LECTURE XIX.

ESSAY, SECOND BOOK. OF THE IDEA OF CAUSE.

Continuation of the examination of the Second Book of the *Essay on the Human Understanding*. Of the idea of cause.—Refutation of the theory which puts the origin of the idea of cause in the sensation.—Origin of the idea of cause in reflection, in the sentiment of the will.—Distinction between the idea of cause and the principle of causality. That the principle of causality is inexplicable by the sentiment of the will alone.—Of the true formation of the principle of causality.

Locke's first fault in regard to the ideas of space, of time, of the infinite, of personal identity, and of substance, is a fault of method. Instead of searching out and recognizing at first, by an impartial observation, the characters which these ideas actually have in the human understanding, he begins by the obscure and perilous question of the origin of these ideas. Then Locke resolves this question concerning the origin of the ideas of space, of time, of the infinite, of personal identity, and of substance, by his general system concerning the origin of ideas, which consists in admitting no idea which has not entered the human understanding either by reflection or by sensation. Now, the ideas of space, of time, of the infinite, of personal identity, and of substance, with the characters by which they are now incontestably marked, are inexplicable by sensation and reflection, and consequently incompatible with the system of Locke. To Locke, then, there remained but one resource, to wit, to mutilate these ideas with their characters, so as to reduce them to the dimensions of other ideas which enter in fact into the human understanding by reflection or sensation, for example the ideas of body, of succession, of number, that of the direct phenomena of consciousness and of memory, and that of the qualities of exterior objects and of our own qualities. But we think that we have shown that these last ideas, which are certainly the condition of the acquisition of the

first, are not the first, that they are their chronological antecedent, but not the logical reason: that they precede them, but that they do not explain them. Thus facts disfigured and confounded, save the system of Locke; established and elucidated, they overturn it.

These observations are equally and particularly applicable to the theory of one of the most important ideas that are in the human understanding, the idea which plays the greatest part in human life and in the books of philosophers: I mean the idea of cause.* Locke would have acted wisely to have begun by recognizing it and describing it exactly, such as it now is and such as it is manifested by our actions and by our discourses. Far from this, he at first investigates the origin of the idea of cause, and refers it, without hesitation, to sensation. Observe the following passage from Locke:

Book II. Chap. XXVI. § 1.—*Of cause and effect. Whence their ideas got.*

"In the notice that our senses take of the constant vicissitude of things, we cannot but observe that several particulars, both qualities and substances, begin to exist; and that they receive this their existence from the due application and operation of some other being. From this observation we get our ideas of cause and effect. That which produces any simple or complex idea, we denote by the general name, cause; and that which is produced, effect. Thus finding that in that substance which we call wax, fluidity, which is a simple idea that was not in it before, is constantly produced by the application of a certain degree of heat; we call the simple idea of heat, in relation to fluidity in wax, the cause of it, and fluidity, the effect. So also, finding that the substance wood, which is a certain collection of simple ideas so called, by the application of fire is turned into another substance called ashes, that is, another complex idea, consisting

* On the idea of cause and the principle of causality, see 1st Series, Vol. 1st, course of 1817, programme, p. 216, Vol. 4, Lecture 22, p. 487, etc.

of a collection of simple ideas quite different from that complex idea which we call wood; we consider fire, in relation to ashes, as the cause, and ashes as effect."....§ 2: "Having thus, from what our senses are able to discover in the operations of bodies on one another, got the notion of cause and effect...."

This is positive; the idea of cause has its origin in sensation. It behooves us to examine this question. But since we wish to ascertain whether sensation gives us the idea of cause, our first care should be not to suppose what is a matter of question; we must divest sensation of every foreign element and interrogate it alone, in order to see what it can render in regard to the idea of cause.

I suppose myself reduced to sensation, and I take the example of Locke, that of a piece of wax, which melts, which enters into a fluid state by the contact of fire. What is there here for the senses? There are two phenomena, the wax and the fire, which are in contact with each other. The senses show me this; moreover, they show in the wax a modification which did not before exist in it. A moment since they showed me the wax in one condition, now they show it to me in another, and this other condition they show me even while showing me, or immediately after having shown me the presence of the other phenomena, to wit, the fire; that is, the senses show me the succession of one phenomenon to another phenomenon. Do the senses show me any thing more? I do not see, and Locke does not pretend, that they do; for according to him, the senses give us the idea of cause in the observation of the constant vicissitude of things Now, the vicissitude of things is certainly the succession of phenomena to each other: let this succession often reappear, several times, constantly even, you will have a constant succession; but let this succession be so far constant as to be perpetual, or let it be limited to a very small number of cases, the greater or less number of cases have no influence over the nature of succession: succession is succession alone. Thus the constant vicissitude of things is, at bottom, reduced to their vicissitude, which is simply

their succession. I grant, with Locke, that the senses give me this succession, and Locke does not pretend that they give any thing more. The only question then between us is to know whether the succession, rare or constant, of two phenomena, explains, exhausts the idea which we have of cause.

Because a phenomenon succeeds another and succeeds it constantly, is it the cause of that phenomenon? Is that all the idea that you form of cause? When you say, when you think that the fire is the cause of the fluid state of the wax, I ask you, whether you simply understand that the phenomenon of fluidity succeeds the phenomenon of the approach of the fire; I ask you whether you do not believe, whether the entire human race does not believe that there is in the fire a something, an unknown property, an explanation of which is not here required, to which you refer the production of the phenomenon of the fluidity of the wax. I ask you whether the conception of a phenomenon which appears after another phenomenon is not one thing, and whether the conception in a phenomenon of a certain property which produces the modification which the senses show us in the phenomenon which follows, is not another thing. I will make use of an example often employed, and which expresses perfectly the difference between the relation of succession and the relation of cause to effect. I will suppose that I now wish to hear a harmony, a succession of sounds, and that my desire is scarcely expressed when this succession of sounds is heard in a neighboring apartment and strikes my ear; there is evidently here nothing but a relation of succession. But suppose that I wish to produce sounds, and that I produce them myself: do I simply place between my volition and the sounds which are heard the relation of succession which I just now placed between my desire and the accidental sounds which were heard? Besides the relation of succession, do I not place between my will to produce sounds and the sounds heard, still another relation and a relation very different? Is it not evident that in the last case I believe that not only the first phenomenon, to wit, the will, precedes the

second, to wit, the sounds, but moreover that the first phenomenon produces the second, that in short my will is the cause, and the sounds the effect? This is incontestable; it is incontestable that in certain cases we perceive between phenomena simply the relation of succession, and that in certain others we place between them the relation of cause and effect, and that these two relations are not identical with each other. The conviction of every person and the universal belief of the human race leave no doubt on this point. Our acts are not only phenomena which appear in the sequence of the operation of the will; they are judged by us and recognized by others as the direct effects of our will. Hence moral imputation, legal imputation, and three quarters of human life and conduct. If there is only a relation of succession between the act of the murderer and the death of the victim, there is an end of the universal belief and all civil life. Every civil action is founded on this hypothesis, universally admitted, that man is a cause; as the science of nature is founded on the hypothesis that exterior bodies are causes, that is, have properties that can produce and do produce effects. Thus, because the senses give the succession of phenomena, their vicissitude more or less constant, it does not follow that they explain this connection of phenomena with each other, much more intimate and profound, which is called the relation of cause and effect: they do not then explain the origin of the idea of cause. In regard to this I refer to Hume, who perfectly distinguished vicissitude, that is, succession from causation, and who clearly established that the latter cannot proceed from sensation.* This is already sufficient to ruin the theory of Locke on the origin of the idea of cause by sensation.

This is not all: not only is there in the human mind the idea of cause; not only do we believe ourselves to be the cause of our acts, and believe that certain bodies are the cause of the movements of certain others; but we judge in a general manner that

* Essay on the Human Understanding.

no phenomenon can begin to exist either in space or in time without having its cause. Here is something more than an idea, here a principle exists; and the principle is as incontestable as the idea. Imagine a movement, any change whatever: as soon as you conceive this change, this movement, you cannot avoid supposing that this change, that this movement, is made by virtue of some cause. It does not concern us to know what this cause is, what is its nature, how it has produced such a change: the only question is to know whether the human mind can conceive a change and a movement, without conceiving that it is produced by virtue of a cause. Hereon is founded the curiosity of man, who seeks the causes of all phenomena, and the legal action of society, which intervenes as soon as any phenomenon appears which interests it. An assassination, a murder, a theft, any phenomenon whatever which comes under the action of law, being given, an author is supposed, a thief, a murderer, an assassin, and investigation follows: these are all things which would not be done, if there were in the mind a veritable impossibility of not conceiving a cause where there is a phenomenon which begins to exist. Observe that I do not say that there is no effect without a cause; it is evident that this is a frivolous proposition, one term of which contains the other, and expresses the same idea in a different manner. The word effect being relative to the word cause, to say that effect supposes cause is to say no more than that effect is an effect. But we do not suppose an identical and frivolous proposition, when we affirm that every phenomenon which begins to exist has necessarily a cause. The two terms of this proposition do not reciprocally contain each other; the one is not the other, they are not identical, and nevertheless the mind places a necessary connection between them. This is what we call the principle of causality.

This principle is real, certain, incontestable. And what are its characters? First, it is universal. I ask if there is a savage, a child, an old man, a healthy man, a sick man, an idiot even, provided that he may not be completely an idiot, who, a phenomenon being given that begins to exist, does not immediately suppose a cause? Assuredly, if no phenomenon is given, if we have no idea of change, we do not suppose, we cannot suppose a cause; for, where no term is known, what relation can be seized? But it is a fact that in this instance, a single term being given, we suppose the other and their relation, and that universally; there is not a single case in which we do not judge thus. Moreover, not only do we judge thus in all cases, naturally and by the instinctive power of our understanding, but try to judge otherwise; try, a phenomenon being given to you, not to suppose a cause; you cannot do it: the principle is not only universal, it is necessary; whence I conclude that it cannot be derived from the senses. In fact, should it be granted that sensation may give the universal, it is evident that it cannot give the necessary; for the senses give what appears or even what is, such as it is or appears, such or such a phenomenon, with such or such an accidental character: but it is impossible that they should give what ought to be, the reason of a phenomenon, still less its necessary reason.

It is so true that it is not the senses and the exterior world that give us the principle of causality, that, without the intervention of this principle, the exterior world, from which Locke borrows it, would not exist for us. Suppose that a phenomenon may begin to appear in time or in space, without your necessarily seeking a cause; when the phenomenon of sensation appears under the eye of consciousness, not seeking a cause for this phenomenon, you would not seek any thing to which to refer it; you would stop at this phenomenon, that is, at a simple phenomenon of consciousness, that is again at a modification of yourself; you would not go out of yourself, you would not attain the exterior world. What is necessary in order that you may attain the exterior world and suspect its existence? It is necessary that, a sensation being given, you be compelled to ask yourself what is the cause of this new phenomenon, and that, in the double impossibility of referring this phenomenon to yourself, to the *me* that you are, and of not referring it to a cause, you

be compelled to refer it to a cause other than yourself, to a foreign cause, to an exterior cause. The idea of an external cause of our sensations, such is the fundamental idea of a without, of exterior objects, of bodies, and of the world.* I do not say that the world, bodies, exterior objects, are only the cause of our sensations; but I say that at first they are given to us as causes of our sensations, on this condition and by this title; afterwards, or at the same time, if you please, we add to this property of objects still other properties; but it is upon this that all those which we may afterwards know are founded. Take away the principle of causality, sensation reveals to us only its relation to the *me* which proves it, without revealing to us that which produces it, the *not me*, external objects, the world. It is often said, and philosophers themselves, with all others, say that the senses discover to us the world. They are right, if they simply mean that without the senses, without some previous sensation, the principle of causality would lack the basis for attaining exterior causes, so that we should never conceive the world: but we should deceive ourselves entirely if we understood that it is the sense itself which, directly and by its own force, without the intervention of reason and of any foreign principle, makes us know the exterior world. To know in general, to know whatever it may be, is beyond the reach of the senses. It is reason, and reason alone, which knows, and knows the world; and it knows it at first only under a title of cause; it is at first for us only the cause of sensitive phenomena which we cannot relate to ourselves: and we should not seek this cause, and consequently we should not find it, if our reason were not provided with the principle of causality, if we could suppose that a phenomenon may begin to appear on the theatre of consciousness, of time or of space, without a cause. Therefore, the principle of causality, I do not fear to say it, is the father of the exterior world, and it is as far as possible from drawing it from the world and making it come from

* First Series, Vol. 1, Course of 1817, Lect. 11, p. 294, and Vol. 4, Lect. 21. p. 425.

sensation. When we speak of exterior objects and of the world without previously admitting the principle of causality, either we do not know what we say, or we are guilty of a paralogism.

The result of all this is that, if there is any question concerning the idea of cause, we cannot find it in the succession of exterior and sensible phenomena; that succession is the condition of the conception of cause, its chronological antecedent, not its principle and its logical reason; and that if the question is not only of the idea of cause, but of the principle of causality, the principle of causality escapes still more the attempt to explain it by succession and sensation. In the first case, that of the idea of cause, Locke confounds the antecedent of an idea with that idea; and in the second case, that of the principle of causality, he produces from the phenomena of the exterior world precisely that without which there would be for us no outward, no world; he supposes that which is yet a matter of question, he no longer confounds the antecedent with the consequent, but the consequent with the antecedent, the consequence with its principle; for the principle of causality is the necessary foundation of even the most trivial knowledge of the world, of the feeblest suspicion of its existence; and to explain the principle of causality by the spectacle of the world, which the principle of causality can alone discover to us, is, once more, to explain the principle by its consequence. Now, the idea of cause, and the principle of causality, are incontestable facts in the human understanding; therefore the system of Locke, which is condemned to obtain in their place only the idea of succession, of constant succession, does not account for facts and does not explain the human understanding.

But is there nothing more in Locke on the great question of cause? Does Locke never assign to the idea of cause any other origin than sensation? Do not expect from our philosopher this perfect consistency. I have already told you, I shall very often repeat it, nothing is so inconsistent as Locke; in his *Essay* contradictions exist not only from book to book, but in the same book from chapter to chapter, and almost from paragraph to

paragraph. I have already read to you the positive passage from Book II. Chap. XXVI., in which Locke derives the idea of cause from sensation. Well, let us turn over a few pages, and we shall see him, forgetting both his assertion and the particular examples destined to justify it, conclude, to the great astonishment of the attentive reader, that the idea of cause comes no longer from sensation alone, but from sensation, or from reflection. *Ibid.*: "In which and all other cases, we may observe, that the notion of cause and effect has its rise from ideas, received by sensation *or* reflection; and that this relation, how comprehensible soever, terminates at last in them." This *or* is nothing less than a new theory: thus far Locke had not said a word concerning reflection; it is a manifest contradiction of the passage which I have cited to you. But is this contradiction thrown in here by chance, then abandoned and lost? Yes, in Chapter XXVI.: not in the entire work. Read another chapter of this same second book, Chapter XXI., on *power*. At bottom a chapter on power is a chapter on cause; for what is power, if not the power of producing something, that is, a cause?* To treat of power, then, is to treat of cause. Now, what is the origin of the idea of power, according to Locke, in the express chapter which he devotes to this investigation? As in Chapter XXVI., it is at the same time sensation and reflection.

Book II. Chap. XXI. *Of Power*, § 1. "*This idea how got.* The mind being every day informed, by the senses, of the alteration of those simple ideas it observes in things without, and taking notice how one comes to an end, and ceases to be, and another begins to exist which was not before: reflecting, also, on what passes within itself, and observing a constant change of its ideas, sometimes by the impression of outward objects on the senses, and sometimes by the determination of its own choice; and concluding from what it has so constantly observed to have been, that the like changes will for the future be made in the

* The famous Essay of Hume, on Cause, is entitled *Idea of Power*.

same things by like agents, and by the like ways; considers in one thing the possibility of having any of its simple ideas changed, and in another the possibility of making that change; and so comes by that idea which we call power."

Of these two origins, I have demonstrated that the first, sensation, is insufficient to explain the idea of cause, that is, of power. The second origin remains. But does this second origin precede, or does it follow the first? According to Locke, we derive the idea of cause both from sensation and from reflection; but from which do we draw it first? One of the eminent merits of Locke, as I have already designated to you, is that of having shown, in the question concerning time, that the first succession which reveals to us the idea of time, is not the succession of exterior events, but the succession of our thoughts. Here Locke equally says, that it is first from the interior and not from the exterior, in reflection, and not in sensation, that the idea of power is given to us. It is a manifest contradiction, I agree, with his official chapter on cause; but it is an honor to Locke to have seen and established, while contradicting himself, that it is in reflection, in the consciousness of our operations, that the first and most clear idea of cause is given to us. I wish to read this entire passage from Locke, because it shows a true talent for observation and a rare psychological sagacity.

Book II. Chap. XXI. § 4. "*The clearest idea of active power had from spirit.* We are abundantly furnished with the idea of passive power by almost all sorts of sensible things. In most of them we cannot avoid observing their sensible qualities, nay, their very substances, to be in a continual flux: and therefore with reason we look on them as liable still to the same change. Nor have we of active power (which is the more proper signification of the word power) fewer instances: since whatever change is observed, the mind must collect a power somewhere able to make that change, as well as a possibility in the thing itself to receive it. But yet, if we will consider it attentively, bodies, by our senses, do not afford us so clear and distinct an idea of active

power as we have from reflection on the operations of our minds For all power relating to action,—and there being but two sorts of action whereof we have any idea, viz., thinking and motion,—let us consider whence we have the clearest ideas of the powers which produce these actions. 1. Of thinking, body affords us no idea at all: it is only from reflection that we have that. 2. Neither have we from body any idea of the beginning of motion. A body at rest affords us no idea of any active power to move; and when it is set in motion itself, that motion is rather a passion than an action in it. For when the ball obeys the stroke of a billiard-stick, it is not any action of the ball, but bare passion: also, when by impulse it sets another ball in motion that lay in its way, it only communicates the motion it had received from another, and loses in itself so much as the other received: which gives us but a very obscure idea of an active power of moving in body, whilst we observe it only to transfer, but not produce, any motion. For it is but a very obscure idea of power, which reaches not the production of the action, but the continuation of the passion. For so is motion in a body impelled by another; the continuation of the alternation made in it from rest to motion being little more an action than the continuation of the alternation of its figure by the same blow, is an action. The idea of the beginning of motion we have only from reflection on what passes in ourselves, where we find by experience, that barely by willing it, barely by a thought of the mind, we can move the parts of our bodies which were before at rest. So that it seems to me, we have, from the observation of the operation of bodies by our senses, but a very imperfect, obscure idea of active power, since they afford us not any idea in themselves of the power to begin any action, either motion or thought."

Locke evidently feels that he has contradicted himself, and therefore adds: "But if from the impulse bodies are observed to make one upon another, any one thinks he has a clear idea of power, it serves as well to my purpose, sensation being one of those ways whereby the mind comes by its ideas: only I thought

it worth while to consider here, by the way, whether the mind doth not receive its idea of active power clearer from reflection on its own operations than it doth from any external sensation."

Now, this power of action, of which reflection gives us the distinct idea, which sensation alone cannot furnish, what is it? This power is that of the will.

Book II. Chap. XXI. § 5: "This at least I think evident, that we find in ourselves a power to begin or forbear, continue or end several actions of our minds, and motions of our bodies, barely by a thought or preference of the mind ordering, or, as it were, commanding the doing or not doing such or such a particular action. This power which the mind has thus to order the consideration of any idea, or the forbearing to consider it—or to prefer the motion of any part of the body to its rest, and *vice versa*, in any particular instance—is that which we call the *will*. The actual exercise of that power, by directing any particular action, or its forbearance, is that which we call *volition*, or willing. The forbearance of that action, consequent to such order or command of the mind, is called *voluntary*. And whatsoever action is performed without such a thought of the mind, is called *involuntary*."

Behold, then, the will considered as a power of action, as a productive power, and consequently as a cause. This is the germ of the beautiful theory of M. de Biran on the origin of the idea of cause. According to M. de Biran,* as well as according to Locke, the idea of cause is not given to us in the observation of exterior phenomena, which, considered solely with the senses, do not manifest to us any causative power and appear simply successive: it is given from within in the reflection, in the consciousness of our operations and of the power which produces them, to wit, the will. I make an effort to move my arm, and I move it. When we analyze attentively this phenomenon of the effort which M. de Biran considers as the type of the phenomena of the will, we find therein: 1st, the consciousness of a voluntary act; 2d, the consciousness of a movement produced;

* Works of M. de Biran, *passim*.