

The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Editor: DR. PAUL CARUS,
Assistant Editor: T. J. McCORMACK.

Associates: } E. C. HEGELER.
 } MARY CARUS.

VOL. XIII. (NO. 5)

MAY, 1899.

NO. 516

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ÉTIENNE BONNOT DE CONDILLAC.
(1715-1780)

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Frontispiece to *The Open Court*.

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CONDILLAC.

(1715-1780.)

BY PROF. L. LÉVY-BRUHL.

IN order to characterise Voltaire, Rousseau, and the Encyclopedists, from the point of view of philosophy, the Germans often use a rather significant phrase. They call them philosophers *für die Welt*, popularisers. They consider them quite as desirous of spreading their doctrines among the public as of testing them thoroughly. But was there not one among them, or very near them, with whom the speculative interest stood foremost, a philosopher without any qualification and in the strictest sense of the word, a thinker, in fact, who joined together into a system the body of the philosophical ideas which prevailed in the latter half of the eighteenth century?

This demand was met by Abbé de Condillac. He was, as he has been called, the "philosophers' philosopher." Being loved and admired by most of them, he was for some time a contributor to the *Encyclopédie*. He made a long stay in Italy, as tutor to the son of the Duke of Parma, and then returned to France and lived peacefully in the country, apart from literary and philosophical quarrels. He never appeared at the French Academy except on the day when he made his inaugural address. Yet he was personally acquainted with nearly all the distinguished men of the time, and the continual succession of his published works did not permit the public to forget him. These works were numerous and bulky, from the *Essai sur l'Origine des Connaissances Humaines* (1746), in which many of the ideas which he was to develop later on were already sketched, down to the *Langue des Calculs*, which did not appear until after his death. He touched not only upon

every phase of philosophy proper, but also upon pedagogy, grammar, history, political economy and social science, the most original portion of all this considerable body of work being that on the theory of knowledge.

Condillac proposed studying the human mind, not as a metaphysician, but as a psychologist and a logician ; not in order to discover the nature of it, but to understand its operations. He wished to observe the art with which they are combined, and how we are to manage them in order to acquire as much intelligence as we are capable of receiving ; and, therefore, he wished to trace back the origin of our ideas, to discover their birth, to follow them as far as the limits set them by nature, and in this way to "determine the extent and boundaries of our knowledge and to renovate the human understanding altogether."

Condillac's leading idea therefore is derived from Locke, but not from Locke only. Hostile as he was to innate ideas and Cartesian metaphysics, there is in him clearly something of the Cartesian spirit. Locke had inquired chiefly into the contents of the human mind ; Condillac endeavored to construct a system. He sought an "unassailable first principle, sufficient to explain all the rest." He sought it, it is true, in the primitive data of the senses, whereas Descartes had found it in the intuition of thought ; but the opposition between their doctrines does not exclude a certain analogy in their conceptions of the proper method.

Condillac never concealed his indebtedness to Locke, but his estimate of the philosophy of his predecessor varied. In his first work he seems to follow him faithfully and to recognise, as Locke did, two sources to our ideas : sensation and reflexion. Later on, when more thoroughly master of his own thought, he asserted sensation to be the only source of our ideas. He considers Locke to have erred in not carrying the analysis far enough. Locke did not realise how indispensable it is that we should learn how to feel, see, hear, etc. All the faculties of the soul he thought to be innate qualities, and he did not suspect that they might possibly originate in sensation itself. He thought that we naturally make use of our senses by a sort of instinct. Most of the judgments which are mingled with our sensations escaped him. In one word, it was in the very name of empiricism that Condillac criticised Locke's empiricism. It is not sufficient to reduce the whole of our knowledge to sentient knowledge. We must show how this sentient knowledge is produced, resolve it into its elements, and show how these elements can account for every form of activity in the human soul.

Let then our starting-point be sensation, isolated by analysis and separated—or at least Condillac thought it so—from all judgments mingled with it. This sensation does not bring us out of ourselves. It merely consists in a modification of consciousness which may be keen or weak, pleasurable or painful; but it teaches us nothing of what is outside ourselves, or even whether anything exists outside ourselves. This would be true as regards all our sensations, if we had not touch. The sensations of touch have the singular property of suggesting to us the idea of objects distinct from ourselves. They are at the same time feelings and ideas: feelings in their relation to the soul which they modify, ideas in their connexion with some outward thing. Being accustomed to ascribe all the sensations of the sense of touch to external objects, we fall into like habits with our other senses. Thus our sensations become objective; they appear to us no longer as modifications of the state of the *ego*, but as qualities of bodies around us. They have become ideas.

Let us now suppose a sensation more vivid than others to force itself upon our consciousness so powerfully as to throw all others, at least temporarily, into the shade: this exclusive sensation will be what we call attention. But attention may just as well be directed to a past sensation, which recurs again to the mind, as to a present sensation. Memory is therefore nothing but a transformed sensation. We are thus capable of a twofold kind of attention, exercised on the one hand by memory, on the other by the present sensation. Once given a twofold kind of attention, and there results comparison; for, attending to two ideas and comparing them are one and the same thing. Now, we cannot compare them without perceiving some difference or resemblance between them. To perceive such relations is to perform an act of judgment. Thus does sensation, as it undergoes transformations, become successively attention, memory, comparison, and judgment. Having reached this point we have explained the whole of human understanding, which is, in fact, nothing but a collection or combination of the operations of the soul.

By looking upon sensations as representative we have observed that all our ideas and the faculties of our understanding issue from them. Now if we consider them with regard to their pleasurable or painful character, we shall behold the birth of all the operations usually ascribed to the will. Condillac lays it down as a principle that there are no neutral sensations, but that each of them gives us either pleasure or pain, and makes us inclined to

continue it or to escape it. Were it not for this property of our sensations, intellectual activity would not be aroused,—attention and memory, and therefore understanding, would be left undeveloped. But nature has made us very sensible of the relative character of the sensations that affect us. We cannot be uncomfortable, or less comfortable than we have been before, without comparing our present state with the states we have formerly been in; and this comparison makes us feel some uneasiness, or disquiet, and as soon as there is added to this the idea of the object we think likely to contribute to our happiness, the action of our faculties is determined in the direction of this object. This is what we call desire. But from desire spring passions: love, hatred, hope, fear, volition. Again, all these are but transformed sensations.

In order to illustrate his theory, Condillac, in his *Traité des Sensations*, had recourse to the celebrated fiction of an animated statue, shaped internally like ourselves, in which he awakens the senses in succession, beginning with smell and ending with touch. Next we see the faculties of the soul springing one after another from the progressive transformations of sensation. Similar fictions are to be found in Diderot and Buffon, which is sufficient to prove that they suited the taste of their contemporaries and answered their idea of the development of the mind. To-day, on the contrary, we are chiefly struck by the artificial and arbitrary character of such a supposition. We see in it an involuntary confession of the fact that his theory of knowledge proceeds in a purely abstract way.

Yet it would be unfair to condemn their doctrine summarily on that account. It is with Condillac as with many other French philosophers of his time, between whose minds and his there was evident affinity. The solutions he unhesitatingly proposes are hasty and often rash; the problems he sets and the general method he indicates for their solution are highly interesting. In his theory of transformed sensation, Condillac seeks to account for the evolution of the human mind by starting from an irreducible "first fact." As Buffon tried to explain the genesis of our solar system, as Rousseau sought afterwards to explain the genesis of society, Condillac endeavors to trace back the genesis of the faculties of the human mind. On the way he notices many interesting psychological facts. He shows the part played by the association of ideas, which causes us to look upon notions that are really acquired and complex as being natural and simple; he sees that the association of ideas is a particular case of habit. And thus the task of the phi-

losopher, according to Condillac, consists chiefly in dissociating, by means of analysis, the elements which habit has joined together so closely that we can no longer see where they are welded together.

Analysis, therefore, does not stop where reflexion and memory can separate or resolve no further. It is true, we have a tendency to believe that part of our knowledge is born with us. But this is because we can remember a time when we did not know a given thing only in case we can remember having learned it; and, in order to be conscious of learning we must know something already. How then could we remember having learned to see, hear, or touch? And yet it is certain that we have learned these things. Consequently, we are driven to suppose that to be innate the acquisition of which we cannot otherwise account for. All the rest is the product of experience. For instance, if some faculty happens to be perfected (as the judgment of distance by sight), it is therefore acquired; it was in its beginning, at a time beyond the reach of our memory, a first improvement upon some earlier state. Condillac applied to psychology Pascal's well-known saying: "Nature itself is only a first habit, as habit is a second nature."

From these principles naturally follows the theory of instinct. We can distinguish two "selves" in every man: the self of habit and the self of reflexion. "The self of reflexion is its own master, and is conscious of its own operations while performing them. It endeavors to know or reach the objects which it has in view, and which it may give up for other objects when it pleases. The "self of habit" acts in a reflex way, so to speak, without the intervention of consciousness being needed. It touches, it sees, and it directs the animal faculties; it guides and preserves the body. If we suppress in a grown-up man the "self of reflexion," the "self of habit" which remains suffices for such needs as are absolutely necessary for the preservation of the animal. Instinct is nothing but habit *minus* reflexion. But, Condillac adds immediately after, it is by reflecting that beasts acquire it. As they have but few wants, a time soon comes when they have done all that reflexion can teach them. They daily repeat the same actions, and their habits become automatic.

Yet does not instinct often appear to be innate and hereditary?—It does, says Condillac, but it is not so; for we find it subject to improvement; now, whatever is subject to improvement is acquired. All these consequences are most logically inferred from Condillac's own principles. Therefore he had a right to answer

those who reproached him with having drawn his inspiration from the celebrated passage in which Buffon represents man awakening to life and admiring nature around him: "Monsieur de Buffon supposes his imaginary man to possess in the beginning habits which he ought to have had him acquire." To treat as acquired habits faculties which appear to be most inherent in our nature, is Condillac's favorite maxim. We all know how it prospered in the present century. It was one of the ruling principles of psychology, as long as the philosophy of association was in favor, in England as well as in France.

The sum of our reflexions over and above our habits constitutes our reason. But language is necessary for the development of reason. Were our thought limited to the representation of individual and concrete objects and unable to form abstract and general ideas, it would remain forever in a rudimentary state. Now such ideas are simply denominations and designations of classes. For instance, the idea of "animal" connotes characteristics common to man, the lion, the horse, and the totality of animals, and these characteristics only. This idea I can fix only with the help of the word which expresses it. We see therefore how indispensable words are to us. But for them, there would be no abstract ideas. Had we no abstract ideas, we should have neither genera nor species, and had we neither genera nor species, we could not reason upon anything. To speak, to reason, to form general or abstract ideas, are at bottom one and the same thing.

Therefore, to communicate thought is not the only function of language. Whenever man thinks, even though he should not express his thought outwardly, he speaks. This has been called "inward language." The "first advantage" of language, according to Condillac, is to separate thought into its elements by means of a series of signs which successively represent the same. Whenever I reason, all the ideas which constitute this reasoning are present in my mind at once. I should not be able either to enter upon the reasoning or to bring it to a close if the series of judgments of which it is composed were not grasped all together by my mind. It is not, therefore, by speaking that I judge and reason, and these operations of the mind necessarily precede discourse. But discourse is a real analysis which resolves these complex operations and separates their successive stages. It leads the mind from one thought to another, and from one discovery to another. The more limited the faculty of thinking is in one who does not analyse his own thoughts, and who, in consequence, does not ob-

serve all that he does while thinking, the further this faculty must reach in one who does analyse his thoughts and observes even their minutest details.

Consequently, "the art of reasoning is equivalent to the art of speaking." In this sense well-constructed language is akin to well-constructed science. Nearly all our errors originate in defects or misuse of our language. If we treat abstractions as realities, that is, if we mistake for a thing actually existing what is merely the designation of an assemblage of qualities, is not that a misuse of language? How often do we make use of words before we have determined their meaning, and even without having felt the need of determining it! Such confusion in language necessarily implies confusion in thought. Error thus begets error, and language lends itself no less easily to false systems than to true analysis.

There is then but one way of restoring order to the faculty of thinking, and that is to forget all that we have learned, to return to the origin of our ideas, to follow them as they develop, and, as Bacon says, to make over the human understanding. "Go back to nature," is Condillac's motto, as it was also to be that of Rousseau. Error is our own doing. We think and speak erroneously, and therefore we blunder; but we have only ourselves to blame. The spirit of the rising generation is modelled after that of the preceding one, and erroneous systems are handed down together with the languages which are their vehicles. Such are the effects of bad education, and education is bad only inasmuch as it is contrary to nature. "Nature has begun all things, and always aright: this truth cannot be repeated too often."

We imagine that languages would be more perfect if they were the work of philosophers, which is a serious mistake. The languages of the sciences (algebra excepted) have no advantage over other languages. According to Condillac, the earliest vulgar languages must have been the best fitted for reasoning. The development of the ideas and faculties of the soul must have been perceptible in these languages, in which the first acceptation of each word was still known, and in which analogy supplied all the others. They were transparent things, so to speak, through which one could watch the progress of the composition of thought. Their syntax was crystallised logic, and the science of the mind thus spontaneously revealed itself in the structure of language. "Sound metaphysics began before languages, and they owe to it their best qualities. But this metaphysics was then not so much a science as an instinct. It was nature guiding men without their knowing it,

and metaphysics became a science only after it had ceased to be sound."

* * *

There is therefore, according to Condillac, a natural method which is the soul of language and science. If we followed it properly, it would lead us infallibly to truth. This method he calls "analysis." In his first work, he contented himself with saying that analysis consists merely in combining and separating our ideas in order to make different comparisons and thus to discover their mutual relation and the new ideas to which they may give rise. This analysis is "the secret of discoveries" because it always takes us back to the origin of things. "It consists," he says again, "in tracing our ideas back to their origin, and in studying their development."

We see even by these definitions, that in Condillac's analysis thought is not opposed to synthesis as decomposition is to composition. It comprehends both processes; there is no reasoning which is not a succession of compositions and decompositions, and the two operations are inseparable. Yet the distinction between analysis and synthesis subsists in Condillac, but in a special sense. To proceed analytically, in his view, is to start from the simple, the primitive, and the particular, proceeding with the help of observation and experience, and reproducing the "development" of things. To proceed synthetically is to start from general and abstract principles, aiming thence to deduce the particular and the concrete,—an ambitious and faulty method which has too often led metaphysicians astray.

If our minds were powerful enough to perceive distinctly, at one glance, a collection of objects or all the qualities of an object and the connexions between these, we should have no need of analysis. Our knowledge would be intuitive and perfect from the first. But it is not so; we first have collective impressions, and in order to transform these into knowledge we must decompose them. We therefore consider one after another the objects which form part of a whole, and compare them in order to judge of their mutual connexion. When we have thus become acquainted with their respective positions, we observe in succession all those that fill the intervals; we compare each of them with the nearest principal object and thus we determine its position. In this way we make out all the objects, the form and situation of which we have discovered, and take them all in at one glance. The order assigned to them in our mind is no longer successive, it has become simul-

taneous. It is the order in which the objects really are situated, and we perceive them all at once distinctly; whence this specific definition of analysis: "To analyze is simply to observe in *successive order* the qualities of an object, in order to assign to them in the mind *the simultaneous order* in which they exist."

But there are many ways of conceiving this successive order that leads to a view, both simultaneous and distinct, of the relations between objects; can it be said that any one of these many is the pre-eminently analytical order? "The whole difficulty," says Condillac, "consists in finding how to begin in order to apprehend ideas in their most essential connexion with one another. I assert that the only combination by which this is to be found is the one which is in accordance with the very genesis of things. We must start from the first idea which must have produced all others." The analytical order is the genetic order. If we knew a sufficient number of facts, and had studied them closely enough, systems would in some sort be self made, as facts would group themselves of their own accord in such an order as to explain one another in succession. We should then find that in every system there is a first fact, which is the beginning of it, and which for this reason might be called the principle, for principle and beginning are two words which have originally the same meaning. Any system which does not thus exactly reproduce the order of the evolution and composition of facts, any system resting on general and abstract principles is arbitrary, and consequently false. The logical order of science coincides with the order in which phenomena are produced in the course of time. In one word, in this empirical conception of analysis the mind is methodically made subordinate to things. It is in things that order is inherent, and the function of the mind consists in reflecting back this order as faithfully as possible, and in being, to use Bacon's expression, a perfect mirror.

The stumbling-block to empiricism of this kind is generally to be found in mathematics and metaphysics. As regards mathematics, Condillac got out of the difficulty by reducing every demonstration to a succession of equivalent propositions "the identity of which is obvious," and is more easily perceived when we use algebraical signs. Nor was metaphysics embarrassing to Condillac, no doubt because he took but little care to make it fit in with the rest of his system. He proves dogmatically the existence of God from the necessity of a first cause and from the existence of final causes. We again meet in him the argument of the watch and the watch-maker, which Voltaire thought decisive. Without knowing the

essence of the soul and of the body, Condillac knows that they are two distinct substances. "The body may be defined as an extended substance, and the soul as a sentient substance. It is sufficient to consider extension and sensation as two incompatible properties, to be convinced that the substance of the soul and that of the body are too widely different substances. Locke was wrong in declaring that it will perhaps be forever impossible for us to know whether God has not endowed some heap of matter shaped in a certain way with the faculty of thinking.—For the subject that thinks must be one. Now a heap of matter is not one; it is a multitude. The soul thus being a different substance from the body, we cannot understand how the latter would act upon it. The body can be only an occasional cause. We must therefore acknowledge that the senses are but the occasional source of our knowledge. Free access is thus left for idealism.

There is no reason why we should question Condillac's sincerity as regards his spiritualistic metaphysics; but the very fact of its occupying so small a place in his system, and being so closely connected with it, is characteristic. It means that psychology was beginning to live an independent life and trying to rely solely on observation and experience. Locke had shown the way; Condillac advanced farther. True, his solutions are still far from perfect. He gives bad definitions of the terms he uses, and commentators in our days are not of one mind as to what he understands by "sensation," "perception," and "nature." No doubt, when he tries to analyze facts, to discover their origin, and to trace back their genesis, he most often construes them with the aid of factors in themselves very complex. Nevertheless he has a precise conception of empirical psychology, and attempts to study the especial share of each of the senses in our knowledge, to analyze habit and instinct, to define the function of the association of ideas, and, in short, to discover the genesis of psychological phenomena. All these points were to be taken up again later on, in accordance with a more prudent and safer method; but at last the questions had been raised, and often with remarkable clearness and pertinency, so that the influence of Condillac upon French thought was long-lived and persistent, and it would not be impossible to find traces of it in what is taught today in our schools.