with those who gradually discover truth in the [67] sciences as with those who, when they start to become rich, have less trouble making great acquisitions than they previously had when poor in making much lesser ones. Or they can be compared to captains of armies whose forces customarily grow in proportion to their victories, and who need more skill to maintain themselves after the loss of a battle than to capture villages and provinces after winning one. For

truly it is giving battle when we try to conquer all the difficulties and errors that prevent us from attaining the knowledge of the truth, and it is to lose one when we accept some false opinion regarding a matter of some generality and importance. Afterwards, we need much more ability to regain the same state we were in than we need to make great progress when we already have assured principles. As for myself, if I have hitherto found some truths in the sciences (and I hope that the things contained in this volume will lead people to judge that I have found some), I can say that they only follow from and depend on five or six principal difficulties that I have overcome, and that I count as so many battles in which I have had luck on my side. I shall not even fear to say that I think I need to win only two or three more similar ones to accomplish completely the goal of my intentions, and that my age is not so advanced but that, in the ordinary course of nature, I may still have enough leisure for this result. [68] But I believe that I am so much the more obliged to take care of the time that remains to me as I have hope and power to use it well, and I would doubtless have many occasions to waste it if I were to publish the foundations of my physics. For while they are almost all so evident that it is only necessary to understand them to believe them, and there is none that I do not think I can demonstrate, nevertheless, because it is impossible that they should agree with all the diverse opinions of other men, I foresee that I would often be distracted by the opposition to which they would give birth.

It may be said that this opposition would be useful, both because it would make me recognize my mistakes and because, if I had something worthwhile, others might thereby have a better understanding of it and, as many can see further than one man alone, even now begin to use it and also help me with their discoveries. But although I recognize that I am extremely subject to error, and almost never trust the first thoughts that come to me, nevertheless the experience I have of the objections that can be made against me prevents me from hoping for any profit from them. For I have already often experienced the judgments of those I have considered as my friends as well as those of others to whom I thought myself indifferent, and also even of some whose malice and envy, I know, would work to discover what affection concealed from my friends. But it has rarely happened that something has been objected against me that I had not at all foreseen, unless it was [69] far removed from my subject, so that I have almost never encountered a critic of my opinions who did not seem to be either less rigorous or less equitable than myself. And I have never observed either that by means of the disputations that are practiced in the schools any truth has been discovered that was not known before. For while each tries to win, he exerts himself more in

making the most of the probable than in weighing the arguments for one side and the other; and those who have been for a long time good lawyers are not afterwards, for that reason, better judges.

As for the utility that others would receive from the communication of my thoughts, it could not be very great, since I have not yet carried them so far that it would not be necessary to add many things before applying them to practice. And I think I can say without vanity that if there is someone who could do so, it must be me rather than someone else: not because there may not be many minds in the world incomparably better than mine, but because a thing cannot be so well conceived, and rendered one's own, when it is learned from someone else as when we have discovered it ourselves. This is so true in this matter that although I have often explained certain of my opinions to persons with very good minds, who, while I spoke to them, seemed to understand them very distinctly, nevertheless when they repeated them I noticed that they almost always changed them in such a way that I could no longer acknowledge them as mine. In this connection I would [70] like here to request those who will come after us never to believe that the things that will be said about my opinions come from me when I have not divulged them myself. And I am not at all astonished at the extravagances attributed to all those ancient philosophers whose writings we do not have, nor do I judge, for all that, that their thoughts were very unreasonable, since they were the best minds of their times, but only that they have been badly reported to us. For we also see that it almost never happens that any of their sectarians has surpassed them, and I am sure that the most impassioned of those who now follow Aristotle would believe themselves happy if they had as much knowledge of nature as he had, even on the condition that they would never have any more. They are like ivy, which does not try to climb higher than the trees that support it, and often even descends after it has reached the top.⁴¹ For it seems to me that those also descend, that is, make themselves somehow less learned than if they had abstained from study, who, not content with knowing all that is intelligibly explained in their author, try to find there in addition the solution of many difficulties of which he has said nothing and about which he has perhaps never thought. Nevertheless, their mode of philosophizing is most convenient for those who have only mediocre minds; for the obscurity of the distinctions and principles they use enables them to speak of all things as boldly as if they knew them, and to defend whatever they [71] say against the most subtle and capable, without there being any means of convincing

⁴¹ Lalande cites Bacon's *Great Instauration* as a possible source for this thought in "Some Texts of Bacon and Descartes," 66.

them. In this they seem to me like a blind man who, in order to fight without disadvantage against one who sees, makes him descend to the bottom of some extremely dark cave. And I may say that it is to their interest that I refrain from publishing the principles of the philosophy that I use; for they are so very simple and very evident that, if I were to publish them, it would be like opening some windows and bringing daylight into that cave where they have descended to fight. But even the best minds have no occasion to wish to know them; for if they wish to be able to speak about all things and to acquire the reputation of being learned, they will achieve this more easily by contenting themselves with probability, which can be found without great difficulty in all sorts of matters, than by searching for the truth, which is only discovered gradually in some of them, and which, when it is a question of speaking about other matters, obliges us to confess frankly that we do not know them. But if they prefer the knowledge of some few truths to the vanity of appearing ignorant of nothing, as doubtless it is quite preferable, and if they want to follow an intention similar to mine, they do not need for this goal that I tell them any more than I have already said in this discourse. For if they are capable of going beyond what I have done, they will also be all the more able to find by themselves all that I think I have found. And inasmuch as I have always examined everything in due order, it is certain that what still remains for me to discover is [72] in itself more difficult and concealed than what I have hitherto been able to encounter, and they would have much less pleasure in learning it from me than by themselves. Moreover, the habit that they will acquire of investigating easy things first, and passing by small degrees to more difficult ones, will serve them better than all my instruction could do. So, with regard to myself, I am persuaded that if I had been taught from my youth all the truths of which I have since sought the demonstrations, and had had no difficulty in learning them, I would perhaps have never known any others, and I would at least never have acquired the habit and the facility that I think I have of always finding new ones to the extent that I apply myself to seeking them. And in brief, if there is any work in the world that cannot be so well accomplished by anyone other than the one who has begun it, it is the one in which I am engaged.

It is true that one man alone cannot perform all the experiments that can be useful in it, but neither can he usefully employ other hands than his own, except for those of artisans or other such people that he could pay, and in whom the hope of gain, a most efficacious means, would move them to do with exactness everything he prescribed to them. For as for those volunteers who would perhaps offer to help him out of curiosity or desire to learn, aside from the fact that they usually

promise more than they do, and only make beautiful proposals that never amount to anything, they [73] would infallibly want to be paid by the explanation of certain difficulties, or at least by useless compliments and conversations, which could not cost him so little time that he would not be the loser. And with regard to the experiments that others have already made, even if they were willing to communicate them to him, which those who call them secrets never would be, most of them consist of so many complications or superfluous ingredients that it would be very hard for him to decipher their truth. Besides, he would find almost all of them so badly explained or even so false, because those who have made them are forced to make them appear in agreement with their principles, that if there were some that were serviceable, they once again could not be worth the time that he would need to spend selecting them. Therefore if there were anyone in the world assuredly known to be capable of finding the things that are the greatest and most useful to the public that could be, so that other men were compelled to help him by every means to accomplish his intentions, I do not see that they could do anything for him but defray the expenses of the experiments he would need, and otherwise prevent his leisure from being taken up by anyone's importunity. But besides the fact that I do not presume so much of myself as to wish to promise anything extraordinary, nor to indulge in such vain thoughts as to imagine that the public should take great interest in my purposes, my soul is not so base that I would wish to accept from anyone [74] any favor that one might believe I had not merited.

All these considerations taken together were the cause that, three years ago, I did not want to divulge the treatise I had in hand, and that I had even resolved not to publish any other during my life that was so general, or by which the foundations of my physics could be understood. But since then there have been two other reasons that have obliged me to offer here certain particular essays, and to render to the public some account of my actions and my purposes. The first is that if I failed to do so, many who knew of my former intention to publish some writings could imagine that the reasons why I abstained were more to my disadvantage than they actually are. For although I do not love glory excessively, or even, if I dare say so, although I hate it insofar as I judge it contrary to the repose that I esteem higher than all else, nevertheless I have never tried to conceal my actions like crimes, nor have I ever taken great precautions to be unknown, both because I believed that I would be doing myself an injury, and because it would have caused me a kind of anxiety that once again would have been contrary to the perfect repose of mind that I seek. And because, having always remained indifferent to the concern with being known or not, I could not help acquiring some

sort of reputation, I thought that I ought at least to do my best to keep from having a bad one. The other reason that obliged me to write [75] this is that I see more and more every day that my purpose to instruct myself suffers from the delay caused by the infinity of experiments that I require and that I cannot make without the help of others, and although I do not flatter myself so much as to expect that the public will be greatly concerned with my interests, nevertheless I also do not wish so to fail myself as to give those who will come after cause to reproach me some day because I could have left them many much better things if I had not been too negligent in letting them know how they could have contributed to my purposes.

And I thought that it would be easy for me to choose a few subjects that, without being subject to too much controversy, or obliging me to declare more of my principles than I desire, would not fail to show with sufficient clarity what I can or cannot do in the sciences. I cannot say whether I have succeeded in this, and I do not want to influence anyone's judgment by speaking about my writings. But I will be glad to have them examined, and in order for there to be so much the more occasion to do so, I beg all those who have some objections to make to take the pains to send them to my publisher, and after I am informed of them I will try to join my reply to them at the same time; and by this means readers who see them both together can judge more easily of the truth. For I do not promise ever to make long replies to them but only to admit my errors very frankly, if I perceive them, or [76] if I do not, to say simply what I believe to be required for the defense of the things I have written, without adding the explanation of any new matter, in order not to be endlessly involved in one thing after another.

But if some of the things I have said at the beginning of the *Dioptrics* and the *Meteors* are at first shocking because I call them suppositions and seem to have no desire to prove them, the reader should have the patience to read the whole attentively, and I trust he will find himself satisfied. For it seems to me that the reasons are interconnected in such a way that, just as the last ones are demonstrated by the first, which are their causes, so the first are reciprocally proved by the last, which are their effects. And it must not be imagined that in this I commit the error that logicians call reasoning in a circle. For since experience renders most of these effects very certain, the causes from which I deduce them serve not so much to prove them as to explain them; on the contrary, it is the causes that are proved by the effects. And I have called them suppositions only so that it may be known that I think they can be deduced from those first truths that I have explained above, but I have wished deliberately not to do so, to prevent certain minds,

who imagine that they know in one day all that another has thought in twenty years as soon as he has told them but two or three words, and who are the more subject to error and less capable of the truth as they are more penetrating and quick, from [77] taking the opportunity to build on what they believe to be my principles some extravagant philosophy for which I would be blamed. For as for the opinions that are wholly mine, I do not defend them as being new, since if the reasons for them are considered carefully, I am sure that they will be found to be so simple and so conformable to common sense that they will seem less extraordinary and less strange than any others that one might have on the same subjects. And I also do not boast of being the first discoverer of any of them, but rather that I have accepted them neither because they have been asserted by others nor because they have not been, but only because reason has persuaded me of them.

If artisans cannot immediately carry out the invention that is explained in the *Dioptrics*, I do not believe that it should therefore be said that it is bad; for since it requires skill and practice to make and adjust the machines that I have described so that no detail is missing, I would be no less astonished if they succeeded on the first attempt than if someone were able to learn to play the lute excellently in one day by merely being given a good fingering chart. And if I write in French, which is the language of my country, rather than in Latin, which is that of my preceptors, it is because I hope that those who use only their natural reason in its purity will judge better of my opinions than those who believe only in ancient books. As for those who join good sense with study, who are the only judges I desire, [78] they will not be, I am sure, so partial to Latin that they refuse to listen to my reasonings because I explain them in the vernacular.

For the rest, I do not wish to speak here in detail of the progress I hope to make in the sciences in the future, or to bind myself to the public with any promise that I am not confident of fulfilling. I will only say that I have resolved to employ the rest of my life only in trying to acquire some knowledge of nature from which can be derived rules for medicine more assured than those we have had up to the present, and that my inclination is so far removed from other purposes, especially those that can be useful to some only by being harmful to others, that if circumstances compelled me to adopt them, I do not believe that I would be capable of succeeding. Regarding this I make a declaration here that I well know cannot help to make me important in the world, but then I have no desire to be so; and I will always hold myself more obliged to those by whose favor I enjoy without hindrance my leisure than to those who offer me the most honorable positions on earth.