LECTURE XVII.

ESSAY. FIRST BOOK, INNATE IDEAS. SECOND BOOK, OF SPACE.

First Book of the *Essay on the Human Understanding*. Of innate ideas.—Second Book. Experience, the source of all ideas. Sensation and reflection.—Of the operations of the mind. According to Locke, they are exercised only upon sensible data. Basis of sensualism.—Examination of the doctrine of Locke concerning the idea of space.—That the idea of space, in the system of Locke, should be reduced and is reduced to that of body.—This confusion is contradicted by facts and by Locke himself. Distinction of the actual characters of the ideas of body and of space.—Examination of the question of the origin of the idea of space. Distinction between the logical order and the chronological order of our ideas.—The idea of space is the logical condition of the idea of body; the idea of body is the chronological condition of the idea of space.—Of reason and experience, considered in turn as the reciprocal condition of their mutual development.—Merit of Locke's system.—Its vices: 1st, it confounds the measure of space with space; 2d, the condition of the idea of space with this idea itself.

Locke, doubtless, is not the first who instituted the question concerning the origin of ideas; but it is Locke who first made it a great philosophical question, and since Locke, it has preserved this rank in his school. Besides, if this question is not that which a severe method should first agitate, it is certain that in its place, it is of the highest importance: let us see how Locke has resolved it.

In entering upon the investigation of the origin of ideas, Locke encounters an opinion which, if it were well founded, would cut short the question; I mean the doctrine of innate ideas. In fact, if ideas are innate, that is, if, as the word seems to indicate, ideas are already in the mind at the moment when it begins to enter into exercise, it does not acquire them, it possesses them from the first day, precisely as they will be at the last; and, properly speaking, they have no progress, no generation, and no

origin. This doctrine, which Locke imputes to his adversaries, is opposed to his design of beginning with the question of the origin of ideas; it is moreover opposed to the solution which he wished to give of this question, and to the system which preoccupied him. First of all, he should have removed this obstacle, refuted the doctrine of innate ideas. Hence the polemic discussion which fills the first book of the *Essay on the Understanding*. I must give you an account of this discussion.

According to Locke there are philosophers who consider certain principles, certain maxims, and certain propositions in metaphysics and in morals as innate. Now by what reason may propositions be called innate? Two reasons may be and have been given: 1st, that these propositions are universally admitted; 2d, that they are primitively admitted, that they are known as soon as reason is exercised.

Locke examines successively these two reasons.

In metaphysics, he takes the two following propositions: What is, is; it is impossible for the same thing to be, and not to be; and he examines whether in fact all men admit these two propositions. Leaving civilized men who have read the philosophers, he addresses savages, and he asks whether a savage knows that what is, is, that it is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be. He answers for the savage, that the savage knows nothing about it and cares little for it. He interrogates the child, and finds that the child is in the same case as the savage. Finally, supposing that savages and children, like civilized people, admit that what is, is, that it is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be, Locke has in reserve an objection which he imagines to be unanswerable: the idiot does not admit these propositions; and this single exception would suffice, according to Locke, to demonstrate that they are not universally admitted, and consequently that they are not innate; for the soul of an idiot is also a human soul. Examining afterwards whether these propositions are primitive, whether they are the first that are acquired as soon as we begin to make use of reason,

Locke, taking again a little child for the subject of his experiment, maintains that in the child a multitude of ideas precede them: the idea of colors, the idea of bodies, the idea of existence; and that thus the propositions in question are not the first which preside at the development of intelligence.

So much for speculation: it is the same with practice. Locke submits moral propositions or maxims to the same tests to which he has submitted metaphysical propositions. Then, more than ever, he rests upon the manners of savages, the narrations of travellers, and the observation of children. His conclusion is that there is no moral maxim universally and primitively admitted, and consequently, innate.

Such are the first two chapters of the first book of the *Essay on the Human Understanding*. The last goes farther still. If the propositions and maxims, metaphysical as well as moral, previously examined, are neither universally nor primitively admitted, what must be thought of the ideas which are contained in these propositions and which are their elements? Locke chooses two, upon which he establishes a long discussion, the idea of God and the idea of substance. He has recourse to his ordinary arguments to prove that the idea of God and the idea of substance are neither universal nor primitive; in evidence of this he appeals to savages who, according to him, have not the idea of God; he addresses himself to children in order to know whether they have the idea of substance, and concludes that these ideas are not innate, and that no particular idea, nor any general speculation or moral idea, is anterior to experience.

As from the time of Locke, the question of the origin of ideas has become the fundamental question in the sensualistic school, so you will observe that from Locke polemical discussion upon innate ideas is, as it were, the obligatory introduction of this school. And not only the subject, but the manner of treating it comes from Locke. From him arose the habit of appealing to savages and to children, in regard to whom observation is so difficult; for, in regard to the former, it is necessary to refer to travellers who

are often prejudiced, and who do not understand the languages of the people that they visit; and as to the latter, we are compelled to make use of very equivocal signs. The polemics of Locke, in substance and in form, have become the basis of all the polemics of his school against innate ideas.

And what is the real value of these polemics? Permit me to postpone this question ;* for if its discussion should be too general, we should learn nothing, and if too profound, we should anticipate particular discussions which the examination of the *Essay on the Understanding* will successively introduce. Thus in making my reservations on the conclusions of this first book, I enter immediately upon the second, which contains the special theory of Locke on the origin of ideas.

"Let us then suppose, says Locke (B. II. Chap. I. § 2), the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas; how comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store which the busy and boundless fancy of man has painted on it, with an almost endless variety? Whence has it all the materials of reason and knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, from experience; in that all our knowledge is founded, and from that it ultimately derives itself."

Let us see what Locke understands by experience. Let him speak for himself:

B. II. Chap. I. § 2. "Our observation, employed either about external sensible objects, or about the internal operations of our minds, perceived and reflected on by ourselves, is that which supplies our understandings with all the materials of thinking. These two are the fountains of knowledge from whence all the ideas we have, or can naturally have, do spring."

§ 3. "*The objects of sensation one source of ideas.*—First, Our senses, conversant about particular sensible objects, do convey into the mind several distinct perceptions of things, according to those various ways wherein those objects do affect them: and

* See the close of Lecture 22.

thus we come by those ideas we have of *yellow, white, heat, cold, soft, hard, bitter, sweet,* and all those things which we call *sensible qualities;* which, when I say the senses convey into the mind, I mean, they from external objects convey into the mind what produces there those *perceptions.* This great source of most of the ideas we have, depending wholly upon our senses, and derived by them to the understanding, I call *sensation.*"

§ 4. "*The operations of our minds the other source of ideas.*—Secondly, The other fountain from which experience furnisheth the understanding with ideas is the perception of the operations of our own mind within us, as it is employed about the ideas it has got, which operations, when the soul comes to reflect on and consider, do furnish the understanding with another set of ideas, which could not be had from things without; and such are *perception, thinking, doubting, believing, reasoning, knowing, willing,* and all the different actings of our own minds; which we, being conscious of, and observing in ourselves, do from these receive into our understandings as distinct ideas, as we do from bodies affecting our senses. This source of ideas every man has wholly in himself; and though it be not sense, as having nothing to do with external objects, yet it is very like it, and might properly enough be called *internal sense.* But as I call the other *sensation,* so I call this *reflection,* the ideas it affords being such only as the mind gets by reflecting on its own operations within itself. By *reflection,* then, in the following part of this discourse, I would be understood to mean, that notice which the mind takes of its own operations, and the manner of them; by reason whereof there come to be ideas of these operations in the understanding. These two, I say, viz., external material things, as the objects of *sensation,* and the operations of our minds within, as the objects of *reflection,* are to me the only originals from whence all our ideas take their beginnings. The term *operations* here I use in a large sense, as comprehending not barely the actions of the mind about its ideas, but some sort of passions arising sometimes from

them, such as is the satisfaction or uneasiness arising from any thought."

§ 5. "*All our ideas are of the one or the other of these.*—The understanding seems to me not to have the least glimmering of any ideas, which it doth not receive from one of these two. *External objects furnish the mind with the ideas of sensible qualities*, which are all those different perceptions they produce in us: *and the mind furnishes the understanding with ideas of its own operations.* These, when we have taken a full survey of them and their several modes, combinations, and relations, we shall find to contain all our whole stock of ideas; and that we have nothing in our minds which did not come in one of these two ways."

Locke here evidently confounds reflection with consciousness. Reflection, strictly speaking, is a faculty analogous without doubt to consciousness,* but distinct from it, and belongs more particularly to the philosopher; while consciousness belongs to every man as an intellectual being. Moreover, he reduces very much the reach of reflection or of consciousness, by limiting it to the operations of the soul: it is manifest that the consciousness or reflection has for its objects all the phenomena which pass within us, sensations or operations. Consciousness or reflection is a witness and not an actor in the intellectual life. The true powers, the special sources of ideas, are sensations on the one hand, and on the other the operations of the soul, under this general condition, that we have a consciousness of the one as well as of the other, and that we may fall back upon ourselves and reflect upon them, and upon their products. These, then, are the two sources of ideas to which, strictly, the theory of Locke is reduced.

Now, is it the sensibility, is it the operations of our soul that enter first into exercise? Locke does not hesitate to say that our first ideas are furnished to us by the sensibility, and that those which we owe to reflection come later. He declares it, Book II. Chap. I. § 8; he declares it still more expressly, *ibid.*, § 20. "I

* See the preceding lecture; and 1st Series, Vol. 4, Lecture 26, p. 411.

see no reason to believe that the soul thinks before the senses have furnished it with ideas to think on." And again, § 23: "If it shall be demanded, then, when a man begins to have any ideas, I think the true answer is, when he first has any sensation . . . ."

Thus Locke places the acquisitions of the senses before those of thought. We might stop him here: we might ask him if this order is real; if it is possible to conceive, not a sensation perhaps, but an idea of sensation, without the intervention and concurrence of some of the operations of the soul. But without entering into this objection, let it suffice us to state that Locke does not admit the operations of the soul until after the sensations. It remains to know what these operations are, and what are their peculiar functions, on what and in what circle they act, and whether, in supposing that they do not enter into exercise until after the sensibility, they are or are not condemned to work solely on the primitive data which are furnished to them by the senses. For this, it is necessary to examine with care the nature and the object of the operations of the soul, according to Locke.

Locke is the first who has given an analysis, or rather an attempt at an analysis of the sensibility, and of the different senses of which it is composed, of the ideas which we owe to each of them, and to the simultaneous action of several (Book II. Chap. II. § 2; Chaps. III. IV. and V.); he, too, first gave the example of what, at a later period, in the hands of his successors, became a theory of the faculties of the soul. That of Locke, curious, precious even for the times, is in itself extremely feeble, vague, and confused. Nevertheless, faithful to the general spirit of his philosophy, Locke tries to present the faculties in the order of their probable development.

The first of which he treats is *perception* (Book II. Chap. IX. § 2.): "What perception is, every one will know better by reflecting on what he does himself, what he sees, hears, feels, etc., or thinks, than by any discourse of mine. Whoever reflects on what passes in his own mind, cannot miss it: and if he does not

reflect, all the words in the world cannot make him have any notion of it." § 3: "This is certain, that whatever alterations are made in the body, if they reach not the mind; whatever impressions are made on the outward parts, if they are not taken notice of within; there is no perception." § 4: "Wherever there is sense, or perception, there is some idea actually produced, and present to the understanding." And, § 15: "Perception is the first degree towards knowledge." The perception of Locke is what is now called consciousness, the faculty of perceiving what is actually taking place within us.

After perception comes *retention* (Chap. X. § 1), or the power of retaining actual perceptions, ideas, of *contemplating* them when they are present, or of *recalling* them when they have disappeared. In this last case, retention is *memory*, the aids of which are *attention* and *repetition*.

After this comes the faculty of *distinguishing ideas* (Chap. XI.), and that of *comparing* them: whence arise all the ideas of relation, without forgetting the faculty of *composition*, whence arise complex ideas, which come from the combination of several simple ideas. At a later period, finally, the faculty of *abstraction* and *generalization* is developed. Locke does not reckon any other faculties. Thus, in the last analysis, perception, retention, or contemplation and memory, discernment and comparison, composition, abstraction, such are the faculties of the human understanding, for the will, with pleasure, and pain, and the passions, which Locke gives as operations of the mind, form another order of phenomena.

Now, what is the character and what is the employment of these operations? On what is perception exercised? to what is it applied? to sensation. And what does it do? It simply perceives the sensation, simply has a consciousness of it. Add, according to Locke, that the perception is passive (Chap. IX. § 1), forced, inevitable; it is, then, little else than an effect of sensation. The first faculty of the soul adds nothing then to sensation; it simply takes cognizance of it. In retention, contemplation prolongs this perception; having vanished, the memory recalls it. Discernment separates, composition reunites the perceptions; abstraction seizes their most general characters; but finally the materials are always, in the last analysis, ideas of sensation due to perception. Our faculties add to the knowledge which they draw from them nothing but that of their own existence and of their action.

Thus, on one hand, sensation precedes; on the other, the understanding is, for Locke, only an instrument whose whole power is spent upon sensation. Locke, doubtless, has not confounded sensation and the faculties of the soul; he very explicitly distinguishes them: but he makes our faculties play a secondary part in concentrating their action upon sensible data: hence confounding them with sensibility itself was but a step, and in philosophy was already deposited the still feeble germ of the future theory of sensation transformed, of sensation as the sole principle of all the operations of the soul. It was Locke who, without knowing it, and without wishing it, opened the road to that exclusive doctrine, by adding to sensation only faculties whose whole office is to act upon it, without any original power. The sensualistic school will be constituted only when it shall have arrived at this point. In waiting for the future to push thus far the system of Locke, let us take this system for what it is, or rather for what it claims to be: its pretension is to explain all ideas which are, and which may be in the human understanding, by sensation and by reflection, that is, by the sentiment of our own operations.

"If we trace the progress of our minds," says Locke (Chap. XII.), "and with attention observe how it repeats, adds together, and unites its simple ideas received from sensation or reflection, it will lead us farther than at first perhaps we should have imagined. And I believe we shall find, if we warily observe the originals of our notions, that even the most abstruse ideas, how remote soever they may seem from sense, or from any operations of our own minds, are yet only such as the understanding frames

to itself, by repeating and joining together ideas, that it had either from objects of sense, or from its own operations about them: so that even those large and abstract ideas are derived from sensation or reflection, being no other than what the mind, by the ordinary use of its own faculties, employed about ideas received from objects of sense, or from the operations it observes in itself about them, may and does attain unto. This I shall endeavor to show in the ideas we have of space, time, and infinity, and some few others, that seem the most remote from those originals."

All this is well enough. It has somewhat the appearance of a challenge; let us accept it, and see how Locke will draw, for example, the idea of space from sensation and from reflection.

I am somewhat embarrassed in trying to explain to you Locke's opinion in regard to space, and must call to your remembrance an observation which I have already made. Locke is the chief of a school; you must not expect, then, that Locke has drawn from his principles all the consequences which they contain; you must not expect the inventor of a principle to establish it with clearness and precision. This remark, which is applicable to the whole *Essay on the Human Understanding*, is particularly true of the chapters wherein Locke treats of the idea of space. Herein we find, under a clearness sometimes real and sometimes apparent and superficial, an extreme confusion, and contradictions are not only met from chapter to chapter, but from paragraph to paragraph in the same chapter. It is, without doubt, the duty of the historian to exhibit these contradictions, in order to characterize both the epoch and the man; but history is not simply a monograph, it is not interested solely in an individual, however great he may be; it is the germ of the future which it seeks in the past. I shall endeavor, then, after having designated to you, once for all, the innumerable inconsistencies of Locke, to disengage from the midst of these sterile inconsistencies whatever has been fruitful, whatever has borne its fruits, what constitutes a system, the veritable system of Locke. This system consists, you know, in drawing all ideas from two sources, sensation and reflection. The idea of space must then be derived from one or the other of these two sources. Assuredly the idea of space is not acquired by reflection, by the consciousness of the operations of the understanding. It comes, then, from sensation. Behold the systematic principle. We will let Locke set out from this principle, and arrive at the idea of space. But Locke does not wish to reform the human understanding, he only wishes to explain it; he wishes to show the origin of what is, not of what could or should be. Then the trial for him, as for every other philosopher, is this: the principle of his system being admitted, to draw from it what at present exists, to wit, the idea of space, such as it is in the minds of all men. So we will let him proceed according to his system; we will then take from the very hands of this system the idea of space, such as it gives it to us, and we will confront it with the idea of space such as we have it, such as all men have it independently of any system whatever.

According to Locke,* the idea of space comes from sensation. But from what sense does it come? It is not from the smell, it is not from the taste, it is not from the hearing; it is then from the sight and from the touch. This is, too, what Locke says, Book II. Chap. XIII. § 2: "We get the idea of space both by our sight and touch, which I think is so evident, that...." If the idea of space is an acquisition of the sight and of the touch, in order to know what it should be on this condition, let us recur to the preceding chapters wherein Locke treats of the ideas which we receive by sight, and especially by touch. Let us see what touch can give according to Locke and according to every one.

The touch, aided or not aided by sight, suggests to us the idea of something that resists; and to resist is to be solid. "The idea of solidity," says Locke (Chap. IV. § 1), "we receive by our touch, and it arises from the resistance which we find..." And

* On the idea of space in Locke, 1st Series, Vol. 3, Lect. 1, p. 53–57, and in general on the idea of space, 1st Series, Vol. 3, opinion of Condillac, p. 133; Vol. 4, opinion of Reid, Lect. 21, p. 436, and Vol. 5, opinion of Kant, Lect. 4, transcendental æsthetics, p. 81, etc