

Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man

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1785

ESSAY II—OF THE POWERS WE HAVE BY MEANS OF OUR EXTERNAL SENSES.

CHAPTER XVI.

OF SENSATION.

HAVING finished what I intend, with regard to that act of mind which we call the perception of an external object. I proceed to consider another, which, by our constitution, is conjoined with perception, and not with perception only, but with many other acts of our minds; and that is sensation. To prevent repetition, I must refer the reader to the explication of this word given in Essay I. chap. I.

Almost all our perceptions have corresponding sensations which constantly accompany them, and, on that account, are very apt to be confounded with them. Neither ought we to expect, that the sensation, and its corresponding perception, should be distinguished in common language, because the purposes of common life do not require it. Language is made to serve the purposes of ordinary conversation; and we have no reason to expect that it should make distinctions that are not of common use. Hence it happens, that a quality perceived, and the sensation corresponding to that perception, often go under the same name.

This makes the names of most of our sensations ambiguous. and this ambiguity hath very much perplexed Philosophers. It will be necessary to give some instances, to illustrate the distinction between our sensations and the objects of perception.

When I smell a rose, there is in this operation both sensation and perception. The agreeable odour I feel, considered by itself, without relation to any external object, is merely a sensation. It affects the mind in a certain way; and this affection of the mind [227] may be conceived, without a thought of the rose, or any other object. This sensation can be nothing else than it is felt to be. Its very essence consists in being felt, and when it is not felt, it is not. There is no difference between the sensation and the feeling of it; they are one and the same thing. It is for this reason, that we before observed, that, in sensation, there is

no object distinct from that act of the mind by which it is felt; and this holds true with regard to all sensations.

Let us next attend to the perception which we have in smelling a rose. Perception has always an external object; and the object of my perception, in this case, is that quality in the rose which I discern by the sense of smell. Observing that the agreeable sensation is raised when the rose is near, and ceases when it is removed, I am led, by my nature, to conclude some quality to be in the rose, which is the cause of this sensation. This quality in the rose is the object perceived; and that act of my mind, by which I have the conviction and belief of this quality, is what in this case I call perception.

But it is here to be observed, that the sensation I feel, and the quality in the rose which I perceive, are both called by the same name. The smell of a rose is the name given to both: So that this name hath two meanings; and the distinguishing its different meanings removes all perplexity, and enables us to give clear and distinct answers to questions, about which Philosophers have held much dispute.

Thus, if it is asked, Whether the smell be in the rose, or in the mind that feels it? The answer is obvious: That there are two different things signified by the smell of a rose; one of which is in the mind, and can be in nothing but in a sentient being; the other is truly and properly in the rose. The sensation which I feel is in my mind. The mind is the sentient being; and as the rose is insentient, there can be no sensation, nor any thing resembling [228] sensation in it. But this sensation in my mind is occasioned by a certain quality in the rose, which is called by the same name with the sensation, not on account of any similitude, but because of their constant concomitancy.

All the names we have for smells, tastes, sounds, and for the various degrees of heat and cold, have a like ambiguity; and what has been said of the smell of a rose may be applied to them. They signify both a sensation, and a quality perceived by means of that sensation. The first is the sign, the last the thing signified. As both are conjoined by nature, and as the purposes of common life do not require them to be disjoined in our thoughts, they are both expressed by the same name: And this ambiguity is to be found in all languages, because the reason of it extends to all.

The same ambiguity is found in the names of such diseases as are indicated by a particular painful sensation: Such as the toothach, the headach. The toothach signifies a painful sensation, which can only be in a sentient being; but it signifies also a disorder in the body, which has no similitude to a sensation, but is naturally connected with it.

Pressing my hand with force against the table, I feel pain, and I feel the table to be hard. The pain is a sensation of the mind, and there is nothing that resembles it in the table. The hardness is in the table, nor is there any thing resembling it in the mind. Feeling is applied to both; but in a different sense; being a word common to the act of sensation, and to that of perceiving by the sense of touch.

I touch the table gently with my hand, and I feel it to be smooth, hard, and cold. These are qualities of the table perceived by touch; but I perceive

them by means of a sensation which indicates them. This sensation not being painful, I commonly give no attention to it. It carries my thought immediately [229] to the thing signified by it, and is itself forgot, as if it had never been. But by repeating it, and turning my attention to it, and abstracting my thought from the thing signified by it. I find it to be merely a sensation, and that it has no similitude to the hardness, smoothness, or coldness of the table which are signified by it.

It is indeed difficult, at first, to disjoin things in our attention which have always been conjoined, and to make that an object of reflection which never was so before; but some pains and practice will overcome this difficulty in those who have got the habit of reflecting on the operations of their own minds.

Although the present subject leads us only to consider the sensations which we have by means of our external senses, yet it will serve to illustrate what has been said, and I apprehend is of importance in itself to observe, that many operations of mind, to which we give one name, and which we always consider as one thing, are complex in their nature, and made up of several more simple ingredients; and of these ingredients sensation very often makes one. Of this we shall give some instances.

The appetite of hunger includes an uneasy sensation, and a desire of food. Sensation and desire are different acts of mind. The last, from its nature, must have an object; the first has no object. These two ingredients may always be separated in thought; perhaps they sometimes are, in reality; but hunger includes both.

Benevolence towards our fellow-creatures includes an agreeable feeling; but it includes also a desire of the happiness of others. The ancients commonly called it desire: Many moderns chuse rather to call it a feeling. Both are right; and they only err who exclude either of the ingredients. Whether these two ingredients are necessarily connected, is perhaps difficult for us to de[230]termine, there being many necessary connections which we do not perceive to be necessary; but we can disjoin them in thought. They are different acts of the mind.

An uneasy feeling, and a desire, are in like manner the ingredients of malevolent affections; such as malice, envy, revenge. The passion of fear includes an uneasy sensation or feeling, and an opinion of danger; and hope is made up of the contrary ingredients. When we hear of a heroic action, the sentiment which it raises in our mind is made up of various ingredients. There is in it an agreeable feeling, a benevolent affection to the person, and a judgment or opinion of his merit.

If we thus analyse the various operations of our minds, we shall find, that many of them which we consider as perfectly simple, because we have been accustomed to call them by one name, are compounded of more simple ingredients; and that sensation, or feeling which is only a more refined kind of sensation, makes one ingredient, not only in the perception of external objects, but in most operations of the mind.

A small degree of reflection may satisfy us that the number and variety of our sensations and feelings is prodigious: For, to omit all those which accompany our appetites, passions, and affections, our moral sentiments, and sentiments of

taste, even our external senses furnish a great variety of sensations differing in kind, and almost in every kind an endless variety of degrees. Every variety we discern, with regard to taste, smell, sound, colour, heat and cold, and in the tangible qualities of bodies, is indicated by a sensation corresponding to it.

The most general and the most important division of our sensations and feelings, is into the agreeable, the disagreeable, and the indifferent. Every thing we call pleasure, happiness, or enjoyment, on the one hand; and on the other, every thing we call misery, [231] pain, or uneasiness, is sensation or feeling: For no man can for the present be more happy, or more miserable than he feels himself to be. He cannot be deceived with regard to the enjoyment or suffering of the present moment.

But I apprehend, that besides the sensations that are either agreeable or disagreeable, there is still a greater number that are indifferent. To these we give so little attention that they have no name, and are immediately forgot as if they had never been; and it requires attention to the operations of our minds to be convinced of their existence.

For this end we may observe, that to a good ear every human voice is distinguishable from all others. Some voices are pleasant, some disagreeable; but the far greater part can neither be said to be one or the other. The same thing may be said of other sounds, and no less of tastes, smells, and colours; and if we consider that our senses are in continual exercise while we are awake, that some sensation attends every object they present to us, and that familiar objects seldom raise any emotion pleasant or painful; we shall see reason, besides the agreeable and disagreeable, to admit a third class of sensations that may be called indifferent.

The sensations that are indifferent, are far from being useless. They serve as signs to distinguish things that differ; and the information we have concerning things external, comes by their means. Thus, if a man had no ear to receive pleasure from the harmony or melody of sounds, he would still find the sense of hearing of great utility: Though sounds give him neither pleasure nor pain of themselves, they would Live him much useful information; and the like may be said of the sensations we have by all the other senses.

As to the sensations and feelings that are agreeable or disagreeable, they differ much not only in degree, but in kind and in dig[232]nity. Some belong to the animal part of our nature, and are common to us with the brutes: Others belong to the rational and moral part. The first are more properly called *sensations*, the last *feelings*. The French word *sentiment* is common to both.

The intention of Nature in them is for the most part obvious, and well deserving our notice. It has been beautifully illustrated by a very elegant French writer, in his *Theorie des sentiments agreables*.

The author of Nature, in the distribution of agreeable and painful feelings, hath wisely and benevolently consulted the good of the human species, and hath even shown us, by the same means, what tenor of conduct we ought to hold. For, *first*, The painful sensations of the animal kind are admonitions to avoid what would hurt us; and the agreeable sensations of this kind, invite us to those actions that are necessary to the preservation of the individual, or of

the kind. *Secondly*, By the same means nature invites us to moderate bodily exercise, and admonishes us to avoid idleness and inactivity on the one hand, and excessive labour and fatigue on the other. *Thirdly*, The moderate exercise of all our rational powers gives pleasure. *Fourthly*, Every species of beauty is beheld with pleasure, and every species of deformity with disgust; and we shall find all that we call beautiful, to be something estimable or useful in itself, or a sign of something that is estimable or useful. *Fifthly*, The benevolent affections are all accompanied with an agreeable feeling, the malevolent with the contrary. And, *sixthly*, The highest, the noblest, and most durable pleasure, is that of doing well, and acting the part that becomes us; and the most bitter and painful sentiment, the anguish and remorse of a guilty conscience. These observations. with regard to the economy of Nature in the distribution of our painful and agreeable sensations and feelings, are illustrated by the author last mentioned so elegantly and judiciously, that I shall not attempt to say any thing upon them after him. [233]

I shall conclude this chapter by observing. that as the confounding our sensations with that perception of external objects, which is constantly conjoined with them, has been the occasion of most of the errors and false theories of Philosophers with regard to the senses; so the distinguishing these operations seems to me to be the key that leads to a right understanding of both.

Sensation, taken by itself, implies neither the conception nor belief of any external object. It supposes a sentient being, and a certain manner in which that being is affected, but it supposes no more. Perception implies an immediate conviction and belief of something external, something different both from the mind that perceives, and from the act of perception. Things so different in their nature ought to be distinguished; but by our constitution they are always united. Every different perception is conjoined with a sensation that is proper to it. The one's the sign, the other the thing signified. They coalesce in our imagination. They are signified by one name, and are considered as one simple operation. The purposes of life do not require them to be distinguished.

It is the Philosopher alone who has occasion to distinguish them, when he would analyse the operation compounded of them. But he has no suspicion that there is any composition in it, and to discover this requires a degree of reflection which has been too little practised even by Philosophers.

In the old philosophy, sensation and perception were perfectly confounded. The sensible species coming from the object, and impressed upon the mind, was the whole; and you might call it sensation or perception as you pleased.

DES CARTES and LOCKE, attending more to the operations of their own minds, say, That the sensations by which we have notice of secondary qualities, have no resemblance to any thing that pertains to body; but they did not see that this might with equal [234] justice be applied to the primary qualities. Mr LOCKE maintains, that the sensations we have from primary qualities are resemblances of those qualities. This shows how grossly the most ingenious men may err with regard to the operations of their minds. It must indeed be acknowledged, that it is much easier to have a distinct notion of the sensations that belong to secondary, than of those that belong to the primary qualities.

The reason of this will appear in the next chapter.

But had Mr LOCKE attended with sufficient accuracy to the sensations which he was every day and every hour receiving from primary qualities, he would have seen that they can as little resemble any quality of an inanimated being, as pain can resemble a cube or a circle.

What had escaped this ingenious Philosopher, was clearly discerned by Bishop BERKELEY. He had a just notion of sensations, and saw that it was impossible that any thing in an insentient being could resemble them; a thing so evident in itself, that it seems wonderful that it should have been so long unknown.

But let us attend to the consequence of this discovery. Philosophers, as well as the vulgar, had been accustomed to comprehend both sensation and perception under one name, and to consider them as one uncompounded operation. Philosophers, even more than the vulgar, gave the name of sensation to the whole operation of the senses; and all the notions we have of material things were called ideas of sensation. This led Bishop BERKELEY to take one ingredient of a complex operation for the whole; and having clearly discovered the nature of sensation, taking it for granted that all that the senses present to the mind is sensation, which can have no resemblance to any thing material, he concluded that there is no material world.

If the senses furnished us with no materials of thought but sensations, his conclusion must be just; for no sensation can give us the conception of material things, far less any argument to prove their existence. But if it is true that by our senses we have not only a variety of sensations, but likewise a conception, and an immediate natural conviction of external objects, he reasons from a false supposition, and his arguments fall to the ground.