

ETIENNE BONNOT DE CONDILLAC



Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge

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Section I

I The materials of our knowledge and the distinction of soul and body

§1 Whether we raise ourselves, to speak metaphorically, into the heavens or descend into the abyss, we do not go beyond ourselves; and we never perceive anything but our own thought. Whatever the knowledge we have, if we wish to trace it to its origin, we will in the end arrive at a first simple thought, which has been the object of the second, which has been the object of the third, and so on. It is this order of thoughts we must explore if we wish to know the ideas we have of things.

§2 It would be useless to inquire into the nature of our thoughts. The first reflection on oneself is enough to convince us that we have no means of conducting that inquiry. We are conscious of our thought; we distinguish it perfectly from all that it is not; we even distinguish among all our thoughts, each from every other, and that is sufficient. If we stray from that, we stray from something that we know so clearly that it cannot lead us into any error.

§3 Let us consider a man at the first moment of his existence. His soul first has different sensations, such as light, colors, pain, pleasure, motion, rest – those are his first thoughts.

§4 Let us follow him in the moments when he begins to reflect on what these sensations occasion in him, and we shall find that he forms ideas of the different operations of his soul, such as perceiving and imagining – those are his second thoughts.

Thus, according to the manner in which external objects affect us, we receive different ideas via the senses, and, further, as we reflect on the

operations which the sensations occasion in our soul, we acquire all the ideas which we would not have been able to receive from external objects.

§5 Thus the sensations and operations of the soul are the materials of all our knowledge, materials that are employed by reflection as it explores the relations they contain by making combinations of them. But the whole success depends on the circumstances we pass through. The most favorable are those that provide us with the greatest number of objects that may exercise our reflection. The great circumstances in which those who are destined to govern mankind find themselves constitute, for example, an occasion to form very extensive views; and those which continually repeat themselves in the world at large produce the sort of disposition we call natural because, since they are not the fruit of study, we cannot identify the causes that produce them. Let us conclude that there are no ideas that have not been acquired: the first come directly from the senses, the others from experience and increase in proportion to the capacity for reflection.

§6 Original sin has made the soul so dependent on the body that many philosophers have confused these two substances. They have believed that the former is merely the finest and most subtle part of the body and thus the more capable of movement; but that opinion results from their failure to base their reasoning on exact ideas. I ask them what they understand by body. If they seek to give a precise answer, they will not say that it is a single substance, but they will regard it as an assemblage, a collection of substances. Thus if thought pertains to body, it must be either because it is an assemblage or collection, or because it is a property of each substance in this collection. But these words “assemblage” and “collection” merely signify an external relation between several things, thus existing by virtue of their interdependence. By this union we regard them as forming a single whole, though in reality they are no more “one” than if they were separated. It follows that they are mere abstract terms which from without do not suppose a single substance, but a multitude of substances. Thus, when seen as an assemblage or collection, the body cannot be the subject of thought.

Shall we divide thought among all the substances of which the body is composed? In the first place, that is impossible if it is only a single and indivisible perception. In the second place, this supposition must also be rejected if thought is formed of a certain number of perceptions. Let *A*,

B, and *C*, which are three substances that enter into the composition of the body, be divided among three different perceptions; I ask from where is the comparison among them to be made. It cannot be in *A*, for it could not compare a perception it has with those it does not have. For the same reason it cannot be in *B*, nor in *C*. Thus we must admit a point of reunion, a substance that is at the same time a simple and indivisible subject of these three divisions, and consequently distinct from the body, or, in a word, a soul.

§7 I do not know how Locke [E 4.3.6] could propose that it would forever be impossible for us to know whether God had not given the power of thinking to a mass of matter fitly disposed. We must not imagine that for the resolution of this question it would be necessary to know the essence and nature of matter. The arguments founded on this ignorance are entirely frivolous. It is enough to observe that the subject of thought must be “one.” But a mass of matter is not one; it is a multitude.⁸

§8 The soul being distinct and different from body, the latter can only be the occasional cause of what it seems to produce in the former. From this we must conclude that our senses are only the occasional cause of our knowledge. But whatever is occasioned by something can occur without it, for an effect does not depend on its occasional cause except according to a certain hypothesis. Thus the soul can absolutely acquire knowledge without the help of sense. Before the Fall an altogether different system prevailed from the one in which the soul exists today. Exempt from ignorance and concupiscence, it ruled the senses, and suspended and modified their action as it pleased. Thus it had ideas prior to the use of the senses. But things have greatly changed owing to its disobedience. God has deprived it of all its power; it has become as dependent on the senses as if they were the physical cause of what they merely occasion, and now it has only the knowledge that the senses provide. Hence follow ignorance and concupiscence. It is this

⁸ It has been argued against me that the property of time is indivisible. It cannot be said that it is divided among the wheels of a watch: it is in the whole. Why then could the property of thinking not be an organized whole? I answer that the property of marking time can, by its nature, belong to a composite object; for since time is nothing but succession, anything that has motion can measure it. Another objection to my argument is that unity is applicable to a mass of matter fitly disposed, though it cannot be so applied when the confusion is so great that the possibility of considering it as a whole is ruled out. I agree, but I add that then unity is not understood in the rigorous sense. It is taken for a unit composed of other units so that it is consequently properly a collection, a multitude. But that is not the kind of unity I propose to deal with.

state of the soul that I propose to study, the only one that can be the object of philosophy, because it is the only one we can know by experience. Thus, when I say “that we do not have any ideas that do not come from the senses,” it must be remembered that I speak only of the state we are now in after the Fall. This proposition would be altogether false if applied to the soul in the state of innocence or after its separation from the body. I do not treat the knowledge of the soul in these two states, because I cannot reason except on the basis of experience. Furthermore, if, as cannot be doubted, it is important for us to know the faculties of which God has granted us the use despite the Fall, it is pointless to wish to speculate on those He has taken away and will give back to us in the next life.

To say it again, I deal only with the present state. Thus our business is not to view the soul as independent of the body, for its dependence is only too well established, nor as united with a body in a system that differs from the one in which we find ourselves. Our only aim must be to consult experience, and to reason from those facts alone that no one can call in doubt.