

John Locke:

Of the Conduct of the Understanding

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Section 03. Reasoning. Besides the want of determined ideas [010] and of sagacity and exercise in finding out and laying in order intermediate ideas, [011] there are three miscarriages that men are guilty of in reference to their reason, whereby this faculty is hindered in them from that service it might do and was designed for. And he that reflects upon the actions and discourses of mankind will find their defects in this kind very frequent and very observable.

- (i) The first is of those who seldom reason at all, but do and think according to the example of others, whether parents, neighbors, ministers or who else they are pleased to make choice of to have an implicit faith in for the saving of themselves the pains and trouble of thinking and examining for themselves.
- (ii) The second is of those who put passion in the place of reason and, being resolved that shall govern their actions and arguments, neither use their own nor hearken to other people's reason any further than it suits their humour, interest or party; and these, one may observe, commonly content themselves with words which have no distinct ideas to them, though in other matters that they come with an unbiased indifference to they want not abilities to talk and hear reason, where they have no secret inclination that hinders them from being tractable [012] to it.
- (iii) The third sort is of those who readily and sincerely follow reason but, for want of having that which one may call large, sound, roundabout sense, have not a full view of all that relates to the question and may be of moment to decide it. We are all shortsighted and very often see but one side of a matter; our views are not extended to all that has a connection with it. From this defect I think no man is free. We see but in part and we know but in part, and therefore it is no wonder we conclude not right from our partial views. This might instruct the proudest esteemer of his own parts how useful it is to talk and consult with others, even such as came short of him in

capacity, quickness and penetration; for since no one sees all and we generally have different prospects of the same thing according to our different, as I may say, positions to it, it is not incongruous to think nor beneath any man to try whether another may not have notions of things which have escaped him and which his reason would make use of if they came into his mind. The faculty of reasoning seldom or never deceives those who trust to it; its consequences from what it builds on are evident and certain; but that which it oftenest, if not only, misleads us in is that the principles from which we conclude, the grounds upon which we bottom our reasoning are but a part; something is left out which should go into the reckoning to make it just and exact. Here we may imagine a vast and almost infinite advantage that angels and separate spirits may have over us, who in their several degrees of elevation above us may be endowed with more comprehensive faculties and some of them perhaps have perfect and exact views of all finite beings that come under their consideration, can, as it were, in the twinkling of an eye collect together all their scattered and almost boundless relations. A mind so furnished, what reason has it to acquiesce in the certainty of its conclusions!

In this we may see the reason why some men of study and thought that reason right and are lovers of truth do make no great advances in their discoveries of it. Error and truth are uncertainly blended in their minds; their decisions are lame and defective, and they are very often mistaken in their judgments; the reason whereof is, they converse but with one sort of men, they read but one sort of books, they will not come in the hearing but of one sort of notions; the truth is, they canton out to themselves a little Goshen [013] in the intellectual world where light shines and, as they conclude, day blesses them; but the rest of that vast expansion they give up to night and darkness and so avoid coming near it. They have a pretty tragic with known correspondents in some little creek; within that they confine themselves and are dexterous managers enough of the wares and products of that corner with which they content themselves, but will not venture out into the great ocean of knowledge to surveys the riches that nature has stored other parts with, no less genuine, no less solid, no less useful than what has fallen to their lot in the admired plenty and sufficiency of their own little spot, which to them contains whatsoever is good in the universe. Those who live thus mewed up within their own contracted territories and will not look abroad beyond the boundaries that chance, conceit or laziness has set to their enquiries, but live separate from the notions, discourses and attainments of the rest of mankind, may not amiss be represented by the inhabitants of the Mariana Islands,

[014] which, being separate by a large tract of sea from all communion with the habitable parts of the earth, thought themselves the only people of the world. And though the straitness of the conveniences of life amongst them had never reached so far as to the use of fire till the Spaniards, not many years since, in their voyages from Acapulco to Manilla brought it amongst them, yet in the want and ignorance of almost all things they looked upon themselves, even after that the Spaniards had brought amongst them the notice of variety of nations abounding in sciences, arts and conveniences of life of which they knew nothing, they looked upon themselves, I say, as the happiest and wisest people of the universe. But for all that, nobody, I think, will imagine them deep naturalists or solid metaphysicians; nobody will deem the quickest sighted amongst them to have very enlarged views in ethics or politics; nor can anyone allow the most capable amongst them to be advanced so far in his understanding as to have any other knowledge but of the few little things of his and the neighboring islands within his commerce, [015] but far enough from that comprehensive enlargement of mind which adorns a soul devoted to truth, assisted with letters and a free consideration of the several views and sentiments of thinking men of all sides. Let not men therefore that would have a sight of what everyone pretends to be desirous to have a sight of, truth in its full extent, narrow and blind their own prospect. Let not men think there is no truth but in the sciences that they study or the books that they read. To prejudge other men's notions before we have looked into them is not to show their darkness but to put out our own eyes.

"Try all things, hold fast that which is good" [016] is a divine rule coming from the Father of light and truth; and it is hard to know what other Bay men may come at truth, to lay hold of it, if they do not dig and search for it as for gold and hid treasure; but he that does so must have much earth and rubbish before he gets the pure metal; sand and pebbles and dross usually lie blended with it, but the gold is nevertheless gold and will enrich the man that employs his pains to seek and separate it. Neither is there any danger he should be deceived by the mixture. Every man carries about him a touchstone, if he will make use of it, to distinguish substantial gold from superficial glitterings, truth from appearances. And indeed the use and benefit of this touchstone, which is natural reason, is spoiled and lost only by assumed prejudices, overweening presumption and narrowing our minds. The want of exercising it in the full extent of things intelligible is that which weakens and extinguishes this noble faculty in us. Trace it and see whether it be not so. The day laborer in a country village has commonly but a small pittance of knowledge because his ideas and notions have been confined to

the narrow bounds of a poor conversation and employment; the low mechanic of a country town does somewhat outdo him; porters and cobblers of great cities surpass them. A country gentleman who, leaving Latin and learning in the university, removes thence to his mansion house and associates with neighbors of the same strain, who relish nothing but hunting and a bottle with those alone he spends his time, with those alone he converses and can away with no company whose discourse goes beyond what claret and dissoluteness inspire. Such a patriot, formed in this happy way of improvement, cannot fail, as you see, to give notable decisions upon the bench at quarter sessions and eminent proofs of his skill in politics, when the strength of his purse and party have advanced him to a more conspicuous station. To such a one truly an ordinary coffee-house cleaner of the city is an errant [017] statesman, and as much superior to, as a man conversant about Whitehall [018] and the Court is to an ordinary shopkeeper. To carry this a little further. Here is one muffled up in the zeal and infallibility of his own sect and will not touch a book or enter into debate with a person that will question any of those things which to him are sacred. Another surveys our differences in religion with an equitable and fair indifference, and so finds probably that none of them are in everything unexceptionable. These decisions and systems were made by men and carry the mark of fallible on them; and in those whom he differs from, and till he opened his eyes had a general prejudice against, he meets with more to be said for a great many things than before he was aware of or could have imagined. Which of these two now is most likely to judge right in our religious controversies and to be most stored with truth, the mark all pretend to aim at? **All these men that I have instanced in, thus unequally furnished with truth and advanced in knowledge, I suppose of equal natural parts;** all the odds between them has been the different scope that has been given to their understandings to range in, for the gathering up of information and furnishing their heads with ideas, notions and observations whereon to employ their minds and form their understandings.

It will possibly be objected, Who is sufficient for all this? I answer, more than can be imagined. Everyone knows what his proper business is and what, according to the character he makes of himself, the world may justly expect of him; and to answer that, he will find he will have time and opportunity enough to furnish himself, if he will not deprive himself by a narrowness of spirit of those helps that are at hand. I do not say to be a good geographer that a man should visit every mountain, river, promontory and creel; upon the face of the earth, view the buildings and survey the land

everywhere, as if he were going to make a purchase. But yet everyone must allow that he shall know a country better that makes often sallies into it and traverses it up and down than he that, like a mill-horse, goes still round in the same tract or keeps within the narrow bounds of a field or two that delight him. He that will enquire out the best books in every science and inform himself of the most material authors of the several sects of philosophy and religion, will not find it an infinite work to acquaint himself with the sentiments of mankind concerning the most weighty and comprehensive subjects. **Let him exercise the freedom of his reason and understanding in such a latitude as this, and his mind will be strengthened, his capacity enlarged, his faculties improved; and the light which the remote and scattered parts of truth will give to one another still so assist his judgment, that he will seldom be widely out or miss giving proof of a clear head and a comprehensive knowledge. At least, this is the only way I know to give the understanding its due improvement to the full extent of its capacity, and to distinguish the two most different things I know in the world, a logical chicaner [019] from a man of reason.** Only, he that would thus give the mind its flight and send abroad his enquiries into all parts after truth must be sure to settle in his head determined ideas [020] of all that he employs his thoughts about, and never fail to judge himself and judge unbiasedly of all that he receives from others either in their writings or discourses. Reverence or prejudice must not be suffered to give beauty or deformity to any of their opinions