

Philosophical Works of Etienne Bonnot, Abbe de Condillac

Volume 2

Franklin Philip



Philosophical Writings of
Etienne Bonnot,
Abbé de Condillac
Vol. 2

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Abbé de Condillac
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Translated by Franklin Philip

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Preface

Condillac's first book, *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines* (1746), draws on Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* both in design and in viewpoint. The French philosopher had been greatly impressed with Locke's empiricist account of the mind's ideas and of sensation as a source of its knowledge. He judged, however, that Lockean empiricism lacked rigor in countenancing an innate faculty of reflection that operates with some autonomy from sensory processes. In the *Essay* Condillac argues instead that all mental operations are in fact sensory processes and nothing more.

Condillac also added to Locke's theory a universal method for understanding any complex entity: one must go back to its origin and take it apart, reducing it to its simplest ideas—this he called the method of analysis. This ideal method is the one humans first learned as they gained the knowledge needed for survival.

In her discerning study of Condillac's thought and its relation to the French Enlightenment (*The Geometric Spirit*, Yale, 1968), Isabel F. Knight notes that “at the age of thirty-two, Condillac had already staked out the areas of thought [in the *Essay*] he was to spend his life exploring.” The doctrines he upheld here and in later works include an epistemological idealism, the rejection of innate ideas, an insistence on the logical primacy of the observation of sensory particulars, the all-important role of pleasure and pain in the recollection of ideas, the necessity of signs for the manipulation of ideas, and his independently formulated principle of the association of ideas.

One section of the *Essay*—“On the Origin and Progress of Language”—consists of empirical speculation about the beginning of language in the nonverbal signs and pantomimic arts of primitive people. Although the themes of this section develop logically from his conception of analysis, the highly allusive and literary nature of the discussion are not in keeping with

the interests of current scholarship and it has hence been omitted from this translation.

In 1758 Condillac was engaged by Louise-Élisabeth, elder daughter of Louis XV and through marriage the duchess of Parma and Piacenza, as *précepteur* for her young son, Prince Ferdinand. The boy took lessons with the philosopher for nine years, but proved a mediocre student. Condillac published his *Course of Study* in 1772. Its explicit aim was to teach the boy to think, to develop good habits of mind. Condillac's educational program derives from his sensationalist theory of mind, following the principle of the association of ideas; mind is moldable to reason and to "nature" which gives it a model and provides the ultimate authority for all it can know and do. The *Course* comprises volumes on grammar, the art of writing, the art of reasoning (including physics), the art of thinking, and ancient and modern history. The philosophical material in the *Course* was taken, largely word for word, from the *Essay*, but the prefaces and introduction to the course, translated here, illustrate the method of analysis as applied to education.

These books have been translated from the French edition of Condillac's works edited by Georges Le Roy, *Oeuvres Philosophiques de Condillac*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948.

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ESSAY ON THE ORIGIN
OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE

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INTRODUCTION

The discipline making the greatest contribution to the mind's lucidity, precision, and compass, and so necessarily preparing it for the study of every other branch of knowledge, is metaphysics. In present-day France, however, metaphysics is so neglected that many readers will find this claim paradoxical. I confess to having once held the same opinion. Of all philosophers, the metaphysicians seemed to me the least wise: Their works were not in the least instructive. Throughout almost all their writings I found only phantasms, and I blamed metaphysics itself for the divagations of those who pursued it. In undertaking to dispel this illusion and to discover the cause of so many errors, I found thinkers furthest from the truth were the most useful to me. Hardly had I learned the uncertain paths they were taking than I seemed to see the one I should follow. It appeared to me that we could reason in metaphysics and morals with all the precision of geometry, formulate ideas as accurate as those of geometers, give a similarly precise and invariant meaning to words, and finally set down — perhaps better than they did — a simple and easy order sufficient for achieving certainty.

We must distinguish between two sorts of metaphysics. The ambitious kind tries to penetrate every mystery — nature, the essence of beings, the most hidden causes. This is what it fancies itself capable of and what it proposes to reveal. The other, more prudent kind of metaphysics scales down its inquiry to the limitations of the human mind and, as unconcerned with what must lie outside its province as it is avid for what it can grasp, it knows how to confine itself to the limits prescribed for it. According to the ambitious conception of metaphysics, all nature is a kind of magic spell that under scrutiny vanishes like the conception itself. The modest kind of metaphysics strives to see

things as they really are, and is as simple as truth itself. Ambitious metaphysics produces errors without end, and is satisfied with vague notions and meaningless words. The latter kind of metaphysics yields very little knowledge, but avoids error; the mind takes a right view of things and always frames clear ideas.

Philosophers have applied themselves mainly to the former kind of metaphysics, regarding the latter as playing just a subordinate role barely worthy of the name metaphysics. Locke is the only philosopher, I think, innocent of this charge. He confined himself to the study of the human mind, and was successful in this task. Descartes understood neither the origin nor the development of our ideas.¹ That is the source of his method's inadequacy, for we will not discover a method for directing our thoughts if we are unclear about how they are formed. Of all the Cartesians, it was Malebranche who most clearly identified the causes of our errors; he sometimes draws on matter for comparisons to explain the faculties of the mind,² whereas at other times he gets lost in an *intelligible world* that he supposes the source of our ideas.³ Other philosophers create and destroy beings which they add to or subtract from our minds according to their fancy, and believe that this feat of imagination explains the different operations of the mind and the way it acquires or loses knowledge.⁴ Finally, the Leibnizians make the mind into something much more perfect. According to them, the mind is a microcosm, a living mirror of the universe, and by giving it the power to represent everything that exists, they fancy that they are explaining its essence, nature, and all its properties. Thus it is that every philosopher is seduced by his own systems. We see only what is nearby, but we think we see everything. We are like children imagining that when they reach the other end of a field they will be able to touch the sky with their hands.

So is it pointless to read philosophers? But who could think he would be more successful than so many celebrated geniuses if he didn't at least study them all to learn from their errors? Any serious aspirant to the truth must understand the mistakes of those thought to have opened the way to him. Experience gives the philosopher, like the helmsman, a knowledge of the reefs where others have gone aground. Without this knowledge he has no compass to guide him.

It is not enough to identify philosophical errors without delving into their causes. We should work our way back from one cause to another to the first

¹I am referring to his *Third Meditation*. Nothing seems to me less philosophical than what he says on this subject.

²*Inquiry into Truth*, Book 1, Chapter 1

³Book 3. See also his *Discourses* and his *Metaphysical Mediations*, with his replies to M. Arnaud.

⁴The author of *The Action of God on His Creatures*.

one. For there is necessarily one and the same source of error for everyone who goes astray, and that is like a single point at which all roads leading to error begin. Thus, near this point, perhaps, we shall see another point where the road to the truth begins.

Our first and unrelenting aim is the study of the human mind, not in order to discover its nature, but to understand its operations, to observe how they are combined, and how we should direct them to learn everything we are capable of. We must go back to the origin of our ideas, trace their development, and follow them up to the limits prescribed by nature, in order to fix the extent and limits of our knowledge and to consider all human understanding in a new light.

Our search can succeed only through observation, and we should aim only to discover some basic experience that no one can doubt and that is sufficient to explain all others. It should reveal the source of our knowledge, its materials and what sets them in motion, what means we use, and how to use them. I have found the solution to all these problems in, I believe, the connection of ideas with signs or with each other. You yourself can judge as you read this work.

My purpose is to reduce everything concerning human understanding to a single principle. You will see that this principle is not some vague proposition or some abstract maxim or some gratuitous supposition, but a constant experience all of whose consequences are confirmed by other experiences.

Ideas are connected with signs and, as I shall prove, this is the only way that ideas are connected to each other. Thus, after a discussion of the ingredients of knowledge, the distinction between mind and body, and sensations, I was obliged, to elaborate my principle, not only to trace mental operations in all their stages, but also to enquire how we came to use signs of all kinds and what use we ought to make of them.

To achieve this twofold aim, I took things as far back as I could. On the one hand, I went back to perception, for it is the mind's most fundamental activity, and I showed how and in what order perception produces all other mental operations. On the other hand, I began with the language of action. We shall see how it produces all the arts for expressing our thoughts—gesture, dance, speech, declamation and its notation, pantomime, music, poetry, oratory, writing and the genius of different languages. This history of language will reveal the circumstances in which signs are invented. It will show their true meaning, forestall their abuse, and in my opinion leave no doubt about the origin of ideas.

Finally, after explaining the development of mental operations and of language, I try to show the means for avoiding error, and the steps for making discoveries and for teaching others about the ones we have made. That is the general plan of this essay.

Philosophers often claim to be on the side of the truth without knowing what it is. A philosopher finds some hitherto neglected belief and adopts it, not because it seems better, but because he hopes to become the founder of a cult. Indeed, the novelty of a system nearly always guarantees its success.

This hope was perhaps the motive that led the Peripatetics to adopt the principle that all our knowledge comes from the senses. They understood this truth so poorly that none of them knew how to elaborate it. Centuries later, it still remained to be discovered.

Bacon was perhaps the first to recognize this. It forms the basis of a book of excellent advice for the advancement of the sciences.⁵ The Cartesians contemptuously rejected this principle because they judged it only by the writings of the Peripatetics. Finally Locke did grasp it, and he has the honor of being the first to prove it.

Locke, however, never made it his chief topic in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. He took it up here and there, and pursued it sporadically. Although he realized that a book written this way would invite criticism, he confesses to a lack of determination and the opportunity to rewrite it.⁶ It is to this that we must attribute the book's prevailing tedium, repetition, and disorder. Locke was quite capable of correcting these faults, and that is perhaps what makes them inexcusable. He saw, for example, that words and our manner of using them can shed light on the origin of our ideas,⁷ but because this recognition came too late, he treated this subject in Book III although he should have discussed it in Book II.⁸ If Locke had rewritten the *Essay*, we could assume he would have given a much better explanation of the sources of human understanding. As he did not rewrite it, his treatment of the origin of knowledge is too sketchy and superficial. He supposes, for example, that once the mind gets ideas through the senses, it can at will repeat, compare, and unite them in an infinite variety of ways, and make them into all sorts of complex ideas. The fact remains, however, that as children we experience sensations long before we know how to extract ideas from them. Thus, since the mind does not at first have full control over all its faculties, the explanation for the origin of knowledge required showing how the mind acquires this control and how these faculties develop. Locke appears never to have thought of this, nor has anyone criticized him for this lacuna, or tried to supply it in this part of his work. My explanation of the development of mental operations by deriving them from a simple perception

⁵*Novum Organum*.

⁶See his *Preface*.

⁷Book III, Chapter 8, Paragraph 1.

⁸"I must confess, then, that when I first began this Discourse of the Understanding, and for a good while after, I had not the least thought that any consideration of words was at all necessary to it." Book III, Chapter 9, Paragraph 21.

may be so new that the reader has difficulty understanding how I shall carry it out.

In Book I of his *Essay*, Locke examines the belief in innate ideas. I suspect that he dwelled too long arguing against this error; in this book I refute it indirectly. In some places in Book II Locke gives a superficial treatment of the operations of the mind. Book III discusses words, and Locke seems to be the first to treat the topic in a truly philosophical way. Nevertheless, I believed it should make up a considerable part of my own book, because it deserves fuller and fresher examination, and because I am convinced that the principle by which all our ideas develop is the use of signs. Moreover, among the many excellent things that Locke says in Book I about the development of several sorts of ideas like space, duration, and so forth, and in Book IV, *Of Knowledge and Probability*, there are many that I am very far from endorsing, but because most of them concern the extent of our knowledge, they do not enter into my plan and to dwell on them at any length would be pointless.

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