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**EARLY MODERNITY:  
RATIONALISM AND MEANINGS OF THE HUMAN**

**Abstract**

The present paper enquires into some of the differences that occur from the principle commitments made by Rene Descartes, Thomas Hobbes and Baruch Spinoza in the development of their rational philosophies. More specifically, I will focus on what content is given by each for what a human being is in its most general explanation, and subsequently reveal the different course of their theories. Although they accept a science and a philosophy upheld by scientific methods and causal rationality as the criteria for all knowledge, the results are considerably different. The final approach will consider the ethical side of their philosophies, in regard to human freedom.

**Key words:** Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza, principle, rationalism, human being

For the present paper I proposed myself to focus on internal coherences, leaving aside, as much possible, the further interpretations given to the philosophies I take into account. Therefore, I aim at depicting the assembly of ideas of each philosopher in a way that would conserve the meanings they had in focus. For doing that in a comparative way, I believe that the basic differentiation to be revealed concerns what they consider to be the most general idea that can be reached, the most general principle of knowledge. Consequently, the philosophers named above obtain different ideas of what a human being is, about what men can and should do.

As Descartes considers it, the most general idea one can have is that of a *substance* – a thing which exists in such a way that it needs no other thing in order to exist. (The concept of substance has a long tradition in philosophy; it was used by Greek and modern philosophies as the comprehensive and ontological foundation of the world.) For him the only thing that properly deserves this description is God; among the created things he finds that this concept is univocally applied to *mind* and *body* – as things that need only God as higher principle in order to exist. He assumes that each substance has one principal attribute, and mentions that the attribute of the mind is the *thought*, as for the body is *extension*. Descartes separates them because they can be understood independently one from another, and for each of them one has clear and distinct ideas.

We can consider two main instantiations: substance and *modes* of substance, the first having its main cause in itself and the lasts in something else. The modes are “exactly the same thing as we understand elsewhere by attributes or qualities”<sup>1</sup>. Modes are proprieties of the created things which can vary without altering the nature of a thing in an important way. The attributes are proprieties without which the things cannot exist; they are inherent in the substance of the things. As for the qualities, they are proprieties whose alteration would produce a certain alteration in the nature of the things themselves. These three concepts are somehow overlapping in Descartes’ use, so one must carefully consider one or another strong meaning of them.

Descartes considers that there are three types of distinction: *real* - between two or more substances; *modal* - between a mode and a substance or between two modes; *rational or conceptual* - between a substance and its attribute, without which the substance itself cannot be understood, or between two attributes of a substance.

The mind – body distinction is well-known and there is still disagreement whether Descartes is a dualist or not. For my purpose I need to underline the separation and the ontological pre-eminence of thought in his paper *Meditations on First Philosophy*. In his radical exercise of doubt, the only certitude to obtain is neither the existence of the world presented by senses, nor mathematical nor scientific knowledge, but that of a *thinking\_thing* (*ego cogito*): that is “a thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions”<sup>2</sup>. To do all these actions, the thinking thing must exist. During this “night of doubt”, the existence of a body, to which the mind is connected, is disregarded.

This certitude, the most clear (‘clear’ is an idea which “*is present and manifest to an attentive mind*”<sup>3</sup>) and distinct (‘distinct’ is an idea which “while clear, is so separated and delineated from all others that it contains absolutely nothing except what is clear”<sup>4</sup>) idea one can have, has over come the doubt and will sustain any knowledge that will be further obtained. Such an idea is called by Descartes a *principle*; besides its clear and distinct characteristic, it must exist in such a way that may be known without the other things while the knowledge of the other things depends on it<sup>5</sup>. So knowledge is to be obtained causally from clear and distinct ideas.

The process towards science goes by acknowledging the finitude and lack of self sufficiency of the ego and therefore of the existence of God as the primary

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<sup>1</sup> Rene Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991, 56, p. 25

<sup>2</sup> Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Second Meditation, Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 19

<sup>3</sup> *Principles*, 45, p. 20

<sup>4</sup> *Principles*, 45, p. 20

<sup>5</sup> *Principles*, Letter from the Author, p. xvii.

cause and as the one who seeded in the ego the idea of infinite (the argument offered: “what is more perfect – that is, contains in itself more reality – cannot arise from what is less perfect”<sup>6</sup>). In the end, the ego has achieved as certitude: the existence of the self as a thinking thing, the existence of God, and criteria for knowledge as clear and distinct ideas.

As for the body, the ego perceives his body as the body the most closely joined to (“I could never be separated from it, as I could from other bodies”<sup>7</sup>; “There is nothing that my own nature teaches me more vividly that I have a body, and that when I feel pain there is something wrong with the body...”<sup>8</sup>), and also perceives a large variety of data experience from other bodies: shapes, colours, movement, pain, pleasure, in a *passive* way: “these ideas came to me quite without my consent [...] it seemed impossible that they should have come from within me”<sup>9</sup>. So there must be things outside of me (if God is not a deceiver = if my clear and distinct ideas are to be trusted), even though their true nature is not corresponding accurately with what our senses teach us.

The scientific Cartesian approach of bodies is based on the concept of *extension*, the one that explains all other attributes of the matter: shape, motion, etc. His physics contains a mechanical set of laws, as the law of inertia, laws about movement and interactions between bodies, etc. As causes of motion, Descartes takes God to be the primary cause of motion (again following a Greek conception, from Aristotle mainly, who conceived the cosmos causally, deriving from a first unmoved mover) and considers him to maintain an equal quantity of motion in his creation. Therefore bodies are somehow passive in his theory, receiving their motion from God.

As to what a human being is, we have found out that it is a thinking thing. This idea must be detailed in order to reveal Descartes’ conception of free will. There are two main modes of thinking: the perception of the intellect and the activity of the will. “Sense-perception, imagining and pure understanding, are only diverse modes of perceiving; and desiring, having an aversion, affirming, denying, and doubting, are diverse modes of willing”<sup>10</sup>. The will is our capacity to do something or not, and is revealed when our inclinations emerge without sensing an external influence. Also Descartes is assessing that the will is involved in reasoning, because it gives the assent to whatever has been perceived; this is obvious in the cases where we don’t have a complete perception (as it is so often the case in the real life) but yet we have to act.

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<sup>6</sup> *Meditations*, Third Meditation, p. 28

<sup>7</sup> *Meditations*, Sixth M., p. 52

<sup>8</sup> *Meditations*, Sixth M., p. 56

<sup>9</sup> *Meditations*, Sixth M., p. 52

<sup>10</sup> *Principles*, 32, p. 16

I want to emphasize that concerning the activities of the will there may be the 'doubt'. This puts a new light upon the exercise of doubt carried out at the beginning of the Meditations. It was possible mainly because of the free will, which is the free choice of the beliefs one has, the possibility to judge his beliefs in a way or another, to decline the uncertain knowledge. In the paragraph 39 of the Principles, the freedom of will is considered to be "among the first and most common notions innate in us".

There is a very strong connection in a human's life, as a matter of fact a strong interdependency, between knowledge and will. On one hand, the will has greater scope than perception ("understanding is extended only to those few things which are presented to it, and is always very finite"<sup>11</sup>) and this brings human beings into error; on the other hand, the free will is the most honourable feature, the utmost excellence of men, the thing that makes them worthy to praise or blame. Now comes into a new sight, a moral one, the importance of obtaining (and understanding in accordance with) a method. The only way to avoid error, as much as it is possible for a finite being, and to live a moral life is to restrain the will (which extends easily to things one doesn't understand and is "indifferent in such cases"<sup>12</sup>) to what the understanding clearly and distinctly perceives (theme developed in *Traité de l'ame*).

There is one more aspect to be disclosed. There is a tension revealed by Descartes himself between the human freedom and the pre-ordination, the fore-knowledge of all things by God. He solves it by pointing out that we can recognize the infinite power and knowledge of God but we cannot understand in what sense our actions are left undetermined, due to the weakness of our nature. Yet, the fact that we have free will is so obvious to our consciousness that "there is nothing we understand more evidently and perfectly"<sup>13</sup>. As consequence, even if we don't understand how we are free, we are clearly and distinctly free.

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Thomas Hobbes has the concept of *motion* as the most general explanatory concept and for him all the things have but one universal cause and can be understood through it - motion. In his theory, the subjects of knowledge are all *bodies* in motion. This commitment makes him to be considered a materialist and a monist. That is, in his philosophy there is no special status, no separate metaphysical realm for the spirit - as the human mind or soul. Everything in the world is matter, bodies, and all the knowledge about them is to be obtained through motions of the bodies.

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<sup>11</sup> *Principles*, 35, p. 17

<sup>12</sup> *Meditations*, p. 41

<sup>13</sup> *Principles*, 41, p. 19

For Hobbes the bodies have power to act, and the only way in which a body can be a cause, and can produce effects in other bodies, is through motion. So there is a correspondence between cause, power and motion: to be a cause, a body must have the power to act upon another body, and that is made my means of motion. Consequently, the body that receives the effects must have the power to receive them - passive power. The first body is the efficient cause and is called agent, the second body is the material cause and is called patient.

What types of bodies can be differentiated? Following the scale from simple to complex in understanding the motion, there are: A) corresponding to simple motion - geometrical bodies, B) corresponding to the interaction between bodies in motion - material bodies, C) corresponding to the interaction between senses and bodies - human bodies and appearances of the other bodies, D) an artificial body created by human beings - the State, the Leviathan. Briefly, A) stands for geometry, B) and C) stand for physics (who contains as well sense and imagination) and D) and partly C) stand for moral (which deals with the motions of the mind) and civil philosophy.

How are bodies given to us? They are given to us entirely through senses and what we receive is called appearance, fancy. The thoughts of man are representations, appearances. There is no conception in a man's mind which has not at first, totally or by parts, been given in sense. And all knowledge is about the appearances of the bodies, about their generation or production, why they are and what are their *causes* and *effects* - and this latter is the work of reasoning, of *ratiocination*.

Reasoning is the ordering of our data experiences, for the purpose of better being able to carry on our lives. In order to do that, men have an instrument - the language; names of this language can be used as *marks*, notes of remembrance of the appearances, and as *signs*, when they are used to signify from one person to another in such operations as teaching and demonstration. Truth is the right ordering of names in our affirmations. For the right use of the names we need primarily their definitions, their explanation, and secondly to connect properly the propositions that contain the names. Truth is to be found only in speech, not in the things.

If everything in the world is a body, then it needs to be seen what makes the bodies that human beings are move. The answer is: desire, appetite - the endeavour (*conatus*) towards something which causes it. Human life is a continuous search for pleasure, a succession of desires and avoidances of pain that ends only with death. Therefore the engine of desire is not as much to maximize the pleasure in a certain moment but to obtain the guarantee that the pleasure will last as long as possible in the future. "The object of a man's desire is not to enjoy once only, and for one instant of time; but to assure for ever, the way of his future desire"<sup>14</sup>.

Hobbes has an almost misanthropic anthropology about men in the state of nature, in their pre-social condition. The intrigue can be settled as following: "if

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<sup>14</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Basil Blackwell Oxford, 1960, XI, p. 63

any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies"<sup>15</sup>. It is well-known his saying about 'men being wolves to other men' and also the one which says that 'every man is in war with every man'. In this stage of nature there is no justice or injustice (these "are qualities, they relate to men in society, not in solitude"<sup>16</sup>), every man has a right to everything, "Natura dedit omnia omnibus"<sup>17</sup>. In the natural condition there can be no order, nothing can be built, settled, achieved. Men feel continuously threatened and either they produce violence or violence is produced against them.

This conflicting situation involves another two concepts. One of them is fear, the craving for safety and peace, and the other, rather opposite to it, is *power*. These concepts circumscribe the natural condition of men, as, in the war of each man against another, one of the opponents has a stronger power (we remember that all bodies have power to act) and will master the weaker, while the second is living in fear and is hoping for long-lasting security.

It is the place now for a first instantiation of human freedom. In the natural condition men follow their individual interests and have the tendency to extend their power, and they are not limited in this, except by means of an opposed power counteracting from other men (who have the same but opposed interests). Hobbes understands freedom as "the absence of external impediments: which impediments, may often take away part of a man's power to do what he would"<sup>18</sup>.

Up till now the natural condition is a state to get out of, as being a state of war, violence and uncertainty, all of which are contrary to life. "There can be no security to any man, how strong or wise soever he be, of living out the time, which nature ordinarily alloweth men to live"<sup>19</sup>. The possibility to bypass it is provided exactly by the mechanism of desire: it is better (the promise of) a long lasting desire than a greater but a momentary desire - and the only way to achieve this is to transfer (some part of) the power that each man has to an artificial body - the State, the Leviathan.

That is, a body made by humans, for humans, but which is situated at a higher, at the highest level of power. The Leviathan is a covenant establishing that each man gives up his right to govern himself in favour of a single man or assembly of men, who are entitled to decide for all men. The Leviathan is the only one who can provide security, peace, justice, law, good life and who can coerce men to follow these requirements due to its enormous power.

Besides its repressive power, the sovereignty has also the characteristic that is representative of each man; it has unity of will and decision, which is why

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<sup>15</sup> *Leviathan*, XIII, p. 81

<sup>16</sup> *Leviathan*, XIII, p. 83

<sup>17</sup> Th. Hobbes, *Human Nature and De Corpore Politico*, Oxford University Press, 1994, XV, p. 80, translated: 'Nature has given all things to all men'.

<sup>18</sup> *Leviathan*, XIV, p. 84

<sup>19</sup> *Leviathan*, XIV, p. 85

Hobbes thinks of it as of a body, an artificial one. The decisions of sovereignty are beyond critics coming from the governed men (“as long, and no longer, than the power lasteth, by which is able to protect them”<sup>20</sup>). Hobbes brings to bear a very strong sense of the representative establishment of the Leviathan and this is obvious when he says that “every subject is author of every act that the sovereign doeth”<sup>21</sup>.

We can provide now a second instantiation of human freedom, characterized by a restraint, a limitation (men must obey the laws and the rules settled by the Leviathan); yet they can now live in security and peace, they are offered protection, they can develop industrially, economically, they can hope for a better, more long lasting life.

As an overview till now, Descartes and Hobbes overlap their ideas in the realm of matter, where they offer a mechanical understanding of the physical world that contains the bodies. If we ask each of them what a human being is, differences are severe. Descartes sees it as a mind-body union, where the mind has an exceptional, metaphysical status and opens a realm beyond objective dispute - a metaphysical interiority with private access. He also sustains that we have innate ideas in us (like the idea of God, the idea of our freedom).

Hobbes denies that we have any innate ideas (ideas that do not arise from senses), denies the existence of any non-corporeal thing and considers it nonsense. In fact, he is very ironic about this: “It does not seem to be a valid argument to say ‘I am thinking, therefore I am a thought’ or ‘I am using my intellect, therefore I am an intellect.’ I might just as well say ‘I am walking, therefore I am a walk.’”<sup>22</sup> This only shows the distance between Hobbes and Descartes’ metaphysics, even though it is known that Hobbes admired Descartes for his method.

Hobbes sees the human being as a body among others, yet having language and ratiocination as specific instruments; this specific body has active power and is living by means of the mechanism of desire (selfish interest). As consequence, men must enter into a political structure which is able to restrain their individual interest; we can see why Hobbes promotes a public way of thinking, why he is a materialist (there is only the realm of matter) and a nominalist (‘*walk*’ and ‘*thought*’ have the same ontological status, they are just names used by men to mark their experiences), why he theorizes about the mode in which men are grouping in communities, why he is interested about the social, communitarian life of the human beings.

Further, my intention is to present Spinoza’s philosophy, and in the same time, to connect his ideas with the ones above.

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<sup>20</sup> *Leviathan*, XXI, p. 144

<sup>21</sup> *Leviathan*, XXI, p. 139

<sup>22</sup> Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy: with selections from the Objections and Replies*, Third Objections: CSM II I 22

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Benedict Spinoza is an intriguing and complicate philosopher and I intend to partially reveal why. He is said to be a monist, one of the few consequent ones that existed. He thought that there is just one substance in the universe. We remember that Descartes considered that besides God, who properly deserves to be considered substance, in the created world there are two distinct substances: extension and thought. Taking into consideration Descartes' statement from the Replies to Objections: "no essence can belong univocally to both God and his creatures"<sup>23</sup>, it clearly appears a separation between God (as infinite substance) and the finite things. The substances of the created things are essences that need only God in order to exist. We have a hierarchy starting from the infinite substance, continuing with the two substances which characterize the finite things, then the attributes of these two substances, ending with the qualities or modes of the attributes. In Descartes' theory God has as attribute only one of the two substances that ground the finite things: the thought (although not univocally). God has no extension<sup>24</sup>.

Spinoza criticizes this theory, assessing that there can be no more than one substance. "Except God, no substance can be or be conceived"<sup>25</sup>. He argues that by means of a logical construction, geometrically ordered; this is the manner in which his book *Ethics* is wanted to be written. His reasoning is that there could not be two substances because substance is what is in itself and is conceived through itself (D3), therefore is self caused, therefore is infinite (is not limited by anything else of the same nature (D2); in which case its essence would have been determined by this limitation and not through itself), therefore cannot exist two substances.

Hobbes too has a philosophy that upholds a single substance, but his substance is 'matter', so his philosophy is a materialist one. Monism is a concept which (in the history of philosophy) mainly focuses on theories that make a unity from dualisms like: mind (soul, spirit) - body, transcendence - immanence. For that reason Hobbes' theory is a monism, but by ignoring one side of the philosophical dualisms.

Refocusing on Spinoza, he argues that there is only one infinite substance - *Deus sive Natura*, and all that is matter, nature, world and mind is contained in it. He is assessing that we (human beings) can only understand two attributes (from the infinity of attributes) of the substance: extension and thought (we can recognize Descartes here). Here too we have a hierarchy; it begins with the substance, con-

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<sup>23</sup> *Meditations*, p. 93

<sup>24</sup> Jean Luc Marion, "Cartesian Metaphysics: the simple natures", in John Cottingham (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Descartes*, Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 133.

<sup>25</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, in *A Spinoza Reader. The Ethics and Other Works*, Princeton University Press, 1994, P14, p. 93

tinues with two (yet in itself an infinity of) attributes, and ends with infinities of finite modes of the two (or infinity) of attributes of the substance. A major difference from Descartes is that in Spinoza's theory the essences are applied univocally to substance, attributes and modes.

Here is offered to his reader's mind a serious challenge: how to understand the fact that there is only one substance, everything being contained in it and, on the other side, what is individuality and what reality the finite modes (the things) can have. This problem reminds of the Platonic problem of One and Multiple from Parmenides. Does only the One exist? Does only the Multiple exist? Can they exist both? For Spinoza the substance, the attributes and the modes are ontologically One, while the substance is formally Multiple in its expressions, in its affections<sup>26</sup>. We have formal distinction in the substance but this doesn't really divide it, doesn't separate it.

The consequences of only one substance univocally extended are that everything is necessary, and that the attributes are common features both to God (*Natura naturans*) and to the finite modes, to the things that exist (*Natura naturata*). This is available for the attribute of thought, but also for the attribute of extension. The simultaneity of these proprieties is unacceptable for a Christian doctrine of the creation (we must not ignore that Spinoza was born Jewish, as we cannot ignore that Descartes was trying to philosophize in accordance with the Christian conceptions) and for a philosophy in accordance with it; the idea saying that God has extension is outrageous in the same respect. God must maintain, in a Christian conception, his spirituality, his transcendence and the ontological difference between creator and creation. As for the necessity, its significance is most important in the realm of morality. While Christians hold that free will is essential to a moral life based on virtues and values, Spinoza denies the existence of free will, nevertheless he intends to provide an ethics situated on other grounds, which are more similar to Hobbes's materialist philosophy.

There is another important aspect of Spinoza's theory of substance to be underlined. That is the activism of the substance or its immanence. Substance exists in the sense of *efficient* cause of itself and this position is contrary to the one sustaining a *final* cause. Consequently, we cannot consider Nature (or God) pre-determining the world according to precise goals and ends, but to understand that it acts in each moment as an active cause. The attributes express the essence of the substance and they express themselves through infinities of finite modes (things); these expressions are to be understood in terms of powers, of active forces (these concepts are adequate for a theory sustaining active causality). The power is understood as "raison suffisante de la quantité de réalité"<sup>27</sup> that every thing has. In other terms, each thing (finite mode) is part of the infinite power that is the substance; it

<sup>26</sup> G. Deleuze, *Spinoza et le problème de l'expression*, Les Editions de Minuit, 1968, p. 56

<sup>27</sup> *Spinoza et le problème de l'expression*, p. 74

has an inner perseverance to exist (E.III, P6), an inner force that is also called *conatus* (here Spinoza follows Hobbes's theory) and who is correspondent to its essence (E.III, P7). The conclusion to be determined from here is that in each moment a finite mode is everything that it can be, according to its essence.

Now I must explain on which bases Spinoza is building his ethics. The status of human beings is not a special one in the whole context of Nature. Humans have as main attributes extension and thought, like in Descartes. But central differences appear. Thought has no pre-eminence, "the first thing which constitutes the essence of the mind is nothing but the idea of an actual existent body"<sup>28</sup> (what a distance from Descartes!) and Spinoza declares an exact parallelism between thought and extension. Each idea has a precise correspondence with an extended thing of the same essence and power.

If the essence of man is to persevere into existence, if is expressed in terms of power and force, this striving is called *will* when is related to the mind and is called *appetite* when is related to the mind and body together. The appetite accompanied with conscience is called *desire* (E.III, P9). Men are in connection with external things, other finite modes, they are involved in causal connections (and that with necessity); if he has knowledge about these causal connections (understands them clearly and distinctly) then he has adequate ideas about them. If he fails to see or ignores these connections, if he considers by ignorance that he acts free, then he has inadequate ideas.

The things that affect us positively (are useful, bring us pleasure, joy, get us into a greater perfection) are considered to be good, while those who affect us negatively (bring pain, sadness, get us to a lesser perfection) are considered to be evil. In any way, the man is affected, either actively (when he has adequate ideas) either passively (when he has inadequate ideas). To have active affections is to have power to act, equivalent with the power to understand, to acknowledge. To have passive affections is to receive passively, to be the patient of the affections. We can see that the degree of perfection is directly proportional with the possession of adequate ideas. This is a rationalist type of ethics, where knowledge (of causes) provides a higher degree of perfection, of course following the desires that go together with it.

This theory is similar to the one Hobbes has, to the mechanism of desire described in the Englishman's theory. Men are to be understood in terms of desire, power, *conatus*. The rational feature of this type of ethics does not imply that reason is principle or provider of morality, the appetites and desires are active during the whole life; reason can only understand the better ways to satisfy these desires. Instead of searching pleasure hazardous (as is the case with inadequate ideas), reason provides (through perpetual experience and education) a certain organisation of the desires, a certain understanding of the machine of desires that man is.

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<sup>28</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, III (Of the Affects), p. 158

I consider to have offered some significant implications coming from the thoughts of the three modern philosophers mentioned in this paper. Early modernity has a strong requirement for rationality and methodical reasoning; it has its definite character - mechanical physics, causal explanations, reliance on what is to be obtained by the natural light of the reason (consequently a critique of the dogmatism). Yet, as I hope is obvious from the pages above, the principle commitments can be rather different, so can the moral consequences be. My final thought will be that, although some of the ideas of these philosophers are somehow revolutive, the quality of their thinking is even nowadays honourable for anyone who is bothering to understand the world he lives in.

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