

It was my happiness to know him with some degree of intimacy, and to know him in the home which he adorned and blessed. One of his sons was and is my very dear friend, and I was often a guest at his house. Therefore, slight as was his connection with my subject, I am unwilling to dismiss it without my tribute of reverence and love to a memory so precious.

LETTERS FROM JOSEPH DENNIE TO ROGER VOSE.

GROTON, May 16, 1790.

DEAR FRIEND:

Nothing affords me more pleasure than your sentiments of the books you peruse. Conscious of your mental independency, of your judgment, and freedom from undue bias, when I peruse your opinions, I am sure to contemplate an exact transcript of truth in the light in which she appears to you. Now one grand design of reading is to furnish the mind with matter on which to ruminate. In a word to give birth to reflexion. Hence the ancients not unaptly denominated study, "pabulum mentis," by this intimating that they considered books as food, by feasting on which the intellect might gain vigor and arrive at maturity. Both of us keeping the above end in view, have recently perused the works of Beattie and Hume. That you have, appears from your opinion of those authors expressed in a late letter, the declaration of which opinion has given birth to the above remarks; that I have, the underwritten may, possibly, prove. I am fully sensible, that by many of the students Hume is admired; of this number I perceive you were a part. I cannot blame you. The scholar, who could not admire the elegance of style and the ingenuity of reasoning for which that author is so eminently distinguished, I should pronounce grossly deficient in taste. To deny him praise as an author would be literary blasphemy, but considered as a philosopher and as a man, I

think, Roger, that by every Rationalist he must be condemned. Logicians have long since told us, common sense daily tells us that all our knowledge acquired by reasoning is a deduction from intuitive perceptions and ultimately founded on them. Now, if an author prompted by vanity, by a fondness for singularity and paradox, availing himself of the ambiguity and poverty of language boldly attacks first principles and because they cannot be demonstrated true, sceptically and rashly doubts their existence, what can be expected should readers follow his example, but the utter extirpation of Science, Morals and Religion? Every novice knows that intuition shines by its own brightness, that nothing more lucid can be adduced for its illumination. Nothing can be more puerile than to attempt a confutation of those things, which we cannot but believe. Notwithstanding all the vaunts of false philosophy, we cannot withhold our assent from the belief of real existences, and if the disciples of Pyrrho will doubt that the sun shines, tho' to be convinced they need but open their eyes, common sense must apply to them the epithet of fools or another still more opprobrious.

I now hear you say, Dennie, you must allow his arguments are close, ingenious and incapable of direct refutation. I concede it. But be it remembered that the foundation that this sophistical structure is erected upon is a pile, if the expression may be allowed, a pile of "petitiones principii." Farther, if principles be denied, principles flowing from intuition, which as before observed, cannot be proved by anything more evident, it is true a *direct* refutation cannot be framed for obvious reasons, but a *reductio ad absurdum* will equally as well force assent and produce the brightest conviction. I know not by what means this mode of reasoning came to be called *indirect*, which as it should seem involves an idea of its inefficiency, for my very partial smattering of the mathematics suggests that Euclid frequently adopts this mode of demonstration, and you need not be told that the reasonings of that author are conclusive. I am not surprised at the popularity of Hume's scepticism. His language is pure and elegant, his arguments plausible and replete with subtlety. Aware of the forbidding appearance of a metaphysical folio, he has conveyed his reasonings in the gay and agreeable form of essays, hoping, by this artifice, to fix volatility and to rouse indolence. Pleased with the

vehicle in which his poison was conveyed and soothed by doctrines to their wishes most favorable, the superficial, the ignorant and profligate were ready to vote the universe out of being, and to scruple even their own existence. The opinions of this celebrated sceptic were not long suffered to insult the common sense of mankind. Among other opposers of the system appeared the puissant Dr. Beattie¹ concerning whom more shall be said in the next chapter.

Yours,

JOS. DENNIE, Junior.

DEAR FRIEND :

In a late epistle you may recollect that I allowed Hume much praise as an author, but I condemned, and coldly too, that sophistry which labors to destroy common sense, that scepticism which dares, what will not mortals dare! to doubt concerning intuitive truths. I concluded by remarking that the puissant doctor of Aberdeen had assumed the gauntlet and entered the lists of controversy. Concerning this champion, his book, its opinions and their propriety, something with your permission shall be said in the following pages.

The eye, even of carelessness, glancing over the pages of the *Essay on Truth* will immediately perceive that a sober, manly piety, that an uncommon zeal for morals and religion dictated the contents of this work. This earnestness, this zeal for what, it must be confessed, the majority of civilized mankind think true, biasses the reader in favor of this evidently good man and compels him to exclaim, like Pliny upon a similar occasion, that he would rather err with Beattie than think right with the philosophers.

The *Essay on Truth* commences by remarking that although the Deists disclaim verbal chicanery, yet in their works it is asserted that it most abounds. This is proved

¹Beattie's "*Essay on Truth*," designed as a refutation of Hume's sceptical philosophy. It was published in 1770, and had a then unprecedented popularity, passing through five editions in less than four years, and being translated into several foreign languages. It received the superlative commendation of Dr. Johnson. It has probably been little read within the last half-century; but if superseded in the advance of philosophical thought, it probably bears the relation of thought-breeder to more recent treatises ostensibly covering the same ground.

by examination. One of the best definitions of common sense then follows, upon which just definition the Doctor's arguments chiefly rest. Though there is very little parade of ratiocination in this treatise, the Doctor, like every other real scholar, despising the syllogistic nonsense of the Aristotelian commentators, yet, his conclusions are so clearly, so naturally and justly drawn from irrefragable premises that they force assent even from the sciolist. The mode of reasoning here adopted is as happy as that of Euclid and none but those, who, like Mr. Hume, kick common sense out of doors, and determine to renounce their pretensions to rationality, can doubt of its excellency and truth.

Perhaps I may have mistaken your clause respecting Hume; perhaps it was not his moral but his political and miscellaneous essays that you admired; perhaps you meant to be understood as extolling the style, rather than the sentiments of this essayist. But even if this new ground be assumed, I think you are exposed to a defeat. For I cannot by any means concede that Hume is the better writer. If in polemic controversy perspicuity be absolutely essential, if without it disputes of this nature be but learned impertinence, then it clearly follows that Beattie, far from being inferior to the man whom he attacks, greatly surpasses him. That this is a fact may be proved by a recurrence to the pages of each author when it will immediately appear that the one is singularly obscure and indistinct, which indeed was necessary to his design, and the other as singularly plain and lucid. In elegance of style the Doctor is fully equal to the layman. Hume had doubtless in the earlier part of his life, cultivated the *Belles Lettres*, but from the moment he retired to France, and plunged himself into the dreary caverns of metaphysics, from that moment he bid adieu to all the splendid productions of imagination, and labored thenceforth to puzzle both himself and the world.

• Yours,

JOS. DENNIE, Junior.

DEAR FRIEND:

In perusing Beattie, we immediately perceive that he possessed a rich, fertile and cultivated imagination.

Such is the beautiful energy and dignity of his language, that the poet breathes in every page. His periods are correct in a high degree. He is happy both in the selection and collocation of words. His knowledge both of poetry and music is evinced by the melody and just balance of his sentences. Beattie is himself a poet, and one of high rank. He has in addition to many others, written a poem entitled the *Minstrel*, which the critics declare one of the best productions that has appeared since the demise of Queen Anne. In fine to close these observations, Hume and Beattie both received the same advantages from celebrated Scottish seminaries, both were students and both were scholars. But in genius, abilities and in the employment of their talents, essentially different. Nature has bestowed upon one the imagination of a poet, a bold, vehement, and creative genius. In imagination the other was deficient, but he was endowed with singular sagacity, a patient and plodding attention, subtlety, and a talent for disputation. He was master of every trick, of every sophism in controversy. His mind was of that microscopic species that could disregard the vast and magnificent, and pore upon the obscure and the little. Beattie looked abroad, contemplated the wide expanse of nature, feasted upon her charms, and gratefully thanked the author of the feast. Hume pined in the dark cell of the sceptic, voluntarily obscured his optics, and then murmured because there was no light. The one could plod over the schoolmen's page, could trace the dreary mazes of Malebranche and Leibnitz, and wear life away among the reveries of Pyrrho. The delight of the other was to cultivate those valuable books, where truth and sentiment predominated, to roam over Fairy land with Shakespeare, to turn the moral page with Tillotson, and to imbibe the great truths of religion from the Gospel of God. Widely different, in fine, widely different did these great men employ their talents. The one labored in language indistinct as his perceptions, and dark as his designs, "to cloud the sunshine of our belief." The other pointed out a "vista" to heaven, asserted the dignity of truth and common sense, and defended Christianity in a style resembling the cause which he advocated.

From the perusal of Beattie I think, Roger, I have derived advantage. I have learned to make a just estimate of sceptics and scepticism. I have learned that time is

wholly lost, which is spent in tracing the intricacies of such authors. I have learned that such writings, contrary to the objects of other performances, bewilder the reasoning power, darken the understanding and harden the heart. That prejudice, which I ever cherished against metaphysics, is now rooted. To cultivate this barren, unprofitable science is worse than wasting, it is murdering time. Let every scholar study and re-study select parts of Locke. We should be acquainted with the operations of our own minds. But let the works of Hobbes, of Tindal, Hume, and Bolingbroke sink into that oblivious dream, to which they are so nearly allied.

Sincerely yours,

JOS. DENNIE, Jr.

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