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*Hume Studies* Volume XVIII, Number 2 (November, 1992) 275-280.

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# Perception of the Self

George S. Pappas

Differences of detail aside, we may think of both Locke and Berkeley as accepting the same view of the mind. They agree that there are minds, and that each mind is a simple, immaterial substance. Sometimes the word 'soul' is used instead of 'mind'; but in this context, the different terminology is not consequential.

Moreover, Locke and Berkeley employ essentially the same argument for their shared view about minds. More exactly, they use the same argument for the *limited thesis* that there is something distinct from perceptions and from ideas perceived, and that this something is a perceiver, or that which perceives. The argument, given in more detail below, claims that we are aware of our own minds in, or while we are engaged in, perception. The kind of awareness is said to be or to involve a reflex act, a concept we associate with Berkeley, though I think it is one he appropriated from Locke.

Hume, of course, rejects the view of Locke and Berkeley. He rejects the very notion of an immaterial mind or soul, finding it to be meaningless. And he rejects as well the limited thesis that there is something which perceives and which is distinct from all perceptions. In this paper I will restrict attention to Hume's arguments for rejecting the limited thesis.

## 1. Rejection of the limited thesis

Hume investigates the limited thesis of Locke and Berkeley in the well-known section of the *Treatise* which deals with personal identity (*Treatise* 1.4.6). Here is how he expresses the view of "some philosophers":

THERE are some philosophers, who imagine we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our SELF; that we feel its existence and continuance in existence; and are certain, beyond the evidence of a demonstration, both of its perfect identity and simplicity. The strongest sensation, the most violent passion, say they, instead of distracting us from this view, only fix it the more intensely, and make us consider their influence on *self* either by their pain or pleasure.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, Hume represents the argument of those he opposes as containing two premises:

- (1) In perception, one is aware of one's self, and aware of the simplicity of the self.
- (2) In being thus aware of the self and its simplicity one gains an idea of a simple self.

These premises, in turn, support a double conclusion:

- (3) There are simple selves (minds).
- (4) We have an idea of a simple self (mind).

Hume does not take the trouble to *cite* the second premise given here in the passage I have quoted, but it is clear that he has it in mind, since he proceeds directly to a criticism of it. The criticism is quite familiar in form, encapsulating what I call a *derivability argument*. Here is what Hume says:

all these positive assertions are contrary to that very experience, which is pleaded for them, nor have we any idea of *self*, after the manner it is here explain'd. For from what impression cou'd this idea be deriv'd? ... It must be some one impression, that gives rise to every real idea. But self or person is not any one impression, but that to which our several impressions and ideas are suppos'd to have a reference. If any impression gives rise to the idea of self, that impression must continue invariably the same, thro' the whole course of our lives; since self is suppos'd to exist after that manner. (T 251)

He is also sharply critical of the first premise. Hume says:

when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception. (T 252)

So, minimally, Hume's arguments amount to this: (1) is false; hence, we have no ground for claiming (3). Similarly, (2) is false, so that we have no ground for claiming (4).

Actually, of course, Hume asserts stronger claims, maintaining that (3) and (4) are *false*, and not merely that we lack adequate support for them. But to show their falsity requires additional argument beyond what is provided in the above-quoted passages. Here I will not consider those additional arguments, except to note regarding (4) that Hume

may be fairly taken as holding that since the idea of a self is not derivable from any impressions, we have no idea of a self. Failure of this sort of derivability Hume takes to be sufficient to show that the relevant idea does not exist.

### 2. The Arguments of Some Philosophers

It is reasonable to assume that Berkeley and perhaps also Locke are among the philosophers that Hume has in mind as his targets here. How accurately does he represent their views?

Locke says that "sensation convinces us, that there are solid extended substances; and Reflection, that there are thinking ones."<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere Locke says that "we have an intuitive knowledge of our own Existence" (*Essay*, 4.3.21; and 4.11.1). Why does Locke hold such a view?

The answer, I believe, is connected to another view Locke holds, namely what some have called the "self-intimating character of the mental." This is the thesis that if a person is in a mental state, *m*, then she knows that she is in *m*. Here is what he says on this point:

I do say, he (Man) cannot think at any time waking or sleeping, without being sensible of it. Our being sensible of it is not necessary to any thing, but to our thoughts; and to them it is; and to them it will always be necessary, till we can think without being conscious of it. (*Essay*, 1.1.10)

This passage occurs in the discussion of innate ideas. But it is not isolated; Locke repeats similar views elsewhere, including where he talks of spiritual substance and personal identity. He writes:

how far the consciousness of past Actions is annexed to any individual Agent, so that another cannot possibly have it, will be hard for us to determine, till we know what kind of Action it is, that cannot be done without a reflex Act of Perception accompanying it, and how perform'd by thinking Substances, who cannot think without being conscious of it. (*Essay*, 2.27.13)

These passages give us the ingredients of Locke's argument, which we can state this way:

- (5) If a percipient has ideas, either of sensation or reflection, then she is conscious that she has them.
- (6) Being conscious *that* one has ideas is being conscious *of* what is having the ideas.

- (7) Hence, in having ideas, one is conscious of the self which has ideas.

This way of representing Locke's argument yields a conclusion which supports one half of the first premise Hume attributes to "some philosophers." That is, it yields the conclusion that in perception, one is aware of oneself. However, it is silent on the matter of simplicity; the above premises do not bear on the question of whether one is aware of the simple nature of oneself. Accordingly, Locke's actual argument does not license inference to the conclusion Hume mentions, namely that there are simple selves (minds), which is (3) above. Nevertheless, Locke's conclusion thus far does show how he might argue for a claim related to (3). For Locke can now go on to contend that,

- (8) If one is conscious of the self that has ideas, then there are selves which have ideas.  
 (9) Therefore, there are selves which have ideas.

Certainly Locke holds (9), as Hume clearly saw. And we can easily see that the argument from (7) to (9) fairly represents Locke's actual reasoning on this matter. After all, he does say that we have an *intuitive* knowledge of the self, as we have already noted. And if one has knowledge of the self, then plainly there are selves. Consciousness of a self which has ideas, as reported in (7), is sufficient for intuitive knowledge of a self, just as consciousness of a green idea of sensation is sufficient for intuitive knowledge of the presence of a green idea of sensation. So, the above is a fair representation of how Locke actually argues.

In a sense, Locke's argument urges that one may be conscious of something, oneself in this case, without having an idea of that thing. This may seem an abandonment of the core idea of empiricism, and perhaps Hume would have thought as much. But actually, Locke's idea is really very simple. He is pointing out, in effect, that being aware *that* something is the case is a kind of awareness *of* a thing. Thus, to take a simple example, if I see the cereal box tipped over in the kitchen and cereal on the floor, I may be said to see *that* the cat has been in the kitchen, and in this sense, I am aware *of* the cat. Yet I do not then *see* the cat and so, as Locke's terminology would have it, I do not then have an idea of sensation of the cat. The same sort of thing holds for the self and one's awareness of the self. To have a reflex act directed to the self is to be aware or conscious that there is a self, but this is something one does without having an idea of the self, and thus without perceiving the self. By having ideas of some things, for example physical objects, one is conscious that one is having ideas, and thus conscious of that

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which has those ideas. One thus has awareness of a thing of a sort which bypasses having an idea of *that* thing, though it does not bypass having ideas.

Berkeley argues for (1) in a straightforwardly Lockean manner. Here is what he says in the *Principles*, in a passage he added to the second edition:

We comprehend our own existence by inward feeling or reflection, and that of other spirits by reason. We may be said to have some knowledge or notion of our own minds, of spirits and active beings, whereof in a strict sense we have not ideas. In like manner we know and have a notion of relations between things or ideas, which relations are distinct from the ideas or things related, inasmuch as the latter may be perceived by us without our perceiving the former. To me it seems that ideas, spirits and relations are all in their respective kinds, the object of human knowledge and subject of discourse: and that the term *idea* would be improperly extended to signify everything we know or have any notion of. (*Principles*, 89)

Here we find Berkeley talking of reflection or a reflex act in just the way Locke does. If one has ideas, then one is aware that one is having them. We should notice the similarity to our awareness of relations to which he calls attention. We do not perceive relations between perceived ideas, but we are nonetheless aware of the relations. It is just so with the self. In perceiving ideas one does not also perceive the self, but still one is aware of that which is perceiving. Reflection is the term both he and Locke give to this sort of awareness—being aware *that* something is perceiving ideas. This something which perceives ideas both he and Locke call a self.

Unlike Locke, Berkeley explicitly calls attention to the fact that we really do lack an *idea* of the self. In this respect, the self is like a relation: we have ideas of neither. Hence, Berkeley explicitly rejects the second premise which Hume attributes to “some philosophers” and neither would he accept the conclusion, (4), he is represented by Hume as drawing from that premise. On this point Berkeley is emphatic, whereas Locke is simply silent.

We can now address the question of whether Hume accurately captures the arguments provided by Locke and Berkeley. Hume writes that “some philosophers,” whom I have taken to be or include Locke and Berkeley, argue from (1) to (3). We have now noticed that on this point Hume is partly right. Locke and Berkeley do argue from an awareness of a self to the existence of such a being. However, they do

not argue that in perception one is also aware of the simplicity of this self. So, on this count Hume is in error.<sup>3</sup> Even so, however, Hume has missed the sort of awareness or consciousness that Locke and Berkeley are talking about when they defend (1). A reflex act is an awareness *that* something obtains or is the case, an awareness sufficient to underwrite support for (3). But this sort of awareness of a self does not include having an idea of a self, for either Locke or Berkeley. Hence, Hume's attribution of (2) to "some philosophers" cannot seriously be taken as a forceful criticism of Locke or Berkeley.

Since they do not accept (2), they would hardly be accurately represented as arguing from (2) to (4).

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1. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2d ed., rev., ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1987), 251 (hereafter cited as "T").
2. John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (London, 1975), 2.23.29 (hereafter cited as *Essay*).
3. Berkeley at least *does* argue for the simplicity of the self; he just does not do so on the basis of the claim that the self's simplicity is perceived. For his arguments, see *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*, ed. R. Adams (Indianapolis, 1979), 65.