

On Mr. Locke

Francois-Marie Arouet de Voltaire

In this selection from his Letters Concerning the English Nation (1733), Voltaire pays homage to Locke's seminal contribution to theories of the mind.

Perhaps no man ever had a more judicious or more methodical mind, or was a more acute logician than Mr. Locke, and yet he was not a great mathematician. He could never subject himself to the tedious fatigue of calculations, nor to the dry pursuit of mathematical truths, which do not at first present any tangible objects to the mind; and no one has ever given better proofs than he, that it is possible for a man to have a geometrical head without the assistance of geometry. Before his time, several great philosophers had declared, in the most positive terms, what the soul of man is; but as these knew absolutely nothing about it, they might very well be allowed to differ entirely in opinion from one another.

In Greece, the cradle of arts and of errors, where the grandeur as well as the folly of the human mind went to such prodigious lengths, the people used to reason about the soul in the very same manner as we do.

The divine Anaxagoras, in whose honor an altar was erected for his having taught mankind that the sun was greater than Peloponnesus, that snow was black, and that the heavens were of stone, affirmed that the soul was an aerial spirit, but at the same time immortal. Diogenes (not he who was a cynical philosopher after having coined base money) declared that the soul was a portion of the substance of God: an idea which we must confess was very sublime. Epicurus maintained that it was composed of parts in the same manner as the body.

Aristotle, who has been explained in a thousand ways because he was unintelligible, was of the opinion, according to some of his disciples, that the understanding in all men is one and the same substance. The divine Plato, master of the divine Aristotle—and the divine Socrates, master of the divine Plato—used to say that the soul was corporeal and eternal. No doubt but the demon of Socrates had instructed him in the nature of it. Some people, indeed, pretended that a man who boasted his being attended by a familiar genius must infallibly be either a knave or a madman, but this kind of people are just too hard to please.

As for our Church Fathers, several in the primitive ages believed that the soul was human, and the angels and God corporeal. Men naturally improve upon every system. St. Bernard, as Father Mabillon confesses, taught that the soul after death did not behold God in the celestial regions, but conversed with

Christ's human nature only. However, he was not believed this time on his bare word; the adventure of the crusade having a little discredited his oracles. Afterwards a thousand Schoolmen arose, such as the Irrefragable Doctor, the Subtile Doctor, the Angelic Doctor, the Seraphic Doctor, the Cherubic Doctor, who were all sure that they had a very clear and distinct idea of the soul, and yet wrote in such a manner that one would conclude they were resolved no one should understand a word in their writings. Our Descartes, born to discover the errors of antiquity, and at the same time to substitute his own, and carried away by that systematic spirit which throws a cloud over the minds of the greatest men, thought he had demonstrated that the soul is the same thing as thought, in the same manner that matter, in his opinion, is the same as extension. He asserted that man thinks eternally and that the soul, at its coming into the body, is informed with the whole series of metaphysical notions: knowing God, infinite space, possessing all abstract ideas—in a word, completely endued with the most sublime lights, which it unhappily forgets at its issuing from the womb.

Father Malebranche, the Oratorian, in his sublime illusions, not only admitted innate ideas, but did not doubt of our living wholly in God, and that God is, as it were, our soul.

Such a multitude of reasoners having written the romance of the soul, a sage at last arose, who gave very modestly its history. Mr. Locke has displayed the human soul in the same manner as an excellent anatomist explains the springs of the human body. He everywhere takes the light of physics for his guide. He sometimes presumes to speak affirmatively, but then he presumes also to doubt. Instead of concluding at once what we know not, he examines gradually what we want to know. He takes an infant at the instant of his birth; he traces step by step the progress of his understanding; examines what things he has in common with brutes, and what he possesses above them. Above all, he consults his own experience, the awareness of his own thought.

"I shall leave," says he, "to those who know more of this matter than I, the examining whether the soul exists before or after the organization of our bodies. But I confess that it is my lot to be animated with one of those heavy souls which do not always think; and I am even so unhappy as not to conceive how it is more necessary that the soul should think perpetually than that bodies should be forever in motion."

With regard to myself, I shall boast that I have the honor to be as stupid in this particular as Mr. Locke. No one shall ever make me believe that I always think: and I am as little inclined as he could be to fancy that some weeks after I was conceived I was a very learned soul; knowing at that time a thousand things which I forgot at my birth; and possessing when in the womb (though to no manner of purpose) knowledge which I lost the instant I had occasion for it; and which I have never since been able to recover perfectly.

Mr. Locke, after having destroyed innate ideas; after having fully renounced the vanity of believing that we always think; after having laid down, from the most

solid principles, that ideas enter the mind through the senses; having examined our simple and complex ideas; having traced the human mind through its several operations; having shown that all the languages in the world are imperfect, and the great abuse that is made of words every moment, he at last comes to consider the extent or rather the narrow limits of human knowledge. It is in this chapter that he presumed to advance, but very modestly, the following words: "We shall perhaps never be capable of knowing whether a being, purely material, thinks or not." This sage assertion was, by more divines than one, looked upon as a scandalous declaration that the soul is material and mortal. Some Englishmen, devout after their way, sounded the alarm. The superstitious are the same in society as cowards in the army; they themselves are seized with a panic fear and communicate it to others. It was loudly exclaimed that Mr. Locke intended to destroy religion; nevertheless, religion had nothing to do with the business, it being a question purely philosophical, altogether independent of faith and revelation. Mr. Locke's opponents needed but to examine, calmly and impartially, whether the declaring that matter can think implies a contradiction; and whether God is able to communicate thought to matter. But divines are too apt to begin their declarations by saying that God is offended when people differ from them in opinion; in which they too much resemble the bad poets, who used to declare publicly that Boileau spoke irreverently of Louis XIV, because he ridiculed their stupid productions. Bishop Stillingfleet got the reputation of being a calm and unprejudiced divine because he did not expressly make use of injurious terms in his dispute with Mr. Locke. That divine entered the lists against him, but he was defeated; for he argued as a Schoolman, and Locke as a philosopher, who was perfectly acquainted with the strong as well as the weak side of the human mind and fought with weapons whose temper he knew.

If I might presume to give my opinion on so delicate a subject after Mr. Locke, I would say that men have long disputed on the nature and the immortality of the soul. With regard to its immortality, it is impossible to give a demonstration of it, since its nature is still the subject of controversy; which, however, must be thoroughly understood before a person can be able to determine whether it is immortal or not. Human reason is so little able by itself to demonstrate the immortality of the soul, that it was absolutely necessary for religion to reveal it to us. It is of advantage to society in general, that mankind should believe the soul to be immortal; faith commands us to do this; nothing more is required, and the matter is cleared up at once. But it is otherwise with respect to its nature; it is of little importance to religion, which only requires the soul to be virtuous, whatever substance it may be made of. It is a clock which is given us to regulate, but the artisan has not told us of what materials the spring of this clock is composed....

Besides, we must not be apprehensive that any philosophical opinion will ever harm the religion of a country. Though our demonstrations clash directly with our mysteries, that is nothing to the purpose, for the latter are not less revered upon that account by our Christian philosophers, who know very well that the objects of reason and those of faith are of a very different nature. Philosophers

will never form a religious sect, the reason of which is, their writings are not calculated for the common people, and they themselves are free from enthusiasm. If we divide mankind into twenty parts, it will be found that nineteen of these consist of persons employed in manual labor, who will never know that such a man as Mr. Locke existed. In the remaining twentieth part how few are readers? And among such as are so, twenty amuse themselves with romances to one who studies philosophy. The thinking part of mankind is confined to a very small number, and these will never disturb the peace and tranquillity of the world.

Neither Montaigne, Locke, Bayle, Spinoza, Hobbes, Lord Shaftesbury, Collins, nor Toland, lighted up the firebrand of discord in their countries; this has generally been the work of divines, who being at first puffed up with the ambition of becoming chiefs of a sect, grew very desirous of being the head of a party. But what do I say? All the works of the modern philosophers put together will never raise so much commotion as did the dispute among the Franciscans, over the form of their sleeves and cowls.