Tantum profecit
Ut veritati unice litaret.
Hoc ex scriptis ejus disce,
Quæ quod de eo reliquum est
Majori fide tibe exhibebunt,
Quam epitaphii suspecta elogia.
Virtutes si quas habuit,
Minores sane quam sibi laudi
Duceret,
Tibi in exemplum proponeret:
Vitia una sepeliantur.
Morum exemplum si quæras,
Tu Evangelia habes,
Vitiorum utinam nusquam!
Mortalitatis certe (quod prosit)
Hic et ubique.
Natum anno Domini MDCXXXII,
Mortuum XXVIII Octobris MDCCIV.
Memorat hæc tabella
Brevi et ipsa interitura.

LECTURE XVI.*

ESSAY ON THE HUMAN UNDERSTANDING. ITS SPIRIT, ITS METHOD.

General spirit of the *Essay on the Human Understanding*.—Its method: study of the human understanding as the necessary foundation of all true philosophy.—Study of the human understanding in its phenomena or ideas.—Division of inquiries with respect to ideas, and determination of the order in which these inquiries should be made. To postpone the logical and ontological question of the truth or falsity of ideas, of the legitimacy or illegitimacy of their application to such or such objects, to adhere to the study of ideas in themselves, and in that to commence by establishing the actual characters of ideas, and then to proceed to the investigation of their origin. —Examination of the method of Locke. Its merit: he postpones and places last the question of the truth or falsity of ideas; its fault: he entirely neglects the question of the actual characters of ideas, and he starts by that of their origin. First error of the method; chances of errors which it involves; general tendency of the school of Locke.

The first question which we shall put in regard to the *Essay on the Human Understanding* is: Upon what authority does it rest in the last analysis? Does the author search for truth at his own risk and peril by the single force of reason, such as it has been given to man, or does he recognize a foreign and superior authority to which he submits, and from which he borrows the motives of his judgments? In fact, this is, you know, the question upon which it is necessary to interrogate at first every philosophical work, in order to determine its most general character, and its place in the history of philosophy, and even in that of civilization. Now, a single glance at the *Essay on the Human Understanding*, is sufficient to show that Locke is a free seeker of truth. Everywhere he addresses himself to reason; he

* The third volume of the 1st Series contains a lecture devoted to the examination of the philosophy of Locke, p. 35–76.

starts from this authority, and from this alone; and if he subsequently admits another, it is because he arrives at it by reason: so that it is always reason which governs him, and holds in some sort the reins of his thought. Locke belongs, therefore, to the great family of independent philosophers. The *Essay on the Human Understanding* is a fruit of the movement of independence in the seventeenth century, and it has fortified that movement. This character passed from the master into his whole school, and was thereby recommended to all the friends of human liberty. I should add, that in Locke independence is always united to a sincere and profound respect for every thing which should be respected. Locke is a philosopher, and, at the same time, a Christian. Such is the chief. As to the school, you know what it has been. Its independence passed rapidly to indifference, and from indifference to hostility. I mention all this, because it is important that you should continually have in hand the thread of the movement of the sensualistic school.

I pass to the question which comes immediately after that of the general spirit of the whole philosophical work, to wit, the question of method. You know the importance of this question; it should now be evident to you that, as the method of a philosopher is, so will his system be, and that the adoption of a method decides the destinies of a philosophy. Hence our strict obligation to insist on the method of Locke, with all the care of which we are capable. What, then, is this method which, in its germ, contains the entire system of Locke, the system which produced the great sensualistic school of the eighteenth century? We will let Locke speak for himself; in his preface he expresses himself thus:

"Were it fit to trouble thee with the history of this Essay, I should tell thee, that five or six friends, meeting in my chamber, and discoursing on a subject very remote from this, found themselves quickly at a stand by the difficulties that arose on every side. After we had awhile puzzled ourselves without coming any nearer a resolution of those doubts which perplexed us, it came into my thoughts that we took a wrong course; and that before we set ourselves upon inquiries of that nature, it was necessary to examine our own abilities, and see what objects our understandings were or were not fitted to deal with. This I proposed to the company, who all readily assented; and thereupon it was agreed that this should be our first inquiry. Some hasty and undigested thoughts on a subject I had never before considered, which I set down against our next meeting, gave the first entrance into this discourse; which having been thus begun by chance, was continued by entreaty; written by incoherent parcels; and after long intervals of neglect, resumed again, as my humor or occasions permitted; and at last, in a retirement, where an attendance on my health gave me leisure, it was brought into that order thou now seest it."

He returns to the same thought in the introduction which follows the preface:

Chap. II. "I shall not at present meddle with the physical consideration of the mind, or trouble myself to examine wherein its essence consists, or by what motions of our spirits, or alterations of our bodies, we come to have any sensations by our organs, or any ideas in our understandings; and whether those ideas do, in their formation, any or all of them, depend on matter or no: these are speculations which, however curious and entertaining, I shall decline, as lying out of my way, in the design I am now upon. It shall suffice to my present purpose, to consider the discerning faculties of a man, as they are employed about the objects which they have to do with."

Locke is persuaded that this is the only means of repressing the rashness of philosophy, and, at the same time, of encouraging useful investigations.

Chap. IV. "If, by this inquiry into the nature of the understanding, I can discover the powers thereof, how far they reach, to what things they are in any degree proportionate, and where they fail us; I suppose it may be of use to prevail with the busy mind of man to be more cautious in meddling with things exceed-

ing its comprehension; to stop when it is at the utmost extent of its tether; and to sit down in a quiet ignorance of those things, which, upon examination, are found to be beyond the reach of our capacities. We should not then, perhaps, be so forward, out of an affectation of a universal knowledge, to raise questions, and perplex ourselves and others with disputes about things to which our understandings are not suited, and of which we cannot frame in our minds any clear or distinct perceptions, or whereof (as it has, perhaps, too often happened) we have not any notions at all. If we can find out how far the understanding can extend its views, how far it has faculties to attain certainty, and in what cases it can only judge and guess, we may learn to content ourselves with what is attainable by us in this state."

Chap. VI. "When we know our own strength, we shall the better know what to undertake with hopes of success; and when we have well surveyed the powers of our own minds, and made some estimate what we may expect from them, we shall not be inclined either to sit still, and not set our thoughts on work at all, in despair of knowing any thing; or, on the other side, question every thing, and disclaim all knowledge, because some things are not to be understood."

And again, in the same section:

"It is of great use to the sailor to know the length of his line, though he cannot with it fathom all the depths of the ocean. It is well he knows that it is long enough to reach the bottom, at such places as are necessary to direct his voyage, and caution him against running upon shoals that may ruin him."

I shall make but one more and a decisive citation:

"This was that which gave the first rise to this essay concerning the understanding. For I thought that the first step towards satisfying several inquiries the mind of man was very apt to run into, was to take a survey of our own understanding, examine our own powers, and see to what things they were adapted. Till that was done, I suspected we began at the wrong end. . . . ."

I have purposely brought together these citations, in order to

convince you that they contain, not merely a fugitive view, but a fixed rule, a method. This method is, in my opinion, the true method, that which is at the present time the strength and the hope of science. Let me present it to you in language somewhat more modern.

Whatever may be the objects you know or seek to know, God or the world, entities the most remote or the nearest, you know them, and can know them, only on this condition, that you are capable of knowing in general; and you know, and can know them, only in proportion to your general faculty of knowing. All the knowledge you can acquire, the highest as well as the lowest, rests in the last result upon the reach and value of this faculty. You may call it what you choose, spirit, reason, mind, intelligence, understanding. Locke calls it understanding. A wise philosophy, instead of blindly using the understanding and applying it at venture, should first examine it, and search out what it is and what it can accomplish; otherwise it is exposed to misconceptions without number. The study of the human understanding is, then, above all things else, the study of philosophy. There is no part of philosophy which does not presuppose this and from it borrow its light. What, for example, can logic be, that is, the knowledge of the rules which should govern the human mind, without the knowledge of that which we are seeking to govern, to wit, the human mind itself? What can morals be, the knowledge of the rules of our actions, without the knowledge of the subject itself of all morals, of the moral agent, of man himself? Politics, the science or the art of the government of social man, rests equally upon the knowledge of man whom it develops, but whom it does not constitute. Æsthetics, the science of the beautiful and the theory of arts, have their roots in the nature of the being capable of knowing the beautiful and of reproducing it, capable of feeling the particular emotions which attest its presence, capable of awakening these emotions in the souls of others. If man were not a religious being, if none of his faculties reached beyond the bounded and finite sphere of this

world, God would not exist for man; and God indeed exists for him only according to the measure of his faculties; the examination of his faculties and of their reach is, therefore, the condition of every good theodicea. In a word, man is implied in all the sciences, which are in appearance the most foreign to him. The study of man is, then, the necessary introduction to every science that claims a separate existence; and, whatever name we give to it, psychology, or something else, it is necessary to conceive that this study, though certainly not the whole of philosophy, is its foundation and its point of departure.

But is psychology, the knowledge of human nature, possible? No doubt it is; for consciousness is a witness which makes known to us every thing that takes place within the soul. It is not the principle of any of our faculties, but it is the light of all. It is not because we have a consciousness of what takes place within, that it does take place; but that which takes place within us would be as though it had not taken place, if it were not attested by consciousness: it is not by it that we feel, that we will, that we think; but it is by it that we know that we do all this. The authority of consciousness is the last authority into which that of all the other faculties resolves itself, inasmuch as, if the authority of consciousness were overthrown, since by it the action of all our other faculties comes to our knowledge, their authority, without being destroyed in itself, would be nothing for us. So there is no one who does not put full confidence in his own consciousness. At this point skepticism expires; for, as Descartes has said, let one doubt of every thing else, yet he could not doubt that he doubts.* Consciousness has, then, an incontestable authority; its testimony is infallible, and it is wanting to no one. In fact, consciousness is more or less distinct, more or less vivid, but it is in all men. No one is unknown to himself, although very few know themselves perfectly, because all, or nearly all, make use of consciousness without applying

* Throughout the first Series and in this.

themselves to perfect it, to elucidate, and to understand it, by will and attention. In all men, consciousness is simply a natural process; some elevate this natural process to the height of an art, of a method, by reflection, which is in some sort a second consciousness, a free reproduction of the first; and as consciousness gives to all men a knowledge of what passes within them, so reflection can give to the philosopher a certain knowledge of every thing that falls under the eye of consciousness. And observe that the question is not here concerning hypotheses and conjectures, for the question is not even concerning the processes of reasoning; the question is only concerning facts, and concerning facts which can be observed quite as well as those which take place on the scene of the world. The only difference is, that on the one hand they are exterior, on the other interior, and that the natural action of our faculties carrying us outward, it is easier for us to observe the former than the latter. With a little attention, resolution, and practice, we may succeed in interior observation as well as in exterior observation. Finally, psychology, even were it more difficult than physics, is by its nature, like physics, a science of observation, and consequently it has the same title and the same right to the rank of a positive science.

But it is indeed necessary to recognize its true objects. The objects of psychology are those of reflection, which again are those of consciousness: now, it is evident that the objects of consciousness are neither the exterior world nor God, nor the soul itself in so far as substance, for if we had a consciousness of the substance of the soul, we should dispute no longer in regard to its nature, whether it is material or spiritual. Being in itself, whatever it may be, that of bodies, that of God, that of the soul itself, does not fall under consciousness. True philosophy does not exclude ontology, but adjourns it: psychology does not dethrone metaphysics, but precedes and elucidates them; it makes no romance on the nature of the soul; it studies the soul in the action of its faculties, in the phenomena which consciousness and reflection can attain, and directly do attain.