

An Essay Concerning Human Understanding

[Epistle to the Reader, I.1, II.1, II.23]

John Locke

1690

The Epistle to the Reader

[...]

It will possibly be censured as a great piece of vanity, or insolence in me, to pretend to instruct this our knowing age, it amounting to little less, when I own that I publish [this essay] with hopes it may be useful to others. But if it may be permitted to speak freely of those, who with a feigned modesty condemn as useless what they themselves write, methinks it savors much more of vanity or insolence, to publish a book for any other end; and he fails very much of that respect he owes the public, who prints, and consequently expects men should read that, wherein he intends not they should meet with anything of use to themselves or others: and should nothing else be found allowable in this treatise, yet my design will not cease to be so; and the goodness of my intention ought to be some excuse for the worthlessness of my present. 'Tis that chiefly which secures me from the fear of censure, which I expect not to escape more than better writers. Men's principles, notions, and relishes are so different, that it is hard to find a book which pleases or displeases all men. I acknowledge the age we live in, is not the least knowing, and therefore not the most easy to be satisfied; which if I have not the good luck to do, nobody yet ought to be offended with me. I plainly tell all my readers, except half a dozen, this treatise was not at first intended for them; and therefore they need not be at the trouble to be of that number. But yet if anyone thinks fit to be angry, and rail at it, he may do it securely: For I shall find some better way of spending my time, than in such kind of conversation. I shall always have the satisfaction to have aimed sincerely at truth and usefulness, though in one of the meanest ways. The commonwealth of learning, is not at this time without master-builders, whose mighty designs in advancing the sciences, will leave lasting monuments to the admiration of posterity; But everyone must not hope to be a Boyle, or a Sydenham; and in an age that produces such masters, as the great Huygenius, and the incomparable Mr. Newton, with some other of that strain; 'tis ambition enough to be employed as an under-laborer in clearing the ground a little, and removing some of the rubbish, that lies in the way to knowledge; which certainly had been very much more advanced in the world, if the endeavors of ingenious and industrious men had not been much cumbered with the learned but frivolous use of uncouth, affected, or unintelligible terms, introduced into the sciences, and there made an art of to that degree, that philosophy, which is nothing but the true knowledge of things, was thought unfit or incapable to be brought into well-bred company, and polite conversation. Vague and insignificant forms of speech, and abuse of language, have so long passed for mysteries of science: And hard or misapplied words, with little or no meaning, have, by prescription, such

a right to be mistaken for deep learning and height of speculation, that it will not be easy to persuade either those who speak, or those who hear them, that they are but the covers of ignorance, and hindrance of true knowledge. To break in upon this sanctuary of vanity and ignorance, will be, I suppose, some service to human understanding: Though so few are apt to think, they deceive, or are deceived in the use of words; or that the language of the sect they are of, has any faults in it, which ought to be examined or corrected, that I hope I shall be pardoned, if I have in the third book dwelt long on this subject; and endeavored to make it so plain, that neither the inveterateness of the mischief, nor the prevalency of the fashion, shall be any excuse for those, who will not take care about the meaning of their own words, and will not suffer the significancy of their expressions to be enquired into.

[...]

Introduction

Since it is the *understanding* that sets man above the rest of sensible beings, and gives him all the advantage and dominion, which he has over them; it is certainly a subject, even for its nobleness, worth our labor to enquire into. The understanding, like the eye, whilst it makes us see, and perceive all other things, takes no notice of itself: And it requires art and pains to set it at a distance, and make it its own object: But whatever be the difficulties, that lie in the way of this enquiry; whatever it be, that keeps us so much in the dark to ourselves; sure I am, that all the light we can let in upon our own minds; all the acquaintance we can make with our own understandings, will not only be very pleasant; but bring us great advantage, in directing our thoughts in the search of other things.

I.1.1

This, therefore, being my *purpose* to enquire into the original, certainty, and extent of human knowledge; together, with the grounds and degrees of belief, opinion, and assent; I shall not at present meddle with the physical consideration of the mind; or trouble my self to examine, wherein its essence consists, or by what motions of our spirits, or alterations of our bodies, we come to have any sensation 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: and I shall imagine I have not wholly misemployed my self in the thoughts I shall have

I.1.2

on this occasion, if, in this historical plain method, I can give any account of the ways, whereby our understandings come to attain those notions of things we have, and can set down any measures of the certainty of our knowledge, or the grounds of those persuasions, which are to be found amongst men, so various, different, and wholly contradictory; and yet asserted some where or other with such assurance, and confidence, that he that shall take a view of the opinions of mankind, observe their opposition, and at the same time, consider the fondness, and devotion wherewith they are embraced; the resolution, and eagerness, wherewith they are maintained, may perhaps have reason to suspect, that either there is no such thing as truth at all; or that mankind hath no sufficient means to attain a certain knowledge of it.

It is therefore worth while, to search out the *bounds* between opinion and knowledge; and examine by what measures, in things whereof we have no certain knowledge, we ought to regulate our assent, and moderate our persuasions. In order whereunto, I shall pursue this following method.

I.1.3

First, I shall enquire into the *original* of those ideas, notions, or whatever else you please to call them, which a man observes, and is conscious to himself he has in his mind; and the ways whereby the understanding comes to be furnished with them.

Secondly, I shall endeavour to show, what *knowledge* the understanding hath by those ideas; and the certainty, evidence, and extent of it.

Thirdly, I shall make some enquiry into the nature and grounds of *faith*, or *opinion*: whereby I mean that assent, which we give to any proposition as true, of whose truth yet we have no certain knowledge: And here we shall have occasion to examine the reasons and degrees of assent.

If by this enquiry into the nature of the understanding, I can discover the powers thereof; at *how far* they reach; to which 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 exceeding 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 an 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 view; how far it has faculties to attain certainty; and in what cases it can only judge and guess, we may learn to content our selves with what is attainable by us in this state.

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For though the *comprehension* of our understandings, comes exceeding short of the vast extent of things; yet, we shall have cause enough to magnify the bountiful author of our being, for that portion, and degree of knowledge, he has bestowed on us, so far above all the rest of the inhabitants of this our mansion. Men have reason to be well satisfied with what God hath thought fit for them, since he has given them (as St. Peter says), “everything . . . toward life and piety,”¹ whatsoever is necessary for the conveniences of life, and information of virtue; and has put within the reach of their discovery the provisions, that may support, or sweeten this life, and the way that leads to a better. How short soever their knowledge may come of a universal, or perfect comprehension of whatsoever is, it yet secures their great concernments, that they have light enough to lead them to the knowledge of their maker, and the discovery of their own duties. Men may find matter sufficient to busy their heads, and employ their hands with variety, delight, and satisfaction; if they will not boldly quarrel with their own constitution, and throw away the blessings their hands are filled with, because they are not big enough to grasp everything. We shall not have much reason to complain of the narrowness of our minds, if we will but employ them about what may be of use to us; for of that they are very capable: And it will be an unpardonable, as well as childish peevishness, if we undervalue the advantages of our knowledge, and neglect to improve it to the ends for which it was given us, because there are some things that are set out of the reach of it. It will be no excuse to an idle and untoward servant, who would not attend his business by candlelight, to plead that he had not broad sunshine. The candle, that is set up in us, shines bright enough for all our purposes. The discoveries we can make with this, ought to satisfy us: And we shall then use our understandings right, when we entertain all objects in that way and proportion, that they are suited to our faculties; and upon those grounds, they are capable of being proposed to us; and not peremptorily, or intemperately require demonstration, and demand certainty, where probability only is to be had, and which is sufficient to govern all our concernments. If we will disbelieve everything, because we cannot certainly know all things; we shall do much-worse as wisely as he, who would not use his legs, but sit still and perish, because he had no wings to fly.

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 anything; nor on the other side question everything, and disclaim all knowledge, because some things are not to be understood. 'Tis 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. 'Tis well he

¹2 Peter 1:3; originally quoted in Greek.

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. Our business here is not to know all things, but those which concern our conduct. If we can find out those measures, whereby a rational creature put in that state, which man is in, in this world, may, and ought to govern his opinions and actions depending thereon, we need not be troubled, that some other things scape our knowledge.

This was that which gave the first *rise* to this essay concerning the understanding. For I thought that the first step towards satisfying several enquiries, the mind of man was very apt to run into, was, to take a survey of our own understandings, examine our own powers, and see to what things they were adapted. Till that was done, I suspected we began at the wrong end, and in vain sought for satisfaction in a quiet and secure possession of truths, that most concerned us, whilst we let loose our thoughts into the vast ocean of *being*, as if all that boundless extent, were the natural, and undoubted possession of our understandings, wherein there was nothing exempt from its decisions, or that escaped its comprehension. Thus men, extending their enquiries beyond their capacities, and letting their thoughts wander into those depths, where they can find no sure footing; 'tis no wonder, that they raise questions, and multiply disputes, which never coming to any clear resolution, are proper only to continue and increase their doubts, and to confirm them at last in perfect scepticism. Whereas were the capacities of our understandings well considered, the extent of our knowledge once discovered, and the horizon found, which sets the bounds between the enlightened and dark parts of things; between what is, and what is not comprehensible by us, men would perhaps with less scruple acquiesce in the avowed ignorance of the one, and employ their thoughts and discourse, with more advantage and satisfaction in the other.

I.1.7

Thus much I thought necessary to say concerning the occasion of this enquiry into human understanding. But, before I proceed on to what I have thought on this subject, I must here in the entrance beg pardon of my reader, for the frequent use of the word *idea*, which he will find in the following treatise. It being that term, which, I think, serves best to stand for whatsoever is the object of the understanding when a man thinks, I have used it to express whatever is meant by phantasm, notion, species, or whatever it is, which the mind can be employed about in thinking; and I could not avoid frequently using it.

I.1.8

I presume it will be easily granted me, that there are such ideas in men's minds; everyone is conscious of them in himself, and a man's words and actions will satisfy him, that they are in others.

Our first enquiry then shall be how they come into the mind.

Of Ideas in General, and their Original

Every man being conscious to himself, that he thinks, and that which his mind is employed about whilst thinking, being the ideas, that are there, 'tis past doubt, than men have in their minds several ideas, such as are those expressed by the words, *whiteness, hardness, sweetness, thinking, motion, man, elephant, army, drunkenness*, and others: It is in the first place then to be enquired, how he comes by them. I know it is a received doctrine, that men have native ideas, and original characters stamped upon their minds, in their very first being. This opinion I have at large examined already; and, I suppose, what I have said in the foregoing book, will be much more easily admitted, when I have showed, whence the understanding may get all the ideas it has, and by what ways and degrees they may come into the mind; for which I shall appeal to everyones own observation and experience.

II.1.1

Let us then suppose 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. 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.

II.1.2

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 thus we come by those ideas, we have of *yellow, white, heat, cold, soft, hard, bitter, sweet*, and all those which we call sensible qualities. This great source, of most of the ideas we have, depending wholly upon our senses, and derived by them to our understanding, I call SENSATION.

II.1.3

Secondly, the other fountain, from which experience furnisheth the understanding with ideas, is the *perception of the operations of our own minds* 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 understanding, 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

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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 own 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.

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 produced 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, and the compositions made out of them, 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. Let anyone examine his own thoughts, and thoroughly search into his understanding, and then let him tell me, whether all the original ideas he has there, are any other than of the objects of his *senses*, or of the operations of his mind, considered as objects of his *reflection*: and how great a mass of knowledge soever he imagines to be lodged there, he will, upon taking a strict view, see that he has *not any idea in his mind, but what one of those two have imprinted*; though, perhaps, with infinite variety compounded and enlarged, by the understanding, as we shall see hereafter.

II.1.5

He that attentively considers the state of a *child*, at his first coming into the world, will have little reason to think him stored with plenty of ideas, that are to be the matter of his future knowledge. 'Tis by degrees he comes to be furnished with them: And though the ideas of obvious and familiar qualities, imprint themselves, before the memory begins to keep a register of time and order, yet 'tis often so late before some unusual qualities come in the way, that there are few men that cannot recollect the beginning of their acquaintance with them: And if it were worthwhile, no doubt a child might be so ordered, as to have but a very few, even of the ordinary ideas, till he were grown up to a man. But being surrounded with bodies, that perpetually and diversely affect us, variety of ideas, whether care be taken about it, or no, are imprinted on the minds of children. *Light*, and *colors*, are busy and at

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hand everywhere, when the eye is but open; *sounds*, and some *tangible qualities*, fail not to solicit their proper senses, and force an entrance to the mind; but yet, I think, it will be granted easily, that if a child were kept in a place, where he never saw any other but black and white, till he were a man, he would have no more ideas of scarlet or green, than he that from his childhood never tasted an oyster, or a pineapple, has of those particular relishes.

Men then come to be furnished, with fewer or more simple ideas from without, according as the *objects*, they converse with afford greater or lesser variety; and from the operation of their minds within, according as they more or less *reflect* on them. For, though he that contemplates the operations of his mind, cannot but have plain and clear ideas of them; yet unless he turn his thoughts that way, and considers them *attentively*, he will no more have clear and distinct ideas of all the *operations of his mind*, and all that may be observed therein, than he will have all the particular ideas of any landscape, or of the parts and motions of a clock, who will not turn his eyes to it, and with attention heed all the parts of it. The picture, or clock may be so placed, that they may come in his way every day; but yet he will have but a confused idea of all the parts they are made up of, till he *applies himself with attention*, to consider them each in particular.

II.1.7

And hence we see the reason, why 'tis pretty late before most children get ideas of the operations of their own minds; and some have not any very clear, or perfect ideas of the greatest part of them all their lives. Because, though they pass there continually; yet like floating visions, they make not deep impressions enough, to leave in the mind clear and distinct, lasting ideas, till the understanding turn inwards upon itself, and *reflect* on its own *operations*, and make them the object of its own contemplation. Whereas children at their first coming into the world, seek particularly after nothing, but what may ease their hunger, or other pain: but take all other objects as they come, are generally pleased with all new ones, that are not painful; and so growing up in a constant attention to outward sensations, seldom make any considerable reflection on what passes within them, till they come to be of riper years; and some scarce ever at all.

II.1.8

To ask, *at what time a man has first any ideas*, is to ask, when he begins to perceive, having ideas and perception being the same thing. I know it is an opinion, that the soul always thinks, and that it has the actual perception of ideas in itself constantly, as long as it exists; and that actual thinking is as inseparable from the soul, as actual extension is from the body; which if true, to enquire after the beginning of a man's ideas, is the same, as to enquire after the beginning of his soul. For by this account, soul and ideas, as body and extension, will begin to exist both at the same time.

II.1.9

But whether the soul be supposed to exist antecedent to, or coeval with, or some time after the first rudiments of organization, or the beginnings of life in the body, I leave to be disputed by those, who have better thought of that matter. I confess myself, to have one of those dull souls, that doth not perceive it self always to contemplate its ideas, nor can conceive it any more necessary for the *soul always to think*, than for the body always to move: the perception of ideas, being (as I conceive) to the soul, what motion is to the body, not its essence, but operation: And therefore, though thinking be supposed never so much the proper Action of the soul; yet it is not necessary, to suppose, that it should be always thinking, always in action. That, perhaps, is the privilege of the infinite author and preserver of all things, *who never slumbers nor sleeps*; but is not competent to any finite being, at least not to the soul of man. We know certainly by experience, that we sometimes think, and thence draw this infallible consequence, that there is something in us, that has a power to think: But whether that substance perpetually thinks, or no, we can be no farther assured, than experience informs us. For to say, that actual thinking is essential to the soul, and inseparable from it, is, to beg what is in question, and not to prove it by reasons; which is necessary to be done, if it be not a self-evident proposition. But whether this, that the soul always thinks, be a self-evident proposition, that every body assents to at first hearing, I appeal to mankind.

II.1.10

I grant that the soul in a waking man is never without thought, because it is the condition of being awake: But whether sleeping without dreaming be not an affection of the whole man, mind as well as body, may be worth a waking man's consideration; it being hard to conceive, that any thing should think, and not be conscious of it. If the *soul doth think in a sleeping man*, without being conscious of it, I ask, whether, during such thinking, it has any pleasure or pain, or be capable of happiness or misery? I am sure the man is not, no more than the bed or earth he lies on. For to be happy or miserable without being conscious of it, seems to me utterly inconsistent and impossible. Or if it be possible, that the soul can, whilst the body is sleeping, have its thinking, enjoyments, and concerns; its pleasure or pain apart, which the man is not conscious of, nor partakes in, it is certain, that Socrates asleep, and Socrates awake, is not the same person; but his soul when he sleeps, and Socrates the man consisting of body and soul when he is waking, are two persons: Since waking Socrates, has no knowledge of, or concernment for that happiness, or misery of his soul, which it enjoys alone by itself whilst he sleeps, without perceiving any thing of it, no more than he has for the happiness, or misery of a man in the Indies, whom he knows not. For if we take wholly away all consciousness of our actions and sensations, especially of pleasure and pain, and the concernment that accompanies it, it will be hard to know wherein to place personal identity.

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[...]

I see no reason therefore to believe, that the *soul thinks before the senses have furnished it with ideas* to think on; and as those are increased, and retained; so it comes, by exercise, to improve its faculty of thinking in the several parts of it, as well as afterwards, by compounding those ideas, and reflecting on its own operations, it increases its stock as well as facility, in remembering, imagining, reasoning, and other modes of thinking.

II.1.20

He that will suffer himself, to be informed by observation and experience, and not make his own hypothesis the rule of nature, will find few signs of a soul accustomed to much thinking in a newborn child, and much fewer of any reasoning at all. And yet it is hard to imagine, that the rational soul should think so much, and not reason at all. And he that will consider, that infants, newly come into the world, spend the greatest part of their time in sleep, and are seldom awake, but when either hunger calls for the teat, or some pain, (the most importunate of all sensations) or some other violent idea, forces the mind to perceive, and attend to it, he, I say, who considers this, will, perhaps, find reason to imagine, that *a foetus in the mother's womb, differs not much from the state of a vegetable*; but passes the greatest part of its time without perception or thought, doing very little, but sleep in a place, where it needs not seek for food, and is surrounded with liquor, always equally soft, and near of the same temper; where the eyes have no light, and the ears, so shut up, are not very susceptible of sounds; and where there is little or no variety, or change of objects to move the senses.

II.1.21

Follow *a child* from its birth, and observe the alterations that time makes; and you shall find, as the mind by the senses comes more and more to be furnished with ideas, it comes to be more and more awake; thinks more, the more it has matter to think on. After some time, it begins to know the objects, which being most familiar with it, have made lasting impressions. Thus it comes, by degrees, to know the persons it daily converses with, and distinguish them from strangers; which are instances and effects of its coming to retain and distinguish the ideas the senses convey to it: And so we may observe, how the mind, *by degrees*, improves in these, and *advances* to the exercise of those other faculties of *enlarging, compounding, and abstracting* its ideas, and of reasoning about them, and reflecting upon all these, of which, I shall have occasion to speak more hereafter.

II.1.22

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*. For since there appear not to be any ideas in the mind, before the senses have conveyed any in, I conceive that ideas in the understanding, are coeval with *sensation*; which is such an impression or motion,

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made in some part of the body, as makes it be taken notice of in the understanding.

The *impressions* then, that are made on our *senses* by outward objects, that are extrinsical to the mind, and *its own operations*, about these impressions *reflected* on by itself, as proper objects to be contemplated by it, *are*, I conceive, *the original of all knowledge*; and the first capacity of human intellect, is, that the mind is fitted to receive the impressions made on it; either, through the *senses*, by outward objects; or by its own operations, when it *reflects* on them. This is the first step a man makes towards the discovery of anything, and the groundwork, whereon to build all those notions, which ever he shall have naturally in this world. All those sublime thoughts, which tower above the clouds, and reach as high as heaven itself, take their rise and footing here: In all that great extent wherein the mind wanders, in those remote speculations, it may seem to be elevated with, it stirs not one jot beyond those ideas, which *sense* or *reflection*, have offered for its contemplation.

II.1.24

In this part, the *understanding* is merely *passive*; and whether or no, it will have these beginnings, and as it were materials of knowledge, is not in its own power. For the objects of our senses, do, many of them, obtrude their particular ideas upon our minds, whether we will or no: And the operations of our minds, will not let us be without, at least some obscure notions of them. No man, can be wholly ignorant of what he does, when he thinks. These *simple ideas*, when offered to the mind, *the understanding can* no more refuse to have, nor alter, when they are imprinted, nor blot them out, and make new ones in it self, than a mirror can refuse, alter, or obliterate the images or ideas, which the objects set before it do therein produce. As the bodies that surround us, do diversely affect our organs, the mind is forced to receive the impressions; and cannot avoid the perception of those ideas, that are annexed to them.

II.1.25

Of Our Complex Ideas of Substance

The mind being, as I have declared, furnished with a great number of the simple ideas, conveyed in by the *senses*, as they are found in exterior things, or by *reflection* on its own operations, takes notice also, that a certain number of these simple ideas go constantly together; which being presumed to belong to one thing, and, words being suited to common apprehensions, and made use of for quick dispatch, are called so united in one subject, by one name; which by inadvertency we are apt afterward to talk of and consider as one single idea, which indeed is a complication of many ideas together: Because, as I have said, not imagining how these simple ideas can subsist by themselves, we accustom ourselves, to suppose some *substratum*, wherein they do subsist, and from which they do result, which therefore we call *substance*.

II.23.1

So that if anyone will examine himself concerning his *notion of pure substance in general*, he will find he has no other idea of it at all, but only a supposition of he knows not what support of such qualities, which are capable of producing simple ideas in us; which qualities are commonly called accidents: And if anyone should be asked, what is the subject wherein color or weight inheres, he would have nothing to say, but the solid extended parts: And if he were demanded, what is it, that that solidity and extension inhere in, he would not be in a much better case, than the Indian before mentioned; who saying that the world was supported by a great elephant, was asked, what the elephant rested on; to which his answer was, a great tortoise: But being again pressed to know what gave support to the broad-backed tortoise, replied, something, he knew not what. And thus here, as in all other cases, where we use words without having clear and distinct ideas, we talk like children; who being questioned, what such a thing is, which they know not; readily give this satisfactory answer, that is something; which in truth signifies no more when so used, either by children or men, but that they knew not what; and that the thing they pretend to know, and talk of, is what they have no distinct idea of at all, and so are perfectly ignorant of it and in the dark. The idea then we have, to which we give the general name substance, being nothing, but the supposed, but unknown support of those qualities we find existing, which we imagine cannot subsist, *sine re substante*, without something to support them, we call that support *substantia*; which according to the true import of the word is, in plain English, standing under, or upholding.

An obscure and relative idea of substance in general being thus made, we come to have the *ideas of particular sorts of substances*, by collecting such combinations of simple ideas, as are by experience and observation of men's senses taken notice of to exist together, and are therefore supposed to flow from the particular internal constitution, or unknown essence of that substance. Thus we come to have the ideas of a man, horse, gold, water, etc. of which substances, whether anyone has any other clear idea, farther than of certain simple ideas coexisting together, I appeal to everyone's own experience. 'Tis the ordinary qualities, observable in iron, or a diamond, put together, that make the true complex idea of those substances, which a smith, or a jeweller, commonly knows better than a philosopher; who, whatever substantial forms he may talk of, has no other idea of those substances, than what is framed by a collection of those simple ideas are to be found in them; only we must take notice, that our complex ideas of substances, besides all these simple ideas they are made up of, have always the confused idea of something to which they belong, and in which they subsist: and therefore when we speak of any sort of substance, we say it is a thing having such or such qualities, as body is a thing that is extended,

figured, and capable of motion; a spirit a thing capable of thinking: and so hardness, friability, and power to draw iron, we say, are qualities to be found in a loadstone. These and, the like fashions of speaking intimate, that the substance is supposed always something besides the extension, figure, solidity, motion, thinking, or other observable ideas, though we know not what it is.

Hence when we talk or think of any particular sort of corporeal substances, as horse, stone, etc. though the idea, we have of either of them, be put the complication, or collection, of those several simple ideas of sensible qualities, which we use to find united in the thing called horse, or stone, yet because we cannot conceive, how they should subsist alone, nor one in another, we suppose them to exist in, and supported by some common subject; *which support we denote by the name substance*, though it be certain, we have no clear, or distinct idea of that thing, we suppose a support.

II.23.4

The same happens concerning the operations of the mind, viz. thinking, reasoning, fearing, etc. which we concluding not to subsist of themselves, nor apprehending how they can belong to body, or be produced by it, we are apt to think these the actions of some other substance, which we call spirit; whereby yet it is evident, that having no other idea or notion, of matter, but something wherein those many sensible qualities, which affect our senses, do subsist; by supposing a substance, wherein *thinking, knowing, doubting*, and a power of moving, etc. do subsist, *we have as clear a notion of the nature, or substance of spirit, as we have of body*; the one being supposed to be (without knowing what it is) the *substratum* to those simple ideas we have from without; and the other supposed (with a like ignorance of what it is) to be the *substratum* to those operations, which we experiment in ourselves within. 'Tis plain then, that the idea of corporeal substance in matter is as remote from our conceptions, and apprehensions, as that of spiritual substance, or spirit: and therefore from our not having any notion of the substance of spirit, we can no more conclude its non-existence, than we can, for the same reason, deny the existence of body: It being as rational to affirm, there is no body, because we cannot know its essence, as 'tis called, or have no idea of the substance of matter; as to say, there is no spirit, because we know not its essence, or have no idea of a spiritual substance.

II.23.5

Whatever therefore be the secret and abstract nature of substance in general, all *the ideas we have of particular distinct substances*, are nothing but several combinations of simple ideas, coexisting in such, though unknown, cause of their union, as makes the whole subsist of itself. 'Tis by such combinations of simple ideas, and nothing else, that we represent particular substances to ourselves; such are the ideas we have of their several sorts in our minds; and such only do we by their specific names, signify to others, e.g. man, horse, sun, water, iron, upon hearing which words, everyone who understands the language, frames in his mind a combination of those

II.23.6

several simple ideas, which he has usually observed, or fancied to exist together under that denomination; all which he supposes to rest in, and be, as it were, adherent to that unknown common subject, which inheres not in any thing else: Though in the mean time it be manifest, and everyone, upon enquiry into his own thoughts, will find, that he has no other idea of any substance, e.g. let it be gold, horse, iron, man, vitriol, bread, but what he has barely of those sensible qualities, which he supposes to inhere with a supposition of such a substratum, as gives as it were a support to those qualities, or simple ideas, which he has observed to exist united together. Thus the idea of sun, what is it, but an aggregate of these several simple ideas, bright, hot, roundish, having a constant regular motion, at a certain distance from us, and, perhaps, some other? As he who thinks and discourses of the sun, has been more or less accurate, in observing those sensible qualities, ideas, or properties, which are in that thing, which he calls the sun.

[...]

Excerpts and modernized text by [Trevor Pearce](#).

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