THE ART OF BELIEVING IN NOTHING

(A.K.A. “ARS NIHIL CREDENDI” / “PSEUDO-VALLÉE”)

ANONYMOUS

~1700

TRANSLATED BY

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# TRANSLATOR’S INTRODUCTION

In May 1747 the police raided the Collège de la Marche in Paris to arrest two abbots, named Garnier and Letort. According to the records of the Bastille[[1]](#footnote-1), the pair had been betrayed by a printer and a bookbinder for attempting to publish “pernicious” manuscripts; they were charged with “having composed and printed impious works against religion”.

Their interrogator soon discovered that the charges were overstated: in fact, “the 2 abbots don’t know the authors of the manuscripts, which are old documents, and they are unaware whether any copies have been made”. The men were held for several months and then released, but the manuscripts were not relinquished; instead they were studied and reports were made.

The “principal” among them was judged to be “filled with follies and horrors, but decked with such ornaments as will fascinate any shallow mind”[[2]](#footnote-2). This manuscript has since been rediscovered and studied. The abbots were right that it was “old”; it was probably written before they were born (modern scholarship dates its composition to around 1700[[3]](#footnote-3)), and, fortunately for us, there were, indeed, several other copies in circulation, six of which have been discovered in European and Russian archives[[4]](#footnote-4).

The book has been described as “a remarkable, but barely noticed document”[[5]](#footnote-5) and “one of the most profound and attractive texts of the whole body of clandestine philosophical manuscripts, for the feeling of painful sincerity that runs through it, the impression of living and lived philosophy that emanates from it”[[6]](#footnote-6).

**Title.** The manuscript has been frequently and falsely identified with a more famous author, Geoffroy Vallée (1535-74), whose notorious pamphlet of 1572, *La Béatitude des Chrétiens ou le Fléau de la foy*[[7]](#footnote-7), led to his execution. For an unknown reason this manuscript, which has very little in common with Vallée’s, was distributed with the title page from that book.

Its aborted 1747 edition gave it the title *Système de raison sur la religion où l’auteur les frappe toutes* (“A System of Reason on Religion, where the Author Strikes all of Them”)[[8]](#footnote-8), but this was probably made up by the abbots, since it doesn’t appear on any of the surviving manuscripts. In addition to *La Béatitude..*, some of the manuscripts in circulation bear the title *Ars Nihil Credendi*, which I have retained for this edition, since this at least corresponds to the content of the skeptical book.

**Content.** *The* *Art of Believing in Nothing* is an exercise in applying the ancient skeptical principle of *epoché*, the suspension of judgment, to the essential questions of human life and meaning. It begins with a critique of human knowledge and certainty; not only are the senses faulty, they are “tricksters who always trick us” which, at best, can “discover only the surface of material objects”. Human reason fares no better; this book is remarkable in its genre for its characterization of reason as something uncertain, as a “habit”, a “custom”, “self-love”; a “disordered” and “habituated” instinct, something animals have no less than we do.

However, although our instruments are faulty, they are “the sole mediators of all knowledge”. We must resign ourselves to empiricism: the senses and reason are not good guides, but they’re all we have. We should follow them “step by step”, while remaining open to the fact that “everything is possible” and that not everything that exists is manifest to our senses.

Our author begins by applying these principles to God and immortality. He rejects both atheism and religious dogma as untenable since they claim too much. When God’s attributes are listed, the only one that matters is “incomprehensible”. People always want to “materialize” and anthropomorphize God, so that “the deity is an inflated production of reason”. However, if any concept of God is fitting it’s a Spinozistic one, where God is all of nature, where “everything is his will, and his will is all that is”. But even this God cannot be known, and we must suspend our judgement.

As for the soul, it might be “a spirit connected to a body” or “a modification inseparable from my body”; the truth is unknowable. Is it immortal? “No opinion is more widespread than this one, and none is so widely recognized as uncertain.” In our uncertainty, all we know for sure is that, just as our birth was only a mysterious change we experience, death will be one too.

Next, our author discusses human nature and the motives of human behavior. Self-love, with its corollary of self-preservation, is the ultimate, universal motive, common to everything that lives: in fact, “self-love could be called the God of the universe”; “the instinct or the universal reason of all that exists.” Society and civilization are built on the exploitation and channeling of individual self-love and self-interest in ways that are useful to the wider group. But it isn’t a one-way street; social life benefits individuals perhaps as much as the group.

Governments benefit from the belief in an all-seeing avenger to avenge unseen law-breaking, so religion plays an important social role. Religion is a formidable tool for uniting human self-love with the good of society; none is better at this than the Christian one. However, this socially useful function says nothing about the truth of this or any religion. After several pages outlining the cynical way in which Moses created Judaism and how Christianity was established, all ideas of prophecy, tradition, and the reliability of scripture are savaged: it’s all “lies or illusions, trickery or ignorance; ultimately, falsehood and uncertainty”.

Our author confronts Pascal’s famous wager; in his book *Pensées*, he had written that, since “reason cannot decide” whether God exists or not, we still have to act as if he does or doesn’t, and accept the consequences either way. If we choose that God exists and act that way, and if God does indeed exist, we “win everything”; if we do this and lose the wager, we “lose nothing”[[9]](#footnote-9). This premise is entirely refused: if we make such a choice in the Christian framework, we are simultaneously running against a similar dilemma in all the other religions on earth, risking their threatened Hell and refusing their promised Heaven. No: since, by making a choice we run all possible risks, “the decision of making none at all is the only rational choice.”

In closing, our author offers a sort of credo or manifesto for the skeptical individual. Rather than revolting against all institutions, the skeptical individual should accept a “rational curb” on his behavior, shaping it to “the ordinary rules of society”, conducting himself with others “on the basis of their prejudices”: this is an ethics of acquiescence, of quietude, of getting along quietly, but also without the least mental submission: one can be “a rebel without rebellion, submitting without submission”, living a moderate hedonism, practising virtue without putting too much stock in it; with room for the active pursuit of justice: “I will be faithful, I will keep my promises, I will hate oppression, I will do harm to none, I will keep the laws of probity, I will be helpful, beneficent, a good friend, I will support weakness against violence”.

The book presages much of what Rousseau and other *philosophes* would later write about the purity of nature and corruption of civilization; however, for our author, the way back to nature is through “reflection” and reason: reason led us away, and reason must lead us back to it: I must “become truly animal, by the effort of reason”; in order to “merge with other beings, in all things I will follow the reasons and motives given by nature”. The book closes with the words: “finally, let reason vanish, let language vanish, let certainty vanish, let error vanish. Let nature return, let’s stop talking, let’s feel, live, and be ignorant about everything in tranquility.”

**Note on the text**: The original text has no headings, few paragraph breaks, and sentences often run on for whole pages. The headings are mine, and I’ve broken the text up with many additional paragraphs where possible. The typescript used for this translation is available on the “Philosophie cl@ndestine” website[[10]](#footnote-10).

# PREFACE

Whatever the Supreme Being may be, aware of human actions or not, punishing or neglecting their conduct, I attest at the outset of this work that my intentions are good, pure and sincere, and I have no reason to fear his wrath.

It’s not a desire to satisfy ephemeral passions and to enjoy short and perishable pleasures that leads me to think deeply on what I should believe and what I should not believe. It would truly take a brutish brazenness and a stupid blindness, not only to prefer this feeble happiness of being able to satisfy oneself in all things over that which all the religions promise us, but even to consent to the slightest risk of losing it. I’m ready to sacrifice my days and embrace the harshest austerities to earn what they flatter us with. It’s neither the mad vanity of an *esprit-fort*, nor the insane desire to shrug off all restraints, that drives me to the researches that I will carry out.

Give me, not even a security or any certainty, but even the least probability of any sort of happiness other than what we can enjoy in this world, and then see whether I wouldn’t risk even death to attain it. It would be somewhat too high esteem for an imperfect pleasure, to purchase it at the cost of such a great blessing. I am neither incredulous nor stubborn, I would be infinitely obliged to anyone who could deliver me from the uncertainty my reflections bring me; I’m annoyed that the sweet illusions with which I once flattered myself in my ignorance are dubious, and that heaven and this happy Eternity have vanished for me! I was certainly reluctant to abandon such a lovely error! I’m still looking, after waking up, for the imaginary goodness the dream had conjured up.

A very troubling light destroyed many advantages for me. I’m no longer the first Being in the Universe, the son and brother of a God, and the object of eternal glory: what a horrible fall! What a painful loss! However, if I feel infinite regret that such an advantageous error should be false, I can’t feel any such thing about the fact that I recognized this. I regret the untruth of my illusion, but not the loss of my illusion: I can’t enjoy a false blessing. I despise a happiness that is imaginary, and I want to be happy as a result of the truth, not deception. When I find that my error, advantageous as it may be, is false, then leaving it behind is an advantage.

In addition, it doesn't depend on me not to know what I know or not to see what I see. The conviction of my advantage can tilt the balance of what knowledge I have; but my will is not always the master of my judgment. I see, in spite of myself, the light that upsets me. Unhappy as I am to have lost my error, one should not desire to be happy by the pleasant dreams of a madman at the cost of his reason. The simple advantage of knowing one’s misfortune surpasses that of being happy from ignorance or falsehood. Whatever the cost to me, then, whatever loss I may suffer, however sweet I found the false ideas I once had, whatever affection I may still feel for them, I can’t help but cherish all the more the happiness of having recognized the deception. I was not happy, since what seemed to make me happy wasn’t real, and I was truly unhappy to have been deceived. I protest, then, that the desire to know the truth and nothing else is what placed a pen in my hand. I’ve considered that if I had been born in Turkey, I’d be a Muslim; if I’d been born in Germany, I’d be a Lutheran; if I’d been born in England, I’d be a Calvinist; and that I am only a Catholic because I was born in France. And then, taking all sorts of precautions with this, here is what occurred to me.

# THE ART OF BELIEVING NOTHING[[11]](#footnote-11)

## ON REASON AND CERTAINTY.

The Religion I have isn’t of my own choosing, it’s the Religion of the State, of the Country, of the Prince, of my Parents, and not my own. Sheer chance has given me a belief, and everyone assures me that if I’m wrong, if I was born unlucky, I run the risk of an eternal punishment. It would, then, be reckless of me to be led in a matter of such importance by reasons such as these, being Catholic only because I’m French, and not following any other simply because I wasn’t raised in it. Whatever the Prince’s authority, the circumstances of place and of fortune, reflection, trampling on this insane reason of the Prince, education, and Country, must help me make a choice on which all my happiness depends. And if the Religion in which I was born turns out to be the best and the true one, I want it to be mine by choice and not by birth. I want it to be due to reason and not luck. Thus, I undertake to use my reason, to guide me to the truth that everyone claims to have on their side.

The Catholic Religion, however it forbids me to follow false lights, doesn’t entirely forbid me from referring to them; it even says that these mysteries aren’t against reason. Pascal, on this principle, tells me that it’s permissible to examine the authority of the Lawgiver, but once this authority is established, blind faith is required to believe all it says, however incomprehensible it may seem to us.

How fortunate and what a considerable advantage it is that Religion is not without reason and that it can harmonize with it; not only the Catholic one, but nearly all the Religions in the world maintain, each in particular, that all the rest are irrational and that it alone is rational. Each of them tells me that if I shrug off the impressions of childhood and all prejudice to follow the lights of good logic, I won’t fail to embrace it.

So, I take myself aside, erasing everything I’ve learned from my mind, I follow all parties to make the best choice among them, and I set myself up as the judge of each Religion. The Jewish, Pagan, Christian, Mahometan religions eagerly tell me about their own miracles, martyrs, tradition, antiquity, loftiness, morality and form of worship. Each of them tries to tempt me with a future happiness which it alone can bring. Each of them terrifies me with its Hell, which can only be avoided by leaping into their own embrace. I examine everything with extraordinary care. How many different religions do I see! I see some that are dead, which those now dominant have succeeded; they had their day, their age, their lives, their changes like those of today, which will also pass away in their turn. No single religion can avoid vicissitude, which wields its Tyranny over the actions and opinions of men as it does over all the rest.

What stupidity! What degradation! What errors! Truly, what follies have not been embraced by their followers, and even supported by their illustrious apologists! Plants, animals, men, vices, passions, truly, everything has been divinized. Indeed, the choice is very difficult to make between so many different parties, and the fear of error worries me greatly. In each religion I find good and evil, falsehoods and probabilities, degradation and elevation, superstition and abuses: finally, man everywhere. Anything can equally be supported or destroyed, every human tradition is liable to be false; everything that is transmitted by human reports can be corrupted, and each religion claims to rely on them.

I see nothing but fables and fraud in the antiquity these Religions boast of: their miracles are false and invented, their martyrs are won over by the semblance of truth; their morality is useful and necessary for society, and their most perfect forms of worship are crude, superstitious, idolatrous and insulting to Deity. All of them are, in the end, obliged to recur to blind faith to establish things that apply equally to all of them. Their great men were only ever humans, the greatest of whom remains quite petty. Having reached the apex of reason, they have never been raised by it; their greatest effort is a weakness, and their greatest light is a great obscurity.

Finally, I know so well how limited man’s understanding and comprehension are, that I will never bend the knee to any genius to the point of abandoning my reason to his authority, and to the point of being convinced by his example or his account of things. So, what do I gain from the irksome examination of all religions, other than the impossibility of a choice, repelled as I am by injustice and falseness on all sides? I refuse to take any side at all.

I wish it were permissible to be neutral and to stick to the irresolution to which the difficulty of deciding among so many equal sides has led me. But all the Religions cry out with a common accord that I am headed for destruction, and that I run the same risk by making no decision at all as by making the wrong choice, and that finally, the choice of taking none is the worst of all. Errors on all sides, dangers on all sides! O man! How unhappy you are with your reason! But let’s make immense efforts, let’s examine precisely whether it is possible for a man with his own faculties can find the truth; let’s probe the powers of this reason, which is the only instrument which might serve me, and seek to justify my lack of resolution by the impossibility of a solution. The artisan, before starting his work, examines the instrument he intends to use.

What we call Mind, reason, thought, is something so incomprehensible and so obscure, that I don’t think anyone is mad enough to speak with any certainty about it. However strenuously and profoundly reason may reflect on itself, it will always be unaware of itself, and it cannot know itself. What can be judged about it from its effects is that it is very liable to error, that it always strides with an unsteady gait, that it is caught off-guard by the least ray of light, finally that it is the dupe of the least oratorical artifices. A gesture, a tone of voice, a glance cause it to take a lie for the truth. What do I know if this feeble reasoning, at its highest peak, isn’t a childish faculty, a stammering, a balbosity with respect to another supreme reason, almost the way we look at instinct with the eyes of our reason? What if it’s only a dream or a sleep from which death will awaken us? We don’t know if it’s capable of any certain knowledge, but experience teaches us every day that a stronger certainty tears another one away from us, which we thought it was impossible to lose. Often, I believed something as certainly as that two and two make four, and often I’ve recognized the error of this assurance. After an experience so often reiterated, shouldn’t my reason hesitate and be edified, or mistrust itself? In the greatest certainty, can we know when a liar isn’t lying? Should we believe him when he tells the truth? However firmly I may hold to an opinion, should I not think that the faculty that has already misled me so many times might trick me again on this occasion? All these certainties that seem to leave no room for the slightest doubt...[[12]](#footnote-12) however, even with all this evidence, I am often mistaken. It is true that reason is capable of some certain knowledge, but given our state of uncertainty, while this is possible, it should still leave us uncertain. The things we can know for certain shouldn’t keep us from suspecting that we always reason badly: our errors, our darkness, our illusions are infinitely superior to the number of our supposed proofs and should take all credit away from our apparent truths. I’m never so sure about anything that it isn’t possible for me not to be mistaken about it; never, therefore, should I be sure about anything. It’s only by chance when we turn out to be correct: everything is shrouded with a thick veil around which this feeble reason can probe without the strength to pierce it; we never know anything unless it be the difficulties that sometimes show us our mistakes.

This argument can go so far as to destroy the certainty of Mathematics: “What!” I’ll be told, “one and one don’t make two? Can this truth be shaken?” I would audaciously reply: “I don’t know, and if I employ the weapons the Christian Religion give me in its mystery of the Trinity, I’ll tell you that one and one are equal to six, and six is equal to two, just as three equal one, and one three.” A truth, which, according to the Catholics, is not contrary to reason, but beyond it: which is perfectly well adapted to the views I maintain.

This argument is enough to destroy all certainty, for according to us, another reason, supreme and superior to ours, apparently draws conclusions different from ours, and discovers a truth, which, while seeming to contradict reason, does nothing but surpass it. This Pyrrhonism might seem excessive: I know the arguments that are supposed to be used against me, but I confess that there is no argument so correct, no matter what it may be, the consequences of which, so to speak, don’t lead us into problems, contradictions and absurdities, and that also shakes all certainty.

This also proves how susceptible this reason is to the change of days, how delicate and fragile it is, how easy it is to go from the truth to error, to turn at the slightest breeze and to stumble over the slightest choice. I’m aware of the extremity to which I am reduced in the thesis I maintain, to the point of uncertainty about my uncertainty, to the point of doubting whether I doubt, to the point of being unaware whether I think and whether I am; but whatever absurd conclusions might be drawn from a good argument, I abandon the consequences to embrace, with even greater stubbornness, the reasoning. Whatever storm may lie in wait for me, all these absurdities don’t keep me from attaching myself to whatever greater probability seems to draw me. These inevitable contradictions that are to be found in everything, only show better the volubility of reason and that everything is uncertain, including even my uncertainty.

Reason, however, seems to have some certainty, that it believes that there is a God, but not that the God it believes in actually exists. It loses hold of what is outside itself, it is stopped from at least its intended second step, and loses its sight the moment it strays outside. But even if I’ve granted to reason, one, two or even three certainties that are free of all those consequences, the coherence which is always so deceptive, so captive, so delicate, so subtle that it escapes us, how does this do any harm to my opinion? From the fact that any one thing is certain, should we conclude that nearly everything is? For, from a single given certainty or supposition, people immediately construct veritable colossuses of errors, however little free rein reason is granted to turn where it likes. Often there are arguments that convince us and compel, so to speak, our assent and forbid all replies, but which contradict our senses, or a certain feeling that inexplicably possesses us and which, far from being vanquished, triumphs with all its might over the apparent certainty that dazzles us.

So, let’s not be afraid to accept one or two kinds of certainty that are free of all conclusions, since all of them necessarily lead to some contradiction.

When I see a truth that’s consistent and connected with falsehood, I will only take the true part and I will reject the false part that accompanies it. If there is any certain knowledge, it will come via the senses, but their testimony is just as subject to deception, and doesn’t mean that reason has any certainty other than on what happens within it, and by its reflection on itself: my sight perceives an object, but it doesn’t perceive that the object that appears to me really exists. I see a portrait of Caesar, I’ve never met Caesar, I don’t know whether it resembles him. Only the perception of this is, therefore, certain, and not the things themselves; we know the inner impressions they make in us or on us; but not because they exist *per se*. At most, the senses discover only the surface of material objects, of which it seems that reason can judge with greater certainty than of the spiritual ones which surpass it and are out of its reach.

The same experience of faithlessness and perfidy that we have with respect to reason is no less in the senses; they are tricksters who always trick us: and if they sometimes certify the truth for us, how can we tell? They can advise us about an object, the sight gladly offer its conjectures, the ear those of its own, the smell those of its own, touch those of its own. They can accumulate probabilities to produce a certainty: seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, to issue an infallible verdict, they can call on each other for help to reassure each other, but each in particular is faulty, as a group, a composite of ignorant judges who might be mistaken: for if each in particular is liable to error, why should all of them together be unable to err? How do we know that this obscurity of ours doesn’t come from the fact that our senses are not in a state of perfection? We see daily examples of animals that often have different senses from ours, whether as to colors or shapes, which can change the impression an object makes on the imagination and make it different from how it affects us. Some of theirs are subtler than ours. Aren’t we all distinguished from each other by our different degrees of reason, nobility of heart or fineness of our senses? We might naturally lack one or many senses, just as moles lack sight; the lack of which leads us to a thousand errors, and keeps us from grasping the truth. How many flaws of reasoning does a blind man make, how does the defect in his eyes lead him astray, without his being able to even guess what he’s missing? Neither his error, nor the cause of his error: he can’t even detect the absence of something so necessary for him; and his reason, which leads him to make judgments about everything, only perceives in a confused manner that he is deprived of such an aid and that the truth will nearly always remain beyond his grasp. He’s heard speaking from habit about light, daytime, the sun, colors, night, without grasping the meaning of these incomprehensible words, which the laziness of feeble reason refuses to look into, and which, when it does eagerly pursue it, is only confounded the more, or a habit is formed of never thinking much about it, almost as we treat these terms, which are no less obscure for us, such as “chance”, “sympathy” and others we pronounce every day without any better conception of them. We truly are born blind.

And yet, I’m perfectly content to grant that our senses are the only ministers of any certainty we may have and of all our knowledge; nothing is introduced into reason except by their mediation, and we hold to no certainty as strongly as to that of which they give us their testimony; but we are definitely careful not to take one step beyond what they certify to us: if Mathematics seems to offer more certainty than the other Sciences, it’s because it is nothing other than the senses occupied with the surface of matter which they see and which they attentively touch, which arrests and certifies the judgment of reason which seems to be regulated, confronted and assured by it. As fragile and vain as our reason may be, as unfaithful as the senses may be, there are still a thousand obstacles that hide the truth. The passions, one’s temperament, the season, the climate, the sun, rain, health, illness, regulate its judgments; reason is enslaved to everything. Now it’s captive to piety, now love issues its decrees; now the heat inclines it to take the stricter side in some decision, now a pleasant sun towards a more gentle position; it sees things in health differently than the way they seem when it’s sick; finally, chance, despite reason's greatest prudence, has always reserved its rights over our decisions, as over all other events. Reason is like a child who can be pacified with a toy, who is easily misdirected, who will believe anything, who is upset by and made to giggle with trifles: fear, education and example turn it every which way; it is the continual dupe of the heart and of desire. Even lust seems to have its own particular and independent arguments. Should we be astonished that, with such weaknesses, it finds all the sciences so uncertain and that it finds nothing but obscurity and error in them? What contradiction, what diversity of contradictory and mutually destructive opinions, are found in the Laws, whether in the knowledge of Nature or of the Deity, or in morality, or in medicine? Is any axiom so infallible that it doesn’t clash with another infallible one? Everything is debated, everything is contradicted, everything is maintained, everything is destroyed, truth and error are on all sides, everything can be equally chosen and everything can be refused. What Chaos! What confusion! What disorder! Everything is uncertain, every opinion has different probable facets that can be seized on; the reiterated experiment and the repeated effect, the cause of which is unknown, is the strongest argument of reason, and is our only science, which is nothing but a reminiscence, and a remembrance of an accident. This is where the certainty of Mathematics originates, where the senses are found to be strong thanks to a proof that strikes and convinces them; thus, our science is really only a science of memory, normally our reason doesn’t know anything of what we know, we learn things by heart and not through judgment, we know what has been said about things and not what they really are: you must be equipped with all the sciences to be a savant: the goal that can be attained in their research is to be ignorant in a learned manner; the only benefit is to recognize their futility and to have been vainly occupied in them!

I think this is an adequate examination of the fragility and defectiveness of the instrument, by which I am supposed to be helped in understanding the impossibility of attaining certainty. If reason, which is the first foundation of all knowledge, turns out to be uncertain, then what is certain? If the rule of truth turns out to be false and twisted, then how can it be known? If reason is blind, then what can it see? Doesn’t this well-established darkness destroy all certainty, doesn’t it overthrow all opinions, doesn’t it weaken all beliefs, doesn’t it uproot all the religions, and don’t they end up by casting us, ultimately, into a universal suspension of judgement, into an assured doubt and a firm uncertainty? Whatever efforts are made to convince me of something, I have a right to reply: this is the rule you’ve given and recognize, that all of you have mistaken a false daylight for a real light; based on the weakness of reason, I can even refuse all debate, since it destroys all the certainty of all opinions; but since I don't want to regret anything on my own part, I won’t stop using this wretched weapon to help me confound you until you agree that the decision to make no judgement at all is the only rational choice. Not that I claim that there is anything certain in what I’ll advance, as this would go against my rules; I’ll content myself with simple probabilities, since there is no certainty. He who does not know how to doubt, knows nothing at all.

## ON GOD.

With all the restraint of blind reason, I undertake to speak of God, of the first principle. Let us carefully examine this general idea that all men have of a being which is eternal, spiritual and infinite, by which all that exists has its being, from which all began, which we call the first principle. I despise the firmness of those madmen who believe that this being doesn’t exist, as if they could have some assurance of this fact; I am equally opposed to those who believe it and those who don’t believe it, and if the former cannot prove with certainty that it exists, the latter can’t prove either that it doesn’t exist. Normally, fear is what produces the weakness of the former, and vice and folly the latter, an equally irrational credulity: all are blind in their choice, which they should not make. Nothing tells us that it doesn’t exist. I therefore establish this principle: many things exist which we do not know. An infinity of beings might exist, although we don’t know anything about them. And this is why the atheist is wrong to have taken a side. We can also imagine an infinity of beings which, however, are indeed not real. It is highly irrational / against common sense to conclude that something exists because it might be, as well as to claim that it doesn't exist because we can’t understand if it exists. And this is also why others are wrong to claim that there is a spiritual being, God, without thinking that they can conceive of things which might not exist. The possibility of all things, far from being a trap for credulity in either case, ought to disarm all their assurance: this feeble reason cannot know how far it can take any given certainty; it can’t judge what is possible or impossible, what it should claim or not, or finally, know the different degrees of possibility things might possess. Everything should seem possible to it, and without believing anything, believe in the possibility of everything. I therefore believe that they might be a spiritual being, without however believing that there is one: I believe that this may or may not be so, without effectively believing it. The truth might be on either side, but by chance, and not espoused for itself.

Some want this to be a crime, and that men should be punished for failing to pierce this darkness, which our feeble reason cannot pierce, and for being unable to see clearly in this profound obscurity where nature placed us; but would this not mean giving ourselves two feet in height beyond our stature? If it’s a crime, it’s the crime of our maker, and not our own: we can’t have more strength than we possess.

Is it not, on the contrary, submission and reverential obedience to this spiritual being, if such a thing exists, to stay within the boundaries it set, to keep to the ignorance in which it placed us, to stick to the order it wants us to belong to, and to respect the short scope it gave to our reason? This ignorance from which we can’t escape, to which we submit: is this not already a sufficient burden, as shameful, as painful as it is, without also making it a culpable crime, being punished for our miseries, our imperfections, as if we were the causes thereof, as if we were our own authors? This submissive uncertainty, which the pride of reason has found so hard to endure: shall this be a crime worthy of cruel torture? Is it not in itself a harsh sentence? How arrogant is it not, rather, to have broken the barriers within which we’ve been enclosed, to have made the wrong choice indiscriminately, without any guide other than deceitful reason, rather than to keep to the suspension which our natural blindness and the first being destined for us!

If it had mattered to God, to this all-powerful, infinite, spiritual being, ruling all of nature, as, ultimately, he is imagined to be; if it had, I repeat, mattered whether our reason knew and understood that he exists, then would he have left us in this ignorance, even to reason about the ideas we have about him? Can’t it be said by concluding from their own principles: isn’t everything that matters to him in existence, isn’t everything he wants as he wants it, and isn’t everything within him?

O! What a human and fragile conception of contradictory, mutually cancelling, or conditioned wishes: I cannot conceive this supposed infinite being without giving him the perfection of doing what he wants to do. Every effect, every event is his will, nothing is otherwise than as he wants it; the state I’m in, the creed I follow, whether Catholic, Muslim, suspension, or even Atheism, is the one he wants me to have, and I wouldn’t have it if it weren’t his will. I’m ready to worship him even if it means worshiping him in my uncertainty; I await and I consent to his making himself known to me, and I claim to sacrifice my life to him should he give me the power to sacrifice it for him. I respect the thoughts he sends me and the belief he gives me as his own, and not as mine; I neither believe nor disbelieve, I believe and I disbelieve, I am nothing without him, and he is all in all.

The independence of a being is destruction, despite any scholastic distinctions: my will, my judgment, and their actions are all his, all dependent on him, and they do nothing but what he himself does and wants; he permits nothing, but he does everything and wants everything; nothing I do is against his wishes, since he does it himself. Permitting is a term that subtracts something, as if nothing could be done except by him; his assent, his permission, his approbation, his repenting, his wrath, his offense, his punishments, his rewards are all terms forged by human fancy, which give all kinds of weakness to the deity, and then the deity is forced to produce and beget in a perfection which it often can’t maintain.

For it isn't reason that is reason a portion of the deity, but rather the deity is an inflated production of reason. At every moment its expressions and its ideas contradict and overthrow the excellence reason would give to him: his assenting is wishing, and his permission is winning his approbation, whatever this may be, he is he alone and everything is his reward. How else might it be? Does he reward his own repentance, his wrath, his offense, his punishment? Does he repent of himself, does he get angry with himself? Does he punish himself for what he’s done? What does this ridiculous jargon that we’re forced to use when we seek to endow the deity with our passions! Will his wrath, his repentance, his offense not destroy and annihilate the whole future? What is this fabrication of a deity in which man, in spite of himself, fashions this model on himself, dresses it up with his weaknesses and defects, ultimately forming it in his own way and with respect to himself? What do you expect? Men can only think of God as a man, according to his own ideas, his own laws, his own government and politics, and this is a very imperfect way to conceive of God: his will and his infinite power destroy our independence; crime, merit, punishment and reward, wrath, offense, assent, and permission are all expressions which only slight his infinite dignity and dishonor the idea that reason itself has formed, or, to speak without blasphemy, and without insulting that infinite being, the finite wants to explain the infinite. Only one of all these words is suitable to him: *incomprehensible*: when the meaning of this term is abandoned, he is insulted, wronged, everything is his will, and his will is all that is.

What evil am I doing? I’m doing nothing, he does everything; whether I remain in suspension, whether I make a decision, he is the author of both of my acts. What contradiction offends us at every moment? What confusing discourse gets us worked up? The moment we assume the least liberty or independence in man, the moment we fail to attribute everything to him with respect to us, as we do with all else, finally, the moment we make something our own; we can’t attribute anything to ourselves, but a gross contradiction will give us a sense of the robbery we’re committing against him. If we have something that isn’t his, then he isn’t all, he isn’t God; if God is nothing, and nothing is our own; if nothing is our own, we can’t be capable of anything; there is no crime, no punishment: God wills all things, the rule of justice is his will, therefore all is just, and there is no evil, no crime, no sin, nothing that is against his orders; these are phantoms begotten by the imagination only, from nothing, figments of reason, vain negotiations, hollow privations, empty relations, which many Catholics have accepted, wishing to exculpate God for evil, although they recognize him as the author of everything. Jews, Mahometans, Calvinists or Catholics: all your ideas, your opinions, your beliefs are of God, are God’s own, it’s he who wants you to be that way, as each of you in particular are; your worship, although different, inspired as it is by him since all the rest comes from him, is according to his wishes, and cannot displease him; isn’t the very idea that anything could displease him contrary to his perfection? Would it not be unworthy of him to punish things that offend him, as if he were unable to prevent them? The purity of your intentions should also secure you from all risks: your various forms of adoration remain adorations, and pay honor to the deity if he be sensitive to them, and are null and void, if he is indifferent to them or if he doesn’t exist.

The truth is what you revere, what you seek out, what you serve, what you love, with different names, in diverse colors; finally, if there were an infinite, spiritual, eternal and all-powerful being, as all the religions imagine him to be, the mere lights of good sense, free from all biases and prejudice, assure me even by the principles of his believers, that I am not capable, and that I run no risk by remaining in suspension, where nature caused me to be unhappily born.

But let’s see whether it’s true that this spiritual being really exists; since, according to the principles of the Christian himself, if the mists that cover these mysteries allow him to have the merit of believing them, it’s not forbidden for reason to examine the authority of the one who has declared them.

Who will show us that there is a first principle, a spiritual being, which has no beginning? All the religions, even the Christians inform me that nature only reveals this and that I would be excused for persisting in my suspension, if the invisible were not revealed by the visible, and if the voice of all beings which the senses detect were not so intelligible.

If only someone would do me the favor of bringing the senses to support our cause! For, if reason is capable of any certainty, it can only be with their help, which I’m delighted that nature, which I respect and revere, is called to testify. What magnificence I see there! What astonishing and incomprehensible beauty it reveals! Freed of all childish notions, armed with reason alone, I consider the heavens, the sun, the stars, the sea, the earth, fire. I admire the beauty of these objects, I see that they move, and I don’t know who moves them; if they move themselves, or if they are moved by something else, if they made themselves, or if they were made by something else, if they had a beginning or not. I see with certainty that they are infinitely more beautiful, larger and more durable than I am, that they even have power over me, and that I am very dependent on them, that they afflict me, console me, feed me, often kill me, and treat me, ultimately, like the other animals, my brothers. If I make judgments about them as they strike our senses, the sole mediators of all knowledge, I cannot know if they are animated or not, if they are rational or not. I am but an atom compared to them; to a more excellent degree, my reason, astonished by an excess of ignorance, allows me no reasoning about them and has no words other than admiration. Beautiful as they are, the utility and assistance they give me, the harm they can do me; finally, my dependence on them leads me to make them my gods: for what is this admiration of an object that is beautiful, useful and superior, which affects my senses, if not a natural adoration?

If I had always been sheltered from human interaction, retaining the simplicity and purity of reason, not ruined, not corrupted or biased with their prejudices, I wouldn’t know what God is, what the infinite being, the first principle or spirit separate from matter is; but I would realize that I had a beginning, that I am nothing compared to the infinity of things that exist; and, perceiving the beauty, the splendor, and the excellence of the other objects which strike my senses, which alone I should consult, I would be forced to admire them, and this admiration would no doubt be a kind of worship that is natural, just and rational, which would set them up as gods without realizing it, and although ignorant about what God is, these would be all the more fitting to worship as they are unknown and incomprehensible. This incomprehensibility gives me the liberty to attribute to them all the perfections which my reason can imagine: infinity, eternity, and omnipotence; although I see their limited scope, how do I know if they’re real? If only what appears to my eyes is the real part of them, how do I know if it’s sufficient for them to be infinite in power; finally, what do I know about which perfections they lack and which they should have?

Finally, if all together they’re only one God, which you call nature; the first principle, the totality; the supreme being, and who, keeping to a general definition, won’t be subject to contradiction, but something that we can neither know nor conceive, if it is asked: *what is God?* I will reply that this is indeterminate: if you want me to take another step, I’ll say: what do I know about what he is or what he is not; whether there is something which is He in particular, and the rest is not; whether he is everywhere; whether everything which is isn’t He, whether even I am not part of this totality: what do I know, if I was something or not before I was born? And whether, when I die, I come to an end? For, what I see in my death is a change, and not an annihilating terminus: and I see in my birth a generation, and not a creation, or a beginning of myself from nothing: I might have been something without knowing what I was, any more than I now know what I am; I worship this vague, general, naked, and indeterminate something which I don’t understand; I see in this vast extent of the universe, in these infinite spaces, where my imagination finds neither beginning nor end nor middle, an infinity of beings, of which I am an atom; I don’t know if I am one of them; as I see things, everything escapes me, everything surpasses me, and if I consider a fly or a flea worthless because it is tiny, what might beings that are infinitely large think about me? As soon as I want to give a quality, even a name to this indeterminate thing, I get lost. If it’s infinity, my finite mind can’t conceive of the infinite, if it’s eternity, I err. Whatever words I produce, I go wrong, my reason loses its footing, I don’t know where I am, and I recognize that I was wrong to have tried to render less vague, less obscure and less incomprehensible this divine something, susceptible to so many explanations, perhaps conditioned by whatever idea one forms of the deity; this might be all that each person in particular imagines, and maybe all that is not imagined. All these different labels that I’ve applied to the first principle and others which might also be given to it, might be true, everything is possible, as I’ve already said, and it’s not enough that this may be the case: for my feeble reason cannot know, if that which might be, truly is or not.

I’m certainly aware that I’m saying many things that are considered bold and reckless, because biases and childhood prejudices have corrupted the purity of nature, to which I must return, to think sanely. They have such power over us that people listen neither to reason nor to the correctness of words when they feel offended, and they don’t recognize the vulgar absurdities which habit and education make us see as true intelligence.

What I see for sure at the heart of this impenetrable nature, which my senses certify to me, is that all beings, along with myself, are in continual motion; everything is at work, everything is vehemently agitated. Here, then, are two things that I recognize by my senses: matter, and the motion of matter, beings and the motion of beings. Give this motion whatever name you like, call it soul, or life, or reason, or pain, or mind, or vicissitude, I know nothing beyond the fact that these beings move; I don’t know if this motion is properly their own, or if it is given to them by something else; but I see some that move by themselves, and others that seem to be at rest, also possessing an imperceptible interior and exterior motion, and what do I know but that these terms like soul, life, reason, thought, vicissitude, invented by human reason, which thinks it has a cause when it has found a word it doesn’t understand, and under the shelter of which its pride and its laziness doze, are only different species of this universal motion of all nature: what do I know but that it’s a being separate from matter, which you call spirit, from which you create God, who is connected, and naturally married with it, as happens with us: what do I know? Perhaps this spirit is God, who imparts this motion with his omnipotence, while remaining separate from it.

All of this may be, and there may be many things that our senses can’t notice: but although spirit might exist, without my seeing it, it’s not right to assume that it exists. Shouldn’t I reason about what I do see, and remain ignorant about what I don’t see? I perceive beings which my senses can detect and which possess motion, this is all I can know about them; I don’t know what they are, by whom they came into being. If they are of themselves, or came by another, I don’t know anything about their motion: if it has a cause, or if it doesn’t. I return to my suspension of judgement, as the only refuge, to which so much obscurity pushes me back: I certainly see in those beings on earth, as well as in myself, a vicissitude and a continual change, which is nothing other than this general motion of all nature; nothing stays as it is, but nothing ends and vanishes; nor does anything come from nothing, everything comes from something, which is changed into it and turns into something else. What does it change into? Nothing begins to exist, nothing ceases to be, which is only a difference in condition: this vicissitude of changing things may well have been eternal, this change of passing things could go on forever, never changing, constant and immutable in its resolve, why do you expect something that has never existed to commence its existence? And how can I believe the world to have come from nothing, from which I see nothing take birth, and anything return to nothing, to which I never see anything return? What do I know of these nothings from which they want everything to come, and to which they want everything to return or rejoin? I don’t understand this, these names are confused, obscure, void, of human making: finally, I draw only this conviction from this motion, from this certain change which my senses perceive, that is to say that all beings on the earth change, come and go in succession, reproduce and move around, without knowing what this change; and this vicissitude, if it has a cause at all, this internal change to which terrestrial creatures are subject, can it not be caused by the celestial beings that we see lasting forever? On the other hand, what if they also have a limited lifespan like things down here, albeit longer than ours? But reason is made to keep within its bounds, and the restraint I impose on it; finally, from the fact that I keep it from taking any steps until its footing looks sure, it must be unable to consent to ignorance, this faculty which is ignorant of everything.

What I also notice, and to which my senses bear testimony, is an order that reigns in all beings in the universe as well as in me; each element has its own organization, and its position where such order and suitability are visible, which seem not to be due to the blind conduct of chance. All these beings are regulated in their motions and seem to have laws, limits that they never exceed, and mutual interrelations: this shows me a kind of discourse, a reason, an intelligence, finally, something that relates to my way of reasoning not only in their general harmony, but in each being in particular. Then I see the universe as a sort of republic, of which the heavens are the senate, the earth — the people, and me in particular; I accept this discourse, this reason of the universe, this very apparent conformity, this good sense of all nature holds my admiration; I recognize myself a great deal in their regular movements, I see vestiges of myself in them, they judge like me, they argue like me: I even see that I am included in this general and intelligent harmony, that I am part of this civilized state and a small part of this greater body: not the least part, since I’m larger than a flea, which itself isn’t the smallest thing; I don’t know what this universal and judicious rule is, this regulated motion of all beings, which my senses attest to me: can I be sure that they don’t have it of themselves, that this intelligence is not essential to them, inseparable, and part of them, or that it comes from another being that I can’t see. What do I know, but that this Order was discovered by reason? Maybe in reality it isn’t in them, but resides only in the conception that imagines it; perhaps the use of all things is invented, discovered and imagined, as rouge, which, although it wasn’t created for women’s faces, is applied there and used so commonly that you might think that was its purpose, and that it only exists in this relationship; or senna which purges, without having been created for purging. If I would avoid error, I won’t press my judgment further than I should. I see beings, I see that they possess motion and a rule of their motion; all this is certain to me; but what are these beings, what is this motion and the measure of this motion? Things far beyond my reason, and I keep myself from deciding on any of the conjectures that might be drawn. Who can know if they are animated; if they aren’t? If they are: which of them are, which aren’t? Who could know if they are rational or not? Finally, if they are of themselves or come from another who is of himself? Nature only shows us that something exists, and bars the next step: *viz.*, what it is. Behold all the knowledge and certainty that the pure lights of reason are able to acquire, with the help of the senses, in the examination of this whole universe, which ought to have led me to a certain knowledge of God.

Prideful man has broken through these narrow boundaries of reason, he wants to know everything in his ignorance, but as soon as he departs from them, he loses his way; he refuses to recognize that suspension is the only precaution against error, he makes vain efforts to pierce through the darkness in which he must remain, and he grasps as a truth the least false daylight, which makes him think that the darkness is no longer there: what a folly! Then, the gates are open to all sorts of biases, opinions, prejudices and madness, error and illusion are there for the choosing. We must not, therefore, be shocked that, in the choice of deity, men have declared themselves in favor of the idea most flattering to their arrogance: — they refuse the testimony of the senses, these authors of all knowledge, because they would assimilate the deity to an infinite number of unworthy creatures and they give a thousand advantages to other beings above him, which seem far more excellent: he invents a being separate from matter, which he calls spirit, which he wants to make God, a being of nothingness, which he can’t understand, to elude the pain of his ignorance. And to satisfy both his vanity and his self-love, since everything is possible, and since something might exist which fails to strike the senses, he dreams himself up a God, having left behind the folly of making himself God, and, unable to contest this attribution against so many other creatures that are nobler than himself, he strips them of all their real qualities and gives them a superior one, with which he shares sovereignty over the whole universe; he dresses up this imaginary phantom like himself: he gives him reason on the condition that he will say that he has shared it with man alone; he attributes to him the honor of having created everything, on the condition that he’ll say that he created everything for man; he grants eternity to him alone, also on condition that, although he had a beginning, along with the deity, he alone will be immortal and his companion for all eternity. This is the way men go about it: refusing to tarnish himself with the lowly level his senses tell him he belongs to, and refusing to be only a tiny and infirm part of this great whole, he steals the advantages that other beings have over him and, to judge things soundly, excludes and deprives them of feelings and reason, to make them his slaves and his subjects.

This spirit being is always presented to our imagination along with contradictions that destroy it; it’s a being of nothingness, which is everywhere and nowhere, which fills everything and fills nothing, which is in everything and nothing, which is all and nothing: large without size, perfect without perfection, everything without any qualities; for what little attention our reason gives it, we will only ever form this idea of spirit in a confused way, along with a troubled cloud, with a body, in a material, perceptible form, which should convince us that it doesn’t exist, even though we grant that everything is possible, although everything is not equally probable; even if you accept the reality of a spiritual being, how do you understand this bond between a spirit and a body? Where can something be, if it is nowhere? What could be enclosed somewhere, if it isn’t anything? All of this escapes me, contradicts itself and falls under its own weight; finally, this “something” God, which connects to no other idea, remaining bare, vague, indeterminate, uncertain, which has no name, doesn’t contradict the senses and reason; on the contrary, he is attested by them, and I worship him amid my doubts.

##

## THE SOUL.

Our souls, which are nothing, a portion of this great nothing, assuming this is the case, are beyond our knowledge, despite residing in us: all my senses inform me *that* I am, but not *what* I am: I take it as my rule to believe what my senses assure me of, and not to believe or disbelieve, but to remain ignorant of what they don’t tell me, without rejecting or accepting things about which what they give me no witness; they inform me that I have a body, possessed of motion, that I talk and use my reason, but the cause of this reasoning, of this talking, of this soul, of this life, if it’s a spirit connected to a body, how I have it, who gave it to me, where it is, or isn’t, are things my senses are silent about; or, if it’s a modification inseparable from my body, what can I know of such things? My senses don’t contradict these ideas except in that they say nothing about them, and I refuse to take any position, either for or against them, I remain neutral, and I don’t want to resist any opinion they don’t assure me about, but only the one they will destroy, not with their silence, but by declared contradictions; for these extraordinary things, although they aren’t ascertained by the senses, remain possible.

I will believe, even as a Pyrrhonian, with utmost certainty, whatever my senses claim to be true; I will not believe but ignore what they do not assure me to be the case, and I will disbelieve and refuse to believe only what they claim is not true. Finally, to avoid all error, I believe that we should follow them step by step, whether in their certainty, in their indifference, or in their opposition, and no doubt this would be the rule that a man, born and sheltered from human interaction and not corrupted by the prejudices of childhood would follow naturally.

If something in me is immortal, who told me so? Why can’t the idea that all religions presently have of it, be true? No opinion is more widespread than this one, and none is so widely recognized as uncertain. How can I conceive of this split eternity, of something that had a beginning but will never have an end? If the cause of this motion, of these words, finally, of this inexplicable *je-ne-sais-quoi*, is assumed to be a real being and not mere modifications, then how do we know whether it will ever cease to exist? If something were posited which the senses cannot grasp, will it necessarily last forever, and have no boundaries? Can’t something that's spiritual be subject to finitude? It’s certainly supposed to have a beginning. Once again, it’s too much to refuse to believe that everything that exists will affect the senses, and that anything else is nothing, but one must simply consent to ignorance leave it as uncertain; far from my senses certifying something spiritual in me, as the supposed cause of my discourse and my reason, they immediately show me that everything follows the fate of the body, that everything suffers when it suffers, that I think better when my body is fully mature and worse when it's on the decline: can this nothing be possible and degradable when in death I pass from this state to another: nothing of me seems to separate from me and nothing seems to leave me; the senses show a change in me; I’ve clearly ceased to speak; but I still possess a being that is perceptible to the senses, I am not yet deprived of the motion of the soul, perhaps of life and reason too; I still change as I changed before, and I even give life to worms that are moving, and which might have senses, for all we know, if I don’t have what I give to others; there are changes in us, but I don’t know what they really are; nobody has ever told us what we felt, what we endured, what we did, what we thought in this state, and nothing can reveal it: let piles of books be written on this subject, no certainty will ever be found: I know that I am, I know that I cogitate, but I can’t know by whom I exist, nor what reasons in me. If there is a self within me, different from me, was I not something before I was what I am now? For, I didn’t come from nothing, and I existed, although I wasn’t what I am now? Can I know if I haven’t always been something? If I will cease to be something? Finally, if I won’t come to an end, I can’t know all the different changes that will happen within me, or which have come about: for, my life is only the change or the death of what I was, just as my death is only a change or the life of what I will become; I know that I am, that I have been something, and that I will be something, that I have changed, that I change and will change: but this is all; for I don’t reason on the rest, about which my senses tell me nothing. It’s the same for others as for me, everything seems to change, and cannot perish.

Beginning, end, eternity, nothing, are all obscure terms which I can’t understand, and which I can select thoughtlessly, or rather, which I should leave alone, if I can’t also conceive of how they began. There is one being, it’s said, which never started to be, and which caused all the others to have a beginning: am I not left with the same problem, of knowing how he had no beginning, and how he can exist? If beings were made, who made their maker? Can’t this go on to infinity? If he can exist of himself, they can also exist of themselves; my reason is equally confused, if there was a beginning or not; it is forced to deal with an eternity which it doesn’t understand and a beginning which it understands no better: I can’t conceive of how something which, non-existent, could begin to exist; or how something might always have existed: eternity is above me, a beginning is against my common sense. My reason is overwhelmed, repelled, it errs, it is lost when it tries to think that something has always existed, and it’s a contradiction to think of something that exists that it hasn’t always existed, and that something which was nothing could have come into existence: these two incomprehensible contradictions exhaust each other, send reason back and forth, tear it both ways, drag and repel it, call and reject it: finally, they toss it around, and leave it in uncertainty. If we call the senses to our aid in such a quagmire, they will say that they see that something comes from something that already was; that things don’t emerge from nothing, but only from what exists, that they see changes and not creations, that everything that is, was something else before: finally, that there is no beginning of existence, but only beginnings of change.

This is what they see, and what one can be certain about: but our suspension is due to what they don’t see: our reason is so constrained to follow these ministers of its knowledge step by step that it can’t conceive of eternity, although they don’t see any beginning, since the senses say this to him, that they don’t know if everything is eternal, although they can see that nothing has a beginning; they can’t claim that something which didn’t begin at present never had a prior beginning; experience alone, which is our science, makes us conjecture that since all they see only undergoes change, and has no beginning, therefore nothing had a beginning; finally, they demand that reason accept an impenetrable eternity, which surpasses it, and which comes from a necessary conjecture; whether this eternity be given to beings of nature, to the light or to a being of spirit, finally, whatever first principle it may be, it is equally hard to conceive of and requires no less effort of our imagination, no matter what is endowed with it.

One has to admire the expedient which reason has resorted to, to make its mind up on these two contradictory things, unable to disprove an eternity, and unable to conceive of anything without a beginning, seeking to harmonize the two: it flatters itself that it has explained the difficulty by granting eternity to a spiritual being, which it makes eternal, and by granting this beginning of all nature, which alone can be eternal, or even conjointly with it. How horrified reason is by ignorance, doubt, uncertainty! To prefer the choice between two errors, suspension of judgment, and instead face the danger of being mistaken, than to consent and give in to darkness on the subject! If one cannot conceive how something has always existed and that it had a beginning, it’s equally hard to conceive that it will end and that it will never have an end.

How can nothingness be comprehended? Nothing is nothing, it’s a night where my reason is futile, and I cannot believe that something which exists could fall into it or escape from it, could cease to be, having once existed, and become nothing; lasting forever also surpasses me, although my senses seem to consent to it thanks to their experience, for if reason is cautious about taking for an end and a beginning that which is only change, eternal vicissitude and revolution, nothing could be more extraordinary than the ease with which laziness sleeps under the shelter of an infinity of names that it doesn’t know, such as instinct, reason, soul, memory, sympathy, premonition, eternity, time, nature, God, chance, nothingness, which are ignorance, which it makes into the unknown causes and authors of effects that it doesn’t comprehend, and to which it seems to cling greedily, sensing its bad footing, as soon as it seeks to dig any deeper, although in the absence of true knowledge, it latches onto words that are vague and devoid of meaning, by which it tries to satisfy and dazzle itself, and which are, properly speaking, a certain nothing in disguise, in general, of which all of language is composed. Its laziness, balking at the hard work of trying to grasp anything, dozes off under the shelter of these words: they free it of labor and effort, which would be the cost of paying closer attention; it is relieved with their help from the weariness it feels about penetrating what is incomprehensible; concerning this it fashions a whole discourse full of deception, which is nothing but various sounds without any solid meaning, which it uses anyway, with a proud self-assurance, and which it would pass off as true arguments and sure causes; any effort to truly figure things out will result in a regression to infinity on the meaning of all these supposed significations; it’s a language meant for the ear and not the mind, composed of words, nearly all of which are incomprehensible, and which can be justly halted at every step: we apply names to things: wood, water, wheat, iron and others, as we do with names like Edward, Stuart, Condé, Guise, which don’t mean anything, which are only meant to distinguish between things, not to regulate the knowledge of things, but only the differences between them; by which one knows at most what something is not, and not what it is.

However, reason, which is properly speaking only a well-reasoned habit, a custom carried on from childhood, an oft-repeated action, guided by the ordinary reason of other men, which inspire only faculties within the mind, begins to posit these empty sounds as causes, as if it understood them without thinking deeply about them, almost the way words like red, green, blue, would be when coming from a man born blind who had formed the habit of saying them because he’d heard them often: in the same way as a man or an animal can, by the mere force of habit, go somewhere without paying the least attention and without realizing what they’re doing.

The power of this habit is so immense and so imperious that it takes all the effort of reflection, I won’t say to shake off the yoke completely, which I don’t consider possible, but even to escape one’s continual subjection to it. It’s this habit, acquired by education, which corrupts our common sense and all of nature, in a manner so seductive that we ourselves are misled, and we can’t reestablish it with all the efforts of reflection. But we are certainly lost in error from the moment we lose our common sense with respect to that which is hard to know: for habit and nature look very similar, if you don't pay close attention: the ignorance of our reason should therefore make us stay in suspension and stop our judgment: but it’s an argument inculcated in him, to make him receptive to all that is incomprehensible: “Believe,” he’s told, “because you can’t understand it; if it is possible, then believe all you're told about it, since you see nothing impossible in it”: he is tempted by the defects in reason and is offered many obscure things to accept in its place. Why not rather say, “Be ignorant about what you’re ignorant about, think nothing of it, make no decision, leave it be, however it might be”. It's seduced by the hope of escaping uncertainty, which it hates: it loves the grand, the rare, the miraculous, the sublime, the extraordinary; the incomprehensible and the obscure, which it hates, take advantage of its credulity, rendering it susceptible to all impressions, and even seeming to excuse its relaxation. It’s provided with this seductive brilliance on all sides; the night and its blindness lead it to any desired place: its darkness renders it obedient, to the point of following whatever might serve as its guide, without thinking that all leaders are equally blind like itself; this ignorance, finally, precipitates him into a choice when it should only keep him in doubt and resolved not to choose: for, finally, all that is obscure and incomprehensible, which reason abhors, is a terrible ground on which to base our belief, as well as the false brilliance of the marvelous and the great that enchants it, and there is no strong opinion which could not have entered our minds with a similar authority.

Set as your foundation that everything is possible, that a thousand things may exist, although we can’t conceive of them; add to this the necessity of taking a side, on which I don’t agree; also posit the risk of punishment if you're wrong, with which I also disagree; then all that is great, rare, marvelous and obscure might lead me to make an indiscriminate choice, and this choice will be whatever it might be: these reasons are not true proofs; they are seductions proved by our interests, not the truth, which would make us want to believe, but which wouldn’t convince us about things we have an interest in believing. Are we, therefore, in control of what we believe? Does the truth depend on our wishes? Is our love the rule thereof? I can imagine that a person might complain, moan, and be truly upset about their lack of belief, without managing to shrug it off, or be convinced of things that run counter to one’s knowledge: thus, when men, of whatever religion they may be, tell me that they believe their most incomprehensible mysteries, they are mistaken; nobody believes what is incomprehensible; they say and try to convince others that they believe, but their certainty isn’t dependent on their desire for certainty: all they can say is that they want to believe these incomprehensible things, and that this will is so firm that they would gladly sacrifice their lives rather than deny it: but will and not judgment and conviction is the decisive element in their actions and their assurance; they want to act as if they were convinced, although they aren’t. Finally, this is a safe maxim: only certainty should establish my belief, and only our senses give us certainty; the truth is, therefore, independent of my judgment, and my opinion can’t make it bend to my interests: truth always subsists of its own accord, despite the torrent of different prejudices that would demolish it.

## SELF-LOVE.

As for me, I can’t imagine, even when I often repeat it to myself, that the principle that makes us act isn’t the same as what makes, not only all the animals, but also all other beings, act: these seeds of intelligence, spread through all of nature, have certain relations, which everything has with me, and with my way of reasoning, which makes me consider that all of them might be like me, and that I am far from special: give whatever name you like to this principle of motion, which is the rule of all beings, which evinces reason and which my senses attest to me: God, soul, instinct, reason, mind, fate, chance, free will, self-love, nature, I can only judge them by their effects, which alone are available to my senses, and which are equal in all beings: all these names are incomprehensible to me.

The spiritual being might be the principle of my action, it might be the soul, it might be instinct, it might be fate, it might be free will, it might be self-love alone, it might be nature, it might be the universal vicissitude, it might be chance, it might be something unknown which I worship, it might be any of the things I’ve enumerated; as for all the motions, all the events, all the actions of all beings, this is over my head; but it certifies to me that the effect seems to them to be completely well suited, that is, that they exist and that they have an action and a degree of action, motion, and a degree of motion; if I examine my brothers the animals, which are most evident to my senses, how are they different from me? How much closeness, relatedness and resemblance! Am I not forced to confess and recognize that they drink, that they eat and sleep as I do? They have their own sickness and health, their own ennui, their own kinds of chagrins, their own talents as we do; they feel the same lusts and the same pleasures; they are endowed with the same senses, here and there more or less excellent; they are subject to anger, to emulation, to vengeance, to fear; they have foresight and artifice, they are born and die like us. Do they not have a will and the freedom to use it? Do they not have friendships, bonds, and ways of expressing themselves that are equivalent to human speech, different talents of making oneself understood, which nature has given to all animals?

This is all that my senses attest to me with respect to the principle of our action; if things are different, they say nothing about this, they only assure me about the relations between our actions, and from perceptible effects, that we are all judging and talking about the same things.

It seems that a bee, if touched even a little by human pride, could say the following: “The whole universe was made for me; the fields are for my use only, the flowers, the fruits, the streams are all mine. God made everything in my favor, I’m one of the most fragile beings in nature, but I will be the most noble and the first: I have reason, which elevates me above all the rest; I alone have the privilege of having laws, of choosing kings, of governing with a police force and overseeing justice, I alone can foresee the future, the freezing fog of winter and the winds, I alone have presentiments of storms that would kill me if they caught me off guard; I alone build cities and lodgings to protect me from the seasons, I alone know how to gain weight in order to keep the wind from carrying me away. Although my life is fragile and shorter than that of stags and humans, I am far above them, for I have an immortal soul and they die entirely when they die. Although the lion, the bull or man may crush me underfoot, it doesn’t matter: reason makes up for all these disadvantages; they are all but instruments of God, who punishes me as he pleases, and although these cruel men and the unjust hornet come every day, stealing all my wax and honey, yet nothing happens without the permission of Providence, which ceaselessly watches over me, keeping track of all my steps. Although the sun and the heavens are larger than I, I’m worthier than them, for I am animated, and they aren’t; they exist only for me, and if there is anything in Nature from which I get no use at all, it’s because God has blinded me and keeps me from knowing its properties as a form of punishment. I sense that the privileges that God has given me are certainly accompanied by misery; in myself I recognize a great mixture of dignity and weakness, grandeur and lowliness, excellence and infamy.

It seems that I ought to be happier, and no doubt the goodness of God hasn’t exposed me to so many evils without a reason; I must have offended him, which obliged him to take away all the advantages he originally gave me. Because I sense that I lack something, I have a desire for something and for happiness: this is surely a premonition that I should hope for another sort of happiness, and an inner message that nothing here, even the most luscious flowers, are worth my attachment to them. Only traces of my former state have remained, to make me long for it, to strengthen my resolve amid my suffering, and spur me to restore it through my vigilance and my hard work. This insatiable desire to amass and to have wealth is a proof of what we have lost, and will only be satisfied by the possession of God, who is our end and from whom our offense has separated us. From that time, death, disease, winds, men and hornets persecute us to excess, and our short life is full of a thousand miseries. The sun, which should only give me light, dries flowers to make my labor more unpleasant; man, who was only made to cultivate and serve those flowers to me, often burns me to eat my treasures; the thunder roars to intimidate us, to make us think of our duty, and reawaken those who are lazy concerning the public good.”

Can’t we apply all these phenomena of the universe to bees? And what distance is there between bees and us, or between us and elephants or whales? We are bees relative to an infinity of beings that we consider far below us, and which excel as far above us as far as we are above bees, if we simply believe what our senses say about them? Thus, a bee could easily say that God became a bee to save the bee from its evils, that he humbled himself to the point of perishing by fire or by cold, to restore it to its happy state.

I grant that man has a thousand advantages over many animals, while many animals are far above man, but it’s prideful for us to extract ourselves from their company, deny their relatedness to us and reserve immortality and reason for ourselves alone, when our senses convince us that they act and that they live, that they are born, live and die like us, that they might be immortal; they could be that too, but our senses, which are our faithful guides, say nothing about this. All of us, when we die, equally change our state and position; finally, we are beings like any other, and a part of the great whole: we shouldn’t be proud of our upright bodies; camels might boast of the position of their eyes and heads; we shouldn’t flatter ourselves about our wealth: the principal good is health and repose, and these are far better established among animals, where nature and not a bad education allows them to follow the lights of their common sense.

If we consulted and followed our brothers in their conduct, we would go wrong less often, our health and our happiness would be less irregular, and our opinions and our reasoning more correct and accurate, than by always consulting our childhood prejudices and our education, which is our imaginary reason, and which is at the same time the rational discourse that we so often celebrate; by leading us off the common road, it has spoiled everything and led us into error, by supplanting nature, which was a far better possession, and right reason, and our rational instinct, which we should follow and which animals retain. Finally, we must repeat that the principle of action of all beings perceptible by our senses is invisible and unknown, an ignorance which should lead us to suspend our judgement: what if our reason is only an internal sense which interacts with the external ones and which is, as it were, their leader? Call it, therefore, whatever you like, instinct, reason, freedom of choice, will, destiny, chance, God, nature, which determine all events, motions, revolutions, and actions of all beings in the universe: we cannot know them, our senses only inform us of their existence and their general and regular motions, but not about their cause. Let us consent, then, to ignore and doubt these things.

If we had the power to restore this nature with the aid of our senses, and according to the example of our brothers the animals which seem to have retained it, how many vain phantoms would vanish from us! If reflection could overcome this second nature, which opinions taken from and cultivated in human interaction have formed in us, what would become of these ideas of honor, virtue, glory, truth, equity, crime, vice, and other such things, which reside only in opinion and not in nature, which are all empty phantoms begotten by the hollow fantasies of the human brain; false goods, and false evils that the imagination has formed to establish a regime, which the laws can only uphold with great difficulty.

## ON THE ORIGIN OF RELIGION AND GOVERNMENT,

## GOOD AND EVIL.

Poets in their compositions have taken the liberty of saying that men once lived like the other animals, scattered across the countryside without society, without laws, without police, and without religion, everyone only worried about living and self-preservation: perhaps they wanted us to think that this was our natural state, similar to the other animals of the country, without law, without king, without God, without virtue, or vice, or glory, or shame. Our senses tell us that all beings have a natural passion, which is self-love and a desire for self-preservation, all beings naturally love themselves, and this self-love might be a principle of their actions, while the other passions of man and animals are only branches from this stem. All beings are in a continual vicissitude leading them painfully to their end, or rather to their change which they abhor; all nature is therefore in pain, for everything desires and strives to stay as it is: everything has the desire to exist forever, all beings struggle hard against their change and their end, into which they are fatally precipitated, despite all their inclinations. Ultimately, self-love could be called the God of the universe. To love oneself is, therefore, the only impression or passion that is natural to and inseparable from all beings, and all else is only names that diversify self-love. There is no need for education to give us this drive, and we don’t owe this desire for self-preservation to childhood prejudices, or to the example of other men. Thus everyone, as unsociable as they once were, had this universal impression, which will last forever; it was the motive of their actions, common to them and all other beings which are possessed of motion, which seems to come from the necessary change, which constantly undermines them, and from the hatred of change which never leaves them. Force and violence were then their honors, their virtues, which still guide our judgments, and which animate and turn our opinions, our decisions, and our actions at whim. Is reason anything other than the self-love of a being, which excites and vivifies it, seeking to have done with that which drives it towards change and to seek out whatever might slow it down: this is what activates all our senses, which are so many branches and parts of reason and objects of self-love.

This is the instinct or the universal reason of all that exists. This is the rule and the goal of all these fine privileges of reasoning, which we attribute to ourselves alone and which is simply an impression common to all beings, which we recognize to be equally animated like ourselves. We even see that animals, with the help of this same goad, know more than we do about self-preservation, and that on this subject their schemes, their artifices, their words and finally their reason is as subtle as ours, because it is often exercised therein, and reason is nothing but exercise and habit. From this motive of self-love have come all the passions, anger, friendship, hatred, vengeance, fear, vanity, hope: this self-love proper to men, which seems so unsociable, and which has formed the common needs, which has rallied and assembled them to better provide for them, both against the rigors of the seasons, against the attacks of animals, and against hunger: this knot of their common connection alone destroys it. Thus it was necessary to shape and adjust self-love to society; it had to be given just boundaries, proper limits and conventions were necessary to keep the balance between different interests, to establish other kinds of justice, other virtues, other equities, other honors than those of force, which is the only law of self-love; for never could this common accord have existed if it had been left in its entirety. That is why laws and a police were established, to support the weak against the strong and to form an equal equity where everyone could find their interest, and the strongest sacrifice, that of the advantage of force, the advantage received from society. Everyone consented to cease causing harm to others on condition that the same would be done to him, and to do all the good that was in his power on condition that he would receive the same service. Finally, it was set up as a principle not to do to others what one wouldn’t want to be done to us, in order to regulate self-love itself. We were attached to this general accord, through fear of the torments threatened against all those who would contravene it, and the public steels itself to uphold these laws, which are the ties of their connection. But, since these laws might leave some infractions unpunished, and since the darkness of night seemed to give everyone the right to follow their self-love, a God was invented, a scrutinizer, immense, invisible, and all-seeing, who would avenge everything that escaped the rigor of the laws and the knowledge of the public.It has been widely recognized how dependent these laws are on such assistance, and how often this necessary accord of society would be broken unless such imposing authority were given to it. The soul was made immortal, so that even after death people could be punished or rewarded for the exact observance of these ordinances and civil conventions, and that if one escaped the laws, they couldn’t escape Him who is their defender.

These ideas are not natural to us, but they are very much entailed by and closely related to self-love: for the fear of evil and the desire for good are what form the ideas of God and the immortality of the soul. We must not believe that they caused any distress to self-love, the chief of all the passions at the beginning; on the contrary they flattered it, they flatter vengeance; when I’m suffering persecution, how sweet is the idea of an avenger to me: they flatter the idea of a being who will make things right, make me happy, they flatter our vanity; I want to be important, how glorious I find the idea of a God who watches over me: they flatter fear: when I’m afraid of some danger, how consoling is the idea of a defender: finally, hope, friendship, desire, hatred, vengeance, anger, fear, vanity make us accept the idea of a God and of the immortality of the soul. It brings peace to our mind, and produces astounding levels of attentiveness, consideration, respect and love from us. All the passions were, so to speak, seeking to establish it, and this advantage was only given to fear because it seemed stronger than the others. Do we give this advantage to the ruler of all passions? It’s self-love which, in its gullibility, accepts or refuses it, based on its various interests: even the senses refrain from kicking against these ideas. We can’t touch everything that exists; we can’t see everything that exists; we know that something invisible might exist.

This society, advantageous to each individual, has produced powerful men or kings to maintain it – God in a visible form – whom it has charged to oversee the observation of this agreement, and who, no longer powerful as they once were by sheer force, are only so by the permission of the public, which has consented to this out of their own interests and for the preservation of society. These lawgivers or conquerors have always held onto this idea of a deity who would second their laws and their powers; they have gone on to purify it, sometimes enlarging it, sometimes disguising it, as their interests required, and as the crudity of the masses allowed. They have invented cults that tickle the senses, which gave a body, as it were, to this deity and made it nearly tangible and ever-present. This republic, this union of opposing parts didn’t require lesser was in absolute need of such springs to subsist: education was also needed to contribute to upholding this agreement, and this tender age of childhood, when we easily receive all sorts of impressions, was designated in which to transmit only those sentiments which would contribute to maintaining this society: this is the age when people were supposed to resist, efface, destroy nature, to shape our inclinations to fit within the laws.

Finally, to inspire in us the opinions, inclinations, faculties, talents that nature didn’t give us, but which are required by human society, all that contravenes these necessary laws, the principle of all connection, was called evil; and good, all that is in conformity with them: two names that are multiplied by various other names such as *crime*, *misdeed*, *sin*, *vice*, *shame*, *virtue*, *justice*, *equity*, *honor*, *glory* and other such synonyms, which represent good or evil and which are nothing other than the infraction and non-observance of these laws established for the common utility with the senses and with nature. Evil is what makes us suffer and leads us to our death: good, that which slows this down: pain, ennui, chagrin are the evil that offends this natural desire for self-preservation, pleasure, joy, happiness, are goods that flatter them: finally, evil is something from which self-love flees, and good is something that self-love pursues. But there are many imaginary goods and evils, which exist only in opinion and not in reality, but only on whim, phantoms fashioned on the model of the true good and the true evil, to subject this self-love to the laws, as if it could slow down a creature in pursuit of its good or hurry it on the way.

Man is abused by his own inclinations. Children are told these words: *evil*, *crime*, *misdeed*, *sin*, *vice*, accompanied with gestures of displeasure and horror, which, impressed on the child’s senses, inspire an inclination to hatred, horror of doing these things, as if something bad would happen to him. On the contrary, words like *virtue*, *honor*, *pleasure*, *joy*, *happiness*, *justice*, *equity*, are accompanied with smiles and a pleasant face which stimulates love and the pursuit of these things. With these visible motions, the inclinations are gradually plied at will by flattering their interests, people’s only weak spot, and by which they are deceived.

This painful change of all nature, this agitation, the painful and natural movement of all beings is the principle which makes us hate or desire, fear or love, and produces our evil and our good, our misery or happiness, our ennui or pleasure, for pleasure seems to be the agitation of the senses, a delightful movement which occupies them, and which is, properly speaking, the life of the being. That is why we love it so much. Ennui seems to be an image of annihilation that we hate. This requirement to be and to change, this desire to preserve ourselves and this inevitability of changing or ending, makes rest both unpleasant and pleasant for us, and agitation pleasant and painful: agitation pleases us because it’s the life of the being, and it fatigues us because it’s a current which rushes us towards non-being. Rest pleases us because it’s a slowing-down of existence, and fatigues us because it’s a kind of death and nothingness for the being, which desires its own preservation while running towards the end. Both things please and displease us in turn: from pleasure we fall into ennui, and from ennui we soar into pleasure, in agitation we seek repose and in repose agitation. Pleasure is often only an ennui caused by our indolence, an urgent desire; indolence is often nothing but respite, relaxation from labor, a cessation of trouble, which brings displeasure as soon as it comes; pleasure, which ceases to be pleasure through habituation, and from which we always fall into ennui, which seems to be the story of our whole lives. It might be said that true pleasure resides only in the transition from one to the other.

To return to our subject, evil and good, whatever color they’re disguised with, are therefore the motives of all the actions and opinions of men, and the ideas cast in his direction make an impression, via the senses, on the child’s imagination, through the sounds of words accompanied by disagreeable or agreeable mannerisms, tending to the horrible. Once received, they can never be got rid of and they destroy all the lights of nature. Concerning the knowledge of good and evil, people get used to these ideas, developing an affection for what they’ve learned, refusing to unlearn it, and, finally, at a more advanced age, they believe in them and, in the absence of either power or any interest inciting them to go against the authority of education and example, and out of fear of taming this self-love, they feel obliged to maintain this society that can be established only by means of education.

These tremendous monsters of crime, vice and sin, misdeed, infamy and the rest, are all apparent evils which threaten to make them miserable, whether in this life or after death, and at the same time, they’re tricked with this pleasant phantom of honor, of virtue, of glory, of equity, apparent goods: they promise them happiness, to make observance of these laws easier, and they promise him happiness, to facilitate the observance of those very laws which limit his inclinations. Finally, whatever is contrary to society has been received into our minds with the ideas of something that our self-love should flee, as harmful to us. Good and evil, vice and virtue, shame and glory are therefore only determined in relation to the law and should only be exhortations to follow the general agreement of the public, and not real evil and good.

This stirring within, which makes us see ourselves as criminals, and makes us fear a penalty, whether from men or God, is only an effect of this preconception, to which the ideas of our childhood have accustomed us, about committing an infraction against the general pact. Honor is attached to virtue, which is the observance of the law, and infamy to crime, which is the infraction thereof. This honor is an imaginary good, which self-love flatters itself as useful to self-preservation, and infamy a false evil, which is thinks it should flee because it exposes him to true evil: this good or this evil consist only in the judgment that men form about us, and this judgment, whether good or bad, makes a strong impression on us.

We have pretensions to a certain appearance of life in other men’s minds, and we aspire to it, even if the image is not a good one, hating nothing more than being ignored, just as we love to live, even if our life is unhappy. I believe that our vanity is nothing but our self-love of the judgment we form of ourselves: it’s the self-love of judgment, or rather an opinion or opposition of our judgment against the void. Renown, whether good or bad, is a kind of life which reassures us against death, of which we are so afraid. Honor seems to multiply and fortify us against annihilation; glory, which is only a reputation, seems to brave it and perpetuate us against it: infamy, on the other hand, gives us a sense of the void and engulfs us in it. This is why we are so sensitive to what people think about us, which is simply the reward or punishment they apply with greater or lesser precision, to the degree with which we satisfy the common pact. Men's judgment is so important to us that we often regulate our happiness on this basis, and our reason is so indifferent to all opinions, which are so indifferent in themselves, that we have no trouble in conforming to them. We abhor whatever we see abhorred, we find lovely whatever we’re told is lovely; we flee, we hate, we affirm, we praise, we admire, we laugh, we cry, we fear in company, and only because of our subjection to the common judgments, which determine our indifference.

Good, evil, vice and virtue, shame and glory are only what we’re told is good or evil, vice or virtue; chameleonic ignorance and this vague credulity prove that we know nothing. The tyranny that this judgment has usurped over us, through the preconceptions of childhood, is shown above all by the infamy that it applies to the most natural of acts, by the turpitude it commands us to find in an inclination which, in the absence of prejudice, would declare itself as freely as the desire for food and drink, while this human judgment sets out to abuse the weakness of childhood to bias it through education. It could make us find the same turpitude in drinking and eating, and the same turpitude would be visible in all other things it chooses, on any subject to which human judgment applies shame or honor, vice or virtue; when it goes against what it has established, infamy would become glory, and vice virtue: we would rush after these things, we would love them, although even our reflections show us the falseness thereof. It would make us reason in one way and act in another, without ever being able to shake off the yoke laid on us by the judgment of the public: we can’t resist the mob and the majority, and we often know the truth while following lies. Whatever we hear praised is therefore virtue, which is only so because it’s praised; and whatever we hear blamed is vice, which is only so because it’s blamed. It’s human judgment that applies this supposed beauty or ugliness to whatever it wants; this alone is what people want. Provided we have public approval, praise and respect, we care little if, to gain it we’ve followed the path prescribed for us: we’re content to have it, although we know we didn’t deserve it, and even though we gained it only through deception and error.

This judgment has the power to make men voluntarily run towards certain death, and make them sacrifice everything for an apparent good which is displayed and glorified. Thus, each kingdom has its own forms of honor, glory, vice, virtue, equity, law, and modesty; they vary from one town to the next, since there are no laws, no inclinations aside from that of loving oneself that are universal and unalterable. Often virtue in one country is vice in another; often honor in one country becomes infamy ten degrees meridian away. Often the mere course of a river completely changes a fact, and the same impulse is vice on one bank and virtue on the other, turpitude on one side and glory on the other; the same man undertaking a journey could become virtuous or wicked from moment to moment. Therefore, virtue or honor, good or evil, glory and infamy are only opinions: all these words are nothing but human judgment, each individual fearing the blame he is able to avoid; all men's vice really exist only in their imagination, which disposes thereof at will and covers whatever it wants with the terms good and evil.

It’s this judgment which holds that in one country it is a virtue to eat one’s father, as if any better tomb could be provided than one’s own body, and that it’s parricide to bury him and expose him to decay. Everything depends, therefore, on which aspect of the thing is presented to us, to give us horror, hatred, or love, or the pleasant or frightful gestures to which our parents habituated us in childhood, while teaching us the appropriate words and inspiring these ideas in us. We are all so in thrall to this judgment that the torrent of the public opinion drags us along in spite of the contractions of our own convictions, which are powerless to hold us in check. We follow example, which is nothing other than judgment confirmed by the effects of our own self-love, which even makes us risk our lives for this imaginary being of opinion. Even the powerful are captive to the favor and respect of this same public, which they despise, not only in lofty deeds, but also in the vilest and basest ones, after the glory of a successful performance on the lute, or after throwing a ball perfectly, to the honor of successful tree-cultivation: none of this is a matter of indifference to them, and they don’t scorn the value of all the strength, speed, singing voice and skill to which they can lay claim. This is why there are virtues and honors which are subject to fashion, which is nothing but a temporary law imposed by public judgment. None, not even sensual pleasures, fail to recognize the power of this judgment.

This tickling, whether of the palate, or touch, or hearing, or the nose, which seems as though it should subsist of itself, be judged by itself, and be dependent only on itself, being material, corporeal and palpable, like that of animals, which is always equal, always the same and unchanging, is degraded or increased according to the judgment of others, which regulates our own judgement and thus regulates our senses. The unalterable pleasure in the purity of animal nature undergoes the impressions of this public opinion, which corrupts our own and corrupts our senses. This is nearly the same as asking one’s neighbor: “Is this a good dish I’m eating? Am I enjoying it?” Should someone else’s opinion or your own palate decide such things?

However, the authority of the senses is often defeated by the authority of this judgment. The senses, which should be the supreme judge, submit to its decisions. We feel almost no happiness, joy and pleasure, except as others judge that we should feel, to the extent to which they prescribe such feelings, on such occasions, and in such subjects that it allows us to feel such things; if the conviction of the senses sometimes resists the power of this judgment and is unable to contradict all of nature entirely, at minimum it falsifies and twists it in a very deformed manner. For, if my inclination regulates the imagination of another, it can never make my senses believe that they feel no pleasure in the act of love, at least it will cause them to take only a portion thereof, and might often prevent even this, or make it more or less intense, more or less bland; finally, all pleasures, all kinds of titillation, without that which the opinion, judgment, and imagination of others connects and adds to it, is a feeble pleasure and of minor intensity, just as all pains and all sorrow, without this addition of opinion, have very little power of bitterness and violence.

But finally, if pleasure is felt, what does its cause matter? Whether this pleasure comes to me by titillation, by another’s imagination, by my own fantasies, by falsehood and trickery, if it is false that the thing is pleasant, it is true and certain that it has pleased me; thus, my pleasure is always real and true. I’ve felt it, although by opinion, it’s sufficient to have felt it. If, while tasting absinthe, the opinions of someone else and my own can help me sense the pleasant sweetness of the sugar, I will be gratified by it, which shows us that we ourselves develop our passions, our temperament, our inclinations by the impulsion of others and ourselves. We are, in a way, able to increase our pain and pleasure; we give ourselves more or less sorrow or joy: it’s we who make ourselves feel an evil or a good thing to varying degrees, and our hate, our love, our horror, our fear, our anger, our wishes and our boredom often depend on our eager efforts to attain them, and in effect we only feel the passions to the extent that we leap towards them. We only feel hatred and love for something to the extent that we seek them out for ourselves; we flee what we make ourselves flee in order to love what we make ourselves love: finally, all our passions often possess as much anticipation as truth, and each of these supports the other: our inclination awaits our order, and we lead ourselves, according to the judgment of the public, which habituates our inclinations through praise or blame to hate or love what is labeled virtue or vice, honor or infamy. All the displays of joy and sadness, of love and hatred, of pity and anger, of generosity and courage or fear, contain false movements added to them by our vanity or our interests, and which even impress on us, without our consent or our noticing what we pretend to feel, and join to the truth of our inner and real feelings all the power, intensity and even the reality of the false impressions, which the feint obliges us to assume, so that it is not true that a woman doesn’t feel the pain that she shows with her tears at the death of a brutal husband, the resurrection of whom she would mourn even more; she manages to feel it despite the joy and advantage this death brings her.

For, unknown as we are to ourselves, we don’t know our own inclinations: a thousand things reside in our hearts unknown to us, a thousand imperceptible feelings enter there, which guide and govern us, undetected by us. There, the soul is, without our knowing it, falsehood, deception, fear, and all the passions are there equally unknown to us, and as it were in secret; and only certain occasions ever reveal us to ourselves. We can only judge ourselves according to how others judge us, with equal uncertainty, only from the effects we see ourselves producing.

When I try to answer on my own account, I see that the endorsement of anyone else is as good and assured as mine, or that mine is as ill-grounded as anyone else’s. I only know, as others do, what I am capable of. Finally, I depart from myself and I only know my powers and my preferences from experience alone, of which I cannot be sure: I act without knowing how I will act, despite my present movements, nor how I will think at another time, when I might be different and completely altered. For, I change my temperament hourly, so to speak, the same as I do my spatial position, and since my self today is no longer the self of yesterday, how can I have any right over the self who will exist in a month’s time? Human judgment, which we are so accustomed to fearing, is always struggling against our self-love, to harmonize it with this civil society that it destroys: since our self-love cannot be extinguished, people deceive themselves; their self-love is misled, it is guided by a supposed interest which snares it, but since it often returns to its true interest, while abandoning that which the judgment of the public holds up for it, and since the violence done to it, by the common opinion falls short of destroying nature entirely, it’s impossible to guess on what occasion self-love and nature will be defeated by, or will triumph over the judgment of the public, or, finally, what path it will follow amid so many competing influences.

For, free will is just another imaginary term. This fantastic choice, a privilege with which we’re adorned, is only a figment, invented by reason to render us worthy of torments or rewards, or rather to give a hue of justice to the penalties which have been assigned to infractions against the common treaty. All that we love we are forced to love, and we can’t not love it: there is no freedom. The greatest apparent good or evil imposes an invincible necessity on our hatred and our love; we necessarily hate, and we love precisely as we love, ultimately, not because we must love, but because we do love. Our self-love often has two interests in sight, which are in tension, but the strongest interest it sees will inevitably dominate, and without having the choice, it loves, it wants, it voluntarily and necessarily takes it, and can’t not want it, and it can’t not love it, unless it envisages and sees it as the weaker party. This is the source of the will, which is often against itself, when self-love would acquire the good that charms it, or the evil that the public judgment holds up, which are nearly always contrary, opposite, and incompatible. This is the source of this continual debate between our desires and our movements, which destroy each other, and for which vain reasons are sought out; for, whatever cause we’re given for things we don’t understand, we eagerly seize it: it comforts us in our ignorance.

We love to have a plan applied to us, an order which aligns what we feel inside with what we see outside of ourselves; it doesn’t matter what it’s based on. We seize upon the arrangement and the comparison, the seductive charms of which win us over. It’s a scene that delights our hearts to see appropriate ideas; it’s a sense, a reason composed to fit the thing perfectly, which seems to cast a bright light for us; it’s an apparent explanation of the enigma about which we flatter ourselves with a certain feeble understanding; it’s a fabricated tale which seems to be real. All these false subtleties satisfy us, amuse us in all matters where our pride ruefully senses the weakness of our reason, and thinks it can spare itself the shame, and save itself from the trouble of hard labor. Finally, a thousand connections and harmonies can always be found, which one’s reason will fit to the obscure object as when explaining an enigma, and each plan in particular will seem proper and natural at the moment when it’s presented and when it is given a subtle application.

These are different sleights that do the job, about which even what I say is only a “perhaps”, which is as worthy as the other various faces, various sides, which are presented and which trick us while habitually attaching us to one sense, which we are shown, without thinking that there might be a thousand others, all of which are different and no less correct or rational, and which might halt and remove our uncertainty and give peace to our anxious ignorance. Finally, we would end up drawing very different conclusions from the ones we’re used to drawing. For our reasoning is nothing but an instinct habituated to suppositions that are apparent and hard to grasp, which the authority of education, of the public judgment and example make us accept without examination, and on which we are taught to reason consistently. This repetition of the same act ultimately forms this habit of reason, and fortifies this second one which makes us reason in nearly the same way as the nursemaid teaches us to talk or walk, or the way a hunter habituates a dog to hunting tricks, and a bird to seek prey up in the air. It’s an important edifice built by the force of education upon suppositions that one has received without objection and without contradiction, and to which one is accustomed. Anything that falls short of this relationship and this agreement, anything that runs counter to this received plan, anything that does harm to this habit shocks us, astonishes us, repels our judgment and seems irrational to us. Ultimately, only the force of reflection and the guide of our brothers the animals can allow us to return to nature, which civil society has disguised completely for us, to subject us to its laws. It’s only by their instructions that we recognize the true good and the true evil: preservation and annihilation, which constitute the motive of all their actions.

All of our inclinations, whether good or wicked, to virtue or vice, are nothing but a reflex of this civilized self-love. Our virtues are passions ruined by other defective passions. Our virtues are flawed and have bad roots. If self-love is a vice, then everything we do is vicious, everything seems to be weakness and flawed that civil society has made into vice or virtue, everything it has covered with glory or infamy, according to the utility of its agreement and the fulfillment of the general pact. All that is thought most glorious and magnanimous has a shameful basis and comes by base and contemptible motives. Our temperament is vice or virtue, according to the way self-love guides it for the good of society. There is no religion that better establishes this agreement than the Christian one, here it is adapted the best way it can be; mutual succor is its principal law; it’s a virtue to submit, a crime to avenge oneself, a merit to oblige one’s enemy, a sin to hate him. It establishes the power of rulers and the subjection of the masses, to the point of loving the tyrant, and sacrificing oneself for him. So, it should come as no shock surprise that it ended up spreading as far as it has: for, even though it’s divided into diverse sects, it presently enjoys its turn reigning over nearly the whole earth, given that the Mahometan religion is one of its branches: it’s the same with religions as with the other things that succeed each other over time, and which disappear entirely. The new one is always established on the foundations of the old one, which it reorganizes at will, and to which it gives an air of novelty only, or rather which it rejuvenates to look all the more impressive. Although we have spoken of all the religions in general, let’s go into some detail on the one presently dominant, and in which we were born.

## THE TRUTH OF CHRISTIANITY.

= > (p.187) This pompous river that flows so majestically was almost nothing at its source: it's Moses, escaping the persecution of the Egyptians with six hundred thousand fugitives led and ruled in a desert. This sublime genius made laws to prevent disturbances and disorder; he has to maintain his new authority against sedition from this indocile and crude people. He has to establish an order among this assemblage of vagabonds: he forces them to submit to his guidance on the promise that he will lead them to an abundant land, of which he gives them exceptional descriptions. He traps their gullibility with beautiful predictions of a future and of the power of a king who will rule them, to make them more easily submit to his commandments and console them in their present suffering. He gives them laws which, whether he took and composed them from those of the Egyptians, where they had lived, whether he invented them himself, are very judicious. To give an unshakeable power to this new establishment and its authority, he makes God its author and only communicates them to the people as his interpreter. What veneration, what respect, what obedience it inspires in this people! Its capacity to succor them in their needs, whether through political craft or a knowledge of nature, wins for him the role as God’s minister and nature’s master. Everything that is done becomes a miracle. He flatters them with the visible protection of this God, who has chosen them alone, who watches unceasingly over them, whether to reward or punish them. He teaches them their descendance from a beginning of the world which satisfies their curiosity, and he always dazzles them with the care God took of their fathers and the preference he gave them over all other peoples, after having given them as their common father Adam, who is also the father of all nations. He gives them a second one, Abraham, to distinguish them from the other nations. He confirms circumcision, which was already established as a distinction for this family protected by God, and makes it a religious act for them to make it more compulsory. To keep them from mixing with other peoples, over whom they claim great preference, he gives them a very sublime idea of this God, who becomes familiar with them and who had, as it were, dealings with their ancestors.

This is he who is, this is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end; he has no name, vengeance is his alone. Moses was well aware of how amenable mixing with and seeing the example of the Egyptians had made his people to superstition, how burdened their religion had become with the vulgarity of these peoples. For it seems that all peoples have had an elevated idea of the deity and almost with the same epithets: *incomprehensible*, *eternal*, *immense*, *omnipotent*, *the author of all things*, *unique*, *rewarder of good and evil*, which are only common qualities coming from common sense. All nations have had this foundation for their religion, and despite the different alterations that might have led the people to forget it, their sages have always kept it intact. But the troubling part is the fact that the cult established to honor this deity has supplanted the deity itself. The senses want an object that attracts them and gives them rest, and these images that Moses so strictly forbids his people to have, which were only symbols of the deity to help the imagination to think of a being about which it knew nothing, who only appeared in the way I’ve already mentioned; these symbols, which are a muddled and material idea, have become so many gods in the ignorance of the masses who wanted to materialize the deity with statues and ceremonies that affect the senses and render the deity palpable and touchable, so to speak. For religious service is something in formation, where people adore seeing and making it felt. Don’t go thinking that the Egyptian worships a dog or the pagan a bit of wood: they see them as memorials, or even as dwelling-places, somewhat more particular, of the being who is everywhere and who remains unalterable and incorruptible, in spite of the decadence of their symbol.

Neptune, Jupiter, Pluto, and many others that once were, should be understood as a single deity in different functions, but the people have made the sign of God into God himself, and mistaken the portrait for the person, as the Calvinist accuses the Catholic of doing in the veneration of the image and with regard to the Eucharist. Moses had noticed this corruption in the Egyptian religion, and how a visible image was a dangerous gateway to the crudity and ignorance of the masses to forget the deity, and only worship the visible object, a defect that would render a religion mad, irrational and ripe for self-destruction, the yoke of which is too weak to stop a man of reflection and last forever. He wanted to preserve his religion from all these imperfections, to render it firm and stable: he therefore reestablished a suitable idea of the deity, whose greatness, loftiness, elevation, and incomprehensibility help belief through the pleasure of admiration. He rejects all types of simulacra, whether of men, or animals, even as ornamentation, for fear of leaving a snare for their ignorance and their superstition, and to give their senses some resting place which might seize hold of them without corrupting them or seducing them, he invents a chest that would be impossible to worship, where he says that the sublime deity for whom he alone arranges all praise, is particularly present. This chest fixes down adoration without mistaking it for him. It hides God and designates him, proclaims his incomprehensibility and impalpability while rendering him, in a way, palpable, it exposes him to the senses, without mistaking the sign for the thing itself, which is the most important thing to avoid. This chest, on the contrary, by its very nature inviolably preserves his being as a sign, and even leads from the something obscure and invisible thing it hides to the idea of all the greatness of the deity: nothing could be more clever, more political, nothing could be better devised, nothing could be better suited to preserve the idea of this pure and sublime deity, in spite of the crassness of the senses, which have to be satisfied.

He ordains an infinity of ceremonies, he creates a religious service brimming with external and tangible minutiae, the number, variety, order, changing, arrangement, magnificence and mystery of which agreeably captivate the senses, the imagination, and the memory, gaining acceptance for them and keeping people from thinking too much about them due to the difficulty of learning them and the sweetness of admiring them, which distracts people and leaves no leisure to think too deeply about them. He retains sacrifice from the other religions he has known, for he defers to them in this matter, for it seems that the idea of God must have led all nations naturally and consecutively to this fashion of worship. For sacrifice seems to be a gift made to the deity; it’s something offered to him to win his love, to recognize him as the creator, author, benefactor, master, and ruler, to whom everything belongs and from whom everything was received. For in sacrifice we are annihilated and avow the nothingness of all creatures: one annihilates oneself before Him who is all by Himself, to glorify him by our baseness and elevate him by our humiliation, and by the extinction of what is offered to Him.

Moses also retains the mortification[[13]](#footnote-13) of the body, which is universal and common to all religions. This is a sacrifice in which one gives oneself, not only one’s body, but also one's mind, in bodily affliction; this is an expression of submission, a show of respect attested by pain; it’s a confession, which is the rule of all that is good, which alone merits no punishment, and is in no way guilty: it’s a voluntary punishment for having offended him, it’s an attestation that he is the avenger of crime, it’s a testimony that he alone is good, happy and perfect, while everyone else is guilty, unhappy and defective; it’s a disfigurement of his own workmanship to give all the luster to the artisan; it’s a pain of the creature, honorable to the creator in whose honor the creature is punished; it’s a voluntary suffering, in which one delivers to Him one’s pleasure, one’s health, to prove that one is giving all they can give.

To establish his family above others, Moses gave it the priesthood, which would keep it busy with so many ceremonies and keep it fed with the large number of sacrifices. Finally, he gives it the best, the most honorable, the sweetest and most lucrative governmental functions; he composes a book from all I’ve just discussed, where he makes God the guide of all actions, to whom he owes all the laws he has given, of whom he was only a colleague in ruling the people, and in order to preserve this book forever, he places it in the ark, this mysterious chest where God resides. This book is the most ancient of all books, the source of the religion of the Jews and our own and of all those now dominant, this book tells us things that are hard to believe, and which are above our comprehension.

The creation of the world and its miracles, being contrary to the order of common sense, require an authority to be accepted. As incredible as the tale of this creation and of the miracles performed while guiding this people is, I don’t know how that might have happened or rather whether it might not have happened, but this possibility is also not a sufficient reason to submit to it. I also don’t know whether Moses, as a skilled politician, might have invented these things for the establishment of his laws and his authority. If I agreed that this book truly came from him, I still wouldn’t know if what he says is true: do you think that in six thousand years they will be able plumb the depths of the history of our doings? A fairy tale, a novel – while we struggle to find the least detail in things that have happened in our own time which hasn’t been altered in the telling. Also, how do we know that this book was taken literally during the life of Moses? It might have been seen as simply a good piece of writing, a great story, which became respectable thanks to the recommendation and obscurity which the passage of time gives to things, — and held as true or certain because of the ignorance and superstition of the masses. For this is all possible, and if it can’t be established, then we can’t have any conviction. Even if it had been believed in Moses’ day as it is now, what is known about the artifices that are supposed to be believed? Would this belief be a proof of its truth? Is it impossible to get a crude people to believe miraculous and extraordinary things? How many ignorant men are truly eager to believe whatever seems miraculous! When you think about it, however weak may be the foundation of a common, but universal opinion, how quickly the people embrace a brilliant error! How charmed it is by a magnificent lie, what a snare a striking falsehood is for its gullibility! Consider whether popular belief is a good guarantee of the truth; whether it should be given the slightest credit, whether the sage should follow the torrent of the mob, if, even in indifferent matters where no contradictions are found, this report of the populace should truly tempt our credulity and take us from the state of suspension which we should apply to everything we don’t know for sure.

In addition, is any miracle whatsoever beyond belief with respect to a man who is already thought to have spoken with a God? Doesn’t this supposed commerce with the deity make his words into so many oracles, the authoritativeness of which is recognized despite the obscurities that bother us? Finally, is Moses the only one who succeeded in imbuing the people with this opinion, without it really happening? Didn’t Numa Pompilius and Mahomet successfully claim the same thing, to make their laws more venerable? This extraordinary deed, such as it was, doesn’t need the truth to persist; lies have made it successful.

If you point to miracles as proof of the mission of the Lawgiver, how can you show that he had the assistance and favor of the master of nature, who communicated his power to him? Prove the miracles he says he performed: or should I take him at his word? These facts can be misleading, fabulous, ill-intentioned, and the belief of the masses has no weight. Should the miracles of St. Francis, of Paul, which are superior to those of Jesus Christ in number and in excellence, be believed in order to be received by all of Catholicism, and attested by many witnesses? How many pagans have worked similar miracles? Didn’t they predict the future like the prophets? Didn’t they multiply food? Didn’t they resurrect the dead? Didn’t they slow down the sun? Or rather, haven’t they imposed the belief in these things on mankind? Do they not have authors who wrote it down, so that posterity would believe it? Are they lacking in false witnesses, or real ones invented to attest these things? What entitlement, ultimately, do we have that they lacked, proving ours to be true, and showing theirs to be false? All men can be mistaken and misled, and might aim to deceive; all might be gullible and dishonest; isn’t human tradition, by which we know everything, not a very false path? And might not something that reaches us by these human retellings, from father to son, be false? Or rather, can it ever be true? Is any fact so widely recognized that it will be accepted in all naivety from someone else, and which he himself will share without any alteration? Mustn't a story pass through many hands for it to come to us, corrupted and completely different from what it was despite how little each man, each year, each century, each translator, may add to or take from it: any fact might have been altered and changed over the years. Falsehood at the source, falsehood in transmission, it is impossible for us to know the truth of a fact with any certainty, when we receive it by the testimony of another. Whether the fact happens in our own age or not, it comes to us in a false manner, and we transmit it in a false manner: this testimony of others can always be false or misleading, deceived or deceptive; we will deceive other deceivers!

It’s all lies or illusions, trickery or ignorance; ultimately, falsehood and uncertainty on all sides. Although I can’t prove a lie and the false part of a fact when none of its details repel my credulity, even if I find no contradiction in it, the false part may well be unknown to me. I don’t have to believe everything that is credible: mere plausibility shouldn’t incline me one way or the other, but it’s enough for something to have passed from mouth to mouth to suspect it is simply corrupt: retelling is a very strong proof of falseness.

It shows great restraint even to remain in suspension, and not to contradict people when they’re talking: this condescension, this neutrality is the indulgence of being neither for nor against, doing the favor of not opposing it. I claim that this testimony is a certificate of falsehood, and that it is surely false, and if one is humble enough to choose suspension, doubt and uncertainty, one doesn’t always have to have present in one's mind that anything is possible, and that this testimony, although usually false, might sometimes be true, according to the occasion, without our knowing it: tradition, human retelling, human testimonies – behold the deceptive canal by which all the facts of antiquity come to us, and better reasons could be offered to persuade us to believe, if not to tell us that the opposite cannot be demonstrated. But I would be very careful about granting belief to save myself the futile trouble of exculpating the truth of a fact that’s impossible to discover; I would go my way without saying a word: behold the vain authority of miracles, and of all that we are obliged to believe about them!

You will reply that I believe that Rome is real; although I only know it by the word of another, but it’s a fact that continually subsists, under the power of the senses; a thousand people convinced by their senses attest to me in a consistent manner, without any conspiracy, without any interest in tricking me and perhaps even without having been deceived about the existence of this city; this is different from these other facts, not a trace of which remains; which are supposed to have happened in a single moment, and which often have only a gullible or untrustworthy person as their witness, with either an interest, an inclination, or the power to deceive us while deceiving a thousand others. Finally, however, if this testimony were similar to that which attests the existence of Rome and could be believed at no cost or effort to us, or the assumption of any blindness, then assent could be granted.

But judge for yourself whether we’re in the same situation with respect to Moses and his miracles; which are ancient and gone, which might have been altered, which may have only ever existed in his mind: the people held up as witnesses are only concocted names, vain names thrown into the air, people who never existed, nominations: a hundred people who are cited as if they were real, whose testimony is cited and who are used as supports, strengthened as if by a real pillar, an effective assistance and a true authority. Finally, although I don’t claim that Moses was a political schemer, that his book is false, I would retain my state of suspension simply because these things might be true. But how can I be sure that, after Moses died, this book wasn’t put together and altered, since it has been lost many times, and since it even refers to his death.

After this first founder came many famous men who ruled the Jewish people in the spirit of the lawgiver; and, as this anxious curiosity about the future tormented this people no less than other nations, periodically there arose among them prophets who had, it’s said, commerce with God, and who, to model themselves entirely on Moses, entertained the people with prophecies, with God’s protection, and the arrival of a powerful king, a prosperous state, or even punishment or vengeance, along with attacks on their persecutors, and the transgressors of the Law: language very similar to what might be said to a fugitive nation, living in a desert, and to whom one wished to give a law, to win obedience and respect, and which would bring credit and prestige with the masses. Their style is quite similar to that of Moses, emphatic, enigmatic, obscure and ambiguous; all they say by way of allegory, comparison, parables, metaphors, gives rise to different applications on the arrival of this king and on their future power, and on the punishment of the violators of the law and on the reproach of their persecution. All of this might apply to Jesus Christ, to Solomon, to David, and to a thousand others, to whomsoever you want to apply it; the sweetness of this explanation and an apparent light in an obscure matter is seductive and leads us to accept them; this useful[[14]](#footnote-14)arrangement is appropriated by a skilled hand from something soft and malleable; we find it pleasant, it leads our judgment to believe that this relationship is inherent to it, when it’s only in the mind; that this appropriateness arises of itself, while we are its true authors: it’s a hat which is measured precisely to my head without its maker having me in mind when he made it; it’s a cloak that I take, which happens to be just my size; this enigmatic style of prophecy could equally apply to many of the Jewish kings; this generic and common cloak can be put on anyone you want, since it is made for nobody and everybody, without anything more than chance causing it to fit one person better than another. It may even be less appropriate, less suited to Jesus Christ than to many others.

If we set out to examine each of these prophecies in turn, which are only applied to him because their obscure nature allows them such flexibility and generality: but even if this cloak fits him well enough, even if it designated him clearly, perfectly, uniquely, which is not the case, it would be a fortuitous effect of sheer chance that this conformity should obtain. At least it might be true, and nothing can prove it with certainty, that this prophecy, as clear, detailed and precisely fulfilled only in Jesus Christ as it is, actually had him alone in mind: it’s a relation, if you like, a close match, a story rather than a prediction, a very close match; but the connection is only fortuitous; ultimately, even if this applicability were real, even if it had only metaphor, parable, enigma and allegory to favor and promote its application to Jesus Christ; even if the prophecies had had him in view and their fulfillment didn’t come down to chance, all of which are uncertain and dubious suppositions, which even I willingly grant as true and certain for a moment, what conclusion could be drawn from this? Who could point to the origin of this science of the future: whether it is chance, nature, or God, or the devil who inspires us in this way; the pagans gave prophecies that were fulfilled, Christians recognize that the Devil can predict the future, that even wicked men can have the gift of prophecy, which has necessarily been admitted on the basis of verified facts; and since some have wanted to attribute the fulfillment of their prophecies to chance, that would also work for ours. Might not it be the case that the Devil – to speak and reason according to the principles that are used against the oracles – might not the Devil inspire the prediction of a future man, from the future circumstances of his life, by which the fulfillment of this foreseen fact is proved? Not at all. For the same reason should we believe that this man, truly predicted, is a good and miraculous man? Was Nebuchadnezzar wicked? Should this prediction make us think a thousand things to his credit?

One should only believe what is predicted without any addition. No, I take it back: credit should be taken away when things are predicted and not fulfilled, and the rest should be rejected as dubious: if the bulk of the prophecy arrives in this man mixed with other, invisible things, which they want us to accept, the truth of this fact, as proved and visible, should not push our belief to the point of believing what is not fulfilled and which is neither perceptible nor visible. On the contrary, we might suspect that the certain fulfillment of this fact is a snare, to draw us into falsehood and lies; we might expect that this part of the prediction is only there to hide the falseness of the rest, which passed unnoticed, that the plan of this prophetic spirit is to shake our credulity with the certainty of a foreseen fact, to more easily drive it into error, and to gain a deceptive credit, finally to elevate an Antichrist into God, to hide a seducer under the veil of the truth, and confer respect and authority that will be fatal for the belief of the masses.

But even if it were not a compound of truth and falsehood, but entirely true and clear, there would be no room for any judgment about this man aside from what was in the prophecy and nothing else. God may well have caused Solomon to predict, in a prophecy where his deeds are detailed, or even praised, speaking with the emphasis of metaphor and in a figurative way about his virtues, his knowledge, his wisdom, his power, his submissiveness, without any obligation of belief, — that this made him impeccable; his unpredicted sin can’t render the prophecy false or less divine, the imperfection of this predicted man does nothing to diminish the certainty and the excellence of the prediction. Jesus Christ can, therefore, have been clearly and truly predicted without being God, without being infallible, or impeccable, any more than Solomon, and without any requirement to consider him, beyond what is said of him. A few expressions found in these prophecies, a few terms, that you might even insert as you wish, to certify that he is God, however sincere he was when he himself offered assurances that he was God, all that should pass as nothing but metaphorical expressions, which exaggerate his excellence, as far removed as the thing, taken literally, is from common sense, and from all credibility. It is far easier for reason and judgment to think the former than the latter, instead of believing that God is a man, and to see only a figurative sense in this expression; perhaps Jesus Christ was only referring to himself in this sense when he said he is the son of God. Maybe time alone, and his disciples, ended up promoting the literal sense and driving the spirit out of the figure. Finally, I confess that the establishment of this opinion is an extraordinary event, but which is well within the bounds of human folly: after having seen a serpent God, it’s not hard to believe in a human God. Finally, the prophecy is in no other circumstance a proof that Jesus Christ is not a man like any other, who might be mistaken on his own account or have maliciously tricked us, any more than the miracles, which only came to our knowledge via tradition, the uncertainty of which has already been shown.

Jesus Christ, who knew all the prophecies, applied them to himself as best he could, and this inflated and figurative language of *liberator*, *future king*, *captivity*, *punishment*, *joy*, *pleasure*, which the Jewish writers had used, whether to keep them in fear, or to gain obedience through the sweetness of hope, or by rebuking their ingratitude, matched the state in which he found himself, and happened to be agreeable to the sense in which Jesus Christ ultimately dressed himself. Prophecy is a chameleon that takes the color of the object presented to it. He might have aimed only at reforming the abuses of the Law of Moses and criticizing the Pharisees, the opposition of whom, casting him as their opposite, set him up as the head of a new religion, while destroying that of Moses, which served as the foundation of his own, which his apostles established, either by conspiracy or through the power of persuasion, just as all new religions are ordinarily established; as Mahomet laid the foundations of his own, for in the guise of reform or clarification new things are always introduced, which would be shocking without this veil, and ultimately, the people changes its religion, often without realizing it, and a new belief is smuggled into its mind under the husk of the old one. I leave it to the savants to discuss whether these holy books, which are the source of all our religions, or rather of all the Christian sects, and which have been lost many times, have been restored in all their purity. Even if they even haven’t been lost and mistakenly replaced with others, without our knowing it, even if their various translations haven’t brought in mistakes, additions and abuses, and falsifications, is there any dissertation, study, analysis that can resolve anything on this subject, beyond blind and audacious guesses? Finally, as I’ve already said, isn’t everything that is handled by men, everything coming by their testimony sullied, false, and altered?

The wisdom of the morality of Jesus Christ does not prove the truth of his doctrine; every new establishment aims at a greater good than the existing one, to overawe mankind: this humility, this forgiveness of enemies is only a kind of submission that contributes more to society, which, like the other laws, runs counter to self-love, compensates it, and which is softened by the hope and sight of a higher interest. Ultimately, Christianity is like all other religions in all its details, however our reason might want to distinguish them: this gospel, this history, this summary of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, is also written in a style full of metaphors and parables, and says, clear as a bell, everything they wanted him to say. Each word is susceptible to very different, and equally plausible explanations; it’s a field without a clear path, and this absence of rules shows how incapable this book is of subjecting and uniting its followers. Thus, properly speaking, it is only a source of debate, war, argumentation and sects.

Jesus Christ says that his religion is infallible, but if you set the Christianity of today against the Christianity of the time of Jesus Christ, you’ll find almost no similar characteristics. It’s no longer the same religion. Time, with its empire over all things, has shown its power and changed it immensely, despite all human precautions; a thousand imperceptible changes have disfigured it beyond recognition, and Jesus Christ himself would disavow it, so much has it changed and still changes every day.

Nobody knows where to look for this supposed infallibility: whether in this book, which will always be there and which everyone can innocently explain in their own way; whether it’s in this book and the explanation that the leader gives it; whether it’s in this book and the explanation of the leader of the united assemblies, or only of the assemblies without any leader. It’s said to reside in the leader; but nobody knows who the leader is, whether there is one, or whether all are equal. The Holy Spirit, which is invisible, doesn’t present itself more obviously to some than to others, and doesn’t keep interest, greed, self-love from producing all their decisions. What do we know, when Peter and his successors call this church infallible, and not the other successors of the apostles, whether the primacy of the city of Rome isn’t the sole reason of the primacy of its Bishop? If the successor of Paul, who worked more than any other apostle to found this church, isn’t superior to the successors of Peter, and lacks the power to rebuke them for their failings. Finally, whether it isn’t Christianity in general, which is infallible, and which is the whole body of this church which should never perish? All questions that are impossible to resolve.

This book, the vague meaning of which we seek to determine and establish its sense, leads to a million books of explanations, which are subject to further dubious explanations, and so on to infinity; and our reason is so tentative that the same words, the same citation, the same application or explanation is equally favorable; it’s a heap of explanations that crushes us, troubles us and makes things even more obscure than they were; in trying to enlighten us, they blind us, and in seeking to guide us ,they lead us astray. This whole tradition of the Fathers is equally useful and favorable, and the passages are explained so well, and harmonized with all possible meanings. It is completely impossible for a man without preconceived notions to pick the side of truth, which such a hodgepodge has rendered inscrutable, along with the parabolic and metaphorical style of the history of Jesus Christ.

## AGAINST PASCAL.

Nobody knows if it’s necessary to pick one side, whether they’re all equally good, whether self-interest or vanity are what force everyone to make a choice, that only one’s own is true, while all the rest are vicious, detestable and cursed: for in the dispute people tend to tarnish each other; often they only fight with terms; often they have the same opinion without realizing it, making no effort even to separate from each other when they are in fact united, attributing to their opponent a thousand opinions they don’t hold. People create a phantom to fight it to their own advantage and claim the honor of an imaginary and easy victory. This theology, which was supposed to unite them in agreement, only provides all of them with subtleties to elude the dartscast at them and defend their choice, whatever it may be. Finally, it is astonishing that so many geniuses, above the common level, having been audacious enough to make a decision among so many different paths, and to do so in good faith and with sincere attachment, for all parties contain both good and bad people, credulous and incredulous ones, some of whom follow and defend their cause, persuaded that it is good, and others support it, although they’re convinced of its uncertainty, only because they were born in it and from a sense of honor and self-interest, which is the general and common motive of those who are persuaded and those who aren’t.

If a good person believes in good faith and fails to recognize the subtlety of the arguments he makes against his adversaries, it’s clearly only because the effort of learning things keeps him from being able to reflect on them, busy as he is educating himself on what he must believe and defend; he is too humble to examine whether he should believe and defend these things; his mind, dull in conceiving the meaning of a passage, has lost the power to grasp its accuracy; his memory strives only to retain what is said, which keeps the judgment from studying whether there was a good reason to say it, grasping so many conclusions, drawn from suppositions, and recognizing it falseness. In the end, science is the obstacle to knowledge, the effort at retention is what keeps us from knowing anything: for, it isn’t being learned by oneself and without the sort of reflection capable of digesting things; we are only learned thanks to the learning of others; our memory knows much and our mind nothing at all. Many are well-educated in an ignorant curriculum, who are full without taking any nourishment! With reflection, it’s only a swelling of dropsy, an intumescence of a diseased man, and not the colors of a healthy one; often, weighed down by those things which must be learned, people have no time to reflect on them, and become very idiotic savants; study should only aim at educating the judgment and memory.

This is the cause of the blindness of many good minds that are attached to their cause in good faith. Study often gives them a thirst for what they are learning, like a lawyer who, although he initially found his case dubious, sees what he will gain and how he can win, ultimately lets his judgment be corrupted and, by seeking to persuade others, ends up convincing himself of the soundness of his arguments. Their desire to bring others to a position brings themselves over; they succumb to their own efforts and are defeated by themselves, so that this study, this science, this dispute makes them ever more partial, wins their affection, makes them more fit and assured, and the dearer their cause is to them, the more upsetting it would be to unlearn what they’ve spent their whole lives learning. Nobody wants to lose their prize, their troubles, and their glory, which would vanish if a single ray of reflection were directed at it; our interests and our hearts, which nearly always guide our judgment, would make us shut our eyes against this annoying light, which would give us a painful knowledge of the inanity of our glory, of our science, of our efforts, and would tear our sweet illusions away forever. Finally, nothing is above the folly and weakness of the greatest and most elevated genius in the world; no errors, no opinions, no absurdities, no fantasies are beyond him, and nothing in us can deter us. Such are the limits, the bounds, the nature, flights, and capacity of human reason; this supposed excellence is only with respect to and by comparison with other men, who are even weaker and more foolish.

But finally, if reason is uncertain, if the immortality of the soul is uncertain, if all of nature is uncertain; if vice and virtue, glory and honor are uncertain; if the book of Moses is uncertain, the prophecies uncertain, Jesus Christ uncertain, the miracles uncertain, the Church uncertain, the leader uncertain, infallibility uncertain, tradition uncertain, the testimonies of men false, uncertain and fabulous, all of which form this general and fundamental spring of human conduct and society: if everything, ultimately, is only ignorance, obscurity, uncertainty, doubt, error, opinion, supposition, then what should be done? Doubt, ignore, know nothing, discuss nothing, or discuss without establishing or resolving anything.

If everything, says Pascal, is equally doubtful, then choose what is most advantageous or the side where least risk is found. But if all is equally doubtful, nothing is more advantageous than anything else, there is equal risk on all sides, equal anticipation and equal error: if the Catholic religion is imaginary, then all its advantages are imaginary, and are no better than the advantages of suspension. It may be that each party is the only true one; I confess this, everything is possible; our reason doesn’t determine the measure of the conception; it is not true that we run the risk threatened by one party against another: where did it get the freedom to make threats, and why should we expect the blessings it promises, or how was it able to make promises? Because this Heaven and Hell are goods and evils that each party is able to give in their own right, to support themselves and destroy the others: they are equally true, and equally false, equally possible, and equally to be expected, equally to be feared, equally imaginary, equally doubtful, equally persuasive.

You say that I risk nothing by making a choice; but I cannot make a choice without running all possible risks, which others have eagerly threatened me with, and without renouncing the possible blessings they have eagerly promised me. What is this advantage that some have dreamed up as a promise to me, while all other parties also have the liberty of threatening me with the opposite? Are these blessings or evils only empty promises or threats? If the Christian had made to promises, then he would have no advantage, the arguments being equal on all sides; the win and the loss are equal on all sides. The risk is the same for all in this wager, since all that is offered is only fantasy, promises, or threats that are equally false, equally possible, and of no greater value than anything that isn’t offered and might be offered, at no cost, since, ultimately, there is nothing that truly belongs to any party.

You can say that you have more at stake than I do, but couldn't I offer hollow promises too? I wager nothing if I make a wager, but I lose a great deal if I lose: both of us together can’t lose or win nothing, since there is nothing to a wager where we can equally lose or win. If there is any deceptive subtlety, any seductive comparison in such an abstract subject, we aren’t even separating what is at stake from the wager. For this happiness is the wageritself, this paradise we’re betting on either does or does not exist, and let’s say I was tricked or not, you might be mistaken or not, both of us can be mistaken: this is true or false, or equally dangerous. Nobody can say that the option of suspension has nothing to lose: it promises everything, and promises nothing, it has in hand, like all the others, both good and evil that it can promise or intimidate others with. It also has a hell, where the Mahometan or the Christian will be punished for being brazen enough to escape the ignorance and uncertainty in which nature caused us to be born, for breaking the natural barriers, for having failed to follow the simple lights of good sense, for lacking the acquiescence to hold to the doubts that are our lot – finally, for having taken sides, which was forbidden. For does it not seem that nature has set all sorts of obstacles to certainty, enshrouding all of us in darkness, and that it’s a crime to try and pierce them and attribute ourselves a greater perfection than is prescribed for us, a guilty rashness of running in the night, of attributing ourselves a light and a force that we don’t really possess. Finally, for taking a side, which all of them forbid us to do, we will be punished or rewarded for having despised or having respected his orders. If the Mahometan, or any other among them threatens me with their Hell, I have a greater right to threaten him in the same way, and find that I was wrong to confess that we all have as much to gain and lose; for, although everything is possible and uncertain, isn't it a probability that I find myself in the most rational situation, whatever risk there may be of error and of succumbing to the threatened misfortune, should I not reassure myself with the fact that I can do no better and that to avoid all crime I must remain respectfully ignorant, which is the lot to which I am condemned? I would rather be in a state of suspension than in error: finally, am I guilty for lacking greater rationality or a better grasp of things, for not being stronger and more perfect? Is it a crime not to have keener senses, better eyesight, and living with my condition?

In addition, my suspension is not a side I’ve chosen, but a preparation for all sides. I am uncertain even in my uncertainty. The soundness of my doubt consists in doubting even my doubts, in being suspended and fragile in my suspension, and my suspension will be the party with truth on its side: it is only a simple inclination and a naked desire for the unknown truth. Whoever happens to be correct, I would be for him, whichever opinion is the true one, whichever God is the true one, I wouldn’t reject him, I would serve him and worship him in my doubt and love him with all my heart. What have I to fear then, whether from the Christian, the Jew or the Mahometan, or the Pagan, since I serve the God they serve and I am generally of the same doctrine as they? For, my suspension is not a dead suspension, it is alive and ardent and desirous of the truth; finally, it is well-intentioned, which is all I need to attach myself to whichever religion turns out to be good, to which I will have been found to belong, in my uncertainty. It’s not only a capacity for true religion, but a religion that is already formed and complete, a desire that can confer the merit of truth and compensate for an involuntary defect; it’s docility to all that is true, carte blanche for all impressions, finally, a suspended belief, waiting for and desiring its object with respect and sincerity.

I therefore have nothing to fear from the threats of any party, I can lay claim to all their promises, and I have nothing to lose. What is more, if should I agree that it’s to my advantage to take a side and grant my belief to an opinion, what could be wrong with that? Is that conviction contrary to my judgment? This is proving my interests to me, not the truth, and my benefit is no proof of my opinion. Is the measure of advantage it promises a rule to judge the truth of an opinion? Am I empowered to grant my belief to something I don’t believe? Will my utility compel my persuasion on things of which I’m in no way persuaded? And should a lucrative absurdity be welcomed by my judgment? Thus, it doesn't depend on me to believe what I want; I can’t command my conviction, and I would rebel against myself if I tried to force the issue; I would suffer an inner debate and a civil war, my reason would only recognize the power of the evidence and despise all that I might gain; it would sadly embrace a troubling truth without being able to reject it, and would see, in spite of itself, a light that would mortify all my desires. I would be no less convinced of a belief connected to my misery, my heart would incline one way and my mind the other; my persuasion would be completely different from my desires, and this seductive reason of my interest, by flattering my commitment, would leave my judgment entire with the truth established. Finally, I neither can nor should believe a useful opinion.

In addition, the belief and faith demanded by the Christian is a gift that is independent of us, and which consequently cannot be demanded. The faith we acquire by human means is imperfect, and so an extraordinary infusion from on high is necessary, recognizing neither the voice of the senses nor any reasoning, which is above our forces. I am not culpable if I haven’t received this, unless you blame me for the weaknesses and imperfections of my nature. Finally, to use the language of Christianity, I await this infusion and these divine inspirations with the utmost docility: I desire this faith from God which you say is necessary and independent of my desires and efforts, for any faith coming from myself and not from God wouldn’t be right. At most, I could make myself obey the established form of worship, subject my actions to the laws of religion, without my mind and my judgment recognizing my right to command; but, acceding to my orders, I could be religious without any rational conviction. This sort of respect is properly given to the public; at least we must show it in our external behavior, which is under our own and public control, while we reserve for ourselves our interior conviction, since this is ours alone.

For, ultimately, we do no violence to the mind and the heart: although we force the tongue to use certain words and the body to assume certain postures, we can’t force the mind or the heart to think; these secret movements are above the tyranny of the laws and escape the power of all princes; obeying no other authorities, they are their own rulers, and are even independent of us, and refuse to be controlled by us. Ultimately, judgment and love are free, are not to be chained, imprisoned, taken captive. I can do only what I can do.

## DOUBTFUL ETHICS.

What rule, what sort of behavior, should I exhibit in this general suspension that I embrace? Will I recklessly contradict all that men have established? Will I destroy this civil order, the springs of which I can perceive? Will I refer only to my own interests and my self-love, will I give my senses whatever they want, will I have no laws but my desires?

And, although I suspect that virtue and vice are the products of prejudice which contribute to society, shall I be without any love for the former and without any hatred for the latter? Shall I have no bounds but my own utility and no other motive for my actions than my own benefit, or any other rules for my behavior than my own advantage? Indeed, will I give in to crime, perfidy and do whatever I want? Will I have neither honor nor conscience? Will I be faithless, without dreams, as indifferent to them as to the truth? Will it be up to me to be cruel, inhumane, unjust? Can I equally choose to be treacherous, corrupt and wicked, or a good, sincere and upright man?

No: this is the point where I sense how necessary an establishment of religion was, and how useful the curb of our prejudices is: since my suspension is not irreligion, nor incredulity, nor impiety, but on the contrary it is an indeterminate credulity which is moved almost by anything, and prepared for the truth, finally, well-intentioned as it is, it can regulate my conduct and restrict my self-love to a doubting fear, an uncertainty that is fearful, discreet, and full of goodwill, not slacking the reins to my desires, not leaving me with an unrestricted liberty, and in no way removing the bridle from my inclinations. I have a doubtful God to worship and fear, a doubtful Hell to avoid, a doubtful immortality to hope for: a doubtful vice to flee, a doubtful virtue to practice: my suspension is a universal religion, apt to serve me as a rational curb and to base my actions on the ordinary rules of society. It’s not an insolent, audacious, brutish, impious assurance, like that of the atheist, who allows himself anything and who counts on certain annihilation: it’s a wise and prudent disquiet, concerned about overindulgence. Finally, whoever loves the unknown truth and blessings, has in view uncertain penalties, rewards and eternities: the impulse I feel for an unknown, obscure and undecided truth, keeps me fearlessly immobile amid the precipices all around me. Finally, I find myself obliged to retain, albeit in an uncertain manner, the customs I follow and the religion I find myself in, for the sole reason that I’m in them and that I might be even more mistaken if I changed my situation; this rational worry won’t leave me without qualms, even while following the established rules, and all the more so when I depart from them. Simple respect of the crowd will keep my outer self captive, making it obey all the laws, despite my knowing their uncertainty; even if my suspension left me nothing to fear, I would sacrifice my conduct to the beauty of the civil order and my actions to the utility of the general traits of society:

I will be beneficent, virtuous, sincere, equitable, honestly grateful, by agreement, as a precaution, by my very uncertainty, even if not because of my belief and conviction,

I will be restrained, moderate, and rather hesitant to depart from the beaten path, although convinced by experience of the ineptitude of men, of the falseness of their prejudices, of their flexibility in all their opinions, of their susceptibility, of all sorts of false impressions.

Thus the dimensions of your self and of all that is possible, which I cannot conceive, render me suspicious, discreet, and not bold enough to undertake anything new, and surrounds me with uncertainty, under the common rules. This prudence places me within the common run, without attaching me to it, I make a sacrifice of the interests of my self-love, of my interest and my pleasure, to the uncertain prediction of what might be. I prepare for the various possibilities, I see current customs as an excuse and the greater number of men as a justification;

I take precautions against all possible risks, by repose and immobility, a conformity that is unattached, unstable, insecure about my state, from an inconstant generality of feelings and inclinations, an indeterminacy of mind and heart, and a practice that is timid, submissive, blind, irresolute, not impassioned and not rebellious about what is established,

I will assure myself of this doubtful but possible happiness, through my prudent moderation. I will follow religion, the laws, and prejudice without being attached to them, without certainty, without persuasion in case what is unknown turns out to be true, following my companions and their example. If someone says I’m abandoning nature, which I’ve intended to follow, I will consult the animals our brothers. I will act differently when the senses give me no certainty of the peril I was afraid of. Why not be entirely ignorant of things about which the senses are silent, and why not act as if they weren’t real, as if they had never reached our ears?

O reason, double and fickle, which constantly draws me back from a false daylight which I thought was real, to follow another false daylight which tricks me in turn; reason which makes me abandon an apparent certainty with the charms of another apparent one, of which I am the plaything, which removes from my judgment an opinion it had embraced with all its might, with all its belief, by the impostor charms of another, which it seizes with equal eagerness, after which it flits infinitely from one to another, and passes me by, and guides me from falsehood to falsehood, while rushing towards the unknown truth. But this fear is a proper consequence of the uncertain state in which nature placed me; these are natural lights, which guide me still, and my submission to prejudice does nothing to destroy my suspension. If we acted as if perfectly ignorant, without talking nonsense about uncertain matters, our inclinations and desires wouldn’t be in the same state, neither a sufficient argument, nor a strong enough drive to make us act. The charms of present pleasure should not guide me in my suspension.

It’s no contradiction of nature to prefer the utility of the public over my own, since the utility of the public is my own, my true interest and my good dealings demand that, with my example and my behavior I should maintain this civil order. While we sometimes find that, on one side, the obedience I pay to the prejudices wounds my self-love, which nature has given me to preserve myself, it makes up for it on the other side. Our virtues are not contrary to our inclinations, but reflections of our self-love, like pity, fairness, and gratitude; this is their first root, which supports them, making them easy and natural. Wouldn’t it be an offence against this self-interest inspired by nature, to break the laws, bringing punishment or dishonor? For even if all things were free and permitted, people wouldn't leave outrages against their self-love unpunished. It’s certainly in our interest to accommodate ourselves to their rules, even in spite of ourselves: obedience to them is a result of self-love. The consequences which threaten our disobedience, their blame, their hatred, their approbation, their praise, their respect, are not to be disregarded, since they are useful or fatal to our good dealings, and make us suffer more or less, even if they gave us nothing more than the vain pleasure, or the vain sorrow we’re accustomed to feeling for their contempt or praise, a pleasure which makes up for the one we lose, a trade and a compensation for what give. For their virtues have their pleasures as well as pains, and their vices have their pains as well as their pleasures, often their virtue is less uneasy, less difficult, less toilsome than their vices, and their vices are less agreeable, less useful and less easy than virtue:

Let’s sing and dance and enjoy ourselves, let’s always savor the charms of the sweet errors used to ensnare us, let’s intensify our sensations, for a hollow glory that they give us for having obeyed them,

Let’s make our taste keener to enjoy the sweetness of the empty dishes they offer us, pleasures which are no less real, begotten by a dreamed-up object, an effective sweetness, produced by an imaginary cause, a true joy stimulated by a false principle, ultimately, an advantage, an interest, a utility, a pleasure, a delectation we receive for what we have conceded, which are no less perceptible, no less intense, no less respectable, no less necessary, just as vain, transitory, inconstant, fragile, ultimately, equal to what we have left behind, all of which is subject to pass away.

Pleasure, insensitivity, pain will one day be the same: time unifies all things and annihilates everything equally in the end. No advantages, no aftertaste of past pleasure or pain remain, no traces of happiness or sadness; he who laughed much is no better off than he who wept often. Nothing is forever, all is nothing: although different along the way, it all ends the same way. A strong consolation for the miserable, all these arguments should have no power to regulate our belief, which refuses the proof of utility, and which is not convinced by our own advantage. But to guide our external actions, there is a persuasion of the exterior and not of the inner self, which is only convinced by certainty about a doubtful immortality, by the beauty of the civil order, and my self-love for the public interest, which concerns me in particular, by the force of prejudice and the necessity imposed on me by others, by a threatened torment, by the sweetness of a vice that is often painful, and by the pains of a sweet virtue, finally, by the rather short course of a few years, after the rapid passage of which all will end up equal. The worst that can happen will be to have lost a few minor pleasures, some momentary satisfactions, which will then be lost anyway; in any case it means risking the loss of a few restricted and limited indulgences, for the feeling and duration which we feel only up to a certain point and which enclose us within a very brief span.

A good mind has no regard for all that ends and all that is finite; but in addition, it’s an interest sacrificed to a greater interest, a good given for another good, which is no loss and no risk. This effort is therefore not much, and it is even useful and necessary, and my sacrifice is ultimately minor. Finally, I will worship, in my suspension, this unknown, vague, and indeterminate something, in admiration of so much that is beyond comprehension: amid the crowd I will be to one side, above prejudice;

I will obey, I will indifferently seek the contemptible respect of men, I will be alert to their vain judgments, I will love their virtues indifferently, I will hate their vices indifferently,

I will praise and blame without love or hatred, I will consent to all their opinions, I will follow their laws without attachment, I will respect their customs without respect, I will submit without submission to prejudice, I will reason without reason on their suppositions;

Indifferent and insensible, I will be everything to everyone, and at the same time nothing to everyone, without contradicting or approving; approving everything, and contradicting everything, without accepting or refusing anything, accepting everything and refusing everything, believing everything and believing nothing, rejecting everything and rejecting nothing, discussing everything without discourse, doubting everything, knowing everything, ignorant of everything, ignorant of my ignorance, comprehending everything and comprehending nothing, conceiving everything and conceiving nothing, credulous on all things, incredulous on all things, susceptible to everything and nothing, contrary to everything and to nothing, without religion and without irreligion, without vices, without virtues, with neither docility nor unruliness; a rebel without rebellion, submitting without submission, part of the people but not of them, common but not so common, without certainty or uncertainty, without order or disorder, ruled and not ruled, being contradictory and undefined as nature made me.

I will rest easy in my suspension, I will be ignorant with patience, I will endure my darkness and my misery with gentleness and without complaint, I will get used to the night I live in, I won’t judge things by simple relations, or similitudes.

I will wait for the incomprehensible change of my being without anxiety, I won’t cause myself any harm that is pressing and real and useless in exchange for an evil that is in the future, unknown, imaginary, and which I have to be ignorant about. I won’t grieve for a death that I can’t avoid.

I will let my days flow by, fleeing evil, seeking good, avoiding pain, loving pleasure, I will live without ambition, hating all the pleasures that are fatal, painful, dire, disturbing, painful; I won’t indulge them beyond the point of pleasure and never past their natural limits.

Anxious about over-agitation, and about rest, too close to death and sadness, I will keep myself cheerfully occupied; gentle, moderate, suspending myself always from the ennui that tears at me; I will pursue pleasure gently and without harshness; I will enjoy the sweetness of a busy and amused peace; I will stay midway between agitation and repose,

I will be with myself without being so too much; I will avoid myself without avoiding myself too much; I will separate from myself without separating too much; I will flee all extremes; I will enjoy a laziness that is not languishing, and I will enjoy moderate amusements; my leisure time will be intense and animated, my life will be neither troubled, nor gloomy, a diversity that isn’t chaotic.

A gradual change will leave my heart always in an equal condition, will not push me over the edge into a steep fall from pleasure into ennui, and will guide me up a gentle slope from repose to pleasure, and from pleasure to repose. Unlike most other men, who only oscillate from one to the other when led by their feelings, I will prefer a continual and peaceful happiness over these excesses of enjoyment which dull the senses from overuse, which suppress sensibility through excess, often a painful one, and which quench all desire with an undigested satiety, or even over something that can only be attained when pressed by true suffering, by an opposing penalty, by a contrariety which intensifies one’s tastes, by contracting a torrid fever stoked by disorderliness, the sort of pleasure which exists only relatively and is only tasted through its opposite. Finally, I will amuse myself while waiting for my end.

I will respect this fundamental law of society of doing to others what one would want to be done to oneself and not doing to others what one would not want done to oneself, a law dictated by self-love itself, measured upon self-love, and which in itself is only a species of self-love that is well regulated, well-intentioned, infinitely well-reasoned, nature properly understood, reformed self-interest, corrected greed, the law which is the source of prejudices, which makes virtue and vice, good and evil, justice, injustice, honor, infamy.

I will be faithful, I will keep my promises, I will hate oppression, I will do harm to none, I will keep the laws of probity, I will be helpful, generous, a good friend, I will support weakness against violence.

I will detest ingratitude, I will act in good faith, I will hold sincerity in particularly high regard.

I will carefully avoid lying, I will flee from all artifice, meanness, cowardice; I will hate traitors, I will abhor perfidy, I will help others for the pleasure of doing so.

I will patiently suffer everyone; I will always excuse any behavioral failings by the uprightness of intention.

I will comprehend weaknesses, I will regret to hate; I will only avenge myself slowly and as necessary for my own safety, as a precaution, and not from rage; I will keep myself from seeking vengeance as soon as I can; I will consider the imperfections of man as a man; I will punish by forgiving; I will consider any insults as my own misfortune alone; if I cannot lead my enemy to see reason, I will console myself by making him more just, and more ungrateful; I won’t beat him over the head with his misdeed; I want him to be his own punishment. Men can be my enemy, without my being anyone’s enemy; my hatred will never take advantage of the weapons of friendship and trust; I will even respect, in war, the laws of past friendship.

I will keep the secret of a friend, always remaining its master.

I will abandon all vengeance, not from laziness and nonchalance, but from magnanimity.

I will be true in my affection; no selfishness will ever determine its measure, even in this commerce of necessary civilities and false politeness.

I will assume a tone that is lively, animated, full of feeling and distinction when welcoming the upright man, and a tone of stone-cold compliments, common and general, with the conceited, in order to satisfy custom and my inclinations.

I will be quick with praise, quick with criticism, I will try to think whatever I say, creating for myself a necessary prudence, regarding it as criminal to betray the truth, even by my silence; when forced to hold my tongue, I will make things right, not as a favor, but as a debt, which I must repay.

I won’t despise anyone, every man being equal to anyone else, since there is no true distinction aside from natural talents: since nobility and grandeur are only tolerated usurpation, including royalty, which is only a useful defect and disorder. Pride will never make me think I’m better than others, and there will be nothing apparent in me that is superior, or above them. I will realize that I share the common foibles and imperfections.

I will keep to the rank of the people and I will despise myself when I lapse into vanity; I will bring myself back down with the thought that everything is contemptible; I will avoid all distinctions, whether in luxury or negligence; if presumption should ambush me, I will soon recover, and this will always keep me on guard against myself.

I will love by a second reflection: if I am not always completely in control of my envy, I will unsay my heart, I will blush to myself. I will try to supplant the pains of ennui with the pleasure of respect, and overcome my weakness by the sweetness of admiration. I will strive to love the object of my ennui, to praise, respect, admire, favor what I despise. I want the noble fire of a praiseworthy emulation to extinguish my contempt and purify my desires; without feeling any pain at the sight of virtue, I want to feel only a burning desire to imitate it; may the desire to resemble it do away with any desire to destroy it; may the effort of attaining it distract me from hating it: may equity force my tongue to sing its praises, and punish me for having succumbed to my cowardice, with a sincere confession; in the same way, may I never pay this tribute as a captive who is forced, as a wage of servitude, but only out of love.

I will give those who suffer the same kind of help and pity that I would hope for; at the risk of putting everyone in my debt; ingratitude will never make me regret helping anyone.

I will see the vices of men with the same indifference as the impulses of animals; I will be equally grateful for the good I see done to others; far from disputing the value of a benefit I receive, I will be the same after any favor as I was while hoping for it; I will maintain myself, by force of reflection, in the sensitivity inspired by a newly received favor, which gradually perishes in spite of us, which escapes us and vanishes, if we aren’t careful to nourish and maintain it. I will stiffen against ingratitude, into which I may fall without noticing it; I will force myself to be grateful without feeling the weight of it, or wishing to shake it off while savoring the pleasure of being sensitive to it. I will ceaselessly renew myself in gratitude and in friendship towards my benefactor,

I will be sensitive to human glory; I will respect their honors, without ruining my tranquility to acquire them; I will not despise them excessively, nor will I respect them excessively; I will often recognize the inanity of their applause; I won’t be disturbed with either too much or too little of their respect or their criticism, neither the former nor the latter; I won’t be downcast by the former or the latter, superior to both without arrogance, soberly glorying in their praise, doing without it without any worry, when it fails to come; fearing their criticism, with discretion, without humiliation or anxiety, when it comes, insensible both to their gifts and to their absence: submissive without servitude to their judgments, without neglecting or fearing them too much, whatever wind may blow, I will sleep easily in the shelter of my conscience, under its protection. I am tranquil about all their opinions: it’s my refuge against their injustice and my consolation is my own approbation. In any glory or shame they place upon me, I will accept nothing but what I’ve examined carefully, and which I grant myself, for their mere opinion doesn’t make me praiseworthy. I accept no incense but what is truly mine; I gladly consent to their indifference and to be forgotten, or rather, all of these things, as mere figments of reason, which make no impression on me, and have no power except what is voluntarily given, a free composition by my consent, by conviction, by a pleasant illusion and a consensual deception. I withdraw the consent I’ve given to their prejudices, when they show themselves ungrateful or blind enough to deprive me of the reward they promise to those who obey them. [I am comforted] not only by my conscience, which is an habitual judgment and cannot offer me consolation, nor by my internal witness that I’ve obeyed them, and that they would do me justice if they knew the truth, but also by the knowledge that I had suspended a kind of light, which I had previously set aside, which shows me that nothing is praiseworthy or blameworthy except by treaty and agreement, and which makes all specters and phantoms vanish, which had amused me in a voluntary dream, just as the sun drives away the shadows of night. I disavow what I had consented to, on the condition that, if unfulfilled, I could break the pact they’ve broken, while otherwise ready to submit to it, had their error not treated me unfairly. For I love to be kind, to make everyone happy, and for others to be happy with me, allowing me to be happy with them.

I prefer doing good over evil, all things being equal, not only for the pleasure of being the author of a good deed, which puts someone in my debt, but even for the simple pleasure felt by a noble heart at the sight of everyone in enjoyment of happiness.

Finally, I will love virtue for its own sake. Even if there is no Hell to fear from God and no torture from men, even at the cost of a grueling constraint, a bitter sacrifice, I will be beneficent, sincere, equitable, grateful, from sheer kindness. I don’t serve established prejudices from fear, but only from the pleasure I am accustomed to feeling, when I obey them, from the mere satisfaction that my own witness has habituated me to enjoying, and from the sweet tickling that comes when the opinion of others and my own agree, forming my conscience and tending to give me a hundred torments and rewards. Praise and blame are enough to make me turn whichever way they want and move me at their will; the wind of their voice is enough to bend my docility to their desires. There is no more urgent motivation for my goodwill than my own satisfaction and my goodwill itself, since the voluntary error of prejudices begets a thousand occasions for pleasures which I wouldn't otherwise enjoy, and which, joining with my own intentions, carry and drag me to all [actions that are] praised and blamed.

This free confession of the established suppositions of their virtue and their honor, far from disadvantageous to me, is rather a source of inner contentment, which is sufficient to guide me. But even if the fear of human torments and judgement fails to affect me, even if I had no witness but myself and no satisfaction but that of following a natural bent, and no motive but my own will, this simple inclination to do good will make me do so, even in secret; which proves to me that I’m not equally indifferent in doing evil and good, except when I have an interest in not doing it. I am naturally virtuous and vicious by accident without the obstacle of occasion, over which our fragile inclinations cannot triumph without the attention of a present advantage to guide us. We would be generous, sincere, equitable; this is the rule of nature itself, and which the example of animals confirms for us, for, normally when they do what is wrong, it’s only for their own utility, and they would be good in the absence of this self-interest and the contradiction of self-love, which balances between two goods, or between two evils, the stronger of which always wins.

I will follow the laws of virtue and honor of my own accord.

I will submit without pain to prejudices: my discreet or secret suspension will not make me different from other men.

I will allow myself only what they allow themselves, I will give account to the public as it requires, and another one to myself.

I will not be susceptible to fear, which is the greatest of all evils; I will live without any concerns in my ignorance.

I will never anticipate pain with an indiscreet foresight; I will not abandon a present good to worry about a future evil: for suffering is only in the present, and we would be less unhappy if we only focused on genuine suffering, refusing to be obsessed by our afflictions, whether real or imaginary. I will be as tranquil as the pig of Pyrrho even amid evils that are only too close to me. I will be reserved when I must endure them, my precautions in protecting myself from them won’t be mournful, but wise and peaceful, and no worse than the evil I would avoid, when the evil does arrive.

But when no efforts of reflection can cancel it, and bodily affliction causes me true pain, then at least I will feel it as little as possible. I will only groan as it becomes more or less intolerable; I will pay it the least attention I possibly can; my mind alone will regulate my complaints; I will distract myself, I will leap away from pain, and I will sink into oblivion if I can, I will steel myself against it; I will seek refuge from it. Finally, I will console myself by the very inevitability of suffering, the impossibility of escaping it, the hope of its extinction. With the thought that it has only one point in time and a duration that it can’t exceed, which will not surpass my fortitude. I prepare myself to find it very light, as bad as it may be. I envisage the extremity with an eye that is firm and strong, well beyond the field of battle. I rise above all events.

Death, which is also the death of all pain, the end and goal of pain, does not astonish me, however painful it’s imagined to be, since it sometimes comes unnoticed, and very rapidly: either an endurable pain leads us to it, prepares us for it, and persuades us gradually to succumb to it, or a violent pain, the brevity of which leaves us without firmness, spares us the effort of a drawn-out battle, as it perishes from its own violence, suppressing and deadening the senses through excess. So that finally, it is not as hard to die as people think. In full health we persuade ourselves that it’s worse than it really is, because of distaste and distance from it; and the force of prejudice, which leads people in some countries to find it pleasant, adds additional horror to what nature has already given us, and intimidates us so much in our ignorance about it – although we never feel it, for we are no longer alive when it’s here, as long as we’re alive it’s not here: it’s only the moment of change, which is as imperceptible as the moment of a faint or the transition to sleep; that it’s only a cessation of consciousness or life, which does no good or evil and which is never felt. Only the pains that presage this change and passage are real and fearsome, and these might be felt many times in life; it’s only a privation, a painless nothing, since it is the loss of sensation. The animals, from whom we should learn, teach us that it isn’t all that terrible, and they die more easily than us. This is something beyond me, something incomprehensible. Nor is what follows death to be feared, far from taking it as a rule that everything unknown should be feared, we should only fear what we do know, or rather, we should annihilate all fear so that we feel only as animals do, the pain which makes itself felt. For if we fear everything we don’t know, we will always have something to be afraid of. Life will be nothing but an ingenious ordeal, a voluntary disquiet, a continual fatigue: one must neither desire nor fear what is unknown.

This is how reflection will lead me back to the ways of nature, from which reason had led me astray, and how I will become truly animal, by the effort of reason. I will assimilate myself with other beings. In all things I will follow the lights and impulses given by nature. It is not, per se, as corrupt as men say it is; I’ll regard reason as a disordered instinct, a clock that rings because of its bell and not because of the hours, the disorder of which is considered to be a sign of excellence. The same guide who led me away from the true path, will bring me back, and I will look to the animals, who have preserved nature in its purity, to correct the corruption we have introduced, and set me back on my feet amid my errors, and live and die like them, which is our common fate. After spending my life reasoning, conducting myself with others on the basis of their prejudices, addressing myself on the basis of nature, seeking the good, fleeing evil, obedient to my self-love, which cannot be extinguished, in peaceful suspension, peaceful indifference, uncertain, doubtful of this uncertain and indeterminate thing which has no name, with a pure intention and a suspended desire for the hidden truth, I will die without grimacing, saying, like Aristotle: *Being of beings, whoever you are, take pity on me.*

I declare, in conclusion, that I claim not to have advanced anything certain, that everything that seems surest and well-reasoned remains uncertain, and that I have no doubt that I could be shown to be mistaken, and that I might hear something which would make me recant what I’ve said. Upon further reflection, I might say the opposite, and find other arguments which exist to infinity, and which might persuade me otherwise. My state of suspension could make everything look suspicious to me: finally, better arguments might be found, without finding anything more solid, and more certain, and this alone shouldn’t prove anything but the instability of reason and confirm us in our suspension and ignorance.

Finally, let reason vanish, let language vanish, let certainty vanish, let error vanish. Let nature return, let’s stop talking, let’s feel, live, and be ignorant about everything in tranquility.

END.

1. A. Durand et Pedone-Lauriel, *Archives de la Bastille* (1883), p. 345-7. Available online: https://books.google.com/books?id=aHgi3NbJpMcC&pg=PA345 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Manuscrits de la bibliothèque de l'Arsenal. Archives de la Bastille. Ms-10307. Online at: https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b53104626n/f411.image [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Mothu, Alain. “*La Beatitude des Chrestiens* et son double clandestin.” In *La philosophie clandestine à l'âge classique*, ed. Antony McKenna and Alain Mothu (Oxford, 1997), p. 98; Winfried Schröder, *Ursprunge Des Atheismus: Untersuchungen Zur Metaphysik- Und Religionskritik Des 17. Und 18. Jahrhunderts.* (2012), p. 479. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. http://philosophie-clandestine.huma-num.fr/ms/13/lib. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Schröder, pp. 481-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Mothu, p. 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. My collection *God / Reason / Nature* (2018) contains an English translation of this work. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Mothu, p. 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Pensées* , fragment 397. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. http://philosophie-clandestine.huma-num.fr/phcldata/data/doc/ms13\_ars\_nihil\_credendi.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This and all subsequent headings are not in the original manuscripts; they have been added to break up the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. A lacuna in the manuscript. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Manuscript: “maceration”. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. “Contable” in the original. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)