Mary Astell

MARY ASTELL was born on November 12, 1666, in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. She came from a family of merchants, and so, although she grew up comfortably, she was not a member of the nobility like many of the other women writing philosophy in this period. Although she did acquire a considerable reputation for her writings during her lifetime, she lived quietly and privately and there is much about her life that remains unknown. Even some facts that are often repeated about her remain dubious. Her intelligence is said to have been recognized by an uncle who educated her, but the man who is identified as this uncle, a clergyman named Ralph Astell, died when Astell was thirteen, so the education he provided must have been at an early age. Astell's father died when she was twelve and her mother when she was eighteen. Two years later, surprisingly, she moved alone to London, but how she lived and how she supported herself remain unknown. She was put in touch with a bookseller who gave her work writing pamphlets. She was also befriended by several titled ladies living in Chelsea, where Astell settled, who may have provided her with financial support as well as friendship. She never married and lived a simple and pious life, dying on May 9, 1731, of breast cancer.

One thing that is remarkable about Mary Astell is the extent of her published writings. She not only published copiously, but on a variety of subjects, contributing to several of the religious and political controversies of her day. The work that has been recovered and for which she is known today are her "feminist" writings, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies,* Parts I and II, and *Reflections on Marriage.* In the first she argues that women's shortcomings are due to lack of education and not to lack of native intellectual ability and argues for the importance of education for women in order to fit them rationally for their religious duty. To this end, Astell urged the establishment of institutions into which women could retreat, either to be educated or to live, if they remained unmarried. The argument in favor of education for women is continued in *Reflections on Marriage,* a more polemical work, in which Astell maintains that only a well-trained reason can allow women to avoid the pitfalls of a bad choice of marriage partner or help in dealing with the vicissitudes if a bad marriage is nevertheless entered into. Despite what seems like the radical nature of the views expressed in these works, Mary Astell chiefly allied herself with the most conservative elements of her day, the High Church Anglicans and Torys, against the Whigs, who had been responsible for redefining the relationship between the monarch and the people as a contract. She made several contributions to the debates raging at this time, *A Fair Way with Dissenters and their Patrons, Moderation Truly Stated,* and *An Impartial Enquiry into the Causes of Rebellion and Civil War in this Kingdom,* in which she argued in favor of the divine right of kings and against the practice of occasional conformity, in which those who did not wish to conform to the Anglican Church could worship there once a year and get a certificate that permitted them to hold public office. In Astell's other writings, she enters into discussion with various well-known philosophers of her day, largely over religious issues. She had a correspondence with Malebranche's English disciple, John Norris, over such issues as God's role in the causation of pain and sin and about our duty, as Norris conceived it, to love God only. Norris prevailed upon her to publish their correspon-

dence, which came out in 1695, entitled *Letters Concerning the Love of God.* This volume occasioned Lady Masham's *Discourse Concerning the Love of God,* the Lockean nature of which led Astell to attribute it to Locke. She made it also the target of one of her last works, *The Christian Religion, as Professed by a Daughter of the Church of England,* along with Locke's *Reasonableness of Christianity* and his correspondence with Stillingfleet. This last work is a four-hundred-page treatise in which Astell lays out her religious philosophy and discusses at some length Locke's speculation that God could have superadded thought to matter. This in turn provoked Masham's *Occasional Thoughts.*

Part II of *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies,* from which this selection is taken, was published three years after the first part originally appeared, and contains Astell's account of the sort of education from which she had argued women would benefit. The ideas of Locke, Descartes, and Arnauld have variously been detected in it. Astell certainly quotes frequently from Arnauld's *Art of Thinking* and also from Descartes's *Principles,* but the work is far from being a compilation of the work of others. It provides an interesting example of how certain ways of thinking about the mind are in the air by the end of the seventeenth century, but the work is organized so as to allow Astell to make what she sees as important points about the nature of human knowledge and human cognitive faculties. Her concern is to link the development of our rational faculties with the practical action that is necessary for our salvation, so that she argues that we should develop the mind in the service of rational choice, and not for idle speculation. Thus, although she supposes humans to be unavoidably ignorant of many matters, what she takes to be important is that we avoid error by restraining the passions so that our will does not outrun our judgment.

✧ Selections from *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies,* Part II

CHAP. III

Concerning the Improvement of the Understanding.

The perfection of the understanding consisting in the clearness and largeness of its view, it improves proportionably as its ideas become clearer and more extensive. But this is not so to be understood as if all sorts of notices contributed to our improvement, there are some things which make us no wiser when we know them, others which 'tis best to be ignorant of. But that understanding seems to me the most exalted, which has the clearest and most extensive view of such truths as are suitable to its capacity, and necessary or convenient to be known in this present state. For being that we are but creatures, our understanding in its greatest perfection has only a limited excellency. It has indeed a vast extent, and it were not amiss if we tarried a little in the contemplation of its powers and capacities, provided that the prospect did not make us giddy, that we remember from whom we have received them, and balance those lofty thoughts which a view of our intellectuals may occasion, with the depressing ones which the irregularity of our morals will suggest, and that we learn from this inspection, how indecorous it is to busy this bright side of us in mean things, seeing it is capable of such noble ones.

Selections from Mary Astell's *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies,* Part II (New York: Source Book Press, 1970; reprint of London: R. Wilken, 1697), 78–85, 89–107.

Human nature is indeed a wonderful composure admirable in its outward structure, but much more excellent in the beauties of its inward, and she who considers in whose image her soul was created, and whose blood was shed to redeem it, cannot prize it too much, nor forget to pay it her utmost regard. There's nothing in this material world to be compared to it, all the gay things we dote on, and for which we many times expose our souls to ruin, are of no consideration in respect of it. They are not the good of the soul, its happiness depends not on them, but they often deceive and withdraw it from its true good. It was made for the contemplation and enjoyment of its God, and all souls are capable of this though in a different degree and by measures somewhat different, as we hope will appear from that which follows.

Truth in general is the object of the understanding, but all truths are not equally evident, because of the limitation of the human mind, which though it can gradually take in many truths, yet cannot any more than our sight attend to many things at once: And likewise, because God has not thought fit to communicate such ideas to us as are necessary to the disquisition of some particular truths. For knowing nothing without us but by the idea we have of it, and judging only according to the relation we find between two or more ideas, when we cannot discover the truth we search after by intuition or the immediate comparison of two ideas, 'tis necessary that we should have a third by which to compare them. But if this middle idea be wanting, though we have sucient evidence of those two which we would compare, because we have a clear and distinct conception of them, yet we are ignorant of those truths which would arise from their comparison, because we want a third by which to compare them.

To give an instance of this in a point of great consequence, and of late very much controverted though to little purpose, because we take a wrong method, and would make that the object of science which is properly the object of faith, the doctrine of the trinity. Revelation which is but an exaltation and improvement of reason has told us, that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God, and our idea of the godhead

of any one of these persons, is as clear as our idea of any of the other. Both reason and revelation assure us that God is one simple essence, undivided, and infinite in all perfection, this is the natural idea which we have of God. How then can the Father be God, the Son God, and the Holy Ghost God, when yet there is but one God? That these two propositions are true we are certain, both because God who cannot lie has revealed them, and because we have as clear an idea of them as it is possible a finite mind should have of an infinite nature. But we cannot find out how this should be, by the bare comparison of these two ideas without the help of a third by which to compare them. This God has not thought fit to impart to us, the prospect it would have given us would have been too dazzling, too bright for mortality to bear, and we ought to acquiesce in the divine will. So then, we are well assured that these two propositions are true, There is but one God; and, there are three persons in the godhead: but we know not the manner how these things are. Nor can our acquiescence be thought unreasonable, nor the doctrine we subscribe to be run down as absurd and contradictory by every little warm disputer and pretender to reason, whose life is perhaps a continual contradiction to it, and he knows little of it besides the name. For we ought not to think it strange that God has folded up his own nature, not in darkness, but in an adorable and inaccessible light, since his wisdom sees it fit to keep us ignorant of our own. We know and feel the union between our soul and body, but who amongst us sees so clearly, as to find out with certitude and exactness, the secret ties which unite two such different substances, or how they are able to act upon each other? We are conscious of our own liberty, who ever denies it, denies that he is capable of rewards and punishments, degrades his nature and makes himself but a more curious piece of mechanism; and none but atheists will call in question the providence of God, or deny that he governs *all,* even the most free of all his creatures. But who can reconcile me these? Or adjust the limits between God's Prescience and man's free-will? Our understandings are sufficiently illuminated to lead us to the fountain of life and light, we do or may know enough to fill our souls with the noblest conceptions, the humblest adoration, and the

knowledge as comparison of ideas

entirest love of the author of our being, and what can we desire farther? If we make so ill a use of that knowledge which we have, as to be so far puffed up with it, as to turn it against him who gave it, how dangerous would it be for us to have more knowledge, in a state in which we have so little humility! But if vain man will pretend to wisdom, let him first learn to know the length of his own line.

Though the human intellect has a large extent, yet being limited as we have already said, this limitation is the cause of those different modes of thinking, which for distinction sake we call faith, science and opinion. For in this present and imperfect state in which we know not any thing by intuition, or immediate view, except a few first principles which we call self-evident, the most of our knowledge is acquired by reasoning and deduction: And these three modes of understanding, faith, science and opinion are no otherwise distinguished than by the different degrees of clearness and evidence in the premises from whence the conclusion is drawn.

faith, science, and opinion

Knowledge in a proper and restricted sense and as appropriated to science, signifies that clear perception which is followed by a firm assent to conclusions rightly drawn from premises of which we have clear and distinct ideas. Which premises or principles must be so clear and evident, that supposing us reasonable creatures, and free from prejudices and passions, (which for the time they predominate as good as deprive us of our reason) we cannot withhold our assent from them without manifest violence to our reason.

knowledge

But if the nature of the thing be such as that it admits of no undoubted premises to argue from, or at least we don't at present know of any, or that the conclusion does not so necessarily follow as to give a perfect satisfaction to the mind and to free it from all hesitation, that which we think of it is then called opinion.

definitions of faith and opinion

Again, if the medium we make use of to prove the proposition be authority, the conclusion which we draw from it is said to be believed; This is what we call faith, and when the authority is God's a divine faith.

Moral certainty is a species of knowledge whose proofs are

of a compounded nature, in part resembling those which belong to science, and partly those of faith. We do not make the whole process ourselves, but depend on another for the *immediate* proof, but we ourselves deduce the *mediate* from circumstances and principles as certain and almost as evident as those of science, and which lead us to the immediate proofs and make it unreasonable to doubt of them indeed we not seldom deceive ourselves in this manner, by inclining alternately to both extremes. Sometimes we reject truths which are morally certain as conjectural and probable only, because they have not a physical and mathematical certainty, which they are incapable of. At another time we embrace the slightest conjectures and anything that looks with probability, as moral certainties and real verities, if fancy, passion or interest recommend them; so ready are we to be determined by these rather than by solid reason.

In this enumeration of the several ways of knowing, I have not reckoned the senses, in regard that we're more properly said to be *conscious* of than to *know* such things as we perceive by sensation. And also because that light which we suppose to be let into our ideas by our senses is indeed very dim and fallacious, and not to be relied on till it has passed the test of reason; neither do I think there is any mode of knowledge which may not be reduced to those already mentioned.

Now though there's a great difference between opinion and science, true science being immutable but opinion variable and uncertain, yet there is not such a difference between faith and science as is usually supposed. The difference consists not in the certainty but in the way of proof; the objects of faith are as rationally and as firmly proved as the objects of science, though by another way. As science demonstrates things that are *seen*, so faith is the evidence of such as are *not seen*. And he who rejects the evidence of faith in such things as belong to its cognizance, is as unreasonable as he who denies propositions in geometry that are proved with mathematical exactness.

faith vs science

There's nothing true which is not in itself demonstrable, or which we should not pronounce to be true had we a clear and intuitive view of it. But as was said above we see very few things by intuition, neither are we furnished with mediums to make

the process ourselves in demonstrating all truths, and therefore there are some truths which we must either be totally ignorant of, or else receive them on the testimony of another person, to whose understanding they are clear and manifest though not to ours. And if this person be one who can neither be deceived nor deceive, we're as certain of those conclusions which we prove by his authority, as we are of those we demonstrate by our own reason: nay more certain, by how much his reason is more comprehensive and infallible than our own.

Science is the following the process ourselves upon clear and evident principles; faith is a dependence on the credit of another, in such matters as are out of our view. And when we have very good reason to submit to the testimony of the person we believe, faith is as firm, and those truths it discovers to us as truly intelligible, and as strongly proved in their kind as science.

In a word, as every sense so every capacity of the understanding has its proper object. The objects of science are things within our view, of which we may have clear and distinct ideas, and nothing should be determined here without clearness and evidence. To be able to repeat any person's dogma without forming a distinct idea of it ourselves, is not to know but to remember; and to have a confused indeterminate idea is to conjecture not to understand.

The objects of faith are as certain and as truly, intelligible in themselves as those of science, as has been said already, only we become persuaded of the truth of them by another method, we do not *see* them so clearly and distinctly as to be unable to disbelieve them. Faith has a mixture of the will that it may be rewardable, for who will thank us for giving our assent where it was impossible to withold it? Faith then may be said to be a sort of knowledge capable of reward, and men are infidels not for want of conviction, but through an *unwillingness* to believe.

But as it is a fault to believe in matters of science, where we may expect demonstration and evidence, so it is a reproach to our understanding and a proof of our disingenuity, to require that sort of process peculiar to science, for the confirmation of such truths as are not the proper objects of it. It is as ridiculous as to reject music, because we cannot taste or smell it, or to deny

there is such a thing as beauty because we do not hear it. He who would see with his ears and hear with his eyes may indeed set up in *Bedlam* for a man of an extraordinary reach, a sagacious person who won't be imposed on, one who must have more authentic proofs than his dull forefathers were content with. But men of dry reason and a moderate genius, I suppose will think nature has done very well in allotting to each sense its proper employment, and such as these will as readily acknowledge that it is as honorable for the soul to believe what is truly the object of faith, as it is for her to know what is really the object of her knowledge. And were we not strangely perverse we should not scruple divine authority when we daily submit to human. Whoever has not seen Paris has nothing but human authority to assure him there is such a place, and yet he would be laughed at as ridiculous who should call it in question, though he may as well in this as in another case pretend that his informers have designs to serve, intend to impose on him and mock his credulity. Nay how many of us daily make that a matter of faith which indeed belongs to science, by adhering blindly to the dictates of some famous philosopher in physical truths, the principles of which we have as much right to examine, and to make deductions from them as he had?

To sum up all: we may know enough for all the purposes of life, enough to busy this active faculty of thinking, to employ and entertain the spare intervals of time and to keep us from rust and idleness, but we must not pretend to fathom all depths with our short line, we should be wise unto sobriety, and reckon that we know very little if we go about to make our *own* reason the standard of all truth. It is very certain that nothing is true but what is conformable to reason, that is to the divine reason of which ours is but a short faint ray, and it is as certain that there are many truths which human reason cannot comprehend. Therefore to be thoroughly sensible of the capacity of the mind, to discern precisely its bounds and limits and to direct our studies and inquiries accordingly, to know what is to be known, and to believe what is to be believed is the property of a wise person. To be content with too little knowledge, or to aspire to overmuch is equally a fault, to make that use of our understandings

the wise person

which God has fitted and designed them for is the medium which we ought to take. For the difference between a plowman and a doctor does not seem to me to consist in this, That the business of the one is to search after knowledge, and that the other has nothing to do with it. No, whoever has a rational soul ought surely to employ it about some truth or other, to procure for it right ideas, that its judgments may be true though its knowledge be not very extensive. But herein lies the difference, that though truth is the object of every individual understanding, yet all are not equally enlarged nor able to comprehend so much; and they whose capacities and circumstances of living do not fit them for it, lie not under that obligation of extending their view which persons of a larger reach and greater leisure do. There is indeed often times a mistake in this matter, people who are not fit will be puzzling their heads to little purpose, and those who are prove slothful and decline the trouble; and thus it will be if we do not thoroughly understand ourselves, but suffer pride or ease to make the estimate. . . .

We have already expressed our thoughts concerning the capacity and perfection of the understanding, and what has been said if duly considered, is sufficient to bring every particular person acquainted with their own defects. But because they who need amendment most, are commonly least disposed to make such reflections as are necessary to procure it, we will spend a few pages in considering for them, and in observing the most usual defects of the thinking faculty.

If we are of their opinion who say that the understanding is only passive, and that judgment belongs to the will, I see not any defect the former can have, besides narrowness and a disability to extend itself to many things, which is indeed incident to all creatures, the brightest intelligence in the highest order of angels is thus defective, as well as the meanest mortal, though in a less degree. Nor ought it to be complained of, since 'tis natural and necessary, we may as well desire to be gods as desire to know all things. Some sort of ignorance therefore, or nonperception we cannot help; a finite mind, suppose it as large as you please, can never extend itself to infinite truths. But no doubt it is in our power to remedy a great deal more than we do, and proba-

ignorance and error

bly a larger range is allowed us than the most active and enlightened understanding has hitherto reached. Ignorance then can't be avoided but error may, we cannot judge of things of which we have no idea, but we can suspend our judgment about those of which we have, till clearness and evidence oblige us to pass it. Indeed in strictness of speech the will and not the understanding is blameable when we think amiss, since the latter opposes not the ends for which God made it, but readily extends itself as far as it can, receiving such impressions as are made on it; 'tis the former that directs it to such objects, that fills up its capacity with such ideas as are foreign to its business and of no use to it, or which does not at least oppose the incursions of material things, and deface as much as it is able those impressions which sensible objects leave in the imagination. But since it is not material to the present design, whether judgment belongs to the understanding or will, we shall not nicely distinguish how each of them is employed in acquiring knowledge, but treat of them both together in this chapter, allotted to the service of the studious, who when they are put in the way may by their own meditations and experience, rectify the mistakes and supply the omissions we happen to be guilty of.

They who apply themselves to the contemplation of truth, will perhaps at first find a contraction or emptiness of thought, and that their mind offers nothing on the subject they would consider, is not ready at unfolding, nor in representing correspondent ideas to be compared with it, is as it were asleep or in a dream, and though not empty of all thought, yet thinks nothing clearly or to the purpose. The primary cause of this is that limitation which all created minds are subject to, which limitation appears more visible in some than in others, either because some minds are endowed by their creator with a larger capacity than the rest, or if you are not inclined to think so, then by reason of the indisposition of the bodily organs, which cramps and contracts the operations of the mind. And that person whose capacity of receiving ideas is very little, whose ideas are disordered, and not capable of being so disposed as that they may be compared in order to the forming of a judgment, is a fool or little better. If we find this to be our case, and that after frequent trials

there appears no hopes of amendment, 'tis best to desist, we shall but lose our labor, we may do some good in an active life and employments that depend on the body, but we're altogether unfit for contemplation and the exercises of the mind. Yet ere we give out let's see if it be thus with us in all cases; Can we think and argue rationally about a dress, an intrigue, an estate? Why then not upon better subjects? The way of considering and meditating justly is the same on all occasions. 'Tis true, there will fewest ideas arise when we would meditate on such subjects as we've been least conversant about; but this is a fault which it is in our power to remedy, first by reading or discoursing, and then by frequent and serious meditation, of which hereafter.

As those we have been speaking of are hindered in their search after truth, through a want of ideas out of which to deduce it, so there are another sort who are not happy in their enquiries, on account of the multitude and impetuosity of theirs. Volatileness of thought, very pernicious to true science, is a fault which people of warm imaginations and active spirits are apt to fall into. Such a temper is readily disposed to receive errors and very well qualified to propagate them, especially if a volubility of speech be joined to it. These through an immoderate nimbleness of thinking skip from one idea to another, without observing due order and connection, they content themselves with a superficial view, a random glance, and depending on the vigor of their imagination, are took with appearances, never tarrying to penetrate the subject, or to find out truth if she float not upon the surface. A multitude of ideas not relating to the matter they design to think of rush in upon them, and their easy mind entertains all comers how impertinent soever; instead of examining the question in debate they are got into the clouds, numbering the cities in the moon and building airy castles there. Nor is it easy to cure this defect, since it deceives others as well as those who have it with a show of very great ingenuity. The vivacity of such persons makes their conversation plausible, and taking with those who consider not much, though not with the judicious; it procures for them the character of wit, but hinders them from being wise. For truth is not often found by such as

won't take time to examine her counterfeits, to distinguish between evidence and probability, realities and appearances, but who through a conceit of their own sharp-sightedness think they can pierce to the bottom with the first glance.

To cure this distemper perfectly perhaps it will be necessary to apply to the body as well as to the mind: The animal spirits must be lessened, or rendered more calm and manageable; at least they must not be unnaturally and violently moved, by such a diet, or such passions, designs and divertisments as are likely to put them in a ferment. Contemplation requires a governable body, a sedate and steady mind, and the body and the mind do so reciprocally influence each other, that we can scarce keep the one in tune if the other be out of it. We can neither observe the errors of our intellect, nor the irregularity of our morals whilst we are darkened by fumes, agitated with unruly passions, or carried away with eager desires after sensible things and vanities. We must therefore withdraw our minds from the world, from adhering to the senses, from the love of material beings, of pomps and gaieties; for 'tis these that usually steal away the heart, that seduce the mind to such unaccountable wanderings, and so fill up its capacity that they leave no room for truth, so distract its attention that it cannot enquire after her. For though the body does partly occasion this fault, yet the will no doubt may in good measure remedy it by using its authority to fix the understanding on such objects as it would have contemplated; it has a rein which will certainly curb this wandering, if it can but be persuaded to make use of it. Indeed attention and deep meditation is not so agreeable to our animal nature, does not flatter our pride so well as this agreeable reverie, which gives us a pretense to knowledge without taking much pains to acquire it, and does not choke us with the humbling thoughts of our own ignorance, with which we must make such ado e're it can be enlightened. Yet without attention and strict examination we are liable to false judgments on every occasion, to vanity and arrogance, to impertinent prating of things we don't understand, are kept from making a progress, because we fancy ourselves to be at the top already, and can never attain to true wisdom. If then we would hereafter think to purpose, we must suffer our-

our tendency towards false judgment

selves to be convinced how oft we have already thought to none, suspect our quickness, and not give our desultory imagination leave to ramble.

And in order to the restraining it we may consider, what a loss of time and study such irregular and useless thoughts occasion, what a reproach they are to our reason, how they cheat us with a *show* of knowledge, which so long as we are under the power of this giddy temper will inevitably escape us. And if to this we add a serious perusal of such books as are not loosely writ, but require an attent and awakened mind to apprehend, and to take in the whole force of them, obliging ourselves to understand them thoroughly, so as to be able to give a just account of them to ourselves, or rather to some other person intelligent enough to take it and to correct our mistakes, it is to be hoped we shall obtain a due poise of mind, and be able to direct our thoughts to the through discussion of such subjects as we would examine. Such books I mean as are fuller of matter than words, which diffuse a light through every part of their subject, do not skim, but penetrate it to the bottom, yet so as to leave somewhat to be wrought out by the reader's own meditation; such as are writ with order and connection, the strength of whose arguments can't be sufficiently felt unless we remember and compare the whole system. 'Tis impossible to prescribe absolutely, and every one may easily find what authors are most apt to stay their attention, and should apply to them. But whenever they meditate, be it on what object it may, let them fix their minds steadily on it, not removing till it be thoroughly examined, at least not until they have seen all that's necessary to their present purpose.

Doing so we shall prevent rashness and precipitation in our judgments, which is occasioned by that volatileness we have been speaking of, together with an over-weaning opinion of ourselves. All the irregularities of our will proceed from those false judgments we make, through want of consideration, or a partial examination when we do consider. For did we consider with any manner of attention, we could not be so absurd as to call evil, good, and choose it as such, or prefer a less good before a greater, a poor momentary trifle before the purity and perfec-

tion of our mind, before an eternal and immutable crown of glory! But we seek no farther than the first appearances of truth and good, here we stop, allowing neither time nor thought to search to the bottom, and to pull off those disguises which impose on us. This precipitation is that which gives birth to all our errors, which are nothing else but a hasty and injudicious sentence, a mistaking one thing for another, supposing an agreement or disparity amongst ideas and their relations where in reality there is none, occasioned by an imperfect and cursory view of them. And though there are other things which may be said to lead us into error, yet they do it only as they seduce us into rash and precipitate judgments. We love grandeur and every thing that feeds our good opinion of ourselves, and therefore would judge off hand, supposing it a disparagement to our understandings to be long in examining, so that we greedily embrace whatever seems to carry evidence enough for a speedy determination, how slight and superficial soever it be. Whereas did we calmly and deliberately examine our evidence, and how far those motives we are acted by ought to influence, we should not be liable to this seduction. For hereby the impetuosity of a warm imagination would be cooled, and the extravagancies of a disorderly one regulated; we should not be deceived by the report of our senses; the prejudices of education; our own private interest, and readiness to receive the opinions whether true or false of those we love, and would appear to love because we think they will serve us in that interest; our inordinate thirst after a great reputation, or the power and riches, the grandeurs and pleasures of this world, these would no longer dissipate our thoughts and distract our attention, for then we should be sensible how little concern is due to them. We should neither mistake in the end and object by not employing our understandings at all about such things as they were chiefly made for, or not enough, or by busying them with such as are out of their reach, or beneath their application; nor should we be out in the method of our meditation, by going a wrong or a round about way. For the God of truth is ready to lead us into all truth, if we honestly and attentively apply ourselves to him.

precipitous judgment

In sum, whatever false principle we embrace, whatever

wrong conclusion we draw from true ones, is a disparagement to our thinking power, a weakness of judgment proceeding from a confuse and imperfect view of things, as that does from want of attention, and a hasty and partial examination. It were endless to reckon up all the false maxims and reasonings we fall into, nor is it possible to give a list of them, for there are innumerable errors opposite to one single truth. The general causes have been already mentioned, the particulars are as many as those several compositions which arise from the various mixtures of the passions, interests, education, conversation and reading, etc. of particular persons. And the best way that I can think of to improve the understanding, and to guard it against all errors proceed they from what cause they may, is to regulate the will, whose office it is to determine the understanding to such and such ideas, and to stay it in the consideration of them so long as is necessary to the discovery of truth; for if the will be right the understanding can't be guilty of any culpable error. Not to judge of anything which we don't apprehend, to suspend our assent till we see just cause to give it, and to determine nothing till the strength and clearness of the evidence oblige us to it. To withdraw ourselves as much as may be from corporeal things, that pure reason may be heard the better; to make that use of our senses for which they are designed and fitted, the preservation of the body, but not to depend on their testimony in our enquiries after truth. Particularly to divest ourselves of mistaken self-love, little ends and mean designs, and to keep our inclinations and passions under government. Not to engage ourselves so far in any party or opinion as to make it in a manner necessary that that should be right, lest from wishing it were, we come at last to persuade ourselves it is so. But to be passionately in love with truth, as being thoroughly sensible of her excellency and beauty. To embrace her how opposite soever she may sometimes be to our humors and designs, to bring these over to her, and never attempt to make her truckle to them. To be so far from disliking a truth because it touches us home, and lances our tenderest and dearest corruption, as on the contrary to prize it the more, by how much the more plainly it shows us our errors and miscarriages. For indeed it concerns us most to know

such truths as these, it is not material to us what other people's opinions are, any farther than as the knowledge of their sentiments may correct our mistakes. And the higher our station is in the world, so much the greater need have we to be curious in this particular.

The mean and inconsiderable often stumble on truth when they seek not after her, but she is commonly kept out of the way, and industriously concealed from the great and mighty; either out of design or envy, for whoever would make a property of another must by all means conceal the truth from him; and they who envy their neighbor's preeminence in other things, are willing themselves to excel in exactness of judgment, which they think and very truly, to be the greatest excellency. And to help forward this deception, the great instead of being industrious in finding out the truth, are generally very impatient when they meet with her. She does not treat them so tenderly and fawningly, with so much ceremony and complaisance as their flatterers do. There is in her that which used to be the character of our nation, and honest plainness and sincerity, openness and blunt familiarity: She cannot mould herself into all shapes to be rendered agreeable, but standing on her native worth is regardless of outside and varnish. But to return from this digression.

Above all things we must be thoroughly convinced of our entire dependence on God, for what we *know* as well as for what we are, and be warmly affected with the sense of it, which will both excite us to practice, and enable us to perform the rest. Though we are naturally dark and ignorant, yet in *his light, we may* hope to *see light,* if with the son of Syrac we petition for *wisdom that sits by his throne* to *labor with us,* and sigh with David after his *light and truth.* For then he who is the light that lightneth everyone who comes into the world, the immutable truth, and uncreated wisdom of his father, will teach us in the way of wisdom and lead us in right paths, he will instruct us infinitely better by the right use of our own faculties than the brightest human reason can. For in him are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge which he liberally dispenses to all who humbly, honestly and heartily ask them of him. To close this head: Whatever the notion that we see all things in God, may be

as to the truth of it, 'tis certainly very commendable for its piety, in that it most effectually humbles the most dangerous sort of pride, the being proud of our knowledge, and yet does not slacken our endeavors after knowledge but rather excites them.

As to the *method* of thinking, if it be proper for me to say anything of that, after those better pens which have treated of it already, it falls in with the subject I'm now come to, which is, that *natural logic* I would propose. I call it natural because I shall not send you further than your own minds to learn it, you may if you please take in the assistance of some well chosen book, but a good natural reason after all, is the best director, without this you will scarce argue well, though you had the choicest books and tutors to instruct you, but with it you may, though you happen to be destitute of the other. For as a very judicious writer on this subject (to whose ingenious remarks and rules I am much obliged) well observes, "These operations (of the mind) proceed merely from nature, and that sometimes more perfectly from those who are altogether ignorant of logic, than from others who have learned it." [Arnauld, *Art of Thinking*]

That which we propose in all our meditations and reasonings is, either to deduce some truth we are in search of, from such principles as we're already acquainted with; or else, to dispose our thoughts and reasonings in such a manner, as to be able to convince others of those truths which we ourselves are convinced of. Other designs indeed men may have, such as the maintenance of their own opinions, actions and parties without regard to the truth and justice of them, or the seduction of their unwary neighbors, but these are mean and base ones, beneath a man, much more a Christian, who is or ought to be endowed with greater integrity and ingenuity.

Now reasoning being nothing else but a comparison of ideas, and a deducing of conclusions from clear and evident principles, it is in the first place requisite that our ideas be clear and just, and our principles true, else all our discourse will be nonsense and absurdity, falsehood and error. And that our idea may be right, we have no more to do but to look attentively into our minds, having as we said above, laid aside all prejudices and whatever may give a false tincture to our light, there we shall find a clear and lively representation of what we seek for, un-

sophisticated with the dross of false definitions and unintelligible expressions. But we must not imagine that a transient view will serve the turn, or that our eye will be enlightened if it be not fixed. For though truth be exceeding bright, yet since our prejudices and passions have darkened our eye-sight, it requires no little pains and application of mind to find her out, the neglect of which application is the reason that we have so little truth, and that the little we have is almost lost in that rubbish of error which is mingled with it. And since truth is so near at hand, since we are not obliged to tumble over many authors, to hunt after every celebrated genius, but may have it for enquiring after in our own breasts, are we not inexcusable if we do not obtain it? Are we not unworthy of compassion if we suffer our understandings to be overrun with error? Indeed it seems to me most reasonable and most agreeable to the wisdom and equity of the divine operations, that everyone should have a teacher in their own bosoms, who will if they seriously apply themselves to him, immediately enlighten them so far as that is necessary, and direct them to such means as are sufficient for their instruction both in human and divine truths; for as to the latter, reason if it be right and solid, will not pretend to be our sole instructor, but will send us to divine revelation when it may be had.

God does nothing in vain, he gives no power or faculty which he has not allotted to some proportionate use, if therefore he has given to mankind a rational mind, every individual understanding ought to be employed in somewhat worthy of it. The meanest person should think as justly, though not as *capaciously,* as the greatest philosopher. And if the understanding be made for the contemplation of truth, and I know not what else it can be made for, either there are many understandings who are never able to attain what they were designed and fitted for, which is contrary to the supposition that God made nothing in vain, or else the very meanest must be put in a way of attaining it: Now how can this be if all that which goes to the composition of a knowing man in the account of the world, be necessary to make one so? All have not leisure to learn languages and pore on books, nor opportunity to converse with the learned; but all may *think,* may use their own faculties rightly, and consult the master who is within them.

By ideas we sometimes understand in general all that which is the immediate object of the mind, whatever it perceives; and in this large sense it may take in all thought, all that we are any ways capable of discerning: So when we say we have no idea of a thing, 'tis as much as to say we know nothing of the matter. Again, it is more strictly taken for that which represents to the mind some object distinct from it, whether clearly or confusedly; when this is its import, our knowledge is said to be as clear as our ideas are. For that idea which represents a thing so clearly, that by an attent and simple view we may discern its properties and modifications, at least so far as they can be known, is never false; all our certainty and evidence depends on it, if we know not truly what is thus represented to our minds we know nothing. Thus the idea of equality between 2 and 2 is so evident that it is impossible to doubt of it, no arguments could convince us of the contrary, nor be able to persuade us that the same may be found between 2 and 3.

And as such an idea as this is never false, so neither can any idea be said to be so, if by false we mean that which has no existence; our idea certainly exists, though there be not anything in nature correspondent to it. For though there be no such thing as a golden mountain, yet when I think of one, 'tis certain I have an idea of it.

But our ideas are then said to be false, or rather wrong, when they have no conformity to the real nature of the thing whose name they bear. So that properly speaking it is not the idea but the judgment that is false; we err in supposing that our idea is answerable to something without us when it is not. In simple perceptions we are not often deceived, but we frequently mistake in compounding them, by uniting several things which have no agreement, and separating others which are essentially united. Indeed it may happen that our perceptions are faulty sometimes, through the indisposition of the organs or faculties, thus a man who has the *jaundice* sees everything tinged with yellow, yet even here the error is not in the simple idea but in the composed one, for we do not mistake when we say the object appears yellow to our sight, though we do, when we affirm that it does, or ought to do so to others. So again, when the mind does

not sufficiently attend to her ideas nor examine them on all sides, 'tis very likely she will think amiss, but this also is a false judgment, that which is amiss in the perception being rather the inadequateness than the falsehood. Thus in many cases we enquire no farther than whether an action be not directly forbidden, and if we do not find it absolutely unlawful, we think that sufficient to authorize the practice of it, not considering it as we ought to do, clothed with the circumstances of scandal, temptation, etc. which place it in the same classes with things unlawful, at least make it so to us.

Rational creatures should endeavor to have right ideas of everything that comes under their cognizance, but yet our ideas of morality, our thoughts about religion are those which we should with greatest speed and diligence rectify, because they are of most importance, the life to come, as well as all the occurences of this, depending on them. We should search for truth in our most abstracted speculations, but it concerns us nearly to follow her close in what relates to the conduct of our lives. For the main thing we are to drive at in all our studies, and that which is the greatest improvement of our understandings is the art of prudence, the being all of a piece, managing all our words and actions as it becomes wise persons and good Christians.

Yet in this we are commonly most faulty; for besides the deceits of our passions, our ideas of particular virtues and vices, goods and evils, being an assemblage of diverse simple perceptions, and including several judgments are therefore liable to mistake, and much more so considering how we commonly come by them. We hear the word that stands for such a thing, suppose honor, and then instead of enquiring what it is at the fountain head the oracles of God, and our own, or the impartial reason of the wisest and the best, custom and the observations we make on the practice of such as pretend to it forms our idea, which is seldom a right one, the opinions and practices of the world being very fallacious, and many times quite opposite to the dictates of reason would we but give ear to them. For what a strange distorted idea of honor must they needs have, who can think it honorable to break a vow that ought to be kept, and dishonorable to get loose from an engagement that ought to be

broken? Who cannot endure to be taxed with a lie, and yet never think fit to keep their word? What do they think of greatness who support their pomp at the expense of the groans and tears of many injured families? What is their idea of heaven, who profess to believe such a thing, and yet never endeavor to qualify themselves for the enjoyment of it? Have they any idea at all of these things when they speak of them? Or, if they have, is it not a very false one?

Now that we may avoid mistake the better, and because we usually join words to our ideas even when we only meditate, we should free them from all equivocation, not make use of any word, which has not a distinct idea annexed to it, and where custom has joined many ideas to one word, carefully separate and distinguish them. For if our words are equivocal, how can we by pronouncing such and such, excite the same idea in another that is in our own mind, which is the end of speech, and consequently how can we be understood? And if sometimes we annex one idea to a word, and sometimes another, we may forever wrangle with those who perhaps would be found to agree with us if we understood each other, but can neither convince them, nor clear up the matter to our own mind. For instance: Should I dispute whether evil were to be chosen? Without defining what I mean by evil, which is a word customarily applied to things of different natures, and should conclude in the affirmative, meaning at the same time the evil of pain, or any corporal loss or punishment, I were not mistaken, though another person who annexes no other idea but that of sin to the word evil, might justly contradict me and say that I was. Or if in the process of my discourse, I should without giving notice of it, substitute the idea of sin instead of that of pain, when I mention evil, I should argue falsely. For it is a maxim that we may choose a less evil to avoid a greater, if both of them be corporal evils, or if one of them be so, and we choose it to avoid sin, between which and the evil of pain there is no comparison: But if the two evils proposed to our choice be both of them sinful, that principle will not hold, we must choose neither, whatever comes on it, sin being eligible no manner of way.

Thus many times our ideas are thought to be false when the fault is really in our language, we make use of words without

joining any, or only loose and indeterminate ideas to them, prating like parrots who can modify sounds, and pronounce syllables, and sometimes martial them as a man would, though without the use of reason or understanding anything by them. So that after a long discourse and many fine words, our hearer may justly ask us what we have been saying? And what it is we would be at? And so a great part, of the good breeding of the world, many elegant complements pass for nothing, they have no meaning, or if they have, 'tis quite contrary to what the words in other cases signify.

From the comparison of two or more ideas clearly conceived arises a judgment, which we may lay down for a principle, and as we have occasion argue from. Always observing that those judgments which we take for axioms or principles, be such as carry the highest evidence and conviction, such as every one who will but in the least attend may clearly see, and be fully convinced of, and which need not another idea for their demonstration. Thus from the agreement which we plainly perceive between the ideas of God and of goodness singly considered, we discern that they may be joined together so as to form this proposition, that God is good: And from the evident disparity that is between God and injustice, we learn to affirm this other, that he is not unjust. And so long as we judge of nothing but what we see clearly, we can't be mistaken in our judgments, we may indeed in those reasonings and deductions we draw from them, if we are ignorant of the laws of argumentation, or negligent in the observation of them.

The first and principal thing therefore to be observed in all the operations of the mind is, That we determine nothing about those things of which we have not a clear idea, and as distinct as the nature of the subject will permit, for we cannot properly be said to know anything which does not clearly and evidently appear to us. Whatever we see distinctly we likewise see clearly, distinction always including clearness, though this does not necessarily include that, there being many objects clear to the view of the mind, which yet can't be said to be distinct.

That (to use the words of a celebrated author) may be said to be "clear which is present and manifest to an attentive mind; so as we say we see objects clearly, when being present to our

eyes they sufficiently act on them, and our eyes are disposed to regard them. And that distinct, which is so clear, particular, and different from all other things, that it contains not anything in itself which appears not manifestly to him who considers it as ought." [Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy,* Pt. 1, 43] Thus we may have a clear, but not a distinct and perfect idea of God and of our own souls; their existence and some of their properties and attributes may be certainly and indubitably known, but we can't know the nature of our souls distinctly, for reasons too long to be mentioned here, and less that of God, because he is infinite. Now where our knowledge is distinct, we may boldly deny of a subject, all that which after a careful examination we find not in it: But where our knowledge is only clear, and not distinct, though we may safely affirm what we see, yet we can't without a hardy presumption deny of it what we see not. And were it not very common to find people both talking and writing of things of which they have no notion, no clear idea; nay and determining dogmatically concerning the entire nature of those of which they cannot possibly have an adequate and distinct one, it might seem impertinent to desire them to speak no farther than they apprehend. They will tell you peremptorily of contradictions and absurdities in such matters as they themselves must allow they cannot comprehend, though others as sharp-sighted as themselves can see no such thing as they complain of.

As judgments are formed by the comparing of ideas, so reasoning or discourse arises from the comparison or combination of several judgments. Nature teaches us when we can't find out what relation one idea bears to another by a simple view or bare comparison, to seek for a common measure or third idea, which relating to the other two, we may by comparing it with each of them, discern wherein they agree or differ. Our invention discovers itself in proposing readily apt ideas for this middle term, our judgment in making choice of such as are clearest and most to our purpose, and the excellency of our reasoning consists in our skill and dexterity in applying them.

Invention indeed is the hardest part, when proofs are found it is not very difficult to manage them. And to know precisely wherein their nature consists, may help us somewhat in our en-

quiries after them. An intermediate idea then which can make out an agreement between other ideas, must be equivalent to, and yet distinct from those we compare by it. Where ideas agree it will not be hard to find such an equivalent, and if after diligent search we cannot meet with any, 'tis a pretty sure sign that they do not agree. It is not necessary indeed that our middle idea be equivalent in all respects, 'tis enough if it be in such as make the comparison: And when it is so to one of the compared ideas but not to the other, that's a proof that they do not agree amongst themselves.

All the commerce and intercourse of the world is managed by equivalents, conversation as well as traffic. Why do we trust our friends but because their truth and honesty appears to us equivalent to the confidence we repose in them? Why do we perform good offices to others, but because there's a proportion between them and the merit of the person, or our own circumstances? And as the way to know the worth of things is to compare them one with another, so in like manner we come to the knowledge of the truth of them by an equal balancing. But you will say, though I may learn the value of a Spanish coin by weighing, or comparing it with some other money whose standard I know, and so discern what proportion it bears to those goods I would exchange; yet what scales shall I find to weigh ideas? What hand so even as to poise them justly? Or if that might be done, yet where shall I meet with an equivalent idea when I have occasion to use one?

In answer to this demand I consider, that as light is always visible to us if we have an organ to receive it, if we turn our eyes towards it, and that nothing interpose between it and us; so is truth, we are surrounded with it, and God has given us faculties to receive it. If it be asked, why then do we so seldom find it? The reason is, because instead of making right use of our faculties we employ them in keeping it out; we either shut our eyes, or if we vouchsafe to open them, we are sure to view it through such unsuitable mediums as fail not to misrepresent it to us. And for those few noble spirits, who open the windows of their souls to let in truth, and take the films of interest, passion and prejudice from before their eyes, they will certainly be enlightened,

and cannot miss of obtaining as much truth as they are capable of receiving. For, to go on with the comparison, as we can see no farther than our own horizon, though the light shine never so bright around us; and as we cannot discern every object even within that compass clearly, nor any distinctly but what we particularly apply ourselves to; so neither are our capacities large enough to take in *all* truth, as has been often said, nor are we capable of attaining *any* without attention and diligent examination. But if we carefully consider those ideas we already have and attend to those truths we are acquainted with, we cannot want mediums to discover more, if our enquiries be after that which is within our reach. He who is the fountain of truth is also a God of order, and has so regularly connected one truth with another, that the discovery of one is a step towards a further progress; so that if we diligently examine those truths which, we know, they will clear the way to what we search after: For it seldom happens but that the question itself directs us to some idea that will serve for the explanation or proof of it.

There is no object, no accident of life but affords us matter of instruction. God has so disposed all the works of his hands, all the actings of his providence, that every one of them ministers to our improvement, if we will but observe and apply them. Indeed this living *ex tempore* which most of us are guilty of, our making no reflections, our gay and volatile humor which transports us in an instant from one thing to another, e're we have with the industrious bee sucked those sweets it would afford us, frequently renders his gracious bounty ineffectual. For as the diligent hand maketh rich, whilst the slothful and prodigal come to nothing, so the use of our powers improves and increases them, and the most observing and considerate is the wisest person: For she lays up in her mind as in a storehouse, ready to produce on all occasions, a clear and simple idea of every object that has at any time presented itself. And perhaps the difference between one woman's reason and another's may consist only in this, that the one has amassed a greater number of such ideas than the other, and disposed them more orderly in her understanding, so that they are at hand, ready to be applied to those complex ideas whose agreement or disagreement cannot be found out but by the means of some of them.

But because examples are more familiar than precepts, as condescending to show us the very manner of practicing them, I shall endeavor to make the matter in hand as plain as I can by subjoining instances to the following rules, which rules as I have not taken wholly on trust from others, so neither do I pretend to be the inventer of them.

We have heard already that a medium is necessary when we can't discern the relation that is between two or more ideas by intuition or a simple view. Could this alone procure us what we seek after, the addition of other ideas would be needless, since to make a show of wit by tedious arguings and unnecessary flourishes, does only perplex and encumber the matter, intuition being the simplest, and on that account the best way of knowing.

Rule I. And therefore we should in the first place, acquaint ourselves thoroughly with the state of the question, have a distinct notion of our subject whatever it be, and of the terms we make use of, knowing precisely what it is we drive at: that so we may in the second

Rule II. Cut off all needless ideas and whatever has not a connection to the matter under consideration, which serve only to fill up the capacity of the mind, and to divide and distract the attention. From the neglect of this comes those causeless digressions, tedious parentheses and impertinent remarks which we meet with in some authors. For, as when our sight is diffused and extended to many objects at once we see none of them distinctly; so when the mind grasps at every idea that presents itself, or rambles after such as relate not to its present business, it loses its hold and retains a very feeble apprehension of that which it should attend. Some have added another rule (viz.) that we reason only on those things of which we have clear ideas; but I take it to be a consequence of the first, and therefore do not make it a distinct one: For we can by no means understand our subject, or be well acquainted with the state of the question, unless we have a clear idea of all its terms.

Rule III. Our business being stated, the next rule is to conduct our thoughts by order, beginning with the most simple and easy objects, and ascending as by degrees to the knowledge of the more composed. I need not tell you, that order makes every-

thing, easy, strong and beautiful, and that the superstructure is neither like to last or please unless the foundation be duly laid, for this is obvious to the most superficial reader. Nor are they likely to solve the difficult, who have neglected or slightly passed over the easy questions. Our knowledge is gradual, and by passing regularly through plain things, we arrive in due time at the more abstruse.

Rule IV. In this method we are to practice the fourth rule which is, not to leave any part of our subject unexamined, it being as necessary to consider all that can let in light, as to shut out what's foreign to it. We may stop short of truth as well as overrun it; and though we look never so attentively on our proper object, if we view but half of it, we may be as much mistaken, as if we extended our sight beyond it. Some objects agree very well when observed on one side, which upon turning the other show a great disparity. Thus the right angle of a triangle may be like to one part of a square, but compare the whole, and you'll find them very different figures. And a moral action may in some circumstance be not only fit but necessary, which in others, where time, place, and the like have made an alteration, would be most improper; so that if we venture to act on the former judgment, we may easily do amiss, if we would act as we ought, we must view its new face, and see with what aspect that looks on us.

To this rule belongs that of dividing the subject of our meditations into as many parts, as we can, and as shall be requisite to understand it perfectly. This is indeed most necessary in difficult questions, which will scarce be unravelled but in this manner by pieces: Ever taking care to make exact reviews, and to sum up our evidence justly e're we pass sentence and fix our judgment.

Rule V. To which purpose we must always keep our subject directly in our eye, and closely pursue it through all our progress; there being no better sign of a good understanding than thinking closely and pertinently, and reasoning dependently, so as to make the former part of our discourse a support to the latter, and *this* an illustration of *that,* carrying light and evidence in every step we take. The neglect of this rule is the cause why our

discoveries of truth are seldom exact, that so much is often said to so little purpose; and many intelligent and industrious readers when they have read over a book are very little wiser than when they began it. And that the two last rules may be the better observed, 'twill be fit very often to look over our process so far as we have gone, that so by rendering our subject familiar, we may the sooner arrive to an exact knowledge of it.

Rule VI. All which being done we are in a fair way towards keeping the last rule, which is, to judge no further than we perceive, and not to take anything for truth which we do not evidently know to be so. Indeed in some cases we are forced to content ourselves with probability, but 'twere well if we did so only where 'tis plainly necessary. That is, when the subject of our meditation is such as we cannot possibly have a certain knowledge of, because we are not furnished with proofs which have a constant and immutable connection with the ideas we apply them to, or because we cannot perceive it, which is our case in such exigencies as oblige us to act presently, on a cursory view of the arguments proposed to us, when we want time to trace them to the bottom, and to make use of such means as would discover truth.