

THE  
WORKS  
OF  
JOHN LOCKE.

A NEW EDITION, CORRECTED.

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*IN TEN VOLUMES.*

VOL. III.

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OF  
HUMAN UNDERSTANDING.

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## BOOK IV. CONTINUED.

## CHAPTER V.

*Of Truth in General.*

§ 1. WHAT is truth was an inquiry many ages since; and it being that which all mankind either do, or pretend to search after, it cannot but be worth our while carefully to examine wherein it consists, and so acquaint ourselves with the nature of it, as to observe how the mind distinguishes it from falsehood.

§ 2. Truth then seems to me, in the proper import of the word, to signify nothing but the joining or separating of signs, as the things signified by them do agree or disagree one with another. The joining or separating of signs, here meant, is what by another name we call proposition. So that truth properly belongs only to propositions: whereof there are two sorts, viz. mental and verbal; as there are two sorts of signs commonly made use of, viz. ideas and words.

§ 3. To form a clear notion of truth, it is very necessary to consider truth of thought, and truth of words, distinctly one from another: but yet it is very difficult to treat of them asunder; because it is unavoidable, in treating of mental propositions, to make

What truth is.

A right joining or separating of signs, *i. e.* ideas or words.

Which make mental or verbal propositions.

use of words ; and then the instances given of mental propositions cease immediately to be barely mental, and become verbal. For a mental proposition being nothing but a bare consideration of the ideas, as they are in our minds stripped of names, they lose the nature of purely mental propositions as soon as they are put into words.

Mental propositions are very hard to be treated of.

§ 4. And that which makes it yet harder to treat of mental and verbal propositions separately is, that most men, if not all, in their thinking and reasonings within themselves, make use of words instead of ideas ; at least when the subject of their meditation contains in it complex ideas. Which is a great evidence of the imperfection and uncertainty of our ideas of that kind, and may, if attentively made use of, serve for a mark to show us, what are those things we have clear and perfect established ideas of, and what not. For if we will curiously observe the way our mind takes in thinking and reasoning, we shall find, I suppose, that when we make any propositions within our own thoughts about white or black, sweet or bitter, a triangle or a circle, we can and often do frame in our minds the ideas themselves, without reflecting on the names. But when we would consider, or make propositions about the more complex ideas, as of a man, vitriol, fortitude, glory, we usually put the name for the idea : because the ideas these names stand for being for the most part imperfect, confused, and undetermined, we reflect on the names themselves, because they are more clear, certain, and distinct, and readier occur to our thoughts than the pure ideas ; and so we make use of these words instead of the ideas themselves, even when we would meditate and reason within ourselves, and make tacit mental propositions. In substances, as has been already noticed, this is occasioned by the imperfection of our ideas ; we making the name stand for the real essence, of which we have no idea at all. In modes, it is occa-

sioned by the great number of simple ideas that go to the making them up. For many of them being compounded, the name occurs much easier than the complex idea itself, which requires time and attention to be recollected, and exactly represented to the mind, even in those men who have formerly been at the pains to do it ; and is utterly impossible to be done by those, who, though they have ready in their memory the greatest part of the common words of that language, yet perhaps never troubled themselves in all their lives to consider what precise ideas the most of them stood for. Some confused or obscure notions have served their turns, and many who talk very much of religion and conscience, of church and faith, of power and right, of obstructions and humours, melancholy and choler, would perhaps have little left in their thoughts and meditations, if one should desire them to think only of the things themselves, and lay by those words, with which they so often confound others, and not seldom themselves also.

§ 5. But to return to the consideration of truth : we must, I say, observe two sorts of propositions that we are capable of making.

First, mental, wherein the ideas in our understandings are without the use of words put together, or separated by the mind, perceiving or judging of their agreement or disagreement.

Secondly, verbal propositions, which are words, the signs of our ideas, put together or separated in affirmative or negative sentences. By which way of affirming or denying, these signs, made by sounds, are as it were put together or separated one from another. So that proposition consists in joining or separating signs, and truth consists in the putting together or separating those signs, according as the things, which they stand for, agree or disagree.

§ 6. Every one's experience will satisfy

When men-  
B 2

Being nothing but the joining or separating ideas without words.



him, that the mind, either by perceiving or supposing the agreement or disagreement of any of its ideas, does tacitly within itself put them into a kind of proposition affirmative or negative, which I have endeavoured to express by the terms putting together and separating. But this action of the mind, which is so familiar to every thinking and reasoning man, is easier to be conceived by reflecting on what passes in us when we affirm or deny, than to be explained by words. When a man has in his head the idea of two lines, viz. the side and diagonal of a square, whereof the diagonal is an inch long, he may have the idea also of the division of that line into a certain number of equal parts; *v. g.* into five, ten, an hundred, a thousand, or any other number, and may have the idea of that inch line being divisible, or not divisible, into such equal parts, as a certain number of them will be equal to the side-line. Now whenever he perceives, believes, or supposes such a kind of divisibility to agree or disagree to his idea of that line, he, as it were, joins or separates those two ideas, viz. the idea of that line, and the idea of that kind of divisibility; and so makes a mental proposition, which is true or false, according as such a kind of divisibility, a divisibility into such aliquot parts, does really agree to that line or no. When ideas are so put together, or separated in the mind, as they or the things they stand for do agree or not, that is, as I may call it, mental truth. But truth of words is something more; and that is the affirming or denying of words one of another, as the ideas they stand for agree or disagree: and this again is two-fold; either purely verbal and trifling, which I shall speak of, chap. viii. or real and instructive, which is the object of that real knowledge which we have spoken of already.

Objection against ver- § 7. But here again will be apt to occur the same doubt about truth, that did

tal propositions contain real truth, and when verbal.

about knowledge: and it will be objected, that if truth be nothing but the joining and separating of words in propositions, as the ideas they stand for agree or disagree in men's minds, the knowledge of truth is not so valuable a thing as it is taken to be, nor worth the pains and time men employ in the search of it; since by this account it amounts to no more than the conformity of words to the chimeras of men's brains. Who knows not what odd notions many men's heads are filled with, and what strange ideas all men's brains are capable of? But if we rest here, we know the truth of nothing by this rule, but of the visionary words in our own imaginations; nor have other truth, but what as much concerns harpies and centaurs as men and horses. For those, and the like, may be ideas in our heads, and have their agreement and disagreement there, as well as the ideas of real beings, and so have as true propositions made about them. And it will be altogether as true a proposition to say all centaurs are animals, as that all men are animals; and the certainty of one as great as the other. For in both the propositions, the words are put together according to the agreement of the ideas in our minds: and the agreement of the idea of animal with that of centaur is as clear and visible to the mind, as the agreement of the idea of animal with that of man; and so these two propositions are equally true, equally certain. But of what use is all such truth to us?

§ 8. Though what has been said in the foregoing chapter, to distinguish real from imaginary knowledge, might suffice here, in answer to this doubt, to distinguish real truth from chimerical, or (if you please) barely nominal, they depending both on the same foundation; yet it may not be amiss here again to consider, that though our words signify nothing but our ideas, yet being designed by them to signify things, the truth they contain, when put into propo-

bal truth, that thus it may all be chimerical.

Answered, real truth is about ideas agreeing to things.

sitions, will be only verbal, when they stand for ideas in the mind, that have not an agreement with the reality of things. And therefore truth, as well as knowledge, may well come under the distinction of verbal and real; that being only verbal truth, wherein terms are joined according to the agreement or disagreement of the ideas they stand for, without regarding whether our ideas are such as really have, or are capable of having an existence in nature. But then it is they contain real truth, when these signs are joined, as our ideas agree; and when our ideas are such as we know are capable of having an existence in nature: which in substances we cannot know, but by knowing that such have existed.

Falsehood is the joining of names otherwise than their ideas agree.

§ 9. Truth is the marking down in words the agreement or disagreement of ideas as it is. Falsehood is the marking down in words the agreement or disagreement of ideas otherwise than it is. And so far as these ideas, thus marked by sounds, agree to their archetypes, so far only is the truth real. The knowledge of this truth consists in knowing what ideas the words stand for, and the perception of the agreement or disagreement of those ideas, according as it is marked by those words.

General propositions to be treated of more at large.

§ 10. But because words are looked on as the great conduits of truth and knowledge, and that in conveying and receiving of truth, and commonly in reasoning about it, we make use of words and propositions; I shall more at large inquire, wherein the certainty of real truths, contained in propositions, consists, and where it is to be had; and endeavour to show in what sort of universal propositions we are capable of being certain of their real truth or falsehood.

I shall begin with general propositions, as those which most employ our thoughts, and exercise our contemplation. General truths are most looked after by the mind, as those that most enlarge our know-

ledge; and by their comprehensiveness satisfying us at once of many particulars, enlarge our view, and shorten our way to knowledge.

§ 11. Besides truth taken in the strict sense before-mentioned, there are other sorts of truth; as, 1. Moral truth, which is speaking of things according to the persuasion of our own minds, though the proposition we speak agree not to the reality of things. 2. Metaphysical truth, which is nothing but the real existence of things, conformable to the ideas to which we have annexed their names. This, though it seems to consist in the very beings of things, yet, when considered a little nearly, will appear to include a tacit proposition, whereby the mind joins that particular thing to the idea it had before settled with a name to it. But these considerations of truth, either having been before taken notice of, or not being much to our present purpose, it may suffice here only to have mentioned them.

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## CHAPTER VI.

### *Of Universal Propositions, their Truth and Certainty.*

§ 1. **THOUGH** the examining and judging of ideas by themselves, their names being quite laid aside, be the best and surest way to clear and distinct knowledge; yet, through the prevailing custom of using sounds for ideas, I think it is very seldom practised. Every one may observe how common it is for names to be made use of, instead of the ideas themselves, even when men think and reason within their own breasts; especially if the ideas be very complex, and made up of a great collection of simple ones. This makes the consideration of words and propositions so necessary a part of the treatise of knowledge, that it

is very hard to speak intelligibly of the one without explaining the other.

General truths hardly to be understood, but in verbal propositions.

§ 2. All the knowledge we have, being only of particular or general truths, it is evident that whatever may be done in the former of these, the latter, which is that which with reason is most sought after, can never be well made known, and is very seldom apprehended, but as conceived and expressed in words. It is not therefore out of our way, in the examination of our knowledge, to inquire into the truth and certainty of universal propositions.

Certainty two-fold, of truth and of knowledge.

§ 3. But that we may not be misled in this case, by that which is the danger every where, I mean by the doubtfulness of terms, it is fit to observe, that certainty is two-fold; certainty of truth, and certainty of knowledge. Certainty of truth is, when words are so put together in propositions, as exactly to express the agreement or disagreement of the ideas they stand for, as really it is. Certainty of knowledge is to perceive the agreement or disagreement of ideas, as expressed in any proposition. This we usually call knowing, or being certain of the truth of any proposition.

No proposition can be known to be true, where the essence of each species mentioned is not known.

§ 4. Now because we cannot be certain of the truth of any general proposition, unless we know the precise bounds and extent of the species its terms stand for, it is necessary we should know the essence of each species, which is that which constitutes and bounds it. This, in all simple ideas and modes, is not hard to do. For in these, the real and nominal essence being the same; or, which is all one, the abstract idea which the general term stands for being the sole essence and boundary that is or can be supposed of the species; there can be no doubt, how far the species extends, or what things are comprehended under each term: which, it

is evident, are all that have an exact conformity with the idea it stands for, and no other. But in substances wherein a real essence distinct from the nominal is supposed to constitute, determine, and bound the species, the extent of the general word is very uncertain: because not knowing this real essence, we cannot know what is, or what is not of that species; and consequently what may, or may not with certainty be affirmed of it. And thus speaking of a man, or gold, or any other species of natural substances, as supposed constituted by a precise and real essence, which nature regularly imparts to every individual of that kind, whereby it is made to be of that species, we cannot be certain of the truth of any affirmation or negation made of it. For man, or gold, taken in this sense, and used for species of things constituted by real essences, different from the complex idea in the mind of the speaker, stand for we know not what; and the extent of these species, with such boundaries, are so unknown and undetermined, that it is impossible with any certainty to affirm, that all men are rational, or that all gold is yellow. But where the nominal essence is kept to, as the boundary of each species, and men extend the application of any general term no farther than to the particular things in which the complex idea it stands for is to be found, there they are in no danger to mistake the bounds of each species, nor can be in doubt, on this account, whether any propositions be true or no. I have chosen to explain this uncertainty of propositions in this scholastic way, and have made use of the terms of essences and species, on purpose to show the absurdity and inconvenience there is to think of them as of any other sort of realities than barely abstract ideas with names to them. To suppose that the species of things are any thing but the sorting of them under general names, according as they agree to several abstract ideas, of which we make those names the signs, is to confound truth, and introduce

uncertainty into all general propositions that can be made about them. Though therefore these things might, to people not possessed with scholastic learning, be treated of in a better and clearer way; yet those wrong notions of essences or species having got root in most people's minds, who have received any tincture from the learning which has prevailed in this part of the world, are to be discovered and removed, to make way for that use of words which should convey certainty with it.

This more particularly concerns substances. § 5. The names of substances then, whenever made to stand for species, which are supposed to be constituted by real essences, which we know not, are not capable to convey certainty to the understanding: of the truth of general propositions made up of such terms, we cannot be sure. The reason whereof is plain: for how can we be sure that this or that quality is in gold, when we know not what is or is not gold? Since in this way of speaking nothing is gold but what partakes of an essence, which we not knowing, cannot know where it is or is not, and so cannot be sure that any parcel of matter in the world is or is not in this sense gold; being incurably ignorant, whether it has or has not that which makes any thing to be called gold, *i. e.* that real essence of gold whereof we have no idea at all: this being as impossible for us to know, as it is for a blind man to tell in what flower the colour of a pansy is or is not to be found, whilst he has no idea of the colour of a pansy at all. Or if we could (which is impossible) certainly know where a real essence, which we know not, is; *v. g.* in what parcels of matter the real essence of gold is; yet could we not be sure, that this or that quality could with truth be affirmed of gold: since it is impossible for us to know, that this or that quality or idea has a necessary connexion with a real essence, of which we have no idea at all, whatever species that supposed real essence may be imagined to constitute.

§ 6. On the other side, the names of substances, when made use of as they should be, for the ideas men have in their minds, though they carry a clear and determinate signification with them, will not yet serve us to make many universal propositions, of whose truth we can be certain. Not because in this use of them we are uncertain what things are signified by them, but because the complex ideas they stand for are such combinations of simple ones, as carry not with them any discoverable connexion or repugnancy, but with a very few other ideas.

The truth of few universal propositions concerning substances is to be known.

§ 7. The complex ideas, that our names of the species of substances properly stand for, are collections of such qualities as have been observed to co-exist in an unknown substratum, which we call substance: but what other qualities necessarily co-exist with such combinations we cannot certainly know, unless we can discover their natural dependence; which in their primary qualities we can go but a very little way in; and in all their secondary qualities we can discover no connexion at all, for the reasons mentioned, chap. iii. viz. 1. Because we know not the real constitutions of substances, on which each secondary quality particularly depends. 2. Did we know that, it would serve us only for experimental (not universal) knowledge; and reach with certainty no farther than that bare instance: because our understandings can discover no conceivable connexion between any secondary quality and any modification whatsoever of any of the primary ones. And therefore there are very few general propositions to be made concerning substances, which can carry with them undoubted certainty.

Because co-existence of ideas in few cases is to be known.

§ 8. All gold is fixed, is a proposition whose truth we cannot be certain of, how universally soever it be believed. For if, according to the useless imagination of the schools,

Instance in gold.





























































































































































































































































































































































































































