

THE
WORKS
OF
JOHN LOCKE.

A NEW EDITION, CORRECTED.

IN TEN VOLUMES.

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OF THE

FOURTH VOLUME.

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A
L E T T E R

TO

THE RIGHT REVEREND

EDWARD, LORD BISHOP OF WORCESTER,

CONCERNING SOME PASSAGES RELATING TO

MR. LOCKE'S ESSAY OF HUMAN UNDERSTANDING,

IN A

LATE DISCOURSE OF HIS LORDSHIP'S, IN VINDICATION
OF THE TRINITY.

▲
L E T T E R

TO

THE RIGHT REVEREND

EDWARD, LORD BISHOP OF WORCESTER.

MY LORD,

I CANNOT but look upon it as a great honour, that your lordship, who are so thoroughly acquainted with the incomparable writings of antiquity, and know so well how to entertain yourself with the great men in the commonwealth of letters, should at any time take into your hand my mean papers; and so far bestow any of your valuable minutes on my Essay of Human Understanding, as to let the world see you have thought my notions worth your lordship's consideration. My aim in that, as well as every thing else written by me, being purely to follow truth as far as I could discover it, I think myself beholden to whoever shows me my mistakes, as to one who, concurring in my design, helps me forward in my way.

Your lordship has been pleased to favour me with some thoughts of yours in this kind, in your late learned "Discourse, in Vindication of the Doctrine of the

Trinity;" and I hope I may say, have gone a little out of your way to do me that kindness; for the obligation is thereby the greater. And if your lordship has brought in the mention of my book in a chapter, entitled, "Objections against the Trinity, in Point of Reason, answered;" when, in my whole Essay, I think there is not to be found any thing like an objection against the Trinity: I have the more to acknowledge to your lordship, who would not let the foreignness of the subject hinder your lordship from endeavouring to set me right, as to some errors your lordship apprehends in my book; when other writers using some notions like mine, gave you that which was occasion enough for you to do me the favour to take notice of what you dislike in my Essay.

Your lordship's name is of so great authority in the learned world, that I, who profess myself more ready, upon conviction, to recant, than I was at first to publish, my mistakes, cannot pay that respect is due to it, without telling the reasons why I still retain any of my notions, after your lordship's having appeared dissatisfied with them. This must be my apology, and I hope such a one as your lordship will allow, for my examining what you have printed against several passages in my book, and my showing the reasons why it has not prevailed with me to quit them.

That your lordship's reasonings may lose none of their force by my misapprehending or misrepresenting them, (a way too familiarly used in writings that have any appearance of controversy) I shall crave leave to give the reader your lordship's arguments in the full strength of your own expressions; that so in them he may have the advantage to see the deficiency of my answers, in any point where I shall be so unfortunate as not to perceive, or not to follow, the light your lordship affords me.

Your lordship having in the two or three preceding pages, justly, as I think, found fault with the account of reason, given by the Unitarians and a late writer, in those passages you quote out of them; and then coming to the nature of substance, and relating what that author has

said concerning the mind's getting of simple ideas, and those simple ideas being the sole matter and foundation of all our reasonings; your lordship thus concludes:

"Then it follows, that we can have no foundation of reasoning, where there can be no such ideas from sensation or reflection."

"Now this is the case of substance; it is not introduced by the senses, nor depends upon the operation of the mind; and so it cannot be within the compass of our reason. And therefore I do not wonder, that the gentlemen of this new way of reasoning have almost discarded substance out of the reasonable part of the world. For they not only tell us," &c.

This, as I remember, is the first place where your lordship is pleased to quote any thing out of my "Essay of Human Understanding," which your lordship does in these words following:

"That we can have no idea of it by sensation or reflection: but that nothing is signified by it, only an uncertain supposition of we know not what." And therefore it is paralleled, more than once, with the Indian philosopher's "He-knew-not-what; which supported the tortoise, that supported the elephant, that supported the earth: so substance was found out only to support accidents. And that when we talk of substances, we talk like children; who, being asked a question about somewhat which they knew not, readily gave this satisfactory answer, that it is something."

These words of mine your lordship brings to prove, that I am one of "the gentlemen of this new way of reasoning, that have almost discarded substance out of the reasonable part of the world." An accusation which your lordship will pardon me, if I do not readily know what to plead to, because I do not understand what is "almost to discard substance out of the reasonable part of the world." If your lordship means by it, that I deny or doubt that there is in the world any such thing as substance, that your lordship will acquit me of, when your lordship looks again into that chapter,

which you have cited more than once, where your lordship will find these words:

“* When we talk or think of any particular sort of corporeal substances, as horse, stone, &c. though the idea we have of either of them be but the complication or collection of those several simple ideas of sensible qualities which we use to find united in the thing called horse or stone; yet because we cannot conceive how they should subsist alone, nor one in another, we suppose them existing in, and supported by some common subject, which support we denote by the name substance; though it be certain we have no clear and distinct idea of that thing we suppose a support.” And again,

“† The same happens concerning the operations of the mind, viz. thinking, reasoning, fearing, &c. which we considering not to subsist of themselves, nor apprehending how they can belong to body, or be produced by it, we are apt to think these the actions of some other substance, which we call spirit: whereby yet it is evident, that having no other idea or notion of matter, but something wherein those many sensible qualities, which affect our senses, do subsist; by supposing a substance, wherein thinking, knowing, doubting, and a power of moving, &c. do subsist, we have as clear a notion of the nature or substance of spirit, as we have of body; the one being supposed to be (without knowing what it is) the substratum to those simple ideas we have from without; and the other supposed (with a like ignorance of what it is) to be the substratum to those operations, which we experiment in ourselves within.” And again,

“‡ Whatever therefore be the secret nature of substance in general, all the ideas we have of particular distinct substances are nothing but several combinations of simple ideas, co-existing in such, though unknown, cause of their union, as makes the whole subsist of itself.”

* Human Understanding, B. ii. c. 23. § 4. † *Ib.* § 5. ‡ *Ib.* § 6.

And I further say in the same section, “That we suppose these combinations to rest in, and to be adherent to, that unknown common subject, which inheres not in any thing else. And that our complex ideas of substances, besides all those simple ideas they are made up of, have always the confused idea of something to which they belong, and in which they subsist: and therefore when we speak of any sort of substance, we say it is a thing having such and such qualities; a body is a thing that is extended, figured, and capable of motion; a spirit, a thing capable of thinking.”

These, and the like fashions of speaking, intimate that the substance is supposed always something, besides the extension, figure, solidity, motion, thinking, or other observable idea, though we know not what it is.

“* Our idea of body, I say, is an extended, solid substance; and our idea of our souls is of a substance that thinks.” So that as long as there is any such thing as body or spirit in the world, I have done nothing towards the discarding substance out of the reasonable part of the world. Nay, as long as there is any simple idea or sensible quality left, according to my way of arguing, substance cannot be discarded; because all simple ideas, all sensible qualities, carry with them a supposition of a substratum to exist in, and of a substance wherein they inhere: and of this that whole chapter is so full, that I challenge any one who reads it to think I have almost, or one jot discarded substance out of the reasonable part of the world. And of this, man, horse, sun, water, iron, diamond, &c. which I have mentioned of distinct sorts of substances, will be my witnesses as long as any such thing remains in being; of which I say, “† that the ideas of substances are such combinations of simple ideas as are taken to represent distinct, particular things, subsisting by themselves, in which the supposed or confused idea of substance is always the first and chief.”

If by almost discarding substance out of the reasonable

* B. ii. c. 23. § 22. † B. ii. c. 12. § 6.

part of the world your lordship means, that I have destroyed, and almost discarded the true idea we have of it, by calling it “* a substratum, a supposition of we know not what support of such qualities as are capable of producing simple ideas in us; an obscure and relative idea: that without knowing what it is, it is that which supports accidents; so that of substance we have no idea of what it is, but only a confused and obscure one, of what it does;” I must confess this, and the like I have said of our idea of substance; and should be very glad to be convinced by your lordship, or any-body else, that I have spoken too meanly of it. He that would show me a more clear and distinct idea of substance, would do me a kindness I should thank him for. But this is the best I can hitherto find, either in my own thoughts, or in the books of logicians: for their account or idea of it is, that it is “Ens,” or “res per se subsistens et substans accidentibus;” which in effect is no more, but that substance is a being or thing; or, in short, something they know not what, or of which they have no clearer idea, than that it is something which supports accidents, or other simple ideas or modes, and is not supported itself as a mode or an accident. So that I do not see but Burgersdicius, Sanderson, and the whole tribe of logicians, must be reckoned with “the gentlemen of this new way of reasoning, who have almost discarded substance out of the reasonable part of the world.”

But supposing, my lord, that I or these gentlemen, logicians of note in the schools, should own, that we have a very imperfect, obscure, inadequate idea of substance; would it not be a little too hard to charge us with discarding substance out of the world? For what almost discarding, and reasonable part of the world, signify, I must confess I do not clearly comprehend: but let almost, and reasonable part, signify here what they will, for I dare say your lordship meant something by them, would not your lordship think you were a little too hardly dealt with, if for acknowledging yourself to have a very imperfect and inadequate idea of God, or

* B. ii. c. 23. § 1. § 2. § 3. B. ii. c. 13. § 19.

of several other things which, in this very treatise, you confess our understandings come short in and cannot comprehend, you should be accused to be one of these gentlemen that have almost discarded God, or those other mysterious things, whereof you contend we have very imperfect and inadequate ideas, out of the reasonable world? For I suppose your lordship means by almost discarding out of the reasonable world something that is blamable, for it seems not to be inserted for a commendation; and yet I think he deserves no blame, who owns the having imperfect, inadequate, obscure ideas, where he has no better: however, if it be inferred from thence, that either he almost excludes those things out of being, or out of rational discourse, if that be meant by the reasonable world; for the first of these will not hold, because the being of things in the world depends not on our ideas: the latter indeed is true, in some degree, but is no fault; for it is certain, that where we have imperfect, inadequate, confused, obscure ideas, we cannot discourse and reason about those things so well, fully, and clearly, as if we had perfect, adequate, clear, and distinct ideas.

Your lordship, I must own, with great reason, takes notice that I paralleled, more than once, our idea of substance with the Indian philosopher's he-knew-not-what, which supported the tortoise, &c.

This repetition is, I confess, a fault in exact writing: but I have acknowledged and excused it in these words in my preface: “I am not ignorant how little I herein consult my own reputation, when I knowingly let my Essay go with a fault so apt to disgust the most judicious, who are always the nicest readers.” And there further add, “that I did not publish my Essay for such great masters of knowledge as your lordship; but fitted it to men of my own size, to whom repetitions might be sometimes useful.” It would not therefore have been besides your lordship's generosity (who were not intended to be provoked by the repetition) to have passed by such a fault as this, in one who pretends not beyond the lower rank of writers. But I see your lordship would have me exact and without any faults; and I

wish I could be so, the better to deserve your lordship's approbation.

My saying, "that when we talk of substance, we talk like children; who being asked a question about something, which they know not, readily give this satisfactory answer, that it is something;" your lordship seems mightily to lay to heart, in these words that follow:

"If this be the truth of the case, we must still talk like children, and I know not how it can be remedied. For if we cannot come at a rational idea of substance, we can have no principle of certainty to go upon in this debate."

If your lordship has any better and distincter idea of substance than mine is, which I have given an account of, your lordship is not at all concerned in what I have there said. But those whose idea of substance, whether a rational or not rational idea, is like mine, something he knows not what, must in that, with me, talk like children, when they speak of something they know not what. For a philosopher that says, that which supports accidents is something he knows not what; and a countryman that says, the foundation of the church at Harlem is supported by something he-knows-not-what; and a child that stands in the dark upon his mother's muff, and says he stands upon something he-knows-not-what; in this respect talk all three alike. But if the countryman knows that the foundation of the church at Harlem is supported by a rock, as the houses about Bristol are; or by gravel, as the houses about London are; or by wooden piles, as the houses in Amsterdam are; it is plain, that then, having a clear and distinct idea of the thing that supports the church, he does not talk of this matter as a child; nor will he of the support of accidents, when he has a clearer and more distinct idea of it, than that it is barely something. But as long as we think like children, in cases where our ideas are no clearer nor distincter than theirs, I agree with your lordship, that I know not how it can be remedied, but that we must talk like them.

Your lordship's next paragraph begins thus: "I do not say, that we can have a clear idea of substance, either by sensation or reflection; but from hence I argue, that this is a very insufficient distribution of the ideas necessary to reason."

Your lordship here argues against a proposition that I know nobody that holds: I am sure the author of the *Essay of Human Understanding* never thought, nor in that *Essay* hath any where said, that the ideas that come into the mind by sensation and reflection are all the ideas that are necessary to reason, or that reason is exercised about; for then he must have laid by all the ideas of simple and mixed modes and relations, and the complex ideas of the species of substances, about which he has spent so many chapters; and must have denied that these complex ideas are the objects of men's thoughts or reasonings, which he is far enough from. All that he has said about sensation and reflection is, that all our simple ideas are received by them, and that these simple ideas are the foundation of all our knowledge, forasmuch as all our complex, relative, and general ideas are made by the mind, abstracting, enlarging, comparing, compounding, and referring, &c. these simple ideas, and their several combinations, one to another; whereby complex and general ideas are formed of modes, relations, and the several species of substances, all which are made use of by reason, as well as the other faculties of the mind.

I therefore agree with your lordship, that the ideas of sensation or reflection is a very insufficient distribution of the ideas necessary to reason. Only my agreement with your lordship had been more entire to the whole sentence, if your lordship had rather said, ideas made use of by reason; because I do not well know what is meant by ideas necessary to reason. For reason being a faculty of the mind, nothing, in my poor opinion, can properly be said to be necessary to that faculty, but what is required to its being. As nothing is necessary to sight in a man, but such a constitution of the body and organ, that a man may have the power of seeing; so I submit it to your lordship, whether any thing can properly be

said to be necessary to reason in a man, but such a constitution of body or mind, or both, as may give him the power of reasoning. Indeed, such a particular sort of objects or instruments may be sometimes said to be necessary to the eye, but it is never said in reference to the faculty of seeing, but in reference to some particular end of seeing; and then a microscope and a mite may be necessary to the eye, if the end proposed be to know the shape and parts of that animal. And so if a man would reason about substance, then the idea of substance is necessary to his reason: but yet I doubt not but that many a rational creature has been, who, in all his life, never bethought himself of any necessity his reason had of an idea of substance.

Your lordship's next words are; "for besides these, there must be some general ideas which the mind doth form, not by mere comparing those ideas it has got from sense or reflection, but by forming distinct general notions of things from particular ideas."

Here, again, I perfectly agree with your lordship, that besides the particular ideas received from sensation and reflection, the mind "forms general ideas, not by mere comparing those ideas it has got by sensation and reflection;" for this I do not remember I ever said. But this I say, "* ideas become general, by separating from them the circumstances of time and place, and any other ideas that may determine them to this or that particular existence. By this way of abstraction they are made," &c. And to the same purpose I explain myself in another place †.

Your lordship says, "the mind forms general ideas, by forming general notions of things from particular ideas." And I say, "the mind forms general ideas, abstracting from particular ones." So that there is no difference that I perceive between us in this matter, but only a little in expression.

It follows, "and amongst these general notions, or rational ideas, substance is one of the first; because we find, that we can have no true conceptions of any

* B. iii. c. 3. § 6.

† B. i. c. 11. § 9.

modes or accidents (no matter which) but we must conceive a substratum, or subject wherein they are. Since it is a repugnancy to our first conceptions of things, that modes or accidents should subsist by themselves; and therefore the rational idea of substance is one of the first and most natural ideas in our minds."

Whether the general idea of substance be one of the first or most natural ideas in our minds, I will not dispute with your lordship, as not being, I think, very material to the matter in hand. But as to the idea of substance, what it is, and how we come by it, your lordship says, "it is a repugnancy to our conceptions of things, that modes and accidents should subsist by themselves; and therefore we must conceive a substratum wherein they are."

And, I say, "* because we cannot conceive how simple ideas of sensible qualities should subsist alone, or one in another, we suppose them existing in, and supported by, some common subject." Which I, with your lordship, call also substratum †.

What can be more consonant to itself, than what your lordship and I have said in these two passages is consonant to one another? Whereupon, my lord, give me leave, I beseech you, to boast to the world, that what I have said concerning our general idea of substance, and the way how we come by it, has the honour to be confirmed by your lordship's authority. And that from hence I may be sure the saying, [that the general idea we have of substance is, that it is a substratum or support to modes or accidents, wherein they do subsist: and that the mind forms it, because it cannot conceive how they should subsist of themselves,] has no objection in it against the Trinity; for then your lordship will not, I know, be of that opinion, nor own it in a chapter where you are answering objections against the Trinity; however my words, which amount to no more, have been (I know not how) brought into that chapter: though what they have to do there, I must confess to your lordship, I do not yet see.

* B. ii. c. 23. § 4. † Ibid. § 1.

In the next words your lordship says, "but we are still told, that our understanding can have no other ideas, but either from sensation or reflection."

The words of that section your lordship quotes, are these: "* the understanding seems to me, not to have the least glimmering of any ideas, which it doth not receive from one of these two. External objects furnish the mind with the ideas of sensible qualities, which are all those different perceptions they produce in us: and the mind furnishes the understanding with ideas of its own operations. These, when we have taken a full survey of them, and their several modes, and the compositions made out of them, we shall find to contain all our own stock of ideas; and that we have nothing in our minds which did not come in one of those two ways. Let any one examine his own thoughts, and thoroughly search into his own understanding, and then let him tell me, whether all the original ideas he has there, are any other than of the objects of his senses, or of the operations of his mind, considered as objects of his reflection: and how great a mass of knowledge soever he imagines to be lodged there, he will, upon taking a strict view, see, that he has not any idea in his mind but what one of these two have imprinted, though, perhaps, with infinite variety compounded and enlarged by the understanding, as we shall see hereafter."

These words seem to me to signify something different from what your lordship has cited out of them; and if they do not, were intended, I am sure, by me, to signify all those complex ideas of modes, relations, and specific substances, which how the mind itself forms out of simple ideas, I have showed in the following part of my book; and intended to refer to it by these words, "as we shall see hereafter," with which I close that paragraph. But if by ideas your lordship signifies simple ideas, in the words you have set down, I grant then they contain my sense, viz. "that our understandings can have (that is, in the natural exercise of our faculties)

* B. ii. c. 1. § 5.

no other simple ideas, but either from sensation or reflection."

Your lordship goes on: "and [we are still told] that herein chiefly lies the excellency of mankind above brutes, that these cannot abstract and enlarge ideas, as men do."

Had your lordship done me the favour to have quoted the place in my book, from whence you had taken these words, I should not have been at a loss to find them. Those in my book, which I can remember any where come nearest to them, run thus:

"This, I think, I may be positive in, that the power of abstracting is not at all in brutes; and that the having of general ideas is that which puts a perfect distinction betwixt man and brutes; and is an excellency which the faculties of brutes do by no means attain to*."

Though, speaking of the faculties of the human understanding, I took occasion, by the by, to conjecture how far brutes partook with men in any of the intellectual faculties; yet it never entered into my thoughts, on that occasion, to compare the utmost perfections of human nature with that of brutes, and therefore was far from saying, "herein chiefly lies the excellency of mankind above brutes, that these cannot abstract and enlarge their ideas, as men do." For it seems to me an absurdity I would not willingly be guilty of, to say, that "the excellency of mankind lies chiefly, or any ways in this, that brutes cannot abstract." For brutes not being able to do any thing, cannot be any excellency of mankind. The ability of mankind does not lie in the impotency or disabilities of brutes. If your lordship had charged me to have said, that herein lies one excellency of mankind above brutes, viz. that men can, and brutes cannot abstract, I must have owned it to be my sense; but what I ought to say to what your lordship approved or disapproved of in it, I shall better understand, when I know to what purpose your lordship was pleased to cite it.

The immediately following paragraph runs thus:

* B. ii. c. 11. § 10.

