
REMARKS

UPON

MR. LOCKE'S "ESSAY ON HUMAN UNDERSTANDING."

PEMBROKE, *April 28, 1781.*

FOR some days I have employed myself on the road in reading Mr. Locke's "Essay on Human Understanding:" And I do not now wonder at its having gone through so many editions in so short a time. For what comparison is there between this deep, solid, weighty treatise, and the lively, glittering trifle of Baron Montesquieu? As much as between tinsel and gold; between glass-beads and diamonds. A deep fear of God, and reverence for his word, are discernible throughout the whole: And though there are some mistakes, yet these are abundantly compensated by many curious and useful reflections. I think, therefore, a little time will be well employed in pointing out those little mistakes, and in extracting some of the most useful passages of that excellent treatise.*

I think that point, "that we have no innate principles," is abundantly proved, and cleared from all objections that have any shadow of strength. And it was highly needful to prove the point at large, as all that follows rests on this foundation; and as it was at that time an utter paradox both in the philosophical and the religious world.

* The "passages" here referred to were inserted by Mr. Wesley in the fifth, sixth, and seventh volumes of the *Arminian Magazine*.—EDIT. by Google

That all our ideas come from sensation or reflection, is fully proved in the Second Book. And why should any one be angry at his using the word "idea" for "whatever is the object of the mind in thinking?" Although, it is true, it is his favourite word, which he often thrusts in not so properly.

That "Socrates asleep and Socrates awake is not the same person," (Book II., chap. i., sec. 11,) I can by no means allow. This odd assertion depends upon another, which will be considered by and by.

The operations of the mind are more accurately divided by Aristotle than by Mr. Locke. They are three, and no more: Simple apprehension, judgment, and discourse. It seems Mr. Locke only gives a new name to simple apprehension, terming it perception. Of judgment and reason, he speaks in the Fourth Book. Discerning, comparing, compounding, abstracting, are species of judgment. Retention, or memory, refers to them all.

Complex ideas are most awkwardly divided (I fear, chiefly through affectation of novelty) into modes, substances, and relations. (Chap. xii.) How much clearer is the vulgar division of beings into the ten classes called "predicaments;" or into the two,—substances and accidents! If the word "mode" has any determinate meaning, it is only another term for accidents. And are not relations one species of accidents? So that Mr. Locke's discovery comes to this,—Complex ideas are either modes, substances, or a particular sort of modes!

When accidents are termed *modus entis* or *entium*, in Latin, the phrase seems proper enough. But why any man should squeeze it into the English tongue, I know not; since the old word "accidents" is full as good: And we may retain it without any danger of "running into the notion, that accidents are a sort of real beings."

"What is it determines our will with regard to our actions? Some uneasiness a man is under." (Chap. xxi., sec. 31.) Not always. Pleasure determines it as often as pain. But "desire is uneasiness." It is not: We desire to enjoy pleasure as much as to avoid pain. But desire differs *toto genere*, both from one and the other. Therefore, all that follows, about pain alone determining the will, is wrong from end to end.

“If it be asked, What is it moves desire? I answer, Happiness, and that alone.” (Chap. xxi., sec. 41.) How flatly does that contradict all that went before, where it is said, “Uneasiness alone causes desire!”

“Section 8.—An animal is a living organized body; and, consequently, the same animal, as we have observed, is the same continued life communicated to different particles of matter, as they happen successively to be united to that organized living body. And whatever is said of other definitions, ingenuous observation puts it past doubt, that the idea in our minds, of which the sound ‘man’ in our mouths is the sign, is nothing else but of an animal of such a certain form; since I think I may be confident, that whoever should see a creature of his own shape and make, though it had no more reason than even a cat or a parrot, would call him still a man; or whoever should hear a cat or a parrot discourse, reason, and philosophize, would call or think it nothing but a cat or a parrot; and say the one was a dull, irrational man, and the other a very intelligent, rational parrot. A relation we have, in an author of great note,* is sufficient to countenance the supposition of a rational parrot. His words are:—

“‘I had a mind to know from Prince Maurice’s own mouth, the account of a common, but much credited, story, that I had heard so often from many others, of an old parrot he had in Brazil, during his government there, that spoke, and asked and answered common questions, like a reasonable creature; so that those of his train there generally concluded it to be witchery or possession; and one of his Chaplains, who lived long afterwards in Holland, would never from that time endure a parrot, but said, they all had a devil in them. I had heard many particulars of this story, and assevered by people hard to be discredited, which made me ask Prince Maurice what there was of it. He said, with his usual plainness and dryness in talk, there was something true, but a great deal false, of what had been reported. I desired to know of him, what there was of the first. He told me short and coldly, that he had heard of such an old parrot when he came to Brazil; and though he believed nothing of it, and it was a good way off, yet he had so much curiosity as to send for it; that it was a very great

and a very old one; and when it came first into the room where the Prince was, with a great many Dutchmen about him, it said presently, *What a company of white men are here!* They asked it what he thought that man was, pointing at the Prince. It answered, *Some General or other.* When they brought it close to him, he asked it, *D'où venez vous?* It answered, *De Marinnan.* The Prince, *A qui estes-vous?* The parrot, *A un Portugais.* Prince, *Que fais-tu là?* Parrot, *Je garde les poules.* The Prince laughed, and said, *Vous gardez les poules?* The parrot answered, *Ouy, moy, et je sçay bien faire;** and made the chuck four or five times that people use to make to chickens, when they call them. I set down the words of this worthy dialogue in French, just as Prince Maurice said them to me. I asked him in what language the parrot spoke; and he said, in Brazilian. I asked whether he understood Brazilian: He said, No; but he had taken care to have two interpreters by him, the one a Dutchman that spoke Brazilian, and the other a Brazilian that spoke Dutch; that he asked them separately and privately, and both of them agreed in telling him just the same thing that the parrot said. I could not but tell this odd story, because it is so much out of the way, and from the first hand, and what may pass for a good one; for I dare say this Prince, at least, believed himself in all he told me, having ever passed for a very honest and pious man. I leave it to naturalists to reason, and to other men to believe, as they please upon it."

According to the foregoing account it is evident, Mr. Locke thinks, "consciousness makes personal identity;" that is, knowing I am the same person, makes me the same person. Was ever a more palpable absurdity? Does knowing I exist, make me exist? No; I am before I know I am; and I am the same, before I can possibly know I am the same. Observe, "before" here refers to the order of thinking, not to the order of time.

"Person," says he, "is a thinking intelligent being." Is

* The dialogue between the Prince and the parrot may be thus rendered into English:—Prince.—"Whence come ye?" Parrot.—"From Marinnan." Prince.—"To whom do you belong?" Parrot.—"To a Portuguese." Prince.—"What do you there?" Parrot.—"I look after the chickens." The Prince laughed, and said, "You look after the chickens?" The parrot answered, and said, "Yes, I; and I know well enough how to do it."—EDIT.

it so? Then the same soul is the same person; and that whether it be conscious of being the same or not; and whether it be joined to this or that body. But to constitute the same man, there must be the same body as well as the same soul. But how can this be, seeing the body is changing every moment? That I deny. I deny that the human body changes at all, from the cradle to the grave. By the body I understand that system of vessels which we bring with us into the world, which from that moment is distended more and more in every part, by the adhesion of earthly particles, which circulate through, not only the veins and arteries, but every fibre of its frame. Now this does not, cannot change at all: It neither increases nor diminishes. The blood is in a continual flux; it is not the same for two moments together. But then flesh and blood is not the body; it is only the body's temporary clothing. If this be totally changed every seven years, the body is the same. And, therefore, it is the same man, although he has put on another coat.

Let none then seek a knot in a bulrush. The case is plain, unless it be puzzled by art. I call Cato the same person all his life, because he has the same soul. I call him the same man, because he has the same body too, which he brought into the world.

But what blessed work will Mr. Locke's hypothesis make! If there be no personal identity without consciousness, then Cato is not the same person he was at two months old; for he has no consciousness at all of what he was then. Nay, I have no more consciousness of what I was or did at two years old, than of what Julius Cæsar did. But am I not the same person I was then?

Again: If, consciousness ceasing, identity ceases, a draught of Lethe would change a man into another person. Yea, or if a fever wiped what was past out of the memory, he would not be the same person, nor consequently accountable either to God or man for anything that he, that is, another person, had done before.

There may, therefore, be identity without consciousness. Consequently, although the latter usually accompanies the former, yet it is not the same thing. Yea, and consciousness may be without identity. I know the fact. There is a species of madness, which makes a man conscious of

things he never did, and of words he never spoke. Is he therefore accountable for them? So he thinks; but God's thoughts are not as his thoughts.

Upon the whole, if you take the word "person" for a thinking intelligent being, it is evident, the same soul, conscious or unconscious, is the same person. But if you take it for the same soul, animating the same human body, (in which sense I have always taken it, and I believe every one else that has not been confounded by metaphysical subtlety,) then you and I and every man living is the same person from the cradle to the grave. And God will accordingly reward every man, or every person, (equivalent words,) according to his own works; and that whether he be conscious of them or no; this will make no manner of difference. What every individual man or person sows here, he will reap in eternity.

In reading over the second volume of Mr. Locke's *Essay*, I was much disappointed: It is by no means equal to the first. The more I considered it, the more convinced I was, 1. That his grand design was, (vain design!) to drive Aristotle's *Logic* out of the world, which he hated cordially, but never understood: I suppose, because he had an unskilful master, and read bad books upon the subject. 2. That he had not a clear apprehension. Hence he had few clear ideas; (though he talks of them so much;) and hence so many confused, inadequate definitions. I wonder none of his opponents hit this blot.

I have not time to point out half the mistakes in this volume. I can only make a few cursory strictures.

All along he dotes upon ideas, and frequently puzzles the cause by dragging in the word needlessly and improperly.

Page 3. "To what is it that names, in the use of language, are immediately applied?" Did he know what he meant? If he did, how crude and indistinct is the expression!

Page 4. All this chapter Dean Aldrich comprises in three lines: *Vox est signum rei vel conceptus ex instituto vicarium: Primò declarat conceptum; deinde supponit pro re.* "A word is a sign purposely put for a conception or thing: It first expresses your thought; then the thing you think of."

Page 11. Here his hatred of logic breaks out: "Defining

by genus and difference may be the shortest way, yet I doubt whether it be the best." Then what is the best? No man living can tell a better than this; only if we do not know the difference, we must assign the properties.

Page 21. "The disputes of the schools." I doubt whether Mr. Locke had ever a clear idea of that term. What does he mean by them in, "O ye schoolmen!" But who are they? all the commentators upon Aristotle in the fifteenth and sixteenth century? Did he read them all? Did he ever read one of them through? I doubt, not. Then he should not rail at he knew not what.

Page 22. A man need only read the first chapter of Genesis, to be convinced that God made every species of animals "after its kind;" giving a peculiar essence to each, whether we know that real essence or no.

Page 26. I wish he had understood the three rules of definition, and he would have wrote far more intelligibly than he did.

"The jargon of the schools." (*Ibid.*) What does that term mean? I doubt he had no clear idea of this.

Page 37. "Species and their essences have no real existence in things." Moses says otherwise; and so does Mr. Locke, page 44: "By real essence, I mean that real constitution of anything which is the foundation of all its properties. But this we do not know." True; but it exists. Yet this he denies again, page 50, and page 53, where he says, "Species are not distinguished by generation." Certainly they are: A man generates a man; a dog, a dog; a crow, a crow; and so in other both plants and animals. If there are any exceptions, (as in monsters,) this does not vacate the general rule.

Page 63. "Nature makes many things which agree in their inward frame and constitution: But it is not this real essence that distinguishes them into species." Surely it is: Yet he strangely adds, "The boundaries of the species are made by man." No; by the almighty Creator.

"Each abstract idea makes a distinct species." (*Ibid.*) What! Does my idea of them make a horse, a cow, and a dog, three distinct species? Would not these species be equally distinct, if I had no idea of them at all?

Page 71. The chapter about particles I do not understand; nor does Mr. Locke seem to understand himself

He aims at something, but makes nothing out. *Operosee nihil agit.*

Page 82. "The simple ideas that co-exist in substances." No: Ideas exist only in the mind.

Page 83. "The complex ideas of substances are very different on different men." What then? They are not so different but that all men know a horse from a cow, a crow from a pigeon, and iron from gold.

Page 98. "Logic has much contributed to the obscurity of language." The abuse of logic has; but the true use of it is the noblest means under heaven to prevent or cure the obscurity of language. To divide simple terms according to the logical rules of division, and then to define each member of the division according to the three rules of definition, does all that human art can do, in order to our having a clear and distinct idea of every word we use. Had Mr. Locke done this, what abundance of obscurity and confusion would have been prevented!

Page 99. "Though the word 'man' signifies nothing but a complete idea of properties united in a substance; yet we commonly suppose it to stand for a thing having a real essence on which those properties depend." I do suppose it; and so does everyone that has common sense.

Page 100. "It is a false supposition, that there are certain precise essences by which things are distinguished into species." It is a most true supposition. The Scripture asserts it; and all experience agrees thereto.

Page 140. "Possibly we shall never be able to know whether any mere material being thinks or not." I wonder Mr. Locke did not rather give up this absurd sentence, than defend it through thick and thin.

Page 201. "Man or gold, used for species of things, constituted by real essences, stand for we know not what." Yes, we know what they stand for perfectly well; and no sophister can persuade us to the contrary.

Whatever Mr. Locke says against the terms "essence" or "species," he can find no better words. But I impute this to his violent spleen against logic, which he never rightly understood.

Page 206. "Put a piece of gold separate from the reach and influence of all other bodies." Where is that? Certainly beyond the fixed stars.

Page 209. "Judgment may reach farther." Had he any clear idea affixed to this term.

I think the two next chapters, "Of Maxims, and Of Trifling Propositions," are very true and very useless.

Page 272. "The faculty which supplies the place of knowledge, is judgment. The mind has these two faculties: By knowledge it certainly perceives the agreement or disagreement of ideas; by judgment it presumes them to agree or disagree without perceiving it."

O where are clear ideas now? Is knowledge a faculty of the mind? Or was ever judgment taken before for presuming what we do not know? What a vile abuse of words is here!

Judgment is that operation of the mind which pronounces things to agree or disagree. This is all that the word properly means; and refers as much to certain as to probable things.

Page 277. The chapter Of the Degrees of Assent is quite unsatisfactory. Dean Aldrich says more upon that head in twelve lines than Mr. Locke does in twelve pages.

Page 283. "Any testimony, the farther off it is from the original truth, the less force it has." Nay; the testimony on which we believe the resurrection of Christ, has as much force now as seventeen hundred years ago.

Page 288. "Reason is assisting to all our other intellectual faculties, and contains two of them; namely, sagacity, and illation." What a jumble of ideas! "Reason is that faculty which contains two others,—sagacity and illation!" No mortal ever found this out before. By illation, I suppose he means, the inferring one thing from another. Why, then, can he not say plainly, like other men, "The mind has three operations,—simple apprehension, judgment, and discourse?" But if reason be a faculty of the mind, (usually termed the understanding,) it contains them all three; that is, operates all these ways.

Page 290. Here comes his main attack upon logic, by that marvellous invention of substituting juxta-position of ideas in the place of syllogism. But Bishop Browne has so thoroughly confuted this, (in his Essay on "Human Understanding,") that to add anything more is quite superfluous.

Page 300. "I take notice of one manifest mistake in the rules of syllogism,—that particular premises prove nothing."

Can anything show more clearly his total ignorance of logic?

From a careful consideration of this whole work, I conclude that, together with several mistakes, (but none of them of any great importance,) it contains many excellent truths, proposed in a clear and strong manner, by a great master both of reasoning and language. It might, therefore, be of admirable use to young students, if read with a judicious Tutor, who could confirm and enlarge upon what is right, and guard them against what is wrong, in it. They might then make their full use of all the just remarks made by this excellent writer, and yet without that immoderate attachment to him which is so common among his readers.

WHITEHAVEN,

May 28, 1781.

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* These remarks form the introduction to a series of extracts from the work, inserted by Mr. Wesley in the sixth and seventh volumes of the *Arminian Magazine*.—EDIT.