

Descartes *Discourse on Methods*

Part VI

But immediately after I had acquired some general notions concerning physics and, by starting to test them on various particular difficulties, had noticed just where they could lead and how much they differed from principles which people have used up to the present time, I thought that I could not keep them hidden without sinning greatly against the law which obliges us to promote as much as we can the general good of all men. For my notions had made me see that it is possible to reach understandings which are extremely useful for life, and that instead of the speculative philosophy which is taught in the schools, we can find a practical philosophy by which, through understanding the force and actions of fire, air, stars, heavens, and all the other bodies which surround us as distinctly as we understand the various crafts of our artisans, we could use them in the same way for all applications for which they are appropriate and thus make ourselves, as it were, the masters and possessors of nature.

But it was not only my desire for the invention of an infinite number of devices which might enable us to enjoy without effort the fruits of the earth and all the commodities found in it, but mainly also my desire for the preservation of our health, which is, without doubt, the principal benefit and the foundation of all the others in this life. For even the mind depends so much on the temperament and the condition of the organs of the body that, if it is possible to find some means to make human beings generally wiser and more skilful than they have been up to this point, I believe we must seek that in medicine. It is true that the medicine now practiced contains few things which are remarkably useful. But without having any design to denigrate it, I am confident that there is no one, not even those who make a living from medicine, who would not claim that everything we know in medicine is almost nothing in comparison to what remains to be known about it and that we could liberate ourselves from an infinity of illnesses, both of the body and the mind, and also perhaps even of the infirmities of ageing, if we had sufficient knowledge of their causes and of all the remedies which nature has provided for us.

Now, intending to spend all my life in research into such a necessary science and having encountered a road which seemed to me such that one should infallibly find this science, unless one was prevented either by the brevity of one's life or by the lack of experiments, I judged that there was no better remedy against these two obstacles than to communicate faithfully and completely to the public the little I had found and to invite good minds to try to move on further, by contributing, each according to his own inclination and power, to the experiments which need to be conducted and by communicating to the public everything they learn, so that the most recent people begin where the previous ones have finished. If we thus joined the lives and labours of many people, collectively we might go much further than each particular person could.