

Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man

Thomas Reid

1785

ESSAY II—OF THE POWERS WE HAVE BY MEANS OF OUR EXTERNAL SENSES.

CHAPTER XII.

OF THE SENTIMENTS OF MR HUME.

Two volumes of the "Treatise of Human Nature" were published in 1739, and the third in 1740. The doctrine contained in this Treatise was published anew in a more popular form in Mr Hume's "Philosophical Essays," of which there have been various editions. What other authors, from the time of Des Cartes, had called ideas, this author distinguishes into two kinds—to wit, impressions and ideas; comprehending under the first, all our sensations, passions, and emotions; and under the last, the faint images of these, when we remember or imagine them. [186]

He sets out with this, as a principle that needed no proof, and of which therefore he offers none—that all the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into these two kinds, impressions and ideas.

As this proposition is the foundation upon which the whole of Mr Hume's system rests, and from which it is raised with great acuteness indeed, and ingenuity, it were to be wished that he had told us upon what authority this fundamental proposition rests. But we are left to guess, whether it is held forth as a first principle, which has its evidence in itself; or whether it is to be received upon the authority of philosophers.

Mr Locke had taught us, that all the immediate objects of human knowledge are ideas in the mind. Bishop Berkeley, proceeding upon this foundation, demonstrated, very easily, that there is no material world. And he thought that, for the purposes both of philosophy and religion, we should find no loss, but great benefit, in the want of it. But the Bishop, as became his order, was unwilling to give up the world of spirits. he saw very well, that ideas are as unfit to represent spirits as they are to represent bodies. Perhaps he saw that, if we perceive only the ideas of spirits, we shall find the same difficulty in inferring, their real existence from the existence of their ideas, as we find in inferring the existence of matter from the idea of it; and, therefore, while he gives up the material world in favour of the system of ideas, he gives up one-half of that system in favour of the world of spirits; and maintains that we can, without ideas, think, and speak, and reason, intelligibly about spirits, and what belongs to them.

Mr Hume shews no such partiality in favour of the world of spirits. He adopts the theory of ideas in its full extent; and, in consequence, shews that there is neither matter nor mind in the universe; nothing but impressions and ideas. What we call a body, is only a bundle of sensations; and what we call the mind is only a bundle of thoughts, passions, and emotions, without any subject. [187]

Some ages hence, it will perhaps be looked upon as a curious anecdote, that two philosophers of the eighteenth century, of very distinguished rank, were led, by a philosophical hypothesis, one, to disbelieve the existence of matter, and the other, to disbelieve the existence both of matter and of mind. Such an anecdote may not be uninstrucive, if it prove a warning to philosophers to beware of hypotheses, especially when they lead to conclusions which contradict the principles upon which all men of common sense must act in common life.

The Egoists, whom we mentioned before, were left far behind by Mr Hume; for they believed their own existence, and perhaps also the existence of a Deity. But Mr Hume's system does not even leave him a self to claim the property of his impressions and ideas.

A system of consequences, however absurd, acutely and justly drawn from a few principles, in very abstract matters, is of real utility in science, and may be made subservient to real knowledge. This merit Mr Hume's metaphysical writings have in a great degree.

We had occasion before to observe, that, since the time of Des Cartes, philosophers, in treating of the powers of the mind, have, in many instances, confounded things which the common sense of mankind has always led them to distinguish, and which have different names in all languages. Thus, in the perception of an external object, all languages distinguish three things—the mind that perceives, the operation of that mind, which is called perception, and the object perceived. Nothing appears more evident to a mind untutored by philosophy, than that these three are distinct things, which, though related, ought never to be confounded. [188] The structure of all languages supposes this distinction, and is built upon it. Philosophers have introduced a fourth thing in this process, which they call the idea of the object, which is supposed to be an image, or representative of the object, and is said to be the immediate object. The vulgar know nothing about this idea; it is a creature of philosophy, introduced to account for and explain the manner of our perceiving external objects.

It is pleasant to observe that, while philosophers, for more than a century, have been labouring, by means of ideas, to explain perception and the other operations of the mind, those ideas have by degrees usurped the place of perception, object, and even of the mind itself, and have supplanted those very things they were brought to explain. Des Cartes reduced all the operations of the understanding to perception; and what can be more natural to those who believe that they are only different modes of perceiving ideas in our own minds? Locke confounds ideas sometimes with the perception of an external object, sometimes with the external object itself. In Berkeley's system, the idea is the only object, and yet is often confounded with the perception of it.

But, in Hume's, the idea or the impression, which is only a more lively idea, is mind, perception, and object, all in one: so that, by the term perception, in Mr Hume's system, we must understand the mind itself, all its operations, both of understanding and will, and all the objects of these operations. Perception taken in this sense be divides into our more lively perceptions, which he calls impressions, and the less lively, which he calls ideas. To prevent repetition, I must here refer the reader to some remarks made upon this division, Essay 1. chap. 1, in the explication there given of the words, perceive, object, impression. [pp. 222, 223, 226.]

Philosophers have differed very much with regard to the origin of our ideas, or the sources whence they are derived. The Peripatetics held that all knowledge is derived originally from the senses; and this ancient doctrine seems to be revived by some late French philosophers, and by Dr Hartley and Dr Priestley among the British. [189] Des Cartes maintained, that many of our ideas are innate. Locke opposed the doctrine of innate ideas with much zeal, and employs the whole first book of his Essay against it. But he admits two different sources of ideas . the operations of our external senses, which he calls sensation, by which we get all our ideas of body and its attributes; and reflection upon the operations of our minds, by which we get the ideas of everything belonging to the mind. The main design of the second book of Locke's " Essay," is to shew, that all our simple ideas, without exception, are derived from the one or the other, or both of these sources. In doing this, the author is led into some paradoxes, although, in general, he is not fond of paradoxes: And had he foreseen all the consequences that may be drawn from his account of the origin of our ideas, he would probably have examined it more carefully. Mr Hume adopts Locke's account of the origin of our ideas; and from that principle infers, that we have no idea of substance, corporeal or spiritual, no idea of power, no other idea of a cause, but that it is something antecedent, and constantly conjoined to that which we call its effect - and, in a word, that we can have no idea of anything but our sensations, and the operations of mind we are conscious of.

This author leaves no power to the mind in framing its ideas and impressions; and, no wonder, since he holds that we have no idea of power; and the mind is nothing but that succession of impressions and ideas of which we are intimately conscious.

He thinks, therefore, that our impressions arise from unknown causes, and that the impressions are the causes of their corresponding ideas. By this he means no more but that they always go before the ideas; for this is all that is necessary to constitute the relation of cause and effect. [190]

As to the order and succession of our ideas, he holds it to be determined by three laws of attraction or association, which he takes to be original properties of the ideas, by which they attract, as it were, or associate themselves with other ideas which either resemble them, or which have been contiguous to them in time and place, or to which they have the relations of cause and effect.

We may here observe, by the way, that the last of these three laws seems to be included in the second, since causation, according to him, implies no more than contiguity in time and place.

It is not my design at present to shew how Mr Hume, upon the principles he has borrowed from Locke and Berkeley, has, with great acuteness, reared a system of absolute scepticism, which leaves no rational ground to believe any one proposition, rather than its contrary: my intention in this place being only to give a detail of the sentiments of philosophers concerning ideas since they became an object of speculation, and concerning the manner of our perceiving external objects by their means.