

7. Another first principle is, That the natural faculties, by which we distinguish truth from error, are not fallacious. If any man should demand a proof of this, it is impossible to satisfy him. For suppose it should be mathematically demonstrated, this would signify nothing in this case, because, to judge of a demonstration, a man must trust his faculties, and take for granted the
5 very thing in question.

If a man's honesty were called in question, it would be ridiculous to refer it to the man's own word whether he be honest or not. The same absurdity there is in attempting to prove by any kind of reasoning, probable or demonstrative, that our reason is not fallacious, since the very point in question is whether reasoning may be trusted.

10 If a Sceptic should build his scepticism upon this foundation, that all our reasoning and judging powers are fallacious in their nature, or should resolve at least to withhold assent until it be proved that they are not; it would be impossible by argument to beat him out of this strong hold, and he must even be left to enjoy his scepticism.

Descartes certainly made a false step in this matter; for having suggested this doubt among
15 others, that whatever evidence he might have from his consciousness, his senses, his memory, or his reason; yet possibly some malignant being had given him those faculties on purpose to impose upon him; and therefore, that they are not to be trusted without a proper voucher. To remove this doubt, he endeavours to prove the being of a Deity who is no deceiver; whence he concludes, that the faculties he had given him are true and worthy to be trusted.

20 It is strange that so acute a reasoner did not perceive, that in this reasoning there is evidently a begging of the question.

For if our faculties be fallacious, why may they not deceive us in this reasoning as well as in others? And if they are to be trusted in this instance without a voucher, why not in others?

Every kind of reasoning for the veracity of our faculties amounts to no more than taking their
25 own testimony for their veracity; and this we must do implicitly, until God give us new faculties to sit in judgment upon the old; and the reason why Des Cartes satisfied himself with so weak an argument for the truth of his faculties, most probably was, that he never seriously doubted of it.

If any truth can be said to be prior to all others in the order of Nature, this seems to have the
30 best claim; because in every instance of assent, whether upon intuitive, demonstrative, or probable evidence, the truth of our faculties is taken for granted, and is, as it were, one of the premises on which our assent is grounded.

How then come we to be assured of this fundamental truth on which all others rest ? Perhaps evidence, as in many other respects it resembles light, so in this also that, as light, which is the

35 discoverer of all visible objects, discovers itself at the same time, so evidence, which is the
voucher for all truth, vouches for itself at the same time.

This, however, is certain, that such is the constitution of the human mind that evidence
discerned by us, forces a corresponding degree of assent. And a man who perfectly understood
a just syllogism, without believing that the conclusion follows from the premises,

40 would be a greater monster than a man born without hands or feet.

We are born under a necessity of trusting to our reasoning and judging powers; and a real belief
of their being fallacious cannot be maintained for any considerable time by the greatest Sceptic,
because it is doing violence to our constitution. It is like a man's walking upon his hands, a feat
which some men upon occasion can exhibit; but no man ever made a long journey in this

45 manner. Cease to admire his dexterity, and he will, like other men, betake himself to his legs.

We may here take notice of a property of the principle under consideration that seems to be
common to it with many other first principles, and which can hardly be found in any principle
that is built solely upon reasoning ; and that is, that in most men it produces its effect without
ever being attended to, or made an object of thought. No man ever thinks of this principle

50 unless when he considers the grounds of scepticism ; yet it invariably governs his opinions.

When a man in the common course of life gives credit to the testimony of his senses, his
memory, or his reason, he does not put the question to himself whether these faculties may
deceive him, yet the trust he reposes in them supposes an inward conviction that, in that
instance at least, they do not deceive him.

55 It is another property of this and of many first principles, that they force assent in particular
instances more powerfully than when they are turned into a general proposition. Many sceptics
have denied every general principle of science, excepting perhaps the existence of our present
thoughts ; yet these men reason, and refute, and prove, they assent and dissent in particular
cases. They use reasoning to overturn all reasoning, and judge that they ought to have no

60 judgment, and see clearly that they are blind. Many have in general maintained that the senses
are fallacious, yet there never was found a man so sceptical as not to trust his senses in
particular instances when his safety required it ; and it may be observed of those who have
professed scepticism that their scepticism lies in generals, while in particulars they are no less
dogmatical than others.

Thomas REID, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, VI (“Of Judgment”), 5 (“The First Principles of Contingent Truths”).