

Etienne Bonnot, Abbe of Condillac (1714-1780)

The Abbe of Condillac a close friend of such Enlightenment luminaries as Rousseau and Diderot was from a distinguished family, and exposed to the best education of the time, The Abbe de Condillac pursued a career of writing and learning, which in the end assured him many honors, gained him entry into the Academie francaise, and brought to his many writings renown throughout the intelligentsia of Europe. Condillac, like many of the intellectual luminaries of his time, took Holy Orders early in his career, and though he was inactive as a practicing priest, he worked throughout his life under the guidance of that theological discipline. Worth interest, in this preliminary register' is that Condillac rendered himself distinguished not only as a philosopher but as a physiocrat, that is as a student of economics and the bases of social value strategy.

The central driver of Condillac's thinking coagulated around the greatly influential thought of John Locke, the Englishman whose Essay on Human Understanding, stood at the center of many philosophical stances, in the higher echelon intellectual European thought to and past the time of Kant at the end of the century. The core strategy for the analysis of ideas--'the understanding of human nature'--was to break down more evolved structures of ideas, clusters of thought process which constitute the whole ideational packet of a human being. We might say that this reductionist philosophy of man deeply skirts materialism, while leaving abundant room for respecting ideas.

After another vein of his metaphysic Condillac turns his thinking, as it aspires to cope with its effort to account for the human condition. Here he invents for the reader a statue to be instructively constructed. The statue in question is built up according to an ascending sequence of elements, rising from the most primitive state, to the least elementary; that is from the rudest and most primitive state of being, smelling, upwards toward refined sense conditions like thought, in which there is no material component. How better to illustrate the point that the human being is a layered presentation of multiple levels of sense experience. The rich complexity of Condillac's frame reference of human being is evident in the interplay of sensibility layers by which Condillac anticipates such insights of his time as the categories of thought later finely discriminated in the work of Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason. Memory, for example, is as deeply interwoven with the highest faculties of cognition and perception, as in the on the horizon fictional work of Marcel Proust.

Condillac's achievements in writing brought him national acclaim. as we could see from a more extensive survey: It is clear, as it was in Locke, that Condillac opened the doors to the study of psychology-- sense based as it was in Locke-- as well as to Sociology, the study of communities interacting on the far side of the numerous aggregate and collective inventions the world was allowing to be built. In his special alertness to the nature and value of attention on the far side of his many empirical investigations, Condillac was able to summon up a draft of the new social man, no longer the crossroads of abstractions which in the previous century we find dominant in Descartes, but real-world generated, as in the contemporary fictions of Defoe.