AN ESSAY CONCERNING

HUMAN UNDERSTANDING

BY

JOHN LOCKE

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

BY

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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 perceptions 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. 192.)

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 in two ways.

First, by keeping the idea which is brought into it, for some time actually in view, which is called contemplation.

2. The other way of retention is, the power to revive Memory, 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, which is as it were the storehouse of our ideas. For, the narrow mind of man not being capable of having many ideas

1. 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.

2. 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 implications, but not wholly their organic accompaniments.

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.
been shown, that pain should accompany the reception of several ideas; which, supplying the place of consideration and reasoning in children, and acting quicker than consideration 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; [1] 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 [2] 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.

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.

[1] 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.

[2] 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.

[3] 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.

CHAP. X.

Course of their lives they are not repeated again, are quite 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 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. 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 [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 constitution 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 those images to dust and confusion, which seemed to be as lasting as if graved in marble.

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.

7. In this secondary perception, as I may so call it, or in remembering, the mind is often active.

1 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. Why self-conscious life in man is embodied life at all is by us inexplicable.

3 The imaginative sensibility that one often misses in Locke—attributed by Stewart, forgetful of Bunyan and Milton, to inherited puritanical austerity, is not wanting in this touching passage.

2 Added in the fourth edition.

3 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.)

4 This is recollection (the ἀνάδεικνυμι as distinguished from the ἀνάγνωσθαι 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.
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 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.

9. [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

1 '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.

2 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.

3 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.
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 pres-
servation. 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.

1 The phenomena and laws of unconscious cerebration were imperfectly
known when Locke wrote.