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A journal for restless minds

Colloquī *: to discuss*

Begging the Question

Cogito, ergo cogito, cogito

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Begging the Question

Cogito, ergo cogito, cogito

René Descartes, the seventeenth-century French polymath, is perhaps most familiar for his infamous three-word Latin argument, *cogito, ergo sum* (“I think, therefore I am”) although, to his credit, he wrote *je pense, donc je suis* in his *Discourse on Method*. Whether Latin, French, or English, and while leaving Descartes’ suspect genius aside for the moment, I have always found it more a foolish argument than a profound one, a rather obvious formal logical fallacy¹ which can be clearly shown by this example: while I am doing anything, in this case, thinking, I cannot doubt my existence because I have to exist in order to think.

On a deeper level, the snappy dictum “I think, therefore I am” contains one of the most pernicious confusions possible, so destructive that we might very well call it the first sin. We catch the error if we lapse for a moment into common sense and say, “Well, René, isn’t it really the other way around? In order to think, I first have to exist, and I go right on existing even when I am not thinking. And anyway, didn’t the world get along just fine before I was ever around to think about anything? So we should say, ‘I am, therefore I can think,’ rather than, ‘I think, therefore I am.’”

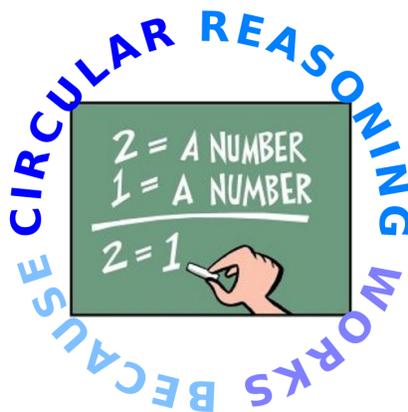
The common sense point is this: reality exists before our thinking, so that our thinking depends on reality, and this in two ways. First, our thinking depends on the reality of our own existence. If we don’t exist, we can’t think. Second, our thinking correctly depends on our properly conforming our minds to what really exists. Scientific theories are judged true or false, better or worse, insofar as they actually correspond to the way things are in the real world. Against Descartes, we assert common sense against nonsense: the first principle of philosophy is reality (or being), not “I think.” Reality trumps.

If we ignore this first principle, and take Descartes’ instead, our imaginations untethered to reality can only run wild, as he himself giddily demonstrates. “I could pretend that I had no body and that there was no world nor any place where I was, but ... I could not pretend ... that I did not exist.” And what does he conclude?

“From this I knew that I was a substance the whole essence or nature of which was merely to think, and which, in order to exist, needed no place and depended on no material thing.”

Obviously this absurdity was not uttered near lunchtime. In any case, reality had the last say over Descartes’ imagination: he died of a cold. I know how hard it is to think when I have a cold. Perhaps he fell victim to his own dictum and ceased for a few fateful minutes to think! *Non cogito, non ergo sum.*²

The first rule in Descartes’ Method was to doubt everything, which leads us to conclude that it might have made as much nonsense to have simply said: *cogito, ergo cogito, cogito* (I think, therefore I think, I think) which merely begs the question, a different logical fallacy altogether. Benjamin Wiker offers another example to prove just how nonsensical was Descartes’ argument.



How grateful would you be if you came to me complaining of a headache and I chopped off your head? Certainly, I fixed the problem—and permanently so!—but at a rather higher cost than you’d hoped for.

René Descartes’ *Discourse on Method* has had a similar effect on the Western mind. Descartes’ little book has done damage to us precisely by seeming to do good, like a bull who kindly offers to straighten up the china shop. Descartes attacked skepticism, but only by denying reality. He confirmed the idea

of the immaterial soul against the pronouncements of the crass materialists of the day, but only by recreating us as insubstantial ghosts trapped in clattering machines. He proved God’s existence, but only by making it depend on our thinking Him into existence. By his good intentions—if indeed they really were good—he fathered every flavor of self-congratulatory solipsism,³ led us to believe we are no different from robots, and made religion a creation of our own ego. Thanks a lot, René.⁴

It is difficult to consider Descartes seriously, yet he has been considered one of the most intelligent men who ever lived, a universal genius; intelligence, however, does not necessarily translate into wisdom, as the poet wrote: “For fools rush in where angels fear to tread.”⁵ Every major philosopher for the next 200 years, except Pascal, followed Descartes in attempting to apply some aspects of

the scientific method to philosophy; the results have been disastrous.

Not content with a mere three words of lunacy, Descartes traveled further and deeper down the proverbial rabbit hole of irrationality, claiming reason, what he called good or common sense, was by nature equal in all men.

Good sense is the most evenly distributed commodity in the world, for each of us considers himself to be so well endowed with it that even those who are the most difficult to please in all other matters are not likely to desire more of it than they have. It is not likely that anyone is mistaken about this, but it proves evidence that the power of judging rightly and of distinguishing the true from the false (which, properly speaking is what people call good sense or reason) is naturally equal in all men.⁶

Petitio principii (meaning assuming the initial point), also known as a circular argument, is a logical fallacy in which the author assumes the statement to be proved to be true. One could argue that the Bible is true because it says so in the Bible. It is a claim using its own conclusion as its premise, and vice versa, generally in the form of "If A is true because B is true; B is true because A is true." With all due respect to Descartes, his assumption that "Good sense is the most evenly distributed commodity in the world ... is naturally equal in all men" truly begs the question, *petitio principii*. As Peter Kreeft notes, "If 'reason' means 'wisdom,' it is obviously *not* equal in all men. But if it means only what we call 'science,' it is. **Wisdom is personal, science is impersonal. Because of this difference, philosophers and ordinary people who seek wisdom have always disagreed, while scientists, who have lowered their aims from 'wisdom' to 'testable knowledge,' have always eventually come to consensus and agreement.**"⁷ Sadly, tragically, wisdom is seldom sought though disagreement runs riot throughout society.

It is often our desire to have something be true that makes us clearly and distinctly see the false as true, the imagined as real. This is as true in the history of science as it is in our everyday life. In either case, reality is the appropriate test of our everyday beliefs and scientific theories.

In contrast to this salutary realism, Descartes' method of doubting everything but his own thought, has, for us poor moderns, made subjectivism the criterion of truth.

But methodical egoism (the Latin for "I" is ego) isn't the only bad thing Descartes sent down the river to us. The very way he defined the "I" has also befouled the historical stream.⁸

Descartes is also known as the father of modern dualism,⁹ imagining man as pure spirit trapped in a self-running machine (the human body). This, of course, is antithetical to the idea that the human person is "created in the image of God, is a being at once corporeal and spiritual" (CCC §362). It further denies that the "soul" refers to human life or the entire human person (CCC §363); "it is a human body precisely because it is animated by a spiritual soul, and it is the whole human person that is intended to become, in the body of Christ, a temple of the Spirit" (CCC §364). This unity of person (body and soul) is specifically brought forth and clearly expressed in *Gaudium et Spes*: "Though made of body and soul, man is one. Through his bodily composition he gathers to himself the elements of the material world; thus, they reach their crown through him, and through him raise their voice in free praise of the Creator. For this reason, man is not allowed to despise his bodily life, rather he is obliged to regard his body as good and honorable since God has created it and will raise it up on the last day. Nevertheless, wounded by sin, man experiences rebellious stirrings in his body. But the very dignity of man postulates that man glorify God in his body and forbid it to serve the evil inclinations of his heart."¹⁰

If Descartes is the father of modern dualism, what does dualism itself beget? A walking philosophical bipolar disorder, a creature who is not at home in creation, a creature who dwells in dual extremes, either as wholly a ghost or entirely a robot. One day he feels that he is a god, a purely spiritual being, capable of completely mastering and manipulating all nature (including his own body) as he would any machine, and the next day believes that he is a purely material being, a helpless machine entirely mastered by the mechanics of nature.

This brings us to Descartes' final error, his absolutely awful proof of the existence of God. We recall that Descartes puts as the first principle of his philosophy "I think, therefore I am." He then asserts that God must exist because he (Descartes, not God) can think of a being more perfect than himself. Therefore, he concludes, "this idea was placed in me by a nature truly more perfect than I was ... and ... this nature was God." To make matters worse, Descartes then claims that it

must be the case that his ideas, “insofar as they are clear and distinct, cannot fail to be true” because they too come from God. Therefore, God exists, because Descartes can imagine Him, and all Descartes’ clear and distinct ideas are absolutely true, because God put them there!

I pray that readers can see the foolishness of this reasoning. I can think of a man or woman who is more perfect than any I’ve ever met. Does that mean either of them necessarily exists? I can think of a superior alien race existing on a much nicer planet than Earth. Does either exist? Our thinking of anything is not proof that it exists, let alone proof that whatever seems to me to be “clear and distinct” is given a divine stamp of authority, as if God put it there. Descartes’ approach to religion is not only false, but creates the characteristically modern belief that God is whatever we “very clearly and very distinctly” imagine Him to be. And that means we fashion God after our own hearts, rather than our hearts and religion after God. This doesn’t just lead to bad belief, but even worse, to bad non-belief. If God is whatever we very clearly and distinctly imagine Him to be, then if we can very clearly and distinctly imagine Him not to be, He isn’t. To be or not to be, that becomes the modern quandary about God. But the horns of this dilemma are largely chimerical; that is, they are the horns of a mythical beast created by Descartes’ imagination. His beastly reasoning has led us to reject God on the grounds that our thinking about Him is fuzzy, and to accept the most ridiculous utopian fantasies about humanity because we can imagine them quite clearly and distinctly. Marxism is only the most obvious instance of the pernicious working out of Descartes’ ideas, but, as we shall see, not the only one.

What are the principal errors we can thank the father of modern philosophy for? First, subjectivism, which is really a thinly disguised form of egoism. We have become Cartesian insofar as we declare that there is no wisdom in the past, and that whatever seems to be certain to us now must be true. Rather than leading us to greater wisdom and independence of thought, we become far more likely to affirm thoughtlessly our own unexamined opinions. Since these unexamined opinions are generally obtained from the frivolous ideas bandied about in the contemporary marketplace, we end up in the very situation Descartes satirized at the beginning of the Discourse, where everyone is satisfied with his own opinion simply because (so he believes) it is his own and so it must be true. This has led to a second evil: the confusion of true wisdom about God with whatever one happens to think about God. This, of course, is the ultimate egoism, since in defining God by our own thoughts, we define everything else accordingly. A third evil then follows from the first two, that real-

ity is defined by what we think it to be. Descartes wanted to imagine he was some kind of disembodied ghost and that his own body and everything in nature were merely machines. The problem with this dualism is that it soon became a monism: the ghost disappeared and we were left only with the machine. Thus, even human life came to be reduced to mere mechanism—something that could be taken apart and rebuilt according to our own desires. The second and third evil then gave birth to a fourth. Since God was caused by our thinking Him, then He must only be a thought and not a reality, a mere subjective projection of our own ego. Since He is not real, then He does not stand against whatever we desire to do with the machine of nature, especially the machinery of the human body. We are free to manipulate it at will, and remake human nature according to our own plans, so that we can really say, in a far deeper way than Descartes, “I think, therefore I am.” Rather than taking ourselves to be made in the image of God, with all the moral limitations that entails, we believe that we are self-creators with no limit but our own ever-increasing power.¹¹

Now I am beginning to think, after all this thinking about thinking, that perhaps the problem we now face is far more serious than a first, second, or dare I suggest, a third thought which is this: that we no longer think much at all. Perhaps we have simply gotten out of the habit, taken on the Greyhound Bus attitude, “Sit back, relax, and leave the thinking to someone else.” There is nothing new with such thoughtlessness should one bother to think to look it up; one needs go no further than the third chapter of Genesis for evidence of the original sin of unthinking. There are, of course, a number of possibilities for the present-day absence of reverie, though that, in and of itself, requires no inconsiderable amount of thought. One might be that Descartes was terribly wrong in thinking that he could think at all (*Et non cogito*) which would have placed him in quite the existential dilemma. Another possibility, suggested by Chesterton, is that we have come to the conclusion that we could not think (which presupposes thinking, does it not?)

This seemed, for some reason, to please us very much. And indeed it would not have mattered seriously if we had not immediately begun to think about our own thoughtlessness. We had a theory that we had no theory. Now, this kind of thing will not do; because whatever advantages there really are in being vague involve the idea that one does not know that one is vague. The one advantage of a child is that he does not know that

he is a child. Unconscious carelessness may sometimes mean genius; conscious carelessness never means anything but bad manners.

When we began to think that it was better not to think, one of our thoughts was this: we said that an anomaly—that is, an illogical action not obviously harmful—did not matter. ... The most trenchant and typical intellects of the nineteenth century asserted again and again that illogicalities were in themselves harmless.

The intellectual objection to anomalies (or rules devoid of reason) is that they accustom the human mind to what is untenable and unfair. He who has got used to unreason is ready for unkindness. ... When you have accustomed men to what is mentally wrong, you have half-accustomed them to what is morally wrong.

In no business seriously intended to succeed would it ever be arranged as a minor concession that the manager who was to be obeyed during the rest of the day should be symbolically kicked by the office-boy every morning on condition that the boot did not actually touch his person. It would not much hurt the manager, though it might needlessly entertain the office-boy. But it would be unpractical because it would be illogical. Exactly as anomaly infringes authority so it infringes equality.

May I remark, as a minor provocation to the intellect, that one of the paragraphs in my article last week was not written by me. I may add that it was entirely my own fault, like most other things that happen to me. I merely mention it here in order to state that any person detecting the correct paragraph will be rewarded with thirty-seven obsolete tram-tickets, four yards of potato-peeling, and one burnt match. I have no more to add.¹²

Should there be any thought at all, let us quickly make use of it before that train leaves the station to consider what Wiker previously noted to be the principal philosophical errors inflicted upon the modern world by Descartes. Let us begin with the argument that rejects/denies/ignores the wisdom of the past, subjectively believing that “whatever seems to be certain to us now must be true.” This is the equivalent to arguing that there is no objective truth, only my truth, your truth, or public opinion; no objective reality, only my reality, your reality, or surreality; no God, just my god(s), your god(s) or no god(s); it is an appeal to ignorance (*argumentum ad ignorantiam*), a logical fallacy, proving nothing except the unknowing. This leads to the acceptance of nonsense, “frivolous ideas bandied about in the contemporary marketplace,” nothing more than unexamined, unsubstantiated, thoughtless opinion,

otherwise known as hogwash and balderdash; the recent political campaigns exemplify the madness of truth defined by opinion, “where everyone is satisfied with his own opinion simply because (so he believes) it is his own and so it must be true.”

Wiker then points to another evil, one derived from man’s “ultimate egoism”, defining God by our own thoughts just as we define (think) everything else, including ourselves and our reality. Anything that might serve to dissuade us of such thoughts is thus determined to be untrue—another logical fallacy known as personal incredulity.¹³ Obviously, a fallacy whole-heartedly endorsed by a large segment of the citizenry during the recent presidential election. As an aside, though germane, supposedly on September 2, 1858, speaking in Clinton¹⁴, Illinois, during the famous Lincoln-Douglas debates, Abraham Lincoln is attributed with saying, “You can fool all the people some of the time and some of the people all the time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time.” I would add that some people are but fools opining foolish thoughts they hold to be true all the time.

It is perhaps the third and fourth evil that are most pernicious: “that reality is defined by what we think it to be” and that God “must only be a thought and not a reality.” Descartes’ discombobulated image that of a “disembodied ghost and that his own body and everything in nature were merely machines.” As Wiker notes, such a dualistic nature quickly becomes a monistic nature: “the ghost disappeared and we were left only with the machine,” a malleable, de-constructable, rebuildable, better than new, improved machine—be all that you imagine yourself to be, and then some—but a machine nevertheless. And that is your reality—not! Such a nightmarish reality where human existence is subject to the thoughts of man *qua* man. This naturally leads to the final evil: “Since God was caused by our thinking Him, then He must only be a thought and not a reality, a mere subjective projection of our own ego. Since He is not real, then He does not stand against whatever we desire to do with the machine of nature, especially the machinery of the human body.” It is this then that leaves us free to choose whatever is desired, whatever is useful, whatever is, according to our own thoughts, within our own best interests.

Thus, man *qua* machine is only valued for its utility; what is inconvenient, unwanted, unpleasant, problematic, disruptive, embarrassing, tiresome, or untimely can as easily be erased, deleted, or aborted, as readily as a carton of spoiled milk or a rotten tomato. Old models destroyed, used models refurbished, damaged goods repaired or tossed out with the garbage.

Religion, what is left of it, is what one thinks of it, as with the divine and the transcendent. Is there any wonder why there are so many “practicing” Cafeteria Catholics?

Cogito, ergo cogito, cogito? Really? Think about it.

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1. A **Formal Fallacy** is a breakdown in how you say something. The ideas are somehow sequenced incorrectly. Their form is wrong, rendering the argument as noise and nonsense.
 2. Benjamin Wiker, “10 Books that Screwed Up the World: And 5 Others That Didn’t Help,” (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2008), 23-24.
 3. **Solipsism**, the view or theory that the self is all that can be known to exist.
 4. Wiker, *10 Books that Screwed Up the World*, 17-18.
 5. Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*, (1711).
 6. René Descartes, *Discourse on Method, Part I*, 1637.
 7. Peter Kreeft, “Socrates’ Children, Volume III: Modern Philosophers,” (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2019), 31.
 8. Wiker, *10 Books that Screwed Up the World*, 26.
 9. **Dualism** is the belief that human beings are not one thing—an intimate and essential union of soul and body—but two entirely different and independent entities, a ghostly soul banging around in a ghostly machine.
 10. Pope Paul VI, “*Gaudium et Spes, Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World*,” December 7, 1965, §14.1.
 11. Wiker, *10 Books that Screwed Up the World*, 27-30.
 12. G.K. Chesterton, “*The Anomalies of English Politics*,” *The Illustrated London News*, March 7, 1908. Cf. G.K. Chesterton *Collected Works Volume XXVIII*, (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1987), 57-61.
 13. The fallacy of **personal incredulity** occurs when one finds a concept difficult to understand, or simply does not fathom how it works, concluding that it is likely untrue. *Example*: Irene was 89 years old, had never left the small town in Iowa where she was raised, and she had never seen a sea vessel. Though her son Michael tried to describe what Navy life on a submarine would be like, she did not believe a word was true. How could a glorified metal tube sustain the lives of many men while submerged for months on end.
 14. How deliciously ironic.

Deacon's Diner

Food for a restless mind

For those restless minds that hunger and thirst for more. Each week this space will offer a menu of interesting and provocative titles, written by Catholic authors, in addition to those referenced in the articles, for you to feed your restless mind.

BOOKS

Salvation: What Every Catholic Should Know

Michael Patrick Barber

Ignatius Press

2019, 189 pages.

Faith and Politics

Joseph Ratzinger (Benedict XVI)

Ignatius Press

2018, 269 pages.

Voyage to Alpha Centauri: A Novel

Michael D. O'Brien

Ignatius Press

2013, 587 pages.

G.K. Chesterton Collected Works: Volume XXVIII

The Illustrated London News 1908-1910

Ignatius Press

1987, 668 pages.

Catholic Christianity: A Complete Catechism of

Catholic Beliefs

Peter J. Kreeft

Ignatius Press

2014, 426 pages.

The Irony of Modern Catholic History:

How the Church rediscovered itself

George Weigel

Basic Books

2019, 322 pages.

Letters on Liturgy

Father Dwight Longenecker

Angelico Press

2020, 164 pages.

Immortal Combat

Father Dwight Longenecker

Sophia Institute Press

2020, 144 pages.

PERIODICALS

First Things

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Touchstone

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Catholic Answers Magazine

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Catholic Herald

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Gilbert!

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www.theimaginativeconservative.org

Catholic Exchange

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Catholic Vote

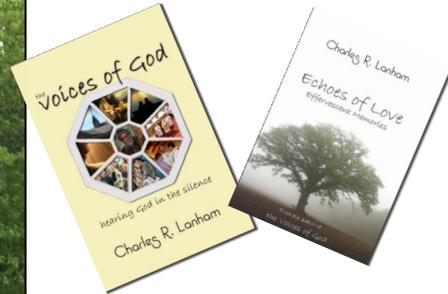
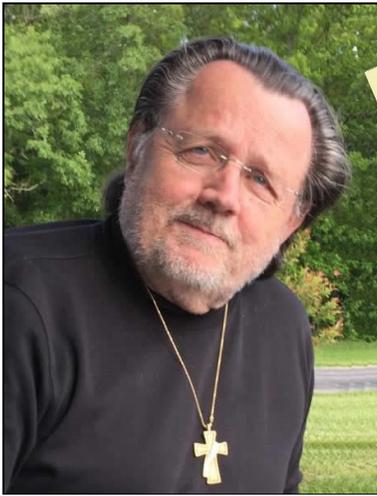
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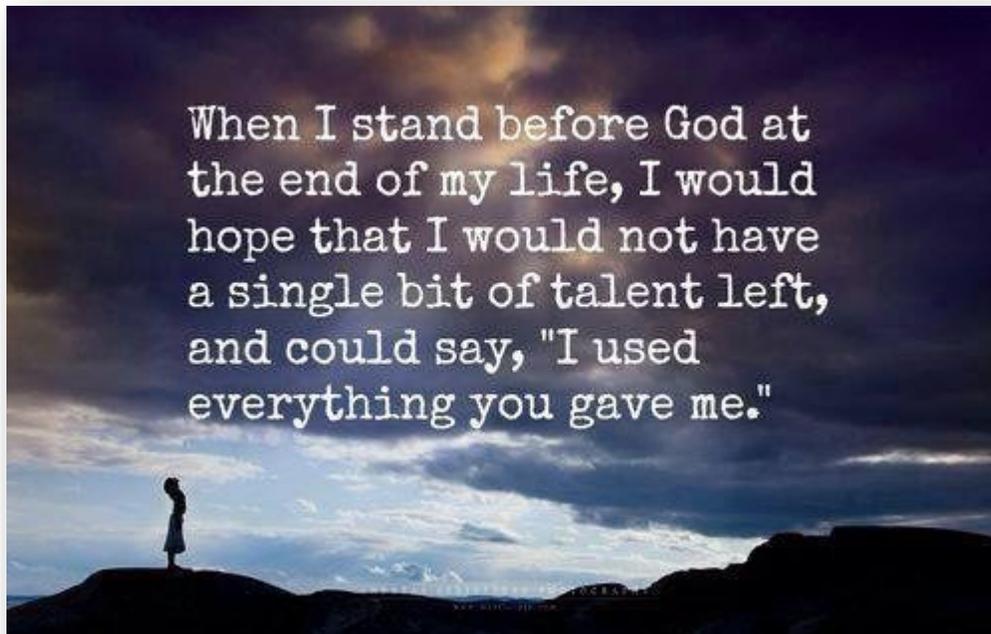


Books are available on
Amazon.com or from the
author's web site at:
deaconscorner.org

Deacon Chuck Lanham is a Catholic author, columnist, speaker, theologian and philosopher, a jack-of-all-trades like his father (though far from a master of anything) and a servant of God. He is the author of **The Voices of God: Hearing God in the Silence**, **Echoes of Love: Effervescent Memories** and has written over 500 essays on religion, faith, morality, theology, and philosophy.

Deacon Chuck can be contacted thru email at

deacon.chuck@deaconscorner.org



Colloquī, the present infinitive of *colloquor* (Latin: *to talk, to discuss or to converse*) is a Deacon's Corner weekly journal. Its mission and purpose to encourage serious discussion, to promote reasoned debate, and to provide serious content for those who hope to find their own pathway to God. Each week **Colloquī** will contain articles on theology, philosophy, faith, religion, Catholicism, and much more. Be forewarned! Essays may and often will contain fuel for controversy, but always with the expressed intent to seek the Truth, the whole Truth and nothing but the Truth, so help us God.

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