



## Mind as White Paper John Locke

*Today we speak of the mind with casual assurance, as though it had the same concrete and tangible existence as a finger or an eye. We inherit this assurance from the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, known as the Age of Reason—a time of practical common sense with little patience for such cloudy concepts as the notions of mind which linked it, on the one hand, with soul or spirit, and, on the other, with actual bodily organs. Either the mind was a separate entity or it did not exist; and if it existed it could be explained in concrete terms. John Locke's "The Mind as White Paper" expresses the central definition of mind for the Age of Reason. It describes the mind as a passive agent shaped by two forces, experience and observation. Mind is therefore a product of living; it does not come from a mysterious world of spirit. In this view the mind is as tangible as a test tube — and just as passive, taking on color and meaning only from what is poured into it.*

1. Idea is the object of thinking. — Every man being conscious to himself that he thinks, and that which his mind is applied about whilst thinking being the ideas that are there, it is past doubt that men have in their mind several ideas, such as are those expressed by the words "whiteness," "hardness," "sweetness," "thinking," "motion," "man," "elephant," "army," "drunkenness," and others. It is in the first place then to be inquired, how he comes by them. I know it is a received doctrine that men have native ideas and original characters stamped upon their minds in their very first being. This opinion I have at large examined already; and I suppose what I have said in the foregoing book [An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Book I] will be much more easily admitted, when I have shown whence the understanding may get all the ideas it has, and by what ways and degrees they may come into the mind; for which I shall appeal to every one's own observation and experience.

2. All ideas come from sensation or reflection. — Let us then, suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas; how comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store which the busy and boundless fancy of man has painted on it with an almost endless variety? Whence has it all the materials of reason and knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, from experience; in that all our knowledge is founded, and from that it ultimately derives itself. Our observation, employed either about external sensible objects, or about the internal operations of our minds, perceived and reflected on by ourselves, is that which supplies our understandings with all the materials of thinking. These two are the fountains of knowledge, from whence all the ideas we have, or can naturally have, do spring.

3. The objects of sensation one source of ideas. — First, our senses, conversant about particular sensible objects, do convey into the mind several distinct perceptions of things, according to those various ways wherein those objects do affect them; and thus we come by those ideas we have, of yellow, white, heat, cold, soft, hard, bitter, sweet, and all those which we call sensible qualities; which when I say the senses convey into the mind, I mean they from

external objects convey into the mind what produces there those perceptions. This great source of most of the ideas we have, depending wholly upon our senses, and derived by them to the understanding, I call “sensation.”

4. The operations of our minds, the other source of them. — Secondly, the other fountain, from which experience furnishes the understanding with ideas, is the perception of the operations of our own mind within us, as it is employed about the ideas it has got; which operations, when the soul comes to reflect on and consider, do furnish the understanding with another set of ideas, which could not be had from things without; and such are perception, thinking, doubting, believing, reasoning, knowing, willing, and all the different actings of our own minds; which we being conscious of, and observing in ourselves, do from these receive into our understandings as distinct ideas, as we do from bodies affecting our senses. This source of ideas every man has wholly in himself; and though it be not sense, as having nothing to do with external objects, yet it is very like it, and might properly enough be called “internal sense.” But as I call the other “sensation” so I call this “reflection,” the ideas it affords being such only as the mind gets by reflecting on its own operations within itself. By reflection, then, in the following part of this discourse, I would be understood to mean that notice which the mind takes of its own operations, and the manner of them; by reason whereof there come to be ideas of these operations in the understanding. These two, I say, viz., external material things, as the objects of sensation, and the operations of our own minds within, as the objects of reflection, are to me the only originals from whence all our ideas take their beginnings. The term “operations” here I use in a large sense, as comprehending not barely the actions of the mind about its ideas, but some sort of passions arising sometimes from them, such as is the satisfaction or uneasiness arising from any thought.

5. All our ideas are of the one or the other of 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, combinations, and relations, we shall find to contain all our whole stock of ideas; and that we have nothing in our minds which did not come in one of these two ways. Let any one examine his own thoughts, and thoroughly search into his 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 hath imprinted; though, perhaps, with infinite variety compounded and enlarged by the understanding, as we shall see hereafter . . .

17. If I think when I know it not, nobody else can know it. — Those who so confidently tell us, that the soul always actually thinks, I would they would also tell us what those ideas are that are in the soul of a child before or just at the union with the body, before it hath received any by sensation. The dreams of sleeping men are, as I take it, all made up of the waking man’s ideas, though for the most part oddly put together. It is strange, if the soul has ideas of its own that it derived not from sensation or reflection (as it must have, if it thought before it received any impression from the body), that it should never in its private thinking (so private, that the man himself perceives it not), retain any of them the very moment it wakes out of them, and then make the man glad with new discoveries. Who can find it reasonable that the soul should in its retirement, during sleep, have so many hours’ thoughts, and yet never light on any of

those ideas it borrowed not from sensation or reflection, or at least preserve the memory of none but such which, being occasioned from the body, must needs be less natural to a spirit? It is strange the soul should never once in a man's whole life recall over any of its pure, native thoughts, and those ideas it had before it borrowed anything from the body; never bring into the waking man's view any other ideas but what have a tang of the cask, and manifestly derive their original from that union. If it always thinks, and so had ideas before it was united, or before it received any from the body, it is not to be supposed but that during sleep it recollects its native ideas, and during that retirement from communicating with the body, whilst it thinks by itself, the ideas it is busied about should be, sometimes at least, those more natural and congenial ones which it had in itself, underived from the body, or its own operations about them; which since the waking man never remembers, we must from this hypothesis conclude, either that the soul remembers something that the man does not, or else that memory belongs only to such ideas as are derived from the body, or the mind's operations about them.

18. How knows anyone that the soul always thinks? For if it be not a self-evident proposition, it needs proof. — I would be glad also to learn from these men, who so confidently pronounce that the human soul, or, which is all one, that a man, always thinks, how they come to know it; nay, how they come to know that they themselves think, when they themselves do not perceive it? This, I am afraid, is to be sure without proofs, and to know without perceiving. It is, I suspect, a confused notion taken up to serve an hypothesis; and none of those clear truths that either their own evidence forces us to admit, or common experience makes it impudence to deny. For the most that can be said of it is, that it is possible the soul may always think, but not always retain it in memory; and I say, it is as possible that the soul may not always think, and much more probable that it should sometimes not think, than that it should often think, and that a long while together, and not be conscious to itself, the next moment after, that it had thought.

19. That a man should be busy in thinking, and yet not retain it the next moment, very improbable. — To suppose the soul to think, and the man not to perceive it, is, as has been said, to make two persons in one man; and if one considers well these men's way of speaking, one should be led into a suspicion that they do so. For they who tell us that the soul always thinks, do never, that I remember, say, that a man always thinks. Can the soul think, and not the man? or a man think, and not be conscious of it? This perhaps would be suspected of jargon in others. If they say, "The man thinks always, but is not always conscious of it," they may as well say, his body is extended without having parts. For it is altogether as intelligible to say, that a body is extended without parts, as that anything thinks without being conscious of it, or perceiving that it does so. They who talk thus may, with as much reason, if it be necessary to their hypothesis, say, that a man is always hungry, but that he does not always feel it: whereas hunger consists in that very sensation, as thinking consists in being conscious that one thinks. If they say, that a man is always conscious to himself of thinking, I ask how they know it? Consciousness is the perception of what passes in a man's own mind. Can another man perceive that I am conscious of any thing, when I perceive it not myself? No man's knowledge here can go beyond his experience. Wake a man out of a sound sleep, and ask him what he was that moment thinking on. If he himself be conscious of nothing he then thought on, he must be a notable diviner of thoughts that can assure him that he was thinking: may he not with more reason assure him he was not asleep? This is something beyond philosophy; and it cannot be less than revelation that discovers to another thoughts in my mind when I can find none there myself: and they must needs have a penetrating sight who can certainly see that I think, when I cannot perceive it myself, and when I declare that I do not; and yet can see that dogs or elephants do not think, when they give all the demonstration of it imaginable, except only telling us that they do so.

This some may suspect to be a step beyond the Rosicrucians; it seeming easier to make one's self invisible to others than to make another's thoughts visible to me, which are not visible to himself. But it is but defining the soul to be a substance that always thinks, and the business is done. If such definition be of any authority, I know not what it can serve for, but to make many men suspect that they have no souls at all, since they find a good part of their lives pass away without thinking. For no definitions that I know, no suppositions of any sect, are of force enough to destroy constant experience; and perhaps it is the affectation of knowing beyond what we perceive that makes so much useless dispute and noise in the world . . .

24. The original of all our knowledge. — In time the mind comes to reflect on its own operations about the ideas got by sensation, and thereby stores itself with a new set of ideas, which I call “ideas of reflection.” These are the impressions that are made on our senses by outward objects, that are extrinsic to the mind; and its own operations, proceeding from powers intrinsic and proper to itself, which, when reflected on by itself, become also objects of its contemplation, are, as I have said, the original of all knowledge. Thus the first capacity of human intellect is, that the mind is fitted to receive the impressions made on it, either through the senses by outward objects, or by its own operations when it reflects on them. This is the first step a man makes towards the discovery of anything, and the ground-work whereon to build all those notions which ever he shall have naturally in this world. All those sublime thoughts which tower above the clouds, and reach as high as heaven itself, take their rise and footing here: in all that great extent wherein the mind wanders in those remote speculations it may seem to be elevated with, it stirs not one jot beyond those ideas which sense or reflection have offered for its contemplation.

25. In the reception of simple ideas, the understanding is for the most part passive. — In this part the understanding is merely passive; and whether or no it will have these beginnings and, as it were, materials of knowledge, is not in its own power. For the objects of our senses do many of them obtrude their particular ideas upon our minds, whether we will or no; and the operations of our minds will not let us be without at least some obscure notions of them. No man can be wholly ignorant of what he does when he thinks. These simple ideas, when offered to the mind, the understanding can no more refuse to have, nor alter when they are imprinted, nor blot them out and make new ones itself, than a mirror can refuse, alter or obliterate the images or ideas, which the objects set before it do therein produce. As the bodies that surround us do diversely affect our organs, the mind is. forced to receive the impressions, and cannot avoid the perception of those ideas, that are annexed to them.

## FOR ANALYSIS

1. Locke's famous definition of the mind as white paper includes in it a tacit appeal to the full use of our powers of observation and experience. How capably do you think we observe and learn from experience?
2. What does Locke say in Part 3 is the function of our senses?
3. According to Part 4, how do our minds operate?
4. For Locke, ideas are the products of sensations and reflections. Consider his example of the sensation of heat. How does he think it gives us the idea of heat?
5. Locke cites “thinking” as an example of reflection. How does he show that we think without having active minds?
6. What is the distinction between Locke's “sensations” and “reflections?” How, according to

- him, do both exist without the agency of a functioning mind?
7. What is Locke's full definition of "ideas" as expressed in Part 5?
  8. What arguments does Locke offer in Parts 17-19 to prove that the human soul is unable to think independently? What is his purpose in offering these arguments?
  9. According to Parts 24 and 25, how does the mind receive knowledge?
  10. There are no ideas in the mind except those imprinted by sensation or reflection, Locke concludes. How does this conclusion justify his statement that the mind, at birth, is a sheet of blank white paper?

### **FOR DISCUSSION**

1. If everyone were born with a mind of blank "white paper," then everyone would be equal at birth. How would this notion affect ideas of government? Locke was one of the major influences on the Constitution of the United States. Can you explain in part how, on the basis of the selection you have just read?
2. If we do not grant Locke's assumption that the mind at birth is like a sheet of blank white paper, what happens to his analysis of mind?

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John Locke. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book II. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894. Introduction and questions from Joseph Henry Satin. *Ideas in Context*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958. Text in public domain.

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