

Treatise on the Sensations

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One of Locke's principal disciples was Condillac (1714-1780), a free-thinking French abbe, who popularized Locke's conviction that all processes of the mind could be broken down into original units of sensation. This extract is the conclusion of his 1784 book, Treatise on Sensations, in which Condillac depicts a lifeless statue gradually acquiring the human "senses" of smell, taste, et cetera, one by one.

It is impossible for me to apply all the suppositions I have made; but those I have instanced prove at least that all our cognitions come from the senses, and particularly from touch, because touch is the sense which instructs all the others. If in allowing my statue sensations alone it has acquired from them particular and general ideas, and has rendered itself capable of all the operations of the understanding; if it has formed desires and passions which it obeys or resists; finally, if pleasure and pain are the unique principle of the development of its faculties, it is reasonable to conclude that we too at first had only sensations, and that our cognitions and our passions are the effect of the pleasures and the pains which accompany the impressions of the senses.

In fact the more I reflect on it, the more convinced I am that this is the sole source of our enlightenment and of our feelings. Consider enlightenment, as soon as we receive it we enjoy a new life, quite different from that which our brute sensations procured for us, if I may so express it. Consider feeling, observe it especially when it is increased by all the judgments we confuse with sense impressions, these sensations, then, which at first only gave us few and coarse pleasures, cause in us the most delicate pleasures, and these follow one another with astonishing variety. So the farther we get from the original sensations the more our life expands and is varied. It will extend to so many things, that we shall with difficulty understand how all our faculties can have one common principle in sensation.

When we have regard only to sensations devoid of judgments the life of one man is hardly different from that of another. The difference will be only in the degree of the liveliness of their feeling. Experience and reflexion will be for them what the chisel is in the hands of the sculptor who discovers a perfect statue in the formless stone, for according to the way in which experience and reflexion are

used new enlightenment and new pleasures will emerge from sensations. In some cases the material will remain rough and unpolished, in others it will become the finished work. Considering the difference between one man and another, we are surprised to see how with the same duration some men enjoy more life than others. For to live is to enjoy, and life is much longer for him who knows how to multiply the objects of his enjoyment.

We have seen that enjoyment may begin with the first pleasurable sensation. For example, the first time we endowed our statue with sight, it had enjoyment in the fact that its eyes were no longer sealed in darkness. We must not, however, judge its pleasures by our own. Many sensations may be indifferent or even disagreeable to us if we are tired of them or desire livelier ones. Quite different is the statue's situation. It may be enraptured with feelings which we do not deign to notice, or notice only with disgust.

Consider the sensation of light when touch first teaches the eyes to spread colors over the whole of nature. There are as many new feelings, and consequently as many new pleasures, as there are new enjoyments. We must reason in the same way with regard to all the other senses, and all the operations of the soul. For we not only enjoy by means of sight, hearing, taste, smell, touch, but also by means of memory, imagination, reflexion, passions, and hope; in a word by all our faculties. But these sources of our enjoyment are not equally active in all men.

We compare pleasures and pains, that is to say, needs which call forth our faculties. Consequently it is to pleasures and pains that we owe the happiness we enjoy. As many as are our needs so many are our different enjoyments, and as many as are the degrees in our needs, so many are the degrees in our enjoyment. In this lies the germ of all we are, the source of our happiness and of our unhappiness. In the observation of this principle we have therefore our sole means of studying ourselves.

The history of our statue's faculties make the progress of all these things clear. When it was limited to fundamental feeling, one uniform sensation comprised its whole existence, its whole knowledge, its whole pleasure. In giving it successively new modes of being, and new senses, we saw it form desires, learn from experience to regulate and satisfy them, and pass from needs to needs, from cognitions to cognitions, from pleasures to pleasures. The statue is therefore nothing but the sum of all it has acquired. May not this be the same with man?