



JOHN LOCKE

*From the painting at Christ Church, Oxford*

AN ESSAY CONCERNING  
HUMAN UNDERSTANDING

BY

JOHN LOCKE

*COLLATED AND ANNOTATED. WITH  
PROLEGOMENA, BIOGRAPHICAL, CRITICAL, AND HISTORICAL.*

BY

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BOOK II. by; it being indifferent to the matter in hand which way  
 the learned shall determine of it<sup>1</sup>.  
 CHAP. IX.

<sup>1</sup> Although, in the preceding chapter, Locke seems to regard the reflex idea of 'perception' as 'simple,' its complexity has exercised philosophers in Britain and Germany, since the *Essay* appeared, more than any problem. In different aspects it has determined the speculations of Berkeley, Reid, and Kant. Here with Locke it is equivalent to 'the power' of acquiring 'simple ideas'; but with the questions suggested by 'externality' omitted,—referred for consideration to some extent in the Fourth Book (e. g. chh. ix. xi). Indeed with Locke perception of presented phenomena is throughout an inexplicable fact. 'Ideas,' he says, 'it is certain I have, and God is the *original* cause of my having them; but how I come by them, how it is that I perceive, I confess I understand not. . . Ideas are nothing but perceptions of the mind, annexed to certain motions of the body by the will of God, who hath ordered such percep-

tions to accompany such motions, though we know not how they are produced. . . . That which is said about objects exciting perceptions in us by motion does not fully explain how this is done. In this I frankly confess my ignorance.' (*Examination of Malebranche*, §§ 10-16, &c.) In short, perception—consciousness in every form—is to Locke inexplicable, and is accepted by him as a mysterious fact which science cannot resolve. Motion may mechanically explain other motion, but not the rise of perception. So too Prof. Huxley:—'How it is that anything so remarkable as a state of consciousness comes about as a result of initiating nervous tissue, is just as unaccountable as the appearance of the Djin, where Aladdin rubbed his lamp in the story, or as any other ultimate fact in nature.' (*Elementary Physiology*, p. 193.)

## CHAPTER X.

## OF RETENTION.

1. THE next faculty of the mind, whereby it makes a further progress towards knowledge, is that which I call *retention*; or the keeping of those simple ideas which from sensation or reflection it hath received. This is done two ways.

First, by keeping the idea which is brought into it, for some time<sup>1</sup> actually in view, which is called *contemplation*.

2. The other way of retention is, the power to revive again in our minds those ideas which, after imprinting, have disappeared, or have been as it were laid aside out of sight. And thus we do, when we conceive heat or light, yellow or sweet,—the object being removed. This is *memory*<sup>2</sup>, which is as it were the storehouse<sup>3</sup> of our ideas. For, the narrow mind of man not being capable of having many ideas

<sup>1</sup> It is in and through 'retention' that we get the idea of *time*, and specially of time as past; without which, and therefore without memory in some degree, perception and consciousness in any form is impracticable. And perception of the present is always blended with conception of a past, if not also with anticipation of a future.

<sup>2</sup> Hobbes calls 'remembrance' a sixth sense—the other five senses 'taking notice of objects without us,' which 'notice' is 'our conception' (idea) of the object perceived. But we also so 'notice' the conceptions thus gained, as that, when they come again, 'we take notice that it is again.' (*Human Nature*, ch. iii, § 6.) Locke makes

our reflex idea of the operation of memory, like that of perception, a 'simple idea of reflection,'—in each case overlooking their rational implicates, but not wholly their organic accompaniments.

<sup>3</sup> The 'wax tablet' and 'storehouse' metaphors do not help to explain memory as a mental act, and only illustrate the poverty of language for the expression of 'ideas of reflection.' At the same time observation shows that in the order of nature motions in the organism accompany the act of conservation. Memory as well as original sense perception is thus conditioned by organic impressions, under relations on which physiology has now thrown considerable light.

BOOK II. under view and consideration at once<sup>1</sup>, it was necessary to  
 →→→  
 CHAP. X. have a repository, to lay up those ideas which, at another  
 time, it might have use of. [<sup>2</sup>But, our *ideas* being nothing but  
 actual perceptions in the mind, which cease to be anything  
 when there is no perception<sup>3</sup> of them; this laying up of our  
 ideas in the repository of the memory signifies no more but  
 this,—that the mind has a power<sup>4</sup> in many cases to revive  
 perceptions which it has once had, with this additional  
 perception annexed to them, that *it has had them before*.  
 And in this sense it is that our ideas are said to be in our  
 memories, when indeed they are actually nowhere;—but only  
 there is an ability in the mind<sup>5</sup> when it will to revive them  
 again, and as it were paint them anew on itself, though some  
 with more, some with less difficulty; some more lively, and  
 others more obscurely.] And thus it is, by the assistance of  
 this faculty, that we are said to have all those ideas in our  
 understandings which, though we do not actually contemplate,  
 yet we *can* bring in sight, and make appear again, and be the  
 objects of our thoughts, without the help of those sensible  
 qualities which first imprinted them there.

Attention, Repetition, Pleasure and Pain, fix Ideas.  
 3. Attention<sup>6</sup> and repetition help much to the fixing any  
 ideas in the memory. But those which naturally at first make  
 the deepest and most lasting impressions, are those which are  
 accompanied with pleasure or pain. The great business of  
 the senses being, to make us take notice of what hurts or  
 advantages the body, it is wisely ordered by nature, as has

<sup>1</sup> Cf. § 9.

<sup>2</sup> This and the next sentence were added in the second edition.

<sup>3</sup> Although the ideas are then 'actually nowhere,' in consciousness it has been suggested that 'the capability of being put into a mental state is itself something actual, and is, moreover, a different something when the state to be reproduced is different.' (See Ward's article, 'Psychology.')

<sup>4</sup> This potential and *unconscious* retention of what has been consciously perceived, favours by analogy recognition of 'innate' intellect (often in like manner potential and unconscious

in the individual) as presupposed in, and a regulative condition of all experience.

<sup>5</sup> The 'rudiments of memory are involved in the *minimum* of consciousness. The first beginnings of it appear in that *minimum*, just as the first beginnings of perception do. The fact that the *minimum* of consciousness is difference, or change of feelings, is the ultimate explanation of memory as well as of single perceptions.' (Hodgson, *Philos. of Reflection*, i. p. 248.)

<sup>6</sup> Attention, as an element in the acquisition and retention of ideas, is

BOOK II. been shown, that pain should accompany the reception of  
 →→→  
 CHAP. X. several ideas; which, supplying the place of consideration  
 and reasoning in children, and acting quicker than considera-  
 tion in grown men, makes both the old and young avoid  
 painful objects with that haste which is necessary for their  
 preservation; and in both settles in the memory a caution  
 for the future.

4. Concerning the several degrees of lasting, wherewith  
 ideas are imprinted on the memory, we may observe,—that  
 some of them have been produced in the understanding by  
 an object affecting the senses once only, and no more than  
 once; [<sup>1</sup>others, that have more than once offered themselves  
 to the senses, have yet been little taken notice of: the mind,  
 either heedless, as in children, or otherwise employed, as  
 in men intent only on one thing; not setting the stamp  
 deep into itself. And in some, where they are set on with  
 care and repeated impressions, either] through the temper  
 of the body, or some other fault, the memory is very weak.  
 In all these cases, ideas [<sup>2</sup>in the mind] quickly fade, and  
 often vanish quite out of the understanding, leaving no more  
 footsteps or remaining characters of themselves than shadows  
 do flying over fields of corn, and the mind is as void of them  
 as if they had never been there<sup>3</sup>.

5. Thus many of those ideas which were produced in the  
 minds of children, in the beginning of their sensation, (some  
 of which perhaps, as of some pleasures and pains, were before  
 they were born, and others in their infancy,) if in the future

not overlooked by Locke. This is not inconsistent with what he says of the 'passivity' of the understanding in perception. We cannot make that white which is presented to sight as black, or that square and soft which is exhibited in sense as circular and hard, but we can *concentrate* consciousness upon any one of the many objects which thus present themselves.

<sup>1</sup> In first edition:—'especially if the mind, then otherwise employed, took but little notice of it, and set not on the stamp deep into itself; or else

when through the temper of the body, or otherwise, the memory is very weak, such ideas,' &c.

<sup>2</sup> Added in the second edition:—'in the mind,' i. e. in the private store-house of individual memory; not ideas of external sense presented to all.

<sup>3</sup> That the range of *potential* memory is much wider than that of *actual* reproduction, *possible under ordinary conditions*, is shown by well-attested examples of abnormal resuscitation—in dreams and cases of cerebral disease.

BOOK II. course of their lives they are not repeated again, are quite  
 CHAP. X. lost, without the least glimpse remaining of them. This  
 may be observed in those who by some mischance have lost  
 their sight when they were very young; in whom the ideas of  
 colours having been but slightly taken notice of, and ceasing  
 to be repeated, do quite wear out; so that some years after,  
 there is no more notion nor memory of colours left in their  
 minds, than in those of people born blind. The memory of  
 some men, it is true, is very tenacious, even to a miracle. But  
 yet there seems to be a constant decay<sup>1</sup> of all our ideas, even  
 of those which are struck deepest, and in minds the most  
 retentive; so that if they be not sometimes renewed, by  
 repeated exercise of the senses, or reflection on those kinds  
 of objects which at first occasioned them, the print wears  
 out, and at last there remains nothing to be seen. Thus the  
 ideas, as well as children, of our youth, often die before us:  
 and our minds represent to us those tombs to which we are  
 approaching; where, though the brass and marble remain, yet  
 the inscriptions are effaced by time, and the imagery moulders  
 away<sup>2</sup>. The pictures drawn in our minds are laid in fading  
 colours; and if not sometimes refreshed, vanish and disappear.  
 How much the constitution of our bodies [<sup>3</sup>and the make of  
 our animal spirits] are concerned in this; and whether the  
 temper of the brain makes this difference, that in some it  
 retains the characters drawn on it like marble, in others like  
 freestone, and in others little better than sand, I shall not  
 here inquire; though it may seem probable that the constitu-  
 tion of the body does sometimes influence the memory,  
 since we oftentimes find a disease quite strip the mind of all  
 its ideas, and the flames of a fever in a few days calcine all

<sup>1</sup> Hobbes speaks of imagination and memory as 'decaying sense,' and describes 'remembrance' as 'nothing else but the missing of parts. To see at a great distance of place, and to remember at a great distance of time, is to have like conceptions of the thing; for there wanteth distinction of parts in both; the one conception being weak by operation at distance,

the other by decay.' (*Human Nature*, ch. iii. § 7.)

<sup>2</sup> The imaginative sensibility that one often misses in Locke—attributed by Stewart, forgetful of Bunyan and Milton, to inherited puritanical auster-ity, is not wanting in this touching passage.

<sup>3</sup> Added in the fourth edition.

BOOK II. those images to dust and confusion, which seemed to be as  
 CHAP. X. lasting as if graved in marble<sup>1</sup>.

6. But concerning the ideas themselves, it is easy to remark, that those that are oftenest refreshed (amongst which are those that are conveyed into the mind by more ways than one) by a frequent return of the objects or actions that produce them, fix themselves best in the memory, and remain clearest and longest there; and therefore those which are of the original qualities of bodies, viz. solidity, extension, figure, motion, and rest; and those that almost constantly affect our bodies, as heat and cold; and those which are the affections of all kinds of beings, as existence, duration, and number, which almost every object that affects our senses, every thought which employs our minds, bring along with them;—these, I say, and the like ideas, are seldom quite lost, whilst the mind retains any ideas at all<sup>2</sup>.

7. In this secondary perception<sup>3</sup>, as I may so call it, or viewing again the ideas that are lodged in the memory, the mind is oftentimes more than barely passive; the appearance of those dormant pictures depending sometimes on the *will*<sup>4</sup>. The mind very often sets itself on work in search of some hidden idea, and turns as it were the eye of the soul upon it; though sometimes too they start up in our minds of their

<sup>1</sup> The conscious act of memory presents what Locke calls a 'simple idea of reflection.' It is not a phenomenon presentable to the senses; although in man, in this life, it is dependent upon organic conditions, regarding which recent physiological research has largely added to our useful knowledge, but without thereby affording more than a mechanical explanation of the invisible act itself. Mind may explain brain; brain cannot explain memory. Whyself-conscious life in man is embodied life at all is by us inexplicable.

<sup>2</sup> Whether any 'idea' of which a man has been conscious is ever *wholly* lost, so that it cannot revive, in this or in a future life, may be questioned. Some facts suggest that no conscious

(or even unconscious) energy can be wholly obliterated. The act perishes, but not the 'habit.' Coleridge suggests that, in connection perhaps with a finer organism—a 'body celestial'—one's whole past life may be revived consciously; and that this resuscitation may be that 'book of judgment' in which every idle word and deed is thus indelibly registered.

<sup>3</sup> 'Secondary perception'—instead of Hobbes's 'sixth sense.'

<sup>4</sup> This is *recollection* (the ἀνάμνησις as distinguished from the μνήμη of Aristotle), in which intelligent purpose uses associative law to recover what has been *partly* forgotten; and in which the more numerous the associations, the easier the recollective act.

BOOK II. CHAP. X. Constantly repeated Ideas can scarce be lost.

In Remembering, the Mind is often active.

BOOK II. own accord, and offer themselves to the understanding; and  
 CHAP. X. very often are roused and tumbled out of their dark cells into open daylight, by turbulent and tempestuous passions; our affections bringing ideas to our memory, which had otherwise lain quiet and unregarded. [This further is to be observed, concerning ideas lodged in the memory, and upon occasion revived by the mind, that they are not only (as the word *revive* imports) none of them new ones, but also that the mind takes notice of them as of a former impression, and renews its acquaintance with them, as with ideas it had known before. So that though ideas formerly imprinted are not all constantly in view<sup>2</sup>, yet in remembrance they are constantly known to be such as have been formerly imprinted; i. e. in view, and taken notice of before, by the understanding.]

Two defects in the Memory, Oblivion and Slowness.

8. Memory, in an intellectual creature, is necessary in the next degree to perception. It is of so great moment, that, where it is wanting, all the rest of our faculties are in a great measure useless<sup>3</sup>. And we in our thoughts, reasonings, and knowledge, could not proceed beyond present objects, were it not for the assistance of our memories; wherein there may be two defects:—

First, That it loses the idea quite, and so far it produces perfect ignorance. For, since we can know nothing further than we have the idea of it, when that is gone, we are in perfect ignorance<sup>4</sup>.

Secondly, That it moves slowly, and retrieves not the ideas

<sup>1</sup> These two sentences were added in the second edition.

<sup>2</sup> Finite human memory, at its best, is revival in fragments, under associative laws, of a past experience, which man cannot keep *simultaneously, in its totality*, in consciousness.

<sup>3</sup> Without memory all our 'faculties' would be, not only 'in a great measure' but absolutely, useless.

<sup>4</sup> This 'perfect ignorance' may consist with continued *potential* knowledge, if memory is the issue of incredible modes of self-activity. On that

hypothesis, 'oblivion,' rather than 'remembrance,' would have to be accounted for; as due to the gradual subsidence into semi-consciousness, and then into unconsciousness, of energies that are latent because superseded (within the necessarily limited capacity of a human consciousness) by new activities, but which are never absolutely annihilated. 'Ideas which remain long without being attended to have a natural tendency to drop out of consciousness.' (J. S. Mill.)

that it has, and are laid up in store, quick enough to serve the mind upon occasion. This, if it be to a great degree, is stupidity; and he who, through this default in his memory, has not the ideas that are really preserved there, ready at hand when need and occasion calls for them, were almost as good be without them quite, since they serve him to little purpose. The dull man, who loses the opportunity, whilst he is seeking in his mind for those ideas that should serve his turn, is not much more happy in his knowledge than one that is perfectly ignorant. It is the business therefore of the memory to furnish to the mind those dormant ideas<sup>1</sup> which it has present occasion for; in the having them ready at hand on all occasions, consists that which we call invention, fancy, and quickness of parts<sup>2</sup>.

9. [<sup>3</sup> These are defects we may observe in the memory of one man compared with another. There is another defect which we may conceive to be in the memory of man in general;—compared with some superior created intellectual beings, which in this faculty may so far excel man, that they may have *constantly* in view the whole scene of all their former actions, wherein no one of the thoughts they have ever had may slip out of their sight. The omniscience of God, who knows all things, past, present, and to come, and to whom the thoughts of men's hearts always lie open, may satisfy us of the possibility of this. For who can doubt but God may communicate to those glorious spirits, his immediate attendants, any of his perfections; in what proportions he pleases, as far as created finite beings can be capable? It is reported of that prodigy of parts, Monsieur Pascal, that till the decay of his health had impaired his memory, he forgot nothing of what he had done, read, or thought, in any part of

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A defect which belongs to the memory of Man, as finite.

<sup>1</sup> 'Dormant ideas' imply latency or unconscious innateness. Throughout life, by far the greater part of the phenomena acquired in experience are thus dormant, yet more or less revivable.

<sup>2</sup> A good memory is (a) apt to receive, (b) tenacious in retention, and (c) ready to produce—under the associative laws. Association, psychical

and organic, individual and inherited—is the mechanical explanation of memory.

<sup>3</sup> This interesting section was added in the second edition. It might be the text of an essay on a *human* understanding of the universe, as intermediate between Omniscience and the nescience of Sense.

BOOK II. his rational age<sup>1</sup>. This is a privilege so little known to most  
 CHAP. X. men, that it seems almost incredible to those who, after the ordinary way, measure all others by themselves; but yet, when considered, may help us to enlarge our thoughts towards greater perfections of it, in superior ranks of spirits. For this of Monsieur Pascal was still with the narrowness that human minds are confined to here,—of having great variety of ideas only by succession, not all at once. Whereas the several degrees of angels may probably have larger views; and some of them be endowed with capacities able to retain together, and constantly set before them, as in one picture, all their past knowledge at once. This, we may conceive, would be no small advantage to the knowledge of a thinking man,—if all his past thoughts and reasonings could be *always* present to him<sup>2</sup>. And therefore we may suppose it one of those ways, wherein the knowledge of separate spirits may exceedingly surpass ours.]

Brutes  
have  
Memory.

10. This faculty of laying up and retaining the ideas that are brought into the mind, several other animals seem to have to a great degree, as well as man. For, to pass by other instances, birds learning of tunes, and the endeavours one may observe in them to hit the notes right, put it past doubt with me, that they have perception, and retain ideas in their memories, and use them for patterns. For it seems to me impossible that they should endeavour to conform their voices to notes (as it is plain they do) of which they had no ideas. For, though I should grant sound may mechanically cause a certain motion of the animal spirits in the brains of those birds, whilst the tune is actually playing; and that motion may be continued on to the muscles of the wings, and so the bird mechanically be driven away by certain noises, because this may tend to the bird's preservation; yet that can never be supposed a reason why it should cause mechanically—either whilst the tune is playing, much

<sup>1</sup> This about Pascal must be taken with allowance. That he never forgot anything 'which he *tried* to retain' is what Madame Perier records of him.

<sup>2</sup> Instead of 'existing' as they mostly

do in the state of being only *revivable*, and that bit by bit, not all simultaneously; and with large portions incapable of resuscitation in this life, under normal conditions at least.

less after it has ceased—such a motion of the organs in the bird's voice as should conform it to the notes of a foreign sound, which imitation can be of no use to the bird's preservation. But, which is more, it cannot with any appearance of reason be supposed (much less proved) that birds, without sense and memory, can approach their notes nearer and nearer by degrees to a tune played yesterday; which if they have no idea of in their memory, is now nowhere, nor can be a pattern for them to imitate, or which any repeated essays can bring them nearer to. Since there is no reason why the sound of a pipe should leave traces in their brains, which, not at first, but by their after-endeavours, should produce the like sounds; and why the sounds they make themselves, should not make traces which they should follow, as well as those of the pipe, is impossible to conceive<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> The phenomena and laws of unconscious cerebration were imperfectly known when Locke wrote.

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CHAP. X.