

The Coherence of Consciousness in Locke's *Essay*

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History of Philosophy Quarterly
Vol. 25, No. 1 (January 2008)

1.0 Introduction¹

Consciousness is a pivotal notion in Locke's *Essay*.² It matters to his accounts of personal identity, sensitive knowledge, his version of the *cogito* argument, memory, and it is one factor in his argument against innate ideas. Nevertheless, Locke's notion of consciousness presents an interpretive puzzle: important passages on consciousness in the *Essay* have proved hard to reconcile.³ Some have thought that Locke meant to identify consciousness with perception in general. According to this view, all thinking is merely a modification of consciousness, and consciousness plays no independent role in Locke's theory of the mind.⁴ Others have suggested that because consciousness involves some kind of awareness of mental states, Locke should be understood to identify consciousness with reflection.⁵ Still others have argued that although both entail some sort of awareness of thinking, consciousness and reflection should be understood to be different perceptual acts. The distinguishing feature is that reflection seems to require an act

¹ I am especially grateful to Donald Ainslie. Special thanks also to Paul Franks, Jennifer Nagel, Marleen Rozemond, and Helga Varden, audiences at the 2005 Midwest Seminar in Early Modern Philosophy, the 2006 Pacific Division Meeting of the APA, and a 2006 colloquium in the Philosophy Department at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

² All references to John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, 4th Edition, P.H. Nidditch, ed., (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975) are cited by book number.chapter number.section number.

³ For more historical treatments of the use of the term 'consciousness' in the seventeenth-century and earlier, see Udo Thiel, "Epistemologism and Early Modern Debates about Individuation and Identity", *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 5:2 (1997), 353 -37; "Hume's Notions of Consciousness and Reflection in Context", *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 2:2 (1994), 75-115. See also Robert McRae, *Leibniz, Perception, Apperception, and Thought* (University of Toronto Press, 1976), 32.

⁴ See Vere Chappell, "Locke's Theory of Ideas" in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 27-8; Martha Brandt Bolton, "Simple Ideas and Sensitive Knowledge", *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 85:3 (2004), 306; G.A.J. Rogers, "Locke and the Objects of Perception", *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 85:3 (2004), 263, and Michael Ayers, *Locke*, 2 vols. (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), I: 288 and II: 286, who seems to think Locke might have held two conceptions of consciousness at once.

⁵ For the view that consciousness and reflection in the *Essay* are the same see Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*, trans. and eds. Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 118; Henry Lee, *Anti-Scepticism: or Notes upon Mr Locke's Essay*, (London, 1702), 40-1, John Yolton's comments on Lee's position in *John Locke and the Way of Ideas* (Oxford University Press, 1956), 73; Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (Edinburgh, 1785), I.v, and Alfred Klemmt, *John Locke, theoretische Philosophie* (Westkulturverlag A. Hain, 1952), 34.

of will or attention where consciousness does not.⁶ None of these interpretations of Locke is satisfactory. Locke is attributed either a theory of consciousness insufficient for the role he assigns it or he is interpreted to have a theory that contradicts other important commitments, such as his commitment to the paucity of reflective abilities in children or to his empiricist principle that all ideas originate in sensation and reflection.⁷ The latter two problems have led to charges that Locke's theories of consciousness and reflection are incoherent.⁸ Nevertheless, Locke can meet all of his commitments as well as avoid any incoherence once consciousness is interpreted as a special kind of reflexive and proprietary perception internal to any perception of an idea.

2.0 Consciousness is Identical to Perception in General

Consider first Locke's definition of consciousness as "the perception of what passes in a man's own Mind" (II.i.19). Locke seems to suggest that consciousness is a perception, and that we are conscious of anything and everything that passes in the mind. Similarly, he is also clear that consciousness is a kind of sensing or awareness of our thinking. "But I do say, he cannot think at any time waking or sleeping, without being sensible of it. Our being sensible of it is not necessary to anything, 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" (II.i.10). Clearly, Locke understands

⁶ Proponents of the view that consciousness is higher order awareness different from reflection include Victor Cousin, *Philosophie de Locke* (Paris: Librairie Academique 1873), 79, 102; James Gibson, *Locke's Theory of Knowledge and its Historical Relations* (Cambridge University Press, 1960), 57, and Robert McRae, *Leibniz, Perception, Apperception, and Thought* (University of Toronto Press, 1976), 34.

⁷ This is also referred to as Locke's concept empiricism. See II.i.4: "These two, I say, viz. External, Material things, as the Objects of *SENSATION*; and the Operations of our own Minds within, as the Objects of *REFLECTION*, are to me, the only Originals, from whence all our *Ideas* take their beginnings."

⁸ As Mark Kulstad, "Locke on Consciousness and Reflection" in *Leibniz on Apperception, Consciousness, and Reflection* (Munich: Philosophia, 1991), 115, notes, both Reid, *Essays*, 127n1, and Cousin, *Philosophie de Locke*, 102, claimed that Locke had either "confounded" (Reid) or "confused" (Cousin) consciousness and reflection, but it is not clearly evident whether the confusion they claim is one of identification or incoherence. See also Ayers, *Locke*, I:309n99, who seems to agree that Locke's view is incoherent.

all thinking to be conscious, and it seems that he also understands consciousness to be inseparable from each and every thought.

On the first of the three major interpretations, consciousness is understood to be merely a synonym for perception in general. Perceptual states, according to this view, just are conscious states, and there is no role for consciousness independent of perception. So, when Locke states, as he does on many occasions, that consciousness is necessary to or essential to thinking, he is seen as making no distinction between consciousness and perception.⁹ This interpretation¹⁰, however, cannot do justice to Locke's understanding of the contributions to perception made by consciousness. There is then no way to account for the role of consciousness in Locke's accounts of memory, his version of Descartes's *cogito* argument for the existence of the thinker, or Locke's account of sensitive knowledge and personal identity. In each of these accounts Locke suggests that consciousness adds something to ordinary perception or even that consciousness is an awareness of a perception. For example, in IV.ii.14, we find Locke asking rhetorically whether one "be not invincibly *conscious* to himself of a different Perception, when he looks on the Sun by day, and thinks on it by night" (my emphasis). Similarly, in II.xxvii.9, Locke seems to say that consciousness is the perception of a perception that in some way grounds our claims to personal identity. A 'person' is defined as someone who can "consider [her] self as [her] self, ... which [she] does, only by that consciousness, which is inseparable from thinking, and as it seems to me essential to it: It being impossible for any one to perceive,

⁹ Other passages asserting the necessary relation between consciousness and thinking or perception include I.ii.5, II.i.11, II.i.12, II.i.18, and II.xxvii.9.

¹⁰ A similar issue arises in Descartes. See Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter Geach, Translator's Note of *Descartes: Philosophical Writings* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), xlvii-xlviii, for the view that *cogitatio* (thought) should be translated as "awareness" in order to avoid an overly intellectualistic rendering of it. The majority of translators, however, have maintained a distinction between consciousness and thinking in Descartes by translating *cogitatio* or *pensée* as "thought" and *conscientia* or *conscience* as "consciousness" or "awareness". Daisie Radner provides a concise discussion of these issues in "Thought and Consciousness in Descartes", *Journal of Philosophy* 26:3 (July) 1988.

without perceiving, that he does perceive.” Although consciousness is “essential” to perception and inseparable from it, it seems to be responsible for something in addition to perception: say, the awareness that *I am the one having the perception*.¹¹ Moreover, in each of these accounts Locke clearly seems to distinguish between ‘consciousness’ and ‘perception’, indicating that the terms have different references. In his endorsement of the *cogito*, Locke can be understood to delineate consciousness from perception in general when he writes, “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*” (IV.ix.3). Along with the act of thinking is consciousness that I am the thinker.

Even more troublesome, identifying consciousness with perception fails to acknowledge the importance of consciousness in Locke’s most cogent argument against innate ideas.¹² That argument runs roughly as follows. Innate ideas, even if perceived through the use of reason, must be in the mind prior to any ideas originating in either sensation or reflection. But the only way we can distinguish a new idea from one already in the mind is through the conscious perception of it. “This consciousness of its having been in the mind before,” says Locke, “being that, which distinguishes Remembling from all other ways of Thinking” (I.iv.20). Unless innate ideas are distinguishable from memories, any memory can qualify as an innate idea. Thus, the argument that there are innate ideas rests on an ability to show how innate ideas are different from memories, since both are ideas that “hav[e] been in the mind before”. Therefore, to understand consciousness as identical to perception in general is to ignore Locke’s explicit claim that consciousness distinguishes memories as memories, and therefore to ignore the essential role

¹¹ See also II.xxvii.16 and II.xxvii.24.

¹² Margaret Atherton, “Locke and the Issue over Innateness” in ed. V. Chappell, *Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 51, argues that because of the “strong connection between ‘being in the mind’ and ‘being in consciousness’, Locke’s arguments against innate ideas are not trivial.

consciousness plays in Locke's first line defense of empiricism. Those who equate consciousness with perception seem to pass by this issue altogether.¹³

2.1 Consciousness is Identical to Reflection

Another way to interpret Locke is to attribute to him the view that consciousness contributes something to perception as some sort of second order awareness of perceptions.¹⁴ Understanding Locke in this way is to see his conception as bearing some resemblance to higher order perception (HOP) theories of consciousness.¹⁵ According to HOP theories, what makes a mental state conscious in the sense that we are aware of being in that state is that it is taken as an object by some other higher order perceptual state.¹⁶ To attribute to Locke the view that consciousness is a higher order perceptual state in which we are aware that we are perceiving ideas is consistent with his claim that all thinking is conscious and with consciousness being a perception of a perception.¹⁷

This reading gives rise to a difficulty, for Locke, with respect to what he says in the following passage:

For the Objects of our Senses, do, many of them, obtrude their particular *Ideas* upon our minds, whether we will or no: And the Operations of our minds, will not let us be without, at least some obscure Notions of them. No Man, can be wholly ignorant of what he does when he thinks. These *simple Ideas*, when offered to the mind, *the Understanding can* no more refuse to have,

¹³ An exception is Ayers, *Locke*, I: 288, who argues that Locke should have identified consciousness with perception to accommodate his imagism but couldn't, since for Locke "the intrinsic intentional content of conscious thought typically goes beyond the intrinsic intentional content of the sensations and images involved in it".

¹⁴ All those mentioned in notes 5, 6, and 8 take the view that consciousness is a second order awareness of perceptions.

¹⁵ Locke attributes higher order thinking to reflection, which he describes in II.i.4 as the "*Perception of the Operations of our own Minds within us*". See Robert Van Gulick, "Inward and Upward: Reflection, Introspection, and Self-Awareness", *Philosophical Topics* 28: 2, Fall (2000), 275-305, for a good analysis of the differences, strengths, and weaknesses of contemporary HOT and HOP theories of consciousness.

¹⁶ See D.M. Armstrong "*A Materialist Theory of the Mind* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968) and W.G. Lycan, "Consciousness as Internal Monitoring", in eds. N. Block, O. Flanagan, and G. Guzeldere, *The Nature of Consciousness* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 754-71.

¹⁷ Note that a regress looms. This issue will be addressed shortly.

nor alter, when they are imprinted, nor blot them out, and make new ones in it self, than a mirror can refuse, alter, or obliterate the Images or *Ideas*, which, the Objects set before it, do therein produce. (II.i.25)

The problem is that consciousness, as an awareness of our thinking, results in the “obscure Notions” mentioned here. This conclusion relies on the textual interpretation that when Locke asserts that we are never “wholly ignorant of what [we] do when we think” he should be understood to mean, “No man can be wholly ignorant of the particular thing he does at a moment when he thinks in a particular way.”¹⁸ This suggests that we have a particular idea of the thinking we perceive within ourselves, and the reason why it must be a particular idea is that “*the Understanding* can no more refuse to have [those simple ideas offered to it] ... , than a mirror can refuse to have ... the images ... which the Objects set before it therein produce” (II.i.25). If consciousness is responsible for ideas of my thinking, and ideas of my thinking are ideas of reflection, then, as some have argued, we should understand Locke to be identifying consciousness and reflection.¹⁹ Thus, conscious states are reflective states, which means that any mental state emerging as the result of consciousness is the result of a second order reflective act.

But, should Locke be interpreted in this way, he runs into trouble reconciling consciousness with his claims concerning the reflective abilities of young children. In II.i.8 he admits that children might have “floating Visions”, namely some perception of their own thinking; yet he explicitly denies that children can reflect.

And hence we see the reason, why ‘tis pretty late, before most Children get *Ideas* of the Operations of their own Minds; and some have not very clear, or perfect *Ideas* of the greatest part of them all their Lives. Because, though they pass there continually; yet like floating Visions, they make not deep Impressions enough, to leave in the Mind clear and distinct lasting *Ideas*, until the Understanding turns inwards upon it self, *reflects* on its own *Operations*, and makes them the Object of its own Contemplation. (II.i.8)

¹⁸ See Kulstad, “Locke on Consciousness and Reflection”, 11 in 62.

¹⁹ Those in note 4.

The “obscure Notions” in II.i.25 and perhaps also the “floating Visions” in II.i.8 must be due to consciousness. But if they are and consciousness and reflection are the same mental act, then Locke contradicts his claim in II.i.8 that young children, though conscious, do not reflect. In Locke’s defense it seems unlikely he would make this mistake. The lack of reflective abilities in young children is important to his commitment to reflection as a more mature kind of thinking. Since reflection is a higher level thinking about perceptions of ideas that leads to clearer and more distinct ideas concerning our mental operations, it is likely that Locke thought young children are incapable of gaining those ideas necessary to higher forms of knowledge.²⁰

Finally, if consciousness is understood to be reflective, namely a higher order perception, then Locke’s theory of consciousness also entails a regress of perceptions. All thinking, for Locke, is conscious, and consciousness is thought to be some sort of perception of a perception. It follows that if consciousness bears a relation to ideas that produces more ideas, then any perception by consciousness results in a mental state that must itself be perceived by consciousness. This results in another mental state of which we must be conscious, and so on. In fact, in the II.xxvii.9 passage already noted Locke surprisingly seems to imply such a regress. When Locke says there that it is “impossible for any one to perceive without perceiving, that he does perceive” it is clear that he must intend ‘perceiving’ to be synonymous with ‘consciousness’. Therefore, if the way in which we perceive in being conscious is identified with the way in which we perceive in reflection then the regress is unavoidable. It is hard to imagine Locke espousing such a view.

2.2 Consciousness is a Source of Ideas

²⁰ Kulstad (ibid., 113-14) makes this point, but sees it as part of Locke’s confusion rather than a reason to read II.i.25 more charitably.

The last interpretation argues that Locke means to have consciousness as different from reflection but nonetheless a higher order awareness resulting in ideas: namely the origin of those ideas constituting the awareness of our own thinking. This interpretation allows a reconciliation of the passages above because as long as consciousness is different from reflection it can be seen to produce the “obscure Notions” in II.i.25 and the “floating Visions” in II.i.8. The problem with this interpretation is that it contradicts Locke’s II.i.4 claim that sensation and reflection are the only sources of our ideas:

These two, I say, *viz.* External Material things, as the Objects of *SENSATION*; and the Operations of our Minds within, as the Objects of *REFLECTION*, are to me, the only Originals, from whence all our *Ideas* take their beginnings. (II.i.4)

Thus, to interpret consciousness as productive of ideas, yet not identical to either sensation or reflection is to attribute to Locke a conception of consciousness that directly contradicts the foundation of his empiricism. The empiricist principle that all ideas originate in sensation and reflection is the essential limit on knowledge and, therefore, a crucial element in Locke’s project to discover the limits of human understanding.

3.0 Consciousness is a Reflexive and Proprietary Constituent of Ordinary Perception

We know that Locke is committed to the following claims: all thinking is conscious; consciousness is somehow a “perception of a perception”, and consciousness cannot be a *sui generis* source of ideas. We also know that whatever we say about consciousness must be reconcilable with Locke’s understanding of the “obscure Notions” in II.i.25 and the vague “floating visions” in II.i.8. Furthermore, the interpretation must be able to make sense of the roles Locke sees consciousness play in memory, sensitive knowledge, his version of the *cogito*, and personal identity. Providing a coherent theory can be done if we understand Locke’s view to

be that consciousness is a special kind of reflexive and proprietary perception internal to ordinary perception.²¹

In short, consciousness is *not* a mental act *additional* to the original perceiving of an idea, but rather something *internal* to it. This requires that we see the perception of an idea as a complex mental act that includes also being conscious that we are perceiving the idea. Therefore, constituent in each perception of an idea is the idea perceived as well as the consciousness of ourselves as perceiving it. For Locke, every act of perception has two objects. There is the idea, which is the object of the perception in the proper sense, namely that toward which we are attending in the perceiving. But also Locke thinks there is an element of reflexivity internal to every perception, so that the perception takes itself as an “object” of sorts, in addition to the idea that is the object properly speaking.

For example, I perceive the idea of a cat when I am looking at a cat. But in so perceiving the idea of the cat I am conscious that *I am perceiving* the idea of a cat. The idea of the cat is the primary object of the perception. My so perceiving the idea is the secondary “object” of the very same perception. We want to be careful not to place too much emphasis on the term ‘object’ to describe the nature of consciousness and its relation to ordinary perception, for we don’t want to re-invite the regress. Rather, we should see consciousness as a special kind of awareness of ourselves as perceiving that is internal to the complex mental act of perceiving an idea. But in being conscious there is no new act of perception, and therefore, there is generated no new idea. Moreover, it is possible that Locke’s account of the complexity in perceiving ideas also involves

²¹ Radner, “Thought and Consciousness”, 439-52, argues persuasively that Descartes has an implicit distinction between consciousness as identical to thinking and consciousness as a reflexive constituent of thinking, and Steven Nadler, *Arnauld and the Cartesian Philosophy of Ideas* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1989), 118-122, argues that Arnauld sees consciousness as a reflexive constituent of perception.

other elements of which we are conscious.²² Nevertheless, because consciousness is understood as a reflexive and proprietary constituent of ordinary perception, it is not an additional mental act above and beyond the original perception. And if it is not an additional mental act, then it can be a “perception of [every] perception”—namely an additional mental element—and yet not be seen as a source of ideas.

One way to get a better handle on this interpretation is to see it in light of later phenomenological theories of consciousness. Phenomenological theories, in general, distinguish themselves from explanations of consciousness that appeal to higher order perceptions or thoughts by arguing that consciousness should be understood as intrinsic to the original mental state. Because they are considered “one-level” theories, they do not obviously invite a regress. For example, Brentano argued that consciousness is not a new mental state but something intrinsic to a perception that is directed toward that perception.²³ Every experience has internal to it both a primary and a secondary object. In hearing a sound we are aware of the sound—the primary object, and we are also aware of the perception of the sound, which is the secondary object of the very same perception. He explains, “In the same mental phenomenon in which the sound is present to our minds we simultaneously apprehend the mental phenomenon itself... We can say that the sound is the *primary object* of the *act* of hearing, and that the act of hearing itself is the *secondary object*.”²⁴ Therefore, Brentano thinks he has avoided a regress by virtue of the fact that what makes a mental state conscious is an intrinsic and dependent feature of the original

²² I will not support this claim except to say there is good evidence that the perception of any idea includes both the intuitive knowledge of identity (IV.i.4) and a supposition of the really existing thing the idea stands for (II.xxx.1 and II.xxxi.1).

²³ Contrary to most interpretations of Brentano’s one-level approach to consciousness, A. L. Thomasson, “After Brentano: A One-Level Theory of Consciousness” in *European Journal of Philosophy*, (2000), 8:2, 191-92, 203, argues that Brentano’s “core” insight was that consciousness should be seen as dependent on perception and thus not to constitute an additional mental act. Therefore, Brentano’s view can be more charitably analyzed as adverbial to avoid the regress.

²⁴ Franz Brentano, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, trans. A. C. Rancurello, D. B. Terrell, and L. L. McAlister (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), pp. 127-28.

mental state. Nevertheless, because consciousness takes itself as an *object*, even if only secondarily, many have argued that Brentano indeed has two mental acts and thus falls into a form of the very regress he is trying to avoid.²⁵

Moreover, it does not follow necessarily that in being conscious I am perceiving there must be a full-fledged object or idea to be conscious of. According to Sartre, consciousness can be both reflective and pre-reflective. When consciousness is pre-reflective, we are aware of ourselves as having mental states, but we are not aware of ourselves thematically—not, say, as objects. To know ourselves in this way would require a further act of reflection on that which we are pre-reflectively conscious. Says Sartre, “it is the non-reflective consciousness which renders the reflection possible; there is a pre-reflective cogito which is the condition of the Cartesian cogito.”²⁶ The regress is avoided because phenomenologists would deny that there is a subject-object relation involved in being pre-reflectively conscious. As Dan Zahavi explains it, All [phenomenologists] argue that consciousness and self-consciousness are closely linked. All defend what might be called a one-level account of consciousness. Moreover—and this might come as a surprise to those who believe that one of the central doctrines in phenomenology is the doctrine of intentionality, that is, the claim that all consciousness is intentional, that all consciousness is object-consciousness—they also reject the attempt to construe intransitive consciousness in terms of transitive consciousness, that is, they reject the view that a conscious state is a state *of* which we are intentionally conscious.²⁷

Locke advances a view roughly similar to a phenomenological account of pre-reflective consciousness. It looks a bit like Brentano in that consciousness is seen as a special kind of awareness internal to the complex mental act of perceiving an idea, and it is a bit like Sartre in that consciousness is a kind of pre-reflective awareness of myself as perceiving an idea. And,

²⁵ See A. Gurwitsch, *Studies in Phenomenology and Psychology* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1979), 89-90 and Dan Zahavi, *Self-Awareness and Alterity: A Phenomenological Investigation* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 30-31. For a very good discussion of these issues see Dan Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood, Investigating the First Person Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005), chs. 1-2.

²⁶ John Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. H. E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), liii.

²⁷ Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood*, 23-24.

like Sartre, Locke would require an additional act of reflection in order to perceive an idea of myself. Locke's version of the *cogito* argument also exhibits a distinction like Sartre's between a pre-reflective consciousness giving us an implicit awareness of ourselves as perceiving ideas and a later reflection (as Locke understands it) on consciousness that results in a full-fledged idea of the self. Although it would be anachronistic to do much more to try to map later theories on to Locke's, the point of the foregoing analysis is to try to orient the interpretation of Locke within more contemporary views and maybe to gesture toward a way in which Locke shared similar insights.²⁸ Given the continuities with current scholarship, this interpretation of Locke's conception of consciousness can be seen to have more than antiquarian interest.

3.1 An Objection and Replies

Locke tells us in I.i.8 that 'idea' is used "to express whatever is meant by *Phantasm, Notion, Species*, or whatever it is, which the Mind can be employ'd about in thinking." Why, then, shouldn't we understand the "obscure Notions" from II.i.25 as ideas of reflection? The answer is that when Locke says that "the Operations of our minds will not let us be without, at least some obscure Notions of them" he is talking about our perceptions of ideas as the result of sensation. What becomes clear is that II.i.25 is not at all about reflection, but about *sensation*. The "obscure Notions" should be understood as consciousness of perceptions caused by the "Objects of our Senses [that] ... obtrude their particular Ideas upon our minds" (II.i.25). And the fact that we are conscious of our perceptions (mental states) involving sensations—namely, perceptions of ideas of sensation—does not imply that in being conscious of these perceptions we have

²⁸ It would also be interesting to look at how Locke's understanding of the relation of consciousness to perception stands up to what Sidney Shoemaker, *The First Person Perspective and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 224, has coined the "perceptual model of self-knowledge". Another interesting comparison might be to A. L. Thomasson's view as mentioned in note 23.

additional ideas of mental operations, or ideas of reflection. Thus, the *obtruding ideas* are from objects of the senses, and what is unavoidable is our perception of them. But to perceive ideas of sensation is to think, and Locke is clear that all thinking is conscious. So, the idea of sensation is the primary object of the perception, while the “obscure Notions” constitute the consciousness that I am perceiving the idea of sensation. The “obscure Notions” are unavoidable, asserts Locke, because consciousness is internal to every perception; it is a reflexive and proprietary awareness of myself as perceiving an idea. Therefore, it is impossible to be wholly ignorant—to have no awareness at all—of what we are doing when we think, namely, when we have those perceptions of ideas caused by external objects.²⁹ In the mirror analogy, then, Locke is saying that the ideas are the images in the mirror that I can’t help but see, and the “obscure Notions” constitute my awareness that I am looking in a mirror.

Indeed, Locke does seem to have room for a distinction between ‘ideas’ and ‘notions’. In his discussion of mixed modes in II.xxii.2, Locke mentions such a distinction: “And hence, I think, it is that these *Ideas* are called *Notions*: as if they had their Original, and constant Existence, more in the Thoughts of Men, than in the reality of things” (II.xxii.2). Mixed modes, Locke appears to be saying, are more properly called ‘notions’, because they have their source more in an active power of the mind to combine simple ideas than in the passive reception of sensations. In addition, there is evidence that some of Locke’s contemporaries used ‘notion’ to refer to mental states representing mental activity or something intelligible, while reserving ‘idea’ for representations or reproductions of something sensible, or represented in reality.³⁰ Moreover, Berkeley uses ‘notion’ to refer to spirits or minds because ideas are images, and we do not have

²⁹ See II.xix.1 for Locke’s claim that in sensation, ideas are furnished in the mind when the mental operation of perception is “annexed to any impression on the Body, made by an external Object.”

³⁰ See Kenneth Winkler, *Berkeley, An Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 279, 279n2.

images of spirits.³¹ Locke could be thinking the same sort of thing since in having ideas of mixed modes the mind actively puts together simple ideas “without examining whether they exist so together in nature” (II.xxii.2).

Many interpret Locke to be an “imagist”, and if this interpretation is correct, then it makes sense that Locke would employ another term to designate mental states that do not involve images.³² This is consistent with the reading that ‘notion’, at least sometimes, might be used by Locke to refer to mental states that are due to mental activity distinct from sensation and reflection.³³ Despite the I.i.8 definition of ‘idea’ Locke has room for a difference between uses of the terms ‘notion’ and ‘idea’, and therefore we have good reason *not* to read the “obscure Notions” in II.i.25 as particular ideas of mental operations produced by a second-order reflective act.

This interpretation is also supported by much of what Locke says about the thinking experiences of children in II.i.6-9 and in II.i.21-22. These sections describe the times, from infancy onward, at which children first come to have different sorts of ideas. Children have vague perceptions of their own mental states before they are able to reflect.³⁴ According to Locke, even a fetus, to some extent, perceives what goes on in its mind:

That a Feotus in a Mother’s Womb, differs not much from a State of a Vegetable; but passes the greatest part of its time without Perception or Thought, doing very little, but sleep in a Place, where it needs not seek for Food, and is surrounded with a Liquor, always equally soft, and near of the same temper; where the Eyes

³¹ Berkeley, in *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, ed. J. Dancy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), Dialogue III (233), 116, uses ‘notion’ to denote something different from ‘idea’. He says, “I say, lastly, that I have a notion of spirit, though I have not, strictly speaking, an idea of it.” See George Pitcher, *Berkeley* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), 71 for the view that Berkeley’s imagism leads him to use ‘notion’ to refer to minds.

³² For the view that Locke is an “imagist”, see Ayers, *Locke*, I: 44-51.

³³ Remember that ideas of reflection require prior ideas of sensation: “the Mind comes to reflect on its own *Operations*, about the *Ideas* got by *Sensation*, and thereby stores it self with a new set of *Ideas*, which I call *Ideas of Reflection*” (II.i.24).

³⁴ Although “tis pretty late” before children have ideas of reflection, they do have “floating visions” of their own thinking (II.i.8 cited above), or what I think Locke also calls “obscure Notions”.

have no Light, and the Ears so shut up, are not very susceptible of Sounds; and where there is little or no variety, or change of Objects, to move the senses. (II.I.21)

The fact that a fetus passes most of its time without perception and thought suggests that it spends at least a small part of its time *with* perception and thought. The body, even of a fetus, although protected by the surrounding fluid, is passive to impressions made on it from the motions of external bodies. Perhaps the fetus can hear sounds or feel vibrations. Because the fetus has at least some perception, she must have at least some ideas of sensation, since perception just is the having of ideas in a mind.³⁵ Moreover, although Locke does not say specifically that fetuses have “obscure Notions”, his view would imply that fetuses must be conscious. Because we cannot be wholly ignorant of what we do when we think, the fetus, when it engages in the “Perception and Thought” necessary for having ideas of sensation, has a vague, obscure notion, or consciousness, of its own mental states. It is conscious of its mental states despite its inability to reflect.

4.0 The Relation Consciousness Bears to Perception

We must acknowledge that there is an ambiguity in Locke’s uses of ‘perception’ and ‘perceiving’. It is not a settled matter whether Locke equates ‘perception’ with ‘idea’.³⁶ And it is not readily clear how to cash out the relation consciousness bears to perception. Although reflection and sensation are different in that having ideas of sensation involves perception as the

³⁵ See II.i.9 and II.ix.1 where Locke equates ‘perception’ with ‘having ideas’ and with ‘thinking’.

³⁶ Sometimes by ‘perception’ Locke seems to mean the act of perceiving and other times the idea produced (as the result of sensation or reflection). In the latter case, Locke will usually, if not always, use the upper case ‘Perception’. I think the confusion is exacerbated by interpreting Locke to mean ‘idea’ by ‘perception’ without at the same time clarifying the difference between the bare mental act of perception and the idea produced in perceiving something, which is a conceptual distinction, for Locke, not one we experience. See, for example, Yolton, *Perceptual Acquaintance From Descartes to Reid* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 88-94, who interprets Locke to use ‘perception’ and ‘idea’ interchangeably. Chappell, “Locke’s Theory of Ideas”, 27-28, argues that although Locke’s usage of the terms is sometimes ambiguous, he never means by ‘idea’ an act of perception as opposed to the object of such an act.

result of bodily impressions and having ideas of reflection involves perception of mental operations, both sensation and reflection produce ideas. In contrast, consciousness does not produce ideas, but at the same time, consciousness, like sensation and reflection, has something to do with perception.

Locke does not devote a specific chapter to an explication of consciousness, but it is important to note that neither does he do so with sensation or reflection. He does, however, treat all three types of perception in various places in II.i. Let's review three of these passages concerning first sensation, then reflection, and last, consciousness:

If it shall be demanded then, *When a Man begins to have any Ideas?* I think, the true Answer is, When he first has a *Sensation*. For since there appear not to be any *Ideas* in the Mind, before the Senses have conveyed any in, **I conceive that *Ideas in the Understanding, are coeval with Sensation; which is such an Impression or Motion, made in some part of the Body, as produces some Perception in the Understanding.*** 'Tis about these Impressions made on our Senses by outward Objects, that the Mind seems first to employ it self in such Operations as we call *Perception, Remembling, Consideration, Reasoning,* etc. (II.i.23, my emphasis)

The other Fountain, from which Experience furnisheth the Understanding with *Ideas*, is the ***Perception of the Operations of our own Minds within us, as it is employ'd 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: and such are, *Perception, Thinking, Doubting, Believing, Reasoning, Knowing, Willing, and all the different actings of our own Minds;* which we being conscious of, and observing in our selves, do from these receive into our understandings, as distinct *Ideas*, as we do from Bodies affecting our Senses. (II.i.4, my emphasis)

For 'tis altogether as intelligible to say, that a body is extended without parts, as that any thing *thinks without being conscious of it,* or perceiving, that it does so. They who talk thus, may, with as much reason, if it be necessary to their Hypothesis, say that a man is always hungry, but that he does not always feel it: **Whereas Hunger consists in that very sensation, as thinking consists in being conscious that one thinks. If they say that a Man is always conscious to himself of thinking; I ask how they know it? Consciousness is the Perception of what passes in a Man's own Mind.** (II.i.19, my emphasis)

Note that in the passage on sensation (II.i.23) and in the one on reflection (II.i.4) Locke's explanation focuses on the production of ideas or the furnishing of ideas in the understanding either by sensation or reflection. In sensation, an impression on the body caused by an external

object “produces some Perception in the Understanding” (II.i.23). Presumably, the motions from the impression on the body travel through the nervous system to the mind where they produce in the understanding a perception of an idea of the external object. That is the process by which we gain ideas of sensation. In reflection, the mind turns in on the ideas (mostly) from sensation it already has and perceives the thinking operations involved in having those ideas. When the mind “comes to reflect on and consider” those ideas it already has, the operations of the mind “do furnish the Understanding with another set of *Ideas*”, namely, ideas of reflection. The ideas “furnished” to the mind in reflection are the result of perceptions of the operations of our minds as they are “employ’d about the *Ideas* it [the mind] has got”. It is clear from these two passages that sensation and reflection are mental acts or operations that furnish or produce additional ideas in the understanding.³⁷

In contrast, Locke describes the perception involved in consciousness much differently—most obviously, he doesn’t use words like ‘furnish’ or ‘produce’. This in itself suggests that Locke does not intend consciousness to furnish or produce ideas. Rather, to explain the relation consciousness bears to perception, Locke employs an analogy, primarily to the relation between hunger and feeling hungry. Although the analogy is not strict, it suggests that Locke understands the relation consciousness bears to perception as having similar aspects to the relation feeling hungry bears to being hungry. Being hungry, Locke says, consists in feeling hungry: what it is like for me to be hungry is not additional to having hunger. Analogously, consciousness is not something additional to thinking or having ideas; being conscious (in some way) just is what it means *for me* to be thinking. On the other hand, consciousness is not identical to perception: it is

³⁷ All mental states involve perception. See II.i.24 for parallel descriptions of how perception is required for an impression from the senses to yield an idea of sensation or for an impression on the mind from reflecting on a mental operation to yield an idea of reflection. Consciousness, however, is a mental state that is not itself perceived. See Kevin Scharp, “Locke’s Theory of Reflection”, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* (forthcoming), for the contrary view that reflection is on mental impressions rather than on operations.

one component of the overall complex mental act of perceiving an idea rather than all that thinking consists in. Analogously, there is more to hunger, say, physiological aspects, than just feeling hungry. On this model, consciousness—as non-productive of ideas and as analogous to the points made about hunger—is best explained as something different from perception but internal to it, perhaps, as my experience of myself as thinking.³⁸

In many places, Locke seems to indicate that consciousness is self-consciousness or some sort of experience of our thinking as our own. The following examples make up just a few of many: “Every Man being conscious to himself, That he thinks...” (II.i.1); “If the *Soul* doth *think in a sleeping Man*, without being conscious of it, I ask, whether, during such thinking, it has any Pleasure or Pain, or be capable of Happiness or Misery?...For to be happy or miserable without being conscious of it, seems to me utterly inconsistent and impossible” (II.i.11), and “For since consciousness always accompanies thinking, and ‘tis that, that makes everyone to be, what he calls *self*; and thereby distinguishes himself from all other thinking things...” (II.xxvii.9). Again, just because consciousness is not an independent mental act does not mean that consciousness is not a constituent of a more complex mental act.

5.0 Consciousness in Memory, Sensitive Knowledge, Personal Identity, and the *Cogito*

There is quite a bit of evidence that Locke must have been thinking of consciousness in just this way. In addition, if we read Locke to see consciousness as this special kind of reflexive and proprietary perception internal to ordinary perception, namely the awareness of ourselves as perceiving ideas, we can make sense of the independent role given to consciousness in those

³⁸ J. L. Mackie, *Problems From Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 180-83, and Kenneth Winkler, “Locke on Personal Identity” in ed. V. Chappell, *Locke*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 153ff, argue that, for Locke, in being conscious we are aware of an I thinking.

accounts in which Locke seems to employ consciousness.³⁹ Consider, first, Locke's analysis of memory. "Memory", he says, "signifies, no more but this, that the Mind has a Power, in many cases, to revive Perceptions, which it once had, with this additional Perception annexed to them, that it has had them before" (II.x.2). That this additional "annexed" perception is due to consciousness is supported by Locke's I.iv.20 assertion that "to remember is to perceive any thing with memory, or with a consciousness, that it was known or perceived before". Clearly, Locke intends consciousness to contribute something to the perception of a revived idea. It contributes the awareness that I have perceived the revived idea before, which makes the difference between reviving ideas and experiencing them as remembered. Indeed, in lending an additional aspect to the ordinary perception of a revived idea, consciousness allows for an awareness that I am perceiving ideas from memory, rather than, say, ideas of reflection or occurrent ideas of sensation.

A more striking piece of evidence that Locke understood consciousness in this way is found in his IV.ii.14 discussion of sensitive knowledge. We cannot but believe that our perceptions of sensation have their sources in actually existing objects because, as Locke explains,

we are provided with an Evidence, that puts us past doubting: For I ask anyone, Whether he be not invincibly conscious to himself of a different Perception, when he looks on the Sun by day, and thinks on it by night; when he actually tastes Wormwood, or smells a Rose, or only thinks on that Savour, or Odour? We as plainly find the difference there is between any *Idea* revived in our Minds by our own memory, and actually coming into our Minds by our Senses, as we do between any two distinct *Ideas*. (IV.ii.14)

The "evidence" here referred to, justifying the belief that the idea of sensation corresponds to a really existing external object, is due to being conscious that the idea of the sun I am perceiving is different from an idea of the sun I am remembering. Note that the objects of the perceptions

³⁹ To argue fully *how* consciousness is important to Locke's accounts of memory, sensitive knowledge, personal identity, and the *cogito* would require much more than what is provided below. Here, it is sufficient to show only *that* Locke thinks it is and that there is an interpretation consistent with those accounts and his other commitments.

are the same: both ideas are *of the sun*. The difference, therefore, must be due to being conscious I am having different kinds of perceptions. In being conscious I am perceiving ideas I am aware of the difference between a perception as the result of sensation and a perception as the result of memory. We find even more support for this view in Locke's conclusion to the IV.ii.14 argument why sensitive knowledge counts as knowledge:

So that, I think, we may add to the two former sorts of *Knowledge*, this also, of the existence of particular external Objects, by that perception and Consciousness we have of the actual entrance of *Ideas* from them, and allow these *three degrees of Knowledge*, viz. *Intuitive, Demonstrative, and Sensitive*: in each of which there are different degrees and ways of Evidence and Certainty. (IV.ii.14)

Locke is arguing that because we are able to distinguish different kinds of ideas “by that perception and Consciousness we have from the actual entrance of *Ideas* from them”, we are justified in our claims that our occurrent perceptions of ideas of sensation are caused by really existing objects presently affecting the senses.⁴⁰ Unless consciousness is somehow different from ordinary perception it cannot be responsible for recognizing the difference between different ways of perceiving of ideas. Moreover, it must be internal to ordinary perception in order to constitute this difference and not at the same time violate the empiricist principle.

Because Locke understands consciousness as consisting in an awareness of ourselves as perceiving ideas, it is clear why consciousness is crucial to his account of personal identity.

For since consciousness always accompanies thinking, and 'tis that, that makes everyone to be, what he calls *self*; and thereby distinguishes himself from all other thinking things, in this alone consists *personal identity*, i.e. the sameness of a rational Being: And as far as this consciousness

⁴⁰ There are, of course, many issues to be resolved concerning Locke's claim that sensitive knowledge counts as knowledge that go beyond the scope of this paper. For an older attempt to reconcile some these problems see Ruth Mattern, “Locke: Our Knowledge which all Consists in Propositions”, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 8:4 (1978), 677-95, reprinted in *Locke*, ed. V. Chappell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 226-41. For more recent work on these issues see Martha Brandt Bolton, “Locke on the Semantic and Epistemic Role of Simple Ideas of Sensation”, *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 85:3 (2004), 301-21; Lex Newman, “Sensitive Knowledge and the Veil of Perception”, *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 85:3 (2004), 273-300; “Locke on Knowledge” in ed. L. Newman, *The Cambridge Companion to Locke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 313-51, and my “The Role of Consciousness in Locke's Theory of Knowledge” presented at the 2007 Pacific Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association.

can be extended backwards to any past Action or Thought, so far reaches the Identity of that *Person*"; it is the same *self* now it was then; and 'tis by the same *self* with this present one that now reflects on it, that that Action was done. (II.xxvii.9)

The consciousness that we are perceiving ideas allows us to find our selves 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 our selves 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. Only when our thinking and acting is brought into relief by an act of reflection do we become explicitly aware of ourselves as thinking and acting, that is, that "it is the same *self* now it was then; and 'tis by the same *self* with this present one that now *reflects* on it, that that Action was done" (II.xxvii.9, my emphasis).

Finally, it should now make sense why Locke can endorse the *cogito* argument without also relinquishing his agnosticism with respect to the nature of thinking substance. Consciousness provides an implicit grasp of our selves as perceivers in any perception of an idea. "In every Act of Sensation, Reasoning, or Thinking", he asserts, "we are conscious to our selves of our own Being; and, in this Matter, come not short of the highest degree of *Certainty*" (IV.ix.3). Being conscious of any perception of an idea, no matter the kind, just is to be aware of that I exist as perceiving the idea. But to be conscious that I am perceiving an idea is not to have a full fledged idea of myself as a thinking thing. To have this idea I must reflect on my own consciousness. Locke says, "Or if I know I *doubt*, I have as certain a Perception of the thing doubting, as of that

Thought, which I call *doubt*” (IV.ix.3). When I take the further step to reflect on my perceptions of ideas not only am I conscious that I am reflecting but also my reflection is directed toward the consciousness internal to the original perception that is the object of my reflection. Thus, in reflecting on any perception of an idea there is produced both an idea of the mental operation—a certain perception of the doubting, as well as an explicit idea of my self as the really existing thing doubting.