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ETIENNE BONNOT DE CONDILLAC
Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge

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ETIENNE BONNOT DE CONDILLAC

Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge

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Abbreviations

CO	*Œuvres philosophiques de Condillac*, ed. Georges le Roy, 3 vols., Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1947–51
Crit. Refl.	Jean-Baptiste Du Bos, *Critical Reflections on Poetry, Painting, and Music*, tr. Thomas Nugent, 3 vols., London, 1748. Reprinted New York, AMS Press, 1978
De oratore	Cicero, *De oratore*, tr. E. W. Sutton and H. Rackham, 2 vols., Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1942
Div. Leg.	William Warburton, *The Divine Legation of Moses*, 3 vols., London, 1738–41
E	John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1975
EMGL	*Encyclopédie méthodique: Grammaire et littérature*, ed. Nicolas Beauzée and Jean-François Marmontel, 3 vols., Paris, Panckoucke, 1782–6
Encyclopédie	*Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, ed. Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert, 28 vols., Paris, 1751–72. Supplement, 4 vols., 1776–7
FLS	Hans Aarsleff, *From Locke to Saussure: Essays on the Study of Language and Intellectual History*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1982
Hiérogl.	William Warburton, *Essai sur les hiéroglyphes des égyptiens, où l'on voit l'origine et les progrès du langage et de l'écriture, l'antiquité des sciences en Egypte, et l'origine du culte des animaux*, tr. Marc-Antoine Léonard des Malpeines, Paris,

Abbreviations

	1744. Ed. Patrick Tort, Paris, Aubier Collection Palimp-seste, 1977 (= *Div. Leg.* 2.66–205)
Orator	Cicero, *Orator*, tr. H. M. Hubbell, Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1997 [1939]
Origin	Condillac, *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines* in CO 1.3–118
Quintilian	Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, tr. H. E. Butler, 4 vols., Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1920–2

Introduction

In the introduction to *Origin*, Condillac explains that his entire argu‐
ment hinges on two notions: the connection of ideas and the language of
action. About the former he believed that it is a fact of experience that
the world, both natural and social, is a concatenation of things and
events. Of these we may form ideas in the mind, but the world will still
remain foreign to us unless we have some way of gaining mastery over
ideas so that we can connect them at will to form discursive thinking;
knowledge is not possible without the power of recall. Fortunately, ideas
connect with signs, "and it is, as I will show, only by this means that
they connect among themselves," namely in our minds, in which signs
constitute a particular kind of ideas. Thus the connection of ideas is a
way of rebuilding, as it were, as much of the world as we can by bringing
the outside under inside control. On its first publication *Origin* carried
the subtitle "a work in which all that pertains to the human under‐
standing is reduced to a single principle." The introduction makes it
clear that this principle is the connection of ideas.

Having assigned this crucial role to signs, Condillac next admitted
that he was obliged to show how we have acquired the habit of using
signs and gained the aptitude to employ them. He would need to give an
account of the origin of speech, and here also he began from the outside
with what he called the language of action. By this he meant the
spontaneous movements and gestures of both voice and body which
Descartes had warned against as posing a threat to the integrity of
discursivity when in Part V of his *Discourse on the Method* he wrote that
"we must not confuse speech with the natural movements which
express the passions and which can be imitated by machines as well as

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by animals.'' Condillac's program was designed to do away with the dualism of body and mind. It was relentlessly anti-Cartesian. We shall later return to the connection of ideas and the language of action.

But before proceeding it will be useful to bear in mind two things that have pervasive relevance to our subject. The first concerns how the eighteenth century differed from the seventeenth about the role of social life in human affairs, while the second is about the nature of Condillac's argument. In the Cartesian view, innateness owes no debt to social intercourse. Right reason and knowledge are private achievements, for in the Augustinian sense we do not truly learn anything from anybody. God alone is the teacher. Communication is risky. Seen in this light, it took a contract to ensure social bonding. The eighteenth century took a different view, shown for instance in Hume's and Adam Smith's rejection of contract theory because they had other means of accounting for social cohesion. Hume said it was ''needless . . . to ask, why we have humanity and a fellow-feeling with others. It is sufficient, that this is experienced to be a principle in human nature. We must stop some-where in our examination of causes.''[1] What he had in mind was sympathy. This very radical cultural shift toward emphasis on natural sociability is illustrated in the proportions of certain word occurrences in French for the years 1600–1700 and 1701–1800, based on a survey of 334 texts by ninety-three authors for the first of those centuries and 488 texts by a hundred and fifty-six authors for the second. The figures are not directly comparable, but still striking enough to leave no doubt about their lesson. See the accompanying table.[2] It would seem safe to conclude that in such a dramatic shift toward social awareness, the entire range of all means of communication would move toward the center of interest: music, pantomime, dance, ballet, acting, poetry, opera, prose, and the condition of being deaf or blind.

The other thing to bear in mind is this: Condillac's conception of the possibility and growth of knowledge rests on an argument about the origin and progress of language which occurs in a process of develop-

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[1] David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, with text revised and notes by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 219. Cf. Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Selby-Bigge (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1955), p. 22: ''To explain the ultimate causes of our mental actions is impossible. 'Tis sufficient we can give any satisfactory account of them from experience and analogy.''

[2] Daniel Gordon, *Citizens without Sovereignty: Equality and Sociability in French Thought, 1670–1789* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 53, in the fine chapter ''The Language of Sociability'' (pp. 43–85).

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Word	1600–1700	1701–1800
Société	620	7,168
Social	8	838
Sociabilité	0	66
Sociable	16	222

ment that requires much repetition, well-formed habits, steady social interaction as in a continuing game, and a very long time. Thus speech and knowledge come to be seen as aspects of our natural history. I think it is true to say that no one before Condillac had so fully and cogently argued that a fundamental human institution is the product of evolving adaptation and functional success over time. This bold conceptualization is a major contribution to theory and knowledge. It readily calls to mind Adam Smith's conception of the invisible hand that stirs individuals into social action without any forethought or intention on their part about ultimate effects. The early formation of speech is not the work of lone creating minds of the private Cartesian sort. Like the market economy, it is not invented; it just comes about in the manner which is illustrated by Hume's beautiful example of how "two men, who pull the oars of a boat, do it by an agreement and convention, though they have never given promises to each other," to which he later in the same paragraph added the observation that "in like manner are languages gradually established by human conventions without any promise" (*Treatise*, p. 490). Adam Smith had read Hume, but I see no likelihood that Condillac had read either of the two Scots. It is surely thought-provoking that Condillac all the same pulled oars with them "without any promise."

Cartesian dualism and language

For Descartes speech was an epistemological obstacle because it was an easy vehicle for the seductive inducements of eloquence and emotive persuasion – hence the denunciations of rhetoric that are so common in Galileo, Descartes, and Locke. By its very nature the expressive uses of language replicated the passion that caused Adam's and thus humanity's loss of the nearly perfect knowledge he demonstrated in the naming of

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the animals, a naming that characteristically relied not on hearing but
on seeing. Let us also remember that in *Paradise Lost* Satan's tempting
of Eve succeeds by eloquence. Thus language was split in two, one form
being considered naturally cognitive, rational, and the inert means for
the communication of ready-made, prior mental discourse; the other
active, emotive, and in the strict sense allied with sin and unnatural.[3] As
late as the 1760s this dual scheme was, as we shall see, advanced against
Condillac's expressivism.

This Cartesian conception amounted to a cognitive appropriation of
language that perfectly served the epistemological and descriptive
priorities of its parent philosophy. Thus, though the seventeenth
century was the great age of French eloquence – now the subject of an
important book by Marc Fumaroli[4] – only its philosophical rival had a
doctrine about the nature of language, a doctrine that was largely
Augustinian and orthodox. It is a puzzling fact that in the matter of
language Locke was at his most Cartesian in taking the position that the
word-free discourse of the mind is the only guarantor of true knowl-
edge. By the same token, Locke shared the rationalist doctrine that
syllogistic is trivial, for "a man knows first, and then he is able to prove
syllogistically. So that *syllogism* comes after knowledge, and then a man
has little or no need of it" (E 4.17.6). This, I believe, is what Quine in
the famous essay "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" called "the impossible
term-by-term empiricism of Locke and Hume," though of course that
impossible doctrine was taken over from rationalism.

But as we shall see, in the decades around 1700 this situation changed,
and soon rhetoric became the source of an altogether new understanding
of the nature of language. Now communication was no longer risky but
creative, and its study became the best avenue of insight into mind and
thought. According to a report by one of his students, this principle was
stressed by Adam Smith in his lectures on rhetoric and belles-lettres
during the 1750s in these words: "The best method of explaining and
illustrating the various powers of the human mind, the most useful part
of metaphysics, arises from an examination of the several ways of
communicating our thoughts by speech, and from an attention to the

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[3] On belief in the Adamic language, see Hans Aarsleff, "The Rise and Decline of Adam and His *Ursprache* in Seventeenth-Century Thought" in *The Language of Adam / Die Sprache Adams*, ed. Allison P. Coudert, Wolfenbütteler Forschungen, vol. 84 (1999), 277–95.

[4] Marc Fumaroli, *L'Age de l'éloquence* (Paris, Albin Michel, 1994 [1980]).

principles of those literary compositions which contribute to persuasion and entertainment."[5] To Descartes and Locke that statement would have made no sense at all.

Condillac and Locke

Condillac admired Locke as the best of philosophers because he had studied the operations of the mind without reliance on postulates about its essential nature. The rejection of innate ideas was one aspect of this empirical commitment, and on this as on other points the debt to Locke is too obvious to need explication. On this basis, however, it is still widely believed that Condillac was a mere follower of Locke, even to the extent that one can still in print meet the dogmatic claim that *Origin* is just a short version of Locke's *Essay*. That conception is false. Even a brief look at *Origin* shows that its philosophy differs from Locke's in at least two fundamental ways.

The first is that while Locke in Book III of the *Essay* worked hard to protect his trusted mental discourse from what he called "the cheat of words," Condillac turned the whole thing upside down by making speech and words the condition for discursivity and thus the agency of knowledge and the exercise of reason. This aspect of *Origin* is so obvious that one wonders how it can be missed and why. I have no doubt that the reason lies in the still prestigious opinion that what have been called "the soulless mechanical rationalists of the French Enlightenment" represented a sort of faint but loyal afterglow of seventeenth-century rationalism with its hostility to poetry, expressivism, and the creative energies of language. The mention of the mechanical is astonishing, since the tenor of French thought at the time was overwhelmingly organismic, as clearly shown, for instance, by Condillac's evident preference for organic metaphors.

The second radical difference between Locke and Condillac can be read directly from the table of contents of Part II. "The Prosody of the First Languages," "Progress of the Art of Gesture among the Ancients," "Music," "The Origin of Poetry," "The Genius of Languages," and other chapter headings indicate topics that could have

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[5] Dugald Stewart, "Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith," ed. I. S. Ross in Adam Smith, *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, ed. W. P. D. Wightman and J. C. Bryce (Indianapolis, IN, Liberty Classics, 1982), p. 274.

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had no imaginable relevance to Locke's enterprise. But for Condillac
they were the heart of the matter. For him the origin of knowledge
begins with sentiment, expression, sympathy, and the mutual benefit of
affective responses that arise in social interaction. *Origin* argues that
speech is the primal human institution, and that aesthetics comes before
epistemology, and imagination before reason. With Hume, he believed
that reason is at the service of the passions.

Both George Berkeley and Condillac found that the *Essay*'s argument
somehow went awry because Locke treated ideas in Book II before
treating "words and language in general" in Book III. If he had reversed
the order, they thought, he would have seen that his faith in the
Cartesian discourse of the mind clashed with his open admission that
words often have an active role in thought, as, for example, when he
observed that like children we learn most words before having experi-
ences to provide the appropriate ideas (E 3.5.15; 3.9.9); that the
complex ideas of mixed modes would either not exist at all or would lose
stability without the words that connect the component ideas under a
single name, because, as Locke said, "it is the name that seems to
preserve those essences, and give them their lasting duration," a passage
Condillac cited against the coherence of Locke's argument (E 3.5.10;
Origin i, 4, §27); and that we hardly ever engage in pure mental
discourse, but use words instead, "even when men think and reason
within their own breasts," a passage Condillac also cited against Locke
(E 4.6.1; *Origin* i, 4, §27). But this critique was balanced by awareness
that the *Essay* was rich in forward-looking notions about language. The
Essay helped create the climate that favored the coming change.

(1) Locke insisted that there is no natural connection between the
sounds of words and what they signify. The dismissal of this common
seventeenth-century dogma released words from any imputation of a
natural connection and divine origin by virtue of Adam's naming of the
animals, thus clearing the way for the only alternative, human origin. (2)
Locke gave language a public dimension owing both to its social use and
to its continued existence and modification in speaking. Languages, he
said, are "suited only to the convenience of communication . . . not to
the reality and extent of things" (E 2.28.2), and were "established long
before sciences," their "more or less comprehensive terms" having
received "their birth and signification from ignorant and illiterate
people who sorted and denominated things by those sensible qualities

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they found in them'' (E 3.6.25). Though Locke never treated the origin
of language, he made suggestive remarks about the beginners, the
beginning, and the growth of languages.[6] (3) This process of usage will
cause change over time, thus giving each language a particular quality
and a historical dimension. He noted that even with our great volume of
classical scholarship, we still often cannot be certain we get the right
sense of ancient authors, and he remarked that much the same was true
of the reading and interpretation of Scriptures (E 3.9.10 & 23). His
writings on religion show that he was no stranger to hermeneutics.
Locke's *Essay* had the effect of expanding thinking about language into
the larger issue of the nature of communication in general.

The *Essay* ranged so widely over the nature and workings of language
that it went beyond the needs of epistemology, but Locke still found no
place for the uses of language on the stage, at the bar, in the pulpit, or in
poetry. He was confident that if we wish to "speak of things as they are,
we must allow, that all the art of rhetoric . . . all the artificial and
figurative application of words eloquence has invented are for nothing
else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby
mislead the judgment" (E 3.10.34). This sounded reassuring, but it was
rather like whistling in the dark, for if words did push their way into
mental discourse, as Locke admitted they were apt to do, then emotion
entering with them would spoil the cognitive appropriation. For
Berkeley one problem with that appropriation was that the language of
the Bible and religion is not cognitive. This leads to the rhetorical
expressivism that took its place; but first we need to pay attention to the
full title of *Origin*.

The title of *Origin*

In French, Locke's *Essay* had the title *Essai philosophique concernant
l'entendement humain*, in which the last two words stand for "human
understanding" in the English title. But Condillac chose to call his work
Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines, which in Thomas Nugent's
translation of 1756 became *An Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*.

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[6] See E 2.22.2; 2.28.2; 3.1.5; 3.6.46; 3.6.51. On the social and public nature of language in Locke,
see James Tully, *A Discourse on Property: John Locke and His Adversaries* (Cambridge, Cambridge
University Press, 1980), pp. 12–16; E. J. Ashworth, "Locke on Language," *Canadian Journal of
Philosophy*, 14 (1984), 49–51, 72; Lia Formigari, *Language and Experience in Seventeenth-Century
British Philosophy* (Amsterdam, Benjamins, 1988), pp. 135–6.

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That comes close if we take it in the sense of "the ways in which human beings acquire knowledge," which of course may be too long for a title. But the point is obvious. Condillac could have called his work "Essai sur l'origine de l'entendement humain," but his not doing so must surely be taken to indicate deliberate choice.

In the penultimate paragraph of the introduction, Condillac leaves no doubt why he finds fault with Locke's notion of the understanding. Since the soul, Condillac there writes,

> 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 (*pour développer mieux l'origine de nos connaissances*), 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.

Those plain words should decide the issue. But among other reasons for not easily granting that Condillac meant to write on "the origin of human understanding," one can also cite his detailed treatment of the roles of attention, reminiscence, memory, and imagination in the process of gaining knowledge; and note the crucial role given to signs in *Origin*, contrasted with Locke's hard work to protect the understanding against "the cheat of words."

Like Descartes, Locke thought of the understanding as a private endowment, while for Condillac understanding and knowledge are public benefits. It is misleading to give the impression that after Locke had written "concerning human understanding" Condillac got the not very interesting copycat notion of writing "on the origin of human understanding." Such a title also tends to sanction the fatal error of believing that *Origin* is merely "a supplement to Mr. Locke's *Essay*," as it says on the title page of the English translation of 1756. It would be correct to call Condillac's work "an essay on the origin of language and human knowledge," but that possibility is ruled out for the good reason that he did not use that title. His title was and is *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*.

Rhetorical expressivism

In the chapter on the progress of gesture in antiquity, Condillac tells how mimes in the time of Augustus had brought their art to such

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perfection that they could perform entire plays by gestures alone, thus
unawares creating "a language which had been the first that mankind
spoke" (II, 1, §34). This was the ultimate progress of expressivism; it
was what Condillac called the language of action, which in his argument
is the proto-language of the speech that sets humans apart from other
animals. But the reaction against the cognitive appropriation had
already by 1700 advanced the claim that emotion, passion, and gesture
cannot be kept apart from communication.

This claim is best known from Berkeley's identification of what has
been called the emotive theory of meaning, in paragraph twenty of his
Treatise on the Principles of Human Knowledge (1710). It is often said that
his theory was altogether new and revolutionary at the time, but that is
not correct. It had already been stated with equal force in at least two
works with large readerships. The Port-Royal *Logic* (1662)[7] had a
chapter on "what words mean in usage," which argued that in addition
to the "principal idea" which is its proper signification, a word often
"raises several other ideas that we can call accessory (*accessoires*) of
which we do not take notice though the mind receives the impression
of them." Thus if someone says, "You have lied about it," the sense is
not merely "You have said what you know is not true," which pertains
to the "truth of things," but also covers the accompanying thoughts of
contempt and outrage that pertain to the "truth of usage." The concept
of accessory ideas obviously belongs with emotive meaning in Berkeley's
sense; even the example of the liar also turns up in Berkeley and in
other texts about emotive meaning. The same chapter also made the
rhetorical point that accessory ideas need not have their source in
custom and usage, but may also be created by the speaker's tone of
voice, facial expression, gestures, and "other natural signs that attach a
multitude of ideas to words," including the affective deviation from
standard syntax, as in the inversion of normal word order.

The second work to anticipate Berkeley was Bernard Lamy's *Rhetoric
or the Art of Speaking*, which after its initial publication in 1675 until the
author's death in 1715 went through a stream of fifteen steadily
expanded and revised French printings that with increasing force and
detail expounded the emotive and expressive dimensions of speech.[8]

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[7] Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole, *La Logique ou l'art de penser*, ed. Pierre Clair and François
Girbal (Paris, PUF, 1965), pp. 93–9. This is Ch. 14 in the fifth edition (1683).
[8] Bernard Lamy, *La Rhétorique ou l'art de parler*, 4th ed. revised and enlarged (Amsterdam, 1699).

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Lamy followed the Port-Royal *Logic* on the primacy of usage
(pp. 66–72), on accessory ideas with the example of the liar (p. 39), and
on the use of vocal gestures, for which he cited interjections (or
particles, as he called them) that express "admiration, joy, disdain,
anger, pain" (pp. 38–9). Lamy boldly claimed that "the passions are
good in themselves" (p. 343) and that people hardly ever act on reason
but on imagination and sense (p. 367), and declared that his book did
something unusual by aiming to uncover the foundations of rhetoric
(p. 153). Lamy's *Rhetoric* remained a respected authority for much of
the eighteenth century.

At this point oratory begins to blend with sympathy, gestures, and
sociability, and in this context Lamy made a timely observation about
the foundations of rhetoric, as we shall see in a moment. In its classical
formulation the art of oratory had five parts: invention, disposition,
expression, memory, and delivery. Traditionally these parts were given
roughly equal importance, but toward the end of the seventeenth
century delivery began to get the most attention, because it came to be
seen as the chief agent of effective persuasion. This change is evident in
Fénelon's *Dialogues on Eloquence in General and on That of the Pulpit in
Particular*, first published in 1718 (in French of course) but written
some forty years earlier.[9] Their thesis is that truth will not prevail
without eloquence and persuasion, and their chief target was sermons
that tended to present ineffectual philosophical argument. In our
present fallen state, wrote Fénelon, with man being "wholly enmeshed
in things of sense . . . it is necessary to give physical body to all the
instructions one wishes to inject into his soul, and to find images that
beguile him," that is by poetry, which, being "the lively portrayal of
things, is as it were the soul of eloquence" (p. 94).

Fénelon found the greatest eloquence in the Old and New Testa-
ments, especially in the prophets and the psalms, which for him
surpassed Homer and Plato in grandeur, naïveté, liveliness, and sub-

The first seven, steadily expanded, issues bore the title *L'Art de parler*, but in 1688 the title was
changed to *La Rhétorique ou l'art de parler* to take account of the new orientation of the work.
This change also signals a movement away from the strict Cartesianism which Lamy professed
earlier in his career.

[9] François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon, *Dialogues on Eloquence*, a translation with an
introduction and notes by Wilbur Samuel Howell (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press,
1951). This text identifies the many references to Cicero, Quintilian, and Longinus. In the
introduction (p. 46), Howell says, rightly I think, that the *Dialogues* are "the earliest statement
. . . of what may be said to have become the dominant modern attitude toward rhetoric."

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limity (p. 131). The example of David showed that "the oriental nations regarded the dance as a serious art, similar to music and poetry," just as the fact that the ancient Greeks went to war to the sounds of "trumpets and drums that threw them into a state of enthusiasm and a sort of furor they called divine" showed that even in pagan Greece "music, dance, eloquence, poetry had no other purpose but to give expression to the passions and to inspire them in the very act of expressing them" (p. 68). Fénelon paid much attention to the use of gestures in delivery. Citing Cicero, he wrote that the "action of the body" expresses "the sentiments and passions of the soul" (p. 99). The Latin word *actio* was Cicero's and Quintilian's term for delivery.

Both cited Demosthenes in support of their belief that delivery is the heart of oratory. Cicero declared that "nature has assigned to every emotion a particular look and tone of voice and bearing of its own; and the whole of a person's frame and every look on his face and utterance of his voice are like the strings of a harp, and sound according as they are struck by each successive emotion."[10] The body is itself like a musical instrument, with delivery or action being "a sort of eloquence of the body, since it consists in gesticulation as well as speech."[11] "Action," said Cicero, "influences everybody, for the same emotions are felt by all people and they both recognize them in others and manifest them in themselves by the same marks" (*De oratore* III, 223). The gestures of action, both with voice and body, constitute a universal language that advances communication and social cohesion. Classical rhetoric did not have a term for the mysterious something that provides humanity with a means of universal communication, but Lamy suddenly supplied it in the fourth edition of his *Rhetoric*. "Human beings are bound to one another," he wrote, "by a wonderful sympathy (*sympathie*) which naturally makes them communicate their passions." Thus a "person with an expression of sadness on his face causes sadness, just as a sign of joy makes those who notice it share in the joy," and all this, Lamy declared, "is an effect of the wonderful wisdom of God" (pp. 111–12). For support Lamy cited (p. 220) some lines from Horace which Hume also used in the second *Enquiry* to make the same

[10] *De oratore* III, 216; cf. *Origin* II, 1, §42n. On Demosthenes, see *De oratore* III, 213; *Orator*, 56; Quintilian III, iii, 1 and XI, iii, 6. In both of these places Quintilian says that the words *actio* and *pronuntiatio* are synonyms for delivery.

[11] *Orator*, 55: "Est enim actio quasi corporis quaedam eloquentia, cum constet e voce atque motu." This compact statement is quoted often.

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point. It is a bit of a puzzle how Lamy came upon the term. It is Greek and its philosophical home was in Stoic philosophy, in which "sympathy" is the name for the cosmic harmony that binds all things together in an organized whole of interconnection that embraces both the physical and the moral worlds. A loan-translation appears in ecclesiastical Latin as *compassio*, which in turn produced other loan-translations such as the German *Mitleid*.

The essential role of sympathy in human affairs calls to mind Hume and Adam Smith, for whom it is the bond that joins individuals together in society owing to "the propensity we have," as Hume said, "to sympathize with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different and contrary to our own" (*Treatise*, p. 316). Both stressed that since sympathy, like an instinct, works without deliberation, forethought, or reflection, neither the gestural expression nor the response to it can be false or mistaken. "The passions, upon some occasions," wrote Adam Smith, "may seem to be transfused from one man to another, instantaneously, and antecedent to any knowledge of what excited them in the person principally concerned."[12] This error-free effect of sympathy ensures that the grounds of morality are firm and public. In sympathy we sense the presence of the great agent Adam Smith memorably called "the superintendent of the universe," whose invisible hand guides us to promote ends that do not figure in our intentions.

Sociability grows on sympathy, and the most commonly used illustration of this effect was the reaction to someone else's pain. In his *Critical Reflections*, which was a work well known to Hume and Adam Smith, Du Bos observed that our conduct would be determined by self-interest if nature had not implanted in us the prompt and instant "natural sensibility of the heart . . . as the first foundation of society." The feelings of those who need our help touch us without delay and, as we are moved, "they receive from us what they would never have gained by way of reasoning or persuasion," for "the tears of a stranger move us even before we know what makes him weep; the cries of a person with

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[12] Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Indianapolis, IN, Liberty Classics, 1982), p. 11. The passage continues with the introduction of the spectator: "Grief and joy, for example, strongly expressed in the look and gestures of any one, at once affect the spectator with some degree of a like painful or agreeable emotion." Cf. Hume, *Treatise*, p. 317: "When any affection is infused by sympathy, it is at first known only by its effects."

whom we share nothing but our humanity make us rush to assistance by an involuntary movement that precedes all deliberation."[13] Most of this passage was quoted verbatim, without quotation marks, in the entry "Société" in the *Encyclopédie* to show how God has provided for our natural sociability by the marvellous ease with which the passions communicate themselves from one brain to another.

The rise of rhetorical expressivism and its fellow concepts was concurrent with new efforts to understand the nature of language and its place in the entire spectrum of human communication, as if to create a media theory for the times. The seventeenth century could believe that our speech somehow had its origin in better times before the Fall when Adam named the animals, but with that faith gone, what would take its place? How could we become self-starters? Obviously, we could not have begun by inventing language by some discursive plotting even in a small way, for doing that would require that we already had a discourse to work with – this was one of the aporias made popular by Rousseau. But with natural sociability, spontaneous emotive expression, and sympathy we could have a proto-language which met the condition that the background of language was certainty, as ensured by action without forethought, and not acts of error-prone reasoning. Discursivity is bought at the cost of potential error, doubt, deceit, and simulation.

Condillac and signs

What Condillac says can be summarized as follows: Nature begins everything, and we are so made that from the first instant of sensation we actively engage with the world in which we live and survive. We owe so much to the passions that without them "the understanding is virtually at a standstill" (i, 2, §106). There is nothing at all passive or mechanical in this philosophy.[14] Though we do not know how, we are

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[13] *Crit. Refl.* 1.39–40. *Crit. Refl.* was first published in two volumes in 1719, and later, first in 1733, in three volumes and was often reissued. The term *sympathie* is rarely used in French at the time, but *sensibilité* either alone or suitably qualified, as in "the natural sensibility of the heart," serves just as well. The *Encyclopédie* has an entry "Sympathie (*Physiolog.*)" which opens with a glowing statement that could have come from Hume or Adam Smith. It is curious that Alan Bewell in his fine book *Wordsworth and the Enlightenment* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 77, writes that "*Sympathy* . . . is the pivotal term in Condillac's account of the origin of language," for Condillac never uses the word in *Origin*, but Bewell's perception that he might have is right.

[14] Nicolas Rousseau, *Connaissance et langage chez Condillac* (Geneva, Droz, 1986), p. 194.

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made to become speaking creatures, unlike other animals, though with them we share consciousness, attention, reminiscence, and a limited form of imagination. Knowledge and discursivity cannot occur without the power of recall, recall not without memory, and neither without signs. These signs cannot be private but must be public. Since we are born with neither innate ideas nor signs, how do we get the signs?

Condillac distinguishes three kinds of signs (1, 2, §35). The first are "accidental signs," which have the effect of producing in us the feeling of having previously experienced a present situation, like a déjà vu without illusion. One does not need to have read Proust to know what that is. Condillac calls this feeling reminiscence, and it carries the great lesson that a past experience can flash vividly on the mind with conviction both that it is not illusory and that it is not produced by intentional recall. What was accidentally encountered triggered the recall. Obviously, with signs having that power, it would be wonderful to have control over them.[15]

Secondly, there are the sounds that spontaneously give expression to affective states of mind such as joy, fear, pain – or what is sometimes called "groans and grunts" or avowals. When thus uttered, these sounds are not signs, but they become so if a hearer or spectator owing to sympathy recognizes them as expressions of familiar states of mind and then in turn acts deliberately by projecting a particular sound as a sign with the intent of communication. Though the sound or gesture is the

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[15] It is worth noting that in the *Encyclopédie* the entries "Mémoire (*Métaphysiq.*)" (10 [1765], 326a–328b) and "Réflexion (*Logique*)" (13 [1765], 885a–886a) refer to *Origin* and that both quote extensively from it. The *Encyclopédie* has a brief entry entitled "Signe (*Métaphysiq.*)" (15 [1765], 188a) which quotes, without indication of source, Condillac's entire 1, 2, §35 on the three kinds of signs, with this telling addition at the end: "These last [instituted] signs are necessary for human beings in order for them to have the power of being in control of their imagination." Presumably Condillac supplied this entry. The attentive reader will understand that one thing Condillac has in mind here is that animals do not have control over their imagination; they are therefore not free, in contrast to humans, who are. Condillac's brief addition about being in control of the imagination is a reminder that his entire project relates to current issues in cognitive science. At a recent meeting the distinguished neurobiologist Eric R. Kandel spoke about long-term memory. After the paper a colleague asked if Kandel would comment on "the general phenomenon of recall." As printed in the official volume, the answer took this form: "Recall is an extremely interesting problem because cognitive psychological studies suggest that it is not simply a question of turning a flash light on a memory process; it's a creative event." See Alexander G. Bearn (ed.), *Useful Knowledge: The American Philosophical Society Millennium Meeting* (Philadelphia, APS, 1999), p. 128. The lesson is this: both Condillac and Kandel (1) make the crucial distinction between storage and recall; and (2) both argue that recall is creative. Readers may know that in the fall of 2000 Kandel received the Nobel Prize for his work on memory.

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same, at that point it ceases to be natural. It joins Condillac's third category of signs, the instituted signs we have ourselves chosen. In this act the hearer or spectator exercises the control over attention that is called reflection, which, once awakened, interacts with signs in a process of reciprocal progress of both. Without natural cries and gestures we could not become self-starting communicators, and Condillac stresses again and again that nascent speech for a long while needs the support of action. All modes of expression, everything that later becomes the separate arts, initially exist together until, ages later, prose emerges from poetry as a language that is ready to serve the needs of analysis and cognition. For Condillac language continues to have many forms and uses; he dismissed the rationalist claim that only the fixed subject–predicate order exhibited the true nature of language.

It is important to understand that the sign function is not the creation of the utterer, but that of the hearer. This is one of the radical differences that separate our two centuries. In the seventeenth century the dominant mode was vision, which by the light of nature reveals truth to the silent and isolated individual. For the eighteenth century the informing agency was hearing, which encompasses both the natural and social worlds. This is why Wordsworth sought to escape from what he called "the tyranny of vision." Speech is created in dialogue, and it becomes the source of self-knowledge. Above it all hovers imagination, which seeks synthesis of all the things that attention has connected for reflection to work on. In a later work Condillac wrote that a person of imagination is a "creative mind" by virtue of being able to join "diverse parts into a single whole that exists only in the mind" (CO 1.413b), which amplifies the remark he has already made in *Origin* that "genius adds to talent the idea of the intellect as being somehow creative" (I, 2, §104).

Condillac was of course well aware of the problem of getting from action to speech and thought – what can perhaps be called the boot-strapping problem. In the crucial chapter "Reflection" he admitted that he faced an impasse, for if "the exercise of reflection can only be acquired by the use of signs," how do we acquire the instituted signs unless some degree of reflection was already possible at an earlier stage (I, 2, §49)? When in the opening chapter of Part II he gives the solution (II, 1, §3), he refers back to the earlier mention of the problem. By repeatedly hearing the spontaneous avowals, the new speakers came to

do by reflection what they had so far done by instinct. Nature begins everything. The proto-language is part of our natural history. From that opening chapter on the language of action, Condillac continues with close focus on the forms of action until, in the opening of chapter 9, he stops to say that he could not interrupt what he "wished to say about the art of gestures, dance, declamation, music, and poetry" because they are all so "closely interrelated as a whole and to the language of action which is their principle." These eight exciting chapters constitute the heart of *Origin*.

Did Condillac give too much to signs?

Condillac occasionally exchanged ideas about language with Maupertuis, a distinguished French scientist who was then president of the Prussian Academy in Berlin. In response to an essay on language he had received from Maupertuis, he wrote that he wished Maupertuis had shown how the progress of the mind depends on language. He then continued with these words: "I tried to do that in my *Origin*, but I was mistaken and gave too much to signs" (CO 2.536a). This has been read as an admission that Condillac was wrong about signs and thus, astonishingly, about the entire argument of *Origin*. But the evidence does not support that reading. Condillac wrote much on language the rest of his life, in *Course of Study for the Prince of Parma*, in *Logic*, and in *The Language of the Calculus* without retreating from the argument of *Origin*. By his own admission, *The Art of Thinking* for the most part repeated, usually verbatim, the text of *Origin*. When he came to the chapter on how we give signs to ideas in Part I, Section 4 of *Origin*, he changed the title in *The Art of Thinking* to "The Necessity of Signs," and to this new title he further added a note in which he said that since the printing of *Origin*, "I have completed the task of showing the necessity of signs in my *Grammar* and in my *Logic*" (CO 1.731a), both of which have searching chapters on the language of action. Obviously, Condillac's remark about having given too much to signs cannot be read as an admission of fatal error on an issue that lies at the center of his philosophy.[16] So what did he mean?

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[16] See N. Rousseau, *Connaissance et langage chez Condillac*, pp. 22–3 and references given there.

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He meant that he had failed to give sufficient emphasis to the equal necessity of social intercourse. This is already implied in what he next says in the letter to Maupertuis, whom he criticizes for assuming that a single isolated person could hit upon the notion of giving signs to ideas. In *Origin* the chapter on how we give signs to ideas was followed by a chapter with "Facts that confirm what was proved in the previous chapter," as also in *The Art of Thinking* after the chapter with the new title. The facts were the accounts of the two boys who for lack of participation in social life could not rise above the state of animals. About the first, the boy from Chartres, Condillac concluded that since he was deprived of hearing and speech, he could not connect ideas with instituted signs, and thus would have no memory, no command of imagination, and no capacity for reflection (I, 4, §20). This is also the chapter that ends with a severe critique of Locke for not having fully grasped the necessity of signs. In the letter to Maupertuis, Condillac did not, perhaps tactfully, refer to this chapter about the two deprived boys. But he did a few years earlier in letters to the Swiss mathematician Gabriel Cramer.[17]

We cannot go into detail about these rich letters. It is sufficient to note that Condillac forcefully insists on the need for social life with frequent references to his chapter on the two boys, that he does not retreat from his view of the necessity of signs, and that he does admit that his exposition was not clear enough. To Cramer's question whether natural signs count for nothing, Condillac answers:

> I answer that before social life, natural signs are properly speaking not signs, but only cries that accompany sentiments of pain, joy, etc., which people utter by instinct and by the mere form of their organs. They must live together to have occasion to attach ideas to these cries and to employ them as signs. Then these cries blend with the arbitrary signs. That is what I am supposing in several

[17] Georges le Roy (ed.), *Condillac, lettres inédites à Gabriel Cramer* (Paris, PUF, 1953). With these letters belongs an illuminating "Mémoire," here printed pp. 89–109. Le Roy's datings were revised by Piero Peccato in "Note sul carteggio Condillac–Cramer," *Belfagor*, 26 (1971), 83–95; I follow the Peccato datings, citing from a letter of the early part of 1747. This volume will be referred to as "Cramer." Maupertuis's essay was entitled "Réflexions critiques sur l'origine des langues et la signification des mots." In 1750 the young Turgot also remarked on the very same passage Condillac criticized; he called it a ridiculous supposition that a lone person would begin to use signs; "a single person . . . would never be tempted to find marks to designate his perceptions; it is only in company (*vis-à-vis des autres*) that we seek to do that." Gustav Schelle (ed.), *Œuvres de Turgot* (Paris, 1913–23), vol. 1 (1913), 162.

> places [with his own references to I, 4, §§23–4 and II. 1. §§2–3].
> But I appeared to suppose the contrary, and thus to make too great
> a difference between natural and arbitrary signs; and in that I was
> wrong. (Cramer, pp. 85–6)

That is, he had seemed to give the impression that he thought natural
cries could be signs before or without social intercourse. This reading is
borne out by what comes next: "That's what my entire system comes
down to in this matter. Social intercourse gives occasion (1) to change
the natural cries into signs; (2) to invent other signs that we call
arbitrary; and these signs (the natural as well as the arbitrary) are the
first principles of the development and progress of the operations of the
mind. I admit that on all this my work is not clear enough. I hope I'll do
better another time" (Cramer, pp. 84–5). We again note how thoroughly
anti-Cartesian the argument is, against solipsism, and against the still
prevailing notion that any acceptable explanation of mental life must
begin with speculation about what goes on or might go on in the mind
of the silent, isolated individual.

Condillac's unbroken commitment to the argument of *Origin* with its
doctrine of signs that are generated within a form of life raises a radical
question not only about the reading of Condillac, but also about the
conventional view of eighteenth-century thought. The question is this:
how is it possible to reconcile his argument about communication and
signs with the widely credited dogma that his philosophy is most fully
represented by the famous statue in his *Treatise on the Sensations* (1754)?
This dogma holds that as the statue is in turn endowed with each of the
five senses, it becomes a full-fledged human being, ready to acquire and
exercise the entire range of intellectual abilities. Seen in this perspective,
Condillac is said to wish "to eliminate all autonomous activity from the
mind" by making reflection "depend upon the mechanical association
of ideas." These words proclaim the familiar knee-jerk belief that "the
informal metaphysics of the Enlightenment tended toward a mechanical
philosophy which saw nothing artificial in likening man to an animated
statue, even as the universe was likened to a watch." Obviously, if that
reading is credited, *Origin* and *Sensations* cannot be reconciled. But the
resolution is simple, for in spite of its prestige, that reading is false,
chiefly because it grasps neither the pivotal role of the necessity of signs
and communication in Condillac's argument nor his persistent affirma-
tion of the creativity and action of the mind. The decisive fact is that,

like the two deprived boys, the statue is radically speechless because its
existence is wholly private and unsocial; its mental life is that of an
animal.[18]

This bizarre misreading is a measure of the stubborn failure to
recognize the centrality of language in eighteenth-century French
thought where this conception was born – to use the appropriate
organismic metaphor – before it spread over the intellectual landscape
of Europe.

Inversions or the problem of word order

Condillac's discussion of inversions brings out the deep implications of
his argument that all languages ultimately stem from and still to some
degree bear the mark of the emotion-based, expressive language of
action. Treating the subject briefly in the chapter "Music," he observed
that compared with French-speakers, the Greeks had a much livelier
imagination because their language was closer to the language of action,
which itself is a product of the imagination; by contrast, French is so
proselike and analytical "that it hardly requires more than the exercise
of memory" (II, 1, §51). In the later chapter "Inversions" he challenged
the rationalist term-by-term position by declaring that it did not make
sense to claim one could tell what the natural order was. The notion that
the bound subject–predicate order was natural might merely be a
French prejudice, since the French language leaves little choice in the
matter. In *Letter on Deaf–Mutes*, Diderot suggested that the rationalists'
faith in their natural order could be an effect of the long tradition of
respect for Aristotelian logic. By contrast, Condillac argued, Latin
grammar puts hardly any constraint on word order, thus leaving
expression free to create the order that best suits the emotions and the
intended emphasis.

In support of his thesis, Condillac cited and analyzed two passages of
Latin poetry, which brought him to the conclusion that the free Latin
order has two great and related benefits. It makes it possible to give
expression a form that comes close to the language of action, and also to

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[18] The quoted passages are from Isabel F. Knight, *The Geometric Spirit* (New Haven, CT, Yale
University Press, 1969), pp. 29, 37, 85. It is telling that "reason" has a long entry in the index to
this book, but "imagination" has none at all. See also Aarsleff, "Condillac's Speechless Statue"
in FLS, pp. 210–24.

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create a picture (*tableau*) which "in a single word unite[s] the circum-
stances of an action, much as a painter unites them on the canvas"
(II, 1, §122). Coming close to the language of action is a virtue, because
early language, like poetry, is more spontaneous and true than the
analytical prose that later developed. And creating a picture brings the
expression close to the instantaneousness of thought, thus escaping
from the time-bound, linear order of French, which can only produce
"a plain narrative."

This last point is weighty, for it implies that the sentence is the unit of
meaning, as Condillac made clear when he said that people who are
familiar with the language of action know that "a single gesture is often
equivalent to a long sentence" (II, 1, §51). This is an important concep-
tion throughout the eighteenth century, and it corresponds to what is
nowadays called semantic holism. Here again we note the contrast to
rationalism, for which individual words are the prime carriers of
meaning. Condillac was pointedly criticized in two long articles in the
Encyclopédie, "Inversion" (8 [1765], 852–62a) and "Langue" (9 [1765],
249a–266a), by the great universal grammarian Nicolas Beauzée, who
argued that at the beginning there was only one language, divine and
Adamic, which followed the analytical order of ideas; a language of
inversions was artificial ("Langue," 258a–259b). In favor of this stance
he invoked both Descartes and the Bible.

For Condillac the quality of the language of action that was recap-
tured by inversions gave the expression vivacity and force; he did not
use the word "energy," but Diderot did with much emphasis in his
Letter on Deaf-Mutes, which is about the aesthetics of inversion and is
much indebted to *Origin*.[19] The concept of expressive energy became so
well known that it gained an entry in EMGL: "Energy is the quality
that in a single word or in a small number of words causes us to perceive
or feel a large number of ideas; or which by means of a small number of
ideas expressed by words excites in the mind sentiments of admiration,
respect, horror, love, hate, etc., which words alone do not signify"
(EMGL 1 [1784], 713a). This of course could have come right out of
Origin, and indeed for illustration the entry immediately cited the
Horatian lines Condillac had quoted and analyzed to make this point
(II, 1, §121).

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[19] See Jacques Chouillet, *Diderot poète de l'énergie* (Paris, PUF Ecrivains, 1984), esp. pp. 27–43.