

Concerning the Improvement of the Understanding*

Mary Astell

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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.

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.

*This is Sections 1–3 of Chapter 3 of Part 2 of Astell's *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1697); original text from [Project Gutenberg](#); notes and modernized text by [Trevor Pearce](#).

§1 Of the Capacity of the Human Mind in General

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 companion of two ideas, 'tis necessary that we should have a third by which to compare them.¹ But if this middle idea be wanting, though we have sufficient 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.² 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*

¹Norris, *Reflections upon the Conduct of Human Life* (1690), Second Reflection, §15; citing Malebranche, *The Search After Truth* (1674–75), Book 6, Part 2, Chapter 1.

²Astell is referring to the [Socinian controversy](#) in England, which started with Stephen Nye's *A Brief History of the Unitarians* (1687) and raged through the 1690s. Nye represented the Unitarians as arguing that the Trinitarians, in claiming "that there are three persons who are *severally and each of them true God*, and yet there is but one true God," had committed "*an error in counting or numbering*; which when stood in, is of all others the most brutal and inexcusable."

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.³ 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?⁴ We are conscious of our own liberty, whoever 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 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 anything by intuition, or immediate 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.⁵

Knowledge in a proper and restricted sense and as appropriated to science, sig-

³John Toland had argued in *Christianity Not Mysterious* (1696), Section 2, Chapter 1, that the doctrine according to which, when faced with a contradiction between the Gospels and the principles of reason, we must "adore what we cannot comprehend," was "the undoubted source of all the absurdities that ever were seriously vented among Christians."

⁴Astell may have been familiar with Descartes' letters to Princess Elisabeth on this topic, which were published in the mid-seventeenth century (although Elisabeth's side of the correspondence was not yet published).

⁵Arnauld & Nicole, *Logic, or, The Art of Thinking* (1662), Part 4, Chapter 1.

nifies 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.

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.

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 matter, 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 past the test of reason; neither do I think there's any mode of knowledge which mayn't 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.⁶

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're 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 dependance 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 withhold 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

⁶This paragraph may be a response to Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), IV.18.4: "Whatsoever truth we come to the discovery of, from the knowledge and contemplation of our own clear ideas, will always be certainer to us, than those which are conveyed to us by traditional revelation: for the knowledge we have, that this revelation came at first from God, can never be so sure, as the knowledge we have from our own clear and distinct ideas."

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*⁷ 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 over-much is equally a fault, to make that use of our understandings which God has fitted and designed them for is the medium which we ought to take. For the difference between a ploughman 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

⁷A nickname for the famous insane asylum in London.

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.

§2 Of Particular Capacities

It is therefore very fit that after we have considered the capacity of the understanding in general, we should descend to the view of our own particular, observing the bent and turn of our own minds, which way our genius lies and to what it is most inclined. I see no reason why there may not be as great a variety in minds as there is in faces, that the soul as well as the body may not have something in it to distinguish it, not only from all other intelligent natures but even from those of its own kind. There are different proportions in faces which recommend them to some eyes sooner than to others, and though *all* truth is amiable to a reasonable mind, and proper to employ it, yet why may there not be some particular truths, more agreeable to each individual understanding than others are? Variety gives beauty to the material world and why not to the intellectual? We can discern the different abilities which the wise author of all things has endowed us with, the different circumstances in which he has placed us in reference to this world and the concerns of an animal life, that so we may be mutually useful, and that since each single person is too limited and confined to attend to many, much less to all things, we may receive from each other a reciprocal advantage, and why may we not think he has done the like in respect of truth? That since it is too much for one, our united strength should be employed in the search of her. Especially since the Divine Being who contains in himself all reality and truth is infinite in perfection, and therefore should be infinitely adored and loved; and if creatures are by their being so incapable of rendering to their incomprehensible Creator an adoration and love that's worthy of him, it is but decorous that they should however do as much as they can. All that variety of sublime truths of beautiful and wondrous objects which surround us, are nothing else but a various display of his unbounded excellencies, and why should any of them pass unobserved? Why should not every individual understanding be in a more especial manner fitted for and employed in the disquisition of some particular truth and beauty? 'Tis true after all our researches we can no more sufficiently know God than we can worthily love him, and are as much unable to find out all his works

as we are his nature, yet this should only prompt us to exert *all* our powers and to do our best, since even that were too little could we possibly do more. We can never offer to him so much praise as he deserves, and therefore it is but fit that he should have *all* that mankind can possibly render him. He is indeed immutable in his own nature, but those discoveries we daily make of his operations will always afford us somewhat new and surprising, for this all-glorious sun the Author of life and light is as inexhaustible a source of truth as he is of joy and happiness.

If then we are convinced that there's some peculiar task allotted us, our next business will be to enquire what it is. To know our own strength and neither to over nor underrate ourselves is one of the most material points of wisdom, and which indeed we are most commonly ignorant of, else we should not reach at all, how unable soever we are to attain it, nor make so many successful attempts and be forced to come off with that pitiful apology, *I was mistaken, I did not think it*. But we can scarce duly estimate our understandings till we have regulated our wills, reformed self-love and a train of immortalized passions, which it is not our business to speak of here, we shall have occasion to do it hereafter. Let it suffice that we remark a frequent error which these engage us in, that is, an aptness to lessen the human mind, to detract from its grandeur and abridge its powers when we consider it in general, and as great a forwardness when we look on ourselves to extend our abilities beyond their bounds. Are we conscious of a defect? The shallowness of human reason at large must bear the blame, we harangue very excellently on the ignorance and vanity of mankind, and it were well if we rested there, and would forbear to murmur even at our Creator himself for allowing us so scanty a portion. But if reason has shone out, dispelling those clouds which eclipsed the bright face of truth, we arrogate all to ourselves. *My* discovery, *my* hypothesis, the strength and clearness of *my* reasonings, rather than the truth are what we would expose to view; 'tis that we idolize ourselves and would have everyone admire and celebrate. And yet all this is no more perhaps than another has done before us, or at least might have done with our opportunities and advantages. The reverse of this procedure would become us better, and it were more glorious as well as more just to ascribe the excellencies of the mind to human nature in the lump and to take the weaknesses to ourselves. By this we should both avoid sloth, (the best use we can make of our ignorance and infirmity being first to be humbled for, and then sedulously to endeavor their amendment) and likewise secure our industry from the mixtures of pride and envy. By looking on our own acquisitions as a general treasure, in which the whole have a right, we should pretend to no more than a share; and considering ourselves as parts of the same whole, we should expect to find our own account in the improvement of every part of it, which would restrain us from being puffed up with the contemplation of our own, and from

repining at our neighbor's excellencies. For let reason shine forth where it may, as we can't engross, so neither can we be excluded from sharing in the benefit, unless we willfully exclude ourselves; everyone being the better for true worth and good sense, except the little souled enviers of them.

To help us to the knowledge of our own capacities the informations of our friends, nay even of our enemies may be useful. The former if wise and true will direct us to the same course to which our genius points, and the latter will industriously endeavor to divert us from it, and we can't be too careful that these don't disguise themselves under the specious appearance of the former, to do us an ill-turn the more effectually. For it is not seldom seen that such as pretend great concern for us, will press us on to such studies or ways of living as inwardly they know we are unfit for, thereby to gratify their secret envy, by diverting us from that to which our genius disposes, and in which therefore they have reason to suppose we would be excellent. But though we may make use of the opinions of both, yet if we will be sincere and ingenuous we cannot have a more faithful director than our own heart. He who gave us these dispositions will excite us to the use and improvement of them; and unless we drive him from us by our impurity, or through negligence and want of attention let slip his secret whispers, this master within us will lay most in our view such lessons as he would have us take. Our care then must be to open our eyes to that beam of light which does in a more especial manner break in upon us, to fix them steadily, and to examine accurately those notices which are most vividly represented to us, and to lay out our thoughts and time in the cultivation of them. It may be our humor won't be gratified, nor our interest served by such a method. other business or amusements put on a finer garb, and come attended with more charms and grandeur, these recommend us to the world make us beloved and illustrious in it: Whilst the followers of truth are despised and looked askew on, as fantastic speculatists, unsociable thinkers, who pretend to see farther than their neighbors, to rectify what custom has established, and are so unmannerly as to think and talk out of the common way. He who speaks truth makes a satyr on the greatest part of mankind, and they are not over apt to forgive him, he contradicts the vogue of the times, is so hardy as to lay open men's darling errors, to draw a lively picture of their most secret corruptions, a representation which they cannot bear. Their gall is touched proportionably as their wounds are more deeply searched into, although it be only in order to a cure. They therefore who love truth shall be hated by the most, who though they openly pretend to honor, yet secretly malign her, because she reproaches them. And as a plausible life is not often a very religious one, which made the best judge pronounce a woe on those whom all men shall speak well of, so neither is the most just and illuminated understanding the most admired and trusted

to, but a plausible speaker, as well as a plausible liver, commonly bears away the bell. If then we consult our passions and vanity we shall go near to determine amiss, and make that use of our intellectuals which fancy or interest pushes us on to, not which nature has fitted us for. Hence it is that those who might have done very well in some studies and employments, make but bungling work when they apply themselves to others. We go on apace when the wind and tide are on our side, but it costs us much labor, and we make little speed, when we row against both.

And as a due consideration of our particular capacity would put us right in our own studies, so would it keep us from clashing with our neighbors, whom we many times contend with not so much out of a love to truth, as through a humor of contradiction, or because we think this the best way to show our parts, and by this trial of skill to exalt ourselves above them. But is there no better way to discover our penetration, and to try our strength, than by a malicious and litigious opposition? The field of truth is large, and after all the discoveries that have been made by those who have gone before, there will still be untrodden paths, which they who have the courage and skill may beat out and beautify. If then instead of jostling and disputing with our fellow travelers, of bending all the force of our wit to contradict and oppose those advances which they make, we would well understand, duly employ and kindly communicate our peculiar talent, how much more service might we do our Lord, how much more useful might we be to one another? What vast discoveries would be made in the wide ocean of truth? How many moral irregularities would be observed and rectified? We should be restrained from aspiring to things above our reach, move regularly in our own sphere, not abuse those good parts which were given us for common benefit, to the destruction of ourselves and others, be in a fair way to discern the defects of our mind and to proceed to the cure of them.

§3 The Most Common Infirmities Incident to the Understanding and Their Cure

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 non-perception 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 probably 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.⁸ 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

⁸This is recommended in Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), Meditation Four.

we're altogether unfit for contemplation and the exercises of the mind. Yet e'er 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 divertisements 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 *revery*, 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 ourselves 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 thorough 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 everyone 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 overweening opinion of our selves. 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 perfection 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 everything that feeds our good opinion of ourselves, and therefore would judge offhand, 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, or 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.

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's in her that which used to be the character of our nation, an 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 throughly convinced of our entire dependance 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*.⁹ For then he who is *the light that lighteneth 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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹

⁹Psalm 36:9; Sirach 1:8; 1 Corinthians 3:9; Psalm 43:3.

¹⁰John 8:12; Proverbs 4:11.

¹¹The claim that we see all material and sensible things in God, i.e., only insofar as God reveals his ideas of these things to us, was defended by Malebranche: see Norris, *Reason and Religion* (1689), Contemplation 2, §§16–25; citing Malebranche, *The Search After Truth* (1674–75), Book 3, Part 2, Chapter 6.