

**AN ESSAY UPON THE
PHILOSOPHY OF EVIDENCE,
OR AN ENQUIRY INTO
THE PROCESS OF BELIEF.**

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An essay upon the philosophy of evidence, or an enquiry into the Process of Belief. by Watkin Williams

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WATKIN WILLIAMS

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AN ESSAY UPON THE
PHILOSOPHY OF EVIDENCE,
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AN ENQUIRY
INTO
THE PROCESS OF BELIEF.



BY
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265. a. 128.

INTRODUCTION TO THE SECOND EDITION.

DR. FORBES WINSLOW in a criticism* upon this essay dissents from the doctrine expressed in the introduction respecting Reid's Theory, "That children have an *instinctive* tendency to *confide* in the *veracity* of others, and that the mind is not naturally in equilibrium, between belief and disbelief." He, however, grants, that in all cases of belief there is an association of antecedents and consequents; but then he asks, "But whence the tendency to this *association*? What is the *foundation* of the principle of *association*? Surely the natural (instinctive) constitution of the human mind." This certainly neither contradicts, nor is it inconsistent with my doctrine; it does not follow that we have an instinctive tendency to *confide* in *veracity*, because belief is always referrible to association, and association is founded in the natural constitution of the mind; at most it only follows that we have an instinctive tendency to form *some* belief, but *not* to form a *belief in veracity* any more than a belief in the *falsehood* of the speaker. Dr. Winslow may have mistaken Reid's use of the word belief, and supposed he had used it in the full sense including affirmative as well as negative beliefs; Reid, however as appears from the context, used it in the limited sense of an affirmative belief, as contradistin-

* See Winslow's Psychological Journal, July, 1858.

guished from disbelief. And in this sense I am still disposed to think Dr. Reid's theory unfounded. How is it that a certain word comes to convey to our minds the idea of a particular given object? How do certain combinations of words (sentences) come to convey to our thoughts some particular given relations of things?

This is wholly the result of experience, the association of the particular sound with the given object is not an instinctive association, but is conventional and arbitrary, the binding together of the two when thus associated is undoubtedly the natural result of the organization of our mind, but then the particular belief resulting from this association is not the result of instinct, but of the particular experience of the individual. Having once experienced the association of a particular sound with the existence of a particular object, when we again hear the sound, perhaps, we expect the existence of the same object, now the expectation of this particular object follows the sound because we have experienced their association, and not from any original tendency that we have to expect this particular object from the presence of this sound; again, if our after experience finds these two invariably associated, whenever we hear the same sound we expect and believe in the existence of the same object; now the first and every successive belief here mentioned is a confidence in the veracity of the sound, as indicating the existence of the particular object; the first step has been proved not to be instinctive, and it is equally clear, that in the subsequent cases the confidence depends upon the uniformity of the association.

The confidence we place in the veracity of witnesses

relating what they have seen or heard is traceable to the same principle: by the influence of association and habit we come to believe in the reality of facts related to us by others, the reality of fact having become associated in our mind with the narration of fact by a witness: thus it is that we place more confidence in the statement of a man whom we have long known, and who has never deceived us, than we do in that of a stranger, or one who has deceived us.

Circumstantial evidence operates in a like manner in producing conviction; the more closely anything which we see or hear is associated in our minds with some other event or object, the more convinced are we of the existence of the latter.

Another most interesting though widely different question is, whether children have an instinctive power of distinguishing between truthful and deceitful people. This is, however, much too long for discussion here.

Another doctrine impliedly held in this essay to be untenable, is that of Sir William Hamilton's, "that inconceivability is no test of impossibility." The term *inconceivable* has been the subject of ambiguity, being by some used to denote that an event is unthinkable, by others simply that the event is unbelievable, or that we cannot conjecture by what means or efficient cause it can be brought about. Many of the disputes concerning this celebrated argument turn upon this confusion. Sir W. Hamilton used it in the former sense. His argument appears in substance to be this. "The conclusions to which the test of inconceivability leads us in certain cases, sufficiently show its invalidity; for example, That space is limited is inconceivable, so also the idea of unlimited space is inconceivable, therefore

space is neither limited nor unlimited." The Westminster Reviewer (Oct. 1858), taking a hasty glance at this argument, condemns it at once as suicidal; he asks, how it is that it shows inconceivability to be no test of impossibility? and answers, because it leads to the conclusion that two things which cannot both be untrue, are both impossible; but why, he asks, is it impossible for both to be untrue? only because it is inconceivable, and thus the validity of the test is assumed to prove its invalidity. The argument, however, is not so easily disposed of, and if properly developed, is untouched by the reviewer's criticism. It then stands thus:—The test of inconceivability leads to the conclusion that space is neither limited nor unlimited; now if we admit this conclusion to be correct, we admit that to be true which is inconceivable, and if we do not admit the conclusion to be correct, then inconceivability does not operate as a test of impossibility. The true answer appears to be that one of the premisses, namely, that unlimited space is inconceivable, is false; the term, *unlimited space*, expresses merely a negative quality of extension, *i. e.* extension of which we do not conceive the limit. If, however, it is said that neither the idea of space being limited or unlimited is conceivable; since language is conversant only with ideas, any proposition predicating either of these qualities of space must be simply meaningless, and the possibility or impossibility of such propositions would be wholly without sense, and quite incapable of being tested.

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INTRODUCTION.

THE following is a fragmentary Essay, containing discussions upon some of the operations of the Human Mind, and an attempt to analyse the *process* of belief concerning matters of fact. There will be found several extracts from the writings of Locke, Berkeley, and Hume.

The matter is condensed into as small a space as possible.

To the class of readers, however, whose favour I hope to gain, I need make little apology for an abruptness hardly to be avoided in a work of this kind.

If the arguments here set forth are correct, many theories are impliedly refuted, which, from the limited nature of this work, are not specified; as an example, we may take the notion expressed in Taylor's Treatise on the Law of Evidence, page 48, and supported by an extract from Dr. Reid,—“That children have an *instinctive* disposition to *confide* in the *veracity* of others, and that the mind is *not* naturally in equilibrium without an inclination to the side of *belief* more than to that of *disbelief*.” A fair consideration of our original acquaintance with surrounding objects, and of the first association in our minds, of words and names with the various relations of things and places to one another, will show that the principle of our childish belief is plainly reducible to the association of our ideas, and that it is no more instinctive than it

is to speak English, or to be a Catholic; this and other theories, if fully treated of, would fill two octavo volumes, a work far beyond my design.

The subjects we shall be engaged in are: The difference of mathematical, physical, and moral, impossibilities or certainties; whether the *process* by which the mind arrives at a *belief* concerning *matters of fact* can be *expressed in* or reduced to the *Syllogism*; a discussion upon Berkeley's Idealism; certainty and contingency are not intrinsic qualities of events, but merely the state of the human mind, respecting such events. We cannot properly say that any fact is contrary to the Law of Nature. The connexion between cause and effect is unknown. Origin of the Legends of the Saints. Application of the foregoing principles to the belief in a popular marvel, for example Clairvoyance; à priori arguments; physiology of sensation; and the existence of the sixth sense.