


**Philosophical Writings of
Etienne Bonnot,
Abbé de Condillac**




*Translated by Franklin Philip
with the collaboration of Harlan Lane*



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Preface

In the course of the eighteenth century, two near contemporaries—David Hume (1711-1776), writing in English, and Etienne Bonnot, abbé of Condillac (1715-1780), in French—argued independently that the only available medium for constructing a rational understanding of reality is the individual person's successive instants in the having of sensations.

Within subsequent philosophy, the brilliant Scotsman has enjoyed a fame that almost totally eclipses the memory of the dogged Frenchman. This translation of three of the philosophical works of Condillac is being published in the hope of redressing the balance between the two.

Hume was skeptical about the reasonableness of certain common-sense assumptions, and the tensions created by his practically intolerable but seemingly irrefutable skepticism have helped to keep Humean metaphysics alive. Condillac, despite his official status as metaphysician for the acute critics of the French Enlightenment, was himself mostly not skeptical. The absence of tension between his sensationalism and common sense may, together with his compatriots' characteristic impatience with empirical ideas, account for Condillac's comparative obscurity even in French philosophy.

Condillac has had a continuing influence, however, on Western thought, for his constructive ideas have been incorporated into the behavioral sciences. From the first

psychiatrist Philippe Pinel's use of observation of the mentally infirm to the application of Maria Montessori's sensory training of the child, the social sciences have explicitly relied on Condillac's genetic theory of mental operations.

Of the three books included in this volume, the first, the *Treatise on Systems* (1746), contrasts Condillac's philosophic system with rationalistic systems that end in contemplation rather than observation. The *Treatise on Sensations* (1754) details the development of knowing, desiring, and acting, beginning with a single impression in one sense modality and ending with the full reconstitution of the external and mental worlds of the individual. Finally, the posthumously published *Logic* (1792) elaborates Condillac's universal method for acquiring knowledge by a child, an adult, or a discipline—the method of analysis.

Condillac came from a family belonging to the minor aristocracy of Grenoble. After receiving holy orders in the Catholic church, he dressed in a cassock but did not otherwise pursue the priestly vocation. Most of his adult life was spent in Paris, where he became acquainted with the leading intellectual figures of the time, including Voltaire, and often dined with Rousseau and Diderot. Accounts of salon life suggest that he was socially unassertive. He died at his estate in the Loire valley at the age of sixty-five.

These books have been translated from the French edition of Condillac's works edited by Georges Le Roy, *Oeuvres Philosophiques de Condillac*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948.

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Book I:
A Treatise on Systems

1 Three Sorts of Systems Should be Distinguished

A system is nothing other than the arrangement of different parts of an art or science in an order in which they all lend each other support and in which the last ones are explained by the first ones. Parts that explain other parts are called principles, and the fewer principles a system has the more perfect it is. It is even desirable to reduce all principles to a single one.

In the works of philosophers we can observe three sorts of principles from which three sorts of systems are formed.

The principles I put in the first class, as the most fashionable ones, are general or abstract maxims. They must be so evident or so well-proven that we cannot cast doubt on them. In fact, if they were uncertain, we could not be certain of the conclusions we draw from them. The author of the Art of Thinking is speaking about these principles when he says:¹

Everyone agrees that it is important to have in mind several axioms and principles that, being clear and indubitable, can serve us as a basis for understanding the most hidden things. But those that are generally given are so rarely useful that it is quite pointless to know them. For what they call the first principle of knowledge, "it is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be," is perfectly clear and certain; but I find no

occasion where it can ever serve to give us any knowledge. I thus believe that the following can be more useful.

He then gives us a first principle: "Everything included in the clear and distinct idea of a thing can be truly affirmed of it." As a second principle: "The idea of everything that we conceive clearly and distinctly includes at least possible existence"; as a third principle: "Nothing cannot be the cause of anything." But it would be needless to relate the other principles; the ones just mentioned are sufficient to serve as examples.

Philosophers ascribe such great virtue to these sorts of principles that they naturally have tried to increase their number. Metaphysicians particularly distinguished themselves in this way. Descartes, Malebranche, Leibniz, and others outdid each other in lavishing them on us, and we have no one else to blame now but ourselves if we do not penetrate as far as "the most hidden things."

Principles of the second kind are suppositions formulated to explain things that we could not otherwise give an account of. If these suppositions do not appear impossible and if they provide some explanation of known phenomena, philosophers do not doubt that they have discovered the true guiding principles of nature. Would it be possible, they say, for a false supposition to yield an appropriate outcome? Whence arises the opinion that the explanation of phenomena proves the truth of a supposition, and that we should judge a system less by its principles than by the way it explains things. Suppositions that are at first arbitrary are considered to become indisputable through the skill with which they are employed.

The metaphysicians were as inventive with this second kind of principle as with the first. And because of their work, metaphysics no longer encountered anything that could be a mystery for it. In their language, metaphysics means the science of first truths, the first principles of things. But it must be agreed that we do not find this science in their works.

Abstract ideas are merely ideas constructed out of what several particular ideas have in common. An example is the idea of animal. It is extracted from what belongs alike to the ideas of man, horse, monkey, and so on. In this way, an abstract idea can appear to explain what we observe in particular objects. For example, if we ask why the horse walks, drinks, or eats, someone will give a highly philosophical answer stating that it is merely because the horse is an animal. When we analyze this answer, however, it merely means that the horse walks, drinks, and eats because in fact it walks, drinks, and eats. But people are rarely dissatisfied with an initial answer. It seems that their curiosity leads them less to learn about one thing than to raise questions about many things. The philosopher's confident manner obliges them to do this. They would fear appearing stupid if they insisted too much on the same point. It is enough for the oracular pronouncement to be composed of familiar expressions, and they will be ashamed of not understanding it. Or if they cannot close their eyes to its obscurity, a single look from their teacher would appear to clear it up. Can we doubt matters when he in whom we place all our confidence does not doubt them himself? Thus we have nothing to be surprised at if abstract principles have proliferated and have always been regarded as the source of our knowledge.

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