

The Synthesis of Empiricism and Innatism in Berkeley's Doctrine of Notions

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Abstract: This essay argues that Berkeley's doctrine of notions is an account of concept-formation that offers a middle-way between empiricism and innatism, something which Berkeley himself asserts at *Siris* 308. First, the widespread assumption that Berkeley accepts Locke's conceptual empiricism is questioned, with particular attention given to Berkeley's views on innatism and ideas of reflection. Then, it is shown that Berkeley's doctrine of notions comes very close to the refined form of innatism to be found in Descartes' later writings and in Leibniz. Finally, it is argued that Berkeley denies a principle common to both empiricism and innatism, namely, that all conceptual knowledge amounts to the perception of ideas. By denying this—at least in the case of the concepts of self, causation, substance, and virtue—Berkeley is able to provide a synthesis of conceptual empiricism and innatism.

In *Siris*, Berkeley offers us a characteristically succinct reflection on his doctrine of notions:

[Aristotle] held that the mind of man was a *tabula rasa*, and that there were no innate ideas. Plato, on the contrary, held original ideas in the mind; that is, notions which never were or can be in the sense, such as being, beauty, goodness, likeness, parity. Some, perhaps, may think the truth to be this: that there are properly no *ideas*, or passive objects, in the mind but what were derived from sense: but that there are also besides these her own acts or operations; such are *notions*. (*Siris* 308)¹

I wish to use this statement as a guide in interpreting Berkeley's doctrine of notions. When Berkeley writes, "Some, perhaps, may think the truth to be this," I understand him to be expressing his own view that we may reconcile empiricism and innatism—two traditions represented in this passage by Aristotle and Plato—by treating innate notions as "acts or operations" of the mind.

Writers on Berkeley sometimes treat his doctrine of notions as so evasive and enigmatic that it hardly qualifies as a doctrine at all. One commentator has said of Berkeley's overall view of spirit that it is "extraordinarily sketchy."² My aim here is to show that, despite the relatively meager sources, the doctrine of notions, particularly as it is represented in the final editions of the *Principles* and *Three Dialogues* of 1734 (where the term "notion" is first used in its technical sense), offers us an interesting middle way between empiricists and innatists. It also provides an understanding of concept-formation that is novel in Berkeley's time and which allows him to avoid certain problems with Locke's empiricist and Descartes' innatist accounts. In particular, Berkeley gives us a more satisfactory account of how we acquire the concept of the self, and then of how we acquire other concepts such as causation and substance, which he thinks are based on our knowledge of the self.

I. Empiricism and Innatism

¹ *Works* 5: 143. Here and elsewhere the reference is to *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, ed. A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop, 9 volumes (London: Thomas Nelson, 1948-57).

² A.C. Grayling, *Berkeley: The Central Arguments* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1986), 155.

First let me describe how we might understand the early-modern dispute between empiricism and innatism. At this time the word “empiricism” was not used to describe the philosophical doctrine that we now use it to refer to. But a certain kind of empiricism, though it went without a title, was in fact a familiar position widely subscribed to. It was defended by the Scholastics, and it continued to be defended, with various modifications, by such moderns as Gassendi, Hobbes and Locke. All these philosophers expounded versions of what now often goes under the name “conceptual empiricism.”

Conceptual empiricism is usefully summed up in the Thomist maxim: *nihil est in intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sensu*.³ This maxim says at least three things. Most obviously, it says that the mind is a blank sheet or *tabula rasa* at its inception, containing no innate content. Secondly it says that all the objects of thought, including our most abstract intellectual concepts, are derived from the content of sense experience. Thirdly it says—or at least implies—that we cannot think without the aid of images: that is, without perceptual or quasi-perceptual mental objects. For the Scholastics the *nihil est in intellectu* principle was supplemented by a theory of abstraction. This attempted to explain how the material of intellectual thought was derived from the raw data of sensory experience. Our minds “draw out” from the images of sense concepts of more general significance. But these concepts remain images, however lacking in detail and particularity. Locke followed the scholastics in appealing to abstract ideas to explain certain central intellectual concepts.

Conceptual empiricism is to be contrasted with innatism. This holds that the concepts central to intellectual reflection cannot be derived from the content of sense experience, but are rather internal to the mind itself. Cartesian innatism, with which we are primarily interested here, says that the mind can find in itself preformed conceptions of self, substance, thought, God, as well as *res extensa* and its different modes. Cartesian innatism went hand in hand with the doctrine of pure intellect, a faculty that was said to be able to survey innate concepts and perceive their nature and their relations. Crucially, pure intellect has access to concepts that are neither images nor derived from imagery, and it is therefore not an abstractive faculty.

It is important, in the present context, to be aware that the term “notion” played a special role in the expression of innatist doctrine. Descartes used the terms *notio/notione* in Latin (and *notion* in French) to describe mental contents underived from sense. In fact he came to distinguish systematically between sense-based images (*imagines*) and notions (*notiones*). This division is apparent in the *Replies to Objections*⁴ and is most clearly developed in his *Principles of Philosophy* [PP].⁵ Here the term *notio* is used to describe non-sensual ideas that have a special

³ Berkeley explicitly mentions this principle at *Notebooks* (NB) 779 (*Works* 1: 94) calling it an “axiom of the Schoolemen.”

⁴ See for example the discussion of the “primary notions” of geometry and metaphysics at AT VII 156-7; CSM 2: 111 (*Replies* II), or the distinction between preconceived opinions and notions at AT IXA 202-206; CSM 2: 269-71 (*Replies* V). Here and elsewhere I use AT to refer to *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. by C. Adam and P. Tannery (Paris: Vrin, 1964-76) with volume number and page; and I use CSM to refer to *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch (Cambridge: CUP, 1985) with volume and page.

⁵ In the first book of the *Principles of Philosophy* the term *notio-notiones* is used in sections 10, 13, 47, 49, 50, 52, 54, 63, and 75. In all these different contexts the term is used to refer to non-sensory content that is known to the pure intellect. Notions are variously modified as “common,” “innate” and “primary”: the

epistemic status. Descartes links his use of the term to its etymology: *notiones* are the simplest constituents of knowledge that are *per se nota*—“known through themselves,” or “self-evident” as the phrase is rendered in what is now the standard English translation.⁶ The fact that notions are not derived from sense, makes them natural candidates for being innate contents of the mind. That is not to say that all notions are *necessarily* innate—some may for example be assembled from innate simples, and not be themselves preformed in the mind. But the non-imagistic character of innate concepts is, no doubt, the reason that Locke entitled the First Book of his *Essay* “Of Innate Notions,”⁷ and why in the course of that book he targets what he describes not only as “innate Notions,” but also “primary Notions,” “Notions naturally imprinted,” “original Notions,” “common Notions,” etc.⁸

II. A Synthesis

Now let us return to the passage from *Siris* that we quoted at the beginning. It has a number of interesting features. For example, when Berkeley positions his own theory of notions as offering a middle way between Aristotle and Plato, he clearly intends it as a middle way between conceptual empiricism and innatism. Berkeley alludes to the maxim “*nihil est in intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sensu*” in saying of Aristotle “there are properly no *ideas*, or passive objects, in the mind but what were derived from sense.” And the phrase “original ideas in the mind,” as well as the Cartesian term “notion,” indicates that although explicit mention is made of Plato, a broad tradition of innatism is being referred to of which Descartes is the contemporary spokesman.

The reconciliation that Berkeley describes in this passage is I think best described as a synthesis. By this I mean two things. First, Berkeley interprets both empiricism and innatism to be saying something that is important and true. He tells us that conceptual empiricism represents a significant truth about ideas or the “passive objects” of knowledge. They do indeed all come to us via sense. But he also says that innatism expresses something significant about our operations with these objects. These operations constitute a conceptual grasp that cannot be derived from sense and which Berkeley therefore thinks cannot be incorporated into an empiricist perspective. This is a synthesis also because the two competing positions are brought together by the denial of the very assumption that makes their opposition possible. This assumption, which we will

common notions refer to axioms, or self-evident first principles, whereas the primary, or simple notions most often refer to concepts, like substance, thought, extension. Notions in this latter sense are related to the simple natures of the Descartes’ *Regulae*—see L.J. Beck, *The Metaphysics of Descartes* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965), 89-90. See also Alan Hart, “Descartes’ ‘Notions’,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 31 (1970), 114-22.

⁶ See PP I, 10: AT VIII A 8; CSM 1: 196.

⁷ The title of the First Book of Locke’s *Essay* sometimes goes unnoticed because it only appears on the page of contents, and not in the text proper. See John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 15. Hereafter E.

⁸ These phrases occur for example at E I.ii.1, 48, E I.ii.5, 49-5, and E I.iii.16, 77, as well as elsewhere in the First Book of the *Essay*. The term “notion” is also, of course, to be found in a looser sense, in both Locke and Berkeley, referring to an opinion or intellectual idea.

discuss below, is that concepts are all necessarily perceptions, or what Berkeley here calls “passive objects.”⁹

We might also note a second feature of this passage: Berkeley *equates* notions with our mental operations. It is not that notions are something in addition to mental operations which somehow represent them to the mind. Rather, Berkeley says of the mind’s own acts and operations: “such are notions.” This implies that the very process of operating may involve knowledge of what we are doing. It suggests that our operations may be *per se nota* or known through themselves. This, I believe, is an abiding feature of Berkeley’s doctrine of notions which, right from the first edition of the *Principles*, treats our grasp of our own active self as one that is internal to our exercise of mental operations.

III. Doubts about Conceptual Empiricism

We are used to seeing Berkeley’s philosophy assimilated to the empiricist tradition. He is usually treated as one of three British Empiricists, standing between Locke and Hume. Sometimes it is also claimed that Berkeley radicalizes Locke’s empiricism just as Hume further radicalizes Berkeley’s own. The empiricist reading of his philosophy is, of course, by no means universal. A number of commentators, including Harry Bracken,¹⁰ Louis Loeb,¹¹ Stephen Daniel,¹² and Costica Bradatan¹³ have highlighted non-empiricist themes even in his early philosophy. These commentators have tended to focus on Berkeley’s references to archetypes when explaining his divergence from empiricism; so while the reading of Berkeley that I am concerned to expound here is allied to these interpretations, it does have a rather different focus by concentrating on the doctrine of notions.

In a moment I wish to look at some textual reasons for resisting the categorization of Berkeley as a conceptual empiricist, many of which have been already been pointed to by the commentators we have mentioned. But first let us say something more about conceptual empiricism in Locke: Locke would after all be the paradigm of empiricism for Berkeley, since the philosophy of his *Essay* was the statement of empiricism that Berkeley was best acquainted with (although he also had a good knowledge of Hobbes’ conceptual empiricism, and he would no doubt have also been familiar with Gassendi’s objections to the *Meditations*). Locke’s conceptual empiricism involved, in particular, three important parts of his philosophy in the *Essay*. The first of these is Locke’s theory of abstraction which enabled him to explain how we arrive at certain general concepts from the *concreta* of sense. Berkeley’s opposition to the doctrine of abstraction needs no commentary here as it is explicitly stated in many places, most extensively in the Introduction

⁹ I discuss this assumption in my section 5 below.

¹⁰ Harry M. Bracken, *Berkeley* (London: Macmillan, 1974).

¹¹ Louis Loeb, *From Descartes to Hume: Continental Metaphysics and the Development of Modern Philosophy* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1981).

¹² Stephen H. Daniel, “Berkeley’s Christian Neoplatonism, Archetypes and Divine Ideas,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 39 (2001): 239-58. Daniel argues for an innatist reading of Berkeley from the *Notebooks* onwards in his more recent “How Berkeley’s Works Are Interpreted” in *George Berkeley: Religion and Science in the Age of Enlightenment*, ed. Silvia Parigi (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010), 8-10.

¹³ Costica Bradatan, *The Other Bishop Berkeley: An Exercise in Reenchantment* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).

to the *Principles*.¹⁴ Instead I wish to focus on Berkeley's attitude to two further theses that were essential to Locke's conceptual empiricism: these are his doctrine of reflection and his rejection of innate ideas. Berkeley's view of these two parts of Locke's empiricism is somewhat harder to discern.

Let us start with Berkeley's view of the anti-innatism in the First Book of the *Essay*, where Locke treats the mind, at its beginning, as a *tabula rasa*.¹⁵ Many commentators assume that Berkeley followed Locke in rejecting innate notions, or innate ideas (as they are now almost always termed), and that he also endorsed the *tabula rasa* doctrine which came with this rejection. But it is very hard to find a passage where Berkeley actually says this, or indeed one where he shows any sympathy for the thrust of Locke's anti-innatist polemic. On the contrary, there is textual evidence that Berkeley was not satisfied with the conclusions of the First Book of the *Essay*. A lack of enthusiasm is suggested, for example, in the *Notebooks* where he opines that Locke's mistake was not to begin his *Essay* with the Third Book on language.¹⁶ And a few pages before this remark he had made a considerably more explicit statement on the issue: "There are innate ideas i.e. Ideas created with us."¹⁷ The *Notebooks* are probably not, however, a source of a single, stable doctrine, at least when it comes to spirit. At one stage Berkeley seems to have gone through a radical empiricist phase, when he was inclined, like Hume later, to treat the mind as merely a "congeries of perceptions."¹⁸ He also felt able to invoke the *Nihil est in intellectu* axiom in one remark.¹⁹

Let us pass to a later phase of Berkeley's philosophy: in the first dialogue of *Alciphron* we find a discussion of what is "natural to the mind of man"—a phrase that conjures up (no doubt intentionally) innatist doctrine.²⁰ Indeed, we can read the sections in question as a systematic critique of Locke's central arguments against innatism. Euphranor, Berkeley's spokesman in the dialogues, contends that the notion of God is natural to us, while also allowing that it is not originally present in our minds nor universal to all minds. The conception of being "natural to the mind of man," therefore, avoids Locke's criticisms of innate ideas that emphasize the absence of these ideas in the minds of children, madmen, "Ideots," and in certain geographically-remote communities. In *Siris*, Berkeley returns more explicitly to the innatist debate, openly disparaging those moderns who have "*attempted to explode*" innate ideas.²¹ Here, again, he makes it clear that innatism need not say that content is actually present in the mind from birth,

¹⁴ See Bracken, *Berkeley*, 40f. for a lucid statement of the role of Berkeley's anti-abstractionism in his rejection of conceptual empiricism.

¹⁵ Locke uses the scholastic "*tabula rasa*" in the abridgement of the *Essay* that he published and circulated among his friends, but in the *Essay* itself he prefers "white Paper, void of all Characters" [See "Extrait d'un Livre Anglois..." *Bibliothèque Universelle et Historique*, ed. J. Le Clerc (Amsterdam, 1688), vol. 8, 49-142: 49; and E II.i.2, 104].

¹⁶ NB 717 (*Works* 1: 87).

¹⁷ NB 649 (*Works* 1: 79).

¹⁸ NB 580 (*Works* 1: 72). The suggestion that Berkeley went through a "Humean" phase has, however, been recently questioned by Daniel in his "How Berkeley's Works Are Interpreted."

¹⁹ NB 779 (*Works* 1: 94).

²⁰ Alc. I, 14-15 (*Works* 3: 55-60)

²¹ *Siris* 309 (*Works* 5: 143). The italics are mine.

but can instead point to its universal *potential* to be there.²² This last point is also emphasized in an explicitly innatist passage of the sermon “Thy Will be Done in Earth as it is in Heaven,” where Berkeley says that notions are “natural or innate” as universal dispositions or tendencies.²³

None of the passages we have mentioned so far occur in what is often thought to be the classic period of Berkeley’s philosophical career which begins in 1709 with the publication of his *Essay on Vision* and extends to 1721 with *De motu*. But it is in this period that Berkeley shows a willingness to talk of the concept of the self—and indeed our knowledge of the spiritual sphere in general—in terms of pure intellect. In the *Notebooks* Berkeley had stated baldly “Pure Intellect I understand not,”²⁴ but in a letter of 1711 to Le Clerc in Latin, his view has evidently softened. He is now willing to accept a distinction between imagination and pure intellect, at least on the condition that pure intellect is allowed to comprehend only spiritual things that are known by reflection on the mind itself.²⁵ In the *Three Dialogues*, Philonous carefully distinguishes between the doctrine of pure intellect and that of abstract ideas, and he again makes room for the role of pure intellect in the spiritual sphere:

Since I cannot frame abstract ideas at all, it is plain, I cannot frame them by the help of *pure intellect*, whatsoever faculty you [Hylas] understand by those words. Besides, not to inquire into the nature of pure intellect and its spiritual objects, as *virtue, reason, God*, or the like; thus much seems manifest, that sensible things are only to be perceived by sense, or represented by the imagination.²⁶

In *De motu*, Berkeley’s most explicit endorsement of pure intellect is made: “Pure intellect [*purus intellectus*],” he writes, “is concerned only with spiritual and inextended things, such as minds, their states, passions, virtues, and such like.”²⁷ *De motu* was Berkeley’s first publication after the loss of his manuscript of the Second Part of the *Principles* which was to deal with our knowledge of spirits, as well as with moral concepts. This loss seems to have occurred in southern Italy in 1716, some five years before *De motu* was published, and perhaps two or three years before it was written. It is likely, then, that what Berkeley says in the passage of *De motu* we have just quoted gives us a strong hint of the theory that had been developed in the missing manuscript. By accepting the pure intellect, Berkeley is rejecting conceptual empiricism: he is endorsing a faculty that has access to mental content underived from the images of sense, and it strongly suggests that he has sympathy with Cartesian innatism.²⁸

²² See especially *Siris* 314 (*Works* 5: 145) where Berkeley says that “first notions” lie dormant in the mind until aroused by reflection.

²³ See *Works* 7: 130.

²⁴ NB 810 (*Works* 1: 97).

²⁵ “...etiamsi admittatur distinctio illa, tamen intellectus purus mihi videtur versari tantum circa res spirituales, quae cognoscuntur per reflexionem in ipsam animam...” (*Works* 8, 49-50).

²⁶ DHP (*Works* 2: 193-4).

²⁷ DM 53; see George Berkeley, *Philosophical Works, including the Works on Vision*, ed. Michael R. Ayers (London: J. M. Dent, 1992), 269. Hereafter PW.

²⁸ It is true that Malebranche, who was no innatist, also makes use of the pure intellect for his doctrine of “seeing all things in God.” Malebranche’s pure intellect is, nevertheless, no less in conflict with empiricism than Descartes’. One should also add that, since Berkeley did not subscribe to the vision in God thesis, it makes much more sense to link his pure intellect to Descartes and his innatist followers.

Let me turn, now, to the third and final component of Locke's conceptual empiricism: his doctrine of ideas of reflection. Locke, when he introduced reflection as a second "fountain" of ideas, proposed that we understand it by analogy with sense experience, telling us that reflection "might properly enough be call'd internal Sense."²⁹ Locke says the mind "turns its *view* inward upon it self, and *observes* its own Actions,"³⁰ and he talks of our "*looking* immediately into our selves."³¹ For Locke reflection is quasi-sensory perception. This is why it constitutes an important part of his defense of conceptual empiricism. Locke's theory of reflection broadens our understanding of sense to include internal perception, the hope clearly being that we can then allow for the knowledge that the mind has of its own activities without being tempted to join the Cartesians in abandoning conceptual empiricism.³²

Berkeley is, again, never quite explicit about his view of Locke's ideas of reflection. Daniel Flage has suggested—I think with some reason—that he does wish to maintain at least some ideas of reflection, perhaps of the feelings that individuate our different emotions.³³ This is why Berkeley writes as if there are ideas of reflection in several places in the *Principles*, one of which is, of course, the very first section of the main text.³⁴ But it is clear that, when it comes to the mind's own nature and its operations, Berkeley treats Locke's sensory model as a fundamentally wrongheaded approach. Berkeley is particularly critical of the view that an "idea"—which for him refers to a passive object of the mind—can represent an active mental power.³⁵ This thought about passivity is backed-up by a more general Cartesian skepticism towards the presentation of self-knowledge as a quasi-sensory affair. At PHK 136, he states that it is absurd to think that a sense could give us knowledge of our own soul,³⁶ and at PHK 142 he argues that the idea we might be able to perceive our soul by a sensory faculty is as contrary to reason as the idea that we might be able "to see a sound."³⁷ Here Berkeley echoes Descartes' statement in the *Discourse* that trying to use one's imagination to understand the innate ideas of God and the soul is like "trying to use one's eyes in order to hear sounds."³⁸

Berkeley's opposition to the perceptual model for understanding the inner, spiritual sphere is also evident in a sometimes misunderstood remark in PHK 27 which I think is sometimes misunderstood. Berkeley writes:

²⁹ E.II.i.4, 105.

³⁰ E.II.vi.1, 127 (my emphasis).

³¹ E.II.vii.9, 131 (my emphasis).

³² This intent is so fundamental to Locke's philosophical position that he states it in what is probably the very first sentence that he committed to paper towards his *Essay concerning Human Understanding*. He begins Draft A with the words: "I imagin that all knowleg is founded on and ultimately derives its self from sense, or something analogous to it ..." Locke goes on to indicate that what is analogous to sense is "experience of the operations of our owne mindes." See *Drafts for the Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Nidditch and G.A.J. Rogers, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) 1 and 7.

³³ Daniel E. Flage, "Berkeley's Ideas of Reflection," *The Berkeley Newsletter* 17 (2006), 7-13, where Flage talks of ideas of feeling that differentiate, say, being in love from being angry (10).

³⁴ For an enumeration of Berkeley's various references to ideas of reflection in the *Principles*, see Flage, "Berkeley's Ideas," 8.

³⁵ See, for example, PHK 27 (*Works* 2: 27)

³⁶ *Works* 2: 102-4.

³⁷ *Works* 2: 106.

³⁸ *Discourse on Method*, Part IV (AT VI 129; CSM 1: 37).

Such is the nature of spirit or that which acts, that it cannot be of itself perceived, but only by the effects which it produceth.³⁹

George Pitcher and Daniel Flage both read this as a positive statement about our knowledge of spirit, which asserts that such knowledge is always relative, that is, spirit is not known directly but only as that entity that produces certain effects.⁴⁰ But Berkeley is concerned here with the possibility of *perceiving* spirit—he says, after all, that spirit “cannot be of itself *perceived*.”⁴¹ He allows, it is true, an indirect perception of spirit, but he makes it quite clear that if we seek to know spirit directly, perception cannot be of help. This is why, in the same section, Berkeley contrasts the indirect knowledge of spirit we gain by perception, with the *notion* of self that we all possess, and which is evidenced in our understanding of the word as well as in our understanding the words for the various mental operations such as willing, loving, hating. In the *Three Dialogues*, Berkeley tells us quite unequivocally that we have a direct and intimate knowledge of spirit:

I know what I mean by the terms I and myself; and I know this immediately, or intuitively, though I do not perceive it as I perceive a triangle, a colour, or a sound.⁴²

Now, of course, Locke’s theory of reflection was concerned with our perception of occurrent mental operations, and he nowhere suggested that we could perceive our soul itself, or the essence of our soul, by reflection. Apart from anything else, Locke was agnostic towards the nature of the soul and this showed itself in his refusal to exclude the possibility of “thinking matter.” But it is precisely because Berkeley thought that we do have an understanding of the essence of the soul and because he thought that our mental operations were internal to this essence, that he was led to reject Locke’s comparison of reflection with sense perception. The complete knowledge of spiritual substance that Berkeley wished to account for could not be explained by an internal sense.

So we have found evidence that Berkeley was at least unhappy with Locke’s arguments against innatism, perhaps because he wished to defend innate notions in a somewhat different form than

³⁹ *Works* 2: 52.

⁴⁰ See George Pitcher, *Berkeley* (London: Routledge, 1977), 222; Flage leans on this passage more overtly when he, like Pitcher, asserts that Berkeley thinks we have only a relative notion of spirit—see Daniel E. Flage, *Berkeley’s Doctrine of Notions: A Reconstruction based on his Theory of Meaning* (London: Croom Helm, 1987), 151 ff. Flage’s thesis that we have only a relative notion of spirit has been subjected to a detailed and (to my mind) persuasive critique by Talia Mae Bettcher in her “Berkeley on Substance” (unpublished manuscript).

⁴¹ My emphasis. The context makes it clear that Berkeley is talking about the conception of spirit *per se*, not just other spirits, as some would have it. The general point, stated earlier in the section, is that “there can be no idea formed of a soul or spirit.”

⁴² *Works* 2: 231. It has been suggested to me that this statement might still allow a peculiar kind of perception of the self—that is to say it might be read as saying “I do not perceive [the self] as I perceive a triangle, a colour or a sound, but I do still perceive it in another way.” This reading would, I believe, be unsustainable in context. This is partly because the “other way” of perceiving spirit would be left quite unexplained, but also because Philonous, in the passage that follows this quote, simultaneously characterizes ideas as things perceived and denies that there is an *idea* of the self. Incidentally I know of no passage in Berkeley where he says we can have a direct *perception* of anything but an idea. One should also note at this point that “I,” “myself,” “mind,” “soul” and “spirit” are synonyms for Berkeley (see PHK 2, *Works* 2: 42).

those that Locke attacked. We have also found that he rejected Locke's quasi-sensory model of reflection for explaining the knowledge we have of our own mental powers. The doctrine of notions seems to be relevant to both these critical moments in his engagement with Locke's empiricism. I wish to suggest not only that the doctrine of notions replaces Locke's empiricist internal sense of reflection, but that it also constitutes what Berkeley thought might be salvaged from innatism, as indicated in the passage from *Siris* that we quoted at the beginning.

IV. Berkeley and Innatism

Now the suggestion of any sort of kinship between Berkeley's notions and innatism may look willfully controversial. To help dispel this impression we must first distinguish between what might be called a crude and a refined version of innatism in Descartes' work. The crude version, which Descartes' opponents (such as Hyperaspistes and later Locke) tended to target, treated innate content as a collection of ideas somehow sitting in the mind from its inception. Most notoriously, perhaps, Descartes says in the *Meditations* that God stamps the idea of himself on our minds just as a craftsman stamps his mark on his handiwork.⁴³ However, in his replies to the empiricist objections of Gassendi and Hobbes, and then at greater length in the "Comments on a Certain Broadsheet," Descartes develops a theory that involves two important refinements to crude innatism. He points out that innate notions need not be actually existent in the mind *ab initio*, but merely have the potential to be there—something that we have found Berkeley asserting in several places, starting with *Alciphron*. Descartes then explains how this potentiality is realized when we become aware of our own nature as a "thinking thing." Such reflection, Descartes implies, gives us immediate access to concepts like "thought," "substance," "cause," "self" and so on. In "Comments on a Certain Broadsheet," Descartes goes as far as to equate innate ideas with "the mind's own faculty of thinking."⁴⁴

A similar refined version of innatism is also developed by Leibniz in his later writings, particularly in the *New Essays* and, more briefly, the *Monadology*.⁴⁵ Partly, no doubt, in response to Locke's critique of crude innatism, Leibniz argues that the principle *nihil est in intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sensu* is a valid law that has one exception: our idea of the soul or intellect itself.⁴⁶ Once we allow that we have an idea of the intellect, or thinking self, which is not derived from sense, this gives us the key to many other concepts that can be gained from a reflective acquaintance with our own minds. Such reflection, Leibniz argues, shows us that the "soul includes being, substance, one, same, cause, perception, reasoning, and many other notions which the senses cannot provide."⁴⁷

The refined understanding of innate ideas has at least two advantages over its cruder predecessor. It is philosophically more satisfactory because the postulation of innate ideas is no longer *ad hoc*

⁴³ CSM 2: 35; AT VII 51.

⁴⁴ AT VIII B 358; CSM 1: 303: "I have never written or taken the view that the mind requires innate ideas which are something distinct from its own faculty of thinking." See also AT VII 189; CSM 2: 133 and AT VII 372-74; CSM 2: 256-57.

⁴⁵ See G.W. Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*, trans. and ed. Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 110-11; and G.W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Texts*, trans. and ed. R.S. Woolhouse and Richard Francks (Oxford: OUP, 1998), 272 (*Monadology* §30).

⁴⁶ Leibniz, *New Essays*, 111.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* I do not mean to suggest that Leibniz influenced Berkeley in this respect.

but is explained by the fact that we have a self-reflective faculty of thought. It is also ontologically more economical because it does not involve a secret treasure trove of ideas contained within the mind from the beginning, but only their potential to arise from reflection. But the refined view does come with one drawback, at least for Descartes. It does not seem compatible with the Cartesian view that our concept of geometrical space is innate. It is hard to see how our innate ideas of *res extensa* could be derived from mere reflection on the thinking self.⁴⁸

Berkeley's doctrine of notions is closely akin to the refined form of innatism. It shares with the innatists the conviction that the semantic content of certain concepts, including self, cause and substance, is not to be found in the data of sense, nor is it to be abstracted or constructed therefrom. It explains how our grasp of these concepts arises from our reflective acquaintance with the nature of the mind itself. In *De motu*, for example, Berkeley says that active cause is properly understood only when we "meditate" on "incorporeal things," and that this concept belongs to first philosophy or metaphysics.⁴⁹ We might also notice how, in the context of Berkeley's system, the difficulty we have just highlighted with the innateness of *res extensa* vanishes. For Berkeley there is simply no idea of abstract geometrical space that needs to be explained. It may therefore look as if Berkeley's theory of notions is actually a more consistent version of Descartes' refined form of innatism than Descartes' own.

Let us briefly consider two potential objections to our linking of Berkeley's doctrine of notions with the refined version of innatism. First, it might be said that Berkeley's position exhibits a closer resemblance to the crude version of innatism than to its refined cousin because notions are ever-present to the mind, which is always active. It hardly seems consistent of Berkeley to talk of notions of self, substance and causation as being *potentially* in the mind: if the mind by its very nature is active, they must always *actually* be there. To meet this objection we should point out that when Berkeley discusses innatist doctrine, particularly in the passages of *Alciphron* and the Sermon "Thy Will be Done in Earth as it is in Heaven" we have mentioned, he is primarily interested in the notion of God. The notion of God is not present to the mind from its beginning, but requires reason and reflection. Berkeley's account of this notion and some other notions (e.g., of other finite minds and moral concepts) is more in harmony, then, with the refined version of innatism. More importantly, though, Berkeley thought that all notions require a kind of (non-perceptual) attention to one's mental activities. In the course of explaining his master-argument, for example, Berkeley tells us that the mind is apt to "take no notice of itself,"⁵⁰ and this surely means that notions, though they are always potentially accessible to the mind, need not be the actual subject of awareness from the mind's beginning.

A second objection would seek to assimilate the doctrine of notions to the traditional empiricist reading by pointing to the undeniable fact that the content of Berkeley's notions is still gained

⁴⁸ A point made by Michael Ayers in "Was Berkeley an Empiricist or a Rationalist," *The Cambridge Companion to Berkeley*, ed. Kenneth Winkler (Cambridge: CUP, 2005), 34-63, see 40. Generally, Ayers' essay is a statement of the opposing interpretation to the one taken here, treating Berkeley as an empiricist.

⁴⁹ DM 71-72 (PW 275-76).

⁵⁰ PHK 23 (*Works 2*: 50).

from experience in the most general sense of the word.⁵¹ Thus Anthony Grayling writes: “The signal point is that without experience as such we do not come by notions; so Berkeley’s empiricism is unequivocal.”⁵² The trouble with this objection, however, is that the same may be said of the refined version of innatism that we have been discussing. That too says that innate concepts emerge in the course of experience as the thinking subject becomes aware of its own nature. Grayling’s broad understanding of empiricism therefore risks bringing Descartes and Leibniz into the empiricist fold. At this point some might say that refined innatism and empiricism can no longer be usefully separated from one another, and that the distinction between innatists and empiricists has been effectively erased. But if we continue to use the term empiricism in the narrow sense of conceptual empiricism that we outlined above, then empiricism requires that intellectual concepts be derived from the content of *sense* experience or something analogous to it; and this is exactly what Berkeley denies is the case with the concepts of self, substance, causation, etc.

V. Perception, Subject and Object

There remains one significant difference between Berkeley’s doctrine of notions and the innatism of Descartes and Leibniz, and it is this difference that enables him to find the middle way between empiricism and innatism described at *Siris* 308. Although Descartes and Leibniz reject the empiricist model of self-knowledge, resisting any attempt to treat self-knowledge as involving images or a quasi-sensory faculty, they do still talk of a *perception* of the self and other ideas that are derived from selfhood. This is strikingly put in Descartes’ Second Meditation, where the meditator describes his liberation from sensory perceptions and his coming on the pure idea of his self in the following way:

I thus realize that none of the things that the imagination enables me to grasp is at all relevant to this knowledge of myself which I possess, and that the mind must therefore be more carefully diverted from such things if it is to perceive its own nature as distinctly as possible [*ut suam ipsa naturam quam distinctissime percipiat*].⁵³

Here Descartes shows that he is willing to treat self-knowledge as a *perception* of one’s own nature. This, as we learn elsewhere, is a purely intellectual perception. Descartes, whether consciously or not, looks upon self-reflection as involving a split between perceiving subject and perceived object. Somehow the subject must stand back from itself and perceive itself as an object of the mind. The paradoxical character of such a mental act is palpable. If we treat self-knowledge as a form of perception, then however intellectual and non-sensory we make this mental act, it threatens to be self-defeating, as the self, *qua* perceiver, eludes its own perception.

⁵¹ In *De motu*, for example, Berkeley more than once writes of our experience of causal power. See, for example, DM 30 (PW 262): “A thinking, active thing is given which we experience as the principle of motion in ourselves.”

⁵² A. C. Grayling, “Berkeley’s Argument for Immaterialism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Berkeley*, 166-89, quoting 173.

⁵³ AT VII 28; CSM 2: 19.

It is as if, to use Gilbert Ryle's analogy, one is trying to jump on the shadow of one's own head.⁵⁴

Berkeley's doctrine of notions is alive to this threat. He says that we as active beings are aware of our operations through exercising them by "a kind of inner consciousness" (*conscientia quadam interna*).⁵⁵ There is no *perception* of the self as an object: rather our mental activities reveal our natures as active beings. They do this without there being an idea, or passive item, present to the mind as it becomes aware of its own self, its causal power, or its substancehood. This allows Berkeley to drop the problematic assumption, shared by empiricist and innatist alike (despite their differences), that the spiritual sphere is known by a peculiar *perception*. This means that we cannot talk of innate *ideas* in his connection, as we can in connection with Descartes and Leibniz. Berkeley's notions are not a special sub-division of ideas as in Descartes. "To have an idea is all one as to perceive," Berkeley states early in PHK,⁵⁶ and so in denying that we have an idea of spirit, he is rejecting the possibility of any form of perception of it.⁵⁷

We now see the full significance of the statement at PHK 27 that we have already had occasion to discuss:

Such is the nature of spirit or that which acts, that it cannot be of itself perceived, but only by the effects which it produceth.⁵⁸

Here we may take Berkeley to be rejecting not just the sensory Lockean perceptual model for understanding reflection, but also the intellectual version of the perceptual model to be found in the Cartesian innatist tradition. Any attempt *to perceive* the thinking subject, whether by sense or intellect, can only reveal the thinking subject indirectly by our perceiving its effects, or ideas.

It is by denying the perceptual model of self-knowledge that Berkeley is then able to bring about the synthesis that I referred to earlier. Conceptual empiricism is valid for what we can perceive. Perceptions—that is mental objects, or ideas—are always either sensory, or derived from sense experience. None of this, however, gives us an understanding of self, causation, or substance. Nor, it seems, does it give us an understanding of moral and aesthetic concepts, for the list of notions in *Siris* includes "goodness" and "beauty," and in the *Three Dialogues* and *De motu* Berkeley mentions "virtue" as belonging to the spiritual sphere. To explain our grasp of these concepts, Berkeley appeals to our exercise of spiritual powers, and it is here that empiricism is found to fall short. Our conceptual grasp of spirit, substance, causal power, and of value, is not derived from sense, but is internal to the exercise of our mental faculties.

This position, however sketchily it is portrayed in Berkeley's writings, has the important philosophical advantage of being able to incorporate the insights of both sides of the debate about innatism. It also makes an interesting and significant break with the view—common to

⁵⁴ Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), 187.

⁵⁵ DM 21 (PW 260). See also PHK 89 (*Works* 2: 80) where Berkeley talks of "inward feeling."

⁵⁶ PHK 7 (*Works* 2: 44).

⁵⁷ This also means that my talk above of innate *contents* in the case of Descartes and Leibniz is not strictly applicable to Berkeley's position.

⁵⁸ PHK 27 (*Works* 2: 52).

Locke and Descartes—that to have a concept is to have some kind of special object before the mind. Berkeley has, of course, already questioned such a view in his critique of abstract ideas, when he holds that it is not the presence of an abstract idea that enables us to grasp the general concept of triangle, but our active use of a particular triangle, when we allow it represent other triangles. This makes our mastery of the concept of triangle as much a result of our ability to operate with ideas as of our passive perception of them. The doctrine of notions may be seen as another, deeper, expression of Berkeley's view that concepts are constituted by our mental activity.⁵⁹

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