

# Locke on Reflection & Self-Consciousness

PHIL 971 Kant Seminar

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## 1 Locke's Content Empiricism

- All representational content derives from two sources—viz. outer sense or “sensation” and inner sense or “reflection”<sup>1</sup>

*Sensation*: ideas of objects, gained via ways in which those objects affect us<sup>2</sup>

*Reflection*: ideas of the mind's operations, gained via attention to the mind's activity in generating sensation (sensory ideas)<sup>3,4</sup>

- What makes these two sources of ideas belong to a single faculty of sense?
  - Ideas are received passively
  - Ideas do not reveal their object as it is in itself
  - Ideas have a (distinctive?) phenomenology
  - Ideas rely on attention to something (e.g. an (impression caused by an) external object or an operation of the mind)

## 2 Locke on Knowledge

- Knowledge is the perception of agreement/disagreement between one's ideas<sup>5</sup>
- Four types of agreement/disagreement for knowledge (ECHU IV.i.3)
  1. Identity and diversity
  2. Relations
  3. Co-existence/necessary-connection
  4. Real existence
- Three kinds or “degrees” of knowledge (ECHU IV.ii)
  1. Intuitive
  2. Demonstrative
  3. Sensitive
- Q: If knowledge requires perception of relations between ideas, then how can we have knowledge of particular ideas?<sup>6</sup>
  1. Knowledge that an idea is in the mind
  2. Knowledge of what the idea is
  3. Knowledge of the difference between ideas

<sup>1</sup> All ideas come from sensation or reflection. Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas:—How comes it to be furnished? ... To this I answer, in one word, from experience. In that all our knowledge is founded; and from that it ultimately derives itself. Our observation employed either, about external sensible objects, or about the internal operations of our minds perceived and reflected on by ourselves, is that which supplies our understandings with all the materials of thinking. These two are the fountains of knowledge, from whence all the ideas we have, or can naturally have, do spring. (Locke 1970, I.i.2)

<sup>2</sup> our Senses, conversant about particular sensible objects, do convey into the mind several distinct perceptions of things, according to those various ways wherein those objects do affect them. ... This great source of most of the ideas we have, depending wholly upon our senses, and derived by them to the understanding, I call *sensation*. (ECHU II.i.3)

<sup>3</sup> the other fountain from which experience furnisheth the understanding with ideas is,—the perception of the operations of our own mind within us, as it is employed about the ideas it has got;—which operations, when the soul comes to reflect on and consider, do furnish the understanding with another set of ideas, which could not be had from things without. ... This source of ideas every man has wholly in himself; and though it be not sense, as having nothing to do with external objects, yet it is very like it, and might properly enough be called internal sense. (ECHU II.i.4)

<sup>4</sup> By reflection then, in the following part of this discourse, I would be understood to mean, that notice which the mind takes of its own operations, and the manner of them, by reason whereof there come to be ideas of these operations in the understanding. (ECHU II.i.4)

<sup>5</sup> Since the mind, in all its thoughts and reasonings, hath no other immediate object but its own ideas, which it alone does or can contemplate, it is evident that our knowledge is only conversant about them... Knowledge then seems to me to be nothing but the perception of the connexion of and agreement, or disagreement and repugnancy of any of our ideas. In this alone it consists. (ECHU IV.i.1-2)

<sup>6</sup> Every one finds in himself, that he knows the Ideas he has; That he knows also, when any one is in his Understanding, and what it is; And that when more than one are there he knows them distinctly and unconfusedly one from another. Which always being so, (it being impossible but that he should perceive what he perceives,) he can never be in doubt when any Idea is in his Mind, that it is there, and is that Idea it is; and that two distinct Ideas, when they are in his Mind, are there, and are not one and the same Idea. (IV.vii.4; cf. IV.i.4)

## 2.1 Weinberg's Proposal

### CONSCIOUSNESS & REFLECTION:

- Locke's commitments (or desiderata on a theory):
  1. All thinking is conscious
  2. Consciousness is a "perception of a perception"
  3. Consciousness cannot be a source of ideas (over and above sensation & reflection)
  4. Whatever consciousness is must be reconcilable with the "obscure notions" of II.i.25 and the "floating visions" of II.i.8
  5. Consciousness has a role in memory, sensitive knowledge, the cogito, personal identity, and (implicitly) in moral agency
- **Reflexivity:** Weinberg proposes that we satisfy all these claims by construing consciousness as "a reflexive self-referential awareness internal to ordinary perception" (Weinberg 2016b, 32). Consciousness is not something *added* to perception of an idea, but is rather something "*internal*" to it (p. 33)
- **Mineness:** Weinberg also construes consciousness as that by which we grasp our ideas or thoughts more generally as our own<sup>7</sup>
  - **Objection:** Does the proposed self-reflexive content of perception of an idea violate Locke's content empiricism?

<sup>7</sup> The consciousness that we are perceiving ideas allows us to find ourselves in any present or past thought or action. That we are the ones thinking and acting is given implicitly in the consciousness constituent of every perception of an idea. As Locke says, "consciousness" is that "whereby I am my self to my self" (II.xxvii.24). It is the experience or awareness of my thoughts and actions as mine—my awareness of myself as thinking and acting—that constitutes the criterion by which I can claim to be having those thoughts and engaging in those actions. This implicit grasp of ourselves as so perceiving a thought or performing an action is made explicit to us when we turn our present attention to those thoughts and actions in reflection. (Weinberg 2016, 50)

<sup>8</sup> Existence and Unity, are two other Ideas, that are suggested to the Understanding, by every Object without, and every Idea within. When Ideas are in our Minds, we consider them as being actually there, as well as we consider things to be actually without us; which is, that they exist, or have Existence. (ECHU II.vii.7)

<sup>9</sup> We...have three different constituents of the perception of any idea: the idea perceived, an idea of existence, and the consciousness that I am perceiving them...the simultaneity of the idea perceived and the idea of existence grounds the knowledge that the idea is there. But also constituent in the complex mental state, and so simultaneous with the idea perceived and the idea of existence, is consciousness, which is an awareness of an I perceiving. The simultaneity of the idea perceived and consciousness grounds the knowledge of what the idea is. That is, the thing presented to me as existing in my mind agrees with what I am perceiving it to be. (Weinberg 2016, 77)

<sup>10</sup> My suggestion is that the trio of items in the mind leads to one true mental proposition expressing the agreements therein. ... Knowing our own ideas, then, is due to perceiving a complexity of mental content, each part of which makes a contribution to the state of affairs as equally expressed in any of the family of the relevant true propositions. (Weinberg 2016, 78)

### SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS & KNOWLEDGE:

- Knowledge is propositional
- Knowledge requires perception of an idea(s)
- Every perception of ideas brings with it the idea of existence<sup>8</sup>
- Perception of an idea is a complex mental state consisting of, at least, (i) the act of perception, (ii) the idea perceived, and (iii) the self-consciousness that *I am perceiving*
- Knowledge of particular ideas consists of (i) the act of perception; (ii) the particular idea perceived; (iii) the idea of existence; (iv) the consciousness that *I am perceiving*<sup>9</sup>
- Knowledge of an idea is made possible by perceiving the intuitive agreement amongst the parts of the *perception* of the idea<sup>10</sup>

## 2.2 Self-Knowledge & the Cogito

- According to Locke we have intuitive knowledge of our own existence<sup>11</sup>
  1. Knowledge that one exists is just as certain as knowledge of one's ideas
  2. Knowledge that one exists is had in virtue of any act of thinking
  3. Knowledge of one's existence requires nothing further than what is present to mind (i.e. the idea one currently perceives)

## 3 Leibniz's Criticisms

### 3.1 Is Reflection Empirical?

- Locke characterizes reflection as a form of *experience*, an “inner” kind of perception. But is one's awareness of one's mind something that is really “given” to us, as the senses provide information of external objects?<sup>12</sup>

### 3.2 Reflection's Reach

- Locke construes reflection as providing only an awareness of the mind's *operations* but why not think we have access to ourselves as subjects?<sup>13</sup>

### 3.3 Reflection & Regress

- Locke considers reflection to be consciousness of our own thoughts (or mental operations) and considers consciousness to accompany all thought. But this generates a vicious regress.<sup>14</sup>

## References & Further Reading

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- Simmons, Alison. 2001. “Changing the Cartesian Mind: Leibniz on Sensation, Representation and Consciousness.” *The Philosophical Review* 110 (1): 31.
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<sup>11</sup> As for our own Existence, we perceive it so plainly, and so certainly, that it neither needs, nor is capable of any proof. For nothing can be more evident to us, than our own Existence. I think, I reason, I feel Pleasure and Pain; Can any of these be more evident to me, than my own Existence? . . . Experience then convinces us, that we have an intuitive Knowledge of our own Existence, and an internal infallible Perception that we are. In every Act of Sensation, Reasoning, or Thinking, we are conscious to our selves of our own Being; and, in this Matter, come not short of the highest degree of Certainty. (ECHU IV.ix.3)

<sup>12</sup> Now, reflection is nothing other than attention to what is within us, and the senses do not give us what we already bring with us...can anyone deny that there is a great deal innate in our mind, since we are innate to ourselves, so to speak, and since we have within ourselves being, unity, substance...and a thousand other objects of our intellectual ideas? (Leibniz 1996, 294, Preface to the *New Essays*)

<sup>13</sup> It is very true that our perceptions of ideas come either from the external senses or from the internal sense, which one may call reflection; but this reflection does not limit itself solely to the operations of the spirit, as is said [in Locke's ECHU II.I.4]; it extends to the spirit itself, and it is in apperceiving it that we apperceive substance. (Leibniz, *Echantillon de reflexions sur le II. livre [of Locke's Essay]*, 1698)

<sup>14</sup> It is impossible that we should always reflect explicitly on all our thoughts; for if we did, the mind would reflect on each reflection, ad infinitum, without ever being able to move on to a new thought. For example, in being aware of [‘en m’appercevant de’] some present feeling, I should have always to think that I think about that feeling, and further to think that I think of thinking about it, and so on ad infinitum. It must be that I stop reflecting on all these reflections, and that eventually some thought is allowed to occur without being thought about; otherwise I would dwell for ever on the same thing (Leibniz 1996, 118)

(2): 196–215.

Thiel, Udo. 2011. *The Early Modern Subject: Self-Consciousness and Personal Identity from Descartes to Hume*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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