Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge
Introduction

Since metaphysics more than any other science ensures the clarity, precision, and scope of the mind, it is also the best preparation for the study of all the other sciences. It is today so little regarded in France that many readers will no doubt find my claim paradoxical. I confess that there was a time when I would have shared that opinion. Of all the philosophers, the metaphysicians seemed the least wise: their words did not tell me anything, hardly ever did I find anything but airy speculations, and I charged metaphysics with gross errors that were in fact the aberrations of its practitioners. Wishing to overcome this illusion and to find the source of so many errors, I found those who were farthest from the truth to be the most useful. I had scarcely recognized the uncertain paths they had followed before I thought I saw the way that I should follow. It appeared to me that one could reason in metaphysics and in the moral sciences with as much precision as in geometry, that we could form accurate ideas as well as the geometers, like them determine the sense of expressions in a precise and invariable manner, and perhaps better than they have done prescribe a simple and easy procedure to attain certain knowledge.

We must distinguish two sorts of metaphysics. One has the ambition of solving all mysteries; nature, the essence of all beings, the most hidden causes, those are the things that embellish it and that it promises to open up. The other is more modest and adjusts its inquiries to the weakness of the human mind, and being as unconcerned about what must lie beyond its grasp as it is avid to seize what lies within it, this sort of metaphysics is content to stay within the bounds that are marked out for it. The first turns all nature into a kind of enchantment that
vanishes with it; the second, seeking to see things only as they really are, is as simple as truth itself. With the former, errors multiply endlessly and the mind is satisfied with vague notions and words without meaning; with the latter, we gain little knowledge, but avoid error, as the mind gains accuracy and always forms clear ideas.

Philosophers have chiefly practiced the former and have looked upon the latter as a mere addition that barely merits the name of metaphysics. Only Locke, I believe, is the exception: he has limited himself to the study of the human mind and has completed his task with success. Descartes knew neither the origin nor the generation of our ideas.¹ To that failure we must attribute the inadequacy of this method; for we will not find a safe way of conducting our thoughts as long as we do not know how they are formed. Malebranche, who of all the Cartesians has best understood the causes of our errors, sometimes draws comparisons from matter to explain the faculties of the soul,² sometimes loses himself in a “world of pure intellect” where he imagines that he has found the source of our ideas.³ Others create and annihilate beings, joining them to our soul or taking them away from it as they please and believe that such fantasizing will account for the different operations of the mind and of the manner in which it acquires or loses its knowledge.⁴ The Leibnizians finally make a more perfect being of this substance: according to them it is a little world, a living mirror of the universe, and by the power they give it to represent everything that exists, they flatter themselves that they explain its essence, nature, and all its properties. Thus everyone allows himself to be seduced by his own system. Seeing only what surrounds us, we believe we see everything that exists; we are like children who think that they can touch the sky at the far side of a plain.

Is it then useless to read the philosophers? Who could claim to succeed better than so many geniuses who have been the wonder of their century, unless he at least studies them to profit from their errors? For

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¹ I refer to the Third Meditation. I find what he says on this subject entirely unphilosophical.
² The Search after Truth, Bk. I, Ch. 1.
³ Ibid., Bk. III. See also his dialogues and metaphysical meditations, with his answers to Antoine Arnauld.
⁵ Condillac is referring to Nicolas Malebranche, Entretiens sur la métaphysique et la religion (Paris, 1683), Méditations chétotisme et métaphysiques (Paris, 1683), and Réponse du P. Malebranche à M. Arnauld 1684–1703 (Paris, 1709).
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anyone who wishes to make progress in the search for truth, it is essential to know the mistakes of those who first sought to open the way. The experience of the philosopher, like that of the pilot, is the knowledge of the rocks on which others have foundered; and without this knowledge no compass can guide him.

It would not be sufficient to uncover philosophical errors unless we get at their causes; we should even rise from one cause to the next till we reach the first; for there is one that must be the same for everyone who goes astray, and that is like the unique point that is the beginning of all the paths that lead to error. Here then, perhaps, at this point we will find another where the unique road to truth begins.

We must never forget that our first aim is the study of the human mind, not to discover its nature, but to know its operations, to observe how artfully they interact, and how we ought to conduct them in order to acquire all the knowledge of which we are capable. We must ascend to the origin of our ideas, reveal how they are generated, trace them to the limits that nature has set for them, and thereby determine the extent and limits of our knowledge and invest human understanding with new life.

The success of these inquiries depends entirely on the results of observation, and our only aim should be the discovery of a fundamental fact of experience that no one can cast doubt on and that is sufficient to explain all the rest. It ought to point clearly to the source of our understanding, to the materials from which it is formed, to the principle that activates the materials, the means we use in that process, and the manner in which we should employ them. I believe I have found the solution to all these problems in the connection of ideas, either with signs or among themselves. The reader may decide whether I am correct in the course of his reading of this work.

It is evident that my design is to reduce everything that pertains to the human mind to a single principle, and that this principle shall be neither a vague proposition, nor an abstract maxim, nor a gratuitous supposition, but a firm fact of experience whose consequences will all be confirmed by new acts of experience.

Ideas connect with signs, and it is, as I will show, only by this means that they connect among themselves. Thus after a word on the materials of our knowledge, on the distinction of soul and body, and on the sensations, I have been obliged, in order to reveal my principle, not only
to trace the operations of the soul in all their advances, but in addition to explore how we have acquired the habit of using signs of all kinds, and the use to which we should put that habit.

In order to fulfill this double task, I have traced things as far as I could. On the one hand I have taken a new look at perception, because it is the first operation of the soul that we notice, and I have shown how and in what order it produces all the operations we gain the power to exercise. On the other hand I have begun with the language of action. It will be shown how it has produced all the arts that pertain to the expression of our thoughts: the art of gesture, dance, speech, declamation, the art of recording it, the art of pantomime, of music, of poetry, eloquence, writing, and the different characters of languages. This history of language will show the circumstances in which signs are imagined; will reveal their true meaning and show how to prevent their abuse; and it will not, I believe, leave any doubt about the origin of our ideas.

Finally, having expounded the progress of the operations of the soul and of language, I try to indicate the means by which error can be avoided and to show the order we should follow, either to make new discoveries or to instruct others in those we have made. Such is the general plan of this essay.

A philosopher often declares himself in favor of a truth he does not know. He finds an opinion that has hitherto been unregarded and adopts it, not because he finds it superior, but in the hope of becoming the founder of a sect. In fact, the novelty of a system has nearly always been sufficient to ensure its success.

Perhaps this was the motive that made the Peripatetics adopt the principle that all our knowledge comes from the senses. They were so far from really knowing this truth that none of them has been able to explain it, so that after many centuries it was a discovery still in need of being made.

Bacon is perhaps the first to have seen it. This truth is the foundation of a work in which he gives excellent guidelines for the advancement of learning.5 The Cartesians rejected this principle with contempt because they judged it only from the writings of the Peripatetics. Finally, Locke

addressed it, and he has the distinction of being the first to demonstrate it.

It does not seem, however, that this philosopher ever made the treatise he has given us on the human understanding his principal occupation. He undertook it by chance, and continued it in the same spirit; and though he was aware that a work so composed would not fail to face blame, he did not, as he said, have either the courage or the leisure to do it over. To this we may charge the longueurs, the repetitions, and the lack of order that prevails in it. Locke was very capable of correcting these defects, and that perhaps makes him less excusable. He saw, for example, that words and the manner in which we use them can cast light on the primitive origin of our ideas [E 3.7.1], but having made that discovery too late, it is only in the Third Book that he treated a matter that should have been treated in the Second. If he had been able to start afresh on his work, there is reason to believe that he would have given a much better account of the springs of human understanding. But since he did not do it, he passed lightly over the origin of our knowledge, and that is the part that is the most superficial. He assumes, for example, that as soon as the soul receives ideas by sense, it can at will repeat, compose, and unite them together with infinite variety and make all sorts of complex notions of them. But it is well established that in infancy we had sensations long before knowing how to turn them into ideas. Thus, as the soul does not from the first instant control the exercise of all its operations, it was necessary, in order to give a better explanation of the origin of our knowledge, to show how it acquires that exercise, and what progress it makes in it. It does not appear that Locke addressed that question, or that anyone has ever blamed him for the omission or has tried to remedy this part of his work. Perhaps even the design of explaining the operations of the soul, by deriving them from a simple perception, is so novel that the reader may find it hard to understand how I will proceed.

In the first book of his Essay Locke examines the doctrine of innate ideas. I am not sure that he has not spent too much time on opposing that error; the present work will destroy it indirectly. In some places in the Second Book, he treats, though superficially, the operations of the

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5 *Essay*, “Epistle to the Reader.”

6 “I admit” (he says, E 3.9.21), “that, when I began this work and long after, it did not at all occur to my mind that it would be necessary to devote any reflection to words.”
soul. Words are the subject of the Third Book, and he seems to me the first who has written on this matter as a true philosopher. I have found, however, that it must occupy a large part of my work, both because it can still be viewed in a new and more extended manner, and because I am convinced that the use of signs is the principle that develops the seed of all our ideas. For the rest, among the excellent things that Locke says in his Second Book on the generation of several sorts of ideas, such as space, duration, etc., and in the Fourth, with the title “On Knowledge,” there are many I am far from approving. But as they belong more narrowly to the extent of our knowledge, they do not enter into my plan, so there is no point in being detained by them.
Part I

The materials of our knowledge and especially the operations of the soul
Section 1

1 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
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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.

§§ Thus the sensations and operations of the soul are the materials of all our knowledge, materials which 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.

§§ 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,