

One of the most important distinctions of our judgments is that some of them are intuitive, others grounded on argument.

It is not in our power to judge as we will. The judgment is carried along necessarily by the evidence, real or seeming, which appears to us at the time. But in propositions that are
5 submitted to our judgment, there is this great difference; some are of such a nature that a man of ripe understanding may apprehend them distinctly, and perfectly understand their meaning without finding himself under any necessity of believing them to be true or false, probable or improbable. The judgment remains in suspense, until it is inclined to one side or another by reasons or arguments.

10 But there are other propositions which are no sooner understood than they are believed. The judgment follows the apprehension of them necessarily, and both are equally the work of Nature, and the result of our original powers. There is no searching for evidence, no weighing of arguments; the proposition is not deduced or inferred from another; it has the light of truth in itself, and has no occasion to borrow it from another.

15 Propositions of the last kind, when they are used in matters of science, have commonly been called *axioms*; and on whatever occasions they are used, are called *first principles*, *principles of common sense*, *common notions*, *self-evident truths*. (...)

What has been said, I think, is sufficient to distinguish first principles or intuitive judgments, from those which may be ascribed to the power of reasoning; nor is it a just objection against
20 this distinction, that there may be some judgments concerning which we may be dubious to which class they ought to be referred. There is a real distinction between persons within the house, and those that are without; yet it may be dubious to which the man belongs that stands upon the threshold.

It is likewise a question of some moment, whether the differences among men about first principles can be brought to any issue? When, in disputes, one man maintains that to be a first principle, which another denies, commonly both parties appeal to common sense, and so the matter rests. Now, is there no way of discussing this appeal? Is there no mark or criterion,
5 whereby first principles that are truly such, may be distinguished from those that assume the character without a just title? I shall humbly offer in the following propositions what appears to me to agreeable to truth in these matters, always ready to change my opinion upon conviction.

First, I hold it to be certain, and even demonstrable, that all knowledge got by reasoning must be built upon first principles.

10 This is as certain as that every house must have a foundation. The power of reasoning, in this

respect, resembles mechanical powers or engines; it must have a fixed point to rest upon, otherwise it spends its force in the air, and produces no effect.

When we examine, in the way of analysis, the evidence of any proposition, either we find it self-evident, or it rests upon one or more propositions that support it. The same thing may be
15 said of the propositions that support it, and of those that support them, as far back as we can go. But we cannot go back in this track to infinity. When then must this analysis stop? It is evident that it must stop only when we come to propositions, which support all that are built upon them, but are themselves supported by none, that is, to self-evident propositions.

Secondly, we may observe, that opinions that contradict first principles are distinguished from other errors by this; that they are not only false but absurd. And, to discountenance absurdity, Nature hath given us a particular emotion, to wit, that of ridicule, which seems intended for this very purpose of putting out of countenance what is absurd, either in opinion or practice.

5 This weapon, when properly applied, cuts with as keen an edge as argument. Nature hath furnished us with the first to expose absurdity; as with the last to refute error. Both are well fitted for their several offices, and are equally friendly to truth when properly used. (...)

But it must be acknowledged, that the emotion of ridicule, even when most natural, may be stifled by an emotion of a contrary nature, and cannot operate till that is removed.

10 Thus, if the notion of sanctity is annexed to an object, it is no longer a laughable matter; and this visor must be pulled off before it appears ridiculous. Hence we see, that notions which appear most ridiculous to all who consider them coolly and indifferently, have no such appearance to those who never thought of them, but under the impression of religious awe and dread.

15 Even when religion is not concerned, the novelty of an opinion to those who are too fond of novelties; the gravity and solemnity with which it is introduced; the opinion we have entertained of the author; its apparent connection with principles already embraced, or subserviency to interests which we have at heart; and, above all, its being fixed in our minds at that time of life when we receive implicitly what we are taught; may cover its absurdity, and fascinate the
20 understanding for a time.

But if ever we are able to view it naked, and stripped of those adventitious circumstances from which it borrowed its importance and authority, the natural emotion of ridicule will exert its force. An absurdity can be entertained by men of sense no longer that it wears a mask. When any man is found who has the skill or the boldness to pull off the mask, it can no longer bear
25 the light; it slinks into dark corners for a while, and then is no more heard of, but as an object of ridicule.