

ESSAYS,

Literary, Moral & Philosophical

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I N T H E

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AS A RECORD

OF FRATERNAL AFFECTION,

THE FOLLOWING ESSAYS ARE INSCRIBED TO

JACOB RUSH,

Judge of the Third District of Pennsylvania,

BY HIS FRIEND

AND BROTHER,

THE AUTHOR.

January 9, 1798.

P R E F A C E.

MOST of the following Essays were published in the Museum, and Columbian Magazine, in this City, soon after the end of the revolutionary war in the United States. A few of them made their first appearance in pamphlets. They are now published in a single volume, at the request of several friends, and with a view of promoting the ends at first contemplated by them. Two of the Essays, viz: that upon the use of Tobacco, and the account of remarkable circumstances in the constitution and life of Ann Woods, are now submitted for the first time to the eye of the public. The author has omitted in this collection two pamphlets which he published in the year 1772, upon the slavery of the Negroes, because he conceived the object of them had been in part accom-

P R E F A C E.

plished, and because the Citizens of the United States have since that time been furnished from Great Britain and other countries, with numerous tracts upon that subject, more calculated to complete the effect intended by the author, than his early publications.

BENJAMIN RUSH.

Philadelphia, Jan. 9, 1798.

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THOUGHTS ON COMMON SENSE.

THE human mind in common with other branches of philosophy, has become the subject of attention in the present age of free and general enquiry. While new faculties are discovering in it, it will conduce equally to our acquiring a perfect knowledge of its powers, to detect and remove such *supposed* faculties as do not belong to it.

I have long suspected the term *Common Sense* to be applied improperly to designate a faculty of the mind. I shall not repeat the accounts which have been given of it by Cicero—Buffier—Berkely—Shaftesbury—Bentley—Fenelon—Locke—Hume—Hobbs—Priestly and others, all of whom agree in describing it as a *faculty*, or *part* of a faculty, possessing a quick and universal perception of *right* and *wrong*; *truth* and *error*, and of *propriety* and *impropriety* in human affairs.

I shall copy, as the substance of all that those authors have said upon this subject, Dr. Reid's account of common sense, published in the 2d. chapter of the sixth number of his *Essays on the intellectual powers of man*.—"It is absurd to conceive (says the Doctor) that there can be any opposition between reason and common sense. It is the first-

“ born of reason, and, as they are commonly joined
 “ together in speech and writing, they are inseparable
 “ in their nature.”

“ We ascribe to reason two offices or two degrees.
 “ The first is to judge of things self-evident; the
 “ second is to draw conclusions that are not self-
 “ evident from things that are. The first of these
 “ is the province, and the sole province, of common
 “ sense, and therefore it *coincides* with reason in its
 “ *whole* extent, and is only *another* name for one
 “ *branch* or one *degree* of reason.”

“ There is an obvious reason why this degree of
 “ reason should have a name appropriated to it, and
 “ that is, that in the greatest part of mankind no
 “ other degree of reason is to be found. It is this
 “ degree of reason that entitles them to the denomi-
 “ nation of reasonable creatures.”

“ These two degrees of reason differ in other
 “ respects, which would be sufficient to entitle them
 “ to distinct names. The first is the gift of heaven—
 “ the second is learned by practice and rules, when
 “ the first is not wanting.”——Thus far Dr. Reid.

It is with great diffidence that I object to any thing
 that comes from a gentleman from whose writings I
 have derived so much entertainment and instruction,
 and who has done so much towards removing the
 rubbish that has for many ages obscured the science
 of metaphysics. This diffidence to offer a single ob-

jection to Dr. Reid's opinion upon the subject under consideration, is increased by the groupe of popular and respectable names under which he has supported it.

The idea which I have adopted of common sense is plain and simple. I consider it as the perception of things as they appear to the *greatest* part of mankind. It has no relation to their being *true* or *false*, *right* or *wrong*, *proper* or *improper*. For the sake of perspicuity, I shall define it to be, *Opinions and feelings in unison with the opinions and feelings of the bulk of mankind.*

From this definition it is evident that common sense must necessarily differ in different ages and countries and, in both, must vary with the progress of taste, science, and religion. In the uncultivated state of reason, the opinions and feelings of a majority of mankind will be *wrong*, and, of course, their common or universal sense will partake of their errors. In the cultivated state of reason, *just* opinions and feelings will become general, and the common sense of the majority will be in unison with truth. I beg leave to illustrate what I mean by a few examples.

1. There are many things which were contrary to common sense in former ages, both in philosophy and religion, which are now universally believed, infomuch that to call them in question is to discover a want of judgment, or a defective education.

2. It is contrary to common sense to speak or write in favour of republicanism, in several European countries; and it is equally contrary to it to speak or write in favour of monarchy, in the United States of America.

3. The common sense of the planters in Jamaica, is in favour of the commerce and slavery of the Africans.—In Pennsylvania, reason, humanity, and common sense, have universally declared against them.

4. In Turkey, it is contrary to the common sense of delicacy which prevails in that country for a gentleman to dance with a lady. No such common sense prevails in any of the western countries of Europe, or in the States of America.

5. It is contrary to the common sense of many numerous sects to believe that it is possible for men to go to heaven, who do not embrace their principles, or mode of worship.—Among rational men, this common sense is contrary to truth and christian religion.

6. The common sense of mankind has generally been in favour of established modes and habits of practice, in medicine. Opium, bark, mercury and the lancet have all forced their way into general use, contrary to this common sense. Their utility is a proof how little common sense accords with the deci-

sions of reason, and how improperly it is supposed to be a part of that noble power of the mind.

7. It is agreable to the common sense of a great part of mankind, to revenge public and private injuries by wars and duels, and yet no wise or just reason has ever been given to justify the practice of either of them

8. The common sense of the bulk of the inhabitants of the British dominions, and of the United States, is in favour of boys spending four or five years in learning the Latin and Greek languages, in order to qualify them to understand the English language. Those persons who recollect that the most perfect language in the world, viz. the Greek, was learned without the medium or aid of a dead or foreign language, consider the above practice (founded in common sense) as contrary to right reason and productive of many evils in education. But further, under this head. The common sense of the same immense proportion of people, is in favour of teaching boys *words*, before they are taught *ideas*. Now nature and right reason both revolt at this absurd practice.

9. The common sense of nearly all nations, is in favour of preventing crimes, by the punishment of death, but right reason, policy, and the experience of a wise and enlightened prince,† all concur in proving

† Leopold Emperor of Germany.

that the best means of preventing crimes, is by *living* and not by *dead* examples.

In the perfection of knowledge, common sense and truth will be in unison with each other. It is *now more* related to error than truth, and in the sense in which I have described it, it implies more praise than censure to want it.

To say that a man has common sense, is to say that he thinks with his age or country, in their *false*, as well as their *true* opinions; and the greater the proportion of people, he acts and thinks with, the greater share he possesses of this common sense.—After all that has been said in its favour, I cannot help thinking that it is the characteristic only of common minds,

To think and act with the majority of mankind, when they are *right*, and differently from them, when they are *wrong*, constitutes in my opinion, the perfection of human wisdom and conduct.

The *feelings* and *opinions* of mankind are often confounded; but they are widely different from each other. There may be *just* feelings connected with *erroneous* opinions and conduct. This is often the case in religion and government—But, in general, opinions and feelings are just and unjust in equal degrees, according to the circumstances of age, country, and the progress of knowledge before mentioned.

Had this common sense depended upon the information of any one of the *five external* senses, I should have had no difficulty in admitting Dr. Reid's account of it, inasmuch as the perceptions they afford are the *same*, in their nature, in all healthy men, and in all ages and countries. But to suppose it to be an inferior degree, or the *first* act of reason, and afterwards to suppose it to be *universal*, is to contradict every thing that history and observation teach us of human nature. †

In matters addressed to our reason, the principal business of reason is to correct the evidence of our *senses*. Indeed, the perception of truth, in philosophy, seems to consist in little else than in the refutation of the ideas acquired from the testimony of our senses. In the progress of knowledge, when the exact connection between the senses and reason is perfectly understood, it is probable that the senses and reason will be in unison with each other, and that mankind will as suddenly connect the evidence of all the senses with the decisions of reason, as they now connect, with certainty, the distance of objects with the evidence of the eyes. This general unison between the senses and reason, as in the case of vision, must be the result only of experience and habit.

I cannot dismiss this subject without adding the following remark.

* The king of Prussia, in his posthumous works, says, "Reason never did any thing great," by which he must have meant the *common* degrees of it, or what is called, by Dr. Reid, *common sense*.

Mankind are governed, says Mr. Bayle, by their prejudices, and not by their principles. To do them good, we must, in some measure, conform to those prejudices;—hence we find the most acceptable men in practical society, have been those who have never shocked their cotemporaries, by opposing popular or common opinions. Men of opposite characters, like objects placed too near the eye, are seldom seen distinctly by the age in which they live. They must content themselves with the prospects of being useful to the distant and more enlightened generations which are to follow them. Galileo, who asked pardon of the pope, on his knees, for contradicting the *common sense* of the church, respecting the revolution of the earth, and Dr. Harvey, who lost all his business, by refusing the *common sense* of former ages, respecting the circulation of the blood, now enjoy a reputation for their opinions and discoveries, which has, in no instance ever been given to the cold blood of common sense.

April 3d 1791.