

REMARKS

UPON AN

ESSAY

CONCERNING

Humane Understanding:

IN A

LETTER

Address'd to the Author.

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R E M A R K S

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E S S A Y

C O N C E R N I N G

Humane Understanding.

S I R,

I Am always best pleas'd with that Philosophy, and those Speculations, that have the fairest Aspect upon Morality and Religion, and so I know you are. You know also, that Principles, not inconsistent with these Sacred Things, may yet fall short, or lay no good Foundation for the Proof of them. I shou'd be very willing to be convinc'd that the *Principles of Humane Understanding*, as you have represented them in your ingenious Essay, are not of this Nature. I know they are not so intentionally; but according to the best Improvements that I can make of them, I do not find that they will reach so far, as to

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give us a firm and full Basis for Morality, the certainty of *Reveal'd Religion*, and the *Immortality of the Soul* of Man. I say, I do not find: for it does not follow from thence, that the learned Author cannot make better Deductions from them than I can, and extend them farther, and with more Force. I know, and see by daily Experience, that a Person that hath a particular Genius and Inclination for such and such Principles, or such an Art or Science, can carry it farther than another that has not that Talent. If I had all the Tools and Materials fit for making a good Watch, I cou'd not make it like an Artist: And therefore I never judge of another Man's Abilities by my own, but by the Proof he gives of his Art and Judgment.

Your general Principle of picking up all our Knowledge from our five Senses, I confess does not sit easily in my Thoughts, tho' you joyn Reflection to help us. I think the illiterate part of Mankind (which is far the greatest part) must have more compendious ways to know their Duty, than by long and obscure Deductions. But that is not the Business of this Letter. My Intention, at present, is only to be informed how far all the Principles of that ingenious Essay taken together, will give us a sure Foundation for *Morality, Revealed Religion*, and a *future Life*. As to Morality, we think the great Foundation of it is, the Distinction of Good and Evil, Virtue and Vice, *Turpis & Honesti*, as they are usually call'd: And I do not find that my Eyes, Ears, Nostrils, or any other outward Senses, make any Distinction of these Things, as they

( 5 )

they do of Sounds, Colours, Scents, or other outward Objects; nor from any Idea's taken in from them, or from their Reports, am I conscious that I do conclude, or can conclude, that there is such a Distinction in the Nature of Things; or that it consists only in Pleasure and Pain, Conveniency and Inconveniency. I allow that you may infer from Observation and Reason, that such a Distinction is useful to Society and Governments: but so the Politicians say, and that this is the only Bottom of Morality and Religion. Both Divines and Philosophers, you know, make a more immutable and intrinsic Distinction, which is that I cannot make out from your Principles. If this Distinction be a Delusion to us, 'tis such a one as I cannot help or discover: This I am sure of, that the Distinction, suppose of Gratitude and Ingratitude, Fidelity and Infidelity, Justice and Injustice, and such others, is as sudden without any Ratiocination, and as sensible and piercing, as the difference I feel from the Scent of a Rose, and of *Assa-fœtida*. 'Tis not like a Theorem, which we come to know by the help of precedent Demonstrations and Postulatum, but it rises as quick as any of our Passions, or as Laughter at the sight of a ridiculous Accident or Object. But I will leave this to your farther Explication: And you having signified, in several parts of your Treatise, that you think *Morality* as capable of Demonstration, as *Mathematicks*; this gives me reason to suspect that it is not the deficiency of your Principles, but my own short-sightedness, that makes me at a loss, how to discern that Evidence, or make out that Demonstration, from your Grounds.

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Pag. 121.  
§. 2.

Pag. 294.  
§. 16.  
Pag. 314.  
§. 18.  
Pag. 369  
§. 8.

You allow, I think, *Moral Good and Evil* to be such antecedently to all Human Laws : but you suppose them to be such ( if I understand you right ) by the Divine Law. To know your Mind farther, give me leave to ask , What is the Reason or Ground of that Divine Law ? Whether the Arbitrary Will of God, The good of Men, or the intrinsic Nature of the Things themselves : If I knew upon which of these three Grounds you wou'd build your Demonstration of Morality, I could better make a Judgment of it. You seem ( p. 192. §. 5. ) to resolve all into the Will and Power of the Law-Maker : But has the Will of the Law-Maker no Rule to go by ? And is not that which is a Rule to his Will, a Rule also to ours, and indeed the Original Rule ?—But I can proceed in this no farther till I see more fully what your Notion of Morality is, and in what Method you pursue it to a Demonstration.

As to *Revealed Religion*, my Difficulty is only this, how it can be prov'd from your Principles, that the Author of the Revelation is *Veracious*. The Truth of the Revelation, you know, depends upon the Veracity of the Revealer, and this I think our outward Senses cannot tell us, nor any reflection upon their Idea's. You will say possibly, that Miracles and the completion of Prophecies, are sensible Effects which accompany the Revelation ; and from these we infer that the Author of them and it, is powerful and knowing. I allow the Inference so far as it goes, but how do we know from these Effects, That Being to be *Veracious*

*cious* as well as Powerful and Knowing ? I mean *Veracious* in all things propos'd to us in this way, and in all the Parts and Promises of the Revelation.

To consider and propose this Matter more at large, 'Tis not enough ( as I judge ) for our satisfaction, and to establish the certainty of Reveal'd Religion, that we know the Physical or Metaphysical Attributes of the Divine Nature : we must also know its Moral Attributes, as I may so call them ; such as Goodness, Justice, Holiness, and particularly Veracity. Now, these I am not able to deduce or make out from your Principles. You have prov'd very well an Eternal, All-powerful, and All-knowing-Being : but how this supreme Being will treat us, we cannot be assur'd from these Attributes. If you say we know that by Revelation, then the Question returns, How do we know the Truth of that Revelation ? We must not take it from the Report of that Revelation it self, for then we argue in a Circle : And it must be collected from some other Attributes, than the bare Power and Knowledge of the Revealer.

If you say Veracity is a Perfection, and consequently must belong to the Nature of God : I think so too according to my Principles : but I do not find that you make use of that Argument, nor do I remember, amongst those many Idea's and Significations of Words, which you have stated and defin'd, that you have any where told us what *Perfection* is ; what its Idea or Definition. If it be from this Head that you wou'd deduce

the Veracity of God, 'tis necessary you shou'd tell us what is to be understood by *Perfection* in your Way : how it is deriv'd from the Senses, and how it includes Veracity.

Where you mention the perfections of God, you take no Notice of Veracity. And in that long Catalogue of Idea's, you have given an Account of, I do not perceive, as I said before, that you have any where told us what is the Idea of Perfection, what it contains, or how it is formed : though it be a Name and Notion generally receiv'd, and of more Importance than many of those Idea's you have so curiously anatomiz'd. And to add that in the last place, not only the Truth of Revelation, but also of our Faculties in other Things, depends upon the Veracity of their Author.

The Immortality of the Soul, was a third Thing which I cou'd not clear to my self, upon your Principles. You suppose that the Soul may be sometimes absolutely without thoughts of one kind or other ; and also that God may, if he pleases, (for any thing we know by the Light of Nature) give, or have given to some Systems of Matter, a Power to conceive and think. Upon these two Suppositions, I cou'd not make out any certain proof of the immortality of the Soul, and am apt to think it cannot be done.

As to the First : I wonder how you can observe that your Soul sometimes does not think ; for when you do observe it, you think. If a man cou'd think and not think at the same time, he might be

be able to make this Observation. But howsoever that be, I do not understand how the Soul, if she be at any time utterly without Thoughts, what it is that produces the first Thought again, at the end of that unthinking Interval. You say Matter cannot produce a Thought ; and you say an unthinking Substance cannot produce a Thought : and I know nothing in ( unthinking ) Man, but one of these two. What is it then that lights the Candle again, when it is put out ? Besides, I am utterly at a loss how to frame any Idea of a dead Soul, or of a Spirit without Life or Thoughts. What is the Soul when she does not think ? what Idea or Definition can you give of her in that State ? she must be actually something if she exist. She must then have some Properties whereby she may be defin'd or describ'd ; something whereby she is distinguish'd from Nothing, and from Matter. Then after all, What Security can we have upon this Supposition, that we shall not fall into this Sleep at Death ? and so continue without Life or Thought ? And bare being is but the immortality of a senseless Stone. You think also which is more surprising, that Angels sleep by fits. If Angels have Bodies, there may be some pretence for this : but if they have no Bodies, they can have no Fumes or Vapors that cause Sleep, nor any waft of Spirits to be recruited. Besides, according to your Opinion we know nothing of Angels but by Revelation, and where does that Revelation tell you that these active Spirits sleep or slumber ? or dream, as you and I do sometimes. And after all, the common Difficulty still returns ; How they awake, and how they

Pag. 44. they pass from their unthinking State, to a thinking State again ; which is always to be consider'd. You compare Cogitation in a Spirit, to Motion in a Body, and so Cessation from Thought in a Spirit, must answer to Rest in a Body. Now, when a Body is in Rest, there must be some Cause to put it into Motion; I enquire therefore what that Cause is, which in the quietism of a Spirit ( Humane or Angelical ) or State of Non-cogitation, brings it to Thoughts again.

But whatsoever you fancy concerning the Sleep of Angels, or of the Soul, I am satisfy'd that it is no sufficient Argument to prove that we have no Thoughts in our Sleep, because we do not always remember them; for the same thing happens to us often when we are awake. If we shou'd observe *Pythagoras* his Rule, to call our selves to an account every Evening, for the Actions and Thoughts of that Day, I believe we shou'd find many vacant Spaces within the compass of a Day, which we cou'd not fill up with Thoughts, nor call to mind what we did or mus'd upon every Minute or Hour. Many fleeting Thoughts pass through the Soul without Observation, and leave no Trace or Idea behind them; and accordingly we forget sometimes in a trice what we had done just before. I'm sure in one Instance this often happens to me, I often go to wind up my Watch again, when I had wound it up not ten Minutes before. And the same thing may be observ'd in many other Instances. Nay, even in Matters of immediate sensation, we sometimes do  
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not perceive that which plainly is expos'd to our Senses; we overlook a thing that lies before our Eyes, and we seek for that which we hold in our Hands. What does not strike us with some Briskness, we little mind when present, and less remember when past and absent. If while we are awake these things happen to us, methinks it cannot be expected, that we shou'd attend and remember all our sleepy Thoughts, when the Impressions are more dull and faint: The Thoughts wandring, fortuitous, and commonly inconnected one with another. When the Impressions happen to be strong, so as to excite Pain, or Pleasure, or any Passion, we remember them, and many times they awake us. But if they are weak, as generally they are in Sleep, we think no more of them. But yet it often happens that next Day, or some Days after, some Accident or Discourse brings to our Mind such a Dream; which, without that Occasion, wou'd have quite slipt our Memory, and wou'd never have been recall'd or thought of again. This shews that we may dream of many things that we do not remember, without some particular Occasion. The Brain in Sleep is moist, something like that of Infants or Children: And you wou'd put a Child to a hard Task, to tell you at Night, all that had pass'd that Day in his Play or his Talk, and much more in his Thoughts. So I should think you a hard Task-Master, if you shou'd put us to count to you all the childish Thoughts we had in the silent Night, and in a sound Sleep.

But to return to the Soul and its Immortality, which is our great Concern. Whether the Soul be, or be not, a distinct Substance from the Body, I do not perceive that her Immortality can be prov'd by your Principles. If she be not distinct from the Matter of the Body, when that is corrupted and dissolv'd, 'tis manifest she must be dissolv'd also. And if she be a Substance, distinct from Matter, however you say she is sometimes without Thoughts, or any manner of Operation; why then may she not be so (according to this Doctrine) after Death, thoughtless and senseless, and so without Life? 'Tis some comfort indeed that we shall at length return to Life at the Resurrection: but I know not how you explain that; nor how far you allow us to be the *same Men*, and the *same Persons* then that we are now: If our Bodies be chang'd, from what they are now, both as to Particles, Shape and Consistency: Unless, I say you will allow the same Soul, with the same Habits and Dispositions, to be the same Man, the same Person, whether its Body be the same or no, I know not how you conceive the Resurrection. But I confess I do not understand what that Discourse about the Identity or Non-identity of the same Man, sleeping and waking, and about *Castor* and *Pollux*, what I say, it aims at and tends to. You seem to be very nice and scholastick, about the Notions of Homogeneity, as I may so say; Personality, and individual Identity or Non-identity: but not seeing what

pag. 44,  
45, &c.  
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what that Discourse drives at, I say no more of it till I have farther Light.

I proceed now to the second Supposition, which I think weakens the Proof of the Immortality of the Soul: when you say God may give and may have given, for any thing we know, a thinking Power to Matter, or Perception and Cogitation to some Systemes of Matter. If this may be done, How do we know that it is not done? or that our Soul is not Matter? If Matter be capable of such a Power, I do not see why it shou'd not have it, that every thing may be improv'd according to its best Capacities. And by this means, that Order of Beings, which we call Spirits, wou'd be superfluous, seeing Matter alone may perform all their Operations. That a Spirit of higher or lower Degree, may think in Matter, all will grant: but that Cogitation shou'd be a Property or Modification of Matter it self, that is to me unconceivable. I can conceive nothing in Matter (at present) nor any other finite Being, but Substance, Modes, or Relations; and how Cogitation, or *vis Cogitans*, shou'd be (in Matter) any of these, I cannot apprehend, according to the Idea I have, either of Matter or Cogitation.

But there is still a farther Doubt or Difficulty in this Case, even as to the Nature of God and his Immateriality. I'm afraid the Materialists will profit too much from that Notion or Concession, that Matter may think: For, say they, if Matter be capable of thinking, it may have

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Will and Understanding, and any other Faculty of a thinking Substance, and in any Degree of spiritual Perfection, and consequently may be God ; at least we have a fair Chance for it ; what it is capable of, it may have fatally, or it may be connate for any thing we know ; there being no Contradiction in the Case. You seem to think that Matter is as truly capable of Cogitation, as of Notion : and if one be connate, as we think it may be, the other may be so also.

They will further argue with you thus. You say you have no Idea of the Substance of Matter, nor know what Properties may flow from it : you do not know then, whether it includes Cogitation, or excludes it ? So we have, say they, again a fair Chance for it, seeing you acknowledge that we have no Idea of the Substance of Matter that excludes Cogitation, and consequently the supreme Cogitant-Being may be Matter, for any thing we know.

Upon the whole, as you seem to acknowledge that your Proof of the Immateriality of the Soul, does amount no higher than Probability ; so I'm afraid your Proof of the Immateriality of God, or any Proof that can be deduc'd from your principles, will rise no higher than Probability. Tho' I think you some where say, that you have demonstrated that *God is immaterial*. I heartily wish it, and that the Doubts I have suggested only to provoke a clearer Proof, may be effectually satisfy'd.

Sir,

Sir, These are some of those Reflections I made in reading your learned Treatise, and if I have mistaken or misrepresented your mind in any thing, 'tis, I'll assure you, not willingly, nor for want of Respect to the Author,

S I R,

Memorandum, I always  
cite the Third Edition.

Your most Humble Servant.

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